

# Interpreting October: How did the Bolsheviks come to power?

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*An analysis of the role of the Military Revolutionary Committee in the  
Bolshevik seizure of power on October 25, 1917.*

Bachelor thesis

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Revolutions in Comparison

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## | Introduction

October 25, 1917. Hundreds of thousands of citizens of Petrograd storm the Winter Palace to dispose of the corrupt and incompetent Provisional Government. At least, according to Sergei Eisenstein's movie *October: 10 days that shook the world*. In reality, the storming of the Winter Palace and the subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power hardly was an heroic affair. Carried out by a relatively small amount of revolutionaries and consisting of merely taking over several fundamental 'strongpoints' in Petrograd, the Bolshevik seizure of power went virtually unnoticed from the vast majority of the population. In terms of popular participation, the October Revolution, however glorified in Soviet propaganda, pales in comparison with the February Revolution. This has led some historians to denominate the Bolshevik seizure of power a textbook example of a coup d'état, designed by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the most notable leaders of the Bolshevik Party. Yet, in the preceding months the legitimacy of the Provisional Government had been thoroughly undermined by a deepening social and economic crisis and a growing popular sympathy for the transfer of power to the 'Soviets'. These Soviets, originating as *ad hoc* councils of workers established to direct strikes, but soon assuming the status and form of a workers' government, began to be perceived by the lower strata of the population of Petrograd as a viable socialist alternative to the 'bourgeois' Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks, although never a majority party in these Soviets, had witnessed a significant increase in their popularity during the course of the revolution. This so-called favourable 'popular mood' has led some historians to focus on the wider social context of the Bolshevik seizure of power, characterizing it as a popular revolution driven from below rather than a carefully planned out coup d'état. Almost a hundred years after the event, the question whether the Bolshevik seizure of power was a coup d'état or a popular revolution continues to divide historians.

Resulting from its tremendous political implications, the account of the Bolshevik seizure of power has been substantially blurred from several ideological strands. In the first decades after its completion, the October Revolution was mainly described in political terms and seen as a coup d'état, isolated from the larger social and cultural context of the revolution. Both inside and outside the Soviet Union, the history of the Russian Revolution was reduced to the history of the Bolsheviks, most notably Lenin. Soviet historians were eager to explain the revolution as a process governed by historical laws. The triumph of the Bolsheviks in October was the inevitable outcome of the ultimate class struggle. The Soviet account, generated most

notably by a party institution<sup>1</sup> specially designed for the purpose, emphasized the pre-eminent role of the Bolshevik Party under the disciplined and farsighted leadership of Lenin. Their glorious leader was the only one who had managed to fathom Marx's historical laws and brought his party to victory, of course supported by a majority of the population. Thus for the Soviets, the Bolshevik seizure of power was a coup d'état and popular revolution at once.<sup>2</sup>

For Western liberal historians, the success of the Bolsheviks can also be explained by their superior organization. While for the Soviets this flowed naturally from their worship of Lenin and the party, for the liberals the Bolshevik leadership was deceiving and opportunistic. Contrasting the Soviet view of the revolution as a process governed by Marxist-Leninist laws, for the liberal historians it was a chain of appalling accidents, only possible in the "galloping chaos"<sup>3</sup> that was unleashed when the Tsar was overthrown in February. Moreover, in this view, the Bolshevik success owed more to intrigue, conspiracy and infiltration than to genuine popular support. Of course, denying the Bolshevik seizure of power to have had widespread support meant denying its legitimacy. The liberals portrayed the Bolsheviks, Lenin above all, as cunning opportunists with a relentless lust for power. Unable, and perhaps unwilling, to satisfy their lust for power via a democratic route, the Bolsheviks exploited the situation in the one city where they did have popular support, Petrograd, to form a bridgehead of power from where control over the rest of the country could be imposed. Operating through the 'Military Revolutionary Committee', officially an organ of the Petrograd Soviet, the Bolsheviks deceitfully camouflaged their true dictatorial aspirations.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the late 1960s, several scholars published works that undermined the idea of a tightly-knit Bolshevik Party under the unquestioned leadership of Lenin. Although still orientated toward the higher politics of the Russian Revolution, these scholars raised several important questions about the organization of the Bolshevik Party and the way it came to power.<sup>5</sup> Then, starting in the 1970s, the preoccupation with politics and 'great men' gradually came to be replaced with a 'view from below', advocated by social historians. According to the social historians, the political historians overemphasized the role of political actors and underestimated the autonomous activity of workers and soldiers and the deepening social polarization that had characterized Russian society already before 1917. The political positions of the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries (SRs) corresponded largely with the political attitudes of the lower 'classes' in Petrograd. Even though the majority of the Petrograd workers did not directly participate in events that led to the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the social historians emphasize that they acceded the seizure of power in the name of the Soviet. According to this view, the Bolsheviks came to power not because of their opportunism, manipulation and superior organization, but because their policies placed them at the head of a

<sup>1</sup> This was the "Commission on the History of the Russian Communist party and the October Revolution", it was established in 1920.

<sup>2</sup> R. Wade (ed.), *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches* (New York 2004) 1-3; E.A. Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (New York 1990) 167-172.

<sup>3</sup> This characterization was made by R.V. Daniels, *Red October: the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917* (London 1967) 10.

<sup>4</sup> E.A. Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution, 172-177*. Examples of the 'orthodox' liberal approach are W.H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1921* (London 1935); M.L. Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy* (London 1977); A. Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks* (London 1965).

<sup>5</sup> The key works here are Daniels, *Red October*; A. Rabinowitch; *The Bolsheviks Come To Power. The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York 1976); A. Rabinowitch, *Prelude to revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 uprising* (Bloomington, Ind. 1968).

genuinely popular movement. That seizure of power by the Soviet eventually evolved in a single-party dictatorship could, of course, not have been foreseen by the workers.<sup>6</sup>

This social or 'revisionist' paradigm replaced the previous liberal or 'orthodox' approach to the revolution. However, following the fall of communism, Russia witnessed an ideological swing to the right, and now it were the former Soviet historians who began to revive the perception of the Bolshevik seizure of power as a coup d'état without popular support. The resurgence of the political historians echoed in the west, most notably around the scholarly debate that followed the publication of Richard Pipes's *The Russian Revolution*.<sup>7</sup> The political historians criticized the social historians not only for their supposed leftist sympathies, biased anti-elitism and quasi-Marxist interpretation, but also for having made an artificial distinction between political and social elements. The social historians had simply written 'history with the politics left out'. The 'popular mood' and the social polarization were, according to this view, merely the preconditions for the revolution, but it were political actors and the internal dynamics of political parties, the Bolsheviks especially, that ultimately determined its outcome.<sup>8</sup>

The approaches of the social and political historians, while never as unified and one-sided as might appear here, seem irreconcilable. The political historians deem the October Revolution unthinkable without the Bolsheviks, the social historians deem the success of the Bolsheviks unthinkable without the popular mood. I will approach the Bolshevik seizure of power by operating on three levels of analysis, all three of them related to this historiographical problem. In Chapter one, I will use the fruits of the scholarship of both the social and political historians to further illustrate the problem as well as balance these two deferring interpretations. In Chapter two, I will approach the problem on a more detailed, empirical level in the case of the Military Revolutionary Committee, the institution of the Petrograd Soviet that brought about the seizure of power. Analyzing the Military Revolutionary Committee is relevant, for it reflects both genuine popular concerns and Bolshevik manipulation, revealing the social and political aspects of the Bolshevik seizure of power. In both chapters, I will clarify how several leading historians of the Russian Revolution have used sources selectively to buttress their overall interpretation of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Finally, in the concluding parts of both chapters and the conclusion, I will get back to the overarching historiographical problem on a higher level of analysis and indicate the limits to approaching the October Revolution as either a popular revolution 'from below' or as the result of manipulation 'from above'. Of course, every historian of the Russian Revolution has in some way combined popular attitudes and political leadership. I think the novelty of my approach is the combination of the process of social polarization and the internal dynamics of the Bolshevik Party in the case of

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<sup>6</sup> R.G. Suny, 'Toward a Social History of the October Revolution', *The American Historical Review* Vol. 88 No. 1 (1983) 31-52. Examples of the 'revisionist' or social approach are: D.H. Kaiser (ed.), *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917* (Cambridge 1987); D. Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet seizure of power, from the July days, 1917 to July 1918* (New York 1984); D.P. Koenker and W.G. Rosenberg, *Strikes and Revolution in Russia 1917* (Princeton 1989).

<sup>7</sup> R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899-1919* (London 1990).

<sup>8</sup> E.A. Acton, V.I. Cherniaev and W.G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Critical companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914-1921* (London 1997); R.G. Suny, 'Revision and retreat in the historiography of 1917: Social History and its Critics', *Russian Review*, Vol. 53 No.2 (1994) 165-182. The best example of the 'new' political history is Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*. Pipes simply dismisses the work of the social historians and has received fierce criticism from fellow academics. With the larger public, however, his book was far more popular.

the Military Revolutionary Committee. By doing all this, I intent to generate a firm understanding of how the Bolsheviks came to power.

When unravelling the course of events leading up to and during the October Revolution, several structural characteristics of Russia will become discernible. The question how much explanatory force should be attributed to these structural characteristics relates to the so-called 'structure-agency problem' in the debate about the 'nature' of revolutions as a historical phenomenon in general. The historiographical divide in structure and agency corresponds to some extent with the division between social and political historians. The political historians' tendency to explain the revolution as the outcome of the Bolshevik's tactical manoeuvring translates into an analysis primarily occupied with agency. The social historians rely on more long-term determined social processes and they tend to operate on a more structural basis.<sup>9</sup> Although my narrative is limited to 1917, I will demonstrate the importance of the structural characteristics of Russia when they become evident in the analysis. Thus, the intention of this thesis is not so much to assign 'final' explaining value to either structure or agency, but to clarify how they could interact so decisively in October.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian Revolution is one of the most extensively documented events in history and although the English literature on it is vast, the bulk of the primary sources is still only available in Russian. As a non-Russian reader, this means that the empirical value of my work is necessarily restricted. This thesis is solely based on other authors' interpretations of the revolution. I have used some primary sources that have been translated to English, but these only serve to illustrate the larger analysis. On occasions of conflicting factual information, I have outweighed the evidence of the involved authors as openly as possible.

Surprisingly, the fall of the Soviet Union did not bring about a large increase of available documents on the revolution in Petrograd. Its impact on the historiography of October was mostly methodological, not empirical.<sup>11</sup> After 1991, archival research on the October Revolution has revolved largely around rereading the sources in the light of new methodological insights. This amounts to what I will do here: interpreting and accommodating factual information in larger methodological and historiographical issues.

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<sup>9</sup> An example of a structural work that is less related to the social-political divide is T. Skockpol, *States and social revolutions, a comparative analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge 1979).

<sup>10</sup> I have borrowed this argument from W.G. Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Revolutionary Russia' in: E.A. Acton, V.I. Cherniaev and W.G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution 1914-1921* (London 1997) 30.

<sup>11</sup> The most important archival progress after 1991 was the new availability of provincial archives. On the revolution in Petrograd, most sources were already available. On the impact of the fall of the Soviet Union on the scholarship of the Russian Revolution see S. Kotkin, '1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70 No. 2 (1998) 384-425.

## | Chapter one

# Prelude: Social polarization and the Bolshevik Party

As announced above, in this chapter I will use the fruits of the scholarship of the social and political historians to describe the course of events from February to October. Central in my interpretation of the Bolshevik seizure of power is that both approaches are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. I will argue here that the process of social polarization as described by the social historians, is invaluable to understanding the Bolshevik popularity, but insufficient in explaining the nature and the success of their seizure of power. At least part of this explanation can be found in the internal dynamics of the Bolshevik Party, central to the work of the political historians.

### **1.1 Revolution from below: social polarization**

When in February Tsar Nicholas II was disposed within a matter of days, the workers of Petrograd had high hopes of the outcome of ‘their’ revolution. Soon, however the Provisional Government that had been formed to assume state power was distrusted by the workers as being a ‘bourgeois’ institution only concerned with landowning and ‘capitalist’ interests.<sup>12</sup> The workers’ antagonism against propertied classes was not simply a by-product of the February Revolution. Already before the outbreak of the First World War, a process of social polarization had been evident in urban Russia. This polarization had formed a large group of ‘middle-class intelligentsia’ and a growing ‘mass’ of radical, unsatisfied workers.<sup>13</sup> These workers placed their trust in the Petrograd Soviet<sup>14</sup> instead of the Provisional Government. The Soviets were in principle representative of a nationwide network of workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ councils. This enhanced the workers’ and soldiers’ perception of the Soviet as a separate locus of power that safeguarded their interests, and, later in the revolution, as a viable alternative to the ‘bourgeois’ Provisional Government.

When judging the Provisional Government for its failure to meet democratic expectations, it should be borne in mind that democratic institutions were virtually absent in Imperial Russia. When formal power fell to the Provisional Government in February, its ministers lacked the institutional means to mediate between conflicting claims on the exercise of author-

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<sup>12</sup> S. Smith, ‘Petrograd in 1917: the view from below’, in: D.H. Kaiser (ed.), *The Workers’ revolution in Russia 1917, the view from below* (New York 1987) 62.

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive analysis of this process, see L. Haimson, ‘The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917’, *Slavic Review* Vol. 23 No.4 (1964) 619-642; Vol. 24 No.1 (1965) 1-22.

<sup>14</sup> The significance of Petrograd in the system of Soviets in 1917 might be confusing. A first All-Russian Central Executive Committee was only formed on the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in July. The Central Executive Committee was still located in Petrograd, but operated separate from the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet.

ity and the state's economic, social and cultural resources.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the Provisional Government wielded no real authority beyond possessing the central bureaucracies of the Tsarist regime. This meant that when a law was passed that was not within the interests of the majority of the population, or even at odds with the interests of some significant social group, it could simply be ignored.<sup>16</sup>

Initially, the Provisional Government tried to operate independently of the Soviet. This changed when, during the so-called 'April Crisis', the cabinet was confronted with large-scale protests against their continuing support for the war aims of the Tsarist regime. Aware of their weaknesses and of the potential of the Petrograd Soviet, the Provisional Government proposed the socialists to join them in a new coalition government. Horrified by the escalating chaos on the Petrograd streets and fearing a civil war, the leaders of the Soviet recognized the need to restore order. On May 5, a new cabinet was announced, consisting of six socialist and sixteen non-socialist ministers. It was never a happy marriage. The Soviet's decision to form a coalition with the government was supported by some workers, but the majority of the factory workers in Petrograd grew increasingly suspicious of both the government and those socialists that had collaborated with the 'bourgeoisie'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, starting with the formation of the new cabinet, the crisis over authority and deepening political and social polarization now also began to be manifest itself *within* the Soviet.

The ones that benefited the most from the progressively suspicious position towards the Provisional Government were the Bolsheviks. Previously in considerable disarray, they began to realign their policy when Lenin returned from exile in Switzerland on April 4. In his famous *April Theses* Lenin posed the Bolshevik Party not only in opposition to the Provisional Government and its support for the war, but also to the current leadership of the Soviet.<sup>18</sup> The realignment of the Bolshevik policy was illustrated by the popular slogans "All Power to the Soviets!" and "Down with the War". It was now time to complete a full transition to socialism: power had to pass into the hands of the 'proletariat'. These policies, although despised by the more moderate wing of the Bolshevik Party, were in accordance with the political attitude of the most radical workers of Petrograd.<sup>19</sup>

After April, the economic situation soon deteriorated further, contributing to an increasing militancy and further radicalization towards the left among the Petrograd workers.<sup>20</sup> This, combined with the failure of the June war offensive and the dissolution of the first coalition cabinet, fed into a new series of demonstrations at the beginning of July. These so-called 'July Days' took place as discontents from the Petrograd Garrison exploded under the threat of being sent to the front. The radicalized workers now openly pushed the Soviet to assume power. One worker yelled to Victor Chernov, the leader of the SRs: "Take power you son-of-a-bitch when it is offered to you."<sup>21</sup> It was a genuine outburst of popular discontent, initially grass-root organized, but soon lead by the Bolsheviks. It was not, as several political historians lead us to believe, a failed Bolshevik putsch. The July Days were another expression of the ever growing popular resentment against the government, but above all demonstrated the growing

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Revolutionary Russia', 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> R. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge 2000) 56.

<sup>17</sup> Suny, 'Toward a social history', 38.

<sup>18</sup> Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 74.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, 'The view from below', 65-67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 182.



ambivalence of workers toward the moderate socialists of the Central Executive Committee. They ended in the Petrograd workers shifting more and more to the left while the new government, now headed by Alexander Kerensky, by deciding to arrest several Bolshevik leaders, made a swing to the right.<sup>22</sup>

The crisis came to a new head when General Lavr Kornilov, appointed commander in chief of the army by Kerensky, started to position himself aggressively towards the Soviet as well as to Kerensky and the Provisional Government.<sup>23</sup> Kornilov began to be seen by the political Right as a figure that could restore order by overshadowing the government and in effect imposing a military dictatorship.<sup>24</sup> The relation between Kornilov and Kerensky became more and more imprinted by suspiciousness and hostility in August, leading the latter to announce the formers' disposal as commander-in-chief. Now labelled as a rebel, Kornilov began to behave like one. He issued a statement denouncing Kerensky and the Soviet and ordered one of his generals, Krymov, to march on Petrograd and dissolve both institutions.<sup>25</sup> In a fateful move, Kerensky decided to call upon the Soviet to defend the government against Kornilov's 'counterrevolution'. Kornilov's putsch failed, on the one hand because of its own poor organization and on the other because of the fierce resistance that was set up by several factory committees and railway workers, preventing Kornilov's troops to come even near to Petrograd.<sup>26</sup> Although the Kornilov affair ostensibly ended with a victory for Kerensky, in effect he had signed his own political death-warrant. Managing to simultaneously spoil all of his chances with the Right and the Left, Kerensky now lost virtually all personal authority. Even more important, the spectre of counterrevolution had been raised and the fear of 'Kornilovites' punctuated the social and political polarization. Once again, the radical Left in general and the Bolsheviks in particular were the main beneficiaries, witnessing a considerable increase in their popularity.<sup>27</sup>

The course of events from February to October as described by the social historians can be summarized as a continuing process of social and political polarization, already well under its way before the revolution, that was brought to an escalating dynamic in February and developed further through the April crisis and July Days, to come to unprecedented highs in the wake of the Kornilov affair. How do the political historians chose to interpret the fateful year of 1917? A short summary may suffice here, for the account of the political historians is misleadingly more blurred than that of the social historians. According to them, Russia simply collapsed into anarchy after February.<sup>28</sup> The Bolsheviks, always a minority party, were able to exploit this chaos because of their ruthless manipulation of the naïve and ignorant Petrograd 'masses'.<sup>29</sup> Richard Pipes, the prime example of the of the 'new' political historians, depicts as the essential events of 1917 three failed Bolshevik 'bids' for power in April, June and July, of

<sup>22</sup> Wade, *Russian Revolution 183-184*; Smith, *view from below 68-69*; Suny, 'Toward a social history', 38.

<sup>23</sup> O. Figes, *A People's tragedy, The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London 1996) 442-444; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> A. Wildman, *The Breakdown of the Imperial Army in 1917* in E.A. Acton, V.I. Cherniaev and W.G. Rosenberg(eds.), *Critical Companion to the Russian* (London 1997) 75.

<sup>25</sup> Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 'The view from below', 72.

<sup>27</sup> Figes, *A People's tragedy*, 453-455; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 204-205.

<sup>28</sup> Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, 376; Ulam, *Lenin and The Bolsheviks*, 314.

<sup>29</sup> L. Schapiro, *1917. The Russian Revolutions and the Origins of Present-Day Communism* (Hounsflow 1984) 214.

which the latter is described as “the equivalent of Hitler’s 1923 beer-hall putsch.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the polarization of the ‘masses’ was in the view of the political historians exclusively the doing of the conscious agitation of political leaders. Clearly, the view of the political historians primarily serves the purpose of denying the Bolshevik seizure of power to have any legitimacy and is inadequate in explaining the Bolshevik popularity and their eventual seizure of power. It has become apparent that the process of social and political polarization can account largely for this popularity and the political leadership of the Bolsheviks should be seen as inextricably bound to this process. Yet, when the narrative of the social historians reaches October, they state the success of the Bolshevik seizure of power in very general terms such as “the overthrow of the Kerensky government proved to be a relatively painless affair.”<sup>31</sup> Although this is not a wrong statement, its explaining value is of course severely restricted. In the subsequent part of this chapter, I will demonstrate the importance of the internal dynamics of the Bolshevik Party by focussing on the Bolshevik leadership, without losing the broader ‘popular mood’ out of sight.

### **1.2 October: The Bolshevik leadership divided**

However we choose to describe it, the fact that the months from February to September witnessed a culminating resentment against the Provisional Government and that its main beneficiaries were the Bolsheviks, stand beyond discussion. With Lenin still in hiding, the command of his party passed to Trotsky, who was, along with several other leading Bolsheviks, freed from prison on September 3.<sup>32</sup> The Bolsheviks had abandoned the slogan “All power to the Soviets” in the aftermath of the July Days, but revived it under the leadership of Trotsky. On September 25, the Bolsheviks won a majority in the Workers’ Section of the Petrograd Soviet. This was exemplary for their increased popularity after the Kornilov Affair and Trotsky now assumed chairmanship of the Petrograd Soviet. The All-Russian Central Executive Committee (CEC), chosen by the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, remained under Menshevik and SR control.<sup>33</sup> Trotsky, who had only joined the party two months earlier, recognized the need to disguise a possible Bolshevik attempt to seize power as the assumption of power by the Soviet. Thus, the strategy that he and the majority of the Bolshevik leadership adopted was aimed at associating the seizure of power with a Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. This strategy seems to have arisen above all from a realistic assessment of the party’s influence among the population of Petrograd and the value the ‘masses’ attached to the Soviets as genuine democratic organs to which power should pass.<sup>34</sup> Trotsky now started to press the Soviet to convene a Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets within two weeks. The CEC was hesitant to oblige the Bolshevik’s demand, especially on such short notice, but finally agreed on September 23 to call for an All-Russian Congress of Soviets to convene in Petrograd on October 20.<sup>35</sup>

Trotsky’s new line infuriated Lenin, who sent several letters to a variety of party organs pressing that “history will not forgive us if we do not assume power now”, the “crucial point of the revolution in Russia has undoubtedly arrived [...] To miss such a moment and to ‘wait’ for

<sup>30</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 521.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, ‘The view from below’, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 467.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>34</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 178-187; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 223-224.

<sup>35</sup> Daniels, *Red October*, 55-56; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks* 188. Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 474 sets this date at September 26.

the Congress of Soviets would be *utter idiocy*, or *sheer treachery*.<sup>36</sup> “If power cannot be achieved without insurrection, we must *resort to insurrection at once*.”<sup>37</sup> Lenin’s commands fell on deaf ears: the Bolshevik leadership simply turned them aside.<sup>38</sup> This frustrated Lenin even more, and he decided to move back to Petrograd from Finland in the first week of October<sup>39</sup> and take matters into his own hands. He pressed the Central Committee to meet on 10 October to discuss the issue of an armed insurrection. The outcome of this meeting is documented in a resolution hastily drafted on a page from a child’s notebook by Lenin:

Recognising thus that an armed uprising is inevitable and the time perfectly ripe, the Central Committee proposes to all the organisations of the party to act accordingly and to discuss and decide from this point of view all the practical questions (the Congress of Soviets of the northern region, the withdrawal of troops from Petrograd, the actions in Moscow and Minsk, etc).<sup>40</sup>

Rex Wade argues that the resolution did not initiate actual preparations for a seizure of power, but merely was a “general statement of policy for a turbulent and seemingly favourable period in the revolution.”<sup>41</sup> Although it is true that the resolution does not convey any specific timetable or plan, it actually *was* immediately followed by very specific preparations for the seizure of power. This becomes clear when we look at the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region (CSNR).

For Pipes, this Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, dominated by the Bolsheviks and their ideological allies, the Left SRs, took the organization of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets in its hand by forming a ‘Northern Regional Committee’ which was to guarantee the convocation of this congress.<sup>42</sup> By doing this, the Bolsheviks undertook “a veritable coup d’état against the national organization of the Soviets: it was the opening phase of the power seizure. With these measures, the Bolshevik Central Committee arrogated to itself the authority which the First Congress of Soviets had entrusted to the [Central Executive Committee].”<sup>43</sup> This characterization of the CSNR very conveniently suits Pipes’s overall interpretation of the October Revolution as a coup d’état that was “plotted and executed by a tightly organized conspiracy.”<sup>44</sup> However, the assessment of the CSNR as a Bolshevik-manipulated forerunner to the All-Russian Congress and essentially offensive in character is not a very convincing interpretation. It seems that the CSNR was in fact defensive in character, from the viewpoint of the Soviet that is, and meant to coordinate the activities of the Soviets in the approaches to Petrograd. By doing this, in the words of the leading Bolshevik Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, the Bolsheviks hoped to “throw around revolutionary Petrograd an iron ring, which would defend the centre of the revolution, the capital, if the need arose”<sup>45</sup> The

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Christopher Read, *Lenin, a Revolutionary Life* (New York 2005) 178.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in E. Acton and T. Stableford (eds.), *The Soviet Union, A Documentary History I* (Exeter 2005) 56-57.

<sup>38</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 178-182; Read, *A Revolutionary Life*, 178-179.

<sup>39</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 482.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *The Bolshevik revolution 1917-1918, Documents and Materials* (London 1934) 58.

<sup>41</sup> Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 225.

<sup>42</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 474-475.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>45</sup> J. White, ‘Lenin, Trotskii and the Arts of Insurrection: The Congress of Soviets of The Northern Region 11-13 October 1917’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 77 No.1 (1999) 120.

CSNR was part of Trotsky's strategy that was based on the defence of the capital, despite Lenin's insistence that it be used to launch an offensive from the Baltic area.<sup>46</sup> The origin of the 'Northern Regional Committee' also takes on meaning within this defensive strategy. It was seemingly felt that the CEC was embarking on a campaign to stop the convocation of the Second Congress of Soviets, the institution that was envisioned by the Bolshevik leaders to which power should pass. To ensure that this would not happen, the 'Northern Regional Committee' was brought to life. Finally, the CSNR also was an essential stage in the evolution of the Military Revolutionary Committee, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. In sum, by looking at the CSNR it can be concluded, against Wade, that the October 10 resolution was succeeded by very specific preparations for the seizure of power as well as, against Pipes, that this planning took place from genuine *defensive* concerns in reaction to the fear that the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets was in danger.<sup>47</sup>

This approach to the CSNR, which flowed from Trotsky's tactically cautiousness and high sensibility to the prevailing 'popular mood', was exemplary for the attitude of the bulk of the Bolshevik leadership after the October 10 resolution. To summarize, this approach entailed the recognition that the Soviets and the Second All-Russian Congress, not the organs of the Bolshevik Party should be utilized for the overthrow of the Provisional Government; that the attack on the government should be masked as defensive, meaning that it was necessary to wait for the government to take action first; and that every opportunity to supersede the Provisional Government's authority should be exploited.<sup>48</sup>

Another important factor in interpreting the Bolshevik seizure of power is how the decision of the CEC on October 18 to postpone the convocation of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets to October 25 should be assessed. The reason for postponing the Congress that was given by the CEC was that an insufficient amount of representatives had arrived in Petrograd. On the day of the CEC's decision the Bolshevik 'conspiracy' had been exposed to the press by Lev Kamenev, one of the members of the Bolshevik Central Committee that had opposed the October 10 resolution. Aware of the Bolshevik plans on the Congress, it appears that the CEC hoped to gain enough time to assemble an anti-Bolshevik majority on the congress.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately for the members of the CEC, their decision benefited the Bolsheviks in two ways. First, it gave them time to mobilize the necessary support. Despite Lenin's insistence on the necessity to take power before the Congress of Soviets convened, the Bolsheviks were before the decision to postpone the congress in no way prepared to manage a seizure of power within this time range.<sup>50</sup> Second, the decision further buttressed the claim that the Congress of Soviets was in danger, enabling the Bolshevik leadership to disguise their actions as defensive. Perhaps even more important, the decision of Kerensky to strike against the Bolsheviks and Left SRs on October 24, provided the Bolsheviks with a perfect excuse to take action against such 'counterrevolutionary' moves.<sup>51</sup> In the next chapter I will describe the Bolsheviks political manoeuvring in more detail by subjecting the Military Revolutionary committee to closer scrutiny. By doing this, it will become clear that, although these 'strokes of luck' did contribute to

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<sup>46</sup> White, 'The Arts of Insurrection', 123-124.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>48</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 224-225.

<sup>49</sup> Daniels, *Red October*, 97-98; Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 477-478.

<sup>50</sup> Daniels, *Red October*, 97-98.

<sup>51</sup> Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 227.

the Bolshevik's success, the full extent of their planning and their decisiveness to take power did so even more.

### ***1.3 Preliminary conclusion***

Before we move to a more detailed description of the course of events in those fateful October weeks, it might be useful to review the general thrust of arguments I have made in this chapter on a higher level of analysis. I have argued that the social historians have convincingly demonstrated that a process of deepening economic crisis and increasing social polarization led the masses to a political position that was progressively favourable to the Bolsheviks. By looking more closely into the activities of the Bolshevik Party, we can also conclude that it was largely because of their tactical cautiousness and responsiveness to this 'popular mood' that they were able to benefit more from this process of social polarization than their socialist competitors in the Soviet. This means that neither 'revolution from below' nor 'manipulation from above' can ultimately explain the Bolshevik's success in October. What I have tried to describe in this chapter is the way the agency of the Bolsheviks interacted in October with the more structurally determined long-term process of social polarization.

## | Chapter two

# Denouement: The Military Revolutionary Committee

The Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) was officially an institution of the Petrograd Soviet, but it were the Bolsheviks that it brought to power. The way it was conceived and operated was in line with the party's tactical course to both supersede the authority of the government by operating through a Soviet institution and to wait for the government to strike first. Moreover, the crisis that gave rise to the institution and the way it was manipulated by the Bolsheviks reflect elements of the nature of the Bolshevik seizure of power that are central in finding out whether it was a coup d'état or social revolution.

### **2.1 Genesis**

As the war progressed, fears that the German army might attempt an advance on Petrograd grew more and more realistic. In the second week of October, Kerensky announced that a large part of the Petrograd Garrison would be sent to the front. The Bolsheviks were ominously well-represented among the Petrograd Garrison and the threat of a German advance was very likely used by Kerensky as a way to get rid of these Bolshevized troops. Stimulated by fears of being sent to the front, the sympathy of the Petrograd Garrison began to shift decisively towards the Soviet. Garrison units that had been previously sympathetic to the government now claimed neutrality or openly sided with the Soviet. At the same time, rumours began to circle that the government was planning its own evacuation, abandoning the "capital of the Revolution" to be conquered by the Germans.<sup>52</sup>

Against this background, the Central Committee of the Petrograd Soviet decided to discuss the capital's defence on October 9. The meeting opened with the proposal of a joint Menshevik-SR resolution which, in effect, would enable cooperation with the government in the interest of the war effort. The Bolsheviks countered the moderates' proposition and pressed the Central Committee to set up a 'revolutionary headquarters' that should take the defence of Petrograd in its own hands and prevent the shipment of the garrison to the front. The Menshevik-SR resolution passed by a vote of thirteen to twelve and their proposal went for the full body of the Soviet that same evening. At this plenary session Trotsky opposed the Menshevik resolution and proposed a new Bolshevik one:

The Petrograd Soviet authorizes the Executive Committee to organize a revolutionary committee of defence, which would concentrate in its hands all information relating to the defence of Petrograd and its approaches, would take measures to arm the workers, and thus would assure the

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<sup>52</sup>Daniels, *Red October*, 72-73; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 477-8; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 224-227.

revolutionary defence of Petrograd and the safety of the people from the attack which is openly being prepared by military and civilian Kornilovites.<sup>53</sup>

Trotsky's motion, brilliantly combining the popular demand that the Soviet take matters in its own hands with real fears of a German advance and imaginary ones of a second Kornilov affair, struck exactly the right chords with the audience. His motion received the support of an overwhelming majority of representatives. The formation of a 'revolutionary committee of defence', later renamed the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), was approved by a large majority of the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet on October 12. The MRC held its first meeting only on October 20, when it selected a leadership composed of two Left SRs and three Bolsheviks. Pavel Lazimir, a Left SR, was voted as the committee's chairman, enhancing the committee's ostensibly non-party character.<sup>54</sup>

A point of discussion considering the MRC is whether its genesis was a direct result of the Bolshevik Central Committee October 10 resolution and the organization of an armed insurrection was the committee's primary purpose from the outset. Pipes confirms this view and argues that Trotsky "had decided already in September 1917 to avail themselves of any opportunity to create what he calls a 'non-party "Soviet" organ to lead the uprising' "<sup>55</sup> and that the "formation of the Military Revolutionary Committee [...] implemented the decision of the Central Committee on October 10."<sup>56</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, who has exhaustively chronicled the activity of the Bolshevik Party during the revolution, rejects this view as misleading. He argues that "at no time during the first half of October was the question of forming a non-party institution like the [MRC] ever raised in the Central Committee."<sup>57</sup> Additionally, he holds that Lenin looked to the Bolshevik Military Organization and the CSNR as the organizer for an insurrection.<sup>58</sup> This might very well have been the case, but in those days it was Trotsky, not Lenin, who most decisively directed the tactical course of the Bolsheviks. As already noted above, Trotsky had ensured that the CSNR, held from October 11-13, was not used to launch an immediate insurrection, but to co-ordinate the activities of Soviets in the approaches to Petrograd. Representatives present at this congress made it clear that in several towns of the Baltic area the military authority of the government was already effectively superseded by committees of the local Soviet.<sup>59</sup> Corresponding with the general purpose of the CSNR, it was decided that the activities of these committees were to be co-ordinated with those of the Petrograd MRC, established on October 9. The 'Northern Regional Committee' that had been formed to ensure the convocation of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets eventually merged completely with the Petrograd MRC.<sup>60</sup> Although this corresponded more with Trotsky's overall tactic than with the October 10 resolution, we still have to conclude that, directly after its genesis, the MRC was conceived by the Bolsheviks as *an –not the–* institution that should be employed to supersede government authority.

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<sup>53</sup>Cited in Daniels, *Red October*, 73.

<sup>54</sup>Daniels, *Red October*, 72-74; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 478-480; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 231-234; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 228.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 478.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>57</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 232-233.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>59</sup> White, 'The Arts of Insurrection', 129-130

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

## 2.2 From defence to offense

Trotsky assured that, at least from the viewpoint of the Soviet, the MRC's actions were defensive in nature. It was only several hours before the Bolsheviks presented the disposal of the Provisional Government to the Congress of Soviets that the MRC's activities started to be outwardly offensive. How did this shift from defence to offense occur?

Perhaps it is useful first to clarify the nature of the MRC's relation to the Bolshevik Party. Pipes describes the MRC as "only a flag of convenience for the true organizer of the coup, the Bolshevik Military Organization."<sup>61</sup> Although the MRC was dominated by the Bolsheviks, Pipes's assessment is once again a mischaracterization. It seems that the bulk of the Bolshevik leadership was primarily concerned with internal party matters and the preparations for the forthcoming Congress of Soviets. Besides, the Bolsheviks were not the only active members of the MRC and, at least until the final confrontation with the government on October 24-25, the characterization of the committee as a 'non-party Soviet institution' was correct to some extent. The fact that the Central Committee appointed, as late as October 16, a 'Military-Revolutionary Centre' composed of members from the Bolshevik Military Organization, only reflected the increased recognition that the MRC could be effectively related to the Bolshevik's own planning.<sup>62</sup>

One of the first actions of the MRC was to initiate a 'garrison conference' on October 18. This was an assembly of representatives from the units of the Petrograd Garrison that would promote cooperation between the MRC and the garrison on this and several later occasions. These garrison conferences were held at the Smolny institute, formerly a girls school but during the revolution functioning as the headquarters of the Soviet and the MRC. During the garrison conferences, the MRC obtained a good sense of which garrison units opposed the Provisional Government and were in favour of transfer of power to the Soviets. The results were satisfying: an overwhelming majority of representatives pledged full support to the MRC and insisted that power should be taken on the forthcoming Congress of Soviets. Only now they had been assured of substantial popular support, the MRC's leaders dared to embark on a decisive confrontation with Kerensky. The first step in this direction was made on October 20, when the MRC dispatched two hundred 'commissars' to several garrison units and weapons depots in Petrograd to prevent possible 'counterrevolutionary' moves.<sup>63</sup> The next day another garrison conference was held and several resolutions were drawn up in the name of the Petrograd garrison:

The Petrograd Garrison welcomes the formation of a Military Revolutionary Committee in connection with the Petrograd Soviet. [...] The Petrograd Garrison will support the Military Revolutionary Committee in all its undertakings.<sup>64</sup>

[...] The Petrograd garrison hereby declares: *The time for words is past.* [...] The All-Russian Congress of Soviets must take the power into its own hands in order to give to the people peace, land and bread. Only thus can the safety of the revolution and of the people be insured.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 480. Daniels, *Red October*, 120 holds the same opinion.

<sup>62</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 239.

<sup>63</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 487; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 233-240; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 228-229.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Bunyan and Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 79.



These resolutions demonstrate both the garrison's progressively aggressive attitude and the MRC's strategy of using the fears of the soldiers to pose its own actions as a *defence* of the revolution. The next day, October 22, the MRC formally declared itself the 'directing organ' of the Petrograd Garrison. On this 'Day of the Petrograd Soviet' several socialist rallies were organized and the Bolsheviks took this opportunity to rouse more popular support for the transfer of power to the Soviet. Trotsky, deploying his oratorical prowess, stirred the crowds to "a state of ecstasy... ready to join in a religious hymn."<sup>66</sup> On October 23, the MRC, albeit not without problems, managed to take control of the Peter and Paul Fortress. This was of essential importance to the success of the seizure of power. The fortress directly overlooked the Winter Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government, and its capture was perceived as a strategic and psychological victory. The General Staff still launched efforts to reach a compromise, but it was too late, the garrison was already under effective control of the MRC. Although formal power still belonged to the government, the MRC controlled the streets already two days before the actual seizure of power.<sup>67</sup>

How many troops did the MRC have at its disposal on those days? Pipes holds that Trotsky's claim that "the overwhelming majority of the garrison were standing openly on the side of the workers" is exaggerated and that "contemporary evidence indicates [...] that the Bolshevik influence was much more modest. The mood of the Petrograd Garrison was anything but revolutionary."<sup>68</sup> Was this indeed the case? Roy Medvedev estimates that on the eve of the October Revolution 300 000 workers, soldiers and sailors stood on the side of the Bolsheviks. The Provisional Government was able to gather 25 000 troops for its defence. The struggle over the Winter Palace on October 25 was accordingly decided between 20 000 attackers and 3000 defenders.<sup>69</sup> Medvedev bases his estimation on calculations of Soviet historians, Pipes on his "own calculations" and a passage of the memoirs of Nikolai Sukhanov, a later critic of the Bolshevik regime who was executed under Stalin in 1940. Although it is very likely that the calculations of the Soviet historians are exaggerated, Pipes assessment seems above all to be predetermined by his characterization of the October Revolution as a coup d'état carried out by a small group of intelligentsia.

Whatever the exact number of troops the MRC was able to mobilize, it was only on October 23 that Kerensky started to take action. In the night of October 23-24 he discussed the matter with his ministers. Early the next morning, several Bolshevik newspapers were shut down, the telephone lines to the Smolny institute were disconnected and the arrest of the MRC's commissars was ordered. In reaction, the MRC dispatched its famous 'Directive No.1':

The Petrograd Soviet [...] is in danger. During the night counter-revolutionary plotters have attempted to bring cadets and shock troops from the suburbs. The papers *Soldat* and *Rabochii Put* have been closed. You are hereby ordered to hold every regiment in [fighting] readiness and await further orders. Any delay or failure to obey this order will be considered a betrayal of the Revolution.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>67</sup> Daniels, *Red October*, 107-125; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 240-8.

<sup>68</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 486.

<sup>69</sup> R. Medvedev, H. Jaspers (transl.), *Oktober 1917* (Hamburg 1979) 71-72.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Bunyan and Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 86.

At the meeting of the Central Committee later that day the Bolshevik leaders discussed, in Lenin's absence, how to react to Kerensky's measures. It is important to note that the possibility to dispose of the government before the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets was scheduled to meet (the next day) was not considered a desirable option. In the words of Joseph Stalin: "Within the Military Revolutionary Committee there are two points of view. The first is that we organize an uprising at once, and the second is that we first consolidate our forces. The Central Committee has sided with the second view."<sup>71</sup> Thus, the actions of the MRC remained defensive in nature and were primarily aimed at neutralizing Kerensky's measures. Trotsky insisted that "an armed conflict today or tomorrow, on the eve of the All-Russian Congress, is not in our plans."<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the MRC issued a press release saying that "contrary to all kinds of rumours and reports, the Military Revolutionary Committee declares that it exists not to prepare and carry out the seizure of power, but exclusively for defence of the interests of the Petrograd Garrison and the democracy from counterrevolutionary encroachments."<sup>73</sup> Trotsky had good reason to refrain himself from any explicit offensive actions. The sanction of the Congress of Soviets was needed to give legitimacy to the seizure of power, or they would lose all support from the workers and soldiers. The Bolsheviks were still not entirely ensured of a majority at this congress.

Lenin, who stayed in hiding at the outskirts of Petrograd, had no contempt for this tactically cautious strategy and was once again confused and infuriated by the Central Committee's refusal to obey his commands. "The situation is extremely critical," he wrote, "delaying the uprising now really means death. [...] On the order of the day are questions that are not solved by conferences, by congresses (even by Congresses of Soviets), but only by the people, by the masses, by the struggle of armed masses. [...] We must not wait! We may lose everything! Who should seize power? At present this is not important. Let the Military Revolutionary Committee seize it, or 'some other institution'."<sup>74</sup> Unwilling to wait for a response to his outrages, Lenin decided around midnight to leave his hiding and went to the Smolny institute. Lenin's arrival at the Soviet headquarters, combined with continuing signs of the Provisional Government's destitution, shifted the MRC's undertakings from defensive to offensive early in the morning of October 25.<sup>75</sup>

At 2:00 a.m. the MRC systematically started to obtain key points of strategic importance in Petrograd. By early morning, the MRC had under its control all centres of communication except for the Winter Palace. Kerensky fled the city in a desperate attempt to rally support from troops at the front. All the other ministers simply awaited their arrest in the Winter Palace.<sup>76</sup> At ten in the morning, Lenin drafted a historic proclamation:

To the Citizens of Russia!

The Provisional Government has been overthrown. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, the Military Revolutionary Committee, which stands at the head of the Petrograd proletariat and garrison. The cause for which the people have struggled –the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 252.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Bunyan and Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 95-96.

<sup>75</sup> Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 267-9; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 235.

<sup>76</sup> Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 491; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 269-276; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 236-237.

landlord ownership of land, workers' control over industry, the creation of a Soviet government—this has been assured. Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants!<sup>77</sup>

This ignored the somewhat inconvenient fact that all the ministers, except Kerensky, were still sitting in the Winter Palace, defended by a small force. Typical of the confusion on this day were some difficulties that the MRC faced in capturing the Palace. For example, the cannon at the Peter and Paul Fortress had not been fired for months and proved to be unusable. Also, a red lantern that was to signal the final push on the Winter Palace could not be found. The MRC offered the Provisional Government several ultimatums to surrender peacefully or face artillery fire from the cruiser *Aurora* and the Peter and Paul Fortress. The ministers, still hoping for resistance to arrive at any moment, rejected the ultimatums. October 26 had already arrived when a small force finally made it into the room where the ministers had spent the day, waiting for their arrest. Antonov-Ovseenko flew in and declared that “the members of the Provisional Government are under arrest. They will be confined to the Peter and Paul Fortress. I will not allow any violence against them.”<sup>78</sup>

During the skirmishing in the city, the Bolsheviks kept delaying the opening of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, still anxious to confront its delegates with a fully overthrown government. The opening of the Congress at the Smolny institute, about an hour before the arrest of the cabinet, coincided with the first round of artillery fire on the Winter Palace. The cannon balls were less destructive to the walls of the Winter Palace than they were to the spirit of reconciliation amongst moderate socialists. The Mensheviks and SRs would not have any of the insurrectionary moves of the Bolsheviks and simply walked out of the Congress. Their capitulation meant the abandonment of all hopes for a broad socialist government and gave the Bolsheviks a free hand in forming a government. The Congress now transformed into an orgy of revolutionary rhetoric and witnessed a number of decrees on Soviet power, immediate peace, and redistribution of land that were passed at a staggering rate. The new government that was created was named the Council of People's Commissars, and Lenin was elected its chairman. Although they faced a number of immediate threats and their position was still extremely insecure, the Bolsheviks had finally managed to seize power.<sup>79</sup>

### 2.3 Preliminary conclusion

What does this closer scrutiny of the Military Revolutionary Committee signify in our analysis of the October Revolution? First of all, it emphasizes the inaccuracy of explaining the Bolshevik seizure of power as either the result of a chain of accidents or of the conscious planning of a small, tightly-knit intelligentsia. The actual conquest of power in Petrograd occurred days before the actual fall of the Winter Palace and formal power finally fell to the Bolsheviks. This was yet another sign of Kerensky's weakness and it was made clear to the government that real power, the power to mobilize troops that is, belonged to the Soviet. The Petrograd workers supported the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the Provisional Government because they believed Congress of Soviets and thus the revolution to be in immediate danger.

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Wade. *Russian Revolution*, 237.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>79</sup> Daniels, *Red October*, 200-213; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 496-501; Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks*, 291-304; Wade, *Russian Revolution*, 239-244.

## | Conclusion

When making a final assessment of the October Revolution, several notions can be discarded. The characterization of the Bolshevik seizure of power as a coup d'état carried out by a small minority of revolutionary intelligentsia under the iron leadership of Lenin is shown to be inadequate. Bolshevism was a genuine mass-movement and its policy expressed the sentiments of a large share of the urban population of Russia. Similarly, portraying the October Revolution as the dramatic conclusion to a chain of accidents is to overlook the more general thrust of events. Of course, if one looks to history –especially the history of a revolution– on a level of human decision-making, every logic appears to be lost in a chaotic chain of actions and reactions. There was, however, a certain logic–not inevitability, it should be stressed– to the way events were unfolding. From the beginning of October the Bolsheviks had, albeit without a specific timetable, consciously been driving towards a seizure of power. Moreover, the undermining of the Provisional Government's legitimacy was so thorough and the problems that it faced so deep-rooted that its overthrow was continuously imminent. Had there been no Bolsheviks, there had still been a deeply divided country in the midst of a deep economic crisis and a devastating war, ruled by an incapable and diffident government.

In Chapter one, I have sought to clarify the 'logic' of events by combining the process of social polarization with the internal dynamics of the Bolshevik Party. By doing this, I also indicated the limits to the scholarship of the social and political historians. I have argued that the political historians have rightly emphasized the importance of internal decision-making processes and political leadership, though wrongly dislocated its meaning from the wider social context of the revolution. On their part, the social historians have rightly stressed the significance of the process of social polarization in explaining the Bolshevik's popularity, but failed to fully comprehend and appreciate the implications of political leadership and the internal dynamics of the Bolshevik Party. The social polarization was neither the doing of Lenin's ideological agitation nor the workers' and soldiers' reaction to their direct materialistic and economic circumstances. Processes such as social polarization and economic deterioration existed as much in the minds of those that lived through the revolution as in their material circumstances. Hence, the growing popularity of the Bolsheviks –or the extreme Left in general– can be *described*, not ultimately *explained*, in terms of social polarization.

The in Chapter two provided analysis of the Military Revolutionary Committee punctuates all issues that are central to the problem of the October Revolution. It reveals the full extent of the Bolshevik's planning and the way their manoeuvring was inextricably bound up with deep-rooted social and political problems. The role of the MRC signifies on the one hand that by downplaying the importance of the planning of the Bolsheviks, too much is allotted to

chance. On the other, it shows that characterizing the Soviet as being controlled completely by the Bolsheviks and the MRC as simply an instrument that was deployed to secure the seizure of power is insufficiently attentive to the tactically cautiousness of the bulk of the Bolshevik leadership and their responsiveness to the 'popular mood'.

How can we finally gauge the agency of Lenin and the Bolsheviks? Their clear-cut ideological message, promising peace, land, and bread and blatantly calling for a violent transfer of power to the Soviets, brought a self-evident solution to the grievances of the Petrograd workers. What this did at most was accelerating the process of social polarization that was already well under its way before 1917. As for Lenin himself, his role was somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, his personal interference pushed the Bolshevik Party to a decisive insurrectionary course on two occasions. First, when he moved back to Petrograd in October to ensure that a insurrection would be set on the agenda, as confirmed in the October 10 resolution. The second time this happened was when Lenin pushed the actions of the MRC from defensive to offensive on the night of October 24-25, resulting in the final overthrow of the Provisional Government. On the other hand, the fact that Lenin's commands were not always obediently followed –pointing to the dynamic nature of the party's policy and the divisions among its leadership– secured the success of the Bolshevik seizure of power. This holds especially for Trotsky's tactically cautious course and his prudent deployment of the Soviet for the seizure of power, instead of launching an outright offensive from the Baltic area, as favoured by Lenin.

With all this in mind, the question whether the Bolshevik seizure of power was a coup d'état or a social revolution still allows no straightforward answer. The events on October 25 were typical of a coup in the sense that they consisted of a swift and forceful overthrow of the Provisional Government, carried out by a relatively small force. However, it has also become clear that to focus too narrowly on this swiftness and forcefulness is to misunderstand the true meaning of the October Revolution. The very fact that the Bolshevik seizure of power was understood to be a Soviet seizure of power, which would bring about a broad socialist coalition government, made it feasible in the first place. In October, the dictatorial aspirations of Lenin and Trotsky coincided with a perceived social revolution in the name of the Soviet. This schizophrenic nature of the Bolshevik seizure of power also was its tragic irony.

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