

Communism – the Failed Experiment, Part III |

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(see here for [Part I](#) and [Part II](#))

The Bolshevik Revolution

1. The Party

The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) was founded in Minsk in 1898, in an attempt to unite the major socialist factions active in Russia at the time. In addition to the unification idea, the party was meant to provide an alternative to the 'Narodnichestvo', the populist revolutionary movement that was represented by the narodniki, the young people that had begun to swarm out into the countryside in an attempt to 'educate the peasantry' (the party representing the narodniki movement was the SRP, see further below). The major difference between these parties consisted in the fact that the RSDLP adopted Marxism as its ideological foundation (as noted in part II of this series, the Czar's censors had mistakenly allowed the Russian translation of Marx' 'Das Kapital' to be published in Russia on the grounds that it was a 'strictly scientific work'. Presumably the censor charged with reading the book got bored out of his skull and one of the great ironies of history was the result).

The beginning of the party's existence was inauspicious – the nine delegates attending its first congress were soon all arrested by the Okhrana, the Czar's secret police. One of the groups attending the first congress of the RSDLP was the '*St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class*', a Marxist group founded by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) and Julius Martov. Due to a number of arrests in 1895, the group was significantly weakened at the time of the first RSDLP congress – Ulyanov for instance was exiled to Siberia at the time. Nevertheless, the League, directed by Ulyanov from prison, was able to organize the biggest strike of factory workers seen in Russia up to that point in time in St. Petersburg in 1896, proving its undiminished organizational capabilities.

When Ulyanov's term of exile ended in 1900, he decided to emigrate and continue his work from Western Europe. From 1900-1902 he lived in Munich, from 1902 to 1903 in London and from 1903 to 1905 in Geneva. While in Western Europe, he founded the party newspaper 'Iskra' ('Spark', 1900) together with Julius Martov, recruited for the RSDLP and wrote numerous theoretical works. Due to the fact that some of his activities were clandestine, he adopted the *nom de guerre* 'Lenin' in 1902. One of his works, entitled 'What Is To Be Done' was published in 1902, just prior to the second congress of the RSDLP which took place in exile in Brussels and London in 1903. Ironically, this work precipitated the ideological split of the party that manifested itself at the very congress that was meant to solidify and unify the party under a single program.

The original organizing committee of the second congress had been elected at the Bialystok conference in Poland in 1902, however, similar to the fate of the delegates attending the first congress of the RSDLP, nearly all of the members of the organizing committee were arrested shortly thereafter. Lenin

then proposed a new committee, with the majority of its membership drawn from people working for the *Iskra* organization (this did not result in a smooth operation guaranteeing unity however). The congress ended up splitting the party into several factions – a typical fate of Russian socialist parties at the time. The General Jewish Labor Bund withdrew from the party altogether when its proposal to adopt a federal structure (which would have allowed the constituent parties to retain their individual identities) was defeated. Already Lenin and other *Iskra*ists were deeply distrustful of the Bund and its motives, so this split was no surprise (Lenin was e.g. incensed over how much time the congress spent debating the to him inconsequential 'language question' on the Bund's insistence). Most importantly though, a disagreement between Martov and Lenin over a number of points – in the main the issue of the composition of *Iskra*'s editorial board and RSDLP party membership rules – led to the internal split into 'Mensheviks' and 'Bolsheviks'. Lenin believed that the party had to be an elitist 'vanguard of the revolution', comprised of 'professional revolutionaries', a demand foreshadowed in 'What Is To Be Done', whereas Martov wanted a broader definition of party membership (reading up on these differences today, one is struck by how minor they seemed to be). In this particular question, Martov's faction won the vote. However, after the Bund delegates – who had voted against Lenin in nearly all questions that were discussed as a matter of principle – stormed out of the Congress, Lenin's faction obtained a small majority that enabled it to win the vote for the composition of the party's central committee and other central party organs.

It was this single vote that Lenin's supporters won by default that resulted in the rather confusing naming of the two factions. 'Mensheviks' are the 'minority', while 'Bolsheviks' are the 'majority'. However, throughout the party's history prior to 1917, the Menshevik faction actually represented the vast majority, while the Bolsheviks were a tiny minority. Their names however were derived on occasion of this single vote at the second congress that the Leninist faction decided for itself, and it stuck.

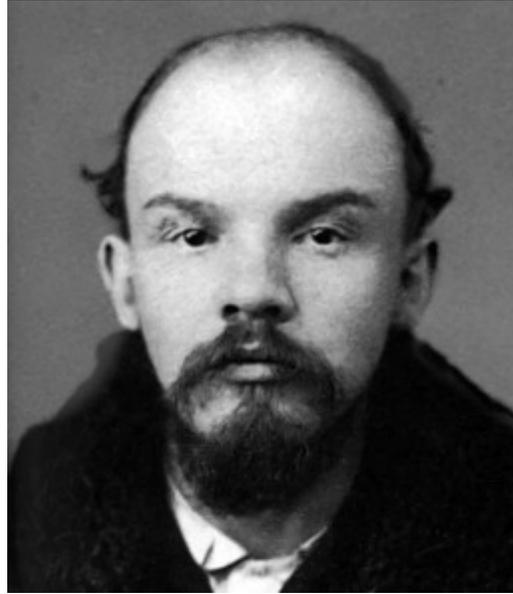
For readers interested in learning more about the second party congress, here is a link to the very interesting account of the proceedings Lenin himself wrote. A complete transcription of the stenographical record of the congress is available [here](#).

The two factions henceforth developed their own independent organizational structures. In another irony, Lenin's proposal regarding party membership rules was adopted anyway at the 4th party congress in 1906, in spite of the Mensheviks being in the majority throughout the 4th congress. While the RSDLP remained formally united, the two factions continued to operate separately and were also regarded as distinct entities for the duration of their participation in Russia's Duma subsequently to Czar Nicholas II's halfhearted reform of Russia's political system. As the Mensheviks were more tolerant of other political movements than the Bolsheviks, they attracted a large number of social democrats to their ranks over the following years, making them into an even larger faction. This balance of power changed significantly in the run-up to the revolution, and even more so in the election of the Russian Constitutional Assembly following the October revolution. During the interregnum of the provisional government following the abdication of Czar Nicholas, the Mensheviks had suffered an internal split themselves, into a 'right wing' and a 'left wing'. In the election to the Constituent Assembly they received only 3% of the vote compared to the 25% the Bolsheviks received.



The leaders of the Mensheviks, photographed in Stockholm in May 1917. Pavel Axelrod, Julius Martov

and Alexander Martinov.



Lenin's mugshot, taken by police after his arrest by the Okhrana in 1895. At the time he was still Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov – he adopted his *nom de guerre* 'Lenin' seven years later while in exile in Munich ('Lenin' is derived from the [Lena river in Siberia](#)).



The first edition of the RSDLP's party newspaper 'Iskra'. Its name and motto ('From a spark, a fire will flare up') was taken from a reply Vladimir Odoyevsky wrote to a poem by Pushkin addressed to the 'Decembrists' imprisoned in Siberia after the 1825 'December uprising' against Czar Nicholai I.

2. The Provisional Government

Following Czar Nicholai II's abdication in March of 1917, a provisional government was formed in Petrograd, at first led by Prince Georgy Lvov. The government was a coalition of several parties, most of which were represented in the Duma and the socialist Alexander Kerensky (RSP), who became minister of justice in its first incarnation (his party however was not participating in the fourth Duma).

Kerensky belonged to the fiercely anti-Czarist Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP), which had been established in 1902, uniting several socialist movements close to the narodniky. A significant core of the SRP consisted of members of the *Narodnaya Volya* ('People's Will') terrorist organization that was responsible for numerous political assassinations, including that of Czar Alexander II. Before becoming a significant faction in the second Duma with 37 elected representatives (the SRP boycotted the first, third and fourth Dumas), the SRP employed a paramilitary arm, the 'SR Combat Organization' (SRCO) that was very active until 1909, continuing the assassination spree of Narodnaya Volya. As mentioned in part II, it was extremely dangerous to accept a post in the Czarist government – mainly due to the SRCO. The SRP was closely associated with the peasantry, while the RSDLP was more of an urban party. Moreover, the SRP's program was not strictly Marxist.

Kerensky was the sole member of the SRP assuming a post in the first provisional government, but his party's representation would soon be strengthened. With this, Kerensky's power increased, until he finally ended up replacing Lvov. The original provisional government due to its close association with the Duma had to contend with competition from the Soviets (workers' and soldiers' councils) that had spontaneously formed as Nicholas II's reign came to ruin, especially the powerful Petrograd Soviet. When foreign affairs minister Milyukov informed the Entente allies in early April of 1917 that Russia would continue its participation in the war, Petrograd was once again shaken by violent demonstrations. Russia's people had become extremely war-weary and the decision of the provisional government to continue the war (purportedly to 'safeguard the revolution') was widely and deeply resented. The decision to continue the war was one of the major factors sealing the fate of the provisional government, as it lost more and more popular support as a result. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks (especially after Lenin's return) were the sole party demanding an immediate end to the war, which helped garner them a lot of support they might otherwise not have enjoyed.

In view of the demonstrations, Lvov sought to pacify the situation by inviting the Petrograd Soviet to participate in the provisional government. The various Soviets were at the time largely controlled by the Mensheviks (however, the Bolsheviks were gaining ever more influence), and following the negotiations, six socialists joined the provisional government (including Kerensky, who assumed the post of war minister). Notably, while there were two Menshevik ministers, no Bolsheviks joined.

In July 1917 two major events took place. One was the later so-called 'Kerensky offensive', in which the provisional government launched a desperate new military offensive against the German and Austrian armies that predictably once again failed. This failure undermined the already shaky authority of the government further. The second event was a renewed popular uprising in Petrograd involving mostly factory workers and soldiers, which the government promptly blamed on the Bolsheviks. Lenin (regarding his return to Russia, see further below) and some of his associates quickly went into hiding to escape the clampdown, while several other Bolshevik leaders were arrested. Lenin shaved off his beard, donned a wig and fled to Finland, where he remained for three months.



Lenin photographed in Finland in August of 1917, clean-shaven and wearing a wig.

After the 'July crisis', the government ministers belonging to 'right wing' parties resigned and a third incarnation of the provisional government was formed, this time with a vast socialist majority. On this occasion Kerensky assumed Lvov's post of minister-president, while at the same time retaining the portfolio of minister of war (a fourth, short-lived government was formed in late September with a slightly enlarged roster of ministerial posts, but likewise with a solid majority of members of socialist parties). While Kerensky was opposed to the Bolsheviks, he was far more concerned with the 'bourgeois' parties like the 'Kadets' (the Constitutional Democratic Party, which was in favor of a constitutional

monarchy), whom he regarded as the more dangerous enemies. As a consequence, he tended to neglect the growing threat from the radical left that evolved right under his nose. More and more soldiers that had deserted (by autumn of 1917, some two million soldiers are estimated to have deserted the Russian army) went over to the Bolsheviks, who promised them bread, land and peace once a communist system was established. The military arm of the Bolsheviks, the so-called Red Guards, which consisted of armed factory workers, soldiers and sailors, became ever stronger.



Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky, the leader of the provisional Russian government from July of 1917 until the October revolution.

The event that may be regarded as the beginning of the end of the Kerensky government occurred in August 1917 and is known as the 'Kornilov affair'.

General Lavr Kornilov, the commander-in-chief of the Russian Imperial Army, while an opponent of the Czar, was among those supporting the continuation of the war. His main concern was likely that Russia would be forced to cede a large amount of territory if it were to sue for peace with Germany (a well-founded concern as it turned out) and he felt honor-bound to fulfill Russia's obligations to the Entente. In addition, Kornilov feared that the country would descend into chaos on the heels of a military defeat. He was also staunchly opposed to the Soviets and the Bolsheviks – reportedly he once demanded that Lenin and his followers should be hanged. Kornilov received communications from Petrograd indicating that the Kerensky government wanted him to 'restore order' in Petrograd by force of arms. The government was allegedly considering to make Kornilov a co-leader of the government alongside Kerensky in order to bolster the government's dwindling authority. It is actually unclear to this day whether or not such a deal was really made.

While Kornilov set troops in motion to impose martial law in Petrograd, Kerensky distributed arms among Petrograd's factory workers, who in turn joined the Bolsheviks and their Red Guards in droves. After apparently inviting Kornilov in, Kerensky made a sudden u-turn, accused Kornilov of being a 'counter-revolutionary' intent on imposing a military dictatorship and dismissed him from his post. The troops under Kornilov's command were arrested, as were Kornilov and his alleged co-conspirators.

It is unclear whether there really was a deal between Kerensky and Kornilov, but conservative politicians probably were strongly in favor of Kornilov's intervention. Kornilov intended to dissolve the Petrograd Soviet, something Kerensky was apparently unwilling to countenance. It seems likely that Kerensky wanted to be seen as the 'savior' who had beaten off a military coup in order to improve his own image. This turned out to be a grave miscalculation.

On the one hand, Kerensky lost the support and loyalty of a large part of the army, as he was seen as

having betrayed Kornilov. On the other hand, he was unable to get credit for forestalling a coup, as the arrests were effected by the Red Guards, which the Petrograd Soviet had mobilized. The leadership of the Soviet knew that the 'Savage Division' and the Third Cavalry Corps dispatched by Kornilov were coming to depose it. The Red Guards simply stopped the trains carrying the soldiers and arrested them on the spot. After the October revolution, Kornilov escaped from the prison in Bykhov where he was held (the prison conveniently happened to be guarded by Kornilov loyalists) and became a commander in the White Army that opposed the new communist government in Russia's post-revolution civil war.

From the conclusion of the Kornilov affair to the fall of Kerensky's government only slightly more than two months would pass.



General Lavr Georgiyevich Kornilov, 1870-1918, commander-in-chief of the Russian Imperial Army (a post to which Kerensky had appointed him), later commander of the White Army. Fired by Kerensky in late August 1917 and imprisoned in Bykhov until his escape in December 1917.



The Red Guards of the 'Electrocraft' Factory in Petrograd.

3. Parvus, the Shadowy Middleman

On April 17, 1917, a telegram sent by the chief of the German Intelligence Agency in Moscow reached the German General Staff headquarters. It was brief and to the point:

“Lenin's entry into Russia has succeeded. He works entirely as desired.”

A few years after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, numerous documents have been discovered that shed fresh light on the bizarre alliance between Lenin's Bolsheviks and the German Reich under emperor Wilhelm. What occasioned this alliance between the ideological antagonists was the desire of the Bolsheviks to immediately end Russia's participation in the 'imperialist war'. Germany was eager to bring its armies back from the Eastern front to help in the brutal trench warfare in France, where the two sides

had been stuck in by and large the same positions for quite some time – suffering enormous losses in the process without having anything to show for them.

Lenin's Bolsheviks were seen as Germany's best chance to bring a quick end to the war in the East – the German and Austro-Hungarian alliance had been far more successful militarily in Russia than elsewhere, but a decisive defeat of Russia had not been achieved yet.

Accordingly, the enemy of Germany's enemy became Germany's friend. Today it is estimated that the German foreign ministry alone contributed about 26 million Reichsmark to the Bolshevik cause over four years, equivalent to about € 75 million (the exact figures will never be known, because the foreign ministry had a habit of destroying all documents that could prove its support of the Bolsheviks; much of the evidence gathered by historians is circumstantial).

The association of the German Reich with Lenin's party began when a former Bolshevik from Estonia, Alexander Kesküla showed up at the German foreign ministry. He primarily tried to sell his own services, but told the Germans *en passant* about the balding man living in exile in Switzerland, whom he recommended as extraordinarily capable with regards to the objective of bringing Czar Nicholai's reign to an end. He told the German diplomats that their best bet would be to immediately help the Bolshevik faction in Russia, while describing Lenin as 'enjoying the greatest respect among the Bolsheviks'. He was, so Kesküla, 'entirely unscrupulous' and possessed the 'most brutal, ruthless energy'. Later Kesküla would change his allegiance and describe Lenin to the Entente in the exact same words – only this time around, it was meant as a warning.

The Germans needed a middleman to organize the help they intended to give to the Bolsheviks, and they found just the right man in the person of Alexander Helphand, a shadowy, Minsk-born businessman of German ethnicity residing in Constantinople, who had become rich selling arms and foodstuffs to the Ottoman empire's army. Helphand, nicknamed 'Parvus' ('the small one'), was a first class political adventurer, of the sort that often pops up during times of great upheaval. Helphand had been opposed to the Czarist regime for a long time, mainly on account of its antisemitism. While studying in Switzerland, he first came into contact with the Marxist philosophy. In 1891 he went to Germany and joined the Social Democrats. Soon he became known for penning eloquent and extremely radical essays, which brought him to the unwelcome attention of the Prussian police, forcing him to live like a vagabond, flitting from one German federal state to the next. In the early 1900s he met Lenin in Munich and even put up the printing press for '*Iskra*' in his Munich flat for a while. However, Helphand was not too enamored of Lenin's vision of a party of professional revolutionaries and instead found a soul mate in Leon Davidovich Bronstein, a.k.a. Trotsky, whom he accompanied to St. Petersburg during the 1905 revolution. Trotsky became the head of the St. Petersburg Soviet (this was before the city was renamed Petrograd), while Helphand lent his talents to the revolutionary press, *inter alia* organizing a bank run by means of a fake alarmist article that predicted an imminent collapse of the banking system. After this first attempt at revolution failed, both he and Trotsky ended up in prison in St. Petersburg. Helphand was exiled to Siberia, but managed to flee and reappeared in Germany in late 1906. His colleagues in the German Social Democratic party were not especially fond of him, due to his womanizing and radicalism. When he faced the possibility of a party tribunal over an alleged theft of party funds, he decided to call it quits and left for Constantinople – where he made his fortune as an arms trader. Helphand approached the German ambassador in Constantinople in 1914 after the outbreak of WW I with the idea that Germany should help the Bolsheviks in order to overthrow the Czar and the ambassador recommended him to the foreign ministry. Helphand soon turned up in Berlin, presenting a detailed plan for toppling the Czarist regime with mass strikes and sabotage. Shortly thereafter, Helphand received a German police passport, explosives and one million Reichsmark. However, when Helphand met with Lenin in Bern, they failed to come to an agreement. Apparently, Lenin was wary of Helphand, who had acquired the reputation of being a German spy – as a Russian politician, Lenin had thus every reason to stay clear of him. However, it is now known that a number of other Bolsheviks did indeed work with Helphand, who set up an import-export company in Copenhagen, whose CFO was Jakob Fürstenberg, a close confidante of Lenin. Numerous other Bolsheviks were parts of the network that Helphand spun from Copenhagen. The company engaged in both legal and illegal trading with Russia, and used the legitimate business activity to funnel money, weapons and propagand material to the Bolsheviks. Even letters from Lenin to his

comrades in Petrograd were smuggled using one of Helphands smuggling routes (on the border between Sweden and then Russian Finland, a small wooden bridge over the Torne river became a major transit point for revolutionary contraband. The widely used code among those in the know was 'I bring greetings from Olga').



Alexander 'Parvus' Helphand, 1867-1924, born Israel Lazarevich Helphand in Berezino in the Minsk province of Belarus. Known as 'Parvus Efendi' in Constantinople, where he helped arm and feed the Ottoman army. The major financier and helping hand of the Bolsheviks in exile.

Helphand, Trotsky and Lev Grigorievich Deutsch (a leader of one of the Menshevik factions of the RSDLP) together in prison in St. Petersburg in 1905.

4. Lenin's Return from Exile

When Czar Nicholas II abdicated in March of 1917, no-one was more surprised than Lenin, who had not expected to live to see the revolution. Unfortunately for Lenin, he was stuck in Bern, with no possibility to reach Russia. Numerous plans were made, but it was impossible for Lenin to cross Entente territory, which left only the journey by train through Germany and Scandinavia. Initially, Lenin feared he and his comrades might get arrested in Germany, but soon the Germans agreed to let the train pass through – they even sent two officers to accompany the train on its journey and do the shopping for the Bolsheviks sitting in the sealed first three compartments of the carriage (this part of the carriage was declared 'extraterritorial'). Thirty of Lenin's exiled comrades went with him on the fateful journey, among them Grigory Zinoviev, then the number two man in the Bolshevik party behind Lenin. Reportedly Lenin

used the journey to train for the planned economy by creating vouchers for smokers who kept blocking access to the toilet. During the journey he also jotted down the so-called 'April Theses', in which laid down the new course for the Bolshevik party in the post-Czar era. When the train arrived in Trelleborg in Sweden, Helphand's CFO Fürstenberg received the illustrious guests. After spending a few days in Stockholm, the journey continued via the border town of Haparanda. To everybody's vast astonishment, the Kerensky government had no objection and allowed the train to enter Russia. On the evening of April 16 (April 3 OS (1)), Lenin arrived in Petrograd to a triumphant reception organized by the Petrograd Soviet and his friends from the Bolshevik party.

The new party newspaper Pravda had been restarted in March of 1917 under the editorial leadership of Lev Kamenev and Joseph Stalin, who had returned from Siberian exile after the Czar's abdication (previously the Pravda's was published from abroad and edited by Leon Trotsky, who espoused an editorial stance in support of all socialist factions in Russia. That earlier version ceased publication in 1912).

Kamenev embraced a conciliatory stance toward the provisional government in his editorials and even supported the continuation of the war. Upon his arrival in Petrograd, Lenin immediately announced a new course: the war was a 'bourgeois fraud perpetrated on the masses', there was to be no support for the Kerensky government and the primary responsibility of the party was to bring about the socialist revolution in Russia. Once that was accomplished, a global revolution would follow automatically.

When Lenin presented his April Theses at the All-Russia Conference of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies the next day, many in the audience were shocked. On April 19 (April 6 OS) the central committee of the Bolshevik faction debated the Theses and initially reacted quite unfavorably. And yet, within days, on occasion of the April party conference, the Bolshevik party adopted the new course and the Pravda's editorial stance immediately changed accordingly.

Helphand must have been happy – Lenin had adopted the very stance he had once communicated to Trotsky, who in turn came up with the idea of the 'permanent revolution'.

After Kerensky blamed the July riots in Petrograd on the Bolsheviks, singling out Lenin and Zinoviev specifically, Lenin and Zinoviev fled to Finland. This experience probably hardened Lenin's stance toward the provisional government further, which he decided had to be overthrown in an armed revolution. A major factor in the hardening of Lenin's attitude may also have been the Kornilov affair, which from afar certainly looked like a failed military coup. To Lenin the Kornilov affair demonstrated the danger that the provisional government might in fact be overthrown by 'counter-revolutionary' forces, a possibility he felt needed to be forestalled by the Bolsheviks getting to it first.

It is further highly likely that Lenin considered the upcoming elections for the Constituent Assembly which the provisional government had set for November 12 (Oct. 31, OS) as representing a potential problem for the revolution he envisaged. It would be far more difficult for the Bolsheviks to engage in an armed insurrection overthrowing the government *after* that date – as a coup at that time would likely lack legitimacy in the eyes of the masses. On tactical grounds, it was clearly better to make a grab for power before the election date .



Lenin disembarks at Finland station in Petrograd to a triumphal reception. After progressing to the Czar's waiting room, he was greeted by Nikolay Semyonovich Chkheidze, the Menshevik leader of the Petrograd Soviet. Chkheidze's address was a patronizing mixture between welcoming Lenin and putting him in his place: "Comrade Lenin, in the name of the Petrograd Soviet and the whole revolution, we welcome you to Russia...*but* we consider that the chief task of the revolutionary democracy at present is to defend our revolution against every kind of attack both from within and without. We hope that you will join us in striving towards this goal." Lenin simply ignored Chkheidze and instead proceeded to address the crowd, saying:

"Dear comrades, soldiers, sailors and workers, I am happy to greet you in the name of the victorious Russian Revolution, to greet you as the advance guard of the international proletarian army. The hour is not far off when, at the summons of our comrade Karl Liebknecht, the people of Germany will turn their weapons against their capitalist exploiters. The Russian Revolution achieved by you has opened a new epoch. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!"



Grigory Ovseyevich Zinoviev (born Ovsey – Gersh Aronovich Radomyslsky), 1883-1936, who returned together with Lenin from exile in Switzerland and was at the time the number two man in the Bolshevik party. Zinoviev had a falling out with Lenin on the eve of the October revolution, but they soon made up again. His career was a fascinating sequence of ups and downs and ended with Stalin disowning him in 1936 at the beginning of the Great Purge. He was found guilty in Moscow's first great show trial of charges including the 'forming of a terrorist organization that killed Politburo member Sergey Kirov and attempted to kill Stalin and other leaders of the Soviet government'. Ironically, it was Stalin himself who had ordered Kirov's assassination.



Pravda editor Lev Kamenev, 1883 – 1936. Lenin quickly brought him to heel in April of 1917 regarding the editorial line of the Pravda, however, he too had a falling out with Lenin on the eve of the revolution (more on the dispute between Zinoviev, Kamenev and Lenin follows below). Similar to Zinoviev, he soon mended fences with Lenin. He ended up as a co-accused with Zinoviev in the 1936 show trial that marked the beginning of Stalin's Great Purges.



Kamenev and Lenin in Gorki in 1922, where Lenin rested after his second stroke. Earlier that year a bullet was removed from his neck that had been stuck there since an assassination attempt in 1918 by Fanya Kaplan, an SRP member (who carried on the SRP tradition of political assassinations).



Trotsky, Lenin and Kamenev have a chat during the eighth congress of the RSDLP in 1919.

5. The October Revolution

While Lenin and Zinoviev were still hiding in Finland, a momentous new political development occurred in the wake of the Kornilov affair. The success of the Red Guards in heading off Kornilov's troops at the pass gave a big boost to the popularity of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd and for the first time they managed to win a majority in the elections for the Petrograd Soviet. Five days later, they also won a majority in the Moscow Soviet, ending the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets. The Bolsheviks had gained in popularity ever since Lenin's arrival. He used a simple slogan to garner support: he promised peace, land and bread. This was an enticing prospect given the widespread war-weariness in Russia and the fact that people struggled with shortages of the most basic foodstuffs and inflation raged. The Kornilov affair was perhaps just the final straw tipping the scales in favor of the Bolsheviks. It should be noted here that the SRP enjoyed far greater support in the rural areas, where the *narodniki* had been agitating for a long time. However, in the urban centers the masses clearly embraced the Bolsheviks. If one considers the desperate situation in which the common people found themselves, it is no surprise that they went over to the one party that seemed to offer the best chance for radical change. Of course no-one knew just *how* radical that change would eventually turn out to be.

Incidentally, a status report to the German government on the situation in Russia dated July 5 1917 noted: "Lenin's propaganda is of the sort that finds broad acceptance among the masses". The Germans naturally kept a close eye on their investment, which they had supported with an additional five million marks shortly before Lenin's return to Russia. Also in July, a cable from the German ambassador in Stockholm said (paraphrasing): "According to reports we have received from Russia, the time is not too far away when Lenin's group will take power and bring about the desired peace."

In September, Lenin completed his book 'The State and Revolution' – a work in which he vacillates between the demand for the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the prediction of an eventual 'complete withering away of the State' (inherently contradictory notions, which are presented as though they were logical progressions) in accordance with the ideas laid out by Marx and Engels about the allegedly inevitable course of history.

Lenin had frequently demanded that instead of establishing a parliamentary democracy, all power should be given to the Soviets (he argued that the Soviets were more democratic than the alternative since they allowed for a more frequent change of leadership). It is notable in this context that once this demand was fulfilled, the democratic character of the Soviets disappeared very fast – instead, the supremacy of the Bolshevik party was asserted in all political affairs. Lenin, like all Marxists, conflated the hated imperial/feudal political structures with capitalism. The erroneous labor theory of value was the basis for asserting that capitalism exploited workers and the association of the bourgeoisie with capitalism meant that it had to be stamped out to end this exploitation. This seemed all the more credible as the circumstances factory workers found themselves in were often appalling, especially in Russia (for instance, the introduction of a 79 hour work week was hailed as a great reform step under the Czar).

Marx' economic theories remained untouched by new developments in economic thought and were accepted as gospel by his followers. The fact that an economy that lacks private property rights and a free market for the means of production is unable to calculate was never assimilated by the communists. They eventually learned this truth the hard way – while creating untold misery for millions of people in the process.

Interestingly Lenin himself at least partly recognized that 'communism pure' could not work, when shortly before his death, he introduced the 'new economic policy' (NEP), reintroducing private property to a limited extent – it was either that, or starvation.

In mid October 1917 (early October, OS), Lenin returned to Russia in disguise, riding on the tender of a railway engine. On October 23 (Oct. 10, OS), a resolution regarding the imminence and inevitability of an armed insurrection was passed by the party's central committee. The resolution noted that intensive preparations were necessary. Six days later, it was decided at the Petrograd Soviet to nominate a Military

Revolutionary Committee (MRC) following the recommendation of the party's central committee and a previous resolution of the Petrograd Soviet. Specifically, Trotsky had demanded the formation of such a body on occasion of a meeting of the Soviet one day before the Bolshevik central committee meeting that resolved to pursue the insurrection (see more on the MRC further below).

Twelve members of the central committee were present at the clandestine ten hour long meeting where the resolution was passed. Generally, there was still no unity in the ranks of the leading Bolsheviks regarding Lenin's revolutionary program. Several of the so-called (by Trotsky) 'compromisers' were not present at the meeting. However, Kamenev and Zinoviev were there, and they – temporarily – broke ranks with Lenin, arguing forcefully against the insurrection. Kamenev wanted to await the election of the constituent assembly and expressed his fear that the uprising would fail, with terrible consequences for the party. In essence, he (similar to many other doubters) reckoned that the Bolsheviks were not yet ready to carry the revolution off successfully on their own – which in turn would likely put their revolutionary goals forever out of reach. Lenin, by his considerable rhetorical talent, may have swayed some other doubters at that meeting, but he was not able to sway Kamenev and Zinoviev. Allegedly Zinoviev made a prediction that would turn out to be prophetic. His objection was that a coup by the Bolsheviks would alienate them from all the other socialist factions in Russia – if they wanted to remain in power following a coup, they would be forced to resort to terror (later Zinoviev would himself be responsible for the first wave of red terror sweeping Petrograd in 1918-19 after the seat of government was moved to Moscow).

In the end, the vote was 10:2 in favor of the insurrection. Kamenev and Zinoviev however would not give in so easily. A few days after the meeting, they published an open letter in a Menshevik newspaper, the *Novaya Shyzn* ('New Life'), once again verbalizing their dissent (the letter was entitled 'On the Current Situation' and was also sent to all party organizations). Lenin was livid. Upon learning of the letter (it was read to him by telephone as he was still in hiding and had not had an opportunity to read the papers), he immediately [fired off a letter to party members](#), branding Zinoviev and Kamenev 'blacklegs' akin to strike breakers and demanding their expulsion from the party. However, it never came to that – both Kamenev and Zinoviev changed their mind again when it became clear that the revolution would take place with or without their consent. Since it was about to happen anyway, they didn't want to be left out. Both men fell out with Lenin shortly after the revolution again and resigned from the central committee, upon which Lenin [called them deserters](#). However, by 1918, both had been reelected to the central committee. Still later, when Lenin became too ill to continue working, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin formed a triumvirate to lead the party that immediately began to conspire against Trotsky (the shifting alliances and inter-party rivalries that were finally decided in Stalin's favor will be subject of a future post).

The open letter published in *Novaya Shyzn* did not escape the notice of the Kerensky government. The government knew from the ever louder rumor mill that the Bolsheviks were planning something big, but failed to take adequate precautions. Also, many in the government trusted they could still negotiate with the Bolsheviks. This was not too far-fetched, given how fractious the numerous socialist movements tended to be. A great many factions and sub-factions could be found in nearly every party – e.g. the Bolsheviks, who were themselves split into those favoring negotiations and those favoring immediate revolution, still referred to themselves as the 'RSDLP (Bolshevik)', in spite of having developed an independent party structure.

The Kerensky government made yet another crucial mistake during October, a mistake that was directly responsible for the creation of the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC). Fearing that many soldiers of the Petrograd garrison had become unreliable and would likely disobey the government, it ordered the commander of the Petrograd military district, general Polkovnikov, to begin transferring the bulk of the garrison to the front to ostensibly relieve the battered troops there. This transparent maneuver to get rid of unreliable soldiers led to a mass mutiny, with most army units in the Petrograd district declaring their loyalty to the Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky thereupon demanded the formation of the MRC to be able to 'coordinate the defense of Petrograd against counter-revolutionary attacks', which demand was ratified by the Petrograd Soviet a week later. Fifteen of the eighteen military units that belonged to the Petrograd garrison declared their allegiance to the Soviet and the MRC's first order of business was to dispatch its commissars to these units to assert its authority, effectively relieving Polkovnikov of his

command.

This meant that the Bolshevik revolutionaries could count on the support of the better part of the garrison. As Trotsky later noted in '[The Lessons of October](#)', the very moment the MRC was formed, the insurrection against the provisional government had effectively begun. Wrote Trotsky:

“At the same time, however, it is quite clear that to prepare the insurrection and to carry it out under cover of preparing for the Second Soviet Congress and under the slogan of defending it, was of inestimable advantage to us. From the moment when we, as the Petrograd Soviet, invalidated Kerensky's order transferring two thirds of the garrison to the front, we had actually entered a state of armed insurrection. Lenin, who was not in Petrograd, could not appraise the full significance of this fact. So far as I remember, there is not a mention of it in all his letters during this period. Yet the outcome of the insurrection of October 25 was at least three quarters settled, if not more, the moment that we opposed the transfer of the Petrograd garrison; created the Revolutionary Military Committee (October 16 [OS,ed.]); appointed our own commissars in all army divisions and institutions; and thereby completely isolated not only the general staff of the Petrograd zone, but also the government. As a matter of fact, we had here an armed insurrection – an armed though bloodless insurrection of the Petrograd regiments against the Provisional Government – under the leadership of the Revolutionary Military Committee and under the slogan of preparing the defense of the Second Soviet Congress, which would decide the ultimate fate of the state power.”

The MRC was almost entirely under the Bolshevik control – of the 66 members, 48 were Bolsheviks, fourteen were 'Left' SRP's (a faction that had split from the SRP and allied itself with the Bolsheviks) and four were syndicalist anarchists. The MRC made the Smolny Institute and Girls School its headquarters. All the top Bolsheviks also gathered there and the revolution was managed and directed from Smolny.



The Smolny Institute and Girls School which

served as the revolution's HQ

The Kerensky government, fearing imminent action, dispatched soldiers still loyal to it to guard neuralgic points in the city. Lenin had meanwhile remained underground, hiding in an apartment. On November 6 (Oct. 24, OS), he reportedly heard about the countermeasures taken by the government, including preparations by government troops to raise the bridges over the Neva. At that point he sent a letter to the central committee ensconced with the MRC in Smolny, announcing that he would join them and instructing them to immediately launch the revolution. An estimated 20,000 soldiers and Red Guards took part in the operation. The government's troops surrendered very quickly – the Bolsheviks were able to take all the major centers of power with almost no bloodshed.

The Winter Palace where the remnants of the provisional government were hiding out (Kerensky himself had fled, while the remaining ministers were hoping he would return with help) was barely guarded. The MRC had a ship on the Neva and had also taken up positions in the Peter and Paul Fortress, effectively surrounding the palace. The handful of troops loyal to the government that remained to defend the winter palace were easily persuaded to give themselves up.

It took the revolutionaries a while to find the ministers of the provisional government who were assembled in the imperial family's breakfast room. The palace proved so big that the revolutionaries at

first got lost in it.

All in all the revolution turned out to be quite an undramatic event, since no-one was any longer willing to fight for Kerensky's government. The revolution were later significantly embellished by Soviet propaganda, since the actual event was so utterly anticlimactic. It was all over within a single night – in the end it was as though Lenin had simply waited the Kerensky government successfully out.

The provisional government was arrested, and the MRC proclaimed on the next morning that the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies had transferred power to the Soviet, thus ratifying the coup.



The Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies

However, the Mensheviks, as well as the 'Right' and 'Center' wings of the SRP denounced the coup as illegal and walked out of the Congress. Trotsky taunted their delegates as they left, telling them that they were 'about to go where they belonged', namely 'into the dustbin of history'.

Among the first actions of the new government was the proclamation of Lenin's Decrees on Land and Peace – the first one ratifying the land seizures the peasants had already effected across the country, the second one declaring an immediate armistice with Russia's opponents in the war. Soon further decrees were issued, such as the nationalization of the banks, the confiscation of all private bank accounts, the confiscation of the properties of the church, the repudiation of all foreign debts (so much for 'safe' government debt...), higher wage rates and shorter working hours, as well as the transfer of all factories to the control of the worker Soviets. Almost immediately all publications were subject to censorship and all non-socialist newspapers were closed down. The MRC also began to control the distribution of food and other goods, began policing Petrograd for 'counter-revolutionary activities', and took over the issuing of permits and licenses.

The first communist nation was born – and soon Zinoviev's prophecy would come to pass.



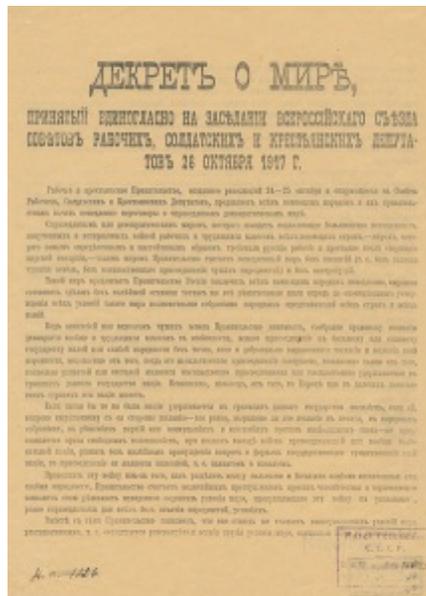
Red Guards marching through Petrograd during the October revolution



Red Guards in front of the Alexander column preparing to storm the Winter Palace



The proclamation of the Military Revolutionary Committee announcing the transfer of power. It reads: "To the citizens of Russia: The Provisional Government has been deposed. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies – the Revolutionary Military Committee, which heads the Petrograd proletariat and the garrison. The cause for which the people have fought, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landed proprietorship, workers' control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power – this cause has been secured. Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants!"



The title page of Lenin's 'Decree on Peace'



The title page of Lenin's 'Decree on Land'



Armed sailors in Petrograd

Next: The Constituent Assembly, Red Terror, Civil War, the NEP, Lenin's Death and the Rise of Stalin

(1): 'OS' stands for 'old style' date. This refers to the fact that Russia only began to use the Gregorian calendar ('new style') from 1918 onward. Thus the revolution actually took place on 6 and 7 November of 1917, but according to the old Julian calendar then in use in Russia, it was 24 and 25 October, hence it is known as the 'October revolution'.

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