

HIS 242

Unit 7 1917 Revolutions and Civil War

Remarks by Professor Blois

The February Revolution The overthrow of the tsarist regime had been discussed and planned by ardent revolutionaries for almost a century, yet it surprised everyone when it occurred. The February Revolution displayed some of the characteristics of 1905--a government weakened by war and spontaneous disturbances by the people [all dates used here in reference to the February revolution, as well as to the later October revolution, are on the Julian or Old Style calendar which continued to be the official one in Russia until the leap from 1 February 1918 to 14 February, a loss of 13 days, which also resulted in the February Rev occurring in early March and the October Rev occurring in early November--applied retroactively]. The major difference was that in 1917 no one supported the tsar. In the words of one historian, "for the first time a tsar had simply become irrelevant." By the beginning of 1917 Nicholas' government had lost even the support of Russia's wartime allies. The memoirs of the British and French ambassadors show that they both hoped for the actual overthrow of the tsarist regime. The three hundred year-old Romanov dynasty came to its end without mourners and, as Riasanovsky puts it, "with hardly a whimper."

The fact that Nicholas was at the front and most lower officials of the government fled the capital allowed the Duma to form a new government. Once the abdication of all the Romanovs had been secured, the new government, which described itself as provisional, began to operate. Russia became probably the first nation in history to drastically extend civil and political rights while prosecuting a full-scale war on her own territory. The

Provisional Government granted full freedoms of speech, religion, and the press. Unions and strike activities were legalized for the first time in Russian history. Russian Poland became independent and minority nationalities were promised autonomy.

Throughout its brief existence, the Provisional Government was plagued by the existence of a shadow government. The Petrograd soviet, active in 1905, reconstituted itself during the February Revolution. By Early March the soviet showed itself an opponent of the Provisional Government by calling for democratically administered army units. The soviet's Order Number One played a large part in the demoralization and eventual collapse of the Russian army.

The soviet was constantly at odds with the Provisional Government until the summer of 1917, when the two began to display more unity of interests. The change came about due to the entry of members of the soviet leadership, such as the socialists Kerensky and Chernov, into high positions in the government. The Bolsheviks later charged that the soviet finally became no more than a fig leaf on the counterrevolutionary government of Kerensky.

Shortcomings of the Provisional Government Because of the peculiarities of its birth and the parallel existence of the soviet, the Provisional Government suffered from a lack of power. Moreover, it failed to cope with the three salient problems facing Russia: the war, redistribution of land, and the impasse of the Russian economy. Not recognizing the depth of public discontent on these matters, the government failed to call the Constituent Assembly, which could have more accurately gauged public feelings and taken appropriate actions. To its sins of omission must be added one singular sin of commission--the Brusilov or Galician offensive of June, 1917. Despite a supposed commitment to a defensive war, Kerensky authorized

this campaign near the now-Ukrainian city of Lviv. At some initial successes, the Russian forces became unwilling to continue fighting. Soon thereafter, an Austro-German counterattack led to a rout, prompting numerous civilian protests against the war during the insurrectionary July Days.

The Kornilov affair was the Provisional Government's last failure of will. Kerensky first supported and later denounced the September counterrevolutionary scheme of Kornilov, the Russian commander-in-chief, to overthrow the government and impose martial law. Only the Bolsheviks profited from the fiasco. Their jailed leaders were released and the Petrograd citizenry was armed by the government. In the wake of the Kornilov affair the Provisional Government could expect support from neither the left nor the right.

While describing shortcomings of the Provisional Government, it is important to note that even while under the stress of war and domestic upheaval, it did have some salient accomplishments. One such was the granting of voting rights for women in July, making Russia the first nation with universal suffrage. When first afforded the opportunity to vote (for the ill-fated Constituent Assembly in November), more women than men did so in many localities.

Lenin before October The February Revolution created an atmosphere very similar to the later one in October. Had he then been in Petrograd, it is quite possible that Lenin could have turned events in his favor. But Lenin was actually one of the last prominent political exiles to return to Russia under the new government's amnesty; and in a speech given in Zurich, where he was then residing, in January 1917, Lenin admitted to his audience that he was getting old--he was 46--and suspected he would not live to see the revolutionary events he had spent his life trying to conjure.

On the evening of April 16 Lenin arrived in Petrograd aboard the so-called sealed train (knowing that Lenin, if in Russia, would speak out against Russia's continuing in the war against it, Germany arranged his transport from Switzerland back to Petrograd via a railway car immune from passport checks as it crossed all national borders en route).

Upon arrival, Lenin was greeted by a large crowd and by a band playing the Marseillaise because Russia lacked a revolutionary anthem. That very night Lenin, reportedly standing atop an armored car, proclaimed his April Theses and the slogans "Peace, Land, Bread" and "All power to the soviets."



There was no photographer present when Lenin reportedly climbed atop an armored car in front of the Finland Station. This is a still image from Sergei Eisenstein's film 'October', made ten years later to commemorate the events of 1917. A worker named Nikandrov who closely resembled Lenin got the role. In August 1991, Boris Yeltsin, perhaps aware he was reprising history, stood on a tank when making his claim for leadership during the failed military coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. It worked for him, as it had for Lenin. It worked out less well for the American presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in 1988. You can google this one up yourself. For a Yeltsin photo, see unit 13. Photo credit: Sputnikimages

Back in Petrograd, Lenin was roundly considered the most over-exuberant and unrealistic of revolutionary leaders, and at first even most Bolsheviks failed to support his rhetoric. Except for Molotov and a very few others, the prominent Bolsheviks were then working for consolidation with the Mensheviks and a conciliatory stance toward the government. Such a reunification of Russian marxists would surely have diminished Lenin's stature and role in the revolutionary movement. However, events were beginning to turn in Lenin's favor, and the workers were becoming constantly more leftist in outlook. Having let the revolutionary situation of February slip through their fingers, the Bolsheviks, now guided by Lenin, had to wait only a few months before another opportunity presented itself.

The October Revolution During the summer of 1917 Lenin was forced to flee to Finland, where he remained until just before the events of October. Before decamping for Finland, Lenin had adopted several disguises. He shaved his mustache and goatee and wore a toupee, and at times wrapped most of his head in a bandage, as if suffering from toothache. While so disguised, he was once stopped by mounted police (with an order for his arrest) but by feigning drunkenness, he was released without having to show his (non-existent) papers. Richard Pipes considers this one of those small moments without which history likely would have moved in a totally different direction: no Lenin, no Bolshevik revolution.

In the aftermath of the Kornilov affair Lenin began to urge a seizure of power before the calling of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. On October 10, Lenin and his closest associates opted for armed insurrection, with only Kamenev and Zinoviev dissenting. The coup, engineered by Trotsky, came on October 26 (OS). Kerensky fled Russia (and eventually immigrated to the U.S., dying in New York City in 1970).

It has been said that rather than seizing power, the Bolsheviks merely picked it up. Indeed, the Provisional Government was very weak and was undergoing a general crisis of will. Lenin perceived the situation accurately and recognized that the opportunity must be grasped, even if it did not meet the objective requisites for a Marxian socialist revolution. Rather than a socialist revolution, then this was Lenin's revolution (or *coup d'etat*, if you wish; both Lenin and Trotsky always referred to it as a perevorot or overthrow, not as a revoliutsiia), a fact that greatly colored the entire history of the Soviet Union.

So, if it was a coup, or overthrow, did the "masses" play any kind of role? Many historians, Pipes among them, contend they did not, but others, including Rex Wade, author of a recent and well-regarded history of the revolution, contend that Russian workers "were determined to have their aspirations fulfilled" and actively took part in all sorts of activities in 1917, while also being largely indifferent to the various parties opposing the government. In this way, they were part of a cresting wave both useful and necessary for Bolshevik success.

The first decrees The Bolsheviks, in contrast to the Provisional Government, acted speedily and energetically on the major problems confronting Russia. In the process, Lenin was not above borrowing the positions of his rivals, such as the SR stand on peasant acquisition of land.

Another example of Bolshevik decisiveness was the doctrine of worker control, Lenin's response to the workers' desire for participation in industrial decision-making, which was implemented in late November, 1917. Other early moves to deal with economic problems included the nationalization of banks and foreign trade, introduction of social insurance legislation, and abolition of inheritance. With these steps Lenin announced his intention to control key elements of the economy, as with the political system. In

December, the Supreme Council (Soviet) of the National Economy (VSNKh) was established to oversee industrial policy in general, and nationalization of firms in particular. However, for the first several months the new government clung to a policy of state capitalism, attempting to compromise with the owners and managers of industrial firms as an alternative to nationalization. The first wave of nationalization came only in the summer of 1918 in response both to the flight of managerial personnel and to the spread of syndicalism among workers.

Russia leaves the war In the first days after the revolution, the Bolsheviks called for immediate peace without annexations or indemnities. By December, peace talks with the Germans were under way. In March 1918, Russia signed the controversial treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, ending Russia's participation in the war, but making onerous concessions to a government with which many felt the Soviet state should not even negotiate.

It has sometimes been asked whether a revolution in foreign policy accompanied the October Revolution. The usual answer is no, since the factors compelling continuity are more pronounced in foreign than in domestic affairs. Foreign policy, heavily conditioned by geography and economics, is biased against rapid change. Moreover, as E. H. Carr has pointed out, once a revolutionary party has achieved power it becomes much more conservative. The need for accommodation with established governments forces continuity upon even a revolutionary regime.

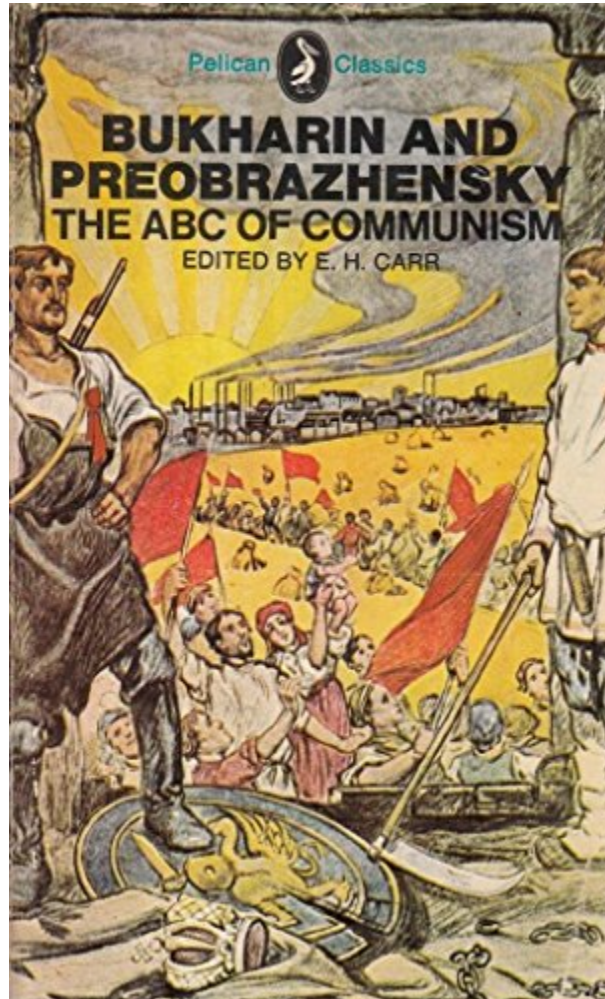
The one crucial fact about Brest with long-range overtones was that given a choice between supporting "world revolution" (the pleas of the German Communist Party not to allow the Kaiser's government the privilege of a single-front war) and the national interest, the Bolsheviks opted for the latter. Indeed, many consider Brest-Litovsk the first step toward the policy

of Socialism in One Country. The late J. P. Nettl wrote that the choice made at Brest "introduced into Soviet thinking a structure of priorities which was to become permanent." That it came long before the Bolsheviks began to view world revolution as an unlikely prospect adds perspective to the significance of Brest, and illustrates the dilemmas facing a revolutionary party risen to power.

War Communism Having secured peace with the Germans, the Bolsheviks were soon forced to confront new enemies. Both intervention by the Allied powers and the Civil War forced the new government into actions it might not otherwise have taken. At the same time, the Soviet government was beginning to institute policies thought to be consistent with Marxian socialism. The interplay of these two realities makes it difficult to characterize the first three years of Soviet rule as either a war-time regime or an attempt to construct socialism. According to Marx, building socialism demanded erecting a "dictatorship of the proletariat," while coping with the Civil War certainly demanded some form of dictatorial control. Thus, the establishment of an authoritarian government seemed a necessity in either case.

War Communism, the term given to the Bolshevik course after mid-1918, has been called a "partly-organized chaos." It sought three goals: nationalization of industrial production, nationalization of transportation and seizure of grain surpluses, and free rationing of any available food and manufactured goods. None of these policies had been introduced in the first months of Soviet power; they were the Bolsheviks' response to war-time needs. And while many elements of War Communism were useful in the context of the Civil War, they were also consistent with long-range goals. For example, the abolition of money was seen by some as a sign of progress toward socialism rather than a retrograde step. Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky, co-authors of The ABC of Communism, championed

War Communism as a conscious attempt to construct socialism in Russia. On the other hand, the glorification of such things as a barter economy can be seen as an effort to make a virtue of necessity.



Cover image from an English language edition of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky's ABC of Communism. It was written as a primer for workers, so they might understand the rapid progress toward communism taking place under War Communism. Of course, War Communism was almost entirely rhetoric and lasted only a couple of years. In the 1920s, Bukharin retreated to espousing a slow route toward communism, while Preobrazhensky remained an advocate of rapid industrial development.

The heroic period of the revolution Should War Communism be considered a legitimate attempt to construct socialism, or was it merely a policy necessitated by the Civil War and Russia's internal disarray? Carr has written that there was logic and precedent from revolutionary doctrine in

many of the steps of War Communism, and the fact that many considered these policies a step toward socialism cannot be ignored. Bukharin was not alone in championing War Communism. The economist and propagandist Lev Kritsman hailed it as "the heroic period of the Russian Revolution." Kritsman reasoned that the "crisis socialism" of the Civil War, by completely destroying the old order, would make it easier to link up with the communist states that were expected to spring up in western Europe, and would clear the stage for a direct transition to socialism in Russia, bypassing the stage of fully-developed capitalism altogether.

With the passing of hopes for world revolution came a new set of priorities for the Soviet state. The transition to socialism was now seen as a long-term process, one which Russia would have to shoulder largely on her own. Recognition of this fact caused a great loss of exuberance on the part of the Bolsheviks and their sympathizers. The task of constructing socialism was now perceived more accurately but less enthusiastically.

Ukraine's failed attempt at statehood

recommended readings, books by Chernov, R. V. Daniels, Melgunov, J. Reed, Pipes (Three Whys), Rex Wade, Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, Cohen (Bukharin), Kennan (Russia and the West), Nove, Schapiro (CPSU)