The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921:

Explaining the Rise, Seizure and Consolidation of Bolshevik Power

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Abstract

The following narrative provides an understanding and analysis of the course of events and processes that led to the Bolshevik rise, seizure and consolidation of power between 1917 and 1921. It is also an attempt to formulate a coherent picture so that readers will come away with a good understanding of the history of the Russian Revolution, the issues that excited passions, and a sense of what it was all about and ‘what happened.’ This paper should give a good sense of revolutionary processes, as well as explain how the Bolsheviks triumphed and why others ultimately failed.

**Introduction**

Momentous forces propelled by commoners, ordinary people – workers, peasants and soldiers – in February 1917, shaped the Russian Revolution. Over time, however, the popular discontent that had brought down an autocracy would somehow be turned on its head and succeeded by the very system it wished to rid itself of – **totalitarianism**. Indeed, the rather open-ended, democratic and emancipatory forces that gave birth to the revolution were also responsible for the very dictatorial, coercive policies that brought it to its end. For the **Bolshevik** seizure of power was one of a dual nature, a popular revolution legitimized by widespread support for **Soviet** power while at the same time a coup d’état by a radical minority political party. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The Bolsheviks were the political party that ultimately triumphed in the struggle to succeed the old, hollow Tsarist regime that dissolved in February 1917. That they did so was the result of situation and accident, as much as it was of organization, ideology and leadership in the eight months that transpired between February and October. Yet, while the **October Revolution** is typically regarded as the point at which the Bolsheviks ascended to power, this event in itself did not bring an end to the upheaval and instability that the **February Revolution** had unleashed. The October Revolution was a beginning, not an end to the Bolshevik Revolution. The strengthening of Bolshevik rule took another three and a half years and obliterated the old order, and ordinary Russians, the very ones that had supported February, then October, became the victims of a tyranny they had meant to depose.

The revolutionary period, 1917 to 1921, was a formative experience, if not across Russian society, then for those who succeeded Tsarism. For the Bolsheviks primary political task, aside from self-preservation, was to gain control over the inclinations and authority of workers’, soldiers and peasants’ institutions and to subordinate ‘the masses’ completely to their will, thereby suppressing the very democratic tendencies that gave rise to Bolshevik rule. Its dynamics were complex, a series of concurrent and overlapping revolutions, decided by great social forces on the one hand, and the role of various actors and specific crises on the other.

**February Days**

The revolution of February 1917 came unexpectedly on 23 February 1917, **International Women’s Day**, when thousands of angry housewives and women workers in the textile industry in **Petrograd**, ignoring pleas from labour leaders to stay calm, surged onto the streets. As a worker in the Vyborg Ward recalled:

We heard female voices in the narrow street by the windows of our shop: ‘Down with the war! Down with high prices! Down with hunger! Bread to the workers!’ Several comrades and I immediately came to the windows...Masses of women workers in a combative mood spilled into the street. Those who noticed us began to wave their hands and shout: ‘Come out! Stop working!’ Snowballs flew into the windows. We decided to join the rally.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The following day 200 000 workers were on strike in Petrograd. By 25 February demonstrators were clashing with troops, and the long-awaited revolution had commenced. That the revolution came directly from the collective actions of the industrial workers and then of the soldier masses, guided by factory-level activists, non-commissioned officers and supported by the general population, left a permanent stamp on the revolution’s character and subsequent development.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, while these agents of activism furnished the primary political and organizational leadership in the demonstrations, the mass movements of those February days retained a “shapeless” character. They were, as the **Menshevik** Nikolai Sukhanov noted, without “any strong, really authoritative centres.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This was reflected in the crowds and demonstrations that formed along **Nevsky Prospect** and in many other public spaces in the capital. The street, however, generated its own leaders, despite what Sukhanov, intellectuals of his ilk, party leaders and government officials would insinuate. Many beyond the street, including many socialists, doubted the radical fervor could be sustained, but the crowds displayed an extraordinary level of self-organization and solidarity. Everybody knew where they should go, the movements of the crowd were not ‘spontaneous:’ they followed a long-established tradition, a spatial cultural code of protest in the capital.[[5]](#footnote-5) They tore down portraits of the tsar, the imperial two-headed eagle and other representations of the **Romanov dynasty**. Such behavior had a cathartic appeal to it. The people could no longer endure the old regime, even if those leading them had not prepared plans for reconstruction.

None of this would have been possible without troops in the Petrograd garrison, an immensely powerful military force, having thrown in their lot with insurgents on the streets. There was, as Sukhanov remarked, “a rather casual, unserious and unreal character” to soldier patrols. These were not the same troops that had suppressed the revolution of 1905. Soldiers, disillusioned after three years of brutal and bloody warfare, fraternized with striking workers. “Into every crowd and group an enormous number of soldiers’ grey greatcoats had been organically assimilated,” Sukhanov reflected.[[6]](#footnote-6) Not all troops were so casual, as some fired on unarmed demonstrators, blood was certainly spilled, and several hundred were killed.[[7]](#footnote-7) The shootings of 26 February, however, led to mutiny and even those that remained in barracks were reluctant to act, tending to evade orders by their commanding officers.

Already by 27 February, two separate bodies claiming legitimacy and authority, the Temporary Committee of the State **Duma** and the Provisional Executive Committee of the **Soviet** of Workers’ Deputies’, emerged. This was the so-called ‘**dual power**.’ It was, **Leon Trotsky** later recalled, ‘the paradox of the February Revolution:’ that a revolution made in the streets resulted in a government made in the **salons**.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was a process that was to have tremendous implications for the development of the revolution. Workers and soldiers did not trust the liberal ‘**bourgeois’** landlords and industrialists of the Duma Committee. They were ‘**counter-revolutionary**,’ and soldiers, having been ordered by the committee to return to barracks and to recognize the authority of their officers – the very ones they had only recently mutinied against – were reluctant to follow orders. The actions of Duma members on the 27th may have guaranteed their participation in the creation of the **Provisional Government**, but this occurred without the popular support of those they claimed to represent.

**Socialists**, on the other hand, who dominated the Soviet, interpreted the ‘revolution’ they had just witnessed as a ‘bourgeois revolution’ and shied away from the responsibilities of government. These moderate socialist leaders generally adhered to **Marx**’s two-stage theory of revolution that argued underdeveloped countries, as in tsarist Russia, must first pass through a stage of bourgeois democracy before moving to a socialist stage. The **Petrograd Soviet** could make a strong case for power as it retained significant backing from workers and soldiers, nevertheless, in what was to be a recurring pattern throughout 1917, moderate socialists refused to take power. Instead, Soviet leaders promised to support the new government in so far as it pursued policies of which they approved. The existence of the Soviet alongside the **Provisional Government** robbed the latter of much of its authority. This was because the Soviet commanded the primary loyalty of the industrial workers and garrison soldiers, the main base of power in Petrograd, and could call on this support in a conflict with the government.

In response to the Duma Committee’s order calling on soldiers to return to barracks and to obey their officers, the Soviet issued **Order Number One**. The order instructed soldiers and sailors to obey their officers and the Provisional Government only if their orders did not contradict the decrees of the Petrograd Soviet. It also provided for the establishment of soldiers’ committees as a democratic counterbalance to the authority of officers – therefore turning military protocol on its head. Furthermore, all weapons were to be handed over to these committees ‘and shall by no means be issued to the officers, not even at their insistence.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The order declared that soldiers would recognize the authority of the Soviet, and that any order by the Duma’s Military Commission would be executed only in so far as if it did not conflict with that of the Soviet’s. Trotsky called it “the only worthy document of the February Revolution,” for it struck at the very heart of army discipline and was a powerful contributor to the breakdown of the armed forces.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Duma Committee and the Petrograd Soviet thus began to cooperate, if warily, to consolidate the February Revolution and form a new government. On 2 March the Duma and Soviet negotiators announced the formation of a Provisional Government that would govern Russia until a new governmental system could be created by a **Constituent Assembly**, to be elected by universal franchise. That same day, **Tsar Nicholas II**, yielding to the reality of events in Petrograd and elsewhere, and to the pressures from his army commanders, abdicated.

While in the first few days following the revolution there was a lot of confusion across the country about what happened in Petrograd, support for the revolution in Moscow and other cities soon followed. Ordinary people across Russia were involved in forming Soviets at every level of government: in villages, districts, cities, and provinces. Committees of soldiers sprang up in most military units. Workers set up committees, trade unions, armed bands, regional brotherhoods and other diverse cultural organizations. Congresses of peasants, of ethnic minorities, and of other population groups were convened. Many localities, regions, and former provinces declared their administrative autonomy. Democracy had apparently triumphed.

Yet, there was a disconcerting and festering divisiveness that came to the fore in the weeks and months following February 1917. The very spirit of the February Revolution revealed that apart from opposition to the old regime and the state itself, there was nothing holding Russia together. Democracy may have triumphed, but ‘democracy was almost universally understood to mean ‘the common people’ – and its opposite was not ‘dictatorship’ but the ‘bourgeoisie’ and the whole of privileged society.[[11]](#footnote-11) This antagonistic and hostile perception of all things ‘bourgeois’ was an important feature of class-consciousness in early 1917. In a general sense, ‘bourgeois’ came to be synonymous with anyone considered an enemy of the common people – a derogatory term, a virtual expletive.

Where educated classes spoke of civic rights and duties, ‘the masses’ took the view that what had taken place was a social revolution in which the old elites were to be the losers and themselves the winners. This was a crucial feature of the political divide that existed between the common people and the privileged class and it was to be a recurring theme in the public discourse throughout 1917. This was reflected in the many letters, appeals and petitions sent by workers, peasants and soldiers to local, regional and provincial, as well as national authorities – Provisional Government or the various Soviet bodies across the land. That workers, peasants and soldiers should call for the suppression of the bourgeoisie and base their arguments on the idea that this was to serve ‘democracy,’ illustrates how far socialist language of class-consciousness and class conflict had come to dominate the democratic discourse in 1917.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**April Days**

Distrust and discontent intensified as frustrations grew over the continuing economic disorder, most significantly, inflation and food shortage. During the war, peasants found less and less incentive to sell their grain: inflation rapidly eroded the value of rubles and as manufactured goods declined, so too did the goods peasants wanted to buy. The Provisional Government’s response was to proclaim a grain monopoly: all producers were to hand over their surplus grain at prices fixed by the government. The price the government offered for grain, even when doubled in August, failed to keep pace with inflation. With **inflation** out of control, recent agreements concluded between trade unions and employers rapidly became irrelevant as wage increases were then invalidated by rising prices.[[13]](#footnote-13) Then there were the hardships caused by a seemingly endless and clearly unsuccessful war, which became a lightning rod for growing disenchantment among the masses.

On occasion, the government was directly and dramatically confronted with popular frustrations in the form of Soviet opposition, but as the spring wore on, mass demonstrations, especially in the streets of the capital, became more frequent. A focal point of these upheavals was the government’s foreign policy, particularly its war policy. The Petrograd Soviet brought pressure upon the Provisional Government by issuing an ‘Appeal to All the Peoples of the World’ on 14 March that repudiated expansionist war aims in the name of ‘revolutionary defensism.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Thousands of war weary workers and soldiers came to view it as a significant first step toward ending hostilities. For, as one anonymous voice from the trenches remarked, “we have had enough bloodshed. We must end the war no matter what, and if they want an offensive, then we’ll mount an offensive against the capitalist and bourgeoisie that are drowning us and killing us and our freedom.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Soviet’s actions and public demand forced the government to respond rather reluctantly on 27 March with a ‘Declaration on War Aims,’ which rejected ‘annexations and indemnities’ as war aims but then asserted the need to observe treaty obligations with its allies.[[16]](#footnote-16) Pavel Miliukov, the Provisional Government’s Foreign Minister, was of the opinion that the revolution did not change Russia’s foreign policy interests, which required that Russia continue the war in close alliance with its allies. So great had been the protest of the Soviet and general public to Miliukov’s public support for the war effort that the government was forced to publish a statement of war aims in keeping with the Soviet’s position and to forward this declaration to its allies as official government policy.

At the same time, shortages of fuel, food and raw materials led manufacturers to cut output, lay off labour and begin to resist the more ambitious claims of factory committees. During March and April, workers who had from the start objected to the formation of a ‘bourgeois’ government began to attract new adherents. They were frustrated by the Provisional Government’s national policy – by the failure to secure peace, by the continuation of a highly authoritarian managerial culture, by grudging concessions to factory committees – but most of all, by the failure of the government to intervene effectively to protect and advance the interests of the people.[[17]](#footnote-17) This only served to alienate workers, peasants and soldiers further, which in turn led them to more radical solutions offered by those on the left.

The Bolshevik Party, much like other parties of the radical left, was ill defined, disorganized, and lacking strong leadership until the return of major political leaders, mostly from abroad. A Russian Bureau of the Bolshevik Central Committee operated under the leadership of Aleksandr Shliapnikov, but its impact on the strike movement in Russia was minimal. At the time of the February Revolution, they participated in the formation of the Petrograd Soviet, although the **Mensheviks** and **Socialist Revolutionaries** (SRs), it must be added, took the leading roles. The party’s membership was negligible – a result of wartime persecution by the authorities – and the party organization was fragmented, both geographically (there was little centralized coordination of the regional organizations) and politically (factionalism was rife).[[18]](#footnote-18) As Bolsheviks such as **Lev Kamenev** and **Joseph Stalin** returned from internal exile in Siberia, they found ways to cooperate with the Mensheviks and to offer combined pressure on the Provisional Government. Reunification was widely expected.

This was not a foregone conclusion however, as Shliapnikov and others felt that Kamenev and Stalin were altogether too pro-Menshevik. Many Bolsheviks were aghast at a policy of ‘conditional support’ for the Provisional Government – and Bolsheviks of such a type were bound to increase in number as the ineffectualness of the Provisional government in tackling problems became more noticeable. Into this fluid situation arrived **Vladimir Lenin** on 3 April 1917 having been long in exile and anxious to convince his party comrades that the moderate course they had taken in relation to the Provisional Government was mistaken. After his welcome home, by now a ritual in revolutionary Russia for returning exiles, Lenin read his ‘**April Theses**’ to Bolshevik delegates of the All-Russian Conference of Soviet Worker and Soldier Deputies.[[19]](#footnote-19) In doing so, he repudiated previous Bolshevik policies only recently affirmed by Kamenev and Stalin.

Lenin’s ‘April Theses’ shocked even Bolsheviks with their dramatic call for revolution against the ‘bourgeois’ Provisional Government, political power to the soviets, an end to the war, nationalization of land and distribution of it to peasants, and control of industry by workers’ councils.[[20]](#footnote-20) Many listeners thought that Lenin, having been away for so long, had simply fallen out of touch with political reality.

When Lenin presented his *Theses* to a joint session of Social Democrats – Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and independents – the next day, Boris Bagdanov called them “the ravings of a mad man.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The *Theses* were published in Lenin’s name alone, the editors of ***Pravda***, Kamenev and Stalin, thought it necessary to emphasize Lenin’s isolation and their independence of him, calling Lenin’s program ‘unacceptable.’ Yet, in spite of this inauspicious beginning, Lenin was able to win a large portion of the party to his side in an incredibly short time. How and why did this happen?

It may seem improbable, but the magnitude of Lenin’s persona was a powerful influence on members of his own party. He had been, after all, the exclusive, sole and unchallenged head of the party since its inception. As Sukhanov remarked, Lenin was “an extraordinary phenomenon,” “narrow-minded” and “within a certain realm of ideas – a few fixed ideas - Lenin displayed such amazing force, such super-human power of attack that his colossal influence […] was secure.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Viewed in this way, his victory over ‘old’ Marxist Bolsheviks, like Kamenev, was due to his virtual unrivaled status within the party, for no other political party had been as closely tied to the personality of a single man. Such an analysis, while prophetic and true, does not alone fully explain Lenin’s success in compelling Bolsheviks to accept his ideas in their entirety.

The influx of new members to the Bolshevik Party, particularly at the local level, was a significant factor in legitimizing Lenin’s programme. Already in April, the Bolshevik Party in Petrograd numbered sixteen thousand members, compared with the only two thousand registered in February. By late June, the party had thirty-two thousand members. It experienced similar growth in other large cities and among soldiers. Party membership grew as factory workers and soldiers, who, knowing next to nothing of **Marxism**, were united by an overwhelming desire for revolutionary action.[[23]](#footnote-23) Even more important than the growing membership or the shift in opinions within the party was evidence that rapidly increasing numbers of lower-class Russians found Bolshevik arguments appealing, especially the demand to replace the ‘bourgeois’ Provisional Government with some sort of ‘democratic’ soviet power and to end the war. Controversial as it was in April 1917, the program of the ‘April Theses’ made the Bolshevik party a political refuge for Russians disillusioned with the Provisional Government.[[24]](#footnote-24)

It helped that on 20 April, the newspapers published the text of a diplomatic note concerning the Provisional Government’s war policy that Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov had sent to the allies two days before. The note assured the allies that the Provisional Government’s Declaration on War Aims to Russian citizens on 27 March did not mean that Russia was no longer committed to the war. “Quite the contrary,” remarked Miliukov, ‘the aspirations of the entire nation to carry the world war to a decisive victory has grown more powerful.” The contents of the note clearly contradicted the foreign policy on which the Petrograd Soviet had been insisting: in the short term, acceptance of the war only in the interests of defending the revolution against German militarism; in the long term, ‘peace without annexations or indemnities’ and the principle of ‘self-determination of peoples.’ The note also seemed to contradict the government’s own ‘Declaration on War Aims’ of 27 March.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Mass demonstrations and clashes on the streets of Petrograd forced both Miliukov and the War Minister, Aleksandr Guchkov, to resign. The Provisional Government thereupon invited the Petrograd Soviet to help form a coalition government consisting of socialist and non-socialist leaders, an invitation that the Soviet Executive Committee accepted with some reservations. Meanwhile, in light of these developments, Lenin succeeded, at the Bolshevik conference held at the end of April, with help from the militant rank and file and against the instincts of more moderate party leaders, in having adopted as party policy the radical critique and programme he had drawn up in his ‘April Theses.’

**A Summer of Discontent**

After the first government crisis over Miliukov’s secret note, **Alexander Kerensky** was appointed the Minister of War and became the dominant figure in the newly formed socialist-liberal coalition. Kerensky was certainly well placed to take advantage of the political situation following the February Revolution. As a member of the Duma Committee and Petrograd Soviet, he was one of the revolution’s most prominent leaders. Kerensky enjoyed enormous popularity within the country. A defense lawyer at political trials in the years preceding February, he was famous enough for his face to be instantly recognized in public, his picture appearing often in newspapers and journals. Something that could not be said of most revolutionary leaders in 1917 - Lenin included.

Kerensky, in some measure, viewed himself above ‘the people,’ undoubtedly a result of the constant adulation he received, which in turn, gave him a false confidence in his own impressions and policies. To raise the morale of the troops he went on a tour of the front during May. His impassioned speeches, impressive as they were, did not however have a lasting effect. Under Allied pressure to continue the war, he launched a June offensive– the Kerensky offensive – against the Austro-Hungarian and German Armies on 17 June. At first successful, the offensive was soon halted and then thrown back by a strong counter-attack. The Russian army suffered heavy losses and it was clear from the many incidents of desertion, sabotage and mutiny that the army was no longer willing to continue the offensive.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Widespread mass mutiny broke out on the Front while anger with the government was as intense in the garrisons behind the lines, and nowhere was hostility greater than among soldiers in the capital. Particularly militant was the St. Petersburg Machine-Gun Regiment. Proud of their part in the February Revolution and determined not to be sent to the Front, they were in the vanguard of demands that an all-socialist government drawn from the soviets should replace the liberal-socialist coalition. Their views were often published in *Soldatskaya Pravda*, a Bolshevik daily and organ of the Military Organization of the Central Committee. In a letter published 2 July ‘K. K.’, a soldier in 2nd company, declared:

All the talking’s being done by the educated and rich, who are yelling about war until total victory. But when I ask them why they don’t go to the Front, if they need a war so much, and why *I*, not *they*, should sacrifice my life, they yell at me, ‘You’re one of Lenin’s lot; who should be locked up.’ I’m not a Leninist and I don’t know Lenin; I’m just expressing my opinion. Comrades! Don’t forget the 27th and 28th February, when we went to get our longed-for freedom! Now we’ve got it, are we really going to hand it over to our enemies, the bourgeois?[[27]](#footnote-27)

During the first days of July, unrest intensified in the capital and at **Kronstadt**, fuelled further as news reached Petrograd of the scale of the dilemma. Activists within the party, and especially members of its Military Organization, were encouraging open and armed anti-government demonstrations and demands that non-socialist ministers resign. The party’s leaders were much more cautious, afraid that a full-blown confrontation might prove premature and serve to strengthen the position of the government. Speaking to the All-Russian Conference of Bolshevik Military Organizations on 20 June, Lenin stressed the need to delay a much talked about armed uprising. “We must be especially attentive and careful, so as not to be drawn into a provocation,” he said. “If we were not able to seize power, it is naïve to think that having taken it we would be able to hold it.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

On the other hand, the Central Committee did not want to lose face with the more radical elements of the revolutionary movement – Kronstadt sailors, soldiers of the Petrograd garrison, and Petrograd workers – a risk made all the greater by the huge scale of demonstrations on 3-4 July. In the early evening, workers from several factories and soldiers of the First Machine Gun Regiment, encouraged by **anarchists**, Left SR, and Bolshevik activists, took to the streets chanting ‘All Power to the Soviets’ and other radical slogans. By midnight, tens of thousands of workers and soldiers had assembled at the Tauride Palace, Soviet headquarters, where they angrily demanded the transfer of all power to the Soviet. The Menshevik and SR dominated Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets refused.

On the night of 3 July, in light of the massive demonstrations and demands from their supporters for action, the Bolshevik’s Military Organization announced that it was ready to support and lead the demonstrations for Soviet power. Early the next morning, the Bolshevik Central Committee with the support of Kamenev, Grigorii Zinoviev and Leon Trotsky (without Lenin, who was not present, but in Finland), announced a similar willingness to lead ‘a peaceful demonstration’ in support of an all-socialist government based on the Soviet.[[29]](#footnote-29) Too little, too late as it were, to bring any real effective leadership to the cause, yet given the toxic mixture of popular discontent and political agitation, it would have been difficult to quell the violence of the July uprising. These were not the same crowds that had brought on the February Revolution, at the very least in temperament if not persona.

Violence, unrestrained and riotous, was a significant feature of the July uprising in 1917, as it was throughout that year, a portent of imminent dissension. Ominous were the observations of J. Butler Wright, an American diplomat, who said that the crowd “composed of half-drunken sailors, mutinous soldiers and armed civilians – paraded through our street, threatening people at windows, and drinking openly from bottles.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Similarly, the prominent Marxist intellectual and revolutionary, Anatoly Lunacharsky, remarked of the “hooligans, provocateurs, anarchists and desperate people [that] turned the demonstration into something largely absurd and chaotic.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Physical violence increased as the year progressed, the result of growing frustration with the pace of government reform, as much as it was a reflection of class conflict and the radicalization of diverse elements of society, if arbitrary in its aims.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Four hundred people were killed in random shootings, wild firing by armed workers’ bands, soldiers and sailors and clashes between army units opposing and supporting both the government and Soviet leaders.[[33]](#footnote-33) Maxim Gorky, the Russian writer and editor of *Novaia Zhin’*, deplored the violence, and like so many commentators then and thereafter was unable to adequately explain it:

And it is clear that this frightening sortie into the ‘social revolution’ was undertaken by somebody hastily, unthinkingly, and that stupidity is the name of the force that pushed people, armed to the teeth, into the streets. […]It was clear that these people did not believe in their strength and it is very unlikely that they understood why they had gone into the street with weapons. […]I do not intend to justify adventurers, I detest and abhor people who arouse the dark instincts of the masses. […][[34]](#footnote-34)

The Provisional Government set up an investigation into the role of the Bolsheviks and their allies in the July demonstrations. The investigation underlined the steps taken by Bolshevik activists to involve workers and sailors from Kronstadt, the open encouragement of Lenin, Lunacharsky, and other leaders, and it concluded that the Bolsheviks’ Central Committee had orchestrated the ‘armed uprising’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Too much focus on the Bolsheviks’ role in fomenting the demonstrations distorted interpretations of the **July Days**. It allowed the Provisional Government and even some socialists on the Soviet to avoid coming to grips with the genuineness of popular discontent. So while the July uprising appeared to have destroyed Bolshevism, this was but a superficial and temporary setback for the party, and parties of the radical left more generally. Kerensky made sure of that. “Recuperating from the rout themselves, the masses poured life and vigor into the Bolshevik Party,” Sukhanov admitted. “They grew together with it: it grew together with them.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The **July Days** did not end the revolution’s summer of discontent. On the one hand, the propertied classes’ fears of chaos and disorder from below seemed to have been realized. On the other, the Provisional Government, now led by Kerensky and galvanized into action against the Bolsheviks, seemed less likely than ever to alleviate economic distress and social resentment among lower classes. While factory management frequently responded to rising costs and loss of control over workers by curtailing or even shutting down operations, workers increasingly resorted to strikes, physical attacks against foremen, and occupations of factory grounds. Crime and acts of violence rose dramatically as unruly bands of armed deserters roamed through streets, railroad stations, and across the countryside. In the countryside, peasant land seizures went unpunished. As class polarization became more manifest and conspiracy theories proliferated, the whole country continued to fall apart.

These, then, were the circumstances in which **Lavr Kornilov**, appointed Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces on 18 July, appeared as a savior to many who longed for an end to the chaos of revolution. Those who supported Kornilov had reason to believe Kerensky favoured their hardline intentions. Indeed, Kornilov and Kerensky shared concerns of the growing signs of social disintegration and the rising popularity of the radical left, and both agreed on the need for ‘order.’ They meant different things by that, however, and did not really trust each other. In part, misunderstanding arose from the machinations of the self-appointed go-between V. N. L’vov, a member of the Provisional Government until late July.[[37]](#footnote-37) Kornilov appears to have believed that Kerensky shared his view, of the need to crush left-wing agitation by force both on the Front and the Home Front, and had approved his plans for the imposition of martial law. At the last moment, however, Kerensky denounced Kornilov for treason and sought to re-establish his leftist credentials by projecting himself as the savior of the revolution. Infuriated by Kerensky’s betrayal and by the charge of treason, Kornilov ordered General Krymov to lead the ‘Savage Division’ and the Cossack Third Cavalry Corps on an assault of Petrograd.

Kerensky was rescued by the very Soviet, workers and soldiers he had intended to move against. In Petrograd, the left frantically mobilized, with the Soviet setting up a special Committee for Struggle Against the Counter-Revolution. The committee represented a united front of the whole Soviet movement – Menshevik, SR and Bolshevik representatives included - the widening rifts of the left having been put aside in defence of the capital. Although it was dependent foremost on the military organization of the Bolsheviks without which, says Sukhanov, “it could only have passed the time with makeshift proclamations and flabby speeches by orators who had long lost all authority.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The key defenders were armed workers self-organized into **Red Guards**, elements of the Petrograd garrison, and railroad workers who halted trains carrying Kornilov’s troops while they were en route to the capital. His attack quickly collapsed when soldiers were told by Soviet delegates they were being used for a counter-revolution. So too did the government, ushering in nearly a month of renewed government crisis.

**Getting Organized**

While the Kornilov affair threw the Provisional Government into disarray, the Bolsheviks enjoyed a revival in popular support. Although he remained prime minister, Kerensky’s efforts failed to restore the Provisional Government. Both the left and the right accused him of having been involved in the conspiracy and then having betrayed his co-conspirator. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, kept gaining in popularity, both by blaming economic hardship and social disorder, which continued to deepen, on a ‘bourgeois’ government and by promising an end to war, the distribution of all land to the peasantry and worker control of factories. Other far-left activists also gained ground and by September a far-left multiparty bloc was winning majorities or big pluralities in city soviets, trade unions, factory committees, and other elections across Russia.

Especially important to the Bolshevik cause was the capture of the main bastion of revolutionary authority, the **Petrograd Soviet**. On 31 August a Bolshevik-sponsored resolution passed in the Petrograd Soviet for the first time. In response the Revolutionary Defensists put their leadership to a vote of confidence on 9 September and lost. On 25 September the Soviet elected a new radical left leadership. Leon Trotsky, who had joined the Bolsheviks in July and quickly became one of its most prominent leaders, became chairman of the Soviet. Simultaneously the Bolsheviks took over the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, thereby giving them control of the two most important soviets. Victories in other cities accompanied this as the radical left bloc – and sometimes the Bolsheviks alone – won election campaigns in factories and barracks and took over control of soviet after soviet.[[39]](#footnote-39)

That the Bolsheviks and their allies gained control through elections bears emphasizing, for they could reasonably claim at this time to speak on behalf of ‘Soviet democracy,’ the worker and soldier masses of the urban soviets and their demand for Soviet power. Soviet power, however, was an ambiguous slogan, meaning different things to different peoples, especially when it came to forming a government. For most it meant the Soviet in some way taking power and replacing the current ‘coalition’ government (one including non-socialists) with a new multi-party all-socialist government. One that would include besides the soviets, the representatives of other worker, peasant and even lower-middle class organizations such as cooperatives, democratically elected city councils, peasant organizations, and other such organizations. Thus, the slogan ‘**All Power to the Soviets**’ became a useful banner for both the masses and the Bolsheviks, one desiring a change in government and the other seeking to claim it.

In September, from Finland, Lenin bombarded the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd with a series of letters urging his colleagues to organize the overthrow of the Provisional Government. “The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies of both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands,” he remarked. Moreover, he argued, “the present task must be an *armed uprising*…It would be naïve to wait for a ‘formal’ majority for the Bolsheviks. No revolution ever waits for *that*.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Nonetheless, Bolshevik leaders were divided and most of the more influential, Kamenev and **Grigorii Zinoviev**, for example, were opposed, focusing instead on the upcoming Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Lenin may have been adamant, but he had no fixed plan.

Returning to the capital on 10 October, Lenin convened a meeting of the Central Committee, and was able to force through a resolution calling for the immediate overthrow and dissolution of the Provisional Government, though of the twenty-one members only twelve were present.[[41]](#footnote-41) Kamenev and Zinoviev dissented and later denounced Lenin’s calls for an insurrection in Gorky’s paper, *Novaia Zhizn*, although they maintained the public line that the leadership had made no decision on the matter. This provoked a vigorous public debate that threatened Bolshevik hegemony and forced a postponement in the Congress of Soviets that was to commence on 20 October, delayed until the 25th. Yet, while the party had formally decided to attempt the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the organized force at its disposal was very limited. In the days to follow, however, the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd, chief among them, Trotsky, adapted their tactics to maximize popular support.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Trotsky and a few other radically inclined Petrograd party leaders were attracted to the idea of an early socialist revolution in Russia, but skeptical about whether workers and soldiers could be mobilized for the kind of ‘armed uprising’ demanded by Lenin. Many were forced to conclude that the party was technically unprepared to initiate an immediate uprising and, in any case, that most workers, soldiers and sailors would probably not be responsive to an uprising before the Congress of Soviets. Furthermore, they were forced to recognize that by usurping the prerogatives of the national Congress of Soviets, they would likely jeopardize possibilities for collaboration with such important allies as the Left SRs. They might even risk the support of such mass organizations as trade unions, factory committees and the Petrograd Soviet.

Consequently, Trotsky pursued a strategy based on the following principles – that the soviets (because of their stature in the eye of the masses), and not party bodies, should be employed for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. That for the broadest possible support, any attack on the government should be limited to actions that could be justified in terms of defending the soviets and that any actions should be delayed until a suitable excuse for giving battle presented itself. To undercut potential resistance and maximize the possibility of success, every opportunity should be utilized to subvert the authority of the Provisional Government peacefully. Finally, that the formal removal of the existing government should be linked with and legitimized by the decisions of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

The uprising was to appear defensive, it was to be led by and clearly identified with the Petrograd Soviet more than the party, and it was to coincide with the convening of and receive immediate legitimization from the Congress of Soviets, due on 25 October. A key organization of this plan was the **Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC)**, which had been established on 9 October to co-ordinate measures against a possible right-wing putsch. As in the Soviet, Bolsheviks now dominated the MRC, its membership overlapping with that of the party’s Central Committee, which was in direct contact with it, and both operating in the same building as the Soviet - the Smolny Institute.

At the same time, the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region was held (on the initiative of the Bolshevik party) in Petrograd 11-13 October. Trotsky, in attendance, aligned MRCs in other parts of the northern region to the Petrograd MRC, so that the capital and its approaches might be defended from a German attack (a genuine possibility), and more importantly, from the threat of ‘counter-revolutionary’ forces. Lenin, on the other hand, in absentia, sent two letters of the view that the Congress was to plan and launch an armed insurrection against Petrograd.[[43]](#footnote-43) Trotsky’s adroit handling of the MRC and the Congress of Soviets, his adept understanding of the military situation and the prevailing mood were keys to the eventual Bolshevik seizure of power.

When Kerensky announced his plans to transfer the bulk of the Petrograd garrison to the Northern Front, hoping the break-up of the garrison would give rise to a badly planned (and expected) Bolshevik uprising, soldiers of the garrison refused to obey orders and switched their allegiance to the MRC. Resolutions passed at an MRC-sponsored garrison conference on 21 October promised full support to the MRC and the Petrograd Soviet and called for the Congress of Soviets to take power. The Provisional Government had effectively lost military control of the capital.

**The October Revolution**

On the morning of 24 October, the Kerensky government gave the Bolsheviks the excuse they required to commence their insurrection by sending a cadre of military cadets to seize the press and editorial offices of the newspaper, *Pravda*. Such a minor repressive measure by the government could hardly stop the ever-rising demand for Soviet power, but it could provide the very ‘counter-revolutionary’ action for which the Bolsheviks had been waiting. Soviet leaders then declared that ‘counter-revolution’ had indeed reared its head and called on the MRC, largely the same forces mustered during the attempted Kornilov coup, to organize a defense of the Soviet and the revolution. Kerensky was unable to mobilize any significant armed force and key positions were rapidly taken over by supporters of Soviet power. The pro-Soviet forces had greater numbers, morale and determination – nobody wanted to die for the Provisional Government – and by midnight they controlled most of the city. Such operations transpired with very little shooting and as one observer noted, “rather resembled a changing of the guard.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

It is worth stressing, however, that despite efforts in October by the Bolshevik Central Committee leadership in assessing their base of support, they appear to have underestimated the size, determination and potential of armed workers’ militias, and particularly the **Red Guards**.[[45]](#footnote-45) Although one needs to be careful not to overstate the effect of the workers’ involvement in this ‘seizure of power,’ since the attitude of the troops was essential, these militias evidently played a significant role. John Reed, an American journalist noted in his first-hand account of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, that the composition of a significant number “was interesting, for in command of the troops was invariably a Red Guard.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The mobilization of the Red Guard and its share in the confused struggle for control of key points of the city on 24-25 October seems to have come mostly from local initiative, from individual units or from factory or district leaders reacting to news and events and not from the MRC or Bolshevik leadership at Smolny.

The makeshift nature of the forces and a haphazard direction from Smolny is reflected in the late arrival of Bolshevik leaders to party headquarters on the evening of the 24th. Lenin, who had been in hiding the past few days on the edge of the city and did not have much influence on events of the 24th, on hearing rumours of a possible ‘counter-revolution’, made his way to Smolny shortly after midnight. Reed, present for Trotsky’s arrival earlier, described the confusion that set in when he tried to enter Smolny. Soldiers guarding the entrance were unfamiliar with Trotsky. “I’ve heard that name somewhere,” one said quizzically. “I guess it’s all right. You can go in comrade.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Similarly, P. D. Mal’kov, a Bolshevik and former sailor, who served the MRC, explains his reaction upon arriving at Smolny when he learned that pro-government cadets had taken the telephone exchange.

I left some fifteen sailors to guard the Smolny and set off with the rest to get the telephone exchange back. But how was I going to get there? […] We saw a tram coming. We stopped it, made the passengers get off and the lads got on. […] I sat next to the tram-driver and said ‘Take us to the Peter and Paul Fortress, you!’ […] We got to the fortress, got hold of a cannon, hitched it onto the tram and moved off to Pochtovaya Street, where the telephone exchange was. […] We aimed it at the exchange and shouted to the cadets, ‘Surrender or we’ll open fire right now!’ They put out a white flag.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Mal’kov’s heroic efforts aside, this episode revealed a particularly irresponsible and negligent character in the military operations organized by the Bolsheviks. It was, as Sukhanov said, “only permissible *when confronting this particular adversary*.”[[49]](#footnote-49) There was no attempt made by Kerensky, nor supporters of the Provisional Government to seize control of the Smolny, or to reinforce the defence of the city. Not in the first half of October, when such measures stood at least some chance of success, nor in the latter half as events unraveled as they did in an earnest yet aimless fashion.

As the armed struggle for control of Petrograd drew to a close on 25 October, the character of events changed as the emphasis shifted to developments in the political arena at the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets. Around mid-morning on 25 October, Lenin wrote a proclamation declaring the Provisional Government overthrown, which was quickly printed and distributed throughout the city. Lenin, had against all logic, achieved his goal of an armed seizure of power before the Congress opening. This was achieved not because he had planned it or that it had been a well-organized insurrection in the name of Bolshevik power. He realized it as a result of Kerensky’s ill-considered actions and because a large contingent of workers and soldiers fought on behalf of protecting the Soviet. Transferring a seizure of power in the name of Soviet power into a Bolshevik regime, as he intended, depended on defining what ‘Soviet power’ meant now that it was a reality.

On the evening 25 October, hardly had the sound of gunfire and cannons ricocheting across the city given way, when an equally stormy session of the Congress of Soviets had begun. The Bolsheviks, although the largest party, were reliant on Left SRs and other radicals to form a majority. Menshevik and SRs, however, rejected the ‘military conspiracy’ propagated by a small circle of Bolshevik leaders in the name of the Soviet. Iuli Martov, the Menshevik leader, made a stirring speech on behalf of all those opposed to the Bolsheviks, calling for a peaceable settlement to the crisis at hand and a government made up of revolutionary democrats.[[50]](#footnote-50) Trotsky replied to Martov’s appeals, admonishing him and the Mensheviks. At that, Martov, rather surprisingly, led Menshevik and SR delegates out of the Soviet. This left the Bolsheviks with an absolute majority and in full control of the Congress, which declared the Provisional Government overthrown.

The Bolsheviks moved quickly to consolidate power. At the second session of the Congress of Soviets on 26 October, they passed a Decree on Land that distributed land to peasants and a Decree on Peace announcing their willingness to enter into immediate negotiations with the Central Powers. A third decree announced the new government, the Council of People’s Commissars (**Sovnarkom**), headed by Lenin. Interestingly, this decree, written by Lenin, declared it a ‘provisional workers’ and peasants’ government.’[[51]](#footnote-51) This is worth noting, for the new government was but a continuation of a series of provisional governments that Russia had seen in 1917 – that is, until a democratically elected Constituent Assembly was to be established. Nevertheless, these decrees were important in strengthening mass support.

The Bolsheviks, however, were also quick to demonize anybody who challenged their claims to power and resisted their policies. The first law issued by the Sovnarkom was a decree instituting and justifying censorship of the press. It provoked intense debate within the Bolshevik Party and between the party and other socialist parties. This was important not only for the immediate issue, but because it was an early posing of the question of how open the new regime would be to conflicting viewpoints and how ready to resort to repressive measures against opposing ideas the regime would become. The proponents of censorship justified it on various grounds, ranging from immediate threats to the regime (Trotsky) to more ideological arguments about weakening ‘capitalists’ and the creation of a new order (Lenin).[[52]](#footnote-52) It also marked the beginning of press control in Soviet Russia.

Meanwhile, Bolsheviks in a number of cities – Moscow, most importantly – were unprepared and faced a more spirited and effective opposition. Fierce fighting occurred there, particularly near the **Kremlin**, and while the number of deaths was never formally established with any precision, it clearly ran into the hundreds.[[53]](#footnote-53) While the Bolsheviks controlled the workers’ soviet, this was not the case in regard to the soldiers’ soviet. In fact, there was a lot of dithering by regiments there. “One garrison regiment,’ remarked John Reed, “badly demoralized by long inactivity,” was approached by both pro-government and pro-soviet forces.[[54]](#footnote-54) Even in towns and cities where Soviet power had already been or soon would be proclaimed, local soviets were by no means automatically willing to accept instructions from Petrograd.

By about 2 November, the date of the victory in Moscow, the Bolsheviks had managed to secure – how secure remained uncertain – a belt of territory across north-central European Russia, reaching from the Western and Northern Fronts in the west to the Volga and Ural Mountains in the east. In still other regions, the Bolsheviks had to engage in a more prolonged struggle. Regions, provinces, or cities with a staunch revolutionary tradition, like Saratov, quickly embraced the new regime. Places with a more deeply entrenched civil society and middle class, like Viatka, resisted longer.[[55]](#footnote-55) Localities dominated by the agricultural economy, like Perm, also resisted but in favour of the traditional pro-peasant party, the Socialist-Revolutionaries. Over the next several months, support for the Bolsheviks often waned. This was a significant issue for the government, one increasingly resolved by violence, intimidation, and electoral fraud.

In brief, across Russia, it was widely assumed that the new government was another temporary one, soon to be replaced, finally, by a legitimate one established via a democratically elected Constituent Assembly. Nor was there any reason at the time of the elections, set for 12 November 1917, to think that the new Bolshevik government would not go ahead with them, convene the assembly and accept its authority. After all, the Bolsheviks had been among the loudest in their demands for the convening of the Assembly and had criticized the Provisional Government for failing to hold the elections promptly, even charging it with delaying the elections for the assembly in order to thwart the people’s right to express their will. Later, in announcing the formation and composition of the new government, the Bolsheviks dominated Congress of Soviets, declared that ‘the Council of People’s Commissars’ would ‘govern the country until the Constituent Assembly [was] convened.’[[56]](#footnote-56) Additionally, many of the early decrees of the new government specified that they were to be in force until the Constituent Assembly had acted on the matter. Lenin did allow the elections to go ahead, reluctantly.

Until then, the Bolsheviks had evaded demands to share power. This had not, obviously, been the expectation of most advocates – indeed – most supporters of Soviet power, who assumed a broad coalition of socialist parties, would replace the failed Provisional Government. There was, during the interregnum period between the October Revolution and the convening of the assembly on 5 January 1918, a relative lack of open resistance to the new Bolshevik government. Perhaps this explains why few people of varied political views felt little need to resist the new government, for it was ‘temporary.’ Regardless, the Bolsheviks were able to consolidate their toehold on power, even if it lacked an organized and reliable armed force, or found it difficult to run a government in the face of the civil service’s open resistance. They managed to do so without reaching out to their socialist brethren, save the radical Left-SRs, who joined their coalition on 10 December.

At the time, Lenin (and Trotsky, for that matter) was clearly reluctant to co-operate with other members of the left-bloc. He had demonstrated that even within his own party, he possessed an instinctive distrust of others to make a revolution. In considering the Bolsheviks’ October ‘seizure’ of power, even in all its organizational awkwardness, almost arbitrary machinations, more than anything, it allowed Lenin to consolidate his hold on the leadership of the Bolshevik party. Had Lenin not been able to force a Bolshevik seizure of power and more significantly, had the Menshevik and SR delegates to the Congress of Soviets not walked out in defiance of that seizure, it’s quite possible Lenin’s leadership within the party might have been marginalized. Kamenev, advocating a Soviet government based on a socialist coalition, may well have superseded Lenin’s role within the party.

Lenin, however, had not returned to Russia on a fact-finding mission to learn the intricacies of the politics central to Russia’s disorder in 1917. He had come to impose his will and ultimately, his view upon reality, to make that reality conform to a theory. Was Lenin’s theory a cause of Bolshevik success? Indeed, it was his role to provide a cohesive theoretical justification for Soviet power and to inspire his supporters with the confidence to smash old state structures and to rely exclusively on the Soviet form as the only one appropriate to save Russia from ruin. Yet, a stranger, more complex story emerges when one assesses his writings, his actions, the course of events and the mass popularity and recruitment of the Bolshevik Party in 1917. Despite the revolution he made, the visions its complex hierarchy of objectives generated and the strategies he adopted in order to implement his vision, Lenin was at the mercy of great social forces as much as any leader in 1917. For differing reasons historians and political commentators have found it convenient to assume that the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917 ready and armed with a well articulated theory of legitimacy which had the dictatorship at its core, but in reality there remained an element of ambiguity in Lenin’s position with regard to the goals of the revolution.[[57]](#footnote-57) More fittingly, then, and as events were to unfold, Lenin and his supporters were willing to ditch any procedure in the service of the cause.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly in November had shown the SRs, not the Bolsheviks, to be the most popular party. Overall, the Bolsheviks received only about a quarter of the vote, while about half went to the SRs (in their various manifestations) and the rest to other opponents of the Bolsheviks. Once it became clear that the Bolsheviks and their Left SR allies would be heavily outnumbered, Lenin and the leadership of the Central Executive Committee began to downgrade the assembly.[[58]](#footnote-58) He insisted that it must come to terms with the reality of Soviet power. Soviet power was, in fact, here to stay. So, the Constituent Assembly opened ever so briefly on 5 January 1918 in the Tauride Palace, electing the SR leader, Victor Chernov, as its chairman. Make no mistake, during its brief sitting the assembly repudiated the old order and confirmed the leftward current prevailing in Russia at that time.[[59]](#footnote-59) Regardless, Bolshevik delegates staged a walkout in protest, followed early the next morning by the palace ‘guard’ shutting down the assembly. Lenin, committed as he was not just to radical socialist restructuring, but to his own particular version of it, was not willing to relinquish power.

**Popular Opposition and the Bolshevik Response**

The Bolsheviks were at this time an embattled minority. Most of their leaders – and most educated elites – doubted they could hang on to power. They were eager to build socialism but exerted almost no influence in the countryside where peasants were busily seizing land or on the periphery where entire regions and former provinces, like Ukraine, Poland and Finland, had moved toward independence. The critical issue, however, remained the problem that had bedeviled the Provisional Government and the Tsarist regime before it – food shortages and grain requisitioning. The loss of the Ukraine to the Germans, confirmed by the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** in March 1918, greatly exacerbated the problem and confronted urban areas and grain-short provinces already suffering from inadequate supplies of food with the specter of starvation.

From its outset, hunger haunted the new regime. Almost immediately after fighting in Petrograd had subsided the desperate search for food began. The American journalist John Reed observed:

Expeditions of sailors, heavily armed, were sent out in groups of five thousand, to the South, to Siberia, with roving commissions to capture cities still held by White Guards, establish order, and *get food*. Passenger traffic on the Trans-Siberian Railroad was suspended for two weeks, while thirteen trains, loaded with bolts of cloth and bars of iron assembled by the Factory-Shop Committees, were sent out eastward, each in charge of a Commissar, to barter with the Siberian peasants for grain and potatoes.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Food brigades from Petrograd, Kharkov, Moscow and other industrial centres roamed the countryside search for goods and foodstuff, often bypassing northern and central grain deficient zones for more abundant regions, as in Viatka’s southern breadbasket region. These brigades resorted to base economics and violence and quickly gained notoriety for their hooliganism, alcoholism, as well as other disreputable acts, stealing goods from villagers and arresting peasants who offered no resistance. Requisitions of this sort violated peasants’ sense of justice and they responded in a number of ways, passively at first: they petitioned the administration, hid grain, refused to bring it to collection points, and complained to the authorities about food brigades.[[61]](#footnote-61)

This led to a further breakdown in the food supply system beginning in early 1918, which led to the Bolshevik decree establishing a ‘**food dictatorship**’ on 13 May 1918. According to this ruling, anyone who failed to surrender “any surplus of grain” or used grain reserves “for their own home brew” was to be considered an “enemy of the nation.” These infractions were punishable with “jail not less than ten years,” their belongings confiscated and faced possible banishment from their communities.[[62]](#footnote-62) The intensity with which the new regime hurled down threats of dire punishment reflected its lack of inhibition in using force against ‘class enemies.’ It reflected, too, the Bolsheviks’ frustration at being unable to stamp out the black market, which continued to supply much of the food that did find its way to the cities.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The government tried to strengthen its hand in mobilizing poorer peasants against richer villagers (pejoratively dubbed ‘**kulaks’** – exploiters) assumed to be hoarding grain, establishing Committees of the Rural Poor (Kombedy), instituted on 11 June 1918.[[64]](#footnote-64) The Kombedy proved a disastrous experiment. Lenin and the leadership had grossly underestimated the resurgence of the village commune during the revolution in the countryside, and the way in which villages seizing privately owned land had subdivided it among households, thereby reinforcing the leveling of land distribution.[[65]](#footnote-65) Although the Kombedy were gradually phased out, they alienated most villagers nonetheless and the food supply situation became increasingly grim. In spite of this, Lenin remained convinced grain requisitioning was in line with the flow of his revolutionary trajectory.

The transition from capitalism to socialism required a period of ‘birth-pangs,’ one that could not be brought about without violence and the dictatorial methods of a new kind of state. He had begun to regard what would later be coined ‘**War Communism**,’ a bundle of policies the regime adopted to deal with a widening economic and military crisis, of which grain requisitioning was but one program. Rationing, wholesale nationalization of industry, attempts at strict labour discipline and increasing reliance on direct barter rather than money, were also steps in this transition, as he saw it, from capitalism to socialism. The state would have to organize the masses, to reorganize the economy along socialist lines.

In *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, Lenin outlined his vision of how this transition would take place. In it he acknowledged that coercion would be necessary, suggesting that there was “no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers. At the same time,” he argued, “in working to raise the productivity of labour, we must take into account the specific features of the transition period from capitalism to socialism, which, […] require that the foundations be laid of the socialist organization of competition, and, […] require the use of compulsion, so that the slogan of dictatorship of the proletariat shall not be desecrated by the practice of a lily-livered proletarian government.”[[66]](#footnote-66) On 26 April the Central Committee unanimously approved this basic outline, it was then published in *Izvestiia* and *Pravda* on 28 April to bolster Bolshevik supporters.

Not only were Russia’s peasantry in opposition to the new regime, but so too were industrial workers, who in the fall, along with soldiers, had been the Bolsheviks’ strongest supporters. It will be recalled that factory committees and trade unions had provided one of the main sources of Bolshevik strength during that time. Once in power, however, the Bolsheviks found little use for these organizations. At the First Congress of Trade Unions held in Petrograd in January 1918, Zinoviev explained their uselessness and that essentially, from the Bolshevik perspective at least, socialism did not include indiscriminate freedom of speech or assembly:

We have overthrown the power of the bourgeoisie, and at the moment when the working class together with the poorest peasantry has achieved the transfer of power to the working class, when your unions have become an element of government, what is the substantive meaning of their independence right now? […]We have never used the name of the revolution to propose granting the freedom to strike and the freedom to sabotage to those gentlemen who support the bourgeoisie.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Mounting unrest as well as disillusionment among workers beset by an industrial collapse and desperate food shortages ensured a dramatic decline in the Bolsheviks popularity. This growing mood of disenchantment and the feeling that they could not obtain redress from existing institutions, firmly in Bolshevik hands, prompted the Petrograd workers to create new institutions independent of the Bolsheviks and the bodies (soviets, trade unions, factory committees), which they controlled.

In the spring massive worker assemblies were held at the Putilov and Obukhov plants, whereby resolutions for the unification of all ‘socialist and democratic forces’ and fresh elections to the Constituent Assembly were passed. The Bolsheviks, in fact, delayed holding elections to the soviets and when they were held, the outcome exceeded their worst expectations. In late May, unrest among Petrograd workers rose to a still higher pitch when workers at Putilov demanded an end to the state’s grain monopoly, guarantees of free speech, the right to form independent trade unions, and new elections to the soviets. Protest meetings that passed similar resolutions took place in Moscow and many provincial towns, including Tula, Nizhnii Novgorod, Orel and Tver.[[68]](#footnote-68) A crisis loomed.

On 20 June the head of the Petrograd **Cheka**, V. Voladarskii was assassinated. In the search for the killer, the Cheka detained some workers, which set off protest meetings in factories. Two days later, a detachment on 300 sailors arrived from Kronstadt, along with a cavalry unit and several companies of infantry. They cordoned off the Nevsky ward, banned all public meetings, imposed a curfew and arrested the leading SRs in the district – including the head of the Obukhov factory committee. An armoured train also arrived and two artillery batteries took up positions on either bank of the Neva River. Later in the evening, the Kronstadt sailors disarmed sailors of the Naval Mine Division on several vessels, who were hostile to the Bolsheviks.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The Obukhov workers, aroused by the arrest of their factory committee chairman, went on strike on 23 June. Zinoviev, now in charge of Petrograd city and the regional government, declared martial law fearful that Putilov workers would go out on strike in support of their comrades at Obukhov. On 26 June an Emergency Assembly of Representatives of Factories and Plants of Petrograd met and called on all workers to hold a one-day political strike in protest for 2 July:

Workers! Hunger is strangling us. Unemployment is tormenting us. Our children drop to the ground because of malnutrition. Our press has been crushed. Our organizations are being destroyed. The freedom to strike has been abolished. And when we raise the voice of protest, they shoot at us and throw us out of the gates, as with the comrades from Obukhov plant. Russia is again turned into a tsarist dungeon.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Yet, this strike, the first significant political strike in Russia since the Bolsheviks’ had taken power, sputtered. Workers, discouraged by threats of arrests, plant closings, threats of fines and firings, around the clock patrols, and uncertain of their strength and purpose, lost heart. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks’ socialist opposition had difficulty in organizing an effective political or military challenge, only adding to workers’ frustrations.

The Menshevik leadership attempted to pursue peaceful opposition within the framework of the emerging Soviet order and, while continuing to condemn the Bolshevik regime, refused to condone the use of force against it.[[71]](#footnote-71) The Left SRs, who were best placed to mobilize popular resistance, did not seek to replace Soviet power nor, at first, to dislodge the Bolsheviks. Instead they attempted to force Lenin and his colleagues to repudiate the peace treaty: in July 1918 they assassinated the German Ambassador, hoping this would rupture relations with Germany and trigger demonstrations of support for a revolutionary war. The plan failed. SRs made the most ambitious efforts to forge a socialist government to rival that of the Bolsheviks. In Samara, a town west of the Urals, secured by the Czechoslovak Legion, a Committee of the Constituent Assembly (Komuch) was established on 8 June 1918 by some seventy SR deputies of the dispersed Assembly.[[72]](#footnote-72)

A thousand miles across the Urals, in Omsk, Kadet liberals established the Provisional Siberian Government in defiance of Soviet power. At the September State Conference, held in Ufa, representatives of both the Provisional Siberian Government and Komuch attempted to eke out a consensus. The Kadets initially regarded the program of the Komuch, which included a confirmation of the Bolshevik land decree and retention of Soviets, as too radical. Yet, somehow this shaky bid resulted in a five-man Directorate, though it was beset by problems similar to those that had eroded the Provisional Government in 1917. It lacked popular legitimacy, had neither coercive force nor substantial tax revenue, and failed to establish an effective governmental authority. Its stated objectives also glossed over bitter ideological divisions related to land reform and private enterprise.

Within a mere six weeks, shortly after moving to Omsk, the All-Russian Provisional Government was overthrown by a military coup. The Kadet and right-wing leaders repudiated allegiance to the Constituent Assembly, and in place of the All-Russian Provisional Government they proclaimed **Admiral Alexsandr Kolchak**, the former commander of the Black Sea Fleet and a member of the Directory’s Council of Ministers, Dictator of all Russia. The SR members of the Constituent Assembly condemned the coup and again attempted to re-establish a rival socialist government, this time in Ekaterinburg, but to little effect. The main threat to Bolshevik Russia, nonetheless, would not be from Kolchak’s Siberian forces, but from the Don and Kuban regions of southern Russia.

Early in 1918, Soviet power had been established in the Don and Kuban with the active support of radicalized Cossacks recently returned from the front. Having experienced Bolshevik rule and under pressure from poor peasant settlers hungry for Cossack land however, the Cossacks overthrew local soviets.[[73]](#footnote-73) The military experience of the Cossacks and the existence of a state structure to provide coordination ensured that there would be no easy Bolshevik victories in Cossack areas as long as the Cossacks themselves retained their willingness to fight. However, while most **Cossacks** were determined to expel the Bolsheviks from their territories, few had much interest in the wider anti-Bolshevik struggle. It was also clear from the policies pursued by the new Don ataman, General Krasnov, and those of the Kuban Rada that the Cossack states wanted independence regardless of who ruled in Moscow.

In their subsequent struggle to resist the advance of the Red Army, they were drawn into an uneasy alliance with members of the Russian Volunteer Army, brought under the command of **General Anton Denikin** in the ‘Armed Forces of South Russia’ in January 1919.[[74]](#footnote-74) The Volunteer Army had made the Don their base because they presumed the Don Cossacks to be stalwart supporters of the old order, but the Cossacks themselves were divided. Denikin noted the fragility of Cossack autonomy and efforts by the Bolsheviks to undermine it through propaganda. “From the front they imported actual Bolshevism, divested, of course, of all idealism, but conspicuous by a repudiation of all authority, by mutinies, aggression, and chiefly by a refusal to fight against the Soviet government, which had falsely pledged itself ‘to maintain the immunity of Cossack rights.’”[[75]](#footnote-75) So, mutual suspicions precluded any possibility of a good working relationship between Denikin’s Volunteer Army and Cossack states, which resulted in their forces fighting independent of each other against the **Red Army**.

As tensions across the nation deepened, and opposition to the regime became widespread, the Bolsheviks’ resorted to the extensive use of political violence and terror. Six weeks after the Bolsheviks seized power, the **Cheka or All-Russia Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-revolution and Sabotage** was set up with Bolshevik Felix Dzerzhinsky at its head. Initially envisaged as temporary, it was charged with investigating and handling over enemy agents and counter-revolutionary activists to revolutionary tribunals. It rapidly accumulated power, and from February 1918 it was authorized to deal with a wide range of culprits – German spies, profiteers, marauders, hooligans, counter-revolutionary agitators – without referring to the courts. By mid-1918 the Cheka employed near 40 000 in armed detachments spread across Soviet-held territory.[[76]](#footnote-76)

From that summer on, the Cheka’s role and its responsibilities were broadened further to include summary trial and execution of suspects. Following the Left SRs assassination of the German ambassador in July, prominent Left SR Chekists were arrested and executed.[[77]](#footnote-77) During the period to follow the Cheka’s reach was extended even further, taking in not only right wing and liberal political activist, but also socialists of other parties, petty traders and peasants. Soon, even relatively sympathetic critics of the regime regarded terror as increasingly integral to its existence. According to I. Z Steinberg, a Left SR Commissar for Justice in the Bolshevik-Left SR coalition, and one of the few prominent Left SRs to escape abroad, terror became a system of rule:

Day after day, month after month the citizens of revolutionary Russia have become inured and used to its increasingly severe and savage forms. What at first shook, pained and sickened us later became commonplace, inevitable and almost comprehensible, in the same way as we got used to an ever decreasing bread ration. […]Terror is a system of violence from above, either already displayed or ready to be displayed. Terror is a legitimized plan of mass deterrence, compulsion and destruction on the part of government. Terror is a precise, well-thought-out and weighed-up schedule of punishment, retribution and threats by which the government scares, lures and obliges us to do its categorical will.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Cheka violence intensified in September 1918, following the assassination of M. S. Uritsky, head of the Petrograd Cheka on 30 August and more importantly, an unrelated assassination attempt on Lenin that very same day. The so-called ‘Red Terror,’ which in a manner of weeks claimed as many as 10 000 lives, primarily ‘bourgeois’ elements already under arrest, was heightened further by a clamour for blood in the Soviet press and orders from the Bolshevik leadership.[[79]](#footnote-79) This upsurge in violence perpetrated by the Cheka provoked unease within sections of the party, criticism in Soviet debates and in the press. As well, critics, among them socialists in Europe, such as prominent German Marxist and Social Democrat, Karl Kautsky, were outspoken critics of the regime. In *Terrorism and Communism*, Kautsky stated that ‘among the phenomena for which Bolshevism has been responsible, terrorism, which begins with the abolition of every form of freedom of the press, and ends in a system of wholesale execution, is certainly the most striking and the most repellant of all.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

Lenin and Trotsky took turns responding to Kautsky’s criticisms and in rather vitriolic and bitter tones.[[81]](#footnote-81) Their justification was that terror and other coercive measures were necessary because of the exceptional circumstances of a revolutionary civil war the Bolsheviks now found themselves waging across Russia. The Bolsheviks adopted the ‘**Red Terror’** in order to demoralize anti-Bolsheviks and to appropriate for themselves the rhetoric and identity of ‘revolution.’ For as Trotsky said, “The man who recognizes the revolutionary historic importance of the very fact of the existence of the Soviet system must also sanction the Red Terror.”[[82]](#footnote-82) That Lenin and Trotsky would invest as much time and effort denouncing Kautsky shows also, how determined they were to establish Bolshevism as the ‘brand’ of a coming wave of socialist revolution that both believed would eventually sweep Europe.

**The Revolution Goes to War**

During the first weeks after seizing power the Bolsheviks relied upon supportive elements of the old army and navy and on volunteers such as the Red Guards. After the Bolsheviks came to power there had been a great deal of talk about using Red Guards to form a new type of proletarian army rather than retaining the remnants of the old (and mainly peasant) one. Yet, despite the ideological attachment to arming all of the people and militia type formations, with civil war looming and war with Germany unresolved, creation of an army along more traditional lines was necessary. Crushing defeats by the Germans in February and March 1918, followed by Czech and Slovak gains near Cheliabinsk, east of the Urals in May and June, made it clear to Trotsky, now People’s Commissar of Army and Navy Affairs, that a reliance on volunteers, unemployed former soldiers and industrial workers, would not do.

Trotsky proved himself a brilliant and highly successful military organizer and commander. While many other Bolsheviks at this time favoured relying only on committed revolutionaries and elected officers, Trotsky advocated using former Imperial Russian officers in senior posts in the newly formed Red Army. Trotsky, however, was forced to constantly defend the use of these ‘military specialists,’ against party members, most notably, Stalin, who suggested Trotsky was too cavalier about these appointments.[[83]](#footnote-83) Trotsky was contemptuous of such arguments and “party ignoramuses” who insisted on party membership as the most important criterion for a command post. “Those who clamour the loudest against making use of officers are either people infected with panic, or those remote from the entire work of the military apparatus or such Party military figures as are themselves worse than any saboteur,” was a typical Trotsky response to attacks by party members opposed to this policy.[[84]](#footnote-84) It helped too that Lenin was a pragmatist and gave Trotsky his full backing.

For two and a half years, save for a few comparatively short intervals, Trotsky lived in a railway coach crisscrossing the ‘Soviet zone’ to the various fronts in which the Red Army was engaged.[[85]](#footnote-85) As armed conflicts unfolded on the periphery of the country, the Bolsheviks retained and then enhanced their hold on the all-powerful economic and political centre of Russia. Its wealth of land and people, but perhaps most importantly, the tsarist arsenals the Red Army commandeered, allowed the Bolsheviks to control Russia’s heartland – which then gave them control of most of the country’s industry and railroads.[[86]](#footnote-86) The inheritance of the former Imperial Army apparatus made it possible to turn these resources and the 60 million, largely ethnically homogenous people in central Russia, into a regular mass army by 1919.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Lenin, fearing the threat of the Allied intervention, a threat he overestimated, and in the face of a summer of defeats, called for an army of 3 million men in October 1918 to defeat Russia’s enemies. This in the face of high desertion rates that tended to fluctuate in accordance with farming seasons. Peasants joined up in the winter, only to desert the following summer. Illness and disease were rampant too, as more soldiers died from disease than from fighting. Mutinies were not uncommon, but more so was desertion, probably the simplest solution to a soldier’s woes. Over a million men deserted from the Red Army in 1918, and nearly four million by 1921. Some deserters formed themselves into guerilla bands. These were called the Greens partly because they hid out in the woods and were supplied by local peasants, sometimes they called themselves Greens to distinguish themselves from both Reds and Whites.[[88]](#footnote-88)

The so-called ‘**White armies**’ of Kolchak and Denikin, however, were never able to mobilize a fraction of the numbers that fought for the Reds. Deep though workers’ disillusionment was with Bolshevik rule, and bitterly though peasants resented the Reds’ grain requisitioning, any chance the Whites would attract popular support was ruled out by the social policies they adopted. The Whites – and this applies to Siberia as much as it does to South Russia – made no real effort to develop policies that might appeal to the peasantry and national minorities – although the support of both was essential. Kolchak even attempted to reverse peasant land seizures, offering no more than a vague intimation of subsequent land reform after a White victory.[[89]](#footnote-89) Neither Kolchak’s regime or Denikin’s Volunteer Army succeeded in attracting the support of the civilian population, not even of private soldiers. They made no real effort to develop policies that might appeal to peasants or national minorities, although support of both was essential.

Moreover, the willingness of the Reds to employ terror was matched by the Whites. Typical was the following order on the treatment of civilians suspected of sympathizing with the Reds:

As a general rule, remember: look upon villages which aid and abet brigands openly or covertly as the enemy and deal with them mercilessly, and use their property to make up for the losses suffered as a result of military activity by that part of the population which sides with the government.[[90]](#footnote-90)

In a struggle that depended on mass mobilization, the White movement failed significantly in appealing to potential political allies or the masses they claimed to be liberating. Its early failure and lack of foresight in establishing a partnership with socialists, who might have propped up an inefficient administration in the regions White armies – Kolchak and Denikin, later N. N. Iudenich – occupied. This was a significant factor in their inability to hold territories captured by military conquest. In the end, they represented an old, defunct order, as the peasant majority found the epaulettes of its officers and their feudal methods symbolic of the tsarist regime. The slogan of ‘One, Great and Indivisible Russia’ rang hollow for peasants and moderate socialists alike.

As for the involvement of the Western powers, this never amounted to much in material terms and always suffered from a lack of clear purpose and commitment. The Allies (Britain, France, the United States, Japan, even Canada) sent troops to Archangel, Vladivostok, the Volga and Caucasus, but few of these troops had an impact militarily in Russia at the time. They had sent troops not because the revolution had brought a Bolshevik government, but rather a weak government. They also, as with so many opponents of the regime, lacked a common resolve, remained suspicious of one another’s motives and were quite obviously fatigued by the demands the Great War had burdened them with. While it is true that Allied munitions and supplies made possible White advances, these resources only arrived in regular quantities in the summer of 1919. Kolchak’s spring offensive and Denikin’s conquest of the south Russian basin region came earlier.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Nevertheless, the Reds were surrounded on almost all sides – anti-Bolshevik forces to the west, south and east – and at the very least, symbolic foreign threats in every cardinal direction. Kolchak’s Ufa offensive, one of the most dramatic anti-Bolshevik operations of the era (the other three being Denikin’s May-June 1919 advance from south Russia, his September-October 1919 advance, and the Polish offensive of 1920), forced Trotsky to move Red Army troops from southern Russia to fight the admiral.[[92]](#footnote-92) This allowed Denikin to advance further than expected. Some have suggested that Kolchak struck too early, before his armies were really ready, and that he should have waited for the summer, by which time Denikin might have joined him in a combined offensive from the Volga. Kolchak, it appears, was over-reaching as he advanced quickly and the 4 000 mile Trans-Siberian rail line to Vladivostok where Allied munitions awaited was difficult to keep secure. This was due to ongoing peasant revolts in the rear, notably in Slavgorod, south east of Omsk.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Meanwhile, in the south, Denikin’s breakthrough in June 1919 saw Petr Wrangel’s Caucasian Army capture Tsaritsyn against superior forces. Yet, Denikin’s Volunteer Army, at the height of the Kolchak offensive, abandoned its assault on Tsaritsyn when the Red Army invaded the Donbas and northern Don. Faced with a choice between saving the Don and linking up with Kolchak on the Volga, Denikin opted for the former.[[94]](#footnote-94) The Reds were clearly overstretched. They continued to suffer from a crisis of supplies, indiscipline and mass desertion, and between fronts in the south and east they had to contend with peasant uprisings. In the meantime, Iudenich and his Northwestern Army had reached the outskirts of Petrograd in October 1919. These battles and the battles of 1919 more generally, were intense and involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers, varying armies and national movements, millions of cartridges, tanks, airplanes and armoured cars. The war that followed Bolshevik succession in Russia was indeed a bitter and devastating conflict to determine Russia’s future.

Despite initial success, the armies of Kolchak, Denikin and Iudenich could not sustain their separate advances on Moscow. Denikin’s soldiers were thinly spread on the Southern Front and were vulnerable to counter-offensives. In the rear, they had left themselves without enough troops to defend their bases against Nestor Makhno’s partisans, Ukrainian nationalists and the Chechens of the Caucasus. At the height of the Moscow offensive they were forced to withdraw vital troops to deal with them.[[95]](#footnote-95) Kolchak suffered from some of the same maladies and by the fall of 1919, his rear was completely disintegrating as prominent resistance movements and partisans rose up and seized vast areas of land. The Red Army, having poured newly raised troops into the area in the spring of 1919, pushed Kolchak’s dwindling forces back beyond the Urals. Iudenich, on the outskirts of Petrograd, meanwhile, had failed to secure vital rail lines, so that by late November, the Red Army was unleashing a general offensive on all fronts.

With these anti-Bolshevik forces all but destroyed in early 1920, military operations continued in the south and east into the spring, the remnants of the Volunteer Army (now led by Wrangel) were driven from the Crimea later in November, and Soviet power faced yet another armed threat in the Polish forces of Josef Pilsudski. Germany’s eventual defeat at the end of the Great War rendered Brest-Litovsk obsolete. Poland, having re-established its statehood, proceeded to carve out its borders from territories long the source of conflict between Russia and Poland. Poland was not alone however. With the collapse of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, nationalist movements fought as much with each other, as with their old rulers. Nonetheless, in the Poles, the Reds faced the largest and most effective force they had come up against.

The Red Army recovered, quickly undertook a counteroffensive and by midsummer was threatening Warsaw. By winter 1919-1920 the main military threats to the Soviet state in south Russia and western Siberia had been defeated, thus freeing up Red troops to fight the Polish advance on Kiev during the spring of 1920. The Poles managed to hold the line, demonstrating the limits of Bolshevik projection of power to borderlands and outer edges of the former Russian empire. An armistice was signed in October 1920, followed by the signing of the Treaty of Riga in early 1921, which split the disputed territories of Belorussia and the Ukraine between Russia and Poland.[[96]](#footnote-96)

**The Revolution’s Finale**

By summer 1920, with the regime having been confronted with the threat that both Petrograd and Moscow might fall, the Bolsheviks imagined that the greatest danger to the revolution appeared to have past. By this time, however, the coercive policies adopted by the Bolsheviks with the goal of keeping the Red Army stocked with weapons and with food – War Communism – had led to a crisis in agriculture and significant economic hardships, both in the cities and the countryside. By this time, with the 1920 harvest falling some 60 per cent of pre war levels, rural unrest was widespread and a large-scale revolt was radiating from the central Russian province of Tambov.[[97]](#footnote-97) A distinctive feature of this rebellion, among many at this time, was the political organization that emerged out of it – the Union of Working Peasants. It was supported by a significant majority of the peasant population and Soviet power, in effect, ceased to exist in Tambov between the fall of 1920 and summer of 1921.

Armed peasant groups like these fought against all governments, for the most part though, these movements were a popular reaction to Bolshevik policies in the countryside. The Bolsheviks initially believed they could defeat such peasant armies easily, treating them as a hopeless cause both in their propaganda and in their military strategies. Yet, the Red Army was forced to deal with each peasant army, and there were many, as a specific instance of unrest, suppressing them harshly and further angering the peasant population. By far the biggest (though least studied) of the peasant revolts broke out in western Siberia: the whole of Tiumen’, Omsk, Chliabinsk, Tobolsk, Ekaterinburg and Tomsk regions, complete with most major towns, fell into the hands of peasant rebels, up to 60 000 of them under arms, and virtually the whole of the Soviet infrastructure remained paralyzed during the first six months of 1921.[[98]](#footnote-98)

By the time Lenin realized the strength of these disparate movements, they had grown into a serious social and military threat to Bolshevik power. Still, while discontent festered across the Russian countryside, the conduit of that frustration remained local in its expression. Rarely did peasant armies move outside of their original geographic region and when they did conquer towns and villages, they just as often left the territory to be retaken later by the Reds. This was a village movement restricted by local interests and unable to forge a united front against the Reds. While peasant revolts were social movements, they lacked a political consciousness in the sense that they did not care what form of government Russia as a country had. This restricted the ‘village movement’ to revolt and rebellion, but not revolution. The Red Army, despite its own flaws, was much better supplied and cohesive.

In late February and early March 1921, factory workers went on strike in Petrograd. Simultaneously and more menacingly, Kronstadt sailors – formerly the staunchest advocates of Bolshevism – rebelled, demanding free and fair elections to the soviets. An anti-Bolshevik Provisional Revolutionary Committee demanded political freedom for all socialist parties, free elections, and the replacement of requisitioning by freer trade in grain. Frantically, the Bolsheviks denounced the revolt as a White-inspired plot and the Red Army stormed the base to crush the rebels. Pitched battles ensued for a week that saw 8 000 rebels flee to Finland. At least 1 000 lay dead on each side. The Cheka spent several months thereafter investigating the rebellion and sentenced to death over 2 000 and to various terms of prison and exile another 6 000.[[99]](#footnote-99)

The threat to Bolshevik authority had been made plain. In Moscow, at the Tenth Party Congress, which happened to be meeting at the time of the Kronstadt rebellion, saw Lenin finally yield. He forced through an economic about-face, which, though cautiously worded, seemed to point in the opposite direction of previous Bolshevik policy, and reintroduced private trade. In effect, though most party activists and leaders opposed Lenin’s plan, it was adopted, but only on the final day of the congress after stubborn resistance.[[100]](#footnote-100) This **New Economic Policy (NEP)** aimed at forestalling Russia’s utter ruin and political collapse allowed small-scale private commerce, including trade in agricultural products, to develop with minimal restrictions and was a frank admission, at least by Lenin, of the need to accommodate the largest and most vital segment of society in Russia – the peasantry.

“Can we satisfy this middle peasantry as such, with its economic peculiarities and economic roots?” he asked. “Any Communist who thought the economic basis, the economic roots, of small farming could be reshaped in three years was, of course, a dreamer. We need not conceal the fact that there were a good many such dreamers among us,” he said. “How could one start a socialist revolution in a country like ours without dreamers?”[[101]](#footnote-101) Even if Lenin would not acknowledge outright the destruction that he and his supporters had let loose upon the peasantry and for that matter, Russian society, he and the Bolsheviks who executed his ideological rhetoric had been forced to retract – to retreat. Of course, retreating on the economic front did not mean allowing the political opposition to gain an advantage, nor within the Russian Communist Party, for that matter. To halt divisions within the party and silence criticism of the leadership, a ban (supposedly temporary) was placed on the formation of intra party factions.[[102]](#footnote-102)

In the meantime, Soviet society was rocked by yet another apocalyptic development – famine. The famine, a result of Russia’s utter ruin and economic collapse, which was itself brought on by terror, Red and White, as well as the constant spectre of war. Between late 1920 and early 1921 drought conditions contributed to an already perilous situation in many of Russia’s agricultural regions. On top of mass terror and the seizure of ‘surplus’ grain by not just Bolsheviks, but several different political and military factions that Russia’s cataclysmic revolutionary war had generated, some five million lives (though exact figures will never be known) perished from hunger and starvation.[[103]](#footnote-103)The Volga region, in particular, the provinces of Kazan, Ufa, Orenburg and Samara, suffered severely.

In 1921, Alexis Babine, a Russian scholar at Saratov University, where he worked as an instructor, described the horrors of hunger and starvation that swept through the Volga region. He noted refugees everywhere, on the outskirts of Saratov, and on the banks of the Volga “many of them mere skeletons hardly able to move around.” Many were children. “Two small boys came to the Mitrofan Market this morning. A kindhearted milkwoman gave them a good feed, after which the boys dropped to the ground, and died,” he remarked. On another occasion, he said of “the sick lying on the floor of their cabins, swollen from starvation, with malodorous inflammation of periosteum, decomposing cartilage, and diarrhea” would have little besides a soup, “which a doctor friend of mine could not induce himself to taste.” He also reported cases of cannibalism.[[104]](#footnote-104)

The famine came after six and a half years of unrest and violence (when one includes the Great War, the revolutions of 1917, then the civil war). No official request for aid was ever issued – indeed - it appears the government may have used the famine as a pretext to consolidate their rule further. The authorities persecuted the Russian Orthodox Church, which held significant influence over the peasant populace, seizing Church valuables and by terrorizing the clergy. The regime and its supporters continued to crackdown on opposition political and cultural leaders as well. By now, the Bolsheviks were not above purging any element of society. By now, they were isolated, having been abandoned by ordinary Russians – save soldiers, who at that point, were themselves controlled by the onslaught of both propaganda and terror. Even the ‘proletariat,’ in whose name the Bolsheviks had taken power – had largely disintegrated, making the Bolshevik Party the vanguard of a nonexistent class.

**Conclusion**

The central issue of which has always engaged historians of the Russian Revolution is whether or not the ultimate outcome, the Bolshevik seizure and consolidation of power, was preordained. Given the history of the Russian state and society in general, and the conditions prevailing in Russia between 1917 and 1921 in particular, was any other outcome possible? Could things have been otherwise?

The starting point for any sensible discussion must be that the party (or faction, as it was before 1917) had always been ‘vanguardist’ in its prescriptions for socialist revolution. Perhaps a one-party state might have been checked if the party had not ben isolated in politics, but then Lenin could not conceive of any other form of administration. He and his supporters had never ceased to show impatience with the niceties of democratic process, the Constituent Assembly, for one, freedom of the press, political parties and eventually trade unions too.

Even though Lenin was ready armed with a well-articulated theory of legitimacy that had the dictatorship of the proletariat at its core, this does not explain how the Bolshevik Party came to power in October 1917. For, the party’s mass popularity and mass recruitment in 1917 submerged, if only briefly, this tendency in Bolshevism. Lenin and the Bolsheviks became the most vigorous advocates of ‘All Power to the Soviets,’ a slogan of great popularity among the masses, signifying not only radical social and economic reform, but a new, if ill-defined, political system. And yet, in the midst of the whirlwind of events, the supporting role of chance and of individual human action was also striking. Indeed, few historical events have been more profoundly distorted by myth than those of the October Revolution. Much like the Russian Revolution, it was something more complex, arguably more situational, even accidental as much as it was democratic and at the same time, conspiratorial. Still, the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin and Trotsky first and foremost among them, were not entirely frank about their long-term objectives.

Once in power, the party began to lose its connection with the democratic aspirations of 1917 and became a party of leaders that told the people what to do. Russia’s future form of government remained an open question. The Bolsheviks’ behavior and policies after the October Revolution were informed in a vacuum, and the internecine war that followed was crucial in explaining them. It was in the context of a revolutionary civil war – a war of succession – that the Bolsheviks had their first experience of ruling, and this undoubtedly shaped the party’s subsequent development in many important respects. This experience militarized the revolutionary political culture of the Bolshevik movement and triumphed over the very democratic tendencies, movements and actions that gave rise to the party’s successful seizure of power. This, in turn, left a legacy that included a readiness to resort to coercion, rule by decree and summary justice.

Meanwhile, the voices of millions of people who imagined the revolutionary outcome differently, their experiences and aspirations so intensely powerful if not liberating, continued to resist the state. All the same, war and strife, famine and pestilence, truly apocalyptic conditions, devastated the country following the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. The Bolshevik hold on power, its consolidation, was bought at the price of great suffering and an unknown terrible number of deaths. This experience in itself explains the impasse that the forces of both state and society found themselves confronted with. Both were exhausted and both were near collapse, though this led to a retreat, a respite, it did not last. For, in time the regime, under new leadership would undertake yet another ambitious social revolution, just as tumultuous. By then, however, there was no longer much balance between the revolution from above and the revolution from below and authoritarian assumptions were at the unchallengeable core of Bolshevism.

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1. For a discussion on the shifting discourse of the Russian Revolution I recommend Edward Acton, “The Revolution and Its Historians: The Critical Companion in Context,” *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914-1921*, ed. Edward Acton et al. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992): 3-17; William Rosenberg, “Interpreting Revolutionary Russia” *Critical Companion*, 18-36; and, Ronald Grigor Suny, “Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and its Critics,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (April 1994): 165-182; and Rex Wade’s “Introduction” *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*, ed. Rex A Wade (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The author of this account was Ilia Mitrofanovich Gordienko, a Bolshevik worker-activist in Vyborg district. John Daly and Leonid Trofimov, eds. *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambrige University Press, 2000), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nikolai Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution: A Personal Record* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Orlando Figes describes the recurrence of violence in the protests of 1917 (Feb, April, July, September and October) in Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 320-323. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘The Paradox of the February Revolution’ is a chapter title in Leon Trotsky’s, *The History of the Russian Revolution Volume One: The Overthrow of Tsarism* (New York; Simon & Schuster, 1932), 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Edward Acton and Tom Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History, 1917-1940 Volume I* (Read Hall: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution Volume One*, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Mark D. Steinberg, ed., *Voices of Revolution, 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and John Daly and Leonid Trofimov, eds., *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), for writings by workers, peasants, soldiers and other diverse peoples during the Russian Revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lars T. Lih, ‘Grain Monopoly and Agricultural Transformation: Ideals and Necessities’ in Acton et al. (eds.) *Critical Companion*, 621-632, explores the continuities as well as contrasts between the ways in which the Tsarist government, the Provisional Government and the early Bolshevik government tried to tackle the problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Frank Golder, *Documents of Russian History, 1914-1917*, Translated by Emanuel Aaronsberg (New York: The Century Co., 1927): 325-326. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. From a letter date 30 May 1917 in Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Browder, R. G. and A. F. Kerensky, eds. *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 1045-1046. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Diane Koenker and William Rosenberg, *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 323-325. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Robert Service, ‘The Bolshevik Party,’ ed. Acton et al *Critical Companion*, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Sukahnov, *The Russian Revolution*, 269-272, for an account of Lenin’s much anticipated return. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Vladimir Lenin, *Between the Two Revolutions: Articles and Speeches of 1917* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 56-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 41-42, 44-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and their Revolution, 1917-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The text of Miliukov’s note, from its publication in *Rech’* on 20 April 1917, and various documents surrounding the April Crisis can be found in Robert P. Browder and Alexander F. Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Volume II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961): 1096-1101. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For an overview of the offensive, see Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 415-421. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Acton and Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History, 1917-1940 Volume I,* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. His speech is not contained in any editions of Lenin’s complete works. An abridged account appeared in *Novaia Zhin’*, 21 June 1917. This excerpt is taken from Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, 121-122; who, references M. Kerdov, *Velikiaia oktiabr’skaia sotsialsisticheskaia revoliutsiia: Sbornik vospominanii* (The Great October Socialist Revolution: Collection of Memoirs), (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1957), 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The exact intentions of the Bolshevik leaders continue to be a source of fierce debate. Some historians argue the Bolsheviks were planning to overthrow the Provisional Government – Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899-1919* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990): 385-438. Others suggest the July uprising was a ‘spontaneous demonstration’ – supported by Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Bolshevism: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* (Bloomington, 1968); and later, Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 425-438. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. William Thomas Allison, ed., *Witness to Revolution: The Russian Revolution Diary and Letters of J. Butler Wright* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. From a letter by Lunacharsky to his wife dated 5 July 1917. Acton and Stableford, *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Perhaps because historians of the Russian Revolution consult so many of the same sources, the theory that ‘dark forces,’ ‘subterranean mentalities,’ and ‘latent feelings driven to the surface’ are echoed in scholarly works through the ages. The idea that revolutionary violence ‘erupted from below,’ is a striking feature of the telling of the revolution. It is revealed first in the works of Maxim Gorky (that I have read), and thereafter chronicled in much the same way. Explaining the origins of physical violence as it appeared in the revolution is difficult and one fraught with generalizations that too often revert to base instincts. As in Chamberlin’s descriptors of the ‘archaic, backward character’ of the Russian people. See William Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921, Volume One: From the Overthrow of the Czar to the Assumption of Power by the Bolsheviks* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1935), 1-17. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5; and, Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 525, for eerily similar arguments echoing Gorky. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wade, *The Russian revolution, 1917*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Maxim Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture and the Bolsheviks, 1918-1919*, Edited by Herman Ermolaev (New York: Paul S. Eriksson Inc., 1968), 72-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See ‘Report of the Public Prosecutor on the Investigation of the Charges Against the Bolsheviks,’ *The Provisional Government, 1917*, ed. Browder and Kerensky, (Stanford, 1961), 1370-1376. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 490. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The Kornilov affair is replete with a series of murky events and shady intentions, not the coup attempt some historians suggest it is. See Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 445-455; also, Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution,* 503. Documents in Browder and Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government, Volume III*, 1527-1613, seem to corroborate this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. From Lenin, ‘The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power’ *Between the Two Revolutions: Articles and Speeches of 1917* (Moscow, 1971), 390-392. The Central Committee discussed this letter and another, ‘Marxism and Insurrection,’ on 15 September. A motion advanced by Kamenev to reject Lenin’s proposal to seize power was defeated. See Lenin, *Between the Two Revolutions*, 393-398. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See James D. White, “Lenin, Troskii and the Arts of Insurrection: The Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, 11-13 October 1917,” in *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*, ed. Rex A. Wade (New York: Routledge, 2004): 187-210. This essay reflects several important issues in the writing of the history of the October Revolution. Foremost, the focus away from Lenin and the myth of a well-planed coup executed from under his direction, to the much more complex question of what Bolshevik leaders – Trotsky – in particular – were actually doing. See also Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution in Petrograd* (New York, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See “’Advice to an Onlooker’ and ‘Letter to the Bolshevik Comrades Attending the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region’ in Lenin, *Between the Two Revolutions*, 474-483. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 620. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a full account of the Red Guards during the October Revolution, see Rex Wade, *Red Guards and Workers’ Militias in the Russian Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 189-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (New York: International Publishers, 1919, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Acton and Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History, 1917-1940*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 614. The italics are Sukhanov’s emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. This argument was made by other groups in various forums during the next few days as debate over forming a broad socialist coalition government became a major political controversy – one that foreshadows the controversies commitment (or lack thereof) to socialist unity espoused. For the text of resolutions by the Mensheviks and SRs, see Rex A. Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History Volume I: The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917-1919* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1991), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. For the text of these documents and initial decrees, see Wade, *Documents of Soviet History Volume I*, 6-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Debate on censorship of the press began with the Decree on the Press of 27 October. It continued for many more days and weeks, with several Bolshevik leaders tendering their resignation. Wade, *Documents of Soviet History Volume I*, 13, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Reed, in a conversation with a young student among hundreds of soldiers and students digging massive pits behind the walls of the Kremlin, was told: “Tomorrow we shall bury here five hundred proletarians who died for the Revolution.” Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. For Saratov, see Donald Raleigh, ‘Saratov’s October’ in *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 262-291; on Viatka, see Aaron B. Retish, *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 64-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Wade, *Documents of Soviet History, 1917-1919*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Neil Harding, ‘Lenin, Socialism and the State in 1917’ *Revolution in Russia*, ed. Edith Frankel et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See J. L. H. Keep, *The Debate on Soviet Power: Minutes of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee Second Convocation, October 1917-January1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), for the rapid evolution of the Bolshevik approach to the post-October constitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. For a rendering of the very brief opening of the Constituent Assembly, see Victor Chernov, “Russia’s One-Day Parliament,” *The Russian Revolution of 1917: Contemporary Accounts*, ed. Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 268-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. On this and other matters related to the complexities of peasant relations with the Aaron B. Retish, *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War*, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. For the text of this document see Wade, *Documents of Soviet History Volume I*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 603-627, for a discussion of ‘bagging’ and the black market grain trade that resulted in the Bolsheviks ‘food dictatorship.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Wade, *Documents of Soviet History Volume I*, 169-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. On the Kombedy, see Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917-1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 184-199, [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1964) XXVII, 235-278. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Daly and Trofimov, eds., *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899-1919*, 559-561. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See Scott B. Smith, *Captives of Revolution: The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Dictatorship, 1918-1923* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Daly and Trofimov, eds., *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922*, 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See V. N. Brovkin, *The Mensheviks after October: Socialist Opposition and the Rise of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (Ithaca, NY, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See Geoffrey Swain, *Origins of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Longman, 1996) for an account of the SR Komuch. More fascinating, however, is the story of the 40,000 Czechoslovak Legion, a well-trained military force seeking to evacuate through Siberia and via the United States so as to resume fighting in France against the Central Powers in pursuit of Czech and Slovak independence. Formerly allied with the Bolsheviks, they became obsolescent after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, when the Bolshevik government sought to comply with German demands that they disarm the Czechs. The Legion ‘mutinied’ and seized control of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. See V. M. Fic, *The Bolsheviks and eh Czechoslovak Legion: The Origins of their Armed Conflict, March-May, 1918* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1978) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. S. O’Rourke, ‘The Cossacks’ in Acton et al. (eds), *Critical Companion*, 499-506, provides the overview. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987) provides a good overview of Denikin and the Cossacks. Also, for a more comprehensive study, see Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia: Vol. 1, 1918 – The First Year of the Volunteer Army, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and, Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia: Volume 2, 1918-1919 – The Defeat of the Whites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See Anton Denikin, *The White Army*, Translated byCatherine Zvegintzov (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1973), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. The best study is G. Legett, *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (December 1917 to February 1922)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). For a more recent overview, see A. L. Litvin, ‘The Cheka,’ ed. Acton et al. *Critical Companion*, 314-322. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. While the Left SRs had quit the government in the wake of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, oddly, they remained in the Cheka. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Acton and Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History Volume One, 1917-1940*, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Orlando Figes links this episode of terror to beginnings of the cult of Lenin. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 627-630. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Karl Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Contribution to the Natural History of Revolution* (London: National Labour Press, 1920), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Kautsky’s *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1918) criticized the Bolshevik regime and provoked Lenin into responding with *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918). Kautsky continued his criticism with *Terror and Communism* (1920), which saw Trotsky replied in kind with his own *Terrorism and Communism* (1920). Trotsky dictated much of this work on his railcar between fronts during the civil war. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See Wade, *Documents of Soviet History Vol. I*, 223-224, which considers the so-called Tsaritsyn affair, which not only illustrates the party struggles over how the army should be organized, but was also an early stage in the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Wade, *Documents of Soviet History: The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917-1919*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. See Leon Trotsky*, My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography*  (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1960), 411-422, for Trotsky’s reminisces on the importance of his armoured train. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. See Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See Orlando Figes, ‘The Red Army and Mass Mobilization during the Russian Civil War, 1918-1920’ *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 168-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 599-600. See also Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War*, 145-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The best account of Kolchak’s regime and the civil war in Siberia is J. D. Smele, *Civil War in Siberia: The anti-Bolshevik government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Orders from Gen. S. N. Rozanov, who had served in the Red Army before joining the Whites and becoming Kolchak’s commander in Krasoyarsk, western Siberia. Acton and Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History Volume I, 1917-1940*, 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War,* 283-284. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Evan Mawdsley says the other four were the 1918 Volga campaign, Denikin’s May-Jun1919 advance from south Russia, his September-October 919 advance, and the Polish offensive of 1920. See Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 656-7; Smele, *Civil War in Siberia*, 537. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 650. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 664. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. See N. Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920* (New York: Random House, 2003), for the best account of Russo-Polish War. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. For an overview of the Tambov rebellion, see O. Figes, ‘Peasant Armies,’ ed. Acton et al. *Critical Companion*, 370-380; and, V. N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 357-382. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 753. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. See I. Getzler, *Kronstadt, 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 205-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. See S. V. Iarov, ‘The Tenth Congress of the Communist Party and the Transition to NEP’ ed. Acton et al. *Critical Companion*, 115-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1964), Volume XXXII, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. This inevitably led the following year to a purge within the party. Lenin, “On Party Unity’ in *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1964), XXXII, 241-244. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 775. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Donald J. Raleigh, *A Russian Civil War Diary: Alexis Babine in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), 182, 194-5, 208-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)