

The October Revolution (draft for a chapter to precede the presentation)

In the Russian capital, Petrograd, on the Soviet Day, held on October 22, 1917:

All Petrograd, with the exception of its upper strata ... thronged out to meetings from early morning to night – young and old, men and women, boys and girls, mothers with children in their arms. No meetings like this had been seen before throughout the revolution ... Fresh and ever fresh waves of workers, soldiers and sailors would roll up to the buildings and flood them full ... They stood there packed shoulder to shoulder, and crowding even closer to make room for more, to make room for all, listening tirelessly, hungrily, passionately, demanding, fearing lest they miss a word of what it is so necessary to understand, to assimilate, and to do. It had seemed as though during the months past, the weeks – at least during the very last days – all the words had been spoken. But no! Today at least those words have a different sound. The masses are experiencing them in a new way, not as a gospel but as an obligation to act. The experience of the revolution, the war, the heavy struggle of a whole bitter lifetime, rose from the depths of memory in each of those poverty-driven men and women, expressing itself in simple and imperious thoughts: This way we can go no farther, we must break a road into the future.

“Around me [wrote Nikolai Sukhanov, who was opposed to the approaching insurrection] there was a mood very near to ecstasy ... [Leon] Trotsky [chairperson of the Petrograd Soviet, and author of this passage] had formulated some brief general resolution ... Those in favour ... Thousands and thousands raised their hands as one man. I looked at the lifted hands and burning eyes ... Trotsky continued to speak. The multitude continued to hold their hands in the air. Trotsky chiselled out each word: Let this vote of yours be your oath ... The multitude held their hands high. They agreed. They took the oath.” ... The same scene was to be observed on a smaller scale in all parts of the city from centre to suburbs. Hundreds of thousands of people, at one and the same hour, lifted their hands and took a vow to carry the struggle through to the end. The daily meetings of the Soviet, the soldiers’ section, the Garrison Conference, the factory and shop committees, had given inner solidarity to a big group of leaders; separate mass meetings had united the factories and regiments; but that day ... welded in one gigantic cauldron and under high temperature the authentic popular masses. The masses saw themselves and their leaders; the leaders saw and listened to the masses. Each side was satisfied with the other. The leaders were convinced: We can postpone no longer! The masses said to themselves: This time the thing will be done!

The October Revolution is not normally recounted in this way. Mainstream historians and political figures say it was not a popular mass movement, but a coup by a minority, the Bolsheviks – so named as the descendant of the 1903 “majority” faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP), which was their party’s official name – and a conspiracy, an act of leaders, behind the scenes.

Trotsky, the leading public figure of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, accepted that the revolution involved a conspiracy. However, he argued this conspiracy was subordinate to the mass insurrection that was needed to change social power – from the rule of capitalists and landlords to the rule of workers and peasants – and necessary to achieve that. He explained that in a “spontaneous” insurrection, demonstrations, strikes and street fights that are founded in near-universal indignation can draw in parts of the military and paralyse the remaining forces of the old regime, so that it can be overthrown. In February, this had been achieved; and this “victory had inevitably to transfer the power to those parties which up to the last

moment had been opposing it". Workers and peasants have no social advantages for transforming society other than their numbers, solidarity, what they have learnt in struggles and how they organise these. To make their own revolution, the 99% need suitable organisations and a plan to use them – in that sense, a conspiracy. "The art of insurrection" is "coordination of the mass insurrection with the conspiracy, the subordination of the conspiracy to the insurrection, the organisation of the insurrection through the conspiracy".

Petrograd's workers and garrison troops, and the nearby sailors in the fleet on the Baltic learnt this in a few months in 1917, as they gained a wealth of experience. Their newly-formed Soviets had handed formal power to the Provisional Government, which had been formed on the say-so of the Tsarist Duma (parliament). March saw weeks of celebrations of the revolution, but in April, when the war aims of the most militarily belligerent ministers were revealed, demonstrations forced them from office. Yet the government, which now came to include several ministers who were avowedly socialist, but were "defencist" supporters of Russia in WWI, still planned an offensive that began in June. The national executive of the Soviets, which was dominated by defencist socialists, then rebuffed armed demonstrations in the capital on July 3 and 4 that called on the Soviets to take power. Instead, they supported the Provisional Government to put down this movement, as it brought loyal troops from the front and mobilised parts of the garrison that had not supported the demonstrations. These troops killed hundreds of demonstrators and jailed many Bolshevik leaders, even though they had first opposed the "coming out" because they saw this would be isolated from the rest of the country, and had only later supported it to try to bring some order to it, and others as well – sometimes on a chance overheard dissenting phrase – as supposed insurrectionists. Lenin, the Bolsheviks' leader, went into hiding north of the city, writing letters and articles to communicate his views, until the day before the October Revolution.

After then, the workers in Petrograd were warier of the chance, in insurrection, to suffer violence and defeat. However, they also had a deeply rooted revolutionary movement which was not eliminated and, indeed, through protests, helped to limit the jailings. With the country's further military decline and economic disruption, and the Provisional Government's effort to address this being attempts to reverse what the revolution had earlier won, perspectives for revolution returned, on an ever-broadening scale.

An early flashpoint was the reintroduction of the death penalty at the front in July. On August 18, when the Petrograd Soviet was reconvened for the first time in four weeks, it voted to abolish the death penalty 900 to four. Those who were opposed were all national executive members. One of them, Irakli Tsereteli, responded:

Why, your resolution shows a lack of confidence in the Provisional Government. And what if the abolition of the death penalty does not follow? Will you keep on trying ... and overthrow the government?

Sukhanov writes that then "shouts rang out: yes! yes! We'll take to the streets again."

Hardly more than a week later, the army commander, Lavr Kornilov, attempted a counter-revolutionary coup. In response, the Bolsheviks, whose numbers had grown from tens into hundreds of thousands before July and were on the upswing again, took the lead practically. While the national Soviet executive was studiously inactive, opposition, from the grassroots up through the Soviets, was certain and swift at the base. Regiments refused orders to deploy, factory workforces organised Red Guard militia units and fortification construction detachments, and the railroad workers tore up railway lines and stopped the troop trains of the cavalry units which had been

ordered to the capital. Without a way forward or any interest in Kornilov's desire to be dictator – a fact brought home to them by the swarm of speakers sent by the Soviets – the horsemen turned away.

The coup had in fact been supported only by some officers, the Kadets (Constitutional Democrats), which was the one functional capitalist party and – until the moment came – the defencist Prime Minister, Alexander Kerensky. Except among the well-off in society, coalition government – with the capitalists – was now discredited; unity with the defencists, who argued coalition government was necessary, was under scrutiny. In September, beyond Petrograd, the stream of support towards Soviet power began to flood: for example, this was registered in the votes of Soviet deputies among the Russians in Finland, and in the Moscow, central Siberian and Kiev soviets. The Petrograd Soviet was breached twice, first on September 1 and then decisively on September 9 after the defencists tried to mobilise to overturn the first vote against coalition with the bourgeoisie and for Soviet power.

In most of the urban Soviets, Bolsheviks were elected to lead. If not them, then members of an emerging Left in the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR), which was, historically, the party of the peasants in support of land redistribution, and, after February, had briefly become the urban majority party, to which all those who were first taking part in revolutionary activity flocked. The calling of a second national congress of the Soviets, due that month, was now postponed to October, at first to the 20th, later to the 25th. Meanwhile, in Petrograd, for a moment, inertia imposed by the presence of the personnel of the national structures of the Soviets and the various parties delayed change. But before the end of the month Trotsky was chair of the city's Soviet.

Now soldiers' representatives came from the front to the Soviet in Petrograd to say they would no longer fight and that peace was necessary, even, one said, "some sort of indecent peace". Peasant committees began to stop waiting for decrees and to start taking the land they worked into their hands. And the workers were reaching out. Their factory committees claimed rights to decide industrial disputes and to re-open workplaces employers had shut down, sent delegates across Russia to guarantee grain and fuel supplies and called for support from the supporters of the revolution in the villages and the trenches for their measures to maintain production. Workers, subject to the control of their factory assemblies, volunteered for Red Guard militia units. The Petrograd factories and shop committees conference heard a report by Trotsky on the agrarian question and issued a manifesto to the peasants: underpinning this was a now widely-developing view that the workers should come forward not only as a class with their own interests, but also as the leader of the people.

The officers and Kerensky made a last roll of the dice. The Petrograd garrison was ordered to the front, although the soldiers opposed being thrown into the slaughter of the trenches and leaving the capital vulnerable to counter-revolution. This is the moment when what served as preparation for insurrection began in earnest, where before this had only been words in the resolutions of some factory committees and Soviets and the Bolsheviks. The Left SRs and other "internationalist" socialists who wanted to stop the war still opposed insurrection. The Petrograd Soviet formed a Military Revolutionary Committee which aimed to stop the garrison's removal and to defend the forthcoming Soviet Congress. The MRC used soldiers' meetings and a conference of unit representatives to bring the city's military under its control. Before the Petrograd Soviet Day this had largely been achieved, but at the Peter and Paul Fortress, which was in the heart of the city, armed with artillery and in control of a major weapons store, the troops, many of whom had arrived in Petrograd in July to suppress the movement, had voted against "coming out". Trotsky reportedly declared "it cannot be that the troops there would not be sympathetic to us" and the MRC arranged

a mass meeting on October 23. This meeting ran from noon to 8pm, hearing from the fort commander and numerous defencists from parties in the Soviet, and Bolshevik and other MRC representatives. Mikhail Lashevich later remembered: "The question was put to the vote ... All those who supported the Military Revolutionary Committee moved to the left, those against to the right. With cries of hurrah, an overwhelming majority rushed to the left".

Yet that same night, somewhat confusedly, the MRC backtracked on its claim to full control of the garrison. The Provisional Government perhaps detected apparent weakness and roused itself to action. The next morning, before dawn, it sent officer cadets to close down a Bolshevik printing press and authorised the arrest of many of the Bolshevik leaders. The MRC ordered troops to reopen the press. Later in the day, the military command sent cadets to raise the bridges of the city: this would cut off the main factory districts from the city centre. Soldiers, together with Red Guards and sailors from the *Aurora*, who refused orders to set to sea from the shipyard and instead sailed the warship up the Neva river into the city, kept some of the bridges open.

By evening, the MRC had called for support from the Baltic Fleet sailors and sent squads to the communication centres (post, telegraph and telephone), State Bank and various military headquarters. On October 25, as the Soviet called on workers not to disorganise production and the Woodworkers' Union voted to end their strike, the insurrectionary forces gathered steadily, in some numbers, around the Winter Palace, which was the headquarters of the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government's defenders slipped away, as did Kerensky. In the night the Palace was taken, attackers slipping into the building through undefended points and only briefly confronting opposition within.

The Soviet Congress was already meeting. This led some to accuse the Bolsheviks, as the key leaders of the MRC and the Petrograd Soviet, of pre-empting a Congress decision on a transfer of political power to the Soviets. However, the Congress was going to support the transfer - in the end, 505 of the 670 delegates were committed in principle to it - and everyone who did not close their eyes to this knew it beforehand. The Provisional Government could have attacked the Congress, if it was not defended. The Soviet had prepared against that by wresting control of the armed forces from the government. That preparation impelled the government towards testing its remaining strength. In the face of that, the MRC and the Soviet needed to again step forward, mobilising the forces it had organised. That is what the "conspiracy" amounted to.

In this process, the Provisional Government's profound isolation was revealed. The mass of the population, represented in factory meetings, the garrison conference, the Soviet and its day of action and the vote at the fortress, had already left the old government behind, before it sought to strike. The revolution had been made by October 23: the rest of the fight was, in Trotsky's words, "a police action". In fact, a crowd faced down cadets at the Liteiny bridge and forced their surrender, but in general, and allowing for the numbers that gathered before the Winter Palace, mass demonstrations were not needed. A lack of these does not indicate a coup, but signifies a more conscious and organised insurrection than any before in the history of revolutions.

Alexander Rabinowitch, whose study *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* shows how this process worked out in Petrograd, nonetheless seeks to reintroduce hints of conspiracy and coup:

Tactically cautious [Bolshevik] leaders in Petrograd, headed by Trotsky, devised the strategy of employing the organs of the Petrograd Soviet for the seizure of power; of masking an attack on the government as a defensive operation on behalf of the Soviet; and, if possible,

of linking the formal overthrow of the government with the work of the Second Congress of Soviets.

On October 21-23, using as an excuse the government's announced intention of transferring the bulk of the garrison to the front and cloaking every move as a defensive measure against the counter-revolution, the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet took control of Petrograd-based military units ... [only once Kerensky responded] just hours before the scheduled opening of the Congress of Soviets and in part under continuous prodding by Lenin, did the armed uprising that Lenin had been advocating for well over a month actually begin.

Rabinowitch's complaint about this is not so much that then, in order to reject the insurrection as an attack, the defencist majority of the other socialist parties were impelled to leave the Soviet Congress, leaving the soviet government to be dominated by the Bolsheviks. Instead, he suggested the Petrograd masses, who supported the goals of the Bolsheviks, as the masses understood these, were deceived by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were ready to use the government's attack on the left, when it came, to enable the armed uprising Lenin envisaged, the consequence of which would be Bolshevik rule. The masses, however, had "believed the Bolsheviks stood for ... the creation of a broadly representative, exclusively socialist government by the Congress of Soviets [as] the hope of insuring that there would not be a return to the hated ways of the old regime, of avoiding death at the front and achieving a better life and of putting a quick end to Russia's participation in the war".

This argument is wrong on several levels. First, although the defencists left the Soviet Congress and the internationalists refused to join the Soviet government because the defencists weren't involved, the new government – not ministers, but "people's commissars [in English, "commissaries", who are officials "delegated by a superior to execute a duty"¹]", a term which Lenin quipped "smelt of revolution" – did what the masses hoped for. The death penalty was abolished again. Workers' control in the factories was supported, not attacked, which meant that the workers could keep trying to stop factory owners sabotaging production: otherwise, the workers would lose their jobs and not be able to get food to survive. The Bolsheviks pronounced what the Socialist Revolutionaries, even when their leader had been agriculture minister, would not: the peasants' local committees could redistribute the landlords' land. Peace proved trickiest. It was proposed to the other governments. In response, the German demands for an agreement were harsh. Lenin wanted to sign anyway, because he saw that the army was dissipating and understood delay meant harsher demands. Trotsky, the commissar for foreign affairs, used the peace negotiations for speeches to encourage revolt in Germany: in fact, during the winter, there were demonstrations against the war in Berlin, but the uprising that overthrew the government was a year away. Others, including the Left SRs, who joined the government in December, thought the soldiers would still fight or just didn't want to give up territory from the old tsarist empire. In February 1918, the German army attacked and faced no opposition: an ignominious agreement was reached. The Left SRs then left the government and began attempts to overturn it, including assassinations and a coup attempt months later.

Second, where Rabinowitch asserted Petrograd's 99% had one view, among them there were in fact two positions with real followings. One was, as he described, for a government of all socialist parties; the other was for a soviet government responsible to the new national executive. The former was primarily supported by the relatively few white-collar workers, who were hostile to the Bolsheviks,

¹ See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commissary>

and soldiers, in very considerable numbers, who supported Soviet power but did not want to fight the troops the army generals eventually mobilised in an unsuccessful attempt to retake the capital. The factory workers largely supported the latter: because they rejected neutrality in the fighting and retreating from their demands, these workers supported the new government without regard for who was involved.

Third, Rabinowitch's argument asks us to accept that the Bolshevik leaders did not mean what they said. That they meant what they said is more likely. Thus, he tells us that on October 24: the party's Central Committee did not discuss doing away with the Provisional Government before the Soviet Congress and was mostly "absorbed with the task of neutralizing the actions of the enemy and retaining or consolidating the strength of the left; that both Joseph Stalin, a co-editor of the party's leading newspaper *Pravda*, and Trotsky argued for this approach before the Bolshevik congress faction, the latter saying "our tactical line has been determined by developing circumstances; and, "in a similar vein", Trotsky told the Petrograd Soviet:

An armed conflict today or tomorrow, on the eve of the All-Russian Congress, is not in our plans ... We are confident that the congress will fulfil our slogan with great force and authority. But if the government want to make use of the twenty-four, forty-eight or seventy-two hours which it still has and comes out against us, then we will respond with a counterattack, matching blow for blow, steel for iron.

Where is the "masking"? Where is the "cloaking"?

The Russian revolutionaries did what they could and what was needed in their circumstances. Our experiences are very different from theirs in many ways, but there are also moments that we have felt the power of the masses: in the Vietnam Moratoriums, marching against nuclear weapons, rallying for East Timor (here again, arms raised, vowing not to stop campaigning), crossing bridges in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, flooding the streets against the Iraq war, fighting for our rights at work, Occupying. Sometimes these moments have been revolutionary, such as in Paris in May 1968, or in Tahrir Square, but, as with other spontaneous uprisings, political power went immediately to those who were until the last moment opposed to these movements. And then it went back to the former rulers.

In Russia in 1917, however, the masses' power to act in their own interest developed and gained direction. At the heart of that process, in terms of the 99% achieving effective political expression, were the Bolsheviks, a socialist party. How that happened is surely what is significant – not for the past, but for the future, globally – about the October Revolution.

A note on sources

This essay and the presentation have been prepared without referencing (these can be provided), but it has certainly used references.

Leon Trotsky's *The History of the Russian Revolution* is the classic Marxist account by a revolutionary who was involved. He used an impressive range of the sources that were available to him, such as Nikolai Sukhanov's diaries, when it was written in 1928, but not his own memory. At the same time, it does reflect his concerns and understandings about what could be learnt from that history when the revolution was rapidly degenerating into Stalinism and he was being thrown out of the Soviet Union.

In more recent decades there has been a stream of studies focused on the revolutionary experience of the masses, in Petrograd in particular. Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* and David Mandel's *The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power*, which focuses on the workers' control movement, are two highlights. Elsewhere, a chapter like that of Sarah Badcock's (in Donald Filtzer's *Dream Deferred*) on the workers of the industrial town of Sormovo offers some insights.

The 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution does not itself seem to have spurred research. Instead, China Mieville has applied his novelist skills to retelling *October*. To do this he has read widely.

In particular, Mieville notes the work of Lars T Lih in "assiduously revolutionising and demythologising our understandings of the political positions of the Russian revolutionaries". This is continuing at the time of writing with a series on the Bolshevik debates in March and April 1917 (see <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/category/authors/lars-t-lih/>). Much of the presentation relies on Lih's work, but he is not responsible for the arguments made, of course. Lih has faced criticism of his views, from which John Marot's article (in *Historical Materialism* in 2014) is considered here. Other discussants of and arguments about Lih's works were looked at in an earlier seminar presentation - <http://links.org.au/node/3490> - parts of which have been reiterated here

However, looking at the debates among the Bolsheviks in 1917, and the context for these, is surely impossible with going back to look (again) at Lenin's own writings, to which references here is scattered across writings from 1902 to 1920.