

## What Were the Reasons for Bolshevik Success in October 1917?

By 1916, Imperial Russia was locked into a European war which had already been raging for close to two years. Russian Armies had suffered enormous losses and setbacks right from the opening campaigns. In 1914, the Russian armies invading East Prussia had been badly mauled, the Second Army under General Samsonov being surrounded and all but destroyed at the Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914 (Stevenson, D. (2004)). There had been some successes, notably those won by General Alexei Brusilov's Eighth Army and the "Southern Front" ("Army Group") against the Austro-Hungarian Armies invading from Galicia and by the end of that campaign the Austrian Commander at AOK (*Armee Oberkommando*, High Command) Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, was forced to retire to the Carpathian line and the Dunajec constituting for the Austrians a serious reverse (Stevenson, D. (2004)). 1915 saw the fall of the great Austro-Hungarian fortress of Przemyśl to the Tsar's Armies before counter-attack drove the Russians out of much of Poland and Lithuania. Despite remarkable recovery on the part of the Russian Army, 1916 also failed to deliver victory, with only General Brusilov's attack against the Hapsburg armies delivering any measure of success, and this too failed to initiate a 'war-winning' breakthrough. Russia's allies were faring little better; Britain and France were bogged down on the western front at Verdun and on the Somme and were having little success in the side-theatres of Gallipoli, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Salonika. Italy entered the war in 1915 but was stuck-fast in successive futile attacks on the Isonzo and Romania, which also entered the war on the entente's side in 1915, had been overrun by the Central Powers (Stevenson, D. (2004)). The outlook for Stavka (the Russian High Command) was grim.

Domestically, the tirade of defeats and setbacks began to alienate the Russian elite and in particular the groups of reformists and moderates in the Russian Duma which had originally been prepared to support the war. A number of these realised that a lost war would almost certainly lead to an upsurge of revolutionary activity and thus formed an alliance, the "Progressive Bloc", of Kadets, Octobrists and other liberal or conservative minded groups (Chubarov, A. (1999)). As the war progressed and the outlook continued to worsen, the Bloc began to call for ever more wide-ranging change, eventually calling for the Tsar to sack his Government, the incompetence of whom many blamed for Russia's current situation, and to form a government which enjoyed the support of the Duma; effectively constitutional monarchy (Chubarov, A. (1999)). Nicholas II characteristically rejected any change. He was increasingly out of touch with domestic politics ever since his decision to depart Petrograd to command at the fronts. In his stead, Government was largely conducted by the Empress Alexandra, with the ever-present and ever-controversial Grigori Rasputin alongside. The fact that the Duma had been marginalised while the Imperial court ruled mostly by decree gave the appearance to some observers that the constitution was being ignored. In time, given Nicholas' intransigence, the ever worsening state of the Russian home-front and the ongoing alienation of the Duma, the mood grew in the Progressive Bloc that the only solution was to remove the Tsar (Chubarov, A. (1999)).

This opposition was expressed in the first of 1917's two revolutions, in February-March. In the preceding months industry had been experiencing a growing strike movement but it was a lock-out at one of Petrograd's largest industrial plants, the Putilov metalworks on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February, which ignited the revolution. This action brought crowds of workers into the streets, the numbers of whom were boosted when on the 23<sup>rd</sup> large numbers of female textile workers went on strike in protest over food shortages. By the end of February approximately 80% of the capital's workers were refusing to work (Chubarov, A. (1999)). The protests in Petrograd grew as the protesters were joined by

members of the middle class; teachers, lawyers, students, until the situation began to escape the control of the garrison commander, General Khabalov, although he was reluctant to admit such to Stavka until it was arguably too late. Although Khabalov's troops obeyed orders to fire on the protesters on the 26<sup>th</sup> (Acton, E. (1995)), on the 27<sup>th</sup>, troops of some of the garrison regiments mutinied and Khabalov ordered the remaining loyalists not to resist: the city, for now, was lost (Chubarov, A. (1999)). It has been speculated that swift, decisive action could have retaken the city and crushed the revolution. Indeed, once news reached Stavka a relief column was despatched under General Ivanov, however, owing in part to Khabalov's earlier reticence, it was despatched too late and would never reach the city (Acton, E. (1995)). Upon receiving news of the revolt, Nicholas attempted to return to Petrograd, making his way back from the front by rail. By the time the Imperial train reached Pskov, home of Headquarters Northern Front, on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, it became stranded by striking railway workers. During this time, the situation had escalated to a point where the Duma leader, the Octobrist M. V. Rodzianko, felt he could no longer accept the formation of any new ministry associated with the monarchy. Critically for Nicholas, upon hearing of the rapid spread of mutiny as far as the Baltic Fleet at Kronstadt and the garrison in Moscow, the head of the Stavka, General Alekseyev, came to the same decision (Acton, E. (1995)). While stranded in his train at Pskov, Nicholas was instructed that he had lost the confidence of the Army and told he must abdicate, which he did so for himself and the Tsarevich Alexei, in favour of Nicholas' brother Grand Duke Michael. The Grand Duke's reading of the situation matched that of Rodzianko, he refused the crown and the monarchy disappeared (Chubarov, A. (1999)).

One of the reasons for the escalation of Rodzianko's demands over the days preceding Nicholas' abdication was news of the establishment, on the 27<sup>th</sup> February, of a Soviet of Worker's Deputies in the Capital, with the potential to challenge the Duma for leadership of the revolution. On the same day a number of leading members of the Duma and other prominent public figures had met to discuss the formation of a new government, without the Tsar. Within a week, this later group would form the "Provisional Government", headed by Prince Lvov and including prominent members as the Kadet leader Miliukov (Minister for Foreign affairs), the Octobrist Guchkov (Minister of War and the Navy) and Alexander Kerensky (Minister of Justice) (Chubarov, A. (1999)). Given its composition, the Provisional Government thus represented much of the upper-middle class, educated, and relatively conservative Progressive Bloc and not the working class revolutionary masses who had swept the Tsar from power. These workers and soldiers found much more adequate representation in the Petrograd Soviet. In this way, alongside other instances of compromise between the Socialist leaders of the Soviet and Liberals in the Provisional Government, and in no small part due to the Soviet's fear of military intervention from the front, the situation arose known as "Dual Power", whereby the Provisional Government officially governed with the Soviet ever-watchful alongside. The difficulty was that, with the support of the armed masses and the garrison troops, the Soviet wielded all practical power, especially following the Soviet's infamous "Order No. 1", subordinating all political decisions relating to the military to the power of the Soviet and allowing for soldiers to elect committees and challenge the orders of their officers. This order, plus the spread of Soviet agents or "Commissars" to the military units of the capital, moved the garrison critically away from government control and towards that of the Soviet.

Of utmost significance regarding Bolshevik success in October 1917 is how they managed to exploit the "Dual Power" system. Equally interesting then, is why the Provisional Government failed to build a power-base of its own prior to October and also why the Petrograd Soviet failed to seize power from the Provisional Government before it came to be dominated by the Bolsheviks over the course of the year. There were numerous reasons why the Soviet, which in early March was perhaps only around 10% Bolshevik, failed, or even refused to attempt to seize power from the Provisional Government. Ideologically, Marxist socialist teaching told the Social Revolutionaries and

Mensheviks in the Soviet that there must be period of bourgeois rule while the "productive forces" of the nation developed before socialism could be reached. However, there are other reasons; the majority of leading members of the Soviet were from the same class background as many in the Provisional Government, and indeed the former Tsarist bureaucracy, and as such they feared the consequences of a truly working-class revolution at that time. Furthermore, fear of a repeat of the failed revolution in 1905 would certainly have played upon the minds of the Deputies in the Soviet (Chubarov, A. (1999)). On the other hand, the Provisional Government, for what token support it enjoyed from the Soviet, was critically weak. Most significantly, it saw itself as only a temporary administration whose primary function was to prepare for elections to a Constituent Assembly. Such an Assembly would enjoy the political mandate to decide on such issues as land reform and peace with Germany. As it stood, the leaders of the Government felt it beyond their remit to do so and thus these issues, of critical importance to the populace, went unaddressed. It has been speculated that, had the Provisional Government quickly called the election and convened the Constituent Assembly that the October Revolution could have been forestalled (Chubarov, A. (1999)). This may well be the case, but the Government procrastinated arguing that the war prevented the vote from being held. They eventually conceded to hold elections in November, which, of course, would be too late.

The result of the Provisional Government's failings and the hesitance of the moderates on the Soviet provided the opportunity for the Bolsheviks, following April 3<sup>rd</sup> rejoined by their illustrious leader, Vladimir Lenin, to come to seize power for themselves. Lenin laid out in his "April Thesis" exactly how this could be achieved; the Bolsheviks must secure the support of the masses, acquire a majority in the Soviet, undermine the Provisional Government's authority and finally transfer the power to the Soviet itself (Chubarov, A. (1999)). The "April Thesis" was soon adopted as formal Party policy. With this newfound cause, the Bolsheviks escalated criticism of the Government and the war and successfully identified themselves with opposition to the ruling bourgeois groups in the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet. Due to the Provisional Government's policies regarding the war, the support of the masses became relatively easy to gain. Most notably, the publication in April of a diplomatic note from Foreign Minister Miliukov to the western allies committing Russia to a "just peace" caused outrage amongst the workers and Miliukov, along with the War Minister Guchkov, were forced to resign. With support for the Provisional Government ever reducing a new government formed, with Kerensky as Minister for War. In an attempt to boost nationalist support for the Provisional Government, a massive assault was launched by the Russian Armies under Brusilov, he having replaced Alekseyev. The assault went in on the 18<sup>th</sup> June/ 1<sup>st</sup> July and although achieving initial success, was hampered by mass desertions and eventually by a crippling German counter attack (Stevenson, D. (2004)). By early July it was clear the assault had failed. Following this disappointment, on the 4<sup>th</sup> a massive demonstration on the streets of Petrograd, including pro-Bolshevik army units called for an end to the war and the fall of the Provisional Government. On this occasion, Lenin argued against the toppling of the Government, pointing out the loyalty of large parts of the army still to the Provisional Government and the un-readiness of the provinces for a mass insurrection (Chubarov, A. (1999)). Despite the stance of the Bolshevik leadership, the demonstration soon became a riot and loyalist troops were forced to open fire, killing perhaps 400 demonstrators and leading to the imposition of martial law. The Bolshevik leadership was forced into hiding and their paper "*Pravda*" was closed down. In the aftermath of the "July Days" Prince Lvov was replaced with Kerensky, who formed a new Coalition Government with the unconditional support of the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik leaders (Chubarov, A. (1999)). Kerensky's government assumed a harder line than that of Lvov, instituting policies such as the return of the death penalty in the army, but this only served to undermine support for the Provisional Government. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, Kerensky organised a "State Conference" in the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in order to rally support for the government. It was a debacle. The most vociferous support was for the new Supreme Commander, General Lavr Kornilov, who had been recently

pressing Kerensky to restore discipline in the army and crush the revolutionary movements. In the resulting "Kornilov coup", the Stavka directed a number of cavalry units to advance on the capital but ultimately to no avail. Kerensky, belatedly disassociating himself with the coup, appealed to the Soviet to defend Petrograd from the counter-revolution. Troops from the garrison, sailors from the Fleet at Kronstadt and the revolutionary "Red Guard" units of armed workers loyal to the Soviet assembled to face the oncoming "counter-revolutionary" forces. Strikes by railway workers prevented the effective concentration of the force and Kornilov was arrested: the coup had failed (Acton, E. (1995)) (Chubarov, A. (1999)). The failure critically damaged Kerensky's public image and his government was now obliged to lift the constraints it had imposed on the Bolsheviks following the July Days. By the 27<sup>th</sup> Kerensky was forced to reform his government, on this occasion included Kadet members, who, with their apparent commitment to defeating Germany and the suspicion of monarchism amongst their members, served to further distance the Provisional Government from the masses.

For the Bolsheviks, the failed "*putch*" had worked wonders. Their popularity was soaring and on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September they had managed to install one of their own number, Lev Trotsky, as president of the Petrograd Soviet; shortly afterwards they enjoyed a full majority (Acton, E. (1995)). Lenin was now convinced that the circumstances were right to seize power by force, and he informed the Bolshevik Central Committee as much from his exile on the Finnish-Russian border. He faced opposition, not only from within the Party in the form of Zinoviev and Kamenev, but also from the Central Executive Committee of the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in which the Bolsheviks were still a minority. This latter problem was due to be rectified soon with the calling of the Second All-Russian Congress and the resistance of Kamenev and Zinoviev was also overruled; commitment to an uprising was confirmed by the Party on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. However, the success of an armed insurrection under the Bolshevik banner was by no means guaranteed (Acton, E. (1995)). Although the role of the Bolsheviks in the Kornilov affair had greatly raised the status of Lenin's party amongst the Red Guards these were still fiercely independent and were by no means bound to fall into line with Bolshevik commands. Likewise, Bolshevik coercive power amongst the units of the Petrograd garrison and the sailors at Kronstadt was limited (Acton, E. (1995)). Due to these fears, Lenin altered his tactics thusly; first, the rising must be made to appear to be in defence of the Left from the Provisional Government; second, the uprising must be seen to be conducted by the Petrograd Soviet, not the Party; and thirdly, since the backing of the Central Executive Committee could not be assured and there was a danger of this body seeking help from the front, complicating the position of the garrison who were to be vital to the revolt, the uprising would be timed to coincide with the meeting of the Second Congress (Acton, E. (1995)).

In the early days of October, events conspired to give the Bolsheviks their chance. When rumours arose that Kerensky intended to remove some of the garrison units from the capital, on the 12<sup>th</sup> the Soviet voted to set up the "Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet" (MRC), ostensibly to protect against a second right-wing *putch* (Chubarov, A (1999)). The MRC was dominated by Bolsheviks and in the following days the MRC and the Soviet, housed alongside the Bolshevik Party in the Smolny Institute, came to a determination both to defend the left and undermine the Provisional Government in so doing. Government efforts then to redeploy some of the garrison units to the front on 21-22 October led the MRC to order troops to contravene the orders of the military establishment, placing much of the garrison beyond government control and moving it closer to the Soviet. Attempts by Kerensky to attack the Bolsheviks themselves then led to an outright explosion. On the 24<sup>th</sup> he ordered pro-government troops to close down the Bolshevik newspapers, as well as bringing legal proceedings against the MRC. In response, the MRC called on the Red Guards and pro-revolutionary forces to resist. Lenin's encouragement to escalate the situation drove the MRC from simple subversion to outright removal of the Provisional Government. The city quickly fell into the hands of the MRC, the crowning moment being the storming of the Winter

Palace on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> October and the capture of the Provisional Government, except for Kerensky (Acton, E. (1995)). In line with Lenin's revised plan, the Second Congress did indeed meet at the same time as the insurrection was in full swing, on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and soon endorsed the formation of a new government. At the time it was expected such a government would encompass all the main socialist parties, however, finding themselves in a minority and enraged by the pre-emptive action of the MRC, the moderate socialists and even the left-wing Mensheviks under Martov stormed out, consigning themselves, in Trotsky's words "to the dustbin of history" (Acton, E. (1995)). The Left Socialist-Revolutionaries remained, who were nevertheless in the minority compared to the Bolsheviks. The Congress then formed a government, the "Council of People's Commissars", and headed by one Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik Party.

Laid out above are the short term circumstances which existed in Russia from the outbreak of war in summer 1914 up until October Revolution of 1917. It is in understanding these events and how they related to the different groups and individuals involved that the truth as to how Lenin's party was able to seize power can be found. The answer, then, should be taken in two parts; how the situation arose which prevailed in the latter months of 1917, and what the role of the Bolsheviks was which allowed them to exploit it. In answering the first part, the situation in Russia was partly a result of the effects of the war and Russia's lack of success against the Central Powers. However, such disappointing results and high casualty rates were factors affecting all the major belligerents and none experienced the sort of social breakdown experienced in Russia. The worst ill-effects felt by the western allies were the limited mutinies amongst the French Army following Nivelle's failed Chemin-des-Dames offensive of 1917. The Russian Army too, in the face of such a daunting strategic outlook, maintained much of its offensive capacity, at least until the breakdown of the Kerensky offensive in August 1917 although it had begun to suffer mass desertion and descent before this (Stevenson, D. (2004)). It was the breakdown of domestic order which broke the resolve of the Army and it is domestically that we can find the root causes of the fall of the Tsarist government, the necessary precondition to the Bolshevik takeover. As Chubarov observes;

"The failure to adapt Russia's antiquated government structure to the fast-changing social and economic conditions was amongst the principal reasons for the downfall of Tsarism" (Chubarov, A. (1999)).

The obstinacy of the Tsarist government was well demonstrated by Nicholas in the latter years of the monarchy and it was his refusal to accept dialogue with the moderates in the Duma which cemented their opposition and, finally, his own downfall. Doubtless, this downfall was precipitated by the monarchy's loss of public credit due to its failures in the war but it was the refusal to compromise with the liberal-moderate opposition and the people, resulting in the loss of support from the Army, which ensured its collapse. The following period of Dual Power then provided the opportunity for the Bolsheviks to expand first their support, and then their influence by the adoption of specific policies designed to win the support of the revolutionary masses. In this the impact of the war is on principal importance. Had the Provisional Government committed itself to peace, or at least only defensive war, or had it rapidly called the Constituent Assembly, Lvov's government may well have been able to rob the Bolsheviks of their anti-war support and secured the transition to democratic government. That successive Provisional Governments failed to address the major issues such as the war and land reform allowed the radical left, such as the Bolsheviks, to politically outflank them and secure the support of the people and great masses of the soldiery. The technical execution of Lenin's "coup" is also important. His leadership of the Bolsheviks; ensuring their commitment to opposing the Provisional Government allowed the Party to avoid being tarnished by association with the as yet still bourgeois government. The Party's role in the Kornilov affair and its ever growing influence in the military units of the capital and

the Red Guards provided considerable leverage, especially when one considers the ramifications of the Soviet's "Order No. 1" in March and the creation of the MRC in October. Thus, by distancing itself from the Provisional Government and the war the Bolsheviks set themselves up to benefit from that government's failings, which were many, mostly concerning failure to address issues such as land, peace and food supply, which would be the focus of the Bolsheviks upon coming to power. The visionary leadership of Lenin and Trotsky then provided the necessary drive and commitment to seize the opportunities given to them by their ever growing support in the Soviet and on the streets and the disaffection of the masses with Kerensky's government. The specific execution of the uprising, coinciding with the meeting of the Second Congress was truly inspired and is another demonstration of the Bolsheviks seizing opportunities. In conclusion, the Bolsheviks succeeded in October 1917 for three principal reasons. Firstly, circumstances developed to their advantage; secondly, the actions of the Bolsheviks themselves not only helped these circumstances to arise, but enabled the Party to fully exploit them, something their adversaries abjectly failed to do; and thirdly, the Provisional Government was too weak and directionless to stop them.

### **Bibliography**

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