**The Russian Coup d'Etat: November, 1917**

The indecisive Kerensky, already minister of war and navy, became Prime Minister soon after the first failed Leninist coup. His response to the putsch was, strangely, to alienate his military supporters (Pipes in particular argues forcefully that Kornilov and other military figures jailed by Kerensky were not in fact plotting against him) while thwarting any serious effort to neutralize the Bolsheviks. As Pipes notes, Kerensky "even deprived the Military Staff of the authority to arrest Bolsheviks and forbade it to confiscate weapons found in their possession. As the end of July, he looked the other way as the Bolsheviks held their Sixth Party Congress in Petrograd." Kerensky soon ordered the release of all but a few of the Bolsheviks from prison, including Trotsky, so that by October 10 (old calendar) "all but twenty-seven Bolsheviks were at liberty and preparing for the next coup."(*The Russian Revolution*) Largely under Trotsky's control due to Lenin's absence, the Bolsheviks intensified their manipulation of the soviets; upon winning control of the Moscow and Petrograd soviets, they set up their own national soviet organization, even though on the national level the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks were still the dominant parties. The Bolsheviks cleverly split off a faction of the Social Revolutionaries, known henceforth as the "Left SRs," which enabled them to keep up the pretense of sharing power with other socialist parties.



The next step was for the Bolsheviks to convene at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Just as Lenin split off his followers from the R.S.D.L.P. and declared his faction to be the "real" party, so too did Lenin now split off his followers in the soviets and declare them to be the "real" national council of soviets - even though the Mensheviks and SRs still had a large majority on the national level. After bargaining for a few concessions, the original Ispolkom legitimized the Second Congress by agreeing to participate. This was a fatal error, as Pipes observes:

Although aware of what the Bolsheviks had in mind, the Ispolkom gave them what they wanted: a hand-picked body, filled with their adherents and allies, which was certain to legitimize a Bolshevik power seizure. (*The Russian Revolution*)

Lenin now secretly returned to Petrograd, ensuring that his followers would exert their best efforts to seize power. The night *before* their hand-picked Second Congress was to meet, on October 24 (old calendar) Leninist cadres forcibly seized control of all the power centers in Petrograd: railroads, mail, phones, banks, bridges. Their early efforts to take the Winter Palace and arrest the Provisional Government were however thwarted by loyal troops. Lenin and Trotsky had planned to open the Second Congress only after the Winter Palace was under their control, but these difficulties put them in an awkward situation. Unfazed, Trotsky simply opened the Second Congress with the *announcement* that the Provisional Government had been dismissed. Lenin arrived at the Congress to proclaim the "worldwide socialist revolution." Suitably packed with loyal Bolsheviks, the Second Congress voted in a new 15-member Provisional Government or "Sovnarkom" composed *exclusively* of Bolsheviks, along with a new Iskolpom of 62 Bolsheviks and 29 Left SRs out of 101 members. The Winter Palace fell shortly thereafter, and part of the Provisional Government was arrested. In other urban centers, similar coups put Lenin's followers firmly in charge, bolstered by their Left SR allies, with a window dressing of other parties to keep up appearances.

Lenin and Trotsky now had the upper hand, but their triumph was incomplete. Their gerrymandered Provisional Government was supposed to reign only until new elections to the Constituent Assembly were held. Lenin's optimism led him to permit these national elections, which were relatively free and representative of the entire Russian population. While the Bolsheviks won in Petrograd and Moscow, and had particularly strong support from soldiers, the elections made it clear that **at best** the Bolsheviks had the support of only a minority of the population - even though they had been in charge of the central government for a month!

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Constituent Assembly Election Results** | | |
| *Party* | *# of Votes (000's)* | *Percent of Vote* |
| Socialist-Revolutionaries | 17,943 | 40.4% |
| Bolsheviks | 10,661 | 24.0% |
| Mensheviks | 1,144 | 2.6% |
| Left SRs | 451 | 1.0% |
| Other Socialists | 401 | 0.9% |
| Constitutional Democrats ("Kadets") | 2,088 | 4.7% |
| Other Russian Liberal Parties | 1,261 | 2.8% |
| Ukrainian SRs | 3,433 | 7.7% |
| Georgian Mensheviks | 662 | 1.5% |
| Mussavat (Azerbaijan) | 616 | 1.4% |
| Dashnaktsutiun (Armenia) | 560 | 1.3% |
| Alash Orda (Kazahkstan) | 407 | 0.9% |
| Other National Minority Parties | 407 | 0.9% |
| Unaccounted | 4,543 | 10.2% |

This was a crushing defeat for Lenin. But while only a quarter of the voters cast their votes for the Bolsheviks, Lenin's followers had the determination and discipline that their opponents lacked. The Leninists abruptly changed their position, declaring that the Constituent Assembly elections did not represent the will of the people. They banned the Kadets (which, like the Bolsheviks, had a relatively strong following in the urban centers), dissolved the Constituent Assembly, and pulled their standard trick: forming a packed parallel assembly and declaring it to the be "the" assembly. As Pipes explains, in early January...

[T]he Bolsheviks opened their counter-Assembly, labeled "Third Congress of Soviets." Here no one could obstruct them because they had reserved for themselves and the Left SRs 94 percent of the seats, more than three times what they were entitled to, judging by the results of the Constituent Assembly. The little left over their allocated to the opposition socialists - just enough to have a target for abuse and ridicule. The congress duly passed all the measures submitted to it by the government spokesmen, including the "Declaration of Rights." Russia became a "Federation of Soviet Republics," to be known as the "Russian Soviet Socialist Republic," which name she retained until 1924, when she was renamed "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." The congress acknowledged the Sovnarkom as the country's legitimate government, removing from its name the adjective "provisional." It also approved the principle of universal labor obligation.

As Orwell wrote in *1984*, "One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes a revolution in order to establish the dictatorship." The first Communist state had arrived.

**The First Communist Dictatorship**

Lenin had promised "Peace, Land, and Bread." After several false starts, the Bolsheviks successfully negotiated a separate peace with the Germans, the famous Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Ratified in March, 1918, Lenin ceded the Baltic states, eastern Poland, and the Ukraine to the Germans. This amounted to surrendering over 25% of Russia's population. This removed the external threat to the Bolshevik regime; and since Lenin anticipated revolution in Europe and in any case planned to break the treaty after consolidating his regime, there was much sense in his claim that "To obtain an armistice now means to *conquer the whole world*." Lenin's Left SR allies objected so violently to Brest-Litovsk that they left the coalition government; but by this point, they had outlived their usefulness anyway. At the Seventh Party Congress the Bolsheviks also changed their official name to the Russian Communist Party, and it was as "Communists" that the world would henceforth know them and their adherents around the world.

(During the negotiations, British, French, and American forces did occupy a few Russian ports, but it should be noted that to some extent the Allies were *invited* by the Bolsheviks in order to strengthen their bargaining position against the Germans. The Allies, blind to the long-term threat that Lenin posed, focused almost entirely on getting Lenin to get back into the war against the Germans. [Click here](http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/allies.htm) to view the **Special Exhibit** on Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War.)

It was also quite easy for Lenin to deliver land to the peasants. They had been seizing and dividing up large estates for almost a year before Lenin legally recognized this accomplished fact. What the peasants did not realize was that just as Lenin planned to dispose of Brest-Litovsk at the first opportunity, so too did he plan to nationalize the peasants' land as soon as he could get away with it.

Lenin's last promise of bread was the hardest to deliver. The Provisional Government, barely more literate in economics than Lenin, had imposed a price ceiling on food, resulting, as any "bourgeois" economist could have told them, in severe shortages of food in the cities. Arguably this hurt the Provisional Government as much as its failure to sign a separate peace with the Germans; for the price ceiling angered both peasants, forced to sell their grain for a pittance, and workers, unable to obtain food at any price.Lenin merely intensified the brutality of enforcement of the price controls on food; rather than starve in the cities, large percentages of the urban population returned to their family farms in the country. (In the end, even this desperate move would not save many of them from starvation).

Draconian enforcement of price controls was merely one of a plethora of tasks entrusted to the backbone of Lenin's new regime: the secret police, or Cheka, headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky. Its nucleus was Trotsky's goon squad from the Petrograd Soviet, which almost immediately became an official organ of the government after the coup. Its rate of growth was fantastic: "The Tsar's secret police, the Okhrana, had numbered 15,000, which made it by far the largest body of its kind in the old world. By contrast, the Cheka, within three years of its establishment, had a strength of 250,000 full-time agents." (Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*) Its powers were vast: now only was the Cheka judge, jury, and executioner, but it acknowledged no law to guide its actions, only "the dictates of revolutionary conscience." Its methods were savage: summary shooting, concentration camps, and forced labor were its three basic weapons. And its potential victims, the "enemies of the people" it was instructed to hunt down, were countless. As the high-ranking Chekist Latsis explained:

The Extraordinary Commission is neither an investigating body nor a tribunal. It is an organ of struggle, acting on the home front of a civil war... We are not carrying out war against individuals. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class.

Or as Zinoviev, another high-ranking Bolshevik put it, "We must carry along with us 90 million out of the 100 million of Soviet Russia's inhabitants. As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated." As Paul Johnson observes, "There is no essential moral difference between class-warfare and race-warfare, between destroying a class and destroying a race. Thus the modern practice of genocide was born." (*Modern Times*)

The work of the Cheka, Russia soon learned, was never done. Censorship was quickly imposed, and it was up to the Cheka to confiscate the literature of dissident workers: "[O]n 17 November the Central Executive Committee passed a decree giving the bolsheviks control over all newsprint and wide powers of closing down newspapers critical of the regime..." (Leonard Shapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*). Workers were re-forming independent soviets; the Cheka broke them up. Independent newspapers criticized Lenin's government; the Cheka closed them down, until the Bolshevik-controlled *Pravda* and *Izvestia* had a monopoly on the supply of news. As Shapiro notes, "The refusal to come to terms with the socialists and the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly led to the logical result that revolutionary terror would now be directed not only against traditional enemies, such as the bourgeoisie or right-wing opponents, but against anyone, be he socialist, worker or peasant, who opposed bolshevik rule." (*The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*)

The Cheka soon turned to "taking hostages"; i.e., arresting people who they guessed had anti-Bolshevik feelings, and shooting them if their demands were not met or their decrees disobeyed. For example, Lenin's government might decree that the peasants in a certain region must deliver food or timber to the government; if the government's demands were not met, they would shoot some hostages. Lenin himself gave the order to...

[D]esignate in every district (designate, do not seize) hostages, by name, from among kulaks, rich men, and exploiters, whom you are to charge with responsibility for collection and delivery to assigned stations or grain-collection points and for turning over to the authorities of all the surplus grain without exception.

The hostages are answerable with their lives for the accurate and prompt payment of the contribution. (quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*

While initially the Cheka was mainly concerned with crushing direct political threats to the regime, it soon began a desperate attempt to impose Lenin's half-baked economic policies on the country. Price maxima were combined with unrestrained printing-press inflationary finance. Businesses and banks were chaotically nationalized. Decrees imposed the "universal labor obligation," which required anyone not currently employed to report to the government to receive their work assignment. And like the Russian governments before it, Lenin's imposed conscription to raise armies - a measure particularly resented by the peasants who thought that Lenin's regime had ended their wartime suffering.

Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin, took Communist tyranny to new heights. But Stalin was not the corrupter of the noble work of a great lover of human freedom. Communism meant tyranny from its inception, and Lenin and Trotsky were the vanguard of that tyranny. Whenever moral scruples stayed the hand of his followers, Lenin urged them to cast "bourgeois morality" aside. As the great democratic socialist historian Carl Landauer concluded, "This totalitarian form of government took a long time to develop and Lenin did not live to see its completion, but he was its author." (*European Socialism: A History of Ideas and Movements*)

<http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/hisfram1.htm>