



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 6 (2017/2)

THE BOLSHEVIKS COME TO POWER THE REVOLUTION OF 1917 IN PETROGRAD, By Ayse Dietrich*, Published by: Pluto Press, London. Written by Alexander Rabinowitch, Year of Publishing: 2017. Subject Area: History of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Book Type: History, Russian and Soviet History. Total Number of Pages: 400. ISBN: 9780745399980, £16.00, Paperback.

The book includes List of Illustrations, Acknowledgements, Note on Transliteration, Dates and Terminology, Preface to the Centenary Edition, Introduction, Sixteen Chapters, Notes, Selected Bibliography and Index.

Although the Bolshevik Revolution has been the subject of numerous previously published books, Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* provides an account of many less known aspects of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

In the Introduction, Rabinowitch discusses the source of his interest in studying and writing about the October revolution, arguing that existing works fail to answer many key questions related to the October revolution, and that many works present a view of the revolution only from the perspective of their own political view, and that the political behavior of the Petrograd workers, soldiers, and sailors, and its impact on the course of the revolution are not taken into account. Therefore, the author's primary aim is to describe the development of the "revolution from below" and the activities of the Bolshevik party organization in Petrograd between February and October 1917 in order to determine the real reasons for the Bolsheviks' success.

The author claims that Vladimir Ilich Lenin was a major influence in steering the party towards an early socialist revolution. By organizing the Russian working class into an effective political force capable of overthrowing the Tsar, Lenin believed he could bring about a socialist revolution without Russia passing through a period of liberal government and capitalist industrial development. According to the writer in 1917 the Petrograd Bolshevik organization included many "moderate" Bolsheviks, who repeatedly rejected the vast majority of Lenin's basic theoretical and strategic assumptions. In addition, the author asserts that the Provisional Government included a number of

talented, well-known figures. However, the writer stresses his intention is not to minimize Lenin's important role in the development of the revolution, taking pains to point out several factors that he sees as contributing to the Bolsheviks' effectiveness compared to other parties. By simply presenting the information found in sources from this period the writer leaves it to the reader to determine whether his reconstruction of events and conclusions are plausible

The first Chapter, "The July Uprising" starts with a depiction of the uprising with demonstrators carrying banners and demanding the transfer of power to the Soviet; the undeniable Bolshevik involvement in the preparation of this "unrest among the proletariat and soldiers for their own purposes"^[1], and "totally irresponsible Bolshevik agitation" in Petrograd; the horrific living standards, and the spreading wave of strikes across the country. To illustrate his point that the Bolsheviks were not welcomed by the masses and many others, Rabinowitch provides reports from newspapers that display this dislike. He then turns his attention to military affairs: the Kerensky offensive, launched on June 18, and the decisive German counterattack begun on July 6; how the demoralized condition of the Russian army resulted in heavy losses; the objectives of the war that were incomprehensible to most of the soldiers and their antagonism toward their officers; and their desertions from the army; Lenin's return to Russia and the accusations that he was a German agent and had organized the July uprising with the help of Germany due to his opposition to the war effort. The author claims that the accusations that the July uprising was instigated by Lenin in cooperation with the Germans was groundless since Lenin had worked very hard to prevent an insurrection from breaking out.

Chapter Two, "The Bolsheviks under Fire", provides detailed information about the Petrograd newspapers' treatment of the charges against the Bolsheviks as established fact, and their ferocious attacks against the Bolsheviks and Lenin blaming the Bolsheviks for openly acting contrary to the will of the revolutionary democracy; and the Provisional Government's adoption of repressive measures and use of force against militant leftist which began very early on the morning of July 5; and the decree issued on night of July 6-7 that all organizers and leaders of the armed movement against the government should be arrested and brought to trial as traitors to their nation and the revolution. The Chapter also discusses the arrests of Trotsky, Martov, Lunacharsky, the issue of a warrant for Lenin's arrest; and Lenin's firm decision not to surrender and eventual escape to Finland.

The third chapter, "Petrograd during the Reaction", describes the killing of seven Cossacks fighting insurgents during the July days in Petrograd; the political atmosphere prevailing there until a sudden shift to "a counterrevolutionary orgy" as Menshevik Vladimir Woytinsky put it; the Provisional Government's efforts to use this killing to mobilize a large crowd for the funerals to publicly demonstrate their victory over the insurgents in an attempt to restore order; the imprisonment of Bolshevik members in the aftermath of the July uprising and the "rebels" continuing to remain politically active in prisons.

In Chapter Four, "The Ineffectiveness of Repression", the author states that almost none of the government's main repressive measures adopted in this period was fully implemented or succeeded in achieving its objectives. Although many Bolsheviks were jailed after the rebellion's collapse, the majority of the Petrograd party organization's almost thirty-two thousand members were not disturbed by the authorities, in part because the All-Russian Executive Committees' stubbornly insisted that action be taken only against individuals, and not against whole political groups. According to the author, contrary to the claims of some historians these attacks of the Bolsheviks

were not part of a deliberate government plan to eliminate the Bolsheviks and the militant labor movement. Rather, all major post-July attacks on the left were either part of government attempts to confiscate weapons, or were ordered by anonymous, low-level officials with approval from higher levels of government.

Next, the author examines why the authorities failed to prosecute cases related to German-agent charges. He concludes that attempting to prosecute these cases could have proved embarrassing for the government for several reasons: it was impossible to prove that funds from German sources were funneled to the Bolsheviks during the July uprising; the main actor in this “conspiracy”, Lenin, was never arrested; and many of those who were arrested after the July days were taken into custody and imprisoned on the basis of hearsay. In addition, he argues that the five-month-old Provisional Government was unable to cope with a judicial problem of this magnitude and that a lack of coordination between the military and civil agencies created further confusion and delay.

The next topic in this chapter discusses how moderate socialists sold out to the government and why the Bolsheviks withdrew the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” and made a declaration for placing power in the hands of the revolutionary proletariat and peasants. He delineates the main differences between Lenin and Stalin, claiming that while Lenin called on the party to make a clear break with more moderate political groups and point the masses toward an armed seizure of power independent of the soviets, Stalin's primary focus was on the need for restraint and consolidation. Rabinowitch argues that Stalin's failure was the result of not discussing the future of the soviets, relatively passive view of the party's future political role among the masses and failing to mention the international situation.

The author continues by examining why the Military Organization was the most severely damaged and criticized institution after the July uprising, the Military Organization's rationale for organizing the July uprising without authorization from the Central Committee and why sympathy for the Bolsheviks rapidly increased in the garrison.

In Chapter Five, “The Bolshevik Resurgence”, Rabinowitch discusses the arguments that were formed concerning the current political situation in order to resolve varying assessments of it, as well as the party's efforts to strengthen the position of "internationalists" by incorporating all elements dedicated to the struggle against the counterrevolution and the major factors for their success.

In the sixth chapter, “The Rise of Kornilov”, the author depicts the atmosphere after the July uprising. In this chapter, Rabinowitch points out that since Kerensky could not significantly influence the course of events, and Russia's political crisis was deepening, society and top military personnel began to cooperate and devote increasing attention to support of preparations for the establishment of a military dictatorship. General Lavr Kornilov was being considered for the post of dictator although he understood very little about the conflicting concerns of the various political groups and classes within Russian society. After resigning from his post and departing for the southwestern front, hostile and antagonistic towards the Soviet, Kornilov decided to restore order in Petrograd, urging the government to authorize strict measures to restore discipline in the army, reinstate capital punishment, and create a dual authority in the army. The author also discusses Kornilov's increased popularity, making him a powerful political figure among both liberals and conservatives and a natural rival to Kerensky, and his attempted military action against the government.

Chapter seven, “Kornilov versus Kerensky”, continues with the developments of the events in the previous chapter, among them the growing enmity between Kerensky and Kornilov, the deepening polarization of Russian society, and Kerensky's weakness in the current circumstances.

The eighth chapter, “The Bolsheviks and Kornilov’s Defeat”, continues the narrative of events in the Kornilov affair. It begins with the open struggle between Kornilov and Kerensky. It then discusses Lenin’s rejection of entering into any political alliance and joining the moderate socialists and the government in the fight against Kornilov, assuming that most of the socialists and the Provisional Government were equally hostile to the revolution. The author describes how the Bolshevik Military Organization prepared to defend the revolution through newly established groups such as the Committee for Struggle and other non-party mass organizations in the emergency created by the advance of Kornilov's forces. Rabinowitch states that they worked “in collaboration with the Soviet on a technical and informational basis while fully retaining our independent political position”. Working through these institutions, Bolshevik Military Organization members were able to help mobilize and arm large numbers of workers, soldiers, and sailors, as well as give programmatic and tactical direction. Some individual trade unions also joined the struggle against Kornilov, the most important being the Union of Railway Workers. They unquestioningly obeyed the government and soviet’s orders to hold up and redirect these troops, and to ignore Kornilov’s orders. The aim of Kornilov’s coup d’état in August 1917 was to overthrow the unstable Provisional Russian Government, yet it failed. Kornilov had underestimated his soldiers’ allegiance to the Bolsheviks, evidence of a complete lack of understanding between the military leadership and his soldiers.

Chapter nine, “The Question of a New Government”, begins with the description of Krymov leading his troops in an unsuccessful assault on Petrograd. The author claims that once the Kornilov threat subsided, Kerensky began planning the formation of an authoritarian government, a right-socialist-liberal coalition cabinet in which the influence of the Kadets would be stronger, dedicated to restoring law and order. According to the author moderate socialists who had previously supported Kerensky’s suppression of the Bolsheviks after the July Days were pushed towards a closer alliance with the extreme left and into conflict with the government due to their experience with Kornilov, Kerensky’s intention to make the Kadets a part of his government, and their concerns over the Kadets’ counterrevolutionary activity and role in the Kornilov conspiracy. Consequently, they demanded the release of Bolshevik leaders still imprisoned due to their suspected involvement in the July uprising.

Soon, factory workers, soldiers, and sailors in the anti-Kornilov movement began to issue political declarations giving their views on the nature of the future government. Their demands included that the Kadets and all counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie hold no positions in the government; to prevent a new counterrevolutionary attack, state power should be given to the workers, soldiers, and poorer peasantry; and all power must be transferred to the soviets to create a national democratic republic. The author stresses that the emphasis on the formation of a revolutionary government to create a democratic republic, rather than a dictatorship of the proletariat and poorer peasantry was Kamenev's work, reflecting the programmatic views of Bolshevik moderates which envisioned the inclusion of representatives of such "democratic" institutions as the trade unions, *zemstvos*, municipal dumas, and cooperatives which were not part of the Soviet. This proposal was presented during a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet on August 31 and adopted the following day.

Rabinowitch argues that the Kornilov experience destroyed the rightist movement. The Kadets were

suspected (not always fairly) of having cooperated with Kornilov, and were temporarily excluded from the cabinet. In addition, whatever success Kerensky had achieved since early July in restoring governmental authority and strengthening the army early July was lost. On the other hand, the crisis resulted in increased popular support for the Soviets. Competing local political organizations and revolutionary committees were more numerous than ever across revolutionary Russia. Workers were not only more militant and better organized, many of them were now armed. At the same time, democratic committees in the army which had organized soldiers against the Kornilov movement, gained a new lease on life. Within the Petrograd garrison, many regimental committees were now under the control of the Bolsheviks rather than more moderate elements. The Bolsheviks emerged as the winners in the Kornilov affair and Kornilov's defeat demonstrated the great potential power of the left and the immense attraction of the Bolshevik's program.

Chapter ten, "All Power to the Soviets", describes Lenin's response to the Kornilov crisis. He urged Bolsheviks to take part in the struggle against Kornilov, to expose Kerensky's weaknesses and shortcomings and to pressure on the government at every opportunity. The chapter also discusses Lenin's interpretation of the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" which he had revived in his work "On Compromises". Lenin explained that it meant a radical restructuring of the entire old state apparatus which hindered anything democratic. In addition, the chapter examines the disputes between Kamenev who advocated the creation of a broad, democratic coalition government rather than an exclusively soviet regime, and Trotsky who urged a full transfer of power to the soviets on the creation of a new socialist government, and the prospects for the peaceful development of the revolution. Later, there is an examination of Lenin's motives for abandoning the moderate positions he advocated in "On Compromises" and calling on the Bolsheviks to prepare for an immediate armed uprising. The author also explores the necessity for the Bolsheviks to seize power at that somewhat unfavorable moment; the reasons Lenin approached immediate insurrection as an art and considered it a fundamental tenet of Marxism; the conditions which Lenin regarded as conducive to a successful insurrection; and developments in the Petrograd Soviets and the replacement of the coalition with a truly revolutionary government.

Chapter eleven, "Lenin's Campaign for an Insurrection", opens with Lenin's criticism of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries' rejection of their compromise to peacefully transferring power to the soviets and the Bolsheviks' failure to boycott the Preparliament. The chapter also examines Lenin's his frustration with their lack of initiative to prepare for the overthrow of the government and to take advantage of the circumstances to overthrow Kerensky while the developments in all major European countries indicated that the worldwide proletarian revolution was at hand. Lenin accused the Bolsheviks of being "miserable traitors to the proletarian cause" if they delayed seizing power any longer. Lenin clearly expressed to the Bolsheviks the need "to agitate inside the party for an earnest attitude towards an armed uprising". Nevertheless, he claimed that the Central Committee did not even consider his proposal, and saw this as "a subtle hint that he should keep his mouth shut, and as a proposal for him to retire" and believed that "if they "wait" for the Congress of Soviets and let the present moment pass, they will *ruin* the revolution". Lenin's resignation, however, was never formally considered by the Central Committee. The chapter also discusses the Central Committee's censorship of Lenin's views; how the government put the revolution and the people in danger with the help of the ruling parties; and the conflict between the Central Committee and the Executive Committee over Lenin's views. Then, it covers Lenin's meeting with the Central Committee's twenty-one members, and his claim that the government was about to surrender Petrograd to the Germans as a means of stifling the revolution; Lenin's efforts to

agitate the leaders with the claim of a possible peace settlement at Russia's expense, and his assertion that the international situation required the Bolsheviks to take the initiative at once. The chapter also examines Kamenev and Zinoviev's criticism of an armed uprising on theoretical and practical grounds, their emphasis the importance of the petty bourgeoisie in the development of the Russian revolution, and their skepticism of Lenin's belief that most Russians supported the Bolsheviks and that the majority of the international proletariat did also. The author asserts that, contrary to later Soviet claims, the meeting between Lenin and the Bolshevik Central Committee failed to dispel doubts within the Central Committee, and that afterwards Bolshevik organizations began to energetically prepare a popular armed uprising as Lenin had urged. Instead, he argues that Lenin only managed to persuade the Central Committee to take steps towards insurrection after weeks of pressuring, threatening and cajoling it.

In Chapter twelve, "Obstacles to an Uprising", the decisions made to organize an uprising at the Northern Region Congress to overthrow Kerensky; the factors why the Northern Region Congress failed to trigger an uprising; Kamenev and Zinoviev's concerns that a declaration of armed insurrection would put not only the party, but the world revolution at risk, and their efforts to postpone this declaration and active use of the congress to bring down the government are examined. The author points out that the reports of nineteen district representative indicate large-scale apathy by the populace to an uprising – only eight reported that the people in their district appeared to be prepared to participate while the other eleven reported varying degrees of disinterest or opposition. As a result, the Central Committee disregarded Lenin, and simply accepted Kamenev's resignation from the party leadership, and ordered Kamenev and Zinoviev to refrain from any public statements contrary to the Central Committee's decisions.

The thirteenth chapter, "The Garrison Crisis and the Military Revolutionary Committee", begins by describing the atmosphere before the uprising. The writer points out the factors that argued against an insurrection at that time, namely, the lack of weapons, trained personnel and organizations, and the almost certain opposition of other political parties, peasants, soldiers, factions within the Bolshevik Party itself, and possibly even the trade unions and soviets. The chapter then examines the event that became the pretense for an uprising, Kerensky's plan to transfer most of the Bolshevized garrison troops to the front lines. It then goes on to cover the accusations that Kerensky intended to surrender Petrograd in order to quell the revolution and the reaction of soldiers in Petrograd to this news. In reaction to the Provisional Government's assault on the extreme left the soldiers expressed the lack of confidence in the government, called for a transfer of power to soviets, and followed this with a pledge of their own support to the Petrograd Soviet. However, the author does point out that despite claims to the contrary, there is no evidence that the Provisional Government had any intention of surrendering Petrograd to Germany without a fight.

Chapter Fourteen, "On the Eve", examines the Kerensky offensive which began at midnight October 23-24, the Military Revolutionary Committee's approach and its declaration not to prepare and carry out a seizure of power, but to exclusively defend the interests of the Petrograd garrison and the democracy from counterrevolutionary encroachments before calling for a counterattack and a mass rising against the Provisional Government.

Chapter Fifteen, "The Bolsheviks Come to Power", begins with the activities of sailors in the Baltic Fleet and at Kronstadt, and the operations planned for the Pavlovsky Regiment; Red Guard detachments from the Vyborg, Petrograd, and Vasilevsky Island districts, and the Keksgolmsky

Regiment. The author describes the capture of the Provisional Government's last positions in Petrograd by revolutionary forces and the seizure of the Mariinsky and Winter Palaces by the Military Revolutionary Committee forces after Lenin's proclamation of the transfer of political power from the Kerensky government to the Military Revolutionary Committee, ushering in a new era in Russian history.

In the "Epilogue" the author discusses the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets' approval of Lenin's decrees on peace and land; the appointment of a provisional revolutionary government; the resistance to the Bolsheviks which formed around the Committee for Salvation organized by the Mensheviks and SRs in the Petrograd City Duma which claimed the right to form a Provisional Government and its organization of an uprising in Petrograd which only the Kadets joined. It then covers Lenin's ultimatum announcing that the "opposition" would observe party discipline and support policies agreed upon by the majority, or face expulsion from the party; in protest, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Nogin, and Miliutin resigned from the Central Committee. The final topics are the formation of a short-lived Bolshevik-Left SR coalition government and Kamenev and his associates' resignation in protest to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which ended Russia's involvement in World War I, and the beginning of the Civil War in Russia.

The author concludes that the Bolsheviks predominated in Petrograd because the Kadets and moderate socialists were inherently weak in this period, while the and the radical left was both active and influential. These factors are the result of the unique characteristics of Russia's political, social, and economic development during the nineteenth century and before. Without doubt, World War I also played a major role in how the 1917 revolution in Petrograd played out. If the Provisional Government had not been committed to military victory, a policy which lacked broad support by 1917, it might have dealt better with the numerous problems that emerged from the collapse of the old order and, in particular, to meet popular demands for immediate fundamental reform. The Bolsheviks' party platform, summarized in the slogans "Peace, Land, and Bread" and "All Power to the Soviets", was one element of the party's strength and popularity in 1917, as was their skillful campaign in support of the Kronstadt sailors, Petrograd factory workers and soldiers.

In the end the writer attributes the Bolsheviks' success not only to Lenin's decisive leadership and the Bolsheviks' unity and discipline, but also to its comparatively tolerant, decentralized and democratic organization and mode of operation combined with an open, mass character. He asserts that the Bolsheviks gained support when the masses came to believe that the congress and the revolution were under threat, and not out of a desire for Bolshevik rule.

The book does have one shortcoming, namely that some events are not fully explained. For example, if there were so many talented leaders among the Bolsheviks and in the Provisional Government, and moderate Bolsheviks like Kamenev, Zinoviev, Lunacharsky, and Riazanov were among the party's most articulate and respected spokesmen, as claimed by the author, then why were they unable to impose their authority to control the revolution and end Lenin's discussions on how the revolution should proceed by arresting him or accepting his resignation from the Central Committee? How was Lenin able to take leadership of the revolution? Does this show the weakness of the Central Committee, or does it indicate the strength of Lenin's ideas and influence? Also, would a non-violent, gradual revolution have been possible in light of the events of the Russian Civil War? Was the armed-conflict inevitable? What brought Russia into this bloody war?

Overall, the book “The Bolshevik Come to Power” is a very well written source on the narration of the Bolshevik Revolution and Alexander Rabinowitch has given us a solid effort. This book provides a more complete understanding of the important and controversial issues related to the Bolsheviks and the Socialist Revolution which brought about dramatic changes in the history of Russia and covers areas previously ignored. In particular, the author has given a detailed, lengthy account of Lenin’s disputes with the other Bolshevik leaders. What becomes clear from this account, however, is that despite often intense disagreement between Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders, Lenin’s views ultimately prevailed in determining the course of the revolution.

The author has also done an admirable and thorough survey of the literature in this field. For the centenary of the Revolution, Pluto Press has made a significant contribution to academicians, researchers and students by reprinting this book.

^[1]The author provides an excerpt from a writer for *Izvestia*.

***Ayse Dietrich** - Professor, Part-time, at Middle East Technical University, Department of History. Editor and the founder of the International Journal of Russian Studies. e-mail: editor@ijors.net, dayse@metu.edu.tr, dietrichayse@yahoo.com

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES