

The Bolsheviks Come to Power

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The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd

NEW EDITION

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THE JULY UPRISING

Still some twenty-five miles from the capital, the mud-spattered, dark green carriages of the Finnish railway train wound their way through pine- and fir-covered, boulder-strewn hills broken here and there by clusters of tidy log cottages. It was the first run of the morning. Seated on hard benches smooth from wear, in a dilapidated carriage occupied mainly by respectably dressed summer residents of the Finnish countryside commuting to work in Petrograd, Lenin, his younger sister Maria, and his comrades Bonch-Bruевич, an authority on Russian religious sects who had been active in the Russian Social Democratic Party from its earliest years, and Saveliev, the university-educated son of a minor noble, also a long-time party member, talked together animatedly. About nine o'clock the train crossed the Sestra River, a narrow, meandering stream that served as a boundary between Finland and Russia; minutes later it slowed to a stop at the small border station of Beloostrov.

Up the track a machinist uncoupled the locomotive, which, chugging and hissing rhythmically, moved off slowly to take on wood and water. Conversation between Lenin and his companions was interrupted at this point by an officious border inspector who popped into their compartment and commanded sharply, "Documents! Show your documents! Have them ready!" Many years later Bonch-Bruевич recalled his uneasiness as he and his friends handed their papers to the waiting inspector. Lenin was traveling on his own passport. Would the name "Ulianov" arouse suspicion? The inspector stamped all four passports with only a perfunctory glance and hurried on.¹

During the twenty-minute stopover at Beloostrov, Bonch-Bruевич rushed off to fetch the morning papers, while Lenin, Saveliev, and Maria Ilinichna ordered coffee at the station buffet. Bonch-Bruевич soon returned with several late editions, and Lenin pounced on them for news of the uprising in Petrograd. Prominent stories in almost all the papers carried details of the previous day's events. From all indications it appeared that the

movement of armed soldiers and factory workers into the streets had been triggered in mid-afternoon by soldiers of the several-thousand-man First Machine Gun Regiment. One or two machine gunners had been dispatched to each major factory and military unit, where, more often than not, their appeals for insurrection had been greeted with enthusiasm. By early evening upper-class citizens had disappeared from downtown streets, and thousands of soldiers in full battle dress and workers carrying banners, many of the latter accompanied by their families, were demonstrating outside the Mariinsky and Taurida palaces, headquarters of the Provisional Government and the Soviet respectively, demanding the transfer of power to the Soviet. According to these accounts, large groups of rebelling workers and soldiers had gone out of their way to parade past Bolshevik headquarters in the Kshesinskaia mansion, a sign of Bolshevik involvement in preparation of the uprising and of the authority of the party among the Petrograd masses.

Insurgents in motorcars commandeered on the streets and in military trucks bristling with machine guns and decorated with red banners had been observed weaving about the city all evening unhindered. There were numerous reports of random rifle and machine gun fire in widely scattered areas; the extent of casualties was as yet unknown. At rail stations long lines of alarmed, well-dressed Petrograders queued up for tickets and prepared to leave the city. With the consent of the guards on duty, insurgent forces had taken control of the psychologically and strategically important Peter and Paul Fortress. According to last-minute dispatches, a group of rebel soldiers had made an unsuccessful attempt to capture War Minister Kerensky. In addition, the left appeared to have secured a major victory in the Workers' Section of the Petrograd Soviet, which on the previous evening had broken with the leadership of the central Soviet organs by endorsing the idea of transferring power to the soviets and forming a commission to help give the mass movement a peaceful and organized character.²

At the start of the trouble the government and the Soviet had appealed to soldiers and workers not to go into the streets; after it was clear that this effort had failed, the commander of the Petrograd Military District, General Petr Polovtsev, a youthful but tough and already much decorated cavalry officer, had urgently called on units of the garrison to restore order in the streets. However, troops not participating in the uprising were ignoring his directives. Late in the evening Polovtsev had published a ban on further demonstrations of any kind. Meanwhile, both the cabinet and the All-Russian Executive Committees had been meeting in emergency session on and off throughout the night in connection with the expanding crisis.

In these early reports there was little consensus about what had sparked the uprising. One of the day's featured stories was that several Kadets had resigned from the cabinet because of differences with socialist ministers over government policy toward the Ukraine.³ Some observers took it for

granted that the developing insurrection was directly related to the apparent breakup of the coalition. Thus a correspondent for the Kadet newspaper *Rech'* suggested that the latter development had provided the opportunity for soldiers in a *few* military regiments and workers in *some* factories to demonstrate their preference for the transfer of "all power to the soviets."⁴ Other observers attributed the disruptions to dissatisfaction among garrison troops with brutal measures adopted by military authorities to deal with front-line units that refused to advance against the enemy.⁵

Despite differences as to the precise issue that had triggered the movement to overthrow the government, virtually all commentators seemed agreed that the Bolsheviks, more than any other political group, were to blame for the trouble. A writer for *Izvestiia*, the newspaper of the Central Executive Committee and the Petrograd Soviet, concluded that a part of the Petrograd proletariat and garrison had come into the streets with arms in hand under the influence of "totally irresponsible Bolshevik agitation." In his view, the Bolsheviks were attempting to make use of genuine dissatisfaction and unrest among the proletarian and soldier masses for their own purposes.⁶ An editorial in *Birzhevye vedomosti*, a nonparty liberal daily, put the matter more directly. "What is this?" queried the writer rhetorically. "The realization of the unfulfilled Bolshevik lust of June 10? An armed uprising against the Provisional Government and the majority of the organized democracy?"⁷ Years later Bonch-Bruевич recalled that during the trip back to Petrograd Lenin was alarmed most of all by the fury toward the Bolsheviks that was sharply reflected in the July 4 papers.⁸

The third warning bell, announcing the train's impending departure, interrupted Lenin's thoughts. Gulping his coffee and grabbing up the papers, he bounded after his associates, who were hurrying back to their compartment. Once again settled in his seat, Lenin fell silent, absorbing the rest of the day's important news.

On this summer morning the papers reported more than the usual upset over the increasingly critical shortages of food and fuel. On July 2 the minister of food supply, Peshekhonov, had summoned representatives of the Central Petrograd Food Supply Board so that they could be apprised of the growing emergency. The report of a board staff member spelled out the dimensions of the existing food supply breakdown in the Petrograd area. It revealed that even with a reduction in rations, grain reserves would barely last until September. The Food Supply Board had recently purchased 100,000 poods (a pood equals thirty-six pounds) of rice in Vladivostok, but deliveries to Petrograd were delayed by shipping difficulties. Milk deliveries had fallen sharply, largely because of currency problems with Finland, Petrograd's main source of dairy products. Supplies of feed grain and hay reaching Petrograd were a scant third of the necessary minimum. Deliveries of eggs and vegetables were also sharply reduced, in part because

authorities in several provinces were not permitting outbound shipments.⁹

There was news that the Committee on Fuel Supply had dispatched an emergency report to the mayor of Petrograd characterizing the situation with regard to wood supplies as catastrophic. The report placed the blame for this shortage on disruptions on rail lines, the overload of the Petrograd rail head, and difficulties with river transport caused by labor problems and by bad weather. It implied that unless immediate measures to eliminate supply and distribution problems for wood were undertaken, increasing numbers of plants and factories would be forced to shut down for lack of fuel.¹⁰ A related report indicated that the growing fuel emergency had impelled officials of the Moscow Stock Exchange to forward an urgent memorandum to the Ministry of Trade and Industry in Petrograd. The stock exchange officials warned that the shutdown of many factories in the course of the summer because of lack of fuel and raw materials was already certain. These officials strongly supported factory owners who insisted on their financial inability to keep on the payroll the many thousands of employees who would soon be forced out of work. In addition, they predicted that massive labor unrest in major industrial areas was inevitable unless the government mobilized unemployed workers for jobs in agriculture and provided adequate relief benefits. The memorandum urged that the government inform the public of the nature and causes of the developing situation so that laid-off workers would not hold factory owners responsible for their situation.¹¹

The main government committees charged with organizing elections to the Constituent Assembly and preparing a land reform program for its adoption were continuing their deliberations. The previous day the Elections Committee had spent many hours debating how members of the armed forces would be represented in the assembly. Meanwhile, the Land Reform Committee heard reports from representatives of local land committees on developments in the provinces. The delegate from Penza Province reported that local peasants were putting the principle of socialization of the land into practice spontaneously by seizing and dividing up land according to a labor norm. Efforts by authorities to protect private property were useless, he maintained. No official would dare take action against the peasants for fear of reprisal. A representative from Poltava Province declared that the peasants were demanding socialization of the land and were awaiting the implementation of this action through proper legislative procedures. "It is clear to me," he went on, "that to avoid land seizures it is necessary for the government to prepare laws on the leasing of land, the prohibition of land purchases and sales, and the conservation of forests. Any delay in the publication of such regulations will make peasants apprehensive that land reform will never come." A speaker from the Don Region declared that the population of his area was demanding the expropriation of private landholdings without compensation. The Petrograd Soviet's representative on the

committee berated the Provisional Government for allowing individual ministries to pursue directly conflicting policies in the countryside. He was particularly critical of the Ministry of the Interior, which, he said, condemned as criminal and anarchical every action taken by the local land reform committees, set up by the Ministry of Agriculture.¹²

It was reported that a day-long strike of Petrograd lumber workers had been settled. Postal and telegraph workers, however, threatened a walkout beginning at 8:00 P.M. on July 4. Clerks and loaders at the main post office were already refusing to work or to allow postmen to make deliveries as the result of a dispute over fringe benefits and a monthly pay raise. At the same time, employees of hotels and rooming houses had joined a citywide waiters' strike. Like the waiters, they were calling for an end to hourly wages and demanding instead compensation based on a percentage of revenue in addition to their regular base salary. In the face of the walkout some restaurant owners were inviting their customers into the kitchen to serve themselves.¹³

The major news item from abroad was that in Berlin, Bethmann-Holweg had resigned as chancellor and had been replaced by George Michaelis.¹⁴ Because of the former chancellor's apparent readiness to entertain the possibility of a negotiated compromise peace, German annexationist and military circles had for many months been applying pressure on Bethmann-Holweg to give up his post; his ultimate departure and the appointment of Michaelis, a nonentity selected by General Ludendorff, were striking indications of the military high command's decisive hold over German politics.

From Dvinsk came a detailed account of a visit to the northern front on July 1 and 2 by Minister of Labor Skobelev and Vladimir Lebedev, acting naval minister.¹⁵ The two were hastily dispatched to the front in the wake of reports that sizable numbers of Fifth Army troops were refusing to obey their commanders' orders and remained adamantly opposed to engaging the enemy. This was the period between the start of the long-awaited and loudly trumpeted Kerensky offensive, launched on June 18, and the decisive German counterattack, begun on July 6. The main thrust of the initial Russian attack had taken place on the southwestern front. At first it had been modestly successful. (When word of the Russian advance reached Petrograd, the nationalist press was jubilant.) Yet within days the demoralized condition of the army at the front became evident, as units that had been persuaded to move into the attack at its start now refused to fight further. By July 4 even the inflated official military dispatches could not hide the fact that the initial breakthrough had bogged down and that Russian forces, under attack everywhere, were suffering heavy losses.

On the northern front, the advance was not due to begin until July 8. A few miles from the front lines, as bands blared, soldiers lined up smartly for review and roared their approval as Skobelev trooped the line. Many of these soldiers had seen action and been wounded in earlier campaigns.

Since the February revolution they had been reading *Pravda*, *Soldatskaia pravda*, *Okopnaia pravda*,¹⁶ and the countless other revolutionary antiwar publications with which the Bolsheviks had inundated the battle zones; by now they were preoccupied with thoughts of peace and land and a more equitable political and social order. The objectives of the war were incomprehensible to most of the soldiers, and they were angered by the knowledge that while the Soviet was trying to arrange a just peace, the government was preparing to launch a new offensive. As a result, the soldiers' antagonism toward their officers mounted sharply. Some units were even becoming distrustful of their own elected committees, which, dominated by Mensheviks and SRs, by and large supported the government's military policies. Nevertheless, while their generals beamed encouragement, the ranks cheered Skobelev. He implored them to give their all for a free Russia, and they responded: "Right you are! We are ready to die for liberty! We will do our duty to the end!" The soldiers waved banners bearing the slogans "To the Attack!" and "Down with Cowards!" A group hoisted Lebedev and Skobelev to their shoulders and conveyed them to their motorcar. Yet barely a week later, when the order to attack was given, the same soldiers would throw down their weapons and stumble pell-mell from the battlefield.

The train carrying Lenin and his companions began slowing down. At the northernmost outskirts of Petrograd it passed the lush gardens of the Forestry Institute and crossed Sampsonovsky Prospect, which ran southward through the Vyborg District, Petrograd's large industrial ghetto. The crowded, soot-blackened factories, grimy, vermin-infested, multilevel barracks, and rundown workers' shanties that the train was now passing had provided fertile ground for the spread of revolutionary ideas during the first great spurt of Russian industrial development in the last decades of the tsarist regime. Embittered students from the Forestry Institute had joined their fellows at St. Petersburg University in the outburst of student unrest that had shaken the Russian government at the end of the 1890s, and they were to be found alongside industrial workers manning the barricades in 1905, July 1914, and February 1917. In October 1905 police had directed a hail of bullets at a crowd of workers demonstrating near the southern end of Sampsonovsky Prospect, at the corner of Botkinskaia Street. Just a short distance away, separated by narrow, muddy, refuse-ridden alleys, were three of Petrograd's larger factories—the Erikson, Novyi Lessner, and Russkii Reno plants. Major political strikes had taken place at the Erikson telephone and electrical factory in 1905, 1912, 1914, and 1916. In 1913 the Novyi Lessner machine factory had been the scene of one of the longest and most famous strikes in Russian labor history, lasting 102 days. A pitched battle between Reno auto factory workers and soldiers and the police in

October 1916 was one of the first signs of the impending storm that culminated a few months later in the fall of the tsar. Now, as Lenin's train moved sluggishly past and drew to a noisy stop at the Finland Station, all three factories were again shut down. Workers from the Reno, Erikson, and Novyi Lessner plants had been among the first to take to the streets the day before.

As Lenin strode from the train, the scene at the Finland Station was very different from the one which had greeted him in April. Then, returning from exile, he had been met by crowds of workers and soldiers. There had been banners and flowers, a band, and an honor guard of sailors. Even the leadership of the Soviet had made its appearance; Nikolai Chkheidze, chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, had been among those welcoming Lenin in what formerly had been the imperial waiting room. On that occasion Lenin had driven to Bolshevik headquarters perched atop an armored car, accompanied by an imposing procession of party functionaries, workers, and soldiers. Now, as Bonch-Bruevich hastened off in search of a taxi, there were no bands or welcoming speeches. An acrid odor of steam, stale food, and sweat permeated the humid summer air. Porters hustled about their tasks. From a booth draped in bunting, an elderly matron with pince-nez gesticulated wildly as she exhorted passersby: "Support our revolutionary soldiers! Sign your liberty loan pledges here!" On the square outside, throngs of workers and soldiers milled about, preparing to renew their demands for immediate peace and the transfer of power to the soviets.

During the more than two hundred years since its founding by Peter the Great, the Russian imperial capital, like prerevolutionary Paris, had become divided into sharply defined socioeconomic districts. Generally speaking, the central sections of the city, encompassing the southern parts of Vasiliievsky Island and the "Petersburg side" on the right bank of the Neva, and much of the left bank extending from the river to the Obvodny Canal, were the domain of the upper and middle classes, while most factory workers lived and worked in the outer industrial districts. The central sections boasted the luxurious rococo and neoclassical palaces of the royal family and high aristocracy, the massive edifices that served as headquarters for imperial officialdom, the imposing Isaac and Kazan cathedrals, and the granite river and canal embankments which together made Petrograd one of Europe's most beautiful capitals. Here, too, were centers of Russian culture such as the Royal Mariinsky Theater, home of the opera and the famed imperial ballet; the Royal Alexandrinsky Theater, where the best in European drama and comedy alternated with the classics of Gogol, Turgenev, and Tolstoy; and the Petersburg Conservatory, on whose stage the most accomplished musicians of the time performed. Also located in this central area on the left bank of the Neva were the capital's banks, offices, and



Street scene in Petrograd, 1917.

better residential neighborhoods, which changed in character as one went further from the Admiralty—the hub of the city—from aristocratic palaces through professional apartment houses to the tenements of the lower middle class. Originating at the Admiralty and dominated by its needle spire was Nevsky Prospect, Petrograd's broadest and finest avenue, with the city's most fashionable shops, while across the Neva, to the north, the embankment at the eastern end of Vasilievsky Island was lined by the distinctive buildings of St. Petersburg University, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Academy of Fine Arts, three symbols of Russian intellectual and artistic achievement, and by the columned façade of the Stock Exchange.

The major factories of Petrograd were located in the districts surrounding this central area—in the Narva, Moscow, and Alexander Nevsky districts on the left bank of the Neva, and in the more remote areas of Vasilievsky Island and the Okhta and Vyborg districts on its right bank.

On the Petersburg side, surrounded by a formal garden and protected by a high, ornate, wrought-iron fence, was the spacious and elegant Kshesinskaia mansion, the former residence of Mathilde Kshesinskaia, prima ballerina of the Mariinsky Ballet and reputed to have been the mistress of Tsar Nicholas II. Kshesinskaia had fled the mansion during the February days, after which it had been taken over by soldiers of an armored car division quartered nearby. In early March, the Bolsheviks, then operating out of two cramped rooms in the attic of the Central Labor Exchange, requested and received permission from the soldiers to make the building their headquarters.¹⁷ In short order, the Central Committee, the Petersburg

Committee, and the Bolshevik Military Organization were comfortably established in different parts of the mansion.

From the Bolsheviks' point of view, the Kshesinskaia mansion was ideally situated. A stone's throw from the Peter and Paul Fortress and the Cirque Moderne, a cavernous concert and assembly hall now the scene of frequent political rallies, it was also close to many military barracks as well as to the teeming factories in the Vyborg District. The move to the Kshesinskaia mansion coincided with the party's spurt in membership and popularity following the February revolution. The new headquarters, over which flew the red standard of the Central Committee, soon became a magnet for disgruntled workers, soldiers, and sailors. The mansion's spacious basement housed the Military Organization's Club Pravda, while the grounds outside the building became the scene of round-the-clock rallies. Each day from early morning until late at night, Sergei Bagdatiev,¹⁸ or Moisei Volodarsky,¹⁹ or another of the party's more popular agitators could be seen atop a rostrum overlooking the street haranguing crowds of passersby. Approximately once a week, elected representatives of party committees in the various districts of the capital assembled at the Kshesinskaia mansion for business meetings. It was to a stunned late-night gathering of some three hundred party leaders in the ornate, white-columned drawing room that Lenin had first personally outlined his new program upon his return to Petrograd on the night of April 3. Several weeks later the mansion was the meeting-place for the Bolsheviks' April Conference.

Not everyone was quite as pleased by this arrangement as were the Bolsheviks. By late spring, Kshesinskaia was determined to get her house back, evidently more for the purpose of expelling the Bolsheviks than out of any desire to return to it herself. In late April and May she badgered both the government and the Petrograd Soviet about evicting the Bolsheviks, and ultimately she took the matter to court. Subsequently, a justice of the peace had given the party twenty days to vacate the mansion,²⁰ but the Bolsheviks on various pretexts had delayed the move. It was to this beehive of radicalism that many of the demonstrating soldiers and workers came on the evening of July 3. While thousands of marchers chanting "All Power to the Soviets!" waited impatiently for instructions, party leaders from the Military Organization and the Petersburg Committee, gathered in the mansion's master bedroom, debated what action to take and ultimately agreed to support openly and lead the movement on the streets.

Lenin hastened to the Kshesinskaia mansion around midday on July 4. He had hardly been briefed on the latest events when some ten thousand Bolshevik-led sailors from Kronstadt, most of them armed and battle-hungry, surrounded the building, demanding his appearance. At first Lenin declined, asserting that his refusal to appear would express his opposition to the demonstration. But at the insistence of Kronstadt Bolshevik leaders, he

ultimately acquiesced. As he stepped out on the second-floor balcony to address the sailors, he grumbled to some Military Organization officials, "You should be thrashed for this!"²¹

Lenin's ambivalent comments on this occasion reflected his dilemma. He voiced a few words of greeting, expressed certainty that the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" would triumph in the end, and concluded by appealing to the sailors for self-restraint, determination, and vigilance. Years later one of Lenin's listeners recalled that for many of the sailors, Lenin's emphasis on the necessity of a peaceful demonstration was unexpected. Anarchists among them and some Bolsheviks as well were unable to see how a column of armed men, eager for battle, could restrict itself to an armed demonstration.²²

Lenin now found himself in an untenable situation. The previous day's developments had reconfirmed that among workers and soldiers in the capital, the Provisional Government had little support. The Soviet leadership, however, was still determined not to yield to mass pressure. Majority socialists remained convinced that neither the provincial population nor the army at the front would support a transfer of power to the soviets, and that in any case it was necessary for "all the vital forces of the country" to work together in the interest of the war effort and the survival of the revolution. They feared that by breaking with the liberals and the business and industrial circles who supported them they would run the risk of weakening the war effort and enhancing the likelihood of a successful counterrevolution.

Because of the Soviet's refusal to take power, the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" was, at least for the time being, tactically bankrupt from the Bolsheviks' point of view. The choice now facing the party was whether to attempt to seize power by force or to mount an effort to end the demonstrations. In weighing these alternatives Lenin considered the potential reaction of the provinces and the front to be of decisive importance. In this regard the situation was no doubt fluid and unclear, but the immediate indications were not very promising. Bolshevik support continued to be weak among the peasantry, while many soldiers were still loyal to the Soviet leadership.

On the afternoon of July 4 the extent of support for direct revolutionary action in the capital itself was by no means certain. The Kronstadt sailors were present in force and spoiling for a fight—en route from the Kshesinskaja mansion to the Taurida Palace they engaged in a confused gun battle with snipers firing from upper-story windows and rooftops on Nevsky Prospect, and broke into scores of houses and apartments, terrorizing the occupants. But some of the troops who had participated in the demonstrations the previous evening had already wearied of the event, while other garrison units still refused to take sides. Moreover, the possibility of the Bolsheviks seizing power independently of and in opposition to the Soviet had never been presented to the workers and soldiers; indeed, while there is