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The October Revolution

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Abstract:

The Russian Bolshevik Revolution of Oct 1917 was caused by the provisional government's utter failure to reestablish state authority or accede to the popular will. The Kerensky government's reluctance to impose immediate land reforms alienated the peasants. Its inability to restore the economy cost it the support of the workers. Finally, its mismanagement of the military led to the army's refusal to defend it when the revolt occurred. The Russian people turned to the Bolsheviks, almost by default, to implement the popular revolutionary program. Lenin and the Bolsheviks eventually implemented their own instead.

Full Text:

With the eightieth anniversary of the Communist Revolution looming large on the horizon, it is probably an appropriate moment to consider once again how it was that the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in October 1917. Of course until 1991 the Revolution remained very much a part of living history, part of the Cold War -- an event which, according to Soviet sources, was part of an unfolding grand design as predicted by Karl Marx, part of the inevitable process on the road to world socialism. In short, the Bolshevik Revolution was bound to happen. Admittedly this view never found much favour in the west, but now with the Soviet Union consigned to the 'dustbin of history' it should be ignored and our focus can turn back to the Provisional Government -- for it was the failure of the Provisional Government (and the other socialist parties) that allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power and hijack what had become a largely popular revolution.

First of all it is important to remember that Nicholas II was not really swept away by a popular revolution. He was removed by his own class -- by his generals to be precise. And their purpose was to prevent revolution. They mistakenly believed that by removing the Tsar, the unrest would subside and the people would be satisfied. How wrong they were! The very thing they sought to prevent, they actually made possible. The people's aspirations were given full rein. But there was perhaps never any real possibility of the people's aspirations being satisfied by the Duma politicians. Like the generals, these were men of wealth and privilege, men of property and business -- they were not revolutionaries; they too were there to prevent revolution. So from the very start, the objectives of the Provisional Government were very different from those of the ordinary people. It is hardly surprising that an impasse developed. Thus in order to make sense of what happened between February and October 1917 we need to look not only at the failings of the Provisional Government, but also at the aspirations of the ordinary people, and finally at how the Bolsheviks were able to exploit both of these.

The Failings of the Provisional Government

A number of criticisms have been made of the Provisional Government. The liberal politicians had little understanding of the workings of government; they wasted time over legal niceties; they were too aware of their provisional nature; they were themselves bitterly divided; they were reluctant to use force to impose their will; they were unable to control the Soviets; they could not manage the economy; they failed to distribute the land; they wished to continue the war; they upheld the interest of the bourgeoisie; they betrayed the masses; and they failed to call the Constituent Assembly.

There is a great deal of truth in all these charges but they miss the point. The point is that too much was expected of the Provisional Government in too short a time. Soldiers wanted an end to the war; peasants wanted the land; workers wanted better conditions; the politically articulate wanted freedom of association, press etc.; different nationalities wanted self determination; the Allies wanted an offensive against the Germans. Any government would have found all these aspirations difficult to fulfill in peacetime let alone during a difficult war. Moreover the government was only provisional (clearly the failure to call the Constituent Assembly was a major mistake) and its power was undermined by the Soviets. Thus it can be argued that it faced an impossible task.

From February onwards the central government was simply drained of power as ordinary people took matters into their own hands. The Tsarist system had held Russia together; with Tsar gone the power structure had collapsed. Traditional authority had been

smashed beyond repair and a climate of disobedience took its place. The government had to comply with the wishes of the masses (and quickly); otherwise it was doomed. There was a honeymoon period perhaps until May, when the government could have acted, but by June it was over. For this reason the June offensive was meant to restore the government's prestige. Accordingly its failure had significant political implications. In particular it was a personal calamity for Kerensky whose self-confidence and judgement suffered as a result. The people increasingly ignored the Provisional Government and when in August Kerensky fell out with Kornilov (another major mistake -- he feared the right and ignored the left) he succeeded in alienating the army. What little power the government had left, evaporated. However, the government not only failed to accede to the people's demands, it consciously tried to resist them. This was the policy of the Kadets, the most influential liberal group of politicians.

There is much truth in Lenin's oft-quoted parody of Provisional Government policy: 'Wait until the Constituent Assembly for land. Wait until the end of the war for the Constituent Assembly. Wait until total victory for the end of the war.' The Kadets did not want to distribute land until the Constituent Assembly was called and as peasant demands became more radical they sided with the landowners. The Kadets were opposed to the state regulation of the economy on philosophical grounds. The Kadets fully supported the war even after the failure of the summer offensive. The Kadets wished to halt the revolution and favoured a military coup to restore discipline and smash the soviets. And the Kadets deliberately postponed the calling of the Constituent Assembly because they knew they would be swamped by the socialist parties (this proved to be correct; in November they only polled 4.7%). Looked at in this light it is not surprising the Provisional Government failed. Given that the Kadets consciously wished to resist the aspirations of the ordinary people but lacked any power to resist them, it is remarkable that the Provisional Government lasted as long as it did.

The People's Revolution

Resistance to popular demands was impossible in the climate of 1917. In the absence of coercion the peasants, workers and soldiers could simply disobey landlords, managers and officers, thereby destroying the authority of the politicians in government. In short no one would do as they were told! But this was not simply blind obstinacy; the people had their own aspirations. And they did not need politicians -- even socialist ones -- to tell them what they wanted.

The peasantry believed the land should belong to those who worked it. The seizure of private land was usually planned and coordinated through the village commune. They also sought equitable justice, local government officials elected by the peasants themselves and free education. 'The goals, methods and rhythm of peasant actions during 1917 were their own' (Acton).

The peasant revolution began slowly and did not really get under way until the autumn. Initially the peasants organized themselves into committees, sought to bring unsown land back into productive use, withdrew their labour from landlords and intervened in the management of estates where landowners looked as though they were asset stripping. The government tried to steer a middle course between the landowners and peasants (which was impossible) and after July tried to take a firmer line against the latter. For instance on 8th July the government confirmed that land seizures were completely impermissible pending the decision of the Constituent Assembly. The subsequent decline in peasant 'incidents' in August was deceptive as the majority were working on the harvest. Although the position of Soviet historians has always been that all the peasants rose in revolt in September and October, it seems likely that this is an exaggeration. There were serious disturbances but these were largely confined to about a dozen provinces and carried out by a minority of the peasantry. Many peasants showed remarkable patience and were prepared to wait for a legal transfer of land but only because they were confident that there was a new environment in which their wishes would be fulfilled. However, the patience of others was running out and at the time of the October Revolution direct action was coming to the fore, and there was little the government could do about it. In short, the Provisional Government could not control events in the countryside.

Most historical research has focused on the proletariat, the working class, though in truth the workers were not as important as the soldiery in terms of the collapse of government authority. In particular the phenomenon of the Soviets has generated much attention. There were 300 of these within three months, 600 by August and 900 by October, but in reality they were controlled by an elite of activists and, for many workers, the unions and factory committees were the organs through which their demands were made and met. What did the workers want? They wanted better conditions: improved wages, a shorter working day, an end to the authoritarian factory structure, and an end to the humiliating treatment meted out by management. In the aftermath of the February Revolution many of these demands were met and unpopular managers were 'purged'.

Initially Factory Committees were quite moderate in their requests. However, the improvement in working conditions did not bring an improvement in the economy; it continued to deteriorate and as it did so worker demands became more extreme as workers moved from their own agenda to a reactive one. Rising prices, shortages of raw materials and problems of food supply led to an increasing number of strikes from May onwards (peaking in September). However, strikes did not keep the factories open and after the July days the workers in Petrograd faced mass redundancies and the possibility of counter revolution. 1917 then was not a glorious episode for the proletariat; it was a growing nightmare. Seen in this light the increasing radicalization of worker demands takes on a different hue and the takeover of factories (workers' control) should be interpreted as a last ditch act of desperation to save jobs, rather than a manifestation of some radical agenda. Motives remained economic though politicization went on apace. However, workers were true to issues rather than parties and they were prepared to support anyone who could restore the economy. Thus they had little time for the Provisional Government and if their leadership in the Soviet failed they were prepared to support new leaders here too. It is in this context that Bolshevik success should be seen.

Where did all this leave the Provisional Government? Well, quite clearly it was powerless to resist initial worker demands and powerless to prevent their increasing radicalization. The responsibility for the collapsing economy must also rest with the government, though all the problems that we have mentioned were inherited. However, they got worse, rather than better. Clearly worker demands did not help the economy (working less hours and being paid more money cannot have helped company viability) but much of subsequent worker intransigence was, as we have seen, the result of economic collapse rather than its cause. The Provisional Government's failure to manage the economy lost it the support of the working class. As in the countryside, the Provisional

Government had little control in the cities, and the main reason for this is because it did not control the soldiers either. Thus by far the most significant group, as far as government authority was concerned, were the soldiers. It was with them that the fate of the government rested.

The soldiers, who were largely peasants in uniform, naturally shared the wish for land reform but they also wanted to transform traditional military discipline. They wanted representative committees, the dismissal of unpopular officers and more humane treatment. These changes occurred almost instantaneously throughout the Empire and were reflected in the Petrograd Soviet's Orders No. 1 and No. 2 (which, though for the Petrograd garrison only, had widespread repercussions across Russia). Generally speaking the changes were 'spontaneous, orderly and responsible', and symptomatic of a 'massive, self-generating revolutionary movement from below' (Read).

Initially the government adopted a conciliatory attitude and proclaimed a limited Declaration of Soldier's Rights (May 11). The soldiers also wanted an early end to the war and did not want to conduct offensive operations. There was, however, an inherent contradiction in this position. The Germans were not simply going to go away! This attitude accounted for the failure of the June offensive and the rebellious garrison troops in early July. In the aftermath the government tried to tighten up discipline by reintroducing the death penalty (July 12) and reports from the front in mid-August indicated that the situation was quite stable. In fact the incidence of desertion (before October) has been much exaggerated and the soldiers were committed to stopping the German advance.

However, the Kornilov Affair destroyed any trust that there might have been. The incident was interpreted as an attack on soldiers' rights. Now no one supported the government and relations between soldiers and officers sunk to an all time low. The soldiers were tired and hungry and had little faith in either the High Command or the possibility of victory. As with the peasantry this disaffection was generated by the soldiers themselves, not by outside political agitators. Hunger was more powerful than propaganda. By October the whole army was being swept by a 'virtual tidal wave ... of self-assertion by the soldier mass on behalf of peace regardless of consequences or conditions' (Wildman). Increasingly radical resolutions were passed by the soldiers and a refusal to obey orders became widespread. The Russian army was disintegrating and once again there was absolutely nothing the government could do about it. Moreover, without military force the government was impotent.

Of course the leading arbiter of national politics was the Petrograd garrison, and garrison troops tended to be more radical than those in the front line. The soldiers would have supported any government which was prepared to carry out the policies they favoured, (peace, land, democracy etc.) but the growing inability, or unwillingness, of the Provisional Government to carry out these policies meant that when the government was threatened the garrison did nothing to save it.

It would appear, then, that the increasingly radical challenge to traditional authority by the peasants, workers and soldiers dictated the course of the revolution and sealed the fate of the Provisional Government. Once it became clear that the government was not going to fulfill their wishes, the ordinary people took direct action through their committees. But there was a limit to what these committees could do: they could not end the war, restore the economy or ensure food supplies throughout Russia. The people needed a government of politicians who were prepared to carry out the people's policies. They needed a party with a programme that coincided with theirs. This is where the Bolsheviks come in.

The Bolshevik take-over

If we look at the state of the political parties in February 1917 we would have to say that the Bolsheviks were the least likely party to take control. The Kadets dominated the government but they were unable to attract mass support as there was an inherent contradiction in wanting universal suffrage and serving the interests of the propertied few. They suffered a precipitate decline. The Soviets were dominated by the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries; the former had considerable support among the proletariat, the latter among peasantry, and both had support among the soldiers. The Bolsheviks were behind all these parties with a membership of 10,000; and things did not get much better for them. Lenin's return in April generated more interest and his position, 'no support to the Provisional Government', and no collaboration with other socialist parties, was unique and proved to be valuable later. However, up to the July Days the party had made little progress and their suppression after this episode seemed to herald their demise. Yet remarkably from this time on their political strength began to grow, as they came to be seen as the one party untainted by collaboration with the Provisional Government. This growth in support in August predated the Kornilov affair but that event proved to be the real turning point. What had been a trickle became a flood in September as more and more people turned to the Bolsheviks as their next best hope. By October membership had ballooned to 300,000.

However there is an important point to be made here. People (and we are mainly taking about workers and some soldiers -- the Bolsheviks were always weak amongst the peasantry) were turning to the Bolsheviks not because they were becoming committed to Bolshevism, but because they had become dissatisfied with the socialist parties which had worked with the Provisional Government and failed to deliver on the fundamental issues of peace, land and bread. The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries were discredited by their collaboration and the Mensheviks in particular suffered a dramatic collapse. This was because they had in fact set themselves against popular opinion by refusing to create a soviet government. Many were hamstrung by their belief in the Marxist theory that a long bourgeois phase had to precede socialism. There was a significant missed opportunity. So the Bolsheviks inherited the people's hopes somewhat by default. They did not hold out 'a new vision of the revolution', but rather 'a more speedy realisation of the original one' (Wildman).

The fact that the Bolsheviks were able to absorb such a dramatic increase in membership and support belies the old view that they were ruthless, rigid, centralised, disciplined, streamlined machine. At this stage they were in fact a flexible, fluid organization, and while Lenin's prestige was immense he did not have the control Soviet historians used to have us believe. In addition the party's propaganda and policies did not educate and persuade the masses; rather, they evoked a response because they coincided with the masses' view. They did not create the people's programme: they merely articulated it.

What Lenin brought to the movement was a programme distinct from the other parties and an unstoppable drive to seize power. Whether or not he was behind the July Days is a moot point; but in the autumn he saw a real opportunity and, although his timing was wrong in September, without him it is unlikely that the Bolsheviks would have taken power in October. It is still likely that the Provisional Government under Kerensky would have collapsed (it had no support and no power at all) but what would have replaced it is anybody's guess, though a soviet government (i.e. a coalition of socialists) was the only real alternative. Kerensky's blunders over Kornilov and finally on 24 October when he tried to suppress the Bolsheviks ensured their victory. In many ways he initiated the insurrection by forcing the Bolsheviks to defend themselves. But while the October Revolution bore all the classic hallmarks of a coup d'etat, it was more than that: it was a response to the popular movement. The troops stood by and allowed the Bolsheviks to take over, in the name of the soviets, in the name of the people. But this turned out to be a massive deception.

Conclusion

Thus it can be argued that the Provisional Government was almost doomed to failure from the start. The propertied classes had removed the Tsar to prevent a revolution but their vision of a liberal democracy which would maintain their position of privilege in no way corresponded to the wishes of the people. Perhaps it was intellectual arrogance that made the bourgeoisie feel the people could not have an agenda. In any event, the people did have an agenda (peace, land, bread, etc.) and this was the revolution from below. The government failed to respond to the people's wishes and even came to resist them. But it had no power to do so. Power rested with the people but they in turn needed a responsive government. Eventually after the failure of the Mensheviks and SRs in coalition many turned to the Bolsheviks. After August Kerensky's government had no power and Lenin stepped into his place in October. But whereas the people saw the Bolsheviks as a vehicle for achieving their aims, for Lenin popular support was a vehicle for achieving his messianic vision of world revolution and world socialism. Accordingly there was bound to be a dramatic clash between these two perceptions. 'Where the people thought they were taking power for themselves, they were actually handing it over to a new, authoritarian leadership with almost unlimited aims' (Read). This became clear as the Bolsheviks struggled to retain power.

Because the whole mechanism of state control had collapsed, the principal objective of the Provisional Government should have been to restore the authority of the state; but it could not. It had no coercive power and the link with the localities had been broken. In fact state authority was not to be re-established until some time after the Bolsheviks had seized power and then they were only able to do so by reverting to the methods of the old regime. This of course explains the paradox at the heart of the Revolution -- how an oppressive, bureaucratic police state under the Tsar was replaced by an oppressive, bureaucratic police state under the Communists. There was a truly popular revolution in 1917, but the Provisional Government failed to respond to it. The Bolsheviks did, but only to pervert it. The Russian people are still living with the consequences.

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