

# 104 Years Ago, The October Revolution, November 7, 1917: History of the Russian Revolutions and Civil War

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## Introduction

*Part 3 of this series set out the political, economic and intellectual context leading to the Russian Revolutions. This one is an attempt to explain the dynamics of the revolutionary era: how did factors as diverse as the country's participation to WWI, constitutional reforms and economic conditions combine to enable the Bolsheviks to take down the tsarist regime?*

The February Revolution (March 1917 in the Gregorian calendar) was a revolution focused around Petrograd (now St. Petersburg). The Russian Revolution of 1905 is considered as a major factor to explain what sparked the February Revolution. In particular, the events of Bloody Sunday triggered massive unrests. A council of workers called the St. Petersburg Soviet was created and the beginning of a communist movement began.

Meanwhile, a Provisional Government was formed by members of the Imperial parliament or Duma. The Soviets, which stand for "workers' councils", initially permitted the Provisional Government to rule while they kept control over various militias. It took place in the context of major military setbacks during the First World War. After the entry of the Ottoman Empire on the side of the Central Powers in October 1914, Russia was deprived of a critical trade route which led to a minor economic crisis and Russia's inability to provide munitions to their army. As a result, the army leadership considered they did not have the means to quell the revolution and Nicholas II was soon to become the last Emperor of Russia. [1]

The disruption of agriculture was also a considerable problem in Russia, but it was not caused by poor harvests, which had not been significantly altered during war-time. The indirect reason was that the government had been printing off millions of ruble notes in order to finance the war, and by 1917 inflation had made prices increase up to four times what they had been in 1914.

The peasantry made no gain in the sale of their products, since it was largely taken away by the middlemen on whom they depended. Consequently, they tended to revert to subsistence farming. Therefore, the cities were constantly in a situation of food shortage.

In the meantime, rising prices led to higher wages expectations in the factories. In January and February 1916, revolutionary propaganda partially financed by German funds resulted in widespread strikes.

The overall outcome was a growing criticism of the government. The original patriotic excitement, which had caused the name of St. Petersburg to be changed to the less German-sounding Petrograd, may have subsided a little but heavy losses during the war strengthened thoughts that Nicholas II was unfit to rule. [2]

A period of dual power followed the February Revolution, during which the Soviets had the allegiance of the political left and the lower classes while the Provisional Government held state power. Many uprisings and strikes occurred during this period. The Bolsheviks campaigned to stop Russia's involvement in WWI. They managed to turn workers militias under their control into the Red Guards (later the Red Army). [3]

Meanwhile, the Social Democrat leaders in exile had voted in favor of their respective governments. In Paris, Plekhanov had adopted a violently anti-German stand, while Parvus supported the German war effort as the best means of ensuring a revolution in Russia. The Mensheviks, i.e the faction opposing the Bolsheviks within the Social-Democratic Party since a dispute between Lenin and Martov occurred in 1904, largely maintained that Russia had the right to defend itself against Germany, although Martov demanded an end to the war and a settlement on the basis of national self-determination, with no annexations or indemnities. These views were shared by Trotsky, one of the Bolshevik leaders, at a conference in Zimmerwald in September 1915. [4]

The Bolsheviks' plan, as theorized by Lenin in *State and Revolution* was to turn the global war into a civil war of the proletarian soldiers against their own governments, and should a proletarian victory emerge from this in Russia, then their duty would be to spread the revolution across Europe. However, it should be noted that at this point Lenin had fewer than 10,000 followers. Then, his leading role in executing the successful Petrograd protests earned him a larger audience due to his strategic skills. [5]

In September 1915, a combination of Octobrists (advocates of Nicholas II's October Manifesto moderate constitutionalism, not to be confused with revolutionaries) and Kadets (members of the Constitutional Democratic Party) in the Duma demanded the forming of a responsible government. The Tsar rejected the proposal. He had now taken over the position of commander-in-chief and left most of the day-to-day government in the hands of the Empress who was fiercely unpopular, owing to her German origins and the influence that Rasputin, a so-called mystic, was thought to exercise over her. In the October Revolution (November in the Gregorian calendar), the Bolshevik party, led by Lenin, overthrew the Provisional Government in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks appointed themselves as leaders of various ministries, established a political police (the Cheka) and seized control of the countryside. As noted in previous parts of this series, the Tsarist regime's inability to accept reasonable constitutional reforms (combined with poor economic policies) was once again a direct explanation of the emergence of violent alternatives. [6]

## Revolution and Counterrevolution

Under Nicholas II, individuals were expected to show deference to the social hierarchy combined with an exalted sense of duty to the country. Religious faith was instrumental in helping political authorities to maintain order in harsh economic and social conditions

through the influence of the clergy. In this regard, and maybe to a greater extent than any other modern monarch, Nicholas II attached his fate and the future of his dynasty to the concept of the ruler as a saintly and infallible father to his people. Indeed, Article 4 of the 1906 Constitution would concern “the essence of the supreme autocratic power”, stating that obedience to the Tsar was being mandated by God himself.

This absolutist belief made Nicholas II unwilling to allow the progressive reforms that would have alleviated the suffering of its subjects. In order to preserve the ultimate authority of the crown in the wake of the 1905 revolution which incited him to decree limited civil rights and democratic representation, he worked to restrain these liberties. [7]

However, as shown in previous parts of this series, Russian intellectuals had been promoting ideals such as the dignity of the individual and the urge to lean the political system towards democratic representation since the Age of Enlightenment. Not surprisingly, a growing opposition movement had begun to challenge the Romanov monarchy openly well before the turmoil of World War I.

A famous incident known as “Bloody Sunday” (January 1905, not to be confused with events unfolding under the same denomination, especially in South Africa in 1900 and Ireland in 1972) immediately comes to mind: Father Gapon led a massive crowd to the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg to present a petition to the tsar and the official response was Cossacks opening fire on the crowd, killing hundreds. Following this brutal massacre, a general strike was declared demanding a democratic republic.

As a result, one can argue that Bloody Sunday marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Strikes were soon to be overflowed by acts of vandalism, mutinies, anti-Jewish pogroms and assassinations of government officials. In several cities, workers formed Soviets (councils) to direct revolutionary activity. At the end of the year, armed uprisings took place in Moscow, Poland and Latvia. Meanwhile, activists from the professional Union of Unions and local assemblies (*zemstva*) formed the Constitutional Democratic Party, whose members were to known under the informal name of Kadets. [8]

The outcome of the 1905 revolution can be deemed as unclear.

In late 1905, Nicholas issued the October Manifesto, which contained promises to provide changes to Russia’s political system as well as the recognition of basic civil liberties for most citizens. More precisely, it included the creation of a national Duma (parliament), universal male suffrage and essential civil freedoms (conscience, speech, assembly and association). However, the socialists rejected the concessions as insufficient and tried to organize new strikes. One recurrent argument was that this new legislative body was flawed from its inception, because the Tsar maintained the power to veto any legislation he wished and the power to disband the body if he and the Duma could not reach an agreement.

In 1906, the first Russian constitution was established as a revision of the 1832 Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire. It restricted the State Duma’s authority in many ways, including a complete lack of parliamentary control over the appointment or dismissal of cabinet ministers. Trade unions and strikes were legalized, provided that they did not engage in what were considered as “illegal political activities” by the police. [9]

The representatives who accepted these changes formed a political party, the Octobrists. As for the Kadets, they advocated universal suffrage. Because of their continued involvement

in armed uprisings, parties of Marxist inspiration were undecided whether to participate in the upcoming Duma elections.

Meanwhile, conservative factions in general actively opposed the reforms. [10]

Nevertheless, the regime continued to function through this chaotic time and managed to restore order in the cities, the countryside, and the army despite additional pressure from anarchist groups (hundreds of officials were murdered). The Tsar's ability to secure a loan from France before the first Duma met gave him even more momentum to replace former Finance minister Witte (a longtime advocate of constitutional monarchy and the mastermind of Russia's early industrialization policy) with the much more conservative Stolypin as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, the equivalent of Prime Minister. [11]

In March 1906, the First Duma was elected. The Kadets and their allies held a dominant position. Consequently, relations between the Stolypin government and the Duma were hostile from the beginning. A lasting disagreement over the new constitution and peasant reform led to the dissolution of the Duma and the scheduling of new elections. No significant improvement occurred however, when the Second Duma met in 1907. [12]

#### The Stolypin Government and the Coup of June 1907

In June 1907, The Tsar promulgated a new electoral law which considerably reduced the electoral weight of non-Russian and lower-class voters in order to increase the weight of the nobility while dissolving the Second Duma. This so-called "Coup of June 1907" had the desired short-term aim of restoring political stability. The Third Duma was dominated by Octobrists for the first time but disagreements with the government still occurred over several issues, including the reform of the peasant court system, the introduction of *zemstva* in western provinces, the establishment of workers' insurance organizations under police supervision and the autonomous status of Finland. [13]

Within the above-mentioned public policies, Stolypin's most ambitious move was his peasant reform program. It would allow the establishment of private property and reorganize communes. The political reward expected by Stolypin was the emergence of a class of conservative landowning farmers loyal to the Tsar. However, by 1914 only about 10 percent of peasant communes had been dissolved because most peasants did not want to permit outsiders to buy land or to lose the safety of the commune.

From 1907 to 1914, it must be noted, nevertheless, that the economy grew significantly thanks to the generation of domestic capital channeled through recently formed rural banks and cooperatives. By 1914 Russian steel production reached the level of France and Austria-Hungary, while Russia's economic growth rate was one of the highest in the world. A lasting concern about Russia's economy was its external debt level, which stood at almost 4 billion rubles in 1914, and would obviously rise substantially when the country engaged in World War I. [14]

#### A Far East Rush and Renewed Balkan Rivalry

In 1905, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war was the first major military victory of an Asian power over a European one in the modern era. Therefore, Russia's defeat was met with shock in the West while Japan's prestige rose greatly as it came to be seen as a modern nation in terms of military power. The almost entire Baltic and Pacific Russian fleets were

gone and the country's international esteem in the process. This was of enormous importance in the perspective of the future World War I. Indeed, Russia was France's and Serbia's ally, and that defeat would give additional confidence to Germany and Austria-Hungary when respectively planning for war with France and Serbia. [15]

Back to the immediate consequences of the Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia recognized Japan's influence in Korea (later annexed through the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1910) and southern Manchuria as well as British ascendancy in Afghanistan, southern Persia and Tibet. The tsarist regime also had to cede the southern half of Sakhalin Island to Japan and to sign over its 25-year leasehold rights to Port Arthur, including the naval base. However, Russia managed to maintain its sphere of influence in northern Persia and northern Manchuria.

Then, Russia and Japan recognized each other's spheres of influence in Inner Mongolia after China's republican revolution of 1911. Russia also protected its strategic and financial position by entering the Triple Entente with Britain and France.

In the long term, a decreased competition from Russia in the Far East, the weakening of European nations during World War I and the Great Depression that followed allowed Japan to plan military efforts to dominate China and the rest of Asia. These maneuvers eventually led to the Second Sino-Japanese War which defined the Pacific War theatres of World War II. [16]

In Europe, Austria-Hungary and Russia resumed their rivalry in the Balkans, focusing on Bosnia and Serbia. In 1908, Izvolsky, the recently appointed Russian Foreign Minister, traded support on the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary for its consent to revise the Treaty of Paris (1856) which granted neutrality to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. Izvolsky's move would have given Russia special navigational rights but it was blocked by Great Britain, while Austria proceeded with the annexation with support from Germany.

A little bit later, in 1913, Greece, Serbia and Romania defeated Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War. Consequently, Austria-Hungary took control of Bulgaria, which was now Serbia's territorial rival in the region, and Germany remained the Ottoman Empire's protector. To counter the Austrian influence, Russia extended its ties to Serbia. Great Power politics and its complex system of alliances in the Balkans were particularly unstable at the eve of World War I. [17]

In June 1914, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary (Archduke Franz Ferdinand) was assassinated by a Serbian citizen. Austria-Hungary held the Serbian government responsible and delivered an ultimatum whose last phase consisted in Serbia allowing 100,000 Austro-Hungarian troops to occupy its territory. When it was rejected, Austria-Hungary responded with force. Russia defended Serbia and through the system of alliances this local conflict soon turned into a global one, with France backing Russia and Germany supporting Austria-Hungary. [18]

#### The Great War and its Effects on Russian Politics

A weakened Russia expected significant gains from a victory in the war, including: control of Constantinople along with the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, as mentioned earlier; alteration of Austria-Hungary's influence in Central & Eastern Europe in the interests of Slavic peoples of the region and Romania; territorial acquisitions in East Prussia from Germany, in eastern Galicia from Austria and northeastern Anatolia from the Ottoman

Empire. However, the German and Ottoman fleets managed to prevent Russia from exporting goods and importing supplies through the Baltic and Black seas. This combined with bureaucratic ineptitude and successive military failures soon turned a majority of the Russian population against its government. [19]

In the larger scheme of Great Power politics, dispute within colonial powers for control of oil fields in the Middle East along with transportation routes to Europe was another reason (if not the most important one, according to William Engdahl) to explain the escalation leading to the outbreak of the war. [20]

On Russia's side, one of the Tsar's principal motives for risking war was clearly his desire to restore the prestige lost following the Russo-Japanese war.

Besides, as pointed out in part 1 of this series, the Russian Empire had always been an agglomeration of diverse ethnicities, which entailed significant signs of disunity in the past. Therefore, he also sought to foster a greater sense of national unity with a war against a common and ancient enemy. The perspective of a shared peril would partially mitigate the social unrest over the persistent issues of poverty, inequality, and harsh working conditions. Unfortunately for him, this patriotic unity did not last long.

Despite anti-German demonstrations in the first few weeks of the war, the most widespread reaction appears to have been skepticism and fatalism. The desire to defend their land fueled by general hostility towards the Kaiser did not necessarily translate into enthusiasm for the war-mongering Tsar and its government. Instead, World War I led to the massive slaughter of Russian troops which undermined the monarchy to the point of collapse. [21]

Bound by treaty, Russia entered World War I at the defense of fellow Slavic nation Serbia and opened hostilities with Austria-Hungary and Germany in support of its French ally. Russian offensives into East Prussia drew enough German troops from the western front to allow Great Britain, France and Belgium to stop the German advance. It came at a huge cost, though: one of Russia's two invading armies was almost totally destroyed at the Battle of Tannenberg (over 30,000 Russian troops were killed or wounded and 90,000 captured, while Germany suffered about 20,000 casualties).

Adding insult to injury, Nicholas II took direct command of the army in the autumn of 1915, making him personally responsible for Russia's future losses, while leaving his German-born wife Alexandra in charge of the government. It did not take long before reports of incompetence and corruption in the Imperial government began to emerge. More precisely, the growing influence of Rasputin on the Imperial family was widely resented. The fact that he had openly warned the Tsar over the dangers of a war with Germany added further suspicion around him. In late 1916, Rasputin's assassination would end the scandal without restoring the credibility of the government. Along with court intrigues, increasing conflict between the Duma and the Tsar weakened the entire power structure. [22]

Meanwhile on the front, the German army was better trained, better led and better supplied than its Russian counterpart. Furthermore, Germany controlled the Baltic Sea and its Ottoman ally had its grip on the Black Sea, which cut Russia off from most of its foreign supplies and potential markets. As a result, it did not take long before the Tsar's forces were thrown out of Poland and Galicia (the northeastern region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) during the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive campaign. Some Russian troops were even sent to the front bearing no arms. By the end of October 1916, Russia had lost between 1,600,000 and

1,800,000 men, 2,000,000 became prisoners and 1,000,000 were missing. At that time, Russia came to the rescue of Romania, which had just entered the war, thereby extending the eastern front to the Black Sea. Not surprisingly, mutinies followed. According to Allan Wildman, the crisis in morale "was rooted fundamentally in the feeling of utter despair that the slaughter would ever end and that anything resembling victory could be achieved." [23]

Besides, there were many signs that the war was leading the national economy on the brink of collapse. The main problems with the war economy were rising prices due to increased public debt to finance the war and food shortages. By the end of 1915, inflation dragged real incomes down at an alarming rate while the lack of food supply made it very difficult to buy even what one could afford. It was particularly hard in the capital, Petrograd (as St. Petersburg had been called since 1914, to Russianize the Germanic name), where distance from supplies and poor transportation networks worsened the situation. Consequently, strikes and crime increased steadily from the middle of 1915. Factory workers, who had won the right to representation in sections of the War Industries Committee, used them as organs of political opposition. The countryside also was becoming subject to unrest, mainly because a satisfactory land reform had yet to be made in the opinion of many peasants. [24]

In this context, government officials wondered how long the people's patience would last. In November 1916, the State Duma issued a warning report to Nicholas II as discontent grew. It stated that a terrible disaster would inevitably occur unless a constitutional form of government was put in place. Once again, the Tsar ignored these warnings. Ultimately, his inept administration would end up costing him both his reign and his life. [25]

#### Economic & Social Factors Leading to the Russian Revolutions

Along with the side effects of the war economy discussed above, basic economic and social conditions can be named as deep explanations of workers' discontent. At that time, the economic and social reality for most people was low real wages, an average 10-hour workday six days a week (many worked up to 12 hours a day), a high level of professional injury risk because of poor safety conditions and overcrowded housing with often deplorable sanitary conditions (no running water, waste management issues).

However, urbanization made it easier for workers to gather and to get exposed to new ideas about the political and social order in Russia. Indeed, by 1914 no less than 40% of Russian workers were employed in factories of +1,000 workers (compared to 30% in 1901), another 40% worked in 100-1,000 facilities and the 20% remaining in 1-100 businesses. To get a better understanding of the importance of these figures, one can compare them with those for the USA the same year, which stood at 20, 45 and 35% respectively. Besides, and still roughly speaking, the population of St Petersburg grew from 1 million to 1.9 million between 1890 and 1910, with Moscow experiencing similar growth. As a result, this new generation of factory workers was much more likely to get involved into various demonstrations of protest than the peasantry had been in previous times. [26]

Furthermore, conscription took away skilled workers who had to be replaced with unskilled peasants, which could not result in anything else than a dramatic decrease in productivity and quality, including regarding military gear. Finally, the poorly-equipped soldiers themselves began to turn against the Tsar. [27]

## The February Revolution

In short, according to Rabinowitch, the February Revolution was the consequence of “prewar political and economic instability, technological backwardness, and fundamental social divisions, coupled with gross mismanagement of the war effort, continuing military defeats, domestic economic dislocation, and outrageous scandals surrounding the monarchy”. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1917 for International Women’s Day, thousands of women textile workers began a strike in Petrograd to protest against the lack of food. Fearing that a famine was looming they called on other workers to join them. [28]

In the next days, almost the entire city was on strike. The February Revolution officially began on February 26<sup>th</sup> when soldiers openly sided with the strikers, after the Tsar dispatched troops to shoot at demonstrators and ordered the Duma to disband. Governmental authority in the capital collapsed and symbols of the regime were torn down around the city. To restore law and order, the liberal bloc of the parliament urged to establish a provisional government headed by Prince Lvov, a descendant of Rurik, the founder of the Russian nation.

Meanwhile, the socialists organized elections among soldiers and workers to form a council (*soviet*) of deputies, which would act as an organ of popular power that could pressure the Provisional Government, considered as “bourgeois”. [29]

In the Winter Palace, the Army Chiefs and the Tsar’s remaining ministers (those who had not fled) suggested that he abdicates the throne. Nicholas II did so on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, and nominated his brother, the Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, to succeed him. But the latter realized that he would have little support so he declined the proposition the next day.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Nicholas II and his family were placed under house arrest by the Provisional Government at the Alexander Palace in Tsarskoye Selo (literally *Tsar’s Village*, renamed Pushkin in 1937). Four days earlier, the socialists had formed a rival government body, the Petrograd Soviet. These two entities competed for power over Russia during a period known as “Dual Power”. [30]

From March to October, Russia under “Dual Power”

As early as March 1<sup>st</sup>, the Petrograd Soviet asserted its supremacy over the upcoming Provisional Government when it issued Order No. 1, which stated:

“The orders of the Military Commission of the State Duma (i.e part of the organization which became the Provisional Government) shall be executed only in such cases as do not conflict with the orders and resolution of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.”, Point 4 of Order No. 1, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917. [31]

According to Robert Service, the Provisional Government’s lack of political legitimacy (as it was not a publicly elected body, having been self-proclaimed by committee members of the Duma) prevented it from questioning the Petrograd Soviet’s on legal ground. Instead, it called for elections to be held later.

On the other hand, the Petrograd Soviet could not deny this “arrangement” because on top



of its own political agenda were precisely the introduction of extensive democratic reforms such as the replacement of the monarchy by a republic, preparation of elections to a constituent assembly, guaranteed civil rights, governmental oversight on police and military actions, abolition of religious and ethnic discrimination. [32]

Due to the democratization of politics after the February Revolution, which legalized formerly banned political parties, Lenin took the opportunity to go back to Russia after living in exile in Switzerland. However, the possibility to return to Russia did not mean it had suddenly become easy. Hoping that his activities would weaken Russia or even, if the Bolsheviks came to power, lead to Russia's withdrawal from the war, German officials arranged for Lenin to pass through their territory. [33]

Shortly after, the head of the Provisional Government resigned following a series of political crises that became known as the "July Days", which saw approximately half a million people come out onto the streets of Petrograd in protest, calling for "all power to the Soviets". Nonetheless, Lenin failed to organize a coup on this occasion. The crowd, lacking leadership, disbanded and the government survived.

Kerensky became its new head. He was more progressive than his predecessor but not radical enough for the Bolsheviks and the large part of the Russian population who could not stand the deepening economic crisis and the continuation of the war any longer. As minister of war and later Prime Minister, Kerensky promoted freedom of speech which materialized by the release of thousands of political prisoners but he was no more successful than his predecessors regarding the war issue.

In the meantime, the Petrograd Soviet joined with other soviets from all around the country to create a national movement. Lenin fled to Finland as the Provisional Government issued arrest warrants against prominent Bolsheviks (including Trotsky), in response to their attempted coup. Lenin would put his time in exile to use by working on his book *State and Revolution* while continuing to lead the party. [34]

However, the Bolshevik failure in the July Days proved temporary, thanks to a massive growth in membership. Indeed, from February to September 1917 the party's audience increased almost tenfold, thereby overtaking the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries as majority factions in Petrograd and Moscow.

In August, misleading communication led General Kornilov, the recently appointed Supreme Commander of Russian military forces, to believe that the government had already fallen at the hands of rebels, or was in serious danger thereof. Consequently, he ordered troops to the capital to try his own coup. Ironically, Kerensky himself asked for Bolshevik assistance in order to secure his position. The Kornilov Affair failed mainly due to the Bolsheviks' control over railroad and telegraph workers who proved instrumental in stopping the General's troops. Because of the lack of details surrounding this episode in Russian history, Richard Pipes questioned Kerensky's involvement in a possible false flag attack: "There is no evidence of a Kornilov plot, but there is plenty of evidence of Kerensky's duplicity". [35]

In early September, the Petrograd Soviet managed to free all jailed Bolsheviks and Trotsky became its chairman. The garrisons in Petrograd, Moscow, the Northern and Western fronts, and the sailors of the Baltic Fleet openly declared through their elected representative body Tsentrobalt that they did not recognize the authority of the Provisional Government anymore and would not carry out any of its commands as a result.

By October, Lenin felt there was no legal danger regarding his return to Petrograd in order to have a second opportunity for revolution. He therefore began pressing for the immediate overthrow of the Kerensky government by the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik Central Committee promptly drafted a resolution, calling for the dissolution of the Provisional Government in favor of the Petrograd Soviet. It was passed 10-2, with Lev Kamenev (Trotsky's brother-in-law) and Grigory Zinoviev (not related to Alexander Zinoviev, the later Soviet critic who would become famous for his novel *Yawning Heights*) opposing the project.

Meanwhile, strikes continued all over the country: in Petrograd, Moscow, Baku (one of the most ancient oil-extracting centers in the world, the first oil well being drilled in 1846), the Donbas (one of the richest mining regions), the Urals (under the influence of metalworkers), while railroad workers disrupted traffic on 44 railway lines ... Moreover, there had been over four thousand peasant uprisings against landowners by October 1917. [36]

### October Revolution

The Bolsheviks used their influence on the Petrograd Soviet to organize the revolutionary forces. Under the authority of the Military Revolutionary Committee, Bolshevik Red Guards began the takeover of government buildings on October 24<sup>th</sup> (O.S.). The Winter Palace was captured the following day.

The effectiveness of the October coup is a direct result of the improvement in planning by Bolshevik leaders, compared to the February one. Since Lenin was not present during the takeover of the Winter Palace (contrary to the official version of the events, as promoted for example in the propaganda movie *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* by Sergei Eisenstein, released in 1928), it has been argued that it was Trotsky's organization and direction that actually led the revolution. [37]

Indeed, Bolshevik troops took over Petrograd in the early hours of the night, facing little opposition. The "Storming of the Winter Palace" narrative, which is none other than the actual title of a 1920 mass spectacle attended by 100,000 spectators, came later to make the event look more heroic. The insurrection was perfectly timed and organized. It "only" resulted in the death of two people and the arrest of eighteen. [38]

Once the Congress of Soviets successfully claimed power from the Provisional Government after the fall of the Winter Palace, the revolution was complete.

On October 26<sup>th</sup> (O.S.), the Congress elected a Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) as the basis of a new government, before the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, and passed the Decree on Peace and the Decree on Land. The latter legalized the actions of the peasants who seized private land and redistributed it among themselves throughout Russia. The alliance between factory workers and peasants became symbolized by the Hammer and Sickle on the Soviet flag. Other decrees included nationalization of all Russian banks along with confiscation of private bank accounts and repudiation of all foreign debts, seizure of the Church's properties (Lenin was a great admirer of the French revolution) and new labor law (higher wages, introduction of an eight-hour working day and control of the factories was given to the soviets). Ironically, the new government officially called itself "provisional" until the Assembly was dissolved. [39]

The Council of People's Commissars promptly organized a political repression campaign by

arresting the leaders of opposition parties, thereby tearing apart freedom of speech and association promises. In the process, major members of the Constituent Assembly, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) as well as Menshevik leaders were imprisoned in The Peter and Paul Fortress in Petrograd. On 20 December 1917, the Cheka was created by decree of Lenin, marking the official end of democratic hopes under Bolshevik auspices.

However, one could argue that this move was more the result of political calculus than a change of convictions. Indeed, members of the Soviets were originally freely elected. When the Bolsheviks realized that they had little support outside of the industrialized areas of Saint Petersburg and Moscow, they decided to prevent non-Bolsheviks from membership.

Because of the Bolsheviks' decision to continue on the autocratic path of previous centuries, constitutional monarchists and liberals gathered their forces into the White Army, which immediately declared war against the Bolsheviks' Red Army, thereby opening a new phase in Russian History, that of Civil War. [40]

Unkept Democratic Promises, Ethnical Diversity and Foreign Interference: a Dangerous Mix

Due to the anti-democratic stance of the Bolsheviks, many people called for another series of political reforms, a fourth Russian revolution, so to speak. Besides, the Whites had backing from Great Britain, France, the USA and Japan, which feared that the government would default on its foreign loans and that the communist ideology would spread in the West, setting the stage for Truman's future "Containment" strategy. Despite powerful external interference, providing substantial military aid to the loosely-equipped anti-Bolshevik forces, they were ultimately defeated. [41]

One explanation for the Bolsheviks' lack of success outside the two main cities of the empire is the latter's ethnical diversity, which has been pointed out in previous parts of this series.

Some regions intended to take advantage of the political turmoil in order to claim independence, using their right to self-determination stated in the November 1917 Declaration of Rights of Nations of Russia. For instance, the Ukrainian Rada, which had declared autonomy on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1917, created the Ukrainian People's Republic on November 20<sup>th</sup>, with the support of the Ukrainian Congress of Soviets. Meanwhile, the Mensheviks seized power in Georgia on October 27<sup>th</sup> and declared it an independent republic. The following day, the Bolsheviks officially lost the support of the peasantry when the Executive Committee of Peasants Soviets declared about recent actions that it "refutes with indignation all participation of the organized peasantry in this criminal violation of the will of the working class". In Estonia, two rival governments emerged: the Estonian Provincial Assembly proclaimed itself the supreme legal authority of Estonia on November 28<sup>th</sup>, while an Estonian Bolshevik sympathizer, Jaan Anvelt, was recognized by the Soviet government as Estonia's ruler on December 8<sup>th</sup>, although forces loyal to Anvelt only controlled the capital. Estonia would eventually clear its territory from Red Guards forces in 1919. [42]

In January 1918, the Constituent Assembly met for the first time and refused to become a puppet of the Bolshevik regime, it was dissolved. Henceforth, all vestiges of democracy were removed.

One month later, the Red Army overthrew the White-supported Kokand autonomy of Turkestan.

Because it seemed to consolidate Bolshevik power in Central Asia, the Allied Forces began to intervene, with the main support to White troops coming from Great Britain. Along with military supply, three prominent British military commanders were sent to the area: Lieutenant-Colonel Bailey, whom the Bolsheviks managed to expel from Tashkent, now the capital of Uzbekistan; General Malleon, who assisted the Mensheviks in Ashkhabad (the capital of today's Turkmenistan) with a small Anglo-Indian force but failed to gain control of Tashkent, Khiva and Bukhara; Major-General Dunsterville, who was driven out of Central Asia by the Bolsheviks only a month after his arrival in August 1918. [43]

In this particularly difficult context, Lenin must be credited for his ability to free his country from the war problem. Indeed, in March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed with Germany, thereby ending Russia's participation in the First World War. It was a major blow in territorial terms, for Russia lost Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus and Finland, as well as the territories captured from the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Right after Germany's defeat, the Soviet government cancelled this treaty but it was too late to avoid further internal opposition, this time mainly from nationalists and conservatives, who could not bear that so many buffer states had fallen into the German sphere of influence. [44]

On the Eastern front, the Revolt of the Czechoslovak Legion broke out in May 1918. Rebel peasants supported by the Mensheviks and the legionaries took control of Samara and Saratov, establishing the Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly, known as the Komuch. Then, they took Chelyabinsk the next month. The Komuch introduced an eight-hour working day along with "restorative" actions, such as returning both land and factories to their former owners.

In the meantime, Russian officers' organizations overthrew the Bolsheviks in Omsk and Petropavlovsk. It took less than a month for the Whites to control most of the Trans-Siberian Railroad from the Ural regions to Lake Baikal and Bolshevik power in Siberia was eliminated during the summer, resulting in the formation of the Provisional Government of Autonomous Siberia in Omsk.

After the fall of Kazan, Lenin called for the dispatch of Petrograd workers to the Kazan Front. [45]

### Execution of the Imperial Family

The Provisional Government had placed Nicholas II and his family under house arrest in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, as early as March 1917. Four months later, the Kerensky government evacuated the Romanovs to Tobolsk in the Urals, allegedly to protect them from rising tension. Then in May 1918, as the force of the White movement grew, they were moved again, to Yekaterinburg this time, which was a Bolshevik stronghold.

On July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918 the Tsar, along with his wife, his children, his physician and several servants were taken into the basement and killed. According to Edvard Radzinsky, the order came directly from Lenin and Sverdlov, the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. However, it seems that there is no evidence that the order came from the top, as it has long been believed. That was the conclusion of Vladimir Solovyov, Russia's chief investigator, in 2011. M. Solovyov noted however that "when they heard that the whole

family had been shot, they officially approved the shooting. None of the organizers nor the participants suffered any punishment," Therefore, the execution may have been carried out on the initiative of local Bolshevik officials, an option later implicitly approved in Moscow. [46]

## A Full-Scale War

On July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1918 the Whites captured Ekaterinburg thereby extending their gains westwards.

It was too much for War Commissar Trotsky who would not tolerate that the ongoing series of reverses at the front could extend any longer. Consequently, he instituted increasingly harsh techniques (death penalty, kidnapping of renegade soldiers' families) in order to prevent mutinies or desertions in the Red Army. On the battlefield, the Cheka special investigations forces, known as Special Punitive Brigades, followed the Red Army to enforce Trotsky's will. The next month, he authorized the formation of barrier troops stationed behind unreliable Red Army units, with orders to shoot anyone withdrawing from the battle-line without authorization. It must be noted that similar techniques were used by the other side. [47]

In September 1918, the Siberian Provisional Government (*Komuch*) and other local anti-Soviet governments met in Ufa and agreed to form a new Provisional All-Russian Government in Omsk, run by a Directory composed of three Socialist-Revolutionaries (Avksentiev, Boldyrev and Zenzinov) and two Kadets (Vinogradov and Vologodskii). Insurgent Cossack units from Siberia, the Urals, Lake Baikal, Orenburg, Semirechye, and Ussuri were under the orders of Boldyrev, who was chosen as Commander in Chief of the newly created government.

Meanwhile on the Volga, Colonel Kappel's White detachment had captured Kazan on August 7<sup>th</sup>, only to see the Reds retake the city almost exactly one month later. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, Simbirsk fell and on October 8<sup>th</sup> it was Samara's turn, pushing the Whites back eastwards to Ufa and Orenburg.

In Omsk, the new War Minister Kolchak of the Provisional Government led a successful coup on November 18<sup>th</sup>. As a result, the members of the Directory were arrested and Kolchak proclaimed himself "Supreme Ruler of Russia". [48]

By mid-December 1918, White armies had to leave Ufa, but managed to balance this failure by taking Perm on Christmas Eve. One explanation to this change in momentum in favor of the Bolsheviks lies in the Cossacks' inability to capitalize on their earlier successes. Moreover, they began to run short of supplies by 1919. As a result, Cossack forces rapidly fell apart when the Soviet counter-offensive led by Antonov-Ovseenko took place in January.

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1919 the Red Army captured Kiev a strategic place of the utmost importance, considering its status of large city and epicenter of the Russian nation (see the first two parts of this series). In the meantime, the British government pulled their military forces out of Central Asia.

However, the White Army was able to break communication between Moscow and Tashkent, which completely cut Central Asia off from the Red Army forces in Siberia. The Bolsheviks'

response was to hold a second regional conference in March. In its wake, a regional bureau of Muslim organizations of the Russian Bolshevik Party was formed in order to try to gain support among the native population by giving them a better representation. [49]

On the eastern front, the general offensive of the Whites began at the beginning of March 1919, which mainly resulted in Ufa switching side again. By mid-April, the White Army were stopped at the Glazov-Chistopol-Bugulma-Buguruslan-Sharlyk line while the Reds were preparing their counter-offensive against Kolchak's forces for the end of the month.

In the west, the Red Army eventually captured Yelabuga on May 26<sup>th</sup>, Sarapul on June 2<sup>nd</sup> and Izevsk on June 7<sup>th</sup>. However, they were chased from Crimea and from the Odessa area in mid-June.

Then in September, a White offensive was launched against the Tobol front, as a last attempt to change the course of events in Central Asia. On October 14<sup>th</sup>, the Reds counterattacked and forced what would become an uninterrupted retreat of the Whites to the east. [50]

In September 1919, the high tide of the White movement against the Soviets had been reached. By this time, counter-revolutionary forces were overextended. Lacking all necessary military and human supplies, the army led by Denikin was decisively defeated in a series of battles in the couple of months. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, the Red Army recaptured Kiev and the defeated Cossacks fled back towards the Black Sea. [51]

### The Struggle for Petrograd

General Yudenich had spent the summer organizing the Northwestern Army in Estonia with local and British support. In October 1919, he tried to take Petrograd with around 20,000 soldiers.

Trotsky personally organized the city's defenses because some members of the Bolshevik central committee in Moscow were willing to give up Petrograd. He declared, "It is impossible for a little army of 15,000 ex-officers to master a working class capital of 700,000 inhabitants." [52]

Trotsky armed all available workers and ordered the transfer of military forces from Moscow. Within a few weeks the Red Army outnumbered Yudenich's forces by three to one. The latter decided to withdraw his troops due to a lack of supplies, repeatedly asking permission to cross the border to Estonia. However, the Estonian government had entered into peace negotiations with the Soviet Government on September 16<sup>th</sup>, so White units who retreated across the border were disarmed and interned. This move did not prevent the Reds from attacking Estonian army positions, as a result fighting continued until a ceasefire came into effect on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1920. The majority of Yudenich's soldiers went into exile following the Treaty of Tartu. [53]

### A Red Wave to Complete the Revolutionary Era

In European Russia and Siberia, communication disruptions ceased to be a problem by mid-November 1919. Thanks to Bolshevik successes north of Central Asia, communication lines

with Moscow were re-established, and the Red Army was able to claim victory over the White Army in Turkestan.

Besides, the Bolsheviks captured Omsk on November 14<sup>th</sup> and Kolchak lost control of his government shortly after this defeat. By December, White forces in Siberia were shattered. Their retreat of the eastern front lasted three months, when the survivors reached the Chita area and joined Semyonov's Cossack forces after crossing Lake Baikal. The latter was supported by Japan and managed to hold Chita for a time. When Japanese soldiers withdrew from Transbaikalia, Semenov's position would become untenable. He was eventually repulsed from Transbaikalia by the Red Army and took refuge in China in November 1920. [54]

At the beginning of 1920, most of the White troops deployed in South Russia were rapidly retreating towards the Don, to Rostov. Denikin hoped to reform his troops but the White Army was not able to hold the Don area. At the end of February 1920, White troops started to retreat across Kuban towards Novorossiysk. Then, around 40,000 men were evacuated by White and Allied ships from Novorossiysk to Crimea, while about 20,000 others were left behind. Following this disastrous evacuation process, Denikin stepped down and was replaced by Wrangel as the new Commander-in-Chief of the White Army. The latter managed to reshape a decent army that remained an active force in Crimea throughout 1920. [55]

In Ukraine, the Bolshevik government signed a political and military alliance with anarchist Makhno's Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army, also known as the Black Guards, which until then fought against both sides in the wake of Ukraine's annexation to Germany by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Black Guards were able to defeat several regiments of Wrangel's troops in the southern part of the country, forcing him to retreat before harvest time.

At this point, Wrangel decided to attack north in an attempt to take advantage of recent defeats of the Red Army at the end of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920. This move failed and White troops were forced to retreat again to Crimea in November 1920, pursued by both the Red and Black forces. On November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1920 Wrangel and the remains of his army were evacuated to Constantinople, thereby ending the Civil War in Southern Russia. [56]

Right after the defeat of Wrangel, the Red Army repealed its alliance with Makhno and attacked his Black Guards, as part of a campaign to liquidate Ukrainian anarchists, which began with an attempted assassination of Makhno by the Cheka. The uninterrupted use of political repression by the Bolshevik government combined with crop seizure policies in a famine context fueled anger within the civil society, which resulted in a naval mutiny in Kronstadt carried out by Soviet Baltic sailors and former Red Army soldiers, followed by peasant revolts. When delegates representing the Kronstadt sailors arrived in Petrograd for negotiations, they raised 15 demands which mainly concerned the right to freedom. The Government's response was to firmly denounce the requests as a reminiscence of Social Revolutionary ideas, a political party that refused to cooperate with the Bolsheviks. Obviously, these revolts were quelled and even entailed 10, 000 casualties before the Red Army entered the city of Kronstadt. Exile seemed like the last option available to rebels. Anti-anarchists attacks by the Bolsheviks increased in ferocity throughout 1921. [57]

By 1921, the Bolsheviks had defeated their internal enemies, with the notable exception of White forces gathered in Vladivostok. On the international stage, however, some newly independent states did not fall under their control: Poland (which received Western Ukraine and Western Belarus when the Peace of Riga was signed with Russia in March 1921), Finland (which also annexed a part of the Russian Kola peninsula), the Baltic States, the Moldavian Democratic Republic (which joined Romania).

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1922, Vladivostok fell to the Red Army and the Provisional Government was dismantled. Three days later, the Treaty of Creation of the USSR was signed by the Russian, Ukrainian, Transcaucasian and Byelorussian soviets. [58]

## Conclusion

Part 4 of this series was aimed at articulating the various elements which led to the Russian Revolutions. Without pretending to be exhaustive, it hopefully pointed out the dynamics of this complex moment in Russia's history. With tsarism gone, a new chapter opens, that of the USSR.

In a long period perspective, the apparent unification of the Russian political system seemed to solve the problem of ethnic diversity. The primary challenge faced by Bolshevik leaders would be to find a solution to the country's economic distress while keeping political dissension carefully tamed. Any failure on these two historic issues would jeopardize the future of the new power structure ...

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