

*The Causes of the Russian Revolution*¹

By Chris Wright

The Russian Revolution is the sphinx of the twentieth century. Its historical meaning is unclear. Lenin and Trotsky interpreted the events of October 1917 and subsequent weeks as constituting an authentic proletarian revolution, a socialist revolution. The main source of confusion for them was why this socialist revolution had occurred in so backward a country as Russia, when Marxist theory predicted that it would occur first in an advanced capitalist society like England. In retrospect, though, it seems that they were wrong: the October revolution was not socialist in the proper sense, because it did not lead to a post-capitalist order. Rather, in the (very) long run the society it made possible succumbed to capitalism, in the 1990s. Moreover, it did not even lead to workers' control over production (which is one way of defining socialism): the Communist party, particularly under Stalin, controlled production, not the workers who slaved in the factories. Even under Lenin, workers' experiments in controlling their factories were discouraged in favor of centralized, bureaucratic control.² But if the October revolution was not socialist or Marxist in the classic sense of "workers' democracy," what was it? Was it simply an "accident," as some historians have argued? Was its success truly a "miracle," so that it had no real historical significance but depended only on luck and Lenin's political skills?

Scholars who argue along these lines have to account for the awkward fact that Communism has had an authentic popular appeal among numerous peoples on every inhabited continent. Nor was Russia the only country that—in the conventional understanding—had a successful "Communist" revolution. China and Cuba did too, among others, which suggests that Russian Communism was not totally improbable after all but resulted from causes that to some extent functioned internationally. Thus, I'll argue in this paper that the Bolshevik revolution was not exactly an accident or a miracle, nor even *nothing but* a "coup," but rather had genuine popular support and could not have succeeded without it. Most importantly, the industrial

¹ [This is an old and—in its first few pages—somewhat simplistic paper, not every statement of which I now agree with. But it may be a useful summary, at least. For a modern and anti-Leninist understanding of revolution, see [Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States](#). This book also shows how the Russian Revolution cemented certain perversions of Marxist theory in the minds of future generations of radicals.]

² See Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution, 1917–21* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 247–255.

workers and many soldiers supported Bolshevism; but the peasants did as well, to an extent, since the Bolsheviks promised to expropriate land from the rich landowners and distribute it among the peasantry. World War I in particular is what laid the foundations for the Bolshevik victory—as World War II (specifically the struggle against the Japanese invaders) laid the foundations for Mao’s victory in China. Nor can it be argued that these wars themselves were “accidental” (with the implication that the revolutions they made possible were based on a very lucky, historically improbable conjuncture); quite obviously, they grew out of the imperialist dynamics of the international capitalist order.³

But what are the broader implications of my argument? I haven’t answered the question of the “meaning” of the Bolshevik revolution. Why did “bourgeois” revolutions occur in England and France, while so-called Communist revolutions occurred in Russia and China? In brief, it is because in England and France during the seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries respectively, the oppressors were not industrial capitalists but mainly the autocracy and the feudal lords (especially in France); hence, the peasants, the urban underclass and the nascent bourgeoisie fought together against the autocratic state and many of the large landowners, effectively paving the way for a bourgeois democratic order. On the other hand, in those countries where capitalism does not emerge indigenously and organically, so to speak, but is consciously imposed by the state and/or by colonial powers’ imperialist policies, industrial capitalists *are* among the major oppressors, who also include the still-existing landowning aristocracy and the autocratic state. Russia in the early twentieth century was one of these countries. As in all modernizing “late-feudal” countries, the Russian peasants were more concerned to throw off the yoke of the landowners (and high taxation) than of the bourgeoisie; the urban proletariat, however, understood that its enemy was capital and the repressive state. So, what effectively tends to happen in “peripheral” countries that have capitalism imperialistically foisted on them (instead of growing organically and very slowly over centuries, as in England and France) is that the peasantry’s anti-feudal, anti-landowners’ rebellion partly allies with the proletariat’s anti-

³ The First World War, for example, which acute observers had foreseen for years, was a product largely of the armaments race and the political and economic pressures for world-domination. After all, when numerous states are packed together in an area as small as Europe, each industrializing at a frenetic pace, expanding economically, seeking new markets abroad and new opportunities for capital investment at each other’s expense, building up their militaries out of mutual suspicion and the political influence of the armaments industry, pursuing secret diplomatic alliances, actively fostering nationalist sentiments in their populations, a conflagration is inevitable.

capitalist rebellion, in a hybrid anti-feudal *and* anti-capitalist revolution.⁴ But since the urban areas are the power-centers, dynamic and conflict-ridden, pulsating with historical initiative, the revolution typically starts there and uses a primarily anti-capitalist instead of an anti-feudal ideology. Indeed, initially it may not really know what to make of the peasantry, treating it as sort of an afterthought. Soon, however, it becomes clear that peasant support is essential if the landowners and capitalists (who together control the state) are to be defeated.

Its leaders invariably interpret the revolution as socialist or post-capitalist. In reality, it functions as a way of smashing relics of pre-modernity, including feudal property-relations and undemocratic ideologies. It signifies the country's entrance onto the modern stage, its embrace of mass politics (with democratic ideologies), nationalism, and the "patriotically inclusive" drive for national power,⁵ to be achieved through economic modernization. It's significant that the Communist regime that seizes power soon fuses Marxist propaganda with nationalist propaganda—thereby revealing its true, nationalist nature.⁶ In order to maintain power the new government pursues the same goal that was being pursued by the *ancien régime* in the final years before its collapse, namely of playing catch-up with the advanced capitalist countries by

⁴ Needless to say, the rebellions don't always succeed. More often than not, capitalists and landowners, who form an uneasy alliance, remain in power for a long time, frequently with the help of a military dictatorship. Latin America provides many examples of this outcome. Christopher Read remarks that Russia itself, in the years before the First World War, "was moving towards military dictatorship based on authoritarianism and Russian nationalism," much like what would happen later in innumerable colonized countries whose states wanted to maintain the power of both capital and the (semi-capitalist) landowning aristocracy. Read, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵ I use the enigmatic term "patriotically inclusive" to contrast the new state's drive for national power with that of the old, the *ancien régime*. In a sense, the protracted transition from the old order to the new coincides with the creation of the nation-state, the "imagined political community" whose members identify with each other on that account. This nationalistic ideology is fundamentally democratic and inclusive, which is why it (1) can't properly exist in a feudal autocratic state and (2) is compatible, ironically, with the egalitarian, collectivistic Communist ideology. The spread of Communism can almost be regarded as the spread of a type of nationalism: it signifies the expulsion of the outsiders, the exploiters, the parasitic capitalists, so that only *the people, the nation*, remains. This creed is revealingly similar to Fascism. Indeed, as it functions ideologically, Communism is little more than an intellectually rigorous Fascism for the proletariat, just as Fascism is a more philosophically malleable and *explicitly* nationalist "Communism" for a capitalist society. (Expulsion of the outsiders, who are defined this time racially or ethnically, not fundamentally by reference to class. This ethnic, rather than economic, definition is what makes Fascism compatible with capitalism and thus a possible tool in the hands of business.)

⁶ In other words, the Communist regime uses its embrace of Marxist ideology as a way of differentiating itself from other nation-states, of proclaiming the country's uniqueness and justice—a source of national pride, and thus a means of shoring up the regime's own power (by motivating its populace to serve the state, in manifold capacities). All this is precisely the opposite of Marxism, which is an internationalist creed.

industrializing and modernizing its economy. It turns out, however, that “Communism,” i.e., a hybrid state-capitalist state-socialism, is not up to the task, being less dynamic and more inefficiently authoritarian than liberal-democratic capitalism, and so in the end it in turn succumbs to a kind of capitalism, as has happened in China and Russia.

No stage in this long process is “accidental,” per se. Neither is it inevitable. It is, rather, a product of deep economic and social tendencies, for example the tendency of capitalism in societies where it doesn’t emerge indigenously to become associated—before having the chance to become entrenched (a chance it *does* have in such countries as England and France⁷)—with the autocratic state and the pre-modern social structures that stifle the peasantry. Because of this association, the potential arises for capitalism to be overthrown—in its infancy—with the state and the landowners. But it is still only a *potential*. Even though the peasantry and the newly born proletariat constitute the vast majority of the population, the power-structures, having a virtual monopoly on violence, can usually maintain their hold on power. Only in the context of a war that is going badly for the state does the state’s overthrow become likely, because in this case the *soldiers* turn against the government as well. Such is what happened in Russia in 1917. And, given this fact of soldiers’ opposition—to be established below—a radical-left, people’s or “Communist” revolution against the Russian government became likely. Had there been no Lenin, such a revolution might have been delayed, or conceivably might not have happened, but the pressures towards it would have remained.

The foregoing constitutes the theoretical framework within which this paper will argue that there was popular support for Bolshevism, that the masses were clamoring for a revolution, and that the war was what allowed the revolution to come to pass. In fact, the war played a central role at every stage of the sequence of events from February to October 1917.

Conditions in Russia prior to the First World War

The last few tsars pursued a policy that combined the blinkered absolutism of the French kings Louis XV and Louis XVI with Bismarck’s promotion of industrialization from above. They understood that economic modernization was both desirable and inevitable, but they wanted it undertaken in such a way that they would retain absolute power. Hence their (suicidal)

⁷ The reason, again, is that in these countries it is born very slowly, from the ground up, consolidating its power at every step.

rejection of the German path of political compromise with representative democracy, which would have stabilized the regime and given it more popular support. Equally importantly, their incompetence extended into matters of economic policy: they bungled both emancipation of the serfs and industrialization.

First of all, emancipation, in the 1860s and subsequent decades, occurred on terms injurious to the peasants, spreading political and economic discontent throughout the country. Emancipation meant that peasants would be given a plot of land and be freed of their legal obligations to the landowner. But before they were granted ownership of the land, they were required to pay, over a period of decades, exorbitant sums of money to the government and landowners. In many cases the land they were given was barely sufficient to live on, since private landowners often retained huge expanses of their former holdings. The extreme inequality that resulted fueled resentment. In addition, the population was rising tremendously, to crisis-levels. In the Black Earth zone of Russia, between 1880 and 1917 the population rose from 100 million to 182 million, causing famines because agricultural techniques remained primitive and inefficient.⁸ The expanding population had to be fed, but the size of the peasants' plots was too small to achieve that purpose, especially since the population growth meant that already-meager strips of land had to be divided up further and distributed to millions of new households. Peasant land-hunger was potentially explosive by 1905, when the first revolutionary upsurge occurred.⁹

All this time, millions of peasants were trying to escape horrendous conditions by seeking industrial employment in the cities, where conditions were even worse. "Wages were low, hours long, factories dangerous, living conditions squalid, discipline brutal, employment insecure and insurance non-existent."¹⁰ Many of the industrial companies in St. Petersburg were state-owned, but the state showed no interest in alleviating discontent by treating its workers humanely. The main reason that worker protest was limited before 1900 is that government repression was effective and organization was impossible.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 set the stage for a revolution that the autocracy barely managed to survive. In January of 1905 industrial workers held a peaceful demonstration

⁸ Christopher Read, op. cit., p. 13.

⁹ Most of the information in this paragraph comes from Graeme Gill, *Peasants and Government in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 1–17.

¹⁰ Read, op. cit., p. 21.

to publicize their economic grievances, to which the government responded with brutal repression. Strikes, terrorist attacks, and demonstrations resulted; across the country, too, peasant uprisings against landowners occurred. Finally in October 1905 the tsar reluctantly made liberal concessions, e.g., by granting a parliament.¹¹ Worker and peasant unrest continued, however, and after the Russo-Japanese war had ended, military repression spread through the country. What in fact was happening between 1905 and 1907 was a minor civil war: thousands of government officials were killed and thousands of summary executions of peasants and workers took place. At length the repression accomplished its purpose: the tsar felt confident enough to reimpose arbitrary authority, and the liberal concessions he had made were hollowed out.

Astoundingly, the autocracy learned no lessons from the 1905–1907 revolts. It remained mired in its old political traditions, while paying lip-service to a few new liberal ideas. An explosion, therefore, was inevitable sooner or later. There would be no step-by-step liberalization of politics. Even the liberalization of the agrarian economy undertaken by Stolypin after 1905, intended to mitigate the problems that had led to peasant insurrections, proved not wholly successful.¹² The society and state had not overcome the legacy of serfdom, including, with regard to the peasants, the centrality of the inefficient and primitive village commune and communal norms, and with regard to the state, a reliance on brute force to keep the population in check (which reliance had evolved under conditions of serfdom). “The Russian state,” writes Christopher Read, “remained, until 1917, essentially a serfowners’ state with corresponding powers and attitudes.”¹³

Nevertheless, the events of 1905 show that a kind of bourgeois revolution, similar to that which had occurred in England and France, was not out of the question in Russia. For months liberals were at the head of the opposition movement; Nicholas then issued his October Manifesto, granting civil liberties, a parliament, universal male suffrage, and the principle of a constitution; in 1906 a quasi-liberal constitution was adopted, the first Russian constitution ever,

¹¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 32–34.

¹² Gill, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–15. Stolypin’s legislation was meant to weaken the power of the peasant commune by making it easier for individual peasants to consolidate their land-holdings, i.e., separate them from the jurisdiction of the community. However, by the time of the tsar’s fall, it seems that less than 20% of households had separated from the commune in this manner. Furthermore, the commune was actually strengthened insofar as peasants resentful of the rearrangement of their plots “fell back on the commune as their chief support,” their main protection against the enclosure movement. Nevertheless, Stolypin’s reforms did have some effect, and, given time, might have led to substantial liberalization.

¹³ Read, p. 28.

and the Duma (parliament) was elected (although subsequently dissolved by the tsar due to its radical politics). As had been the case earlier in other European countries, for example during the liberal revolutions of 1848, the bourgeoisie and the socialist workers resisted the government together, pressuring it to liberalize. Nicholas's concessions to liberalism were half-hearted, but, even so, an independent legal system was beginning in these years, an active civil society was emerging, political parties and trade unions were legalized (though still partly suppressed), censorship was becoming less draconian, and "commercial and professional organizations began to give Russia's main cities a more Westernized and liberal flavor."¹⁴ Moreover, in the years before the Great War the government enacted a program of educational expansion: "enrollments in institutions of higher learning more than tripled and those in secondary schools more than quadrupled... The official goal...was the achievement of universal, compulsory primary school education."¹⁵ George Kennan estimates that, had war not intervened, the goal might have been achieved by the mid-1920s.

It seems, therefore, that a Communist, or proletarian- and peasant-based, revolution was not inevitable in the long run or even overwhelmingly probable. In the absence of a disastrous war, other historical trajectories were possible, even given the government's hidebound conservatism. And yet the prospects for liberal revolution in Russia suffered from a tragic paradox: given the autocracy's hold on power, revolution was most likely to happen in wartime conditions (if, that is, the war was going badly), as during the Russo-Japanese War and World War I—while, on the other hand, the myriad instabilities of such wartime conditions meant that a liberal government would have difficulty maintaining the support of the peasants, workers and, most importantly, the soldiers, all of whom would be tempted to join the camp of the leftist radicals and overthrow the new liberal government. Such is what happened in 1917.

After 1910, prospects for liberal reform grew ever more remote, as the proletariat became increasingly radicalized in response to the old state repression and atrocious living conditions. Large-scale strikes became more frequent. In 1912, for example, government troops massacred 200 striking miners,¹⁶ an event that belatedly symbolized the state's abandonment of its flirtations with liberalism. Since 1905, workers and peasants had been joining the radical

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵ George Kennan, "Autocracy's Many Shortcomings," in *The Russian Revolution and Bolshevik Victory: Causes and Processes*, Arthur Adams, ed. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Company, 1972), p. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats¹⁷ (who split into the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks); they had little interest in liberalism. The stage was being set for their strong suspicion of, and swift disillusionment with, the liberal Provisional Government in 1917.

World War I and the Russian Revolution

The Great War is what finally led to the collapse of tsardom. By 1916, virtually every sector of Russian society was disgusted with the government's handling of the war, from its incompetent military endeavors to its clumsy handling of proletarian discontent. With the growth of the army from a pre-war size of 1,400,000 to 16 million by 1917, the peasantry lost 40–50% of its able-bodied male population, which led to a severe shortage of labor.¹⁸ Certain circumstances ensured that the peasantry's situation in the early parts of the war was not dire, including high grain prices and a prohibition of liquor (which traditionally had consumed a large amount of the peasant's budget). But by 1917, rapid inflation and "increased exactions for the war effort"¹⁹ had renewed and intensified the old desire to expropriate land owned by non-peasants. With the collapse of the autocracy, the peasants set about achieving their goal through initially peaceful and subsequently violent means.

Christopher Hill reports that nominal wages in industry trebled between 1913 and 1917; however, price-inflation was such that these wages bought less than 45% of the goods they would have bought in 1913.²⁰ Tsarist inefficiency was stupendous, denounced vituperatively even by conservative politicians in the Duma. By 1916, strikes and street-demonstrations were frequent. Finally, in February of 1917 thousands of people flooded the streets of Petrograd to protest the food shortages. A general strike began. At first, soldiers and police tried to suppress the demonstrations, occasionally with violence. After several days, though, a number of soldiers switched sides: they joined the crowds and mutinied against their officers. Many of the officers had in fact already fled the city; military discipline was collapsing everywhere. On March 2 the

¹⁷ Maureen Perrie and I. Ritina, "The Russian Peasantry in 1907–1908: A Survey by the Socialist Revolutionary Party," *History Workshop*, No. 4 (1977): pp. 171–191.

¹⁸ Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 33.

tsar abdicated, pressured to do so even by his closest advisors. A “Provisional Government” took over and a republic was proclaimed.²¹

It is evident that the soldiers’ mutiny was decisive for the success of the revolution. This was only the first example of the essential role that the soldiers’ radicalism would play in the unfolding of events over the next year. Industrial workers had started the rebellion—infuriated by low wages, a lack of food, the poor progress of the war, brutal conditions in the factories, and tsarist repression—but soldiers had completed it. Of course, workers and ordinary soldiers saw themselves as belonging to the same class and having the same interests. They were both victims of exploitation.

The new republic began governing with a surge of goodwill from the populace, but already the seeds of future conflict had been sowed: an ambiguous situation existed of dual power between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. The soviets were novel institutions of grassroots democracy that had sprung up during the 1905 revolution and reappeared in 1917. They consisted mainly of delegates from factories and working-class organizations, though the army and navy would also apply the soviet principle. Petrograd’s soviet was the most powerful in the country, but Moscow and many provincial towns developed soviets in the months to come. In some ways they were analogous to the village communes and the workers’ factory committees that would be established later, since their function was to legislate and even to administer laws by direct and indirect democracy. While the Provisional Government was predominantly liberal and bourgeois, consisting of professionals and politicians, the Petrograd Soviet was susceptible to revolutionary ideas of class struggle, workers’ control over industry, distribution of land to the peasants, and military democracy as opposed to hierarchy. Its first order in 1917, which was obeyed all over the country, “authorized all military units to elect committees with rights almost equal to those of the officers” and even stated that no governmental order to the army was valid without the signature of the Soviet.²² In fact, the Petrograd Soviet commanded more allegiance among the masses than the Provisional Government did, and it had more power. As the War Minister Guchkov complained,

²¹ William Chamberlin, “The March Revolution Was Spontaneous,” in Adams ed., op. cit., pp. 46–52.

²² Hill, op. cit., p. 89.

The Provisional Government does not possess any real power; and its directives are carried out only to the extent that it is permitted by the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which enjoys all the essential elements of real power, since the troops, the railroads, the post and telegraph are all in its hands. One can say flatly that the Provisional Government exists only so long as it is permitted by the Soviet.²³

[Incidentally, the duality between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government points up the tension in every anti-*'ancien régime'* revolution between, on the one hand, the impoverished and semi-impoverished masses, including (certain sections of) the peasantry, the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers, and, on the other hand, the bourgeoisie or the 'respectable classes' who are striving for representation in the autocratic government. The latter groups tend to desire only political and legal reforms in the mold of liberalism, while the former desire something like a social revolution, including universal suffrage, radical democratization, and social equality. For example, in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1984), Christopher Hill notes with regard to the English civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century that *two* revolutions occurred: 'The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property (abolition of feudal tenures, no arbitrary taxation), gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law, abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property—the protestant ethic. There was, however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.' The Levellers, the Seekers, the Ranters, the Diggers, and other such radical groups represented the revolution that might have happened. Similarly, in revolutionary France a tension continually displayed itself between radical democracy and 'responsible' representative government. The same conflict flared up in 1848, when the French workers and bourgeoisie fought together against the monarchy—although, more accurately, it's always the workers (and petty-bourgeois) who do the actual fighting—only to part months later, when the bourgeoisie allied itself with the aristocracy in crushing a threatened popular revolution. A similar phenomenon was evident in Russia in 1905,

²³ Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p. 47.

with the workers fighting alongside the bourgeoisie though each distrusted the other. And in 1917, first the bourgeois revolution—exemplified by the establishment of the Provisional Government—triumphed, and then the popular revolution did, exemplified by the events of Red October, which were supposed by millions to have finally established the principle of soviet democracy. Generalizing, it's evident that in some cases the popular revolution fails, which may result in a narrow parliamentary government, limited suffrage, and a liberal social order conducive to the development of capitalism, while in other cases (e.g., Russia in October 1917, China in 1949, and perhaps certain Latin American countries for a few years before the return of capital-based authoritarianism), the popular revolution 'succeeds'—at least it appears to, temporarily—resulting in the suppression of landowners and capitalists. In 1917, the masses had the resources, the numbers, the circumstances, and the leaders to succeed, whereas in France in the 1790s they didn't (because industrialization had not yet begun, modern urbanization was in its infancy, etc.).]

For a while the masses of workers and soldiers who had been radicalized into semi-Marxist revolutionaries by years of misery and struggle did not overtly resist the “bourgeois” Provisional Government. They accepted that the socialist revolution would occur later; for now, they were content to let the liberals govern. The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, less radical than its rank and file, actively cooperated with the government. Some members of the Committee—Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries—even entered the government in May, which turned it into a coalition of liberals and socialists. However, continued economic grievances and dissatisfaction with the war effort led to open revolts against the government in June and July.

Lenin had returned to Russia from exile in April 1917. The Bolshevik party so far had been willing to cooperate with the government, at least for the time being, but Lenin's arrival changed that. He published his “April Theses,” proclaiming that the government had to be resolutely opposed, that power should pass into the hands of the soviets, that the bourgeois revolution was already over and it was time for the proletarian revolution to begin, that landed estates should be confiscated and distributed to the peasants, and that the war should be ended unless it could be turned into a truly *revolutionary* war against the foreign imperialist powers.²⁴ These statements shocked even Lenin's Bolshevik followers, but in time he was able to bring the

²⁴ The History Guide, “Lenin's *April Theses*,” <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/april.html>.

party around to his position. From then on, the Bolsheviks, alone among all parties, represented revolutionary opposition to the government and refusal to participate in it. In April this seemed like a dangerous gamble, and indeed it periodically threatened the political and personal safety of Bolshevik leaders, but in the long run it paid off. For it was only a matter of time before the masses would lose patience with their government, and when that happened they would turn to the Bolsheviks.

During April and May, militancy on all fronts increased. The factory committees in Petrograd and Moscow, which had been established by workers in order to supervise foremen and managers, actually began to take over managerial functions. Slowly they were wresting control of factories away from the owners and managers. In the Petrograd committees, Bolsheviks quickly became the dominant influence. In the countryside, similarly, land-seizures by the peasantry were becoming more frequent. This was not due to Bolshevik propaganda; in fact, most of the peasants hadn't even heard of the Bolsheviks. Their party of choice was the Socialist-Revolutionary. But that mattered little: the Provisional Government was procrastinating on the issue of land reform, and this in itself bred frustration and impatience.²⁵

However, more immediately significant than these developments was the soldiers' war-weariness, which led to an uprising in early July. The government had initiated a major offensive in June, which began promisingly but soon fell apart. Two hundred thousand casualties were sustained, even as hundreds of thousands of soldiers were deserting the army in the months between February and August. Insubordination and lack of discipline were rampant, encouraged by the democratic mentality that revolutionary leaders were propagating everywhere. On July 2, sailors from Kronstadt, a particularly radical area, stormed into Petrograd with the intention of overthrowing the government, having been galvanized by rumors that they were to be transferred to the front.²⁶ Workers and other soldiers joined them, to the point at which the armed demonstration was said to have reached half a million people. They proceeded to the Bolshevik party's headquarters, where Lenin refused to lead them in an assault and advised them to disperse. It seems that he and other leaders were taken off guard by the attempted uprising. Soviet leaders, too, who were far less militant than Lenin, dissuaded the demonstrators from violent action. So the group broke up in confusion and disappointment.

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–56.

²⁶ Read, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

The significance of this event is that it shows how far revolutionary sentiments had permeated the populace. The demonstration had not been organized by Bolsheviks, who indeed were utterly surprised by it. The Provisional Government had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many soldiers and sailors, a sizable proportion of the army and navy. The economic crisis, the intractable problems of the war, the land question, and constant revolutionary agitation had produced the first popular rebellion against the government, which probably could have succeeded had it had effective leadership. The second would be in October—triggered, ironically, by a failed *conservative* rebellion in August.

The attempted conservative coup was centered around General Kornilov, the commander of the Petrograd military district. Officers and “men of property” had been wary of the Provisional Government all along: it was too leftist for them, and too tolerant of continual insubordination in the army. They were concerned above all with winning the war and ensuring that the rights of property were not eroded. Finally at the end of August they acted: Kornilov sent some of his troops to Petrograd on the pretext of suppressing disorders. Apparently he wanted to establish himself as military dictator. The coup failed due to the efforts of the Petrograd workers, who diverted and obstructed troop-trains, shut down newspapers that supported Kornilov, and in general pressured the troops to abandon their mission, assuring them that there were no disorders in Petrograd that had to be put down. Kornilov was arrested. The significance of his failed coup is that it pushed the radicalization of workers and soldiers to its logical conclusion: within weeks, the Bolshevik party had a majority in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets and was acquiring greater influence in soldiers’ committees all along the front, many of which passed resolutions that all power ought to be transferred to the soviets. The Provisional Government lost much of whatever legitimacy it had still had in the eyes of the masses, largely because its prime minister, Alexander Kerensky, was thought to have tacitly supported Kornilov’s move so as to neutralize the troublesome Petrograd Soviet. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, gained new prestige, since they had been warning of a counterrevolutionary attempt from the very beginning. Their main advantage, though, was that “they were the only party uncompromised by association with the bourgeoisie and the February regime, and the party most firmly identified with ideas of workers’ power and armed uprising.”²⁷

²⁷ Fitzpatrick, p. 61.

The immediate result of Kornilov's coup was a power-vacuum at the political center: the army officers and the right now hated Kerensky because they thought he had betrayed them by first supporting Kornilov and then withdrawing his support at the critical moment; the left didn't trust him for the analogous reason mentioned above. For months Kerensky had struggled mightily to maintain the coalition between socialists, liberals and conservatives; it had finally unraveled due to the coup (although it had been falling apart prior to that). The Provisional Government was polarized and ineffective, having lost every semblance of unity as well as the confidence of the masses. The latter were clamoring for the same thing that Lenin had advocated in his April Theses: "All power to the soviets!" Being the only party that expressed unreserved commitment to that idea, the Bolsheviks had the loyalty of the soldiers and workers, at least temporarily and conditionally.

In the final analysis, though, it is true that what happened at the end of October was more like a coup than a revolution. It was not a "spontaneous" upsurge of the masses, even if many sectors of the latter did embrace it afterwards and would have supported it beforehand. (And certainly in the aftermath, during the civil war between the Whites and the Reds, the majority of people supported the Reds at least passively.)²⁸ It was a coup secretly planned by Lenin, Trotsky and the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. In fact, had Lenin not been vehemently insisting on the need for a coup since September to his skeptical colleagues, it surely would not have happened. In the end he convinced them, however, and so on October 24, soldiers loyal to the Military Revolutionary Committee occupied the telegraph offices, the railway stations, nearby bridges, etc. A couple days later forces occupied the Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government was meeting. Very little fighting actually took place. The government didn't put up much resistance, because it couldn't: the Petrograd garrison was no longer loyal to it. Many soldiers were convinced that the government favored reestablishing the power of the officers and rolling back the army's democratization. The soldiers who were sent out by Kerensky to defend particular locations were simply "talked out of" their loyalty to the government by their comrades loyal to the Soviet who showed up at the same locations later. The busy life of the city continued more or less as normal despite the political crisis occurring.

²⁸ Read, p. 198. The author remarks that the Whites' main weakness was their inability to gain a popular base of support. Of course, the situation varied between regions: in some regions, such as Siberia, the majority of peasants did oppose the Bolsheviks.

Again, it is evident that the essential factor was the behavior of the soldiers. Had they supported the government, the coup would have failed. Any coup or revolution, in fact, can be thought of on one level simply as a struggle for who will control the means of violence: will control-over-violence remain in the hands of the current power-elite, or will it pass to a new elite? If a hopeful elite can gain the hearts and minds of the soldiers—or at least the soldiers closest to the power-centers—then all that is necessary to initiate a successful coup is a few clever tactical maneuvers. By October the Bolsheviks had accomplished the first task; they then accomplished the second, through the determination of Trotsky and Lenin. It was the war, however, that had created the conditions for revolution—because the war is ultimately what caused first the tsarist autocracy and then the Provisional Government to lose the support of the “enforcers,” i.e., the soldiers. The Bolsheviks, too, once they had had power for a number of months, began to lose the people’s support,²⁹ but by then—and especially in the thick of the civil war—only two serious options presented themselves: either a Red government that claimed to speak for the workers, the poorest peasants, the soldiers, and democracy, or a White government that (it was commonly known) would have acted, and did act in the regions where it seized power, terroristically on behalf of capitalists, landowners, and the forces of reaction. For most people, especially the workers and the majority of peasants, it was not a difficult decision to make.

I have argued that most industrial workers and many soldiers had joined the Bolshevik camp by October 1917 because it was the Bolsheviks who had been agitating vociferously since April for soviet control, workers’ democracy, “Peace, bread, land,” the democratization of the military, and opposition to the government. N. N. Sukhanov, a Menshevik, later wrote that after the Kornilov revolt, “the mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks. It was in the hands of the party of Lenin and Trotsky.”³⁰ Christopher Read goes so far as to suggest that something like the October revolution might have happened even without the Bolsheviks, given

²⁹ See Roy Medvedev, *The October Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), chapters 12 and 13. In the spring of 1918 much of the petty-bourgeoisie, traditionally the most patriotic class, began to turn away from the Bolsheviks because of the humiliating Brest-Litovsk treaty. But the relatively well-off of the peasantry did so too because of forced grain requisitions in response to starvation in the cities. Even industrial workers in some regions started to prefer the Mensheviks and left-SRs to the Bolsheviks.

³⁰ Quoted in Read, p. 161.

the universal desire for soviet power and the ineffectual character of the government.³¹ Immediately after the October coup, an All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which had been scheduled months before, convened in Petrograd. Three hundred of the 670 delegates were Bolsheviks. A group of Mensheviks and SRs violently criticized the coup and quit the Congress in protest, but even so, soviet power was triumphantly proclaimed at the first session of the Congress, suggesting that a great majority of the populace did favor the outcome of the coup, if not, perhaps, the illegal means.³²

The peasantry, however, was not as supportive of the Bolshevik party as the workers and many soldiers were. On the other hand, there was really no reason for it not to be, given that Lenin and his party had since the spring supported the principle of parceling out the landowners' land to the peasants. Most peasants favored the Socialist Revolutionaries simply because they had been around longer than the Bolsheviks, had made more inroads into the countryside, and people were more familiar with them. In any case, politics was not a major concern of the peasantry, which in 1917 only wanted to have control over the land and be left alone by government agents. Throughout the summer it had been confiscating land in non-peasant hands and revolting against government authority, which had not only failed to address the peasants' traditional grievances but was frantically using every means at its disposal, including grain requisition, to alleviate the chronic food shortage in Petrograd and other cities. Graeme Gill observes that the link between the villages and cities was breaking down. This breakdown had revolutionary potential for the simple reason that without an effective administrative apparatus to transport food from the villages to the cities, mass starvation would result, and starvation would fuel revolutionary sentiment. "Combined with the war-weariness of the soldiers, the disillusionment of rural and urban dwellers left the government defenseless."³³ So the behavior of the peasantry played a role in preparing the ground for the Bolsheviks' success.

Immediately after the coup, however, the Bolshevik party moved towards a dictatorial form of government. Lenin had never been completely comfortable with the democratic idea of soviet power; he supported it only if the soviets could be used as organs of the party. His success was due to the fact that people took the Bolsheviks at their word when they advocated democracy. But during the Congress of Soviets in October, the true nature of the new regime was

³¹ Ibid., p. 175.

³² Fitzpatrick, p. 65.

³³ Ibid., p. 187.

hinted at. It was announced that instead of the government's being headed by the Central Executive Committee of the soviets, elected by the Congress and including representatives from several political parties, it would be headed by a new Council of People's Commissars whose members would be exclusively Bolshevik. Later, party members argued that a broader socialist coalition should govern, but Lenin refused.³⁴

The story of the regime's consolidation lies outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, despite the erosion of popular support in the spring and summer of 1918 in the face of continued economic deterioration and the terrorization of certain parts of the peasantry, during the civil war much of the population fought alongside the Bolsheviks against what they saw as a threat incomparably greater than Lenin's dictatorship, namely the restoration of conservative rule. After the war, and even during it, the Red Army brutally suppressed a number of anarchist uprisings against the Bolsheviks, for example Nestor Makhno's peasant insurrection in the Ukraine and the Kronstadt sailors' revolt in 1920.³⁵ But even before the civil war, the evils of bureaucratization, centralization, terror, and dogmatic thinking on the part of the government had shown themselves. For the remainder of its existence, Communism would rely largely on brute force to maintain its rule, just as the tsarist autocracy had.

However, the differences between tsarism and Communism reveal the meaning of the revolution. Tsarism was analogous to French absolutism before the Great Revolution: exclusion of the masses from politics, blatant suppression of civil liberties without attempting to justify it by reference to principles of "long-term" democracy and so forth (as Communism did), and generally an *ideological* (rather than only political and social) hierarchization of society, an explicit foundation in feudal hierarchies. The point is that capitalism and industrialization made inevitable, sooner or later, the masses' eruption into politics, in France, England, Russia, China, Germany, and every other country. The question was only how this would come about. Would it occur through a step-by-step liberalization, as in England and the United States? Or would it involve a sudden, violent social revolution, as in France? In Russia it took the path of the latter because of, first, the tsars' blind allegiance to reactionary dogmas, and second, the catastrophic nature of World War I. In retrospect, what seems most incredible is not that Red October happened but that the regime survived until 1991. After all, Chinese Communism felt compelled

³⁴ Fitzpatrick, pp. 65 and 66.

³⁵ Read, chapter 11.

to liberalize after only about thirty years in power (1949–1979)—and even thirty years is impressive, thirty years of a monolithic, terrorizing, inefficient, blundering state structure. The lesson is that power is tenacious.