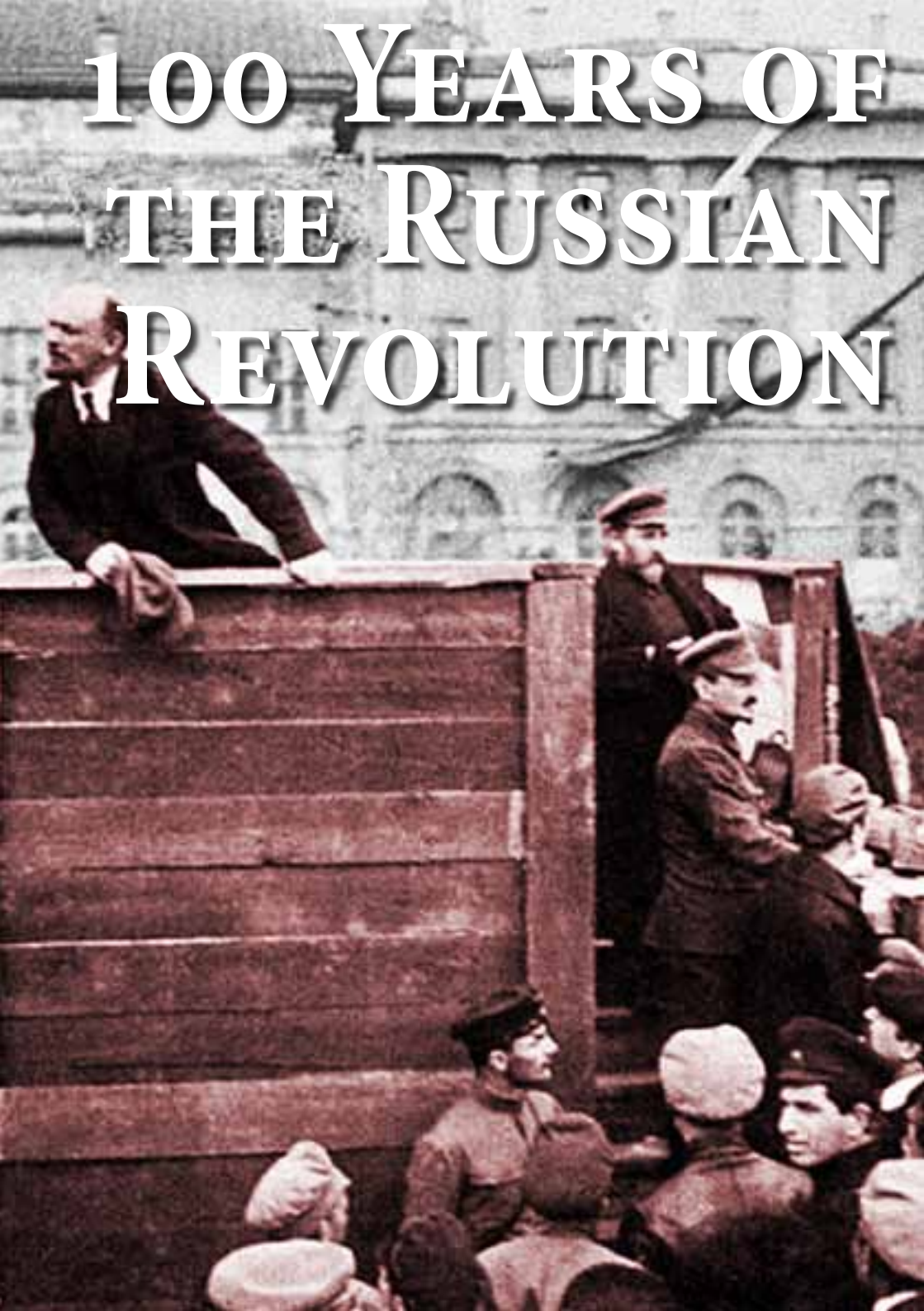
100 Years of the Russian Revolution



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100 Years of the Russian Revolution
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While the aim of this booklet is to celebrate the great victory of the working class one hundred years ago, the study of this history touches on all the major discussions and debates in the socialist movement today and is a guide to our future struggles. We hope it will entice militants to read and study this history as well as the reasons for the later development of Stalinism, which represented a counter-revolution and prepared the final collapse of the workers' states in Russia and Eastern Europe.

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Foreword

The taking of power in October 1917 represents the greatest moment in the history of working class struggle. It was the first time that the working class through their own mass organs of power (Soviets) were able to wrest power from the bourgeoisie and establish a society representing their interests. It also highlighted the crucial role of leadership and the revolutionary party in the process of revolution. While Marxists decry the cult of personality and emphasise the role of collective leadership, one is struck by the central role played by individuals like Lenin and Trotsky in the historical process of the Russian Revolution.

Allison Drew in the preface to her study on South Africa's radical tradition makes a telling observation that in contemporary South Africa, the "past is very much part of the present, not only in terms of its legacies which have shaped the present but in terms of the acute controversies which have arisen over conflicting interpretations of the past"1. In its origins South African socialism was foreign-born2, developing in the early 20th century from the traditions of skilled British workers and Eastern Europeans fleeing Tsarist oppression. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was founded in 1921 under the direct influence of the Third Communist International. In 1928 under the influence of the Soviet Union the the CPSU adopted the 'Native Republic Thesis' after a severe internal struggle which presumed a two-stage conception of social change and laid the basis for the South African Communist Party's (SACP) subsequent 'Colonialism of a Special Type' analysis.

This two-stage conception of revolutionary struggle has been the central contradiction of the international socialist movement since the middle of the 19th century and still bedevils debate and strategy in the growth of revolutionary socialist parties to this day.

While the aim of this booklet is to celebrate the great victory of the working class one hundred years ago, the study of this history touches on all the major discussions and debates in the socialist movement today and is a guide to our future struggles. We hope it will entice militants to read and study this history as well as the reasons for the later development of Stalinism, which represented a counter-revolution and prepared the final collapse of the workers' states in Russia and Eastern Europe.

[1] Allison Drew, South Africa's Radical tradition p9
[2] ibid. p15

Dedication:

The writer dedicates this booklet to the memory of a great militant and revolutionary 'Bolshevik', Andrew 'Jumbo' Phiri who died in 2007. Comrade Jumbo was a committed ***Socialist*** *who spent the greater part of his life struggling against oppression and exploitation. He was a leading activist in the 1980's against the Apartheid regime, and soon after 1994 took up the cudgels to fight against the neo-colonial, neo-liberal ANC regime.*

Comrade Jumbo was a simple man, also materially a poor man, but this never bothered him. He would proudly talk of the great endurance and strength of the poor, and he always respected people less well-off than him. He remained true to his principles and beliefs until the very end. While many persons who consider themselves as freedom fighters fell by the wayside through fatigue, faintheartedness, cowardice or plain desertion, in his famous words, "made peace with the ruling class", Jumbo never lost faith in the struggle for freedom, justice and an equitable distribution of wealth in society, ***in the Socialist future of humanity****.*

PREFACE

One can barely imagine that it has been 100 years since the Great Russian "October" Revolution led by the Bolsheviks and their allies, an event which was not only important for working class and poor people all over the world, but also altered the course of human history. For the first time – if we exclude the brief but glorious episode of the Paris Commune – the working people took political power into their own hands and began the gigantic task of the socialist reconstruction of society. The Russian revolution followed the Great French "bourgeois" Revolution by more than a hundred and twenty five years. The French Revolution of 1789 opened the era of capitalist domination and bourgeois rule, first in Europe and then all over the world. The Russian Revolution of 1917 represents the opening chapter of an era of the proletarian or working class revolution.

The bourgeoisie, its political writers and university professors have made it their task to discredit the October revolution, they have cultivated the myth that the Bolshevik Revolution was only a "coup d'état" pulled off by Lenin and a handful of conspirators. In doing this, the bourgeoisie aims to discredit the name of socialism, especially to discredit scientific socialism, as expressed in the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Krupskaya and Trotsky.

In his epic 'History of the Russian Revolution', Leon Trotsky dispels the big man theory of history and demonstrates that the most important question of a revolution is the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny: "*In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line business – kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime*."[1] This remains the central feature of a revolution, one which the ruling classes live in mortal fear of.

Revolutions do not happen by accident. Marx and Engels in their classical work on political economy 'Capital', demonstrate that revolutions occur according to definite economic laws; when the relations of production come into conflict with the forces of production and society cannot progress any longer, this opens a period of stagnation, instability and general unhappiness in society.

[1] LD Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution, Pluto Press, London 1977, p17

This is when revolutions occur. Over a protracted period of years or even decades society appears to be in a state of "equilibrium". However, beneath the apparently calm surface, powerful currents are building up. There is a gradual accumulation of discontent and frustration in the masses, which increases as time elapses and finally boils over. Trotsky calls these processes the "molecular process of revolution". Just as Geology teaches us that the earth under our feet is as solid as a rock, we know that rocks are by no means steady, and that the ground is constantly shifting beneath our feet. In fact the continents are on the march, and in a state of perpetual "warfare," one colliding with another. These geological changes are not measured by years or even centuries, but aeons, and the continental shifts remain unnoticed except for specialists. Fault-lines build up, subject to unimaginable pressures, which eventually erupt in earthquakes.[2] Similar fault-lines exist in the best-ordered societies. The sudden eruption of wars and revolutions obey approximately the same laws as earthquakes, and are just as inevitable. The discontent within society often takes place first amongst students, who are a sensitive barometer reflecting the changing mood of society. The moment inevitably arrives when the mass of people decide that 'things can't go on like this any longer'. The break occurs when the majority decide to take their lives and destiny into their own hands.

In reality, the psychological changes which occur with extreme abruptness in any revolution, are not accidental, but are rooted in the whole previous period. The human mind, in general, is not revolutionary, but conservative[3]. As long as conditions are generally acceptable, people tend to accept the existing state of affairs within society. Consciousness tends to lag far behind the changes which occur in the objective world of the economy and society. Only in the last resort, when there is no alternative, do the majority opt for a decisive break with the existing order. Long before this, they will try by every means to adapt, to compromise, to seek the imagined "line of least resistance." That is the secret of the appeal of reformist politics.

For the bourgeois intelligentsia a revolution is an aberration, a "freak," a deviation from the norm. Society temporarily goes "mad," until eventually "order" is restored. For such a psychology, the most satisfactory mental image of a revolution is that of a blind herd which has suddenly panicked, or, better still, a conspiracy hatched by demagogues.[4] Lenin and the Bolshevik Party appears to the police-mind to have enacted a 'coup d'état' in the context of a

[2] Alan Woods, The Meaning of October, 1992, p3
[3] LD Trotsky: The History of the Russian Revolution. p18
[4] ibid. p18

weak bourgeoisie which had overthrown the Tsar. They fail to appreciate that the October Revolution was the product of the entire preceding period. The Russian workers and peasants had already passed through the experience of two revolutions (1905 and February 1917) and two wars (1904-5 and 1914-17). Combined with this they had the added advantage of a tried and tested revolutionary party in the Bolsheviks who were able to put forward strategic and tactical demands which reflected the ebbs and flows of the workers movement. It is only on the basis of a study of political processes in the masses themselves that we can even begin to understand the role of parties and leaders. They constitute not an independent, but nevertheless a very important, element in the process: "*Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.*"[5] This was the secret to the successful Russian revolution of 1917.

Tsar Nicolas II visiting soldiers on a World War One front.

The Character of Russian Society

The Russia of the Tsars was one of history's most terrible dictatorships. The vast majority of Russians lived in impoverished conditions where all the people were subject to the iron authority of the Tsarist regime and the Russian nobility. Various half-hearted attempts to reform the system from above or to force change

[5] ibid. p19

through failed assassination plots had little if any effect on the lives of most Russians. Russia's Tsars were the equals of their royal counterparts elsewhere in terms of extravagance and arrogance. But in every other way, Russia was the most backward nation in Europe. Four-fifths of the population lived as peasants, tied to the land and subservient to the feudal nobility. At the turn of the 20th Century, per capita income in the U.S. was eight to 10 times higher than in Russia. The Tsar and his nobles ruled society with an iron grip and imagined themselves a kind of imperial master race. Their empire reached from the edge of Europe straight across Asia, "an immense tract of conquests within which 20 enslaved nations are penned"[6], wrote the anarchist Elisee Reclus. Tsarist Russian society was notoriously anti-Semitic. "It is possible to arrange any kind of pogrom," a police official told a supervisor, "involving 10 people if you like, or 10 000."[7] In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky illustrated the corruption of the old order by describing Tsar Nicholas II himself: "This dim, equable and "well-bred" man was cruel--not with the active cruelty of Ivan the Terrible or of Peter, in the pursuit of historic aims...but with the cowardly cruelty of the late born, frightened at his own doom…He always "read with satisfaction" how they flogged with whips the bob-haired girl-students, or cracked the heads of defenseless people during Jewish pogroms...This "charmer," without will, without aim, without imagination, was more awful than all the tyrants of ancient and modern history."[8]

Russian peasants

In Western Europe the developing capitalist new economies of England, France and Germany was different from any which had gone before it. Capitalism was changing from free competition capitalism to monopoly capitalism; the age of Imperialism meant that large monopoly capitalist corporations were now dominant, exporting capital and seeking new markets for raw materials, for new opportunities to make profits. In the process, native industries were destroyed

[6] Socialist Worker – Alan Maass, How the Stage was set for Revolution, p2
[7] ibid. p2
[8] LD Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution, p19

and huge areas of the planet subordinated as colonies. After 1880 Russian industry itself expanded massively. The main driving force of this expansion was not led by native private businessmen but "foreign industrialists provided the plant and machinery for Russian expansion, and foreign banks most of the capital."[9] Interestingly capitalist factories were at a technological and productive level that equalled or bettered the West. In 1914, in the U.S., 17.8% of the workforce was employed in giant enterprises of 1,000 workers or more while in Russia, the figure was 41.4%. The Putilov metal works in Petrograd was the largest factory anywhere in the world, employing 30,000 workers in 1917[10]. The native Russian bourgeoisie played a secondary role in the country's development because of its dependence on foreign and state capital. As a junior partner to Imperialism it did not strive to change society fundamentally, "it clung to the apron strings of the Tsar and never broke away"[11].

The slow tempo of Russian development, its economic backwardness, the primitiveness of its social forms and the low level of culture was now combined with the most advanced technology and productive relations. This ***uneven and combined development***, to use Trotsky's phrase, had a number of political consequences. While the parasitic system of Tsarism at the top of society was overripe to be toppled and replaced by a more democratic system, the class that had led such revolutions in the West, the capitalist class was weak, timid and backward. Russia's bourgeoisie was tied in a thousand ways to the rule of international capital that financed it, and to its various arrangements and concessions with the Tsarist system. The largest force which had an interest in changing the society was the mass of the peasantry. Though serfdom was annulled already in 1861, the feudal system was a brutal one characterised by high and exorbitant rents, the long hours of work the peasants did for the landlords and the huge debt they had to incur for the tiny pieces of land they worked for their subsistence. It was to fall to the factory proletariat the task of leading the process of change. The development of major towns and industrial suburbs brought people from the countryside with "little training, political knowledge or experience"[12] together in large factories where they quickly learnt class organisation and solidarity. While they were for the first time learning about trade unions and socialist organisation, their conditions of existence resulted in a growing class consciousness which would prepare them to take the lead in the struggle against the Tsarist system.

[9] Socialist Worker – Alan Maass, How the Stage was set for Revolution, p2
[10] ibid. p2
[11] ibid. p3
[12] ibid. p4

The First Russian Revolution – the Dress Rehearsal of 1905

A locomotive overturned by striking workers at the main railway depot in Tiflis in 1905

In February 1904, Russia declared war on Japan, and soon thereafter things started to go badly for the Tsarist forces. This laid the basis for the "Great Dress Rehearsal" of 1905, when strikes and demonstrations shook the power of the Tsarist regime. Though it did not succeed, the revolution of 1905 produced Workers' Councils, or Soviets, which would later be the centre-piece of the successful revolution of 1917.

The years of preparation (1903-05) had witnessed the political representatives of the three main classes in society, the liberal-bourgeois, the petty bourgeois democrats and the proletarian-revolutionary; discuss the theoretical aspects of *all* the fundamental problems of the revolution so that when the revolution broke all the forces were prepared. As one of the Bolsheviks commented, "*we Marxists were already armed with the scientific method of comprehending historical processes*" that "*a general strike of the proletariat with its subsequent transformation into an armed uprising would become the fundamental form of the Russian revolution.*"[13]

[13] ibid. p4

The 1905 revolution actually lasted three years. Starting in late 1904, it exploded in January of 1905, reaching a high point in October, November, and December of that year. In 1906 and 1907 a counterrevolution took place, including trial and imprisonment of activists, closing of newspapers and suppression of trade unions, and assassinations. The revolution was thoroughly defeated by mid-1907 when the second Duma[14] was dissolved.

Bloody Sunday

Soldiers opened fire on the march to the Winter Palace, 9 January 1905

The revolution started in the last four months of 1904. After the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, Tsar Nicholas II made several minor political concessions, which slightly opened the political system. This saw a wave of popular protests initiated by liberals calling for cosmetic changes in the autocratic system[15]. On January 3rd 1905 workers at the Putilov factory in St. Petersburg went on strike. By January 7th between 100,000 and 140,000 workers (about two thirds of the workforce) in St. Petersburg were on strike, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction.

[14] Toothless parliamentary body formed as a concession to stop the revolution.
[15] This did not even include the demand for an elected parliament.

On Sunday, January 9th, a large crowd, approximately 200,000 strong led by the priest father Gapon marched to the Winter Palace to petition the Tsar. This was a peaceful procession with some people carrying images of the Tsar and holy icons. There were no speeches or any form of disturbance. The response of the Tsar was to mobilise police and soldiers everywhere, and out of the blue they started firing on the crowd. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured. The people's faith in the Tsar, their "little father", was shattered.

This led to large scale anger amongst the people and between 500,000 and 1-million workers went on strike.

The revolutionary mass strike

The Social Democrats (both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) who had played little part in the earlier demonstrations were now organizing unions and strikes, agitating for democratic reforms like the right to strike, the eight-hour day, and political democracy. The revolution had been simmering and in the fall a 'meeting-mania' swept through the major universities; workers, secondary and university students, the poor, all participated in political talks, debating political programs and tactics. Typesetters, print shops, railway workers and the working class in general were involved in rolling mass action. They all demanded an eight-hour day, civil liberties, amnesty for all political prisoners, and a Constituent Assembly. The strike spread through the entire empire, bringing the economy to a halt. The revolutionary political strike had begun.

Revolution and counter-revolution marched hand and in hand. Shortly after Bloody Sunday, the 'Black Hundreds' was formed to defend the Romanov monarchy and with the government's police and military forces carried out massive political repression against strikers and protesters. When this did not work, they outlined a reform plan, including an elected parliament, a Duma. All political parties came out from the underground and the Cadets (Liberal Party) saw this as an opportunity to negotiate with the Tsar while the workers prepared a revolutionary insurrection.

Strike actions in St Petersburg spread to become a general strike, October 1917

The St. Petersburg Soviet

On October 13th a strike committee, made up of about 40 representatives from various factories, one 'deputy' for every 500 workers, was formed. On October 17th, the Soviet of Workers Deputies elected an executive committee of 50 people. This Soviet executive committee directed affairs based on democratic decision making. By the end of October, the St. Petersburg Soviet with Leon Trotsky as the elected Chairperson had taken over many of the functions of the local government. This process of elected broad representative Workers Councils (Soviets of Workers', Peasants and Soldiers Deputies) spread throughout the Russian empire and every major city was now led by a Soviet.

With the establishment of the Soviets a situation of dual power developed — the one power represented by the monarchy supported by the wealthy landlords and capitalists; the other power, the Soviets, supported by the workers and peasants. Clashes were inevitable; mass peasant uprisings including land occupation of large estates, military revolts exemplified by the takeover of the Battleship Potemkin and workers' occupation of factories posed the question of which power ruled over society. The 50 days of the St. Petersburg Soviet were days of true liberty; an eight hour working day, soup kitchens for the hungry and unemployed, freedom of the press and protection from right-wing Black Hundred attacks and the repudiation of the country's foreign debt.

Armed insurrection in Moscow

From the onset of the general strike in October, St. Petersburg was the center of the revolution. The center now shifted to Moscow. The Moscow Soviet dominated by the Bolsheviks called for a general strike on December 7th. The workers in Moscow began preparations for an armed uprising. The strike paralyzed the city and tensions mounted. On December 9th the army surrounded a meeting of some 600 people and stormed the building, using heavy artillery. The strikers, massively outnumbered, surrendered. The soldiers continued shooting them after they had been captured. Urban guerrilla war now broke out in the city, with small groups of workers firing small arms at heavily armed troops. Finally, on December 16th the military surrounded the working-class district of Krasnaya Presnya, and after intensive shelling, the troops started a brutal slaughter of civilians, both combatants and non-combatants. Thousands of workers were killed (about 25% were women and children).

For all intents and purposes, the revolution had been defeated. The government immediately started random executions of activists, arrested the leadership including the chairperson of the St Petersburg Soviet, Leon Trotsky, and tortured many activists. To show that democratic changes were underway the Tsar convened an election of the Duma (dummy councils) which was boycotted by the Bolsheviks. When this election failed he convened a second Duma. This time the radicals took control of the Duma and in June 1907 he dissolved it arresting many of the deputies. This marked the final end of the first Russian revolution.

State Duma ,1905

The Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, with Lenin and Martov before the split.

Theoretical Prognosis of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Socialist Movement has its origins in the League for the Emancipation of Labour formed by GV Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism. This was the first organization that emphasized the leading role of the working class in the struggle for emancipation. By 1902 a national organization of socialists had been organized around the newspaper ***Iskra*** (The Spark). Disagreements in the party came to a head at the Second Party Congress in late 1902. The disagreement hinged on two issues: firstly, whether membership of the party should be based on *association* with the party or active *participation* in party activity and secondly, whether three veteran socialists, who were contributing little to the production of the newspaper, should continue as its editors.

Lenin and his supporters (known as the ***Bolsheviks***, meaning 'majority') were for a tightly organized party, in which everyone would be accountable. Martov and his supporters (known as the ***Mensheviks***, the 'minority') argued for a more loose formation. While this was the reason for the ***split*** in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) underneath laid more fundamental differences, namely the character of the forthcoming revolution and the role which various classes would play in it.

In February 1904, Russia declared war on Japan, which was a disaster. Various classes were calling for change in society and different political parties proposed different solutions:

- The ***Cadets***, the party of the Landlords, industrialists and professional people, were constitutional democrats who argued for changes to the constitution which would introduce civil liberties to society.
- The ***Mensheviks***, were socialists who called for a bourgeois democratic revolution and supported the struggle for bourgeois civil liberties. This revolution they argued was to be led by the oppressed bourgeoisie and would lay the foundation for a second socialist revolution in the future.
- The ***Bolsheviks***, were socialists who agreed that the character of the revolution was bourgeois, but that this bourgeois revolution could not be led by the national bourgeois because of their ties to the Tsarist autocracy. This national bourgeois "*…fears to lose in this struggle its property which binds it to the existing order; it fears an all-too-revolutionary action of the workers, who will not stop at the democratic revolution but will aspire to the socialist revolution; it fears a complete break with officialdom, with the bureaucracy, whose interests are bound up by a thousand ties with the interests of the propertied classes*"[16]. They argued that this Russian national bourgeoisie, far from being the ally of the workers would inevitably side with the counter-revolution. The true allies of the workers were the poor peasants, not the landlords nor the Cadet party. The most elementary civil liberties could only be won by a 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', which would still be a capitalist government but one that prioritized the interests of the working class and poor peasants. The heart of the democratic revolution was the need to resolve the agrarian question, the destruction of all the remnants of feudalism. The struggle against Tsarism was to create the most favourable conditions for the establishment of a genuinely progressive constitutional democratic framework for the benefit of the Russian Workers Movement.
- The ***Theory of Permanent Revolution*** was first elaborated by Marx and Engels after the experience of the 1848 revolution in France when the big bourgeoisie were reluctant to take a revolutionary path and failed to complete even the bourgeois revolution. This bourgeoisie was cowardly and tied hand and foot to the aristocracy. In their *Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League*, Marx and Engels proposed the idea of the 'Revolution in Permanence': "*while the democratic petty-bourgeoisie wants to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible…it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and …at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers.*"[17] Leon Trotsky writing after the experience of the 1905 Russian Revolution discussing the motive forces of the coming Russian revolution argued that the complete and genuine solution to the democratic revolution is possible only through the dictatorship of the proletariat. **The national bourgeoisie was too cowardly and tied in a hundred ways with the monarchy** that it could not lead the bourgeois revolution. **The peasantry, he argued, was too fragmented and had historically shown that it could not organize itself independently**. **It was only the working class as a social force that had both the interest and capacity to free society from absolutism**. The coming revolution would thus be an uninterrupted revolution combining the democratic and socialist tasks as a continuing permanent process: "*the seizure of power would mark not the completion but the **initiation** of the revolutionary process of transformation of the social relations.*"[18] The democratic revolution 'grows over' into the socialist revolution which in turn cannot be completed except on an international scale. This revolution would place the working class in power (dictatorship of the proletariat) and that once in power, the workers would be compelled to take radical measures against bourgeois property relations.

[16] Socialist Worker – Alan Maass, How the Stage was set for revolution, 2013, p5

These different political theories were to be tested in the cauldron of actual struggle and the correctness, or otherwise, of these theories can be gauged, not by the *perusal of the polemics of 1905, but in the light of what actually happened.* Engels was very fond of the proverb: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating"; while Lenin frequently cited the words of Goethe: "Theory is grey, my friend, but the tree of life is ever green." The 1917 revolution would add flesh and blood to the bare bones of theory.

[17] Marx & Engels, Address to the Communist League, p98

[18] Mandel E, Revolutionary Marxism Today, p68

The Second Russian Revolution – February 1917

The rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th Century spread capitalism around the globe, and the richest states became locked into competition for the world's resources and markets. The First World War of 1914 was a direct product of this competition; the trade wars were translated into shooting wars, with up to ten million people killed. The great Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg noted that mankind was on the precipice and faced the choice of ***barbarism*** or ***socialism***!

The senselessness and barbarism of the war left the Tsarist system in Russia in a state of general collapse and crisis. One-fourth of the Russian Empire's richest lands had been overrun by Germany; up to six million Russian soldiers had been killed, wounded or captured. The destructiveness of the war was matched by a breakdown in Russia's economy. Prices rose far above wages, and food and fuel were in short supply. By early 1917, the average working woman of Petrograd was spending 40 hours a week in bread lines. Scandalous corruption and ineptitude at the highest levels of Russian society provoked previously loyal subjects of Tsar Nicholas to protest against his system. Strikes and demonstrations for better wages, against war profiteering, and for price controls grew in number and militancy throughout 1915 and 1916. A police report in early 1917 confirmed that Russia's working class was on the edge of despair, and the slightest explosion, however trivial its pretext, would lead to uncontrollable riots. The inability to buy goods, the frustrations of queuing, the rising death rate owing to poor living conditions, and the cold and damp produced by lack of coal created a situation where most of the workers were ready to embark on food riots.

Russian soldiers flee an advance by German tanks, July 1915.

The march by women textile workers in Petrograd, 1917.

On February 23, 1917 (March 8 on the Western calendar – Russia's ran 13 days behind), International Woman's Day, despair turned into open revolt. The women textile workers of Petrograd came out on strike and dragged behind them the Bolshevik Party-led metal workers of the Vyborg district, and while "*the social-democratic circles had intended...meetings, speeches, leaflets… The Bolshevik Party – the most consistently revolutionary worker's party in Russia – initially urged its membership not to participate in the strikes, fearing that the workers' movement was not yet ready to defend itself against an inevitable crackdown by the government. But the Bolshevik rank and file threw itself into the developing rebellion, with more experienced party activists on the ground often providing the lead as masses of people took more and more decisive action.*"[19]

By the end of the day 90,000 workers were on strike. The next day, the 24th, about half of Petrograd's workers were on strike, and large numbers were demonstrating in the streets. "*The slogan "Bread!"* wrote Trotsky, "*is crowded out or obscured by louder slogans: 'Down with the autocracy,' 'Down with the war'!*"[20]

By the third day, large numbers of soldiers who had been mobilized to squash the demonstrations had instead joined the revolt, and could be seen using their

[19] Socialist Worker – Alan Maass, How the Stage Was Set for Revolution, p7
[20] ibid. p7

weapons to shoot at police stations and liberate political prisoners. By February 27th, barracks of peasant soldiers in the cities, training to eventually take their turn in trenches at the front, began to rebel openly and come over to the side of revolution. Large numbers of these soldiers were mobilized by the most militant workers to seize the police stations, arrest government officials and army officers loyal to the Tsar, and drive troops loyal to the government out of the cities.

The Tsar's ministers fled or were arrested. Finally, on March 2nd, three centuries of Romanov rule came to an end when the Tsar abdicated.

Lenin's 'April Thesis' swings the Bolshevik Party towards revolution

The February Revolution in 1917 toppled the Romanov dynasty and replaced it with two competing governments:

On the one hand, the Provisional Government; an ad hoc formation supported by the large landowners and wealthy capitalists. Prince Lvov, a member of the aristocracy with a certain humanitarian reputation, assumed the title of president, while Alexander Kerensky, a radical lawyer and member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), became the Minister of Justice, lending an air of "radicalism" to the government. Lvov commanded the allegiance of the military brass, the ruling classes, large sections of the intelligentsia and the more conservative layers of the working class and peasantry. This Provisional Government lavishly praised the workers and peasants and soldiers and sailors, respectfully complemented the councils (the soviets), and used all kinds of democratic and populist and patriotic rhetoric, promising to bring what the people wanted.

Revolutionary Demonstration March 1917

On the other hand, the Soviet of Workers, Soldiers and Peasants represented all categories of urban workers, the soldiers from the trenches and a wide swath of the peasantry. While the Provisional Government rested on the legal authority of the Tsar's advisory (i.e. powerless) legislature, elected with very limited suffrage, delegates to the Soviets were elected directly subject to immediate and popular recall. Although this wasn't apparent to everyone involved, these two forms of government were inherently incompatible. There was a real contradiction between the needs of the ruling classes for profit and war, and the desires of the oppressed classes for '**peace, bread and land**'. Lenin, joined by Leon Trotsky and a growing number of others, echoed a growing sentiment in the Soviets, that genuine peace – not to mention bread for the workers and land to the peasants – could only be won by those who actually overthrew the Tsar, not by the old-time politicians tied in with the power structures of the wealthy.

The post-February period of the revolution was about which of these forces would triumph, and how the various political parties squared up in this confrontation. The Conservative and liberal parties that dominated the Provisional Government realized that the Soviets were too powerful to simply wish out of existence. And military repression, which the Tsar had used during the 1905 revolution to destroy the soviets, was not possible because so many soldiers looked to the workers' councils as their legitimately elected government. Thus, they bided their time, hoping the revolutionary wave would roll back and present them with an opportunity to co-opt or repress the soviets. Meanwhile, they did their best to continue Russia's participation in the First World War, defend the landlords and curtail the power of the industrial workers' movement.

At the ruined monument to Alexander III in Moscow.

Patriotic rally of disabled veterans in the Tauride Palace, April 1917

The parties themselves took up contradictory positions in this political divide. The **Socialist Revolutionaries** (SR), a broad party representing well-to-do peasants, professionals, students and workers, low-ranking military officers, and especially the bulk of the conscripted peasant soldiers were represented in the Provisional Government by Kerensky and other ministers. On the other hand the SRs held a majority in the Soviets immediately after their formation. The SRs critically supported the Provisional Government who they hoped would eventually end the war, enact some sort of land reform, universal suffrage and democratic elections.

The **Mensheviks** (the more moderate wing of the Russian socialist movement) refused to join the Provisional Government at first, and were well represented in the Soviets, especially the workers' soviets. They, too, were divided on who to support. Some argued that the two institutions could function as some sort of united government with upper and lower houses, while the more radical wing hoped the Soviets could force the Provisional Government to end the war and deliver meaningful reforms. Some Mensheviks supported continuing the war "defensively," and others were for an immediate end. They all supported reforms such as the eight-hour day, and believed the bourgeoisie would naturally rule Russia, while the working class would remain a radical (or loyal) opposition.

The **Bolsheviks** (the radical wing of the Russian socialist movement) were also divided. Some leaders, like Joseph Stalin and Lev Kamenev, and many rank-and-file members had a similar attitude towards the Provisional Government as the left wing of the Mensheviks. That is, they didn't trust the Provisional Government to end the war or enact reforms, saw it as a representative of the ruling classes and were absolutely opposed to becoming members of it. However, they did not raise the call for the Soviets to take power. In fact the internal Bolshevik leadership made it clear that they would "defend" Russia in the war against Germany. The rank and file Bolshevik membership however did not agree and regarded this acquiescence to the authority of Prince Lvov's government as a betrayal. Lenin returned to Russia from exile on April 3rd and presented a radical new policy to the divided Bolshevik Party. Lenin's 'April Thesis' was presented to a small gathering of leading members of the Bolshevik and Menshevik Parties on April 4th and clarified:

- [T]he war...under the new government of Lvov and Co. unquestionably remains on Russia's part a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of that government...[W]ithout overthrowing capital, it is impossible to end the war by a truly democratic peace, a peace not imposed by violence.
- [T]he country is passing from the first stage of the revolution, which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organization of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.
- No support for the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear.
- Recognition of the fact that in most of the Soviets of Workers Deputies, our party is in a minority...The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers Deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our task is...to present a patient, systematic and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses.

Lenin's "April Theses" was a clarion call for a transfer of power to the soviets – 'All Power to the Soviets'. This was the dividing line between the Bolsheviks and the other radical parties; the SRs and Mensheviks were hostile to real workers power and stood for a democratic capitalism.

Within a few weeks, Lenin's policies had won the majority in the Bolshevik

Party due not only to his prestige in the party but also because these ideas accorded with the deep felt needs of the masses who rejected the Provisional Government's treacherous policies. The enthusiasm for Lenin's new tactics also demonstrated the depth of the Bolsheviks' roots among workers, soldiers and even the peasantry. While some party leaders could imagine that things could be sorted out amicably between the Provisional Government and the Soviets, this was not so for the broader working population: for the soldiers, ending the war was, literally, a question of life and death, for peasants the question of land redistribution was long neglected and for the workers massive wage cuts, military discipline in the factories, and the total lack of union rights were issues that could not be left to a future date. By late April, the Bolsheviks stood out clearly as the only serious political party with a plan to realize the call for 'Land, Bread and Peace'.

Lenin addressing a crowd in St Petersburg

This radical program earned the Bolsheviks a great many enemies among the other radical parties, and even some workers thought they were being 'reckless'. However, as the war dragged on, the economy deteriorated and the crisis in the countryside escalated, overthrowing the ruling class became a plausible solution. Far from narrowing the Bolshevik membership, 'patiently explaining' the party's revolutionary program began to attract more and more workers and soldiers. By May, the Bolsheviks' membership had grown to over 100,000, while the other radical parties stagnated, or began to decompose and split among themselves.

The revolution grows in strength – the April, June and July days

The question of 'War' and 'which power should rule' dominated discussion and debate in the society. On his return from exile in May, Leon Trotsky who was the Chairperson of the St Petersburg Soviet in 1905, called for the workers to take power: "*Do not trust the bourgeoisie; control the leaders; rely only on your own force*."[21] While he was not yet a member of the Bolshevik party, this call echoed the program of the Bolsheviks' 'All Power to the Soviets'. At the same time all other parties compromised themselves irrevocably in the eyes of the Russian masses when they supported the war effort. Nikolay Chkheidze, the Menshevik Chairman of the Soviet made clear that the main aim was to defeat Germany "The slogan for the revolution is 'Down with Wilhelm'"[22]. The main purpose of promoting the war was primarily to strangle the revolution. What these parties did not appreciate was that by this time the Russian army was finished as a fighting force.

The Bolshevik approach to win over the masses throughout the country with their slogan of 'All power to the Soviets' came under pressure from the advanced workers in the major cities that were ready to act. The soldiers of the Petrograd garrison, numbering about 300,000, the Petrograd workers in the Vyborg district, where the cities major factories were located, and the sailors of Kronstadt were impatient to end their suffering. The Bolsheviks tried to avoid the situation where the working class and soldiers in Petrograd moved faster than other parts of the country creating the possibility of them becoming isolated and then crushed by the counterrevolution. However, combined with the high pitched agitation of the Anarchists for immediate direct action, a series of demonstrations, one in April, one in June and one in July – each time larger, better armed and more militant – threatened to spill over into street fighting. Several times Lenin and the Bolsheviks had to pour cold water on their own party's rank and file to keep the lid on. On April 20th mass demonstrations erupted around the continuation of the war and this ended in clashes with rightist forces. In response the Bolsheviks' Petrograd Committee issued slogans for the immediate overthrow of the Provisional Government. Lenin criticized them vehemently for not understanding that the mass of people in the country were not yet ready for revolution.

Revolutions are not made to order. By June, it was clear that at least in Petrograd,

[21] LD Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution
[22] Socialist Worker – T. Chretien, Lenin Prepares the Bolsheviks, p3

the Bolsheviks had won over the majority of the working class, as well as a great deal of the military regiments stationed in the city. The Bolsheviks had placed a great deal of importance on winning over the soldiers – without whose support no revolutionary overthrow could succeed – and had created a special organization, the Military Organization (MO), to conduct organizational and propaganda work among the regiments. On the MO's initiative, the party called a demonstration for June 10. Though party leaders like Lenin viewed it as an opportunity to review the troops, MO leaders hoped it could be the signal for an armed confrontation with the Provisional Government. The Central Committee, however, called off the demonstration when faced by a stern demand to cancel it by the Executive Committee of the Soviet – a move that created a great deal of anger in the party ranks. The Soviet Executive Committee then decided to call its own demonstration on June 18th to show its own strength among the masses. The protest was huge, almost half a million people, with most of the factories and a majority of the military garrison regiments marching under Bolshevik slogans 'All Power to the Soviets'; 'Down with the 10 Capitalist Ministers'; 'Peace for the hovels; war for the palaces'.

Trotsky, Lenin and Kamenev

The June demonstration convinced MO leaders that the time was ripe for the seizure of power. But the question at this point was not whether it was possible to seize power in Petrograd. The question was whether such a seizure would

create a 'Paris Commune' situation, in which the capital city became isolated from the rest of the country. At a June 19 conference of the MO, Lenin argued, "If we were now able to seize power, it is naïve to think that having taken it we would be able to hold it."[23] The party, he noted, had not yet even won a majority of delegates in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets, let alone elsewhere in the country.

The 'July Days' developed in response to the military offensive called by the War Minister Kerensky. The stage was now set for a far bigger clash than in April. Amid great fanfare from rightist parties, the bourgeoisie, liberals and moderate socialists, War Minister Alexander Kerensky announced a military offensive to begin on June 18 (the offensive collapsed not long after it started under a German counterattack). Under extreme pressure from troops who didn't want to be sent to the front, the Military Organization called for an armed demonstration to begin on July 3. The Bolsheviks' Central Committee at first tried to stop the protest, but when it was clear it would happen anyway, it decided to join it and give it as peaceful a character as possible. Leon Trotsky notes in his *History of the Russian Revolution* that even workers who were members of the Bolshevik Party were losing patience with the party, wondering when it was going to act decisively to turn the situation. Lenin and the other leaders of the Bolsheviks responded by urging calm and insisting that the time wasn't right. "We understand your bitterness," Lenin wrote in *Pravda* on June 21, "*but we say to them: Comrades, an immediate attack would be inexpedient*."[24]

As the demonstrations began, tens of thousands of armed demonstrators marched to the Tauride Palace, the headquarters of the Soviet, and masses of soldiers and workers also marched to the Ksheshinskaya Mansion, where the Bolsheviks were located, demanding speeches. Lenin disappointed the protesters by urging patience and restraint. Confusion as to the aim of the operation was apparent. The difference between those who wanted to convince the Soviets to take power (the Bolshevik Central Committee) and those pushing for an armed insurrection to forcibly overthrow the Provisional Government (the position of the Military Organization and the Kronstadt sailors) was apparent. Provocateurs deliberately shot at Cossacks and regular troops who had been called from the front to put down the demonstration, causing shootouts. After a series of fruitless armed clashes, which included machine-gun and sniper attacks on protesters from the windows of Petrograd's bourgeois districts, the Bolsheviks issued an appeal on July 5th to end the demonstration

[23] Socialist Worker – A. Muldoon, How Workers Power was Organised, p3
[24] ibid. p4

Moments after troops of the Provisional Government opened fire on a demonstration on the Nevskii Prospect, Petrograd, 4 July 1917.

Sensing that the protest had exhausted itself, the participants disbanded. In the end, the protests left hundreds dead.

The July Days were important for the lessons it taught the workers and revolutionaries: "*A prototype of the July Days is to be found in all the old revolutions – with various, but generally speaking unfavorable, and frequently catastrophic, results. This stage is involved in the inner mechanics of a bourgeois revolution, inasmuch as that class, which sacrifices most for the success of the revolution and hopes the most from it, receives the least of all. The natural law of the process is perfectly clear. The possessing class which is brought to power by the revolution is inclined to think that with this the revolution has accomplished its mission, and is therefore most of all concerned to demonstrate its reliability to the forces of reaction.*"[25] The masses learnt that neither the bourgeoisie nor those socialists who proclaim themselves to be on the side of the masses could be trusted. While the masses wanted to turn over the power to the soviets, the leadership of the soviets was not ready to take power.

Leon Trotsky called the July Days a "semi-revolution", where many lessons were taught to the masses through their own experience. The indignation and disappointment of the popular masses in the February revolution led them to be in a hurry to settle questions with their old allies. They imagined that

[25] ibid. p4

with a new blow they could carry through, or correct, that which they did not accomplish before. Thus they pushed for a new revolution, a revolution without preparation, without program, without estimation of the reserves, without calculation of consequences. This only served the ruling class who were waiting for a stormy outbreak from below, in order to smash it by force. This is the social and psychological basis of that supplementary semi-revolution, which has more than once in history become the starting point of a victorious counterrevolution.

Repression and Reaction – preparations for power

For the first few weeks after the July demonstrations, it seemed that the reaction might be victorious as a wave of demoralization sunk in among workers and soldiers. There were physical attacks against the Bolshevik Party and the left in general. Hundreds were arrested, including Kamenev, Raskolnikov and other leading Bolsheviks. Fearing for his life, Lenin went into hiding, along with Zinoviev. Trotsky as Chairperson of the St. Petersburg Soviet was also arrested. The party was driven from its headquarters and its press was shut down. Several local party offices were raided and destroyed. Using false evidence, Lenin was accused of being a German agent. This slander campaign had its effect, in particular, among some of the least conscious workers and soldiers. A handful of Bolshevik workers were turned out of factories, and the party's recruitment dried up. For a period, the military barracks excluded all Bolsheviks. The Soviet Executive Committee still under the leadership of the SRs and Mensheviks issued a proclamation on July 8th demanding that the government "crush all anarchical outbursts." Street assemblies were banned, and capital punishment was restored in the military in the war zone. The extreme right began acting more openly and confidently. Most significantly, all citizens were ordered to turn in their weapons.

The threat of reaction did not deter the workers from welcoming the Bolsheviks who were seen as guardians of the revolution. While the party's recruitment briefly stopped, it lost very few members, and its organization survived the period intact. The local district soviets which were more in touch with the rank-and-file mood showed little interest in attacking Bolsheviks. They passed a resolution protesting the arrest and persecution of Bolsheviks. Suspicious of the government Russian workers refused to give up their arms, they stopped left-wing soldiers from being sent to the front, resisted the reinstitution of the death penalty and challenged the growth of the extreme right. The reaction was relatively short-lived, and the movement bounced back in a matter of a month –

stronger, deeper and broader. By the beginning of August, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were reporting a mass exodus of members from their parties who were now joining the Bolshevik Party.

Under conditions of repression and taking account of the role of the Soviet leadership in this, Lenin argued that the Soviets had exhausted themselves as revolutionary organs of power and that the party should abandon its call for 'All Power to the Soviets'. In its place he saw the factory committees aligned to the trade unions and the party itself as the possible source of taking the revolution forward. This was an exaggeration of the depth of the reaction and Bolshevik activists more in touch with developments on the ground disagreed. At the Sixth Party Congress, held on July 26th, Bolshevik rank and file militants argued that acting outside and against the soviets would create a split between revolutionary workers and poor peasants, who gave their allegiance to the soviet. Volodarsky, the party's most popular orator argued that one cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater and it would be wrong to equate the local and district soviets with the Soviet Executive Committee. The task was still to win a Bolshevik majority in them.

The Kornilov Coup, a turning point of the revolution

The instability in the country contributed to further peasant seizures of land, the growing desertion of soldiers in large numbers and the increased militancy of the factory workers. The Bolsheviks' popularity grew and by July 26th the party had 240,000 members. This popularity was fed by the growing sentiment that the second coalition government, led by Alexander Kerensky, wasn't prepared to defend the revolution against the rightwing. The Kerensky government was weak and conciliatory to the generals and the capitalists. These developments deeply worried the liberals and conservatives who were becoming impatient and began to look to a military solution, as Pavel Milyukov, leader of the Cadets declared, "*We should no longer commit ourselves to the revolution. Quite the opposite: we need to prepare and accumulate the strength to fight it.*"[26]

General Kornilov waving to crowds at the State Convocation called by the Provisional Government, 12-15 August 1917

Kerensky found himself caught between a growing revolutionary movement and the conservatives who were calling for a clamp down on the masses. Both forces, the Bolsheviks who increasingly spoke on behalf of the mass of workers and soldiers and the capitalists, officers and landowners were rapidly turning their back on his government. Kerensky was afraid to impose draconian measures of repression as this would only draw the masses back onto the streets and this would threaten the very existence of his government. At the same time he could not introduce a fully fledged reform program as this would antagonize his own support base amongst the capitalists and landowners. Kerensky had to do something to conciliate the antagonistic forces and on August 12-14 he called together a consultative body called the Moscow State Conference to rally support for his government. The Bolsheviks called for a general strike to protest the conference and "*the strike came off magnificently. There were no lights, no tramcars; the factories and shops were closed, and the railroad yards and stations; even the waiters in the restaurants had gone on strike.*"[27] Inside the conference, the forces of the right dominated. Gen. Kornilov emerged as the leading figure around which the right-wing forces were gathering. Kornilov, who had been appointed by Kerensky as commander of the armed forces in early July, was seen as the strong man who re-imposed the death penalty in the army and had called for martial law in the factories, railways and the mines. Kornilov's plan was to smash the Soviets and implement his program. Kerensky, who was increasingly becoming isolated, gave the order on August 17th for Kornilov's counter-revolutionary plan to be supported by his government.

This set the stage for a confrontation between the forces of the revolution and those of the counter-revolution. Kornilov began to mobilize his forces to march on the capital of Petrograd. Realizing that Kornilov's victory would mean not only the defeat of the Bolsheviks, but also the Soviets and his own government, Kerensky on August 27th issued a proclamation announcing that Kornilov was moving against Petrograd with the aim of establishing a dictatorship. He demanded that Kornilov immediately resign his post. He then shut himself behind closed doors with advisers and demanded power to form an all-powerful six-man directory.

[26] Socialist Worker – Paul D'Amato, Repression and Resurgence, p3
[27] ibid. p5

Russian Civil War clockwise from top: Soldiers of the Don Army in 1919; a White infantry division in March 1920; soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Army; Leon Trotsky in 1918; hanging of workers in Yekaterinoslav by the Austro-Hungarian Army, April 1918. *Source: wikipedia*

On the same night the Soviet Executive Committee met all night to discuss what position to take on Kerensky's government given his obvious collusion with Kornilov and the practical defense of Petrograd. They formed a military defense body, the 'Committee for Struggle against the Counter-Revolution' which was to lead the defense of Petrograd against the forces of reaction led by Kornilov. The Bolsheviks were in a quandary as they had been forced to go into hiding and many had been imprisoned. Lenin argued that it was necessary to fight the forces of Kornilov and defeat them: "*We shall fight; we are fighting against Kornilov, just as Kerensky's troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness. There is the difference...the war against Kornilov must be conducted in a revolutionary way, by drawing the masses in.*"[28] With the official government paralyzed, the 'Committee for Struggle' became the command center for the defense of Petrograd. To this was joined an extraordinary mobilization of the masses from below. Between August 27th and 30th, more than 240 ad-hoc revolutionary committees sprang up. The Bolsheviks demanded the arming of the workers and formed workers' militias. Lines of workers signed up to become "Red Guards," and the Bolshevik Military Organization took the lead in their training and deployment. Unarmed workers dug trenches, erected barbed wire fencing around the approaches to the city and built barricades. At the Putilov works, workers labored through the night to finish construction of weapons

[28] ibid. p6

The Red Army on the march to Smolnyi, 1918, under the banners 'All power to the Soviets'

that were then sent to the field without testing. Metal workers accompanied the weapons to the field and adjusted them on the spot. The railway and telegraph workers played a particularly decisive role.

Teams of agitators were sent out to argue with Kornilov's troops. Many of the soldiers had not been told why they were being sent towards Petrograd, and they turned on their officers. In one division, the troops raised a red flag inscribed "Land and Freedom" and arrested their officer. Within four days, the Kornilov plot had collapsed. His forces disintegrated as the workers and soldiers again took the center stage of revolution. Trotsky explained the astonishing collapse of the coup: "*Their number seemed enormous to judge by telegrams, speeches of greeting, newspaper articles. But strange to say, now when the hour had come to reveal themselves, they had disappeared.*"[29] The historian Alexander Rabinowitch described the defense of Petrograd against Kornilov as a spontaneous mass upheaval, "*It would be difficult to find, in recent history, a more powerful, effective display of largely spontaneous and unified mass political action,*"[30] he wrote.

Again, the inexhaustible vitality of the soviet form of organization was revealed. Although paralyzed above by the leadership of the compromisers, the soviets were reborn again from below at the critical moment, under pressure from the masses. But within this "spontaneous" uprising, it was revealed that the Bolshevik organizers were prepared to take the initiative to defend the revolution. As working-class leaders, they played a key role in uniting workers and soldiers in the defense of the city. Trotsky records that "*everywhere, committees for revolutionary defense were organized, into which the Bolsheviks entered only as a minority. This did not hinder the Bolsheviks from assuming the leading role... They smashed down the barriers blocking them from the Menshevik workers and especially from the Socialist Revolutionary soldiers, and carried them along in their wake.*"[31]

When a group of sailors visited Trotsky and other imprisoned revolutionaries, they asked if it was not time to arrest Kerensky. "*No, not yet,*" *was the answer. "Use Kerensky as a gun-rest to shoot Kornilov. Afterward, we will settle with Kerensky.*"[32] With the defeat of Kornilov, a radicalized and mobilized working class confronted the question of the direction and aims of the revolution. Throughout the crisis, the Bolsheviks had never stopped pointing out that it

[29] LD. Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution
[30] Socialist Worker – Paul D'Amato, Repression and Resurgence, p6
[31] LD. Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution
[32] ibid.

was Kerensky who had paved the way for Kornilov. Many workers and soldiers saw with their own eyes that it was the Bolsheviks who had most resolutely and energetically defended the city. On September 1, the day when Kornilov was arrested, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies adopted a resolution calling for a transfer of power to the revolutionary proletariat and peasants, and the proclamation of a democratic republic. The stage was set for the next and final stage of the revolution.

The Workers Take Power

The biggest ever experiment in participative democracy, thousands of city and village soviets were established to govern Russia. This is the Petrograd Soviet in 1918, to which 20,000 workers had been elected in four years. *Source: Albert Rhys Williams*

The defeat of the coup attempt led by the right-wing General Kornilov at the end of August set the stage for the final act of the Russian Revolution. The Provisional Government, led by Alexander Kerensky, was further compromised in the eyes of Russian workers. Kerensky had continued to prosecute the war and was complicit in putting Kornilov in a position of power in the first place.

The moderate socialist parties, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SR), still had the support of a large section of workers, soldiers and peasants,

but their collaboration with the Provisional Government had tarnished their standing. By contrast, the Bolsheviks because of their members' decisive role in defeating Kornilov and their commitment to defending the soviets won greater influence. By September, the Bolsheviks were the majority in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets and others across Russia. Leon Trotsky was elected Chairperson of the Petrograd Soviet. "*The mass mood was not specifically Bolshevik in the sense of reflecting a desire for a Bolshevik government*," wrote historian Alexander Rabinowitch. "*As the flood of post-Kornilov political resolutions revealed, Petrograd soldiers, sailors and workers were attracted more than ever by the goal of creating a soviet government uniting all soviet elements. And in their eyes, the Bolsheviks stood for soviet power, soviet democracy*."[33]

The inherently unstable situation of dual power, the soviets on the one hand, and the Provisional Government on the other, was coming to a head. "*It was a question*," Trotsky wrote, "*of one of the elements of a dual power making an insurrection against the other*."[34] 'All Power to the Soviets' was becoming the clear, if not fully formed, aspiration of Russian workers, soldiers and some peasants. But it wasn't the aim of Russia's socialist parties, the Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and even some Bolsheviks, who maintained a murky vision of a broad-based, socialist coalition government to succeed Kerensky's Provisional Government, to take power. By mid-September, the Bolsheviks were oriented around influencing the Democratic State Conference, a body organized by Menshevik and SR leaders in the Provisional Government to rival the Congress of Soviets. The Democratic State Conference would pave the way for a pre-Parliament, a national body representing all classes in Russia, whose opening ceremony was to be presided over by Kerensky.

To Lenin, this orientation was all wrong. He believed the Bolsheviks were missing a decisive opportunity to organize the overthrow of the Kerensky government and claim power for the soviets. He launched a campaign within the party, first among its leadership, and then the rank and file, to take immediate steps toward organizing an insurrection. The reluctance to embrace Lenin's call for insurrection came from a fear amongst some Bolsheviks, as with the July Days, that a premature action would backfire. But Lenin insisted that the situation had changed. As he wrote: "*Comrades! Look around you, see what is happening in the countryside, see what is happening in the army, and you will realize that the peasants and soldiers cannot tolerate it any longer...Go to the barracks, go to the Cossack units, go to the working people and explain the truth to them. If power is in the hands of the soviets...there will be a workers and peasants' government in Russia; it will immediately, without losing a single day, offer a just peace to all belligerent peoples...if power is in the hands of the soviets, the landowners estates*

[33] Socialist Worker – Paul D'Amato, The Party and the revolution, p1
[34] ibid. p1

will immediately be declared the inalienable property of the whole people...No, not one more day are the people willing to suffer postponement."[35]

With the question of the insurrection still unsettled, the Bolsheviks came to terms with the nature of the pre-Parliament and staged a dramatic walkout, led by Trotsky.

The Bolshevik Central Committee met on October 10th, the first time Lenin debated his comrades face to face about the new situation. Lenin insisted that "*the political situation is fully ripe for the transfer of power.*"[36] This resolution was passed by a vote of 10-2. But debates persisted with Lenin's longtime collaborators, Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev steadfastly opposed to an insurrection. They were skeptical of both Bolsheviks' supposed strength and the Provisional Government's weakness. Zinoviev and Kamenev proposed that the party maintain a "defensive posture" and continue plans to work within a Constituent Assembly, as promised by Kerensky. Their conception of working class power was that the "*soviets must be a revolver pointed at the head of the government, with the demand to convene the Constituent Assembly and stop all Kornilovite plots.*"[37] Lenin was quite upset at this: "*Someone has very pointedly retorted to our pessimist: 'Is it a revolver with no cartridges?'...[If] it is to be a revolver 'with cartridges,' this cannot mean anything but technical preparation for an uprising; the cartridges have to be procured, the revolver has to be loaded and cartridges alone will not be enough*."[38]

Lenin was proved right about the need to prepare for an insurrection. But he was wrong about how it should take place: both on the question that the Bolsheviks should themselves carry out the insurrection in the name of the soviets, and that this should begin in Moscow. Other Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky who had now joined the party, argued that support for the Bolshevik party came directly from their policies in the Soviets and that the insurrection should take place through the Soviets. The party agreed to this approach and the Petrograd Soviet established a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organize for this. Under Trotsky's leadership, the MRC began to seize on any attempt at repression by the Provisional Government to not only defend the soviets, but to prepare to expand the scope of soviet power.

The crucial moment arrived in October when the Kerensky government suddenly announced plans to move the bulk of the Petrograd garrison, now as much a center of the revolution as the city's factories, to the front. "In unison,"

[35] ibid. p2
[36] ibid. p3
[37] ibid. p3
[38] ibid. p3

Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee *Source: An Illustrated history of the Russian Revolution, New York: International Publishers 1928*

Rabinowitch wrote, "*garrison troops proclaimed their lack of confidence in the Provisional Government and demanded the transfer of power to the soviets.*"[39] The Military Revolutionary Committee sent its own commissars to replace the government's representatives in all garrison units. The committee issued an order that "*no directives to the garrison not signed by the Military Revolutionary Committee should be considered valid.*"[40] Effectively, the soviet had taken control of the armed forces in Petrograd away from Kerensky "*disarming the Provisional Government without firing a shot,*"[41] Rabinowitch noted.

Meanwhile, preparations were taking place for the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets where the Bolsheviks were certain to have the majority of delegates. On the eve of the congress, the Provisional Government made a last attempt at a crackdown. Kerensky ordered the bridges raised in the center of the capital to disrupt movement, just as the Tsar had done during the February Revolution. The MRC's countermoves were coordinated out of the Smolny Institute – formerly a woman's boarding school, which had been taken over as the central headquarters of the Petrograd soviet, and where the leaders of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary groups gathered. "*Agitators, organizers, leaders of*

[39] ibid. p5
[40] ibid. p5
[41] ibid. p5

factories, regiments, districts would appear," wrote Trotsky, "*to get news, to check up on their own activities and return to their posts.*"[42]

Following the call of the Petrograd soviet on the 22nd of October for the insurrection to proceed, meetings and assemblies were held in all neighborhoods and factories, and they were generally in agreement that the Kerensky government should be overthrown and that all power be transferred to the Soviets. This was not only supported by the Bolsheviks but the whole proletariat of Petrograd. It was a gigantic action in which industrial workers, white collar workers, soldiers, women, children, even many Cossacks, discussed all the political questions of the moment including the question of insurrection, "*The insurrection was so to speak organised for a fixed date: 25 October. It was not fixed by a secret meetings, but openly and publicly, and the triumphant revolution took place precisely on 25 October (6 November in the Russian calendar) as had been foreseen in advance. Universal history has seen a great number of revolts and revolutions, but we would look in vain for another insurrection by an oppressed class which took place on a set date and publicly and which was carried out victoriously on the day announced. In this sense the November revolution was unique and incomparable.*"[43]

The process by which armed workers and soldiers took power in Petrograd was strikingly simple. A company of soldiers "*was given the task of seizing the nearby Nikolaevsky railroad station. In less than a quarter of an hour, the station was occupied by strong guards without a blow.*"[44] Government buildings, transport stations, bridges, communications centers were all were occupied by similar detachments. With ease, a group of 40 sailors seized the State Bank building on the Ekaterininsky Canal. Late on October 25th, detachments of armed workers seized the Winter Palace, where Kerensky had holed up with other top officials of the Provisional Government. Kerensky himself had fled hours earlier. The remaining ministers were arrested without a fight. The empty threats of the bourgeoisie, not to mention the moderate socialists, like the Mensheviks, who predicted chaos and anarchy proved to be unfounded. Even police reports from that night indicate an absence of disorder. Trotsky triumphantly noted that "*The job was done. It was not necessary to employ force, for there was no resistance. The insurrectionary masses lifted their elbows and pushed out the lords of yesterday.*"[45]

The next morning, the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets convened and adopted a decree transferring power to the soviets. The Provisional Government had been toppled, and the demand for 'All Power to the Soviets', the embodiment of workers' democratic self-rule, was made a reality.

[42] LD. Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution
[43] ibid.
[44] ibid.
[45] ibid.

Lenin declares the victory of the revolution to the Second All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, 26 October (8 November) 1917, depicted in this painting by Valentin Serov. The first decrees adopted by the Congress were on Peace and Land!

The Lessons of October

The ruling class continues to spew out a flood of lies about the Russian Revolution. Works like *The end of an illusion* or *The Black Book of Communism* do little more than repeat the propaganda that was already circulating at the time: the revolution was no more than a 'putsch' by the Bolsheviks; Lenin was an agent of German imperialism, etc. The bourgeoisie can only see workers' revolutions as acts of collective madness, a lapse into chaos doomed to end horribly. Bourgeois ideology cannot fathom that the exploited can act in their own interest. The collective and conscious action of the working majority is a notion that bourgeois thought rejects as an unnatural utopia.

Leon Trotsky in his famous defense of the Russian Revolution against Stalinist distortions implored militants and especially the youth: *"…[S]tudy (ing) the October revolution…on the scale of the international…It is indispensable for the entire party, especially its younger generation, to study and assimilate step by step the experience of October, which provided the supreme, the incontestable and irrevocable test of the past and opened wide the gates of the future…"*[46]

[46] ibid.

The crucible of October furnished the acid test of Marxist strategy and the caliber of its leadership. It was the first and only time in history that the working class through their Workers Councils took power, and the importance of learning from this history is that "a revolutionary situation can be lost for several years in the course of a few day" when they are ignored or trampled on. These lessons while not a comprehensive list are guidelines for future revolutions:

- The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events (Trotsky). In ordinary times history is made by specialists in that line of business – kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But when the old order becomes no longer endurable for the masses, they break over the barriers, sweep aside their traditional representatives and create by their own interference the groundwork for a new regime, "*The history of a revolution is for us first of all the history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.*"[47]
- While objective economic developments and changes in the relation between classes are the basis on which revolutions develop and mature, it is the swift, intense and passionate changes in the psychology of classes which explain revolutions. Society does not change its institutions the way a mechanic changes his instruments. For decades oppositional criticism and demonstrations/strikes/riots act as a safety valve for mass dissatisfaction. Entirely exceptional conditions tear off the fetters of conservatism and

[47] ibid.

The Red Army attack Kronstadt, March 1921. The naval base had rebelled against the Bolsheviks and in support of freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists and for the Left Socialist parties. The rebellion was crushed after a 12-day military campaign, resulting in several thousand deaths.

explain the swift changes in mass views and moods. It is the chronic lag of ideas and relations behind new objective conditions that create that leaping movement of ideas and passions that explain revolutions.

- However, whatever our exploiters might think, the reality is that in 1917 the working class was able to rise up collectively and consciously against this inhuman system. It showed that the workers are not dumb beasts, good only for working and obeying. On the contrary, these revolutionary events revealed the enormous and often unsuspected capacities of the proletariat, freeing a torrent of creative energy and a prodigious dynamic of collective mental transformation. John Reed summed up the intense ebullience of proletarian life during the year 1917: "*All Russia was learning to read, and **reading** – politics, economics, history – because the people wanted to **know**.... The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, the first six months, tons, car-loads, train-loads of literature, saturating the land.... Then the Talk.... Meetings in the trenches at the front, in village squares, factories...What a marvelous sight to see: Putilovsky Zavod (the Putilov factory) pour out in its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say, as long as they would talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street-corner was a public tribune. In railway carriages, street-cars, always the spurting up of impromptu debate, everywhere... At every meeting, attempts to limit the time of speakers voted down, and every man free to express the thought that was in him.*"[48]

  This huge outpouring of discussion, this thirst for collective reflection and action was materialised very concretely in the soviets (workers' councils), which allowed the workers to organise themselves and fight as a united class.

- This capacity of the working class to enter into struggle collectively and consciously was no sudden miracle; it was the fruit of numerous struggles and of a long process of subterranean reflection. Marx often compared the working class to an old mole slowly burrowing away under the earth only to emerge suddenly and unexpectedly into the clear light of day. Through the insurrection of October 1917 we saw the imprint of the experiences of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian revolution of 1905, of the political battles fought by the Communist League, the First and Second Internationals, the Zimmerwald, the German Spartacists and the Bolshevik party in Russia. The Russian revolution was certainly a response to the war, to hunger and the barbarism of dying Tsarism, but it was also and above

[48] J. Reed, Ten days that shook the world

all a conscious response, guided by the historic and worldwide continuity of the proletarian movement. Concretely, the Russian workers, prior to the victorious insurrection, had lived through the great struggles of 1898, 1902, the 1905 revolution and the battles of 1912-14.

- The masses go into revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a political programme, which itself still requires the test of events, and the approval of the masses. The fundamental political processes of a revolution consist in the gradual comprehension of the class of the problems arising from the social crisis in society "the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations". The different stages of the revolutionary process express the growing pressure to the left of the masses.

- Political parties and leaders constitute not an independent but nevertheless very important element in the process "*Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box.*"[49] Nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.

- Throughout Russia, far beyond Petrograd, a huge number of soviets called for the seizure of power or took it themselves, marking the victory of the insurrection. The Bolshevik party knew very well that the revolution could not be carried out just by the party or by the Petrograd workers alone; it was a task for the whole proletariat. The events proved that Lenin and Trotsky were right to have said that the soviets, as soon as they appeared in the mass strikes of 1905, were "*the finally discovered form of the dictatorship of the proletariat*". In 1917, this unitary organisation of the fighting proletariat, based on the generalisation of sovereign assemblies and their centralisation through elected and revocable delegates, played an essential political role in the seizure of power, whereas the trade unions didn't play any role at all.

- Alongside the soviets, another form of working class organisation played a fundamental, vital role in the victory of the insurrection. The Bolshevik party was indispensable to the victory of the revolution, "*After October… events have proved that without a party capable of directing the proletarian revolution, the revolution itself is rendered impossible. The proletariat cannot seize power by a spontaneous uprising.*"[50] While the soviets enabled the whole working class to struggle collectively, the party, representing the most determined and conscious fraction of the class, had the role of participating

[49] L.D. Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution
[50] ibid.

actively in the movement, of facilitating the widest and deepest possible development of consciousness in the class, and of formulating proposals that could provide a clear orientation for the activity of the class. The masses took power through the soviets, but the class party was no less indispensable. In July 1917, the intervention of the party was decisive in avoiding a definitive defeat. In October 1917, it was again the party which guided the class towards the taking of power. On the other hand, the October revolution showed very clearly that the party must not and cannot replace the soviets as an expression of working class democracy.

- We must not forget that October 1917 was the proletariat's first experience of a successful insurrection on the scale of an entire country. For the Bolsheviks it was clear that the Russian revolution was only the first act of the international revolution. The insurrection of October 1917 was in fact the most advanced outpost of a worldwide revolutionary wave, of a series of titanic struggles in which the proletariat came close to overthrowing capitalism. In 1917, it overturned bourgeois power in Russia. Between 1918 and 1923, it launched a series of battles in the central country of Europe, Germany. The revolutionary wave spread rapidly throughout the globe. Wherever a developed working class existed, the proletariat rose up against its exploiters: from Italy to Canada, from Hungary to China. The Russian experience confirmed Marx's understanding that revolutions take place within nation states, expand to the international arena and are completed on a world scale.
- The international dimension of the revolutionary wave of the years 1917-1923 proved that proletarian internationalism was not just a fine ideal and a great abstract principle but a real and tangible reality. In the face of the bloody nationalism of the bourgeoisie and the barbarism of the First World War, the working class responded with its international solidarity. "*There is no socialism outside the international solidarity of the proletariat.*"[51]

[51] ibid.

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