

# Russian Political System: Bolshevik Revolution, 1917

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian Revolution upsurge of 1917 derived its dynamic impetus from processes deeply uprooted in Russian history that had close connection forged between autocracy and serfdom. The injustices and brutalities of serfdom provoked a number of violent revolts which were crushed down with great severity and failed to alleviate the peasants' condition. This resulted to develop a fundamental cleavage between the mass of the population and the privileged life. The first revolution of February 1917 dismantled Tsarist autocracy<sup>1</sup> and led to the eventual rise of Soviet Union. Emperor Nicholas II abdicated the throne and hence Russian empire was collapsed with a replacement of Provisional Government.

In the February Revolution which centered around the Petrograd, control of the country was taken over by the members of the Duma, imperial parliament forming Russian Provisional Govt. The Soviets (Workers' Council) led by more radical groups had a stress to influence the government and control various militias but allowed the Provisional Government to rule. February revolution took place in the context of heavy military set back in the First World War that left much of the Russian army in the state of mutiny. Then the failure of the Provisional Government in all aspects including the continuation of Russia involvement in the First World War and the rise of the Strength of the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin resulted the cause of the October Revolution.

## 2. FEBRUARY REVOLUTION (IN BRIEF)

Petrograd workers began several strikes and demonstrations at the beginning of the February. On 7 March, workers at Putilov, the largest industrial unit of Petrograd announced a strike.

The next day, a series of meetings and rallies were held which gradually turned into economic and political gatherings. Demonstrations were organized to demand bread, and these were supported by the industrial working force who considered them a reason for continuing the strikes. Virtually together with many commercial and service enterprises, every industrial enterprise in Petrograd had been shut down.

For suppressing the protest by force, the Tsar ordered to the army who were either untrained or injured troops. But they began to mutiny instead of following the order. Although few actively joined the rioting, many officers were either shot or went into hiding. The police and military guard opened fire to the demonstrators in which two were killed. The demonstrator burnt the police headquarters and seized the arsenals during the next two days. The leaders of Duma formed a committee to run the country. Another body- Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies led Socialist factions was also formed. In this situation Tsar, on March 15, abdicated the throne in favor of his brother but he refused to accept the thrown. Now the committee of the Duma became the Provisional Government that ruled Russia for eight months until the outbreak of October Revolution.

The government was initially chaired by a liberal aristocrat, Prince Georgy Yevgenievich Lvov, a member of the Constitutional Democratic Party (KD). The socialists had formed their rival body, the Petrograd Soviet (or workers' council) four days earlier. The Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government competed for power over Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> Tsarist autocracy refers to a form of autocracy (later absolute monarchy) specific to the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which later became Tsardom of Russia and the Russian Empire. Nicholas II was the last emperor of Czar Regime who abdicated the throne.

### 3. SITUATION AFTER THE OVERTHROW OF THE AUTOCRACY

#### Emergence of Dual Power:

After the tsarist administration failed to suppress the revolution, the news that the autocracy had been deposed quickly spread quickly throughout the country. After the February revolution was accomplished workers of Petrograd and some other cities began setting up soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies in which Bolsheviks were instrumental in forming them.

On February 27, it was decided that the representatives of factory strike committees will comprise the soviet of workers' deputies that will undertake to organize the movement to form a Provisional revolutionary government. However due to the inadequate level of proletarian organization, the leadership of the Petrograd and most of the other soviets was taken over by the petty- bourgeois parties the Mensheviks and socialist revolutionaries. Bolsheviks were in the minority in these soviets. The Provisional committee of the state Duma formed on Feb. 27 to restore order comprises of Socialist revolutionary Kerensky and the Menshevik Chkheidze as representatives of democratic wing. The Bolsheviks called on the workers and troops to disregard the instructions of state Duma committee and obey only the soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies.

As soon as the Provisional Government was formed, Commissars were appointed in all the gubernias and uyezds.<sup>2</sup> They were prominent representatives of the bourgeoisie or the landholders who had held key posts in the gubernias and uyezds under the autocracy.

Dual power took shape as a result of overthrow of the tsar. This was an unprecedented intertwining of two dictatorships: the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie represented by the Provincial Government and the revolutionary- democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasants represented by the soviets. They urged the working classes to support the bourgeoisie on the grounds that a war was waging and the country had to be defended against the enemy. People who had no experience of politics believed Mensheviks and the Socialists-Revolutionaries that the bourgeoisie Provisional Government would meet their cherished aspirations.

The war seriously weakened mass workers organizations. Bolshevik parties were repressed and all its committees were dissolved. Trade unions and even cultural societies were disbanded. This undermined proletariats organizations and strengthened the position of the Mensheviks and the social revolutionaries among the workers. The Constitutional Democratic Party, which represented the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie landowners, was the leading political organization. They also formed their alliance with the right wing parties and groups.

#### Proletariat in the struggle for the revolutions:

The Bolshevik party was only political organization in Russia that actually championed the basic interests of the overwhelming majority of the population. After the overthrow of the autocracy and Bolsheviks were released from prison, they called upon the proletariat to continue struggle because the revolution has not been ended. The demands of the insurgent people have been made but have not been fulfilled. Revolution work in Russia has been directed by the Russian Bureau of the RSDLP (B)<sup>3</sup> central committee that was formed in 1912.

During the war the Provincial Government was pursuing the same piratical, imperialist aims pursued by the deposed tsarist govt. This resulted to evolve new tactics and revolutionary strategy for the new conditions to get rectified under the soviets. Lenin charted it.

He said it was necessary to step up the organization for the popular masses and their preparation for the conquest of power by the Soviets of Workers' Deputies. Only such power can give bread, peace and liberty. The soviets in which Bolsheviks predominated had from the very outset opposed the organs of bourgeois rule. Alongside the soviets, the mass outburst of revolutionary feeling brought to life a new militant organization- the factory committee. The Bolsheviks too scored

<sup>2</sup> Gubernias or governorate, and Uyezd were a major and principal administrative sub division of the Russian Empire and the early Russian SFSR.. Sometimes the term *gubernia* was informally used to refer to the office of a governor. For most of Russian history, uyezds were a secondary-level of administrative division.

<sup>3</sup> RSDLP means Russian social Democratic Labour Party was a revolutionary socialist political party formed in 1898 in but later split into majority and minority factions with the Majority "*Bolshevik*" faction eventually becoming the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

notable success in directing the trade union movement as early as during the first few months after the February revolution. The workers' militia was the basis on which the Red Guards were formed where Bolsheviks were the organizers.

The emergence of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, factory committees and trade unions and the formation of armed detachments of workers were of decisive significance to the further course of revolution and made the workers confident of their strength. The struggle of the proletariat unfolds mainly over the issues of eight hour working day.

#### **Anti Popular Policies of the Provisional Government:**

The Provisional Government from the beginning relied on the Menshevik- Socialist Revolutionary majority in the soviets. It pursued its internal and external policies in the interests of the classes of bourgeoisie and the landowners. It said nothing about the termination of the imperialist war, the transfer of the land to the peasants, an eight hour working day or the satisfaction of the other demands of the working people. The bourgeoisie called upon the working people to forget their class enmity for the period of the war and shed their blood in defense of the country.

The peasants, soldiers, and the backward segment of the workers succumbed to the specious propaganda of the Russian bourgeoisie and also of the Russian and western conciliators.

The Provisional Government refused to do anything about an agrarian reform that would hit not only the landowners but the bourgeoisie themselves. The peasants demanded confiscation of landed estates, the transfer of all lands to them and its distribution on the basis of egalitarian tenure.

The policies of government in every sphere brought the people of Russia bitter suffering. It created a road leading to the evolution of the bourgeoisie-democratic revolution into a socialist revolution.

The road was shown to the people by the Bolshevik party headed by Lenin.

#### **Leninist Course toward the Socialist Revolution:**

Lenin was living in emigration in Switzerland when the February revolution took place. It was imperative that the Bolshevik party was to assess the new political situation the strategy and tactics it would adopt. After coming to the country through various hurdles, Lenin called upon the Bolsheviks to fight the imperialist war, linking its termination with the transition of power to the working class and the poorest sections of the peasants who were against the war. The republic of soviets was a much higher form of democratic state than the usual parliamentary republic. Lenin pointed out that republic of soviets gave the people boundless opportunities for active participation in the administration of new life. But a parliamentary bourgeoisie republic would deny them such participation. He said a Soviet Government is the only possible revolutionary government which directly expresses the mind and will of the workers and peasants.

Lenin stressed that the tactics and policies of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries were misguided and harmful. Lenin said Bolshevik party was subordinated to the main issue politically and economically. So they aimed to save the country from economic catastrophe toward which it was heading. The new program adopted under the Lenin had to include assessment of imperialist wars, and formulate the party's attitude to the state and the formation of the soviet republic. In the April Theses the political slogans of the revolution were "All power to the soviets," "peace without annexations and indemnities!" "Land to the peasants!" and so on. It also discussed the extremely important question of the proletariat's attitudes to the other parties notably the petty bourgeois' and SR who held majority of the seats in the soviets.

#### **4. BOLSHEVIK SUPPORT DURING THE PERIOD OF DUAL POWER**

The Bolsheviks used the democratic liberties by the people in the February revolution for a massive drive to enlist the support of the majority of the people. In the April demonstrations, the Bolsheviks decided that the spontaneous had to be given the power orientation and that clear cut slogans had to be adopted. Russia found herself in a grip of a political crisis because of the unpopular policies of the Provisional Government.

Bolsheviks voted against the motion of coalition government formed with the participation of the socialist- Revolutionary and Menshevik parties this formation reinforced formally the petty bourgeois organizationally. Bolshevik believed that the bourgeois government with the help of Mensheviks and SR deceived the people. However there was no change in the

externals and internal policies of the Provisional govt. They passed decrees to protect commercial secrets, safeguards the banks against control by democratic organizations, punished anti war actions by imprisonment at labor camps and disbanded revolutionary units.

Bolsheviks tried to expose the policies of the coalition government, though they are in minority in the Dumas to win the support of the people. The Bolshevik military organizations played a key role in drawing the soldiers to the side of the proletariat. A soldier club called <sup>4</sup> “Pravda” arranged meetings, lectures, seminars with workers and delegates from the front and so on. However the country side was the most difficult sector for Bolshevik agitation due to ignorance, disunity and misery and almost total literacy of the peasants.

RSDLP (B) central committee jointly with the Petrograd committee decided to stage peaceful demonstrations on June 10. The SR and Menshevik leaders compromised with the bourgeois bound by the imperialist policy of an offensive were horrified and passed a resolution banning the demonstration. It was difficult to restrain people from demonstrating.

This was a heavy blow to the Mensheviks and socialist Revolutionaries. The demonstrations showed the enormously enhanced confidence of the workers and soldiers in the Bolsheviks and the popularity of the Bolshevik organs.

A wave of anti- war rallies of workers and soldiers swept across the land. Popular dissatisfaction with the Provisional Government and with the offensive at the front was about to explode into armed action.

## 5. END OF DUAL POWER

The call for action by the Bolshevik parties met with warm response everywhere. Demonstrations were headed demanding to hand over power to soviets, give lands to peasants, break with imperialist bourgeoisie, sign a peace and place production under effective control. Counter revolutionaries started assaulting on the demonstrators with firing. The offices of Pravda were raided and the staff that was there at that time manhandled and arrested. Martial law was proclaimed in Petrograd. The Provisional Government issued a warrant for Lenin’s arrest. On July 7 he went to hide in the home of S. Y. Alliluyev, a worker of Bolshevik party. On July 8, SR Kerensky was appointed Prime Minister and began forcible suppression of all revolutionary actions in the armed forces. The talks of Constitutional- Democrats with representatives of the socialist parties ended on July 24 with the formation of the second coalition government. The Provisional Government had instituted the death penalty in the army in the field. Kerensky ordered the discontinuance of the publication and circulation of Bolshevik newspapers among the soldiers. Soldiers’ meetings, congresses and rallies were banned. <sup>5</sup>Dual power had come to an end. The peaceful period of the revolution had terminated.

Lenin was in hiding but closely mapped out a plan for preparations of the armed conquest of power. As a leader and champion of the majority of the people the Bolshevik had to prepare the workers and poorest sections of the peasants for the conquest of the power by armed uprising. A new phase in the development of the revolution had set in.

## 6. AN ARMED UPRISING

There was no agreement between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and SR for the defense of the Provisional govt. A unique situation took shape at the close of August and the beginning of September 1917. The authority of the Provisional Government had been undermined in the centre and in the localities while the soviets and factory committees had grown more active. The Bolsheviks focused their efforts on exposing the country- revolutionary designs of the Democratic Conference sponsors. The Bolshevik cry of “All soviets to the Soviets” at the outset of the revolution became the voice of the whole revolutionary Russia. It called the coalition government of violence and repressions. Lenin in analyzing all the developments of Russia came to a conclusion that an armed uprising had to be started.

Bolshevik party mustered and intensified the arming of the Red Guards<sup>6</sup> in September and October. They were added by factory committees and workers of the war plants. The sailors of the Baltic Fleet comprised a large armed force of the revolution. The Petrograd and Moscow garrisons, the Baltic fleet, the Revolutionary troops in Finland and the majority of

<sup>4</sup> Pravda was the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and was one of the most influential papers in the country with a circulation of 11 million. The newspaper began publication on 5 May 1912 in the Russian Empire and emerged as a leading newspaper of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Dual Power’ (9 April 1917) in *collected works*, vol. 24, p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Red Guards were paramilitary volunteer formations consisting mainly of factory workers, peasants, Cossacks and partially of soldiers and sailors for "protection of the Soviet power. They have their formations of Bolsheviks during the October Revolution and the first months of the Civil War.

the troops on the Northern and Western fronts were prepared to act jointly with the working class under the leadership of the Bolsheviks against the provisional govt. The decisive battle against the counter revolution was drawing even nearer but the balance of strength was heavily in favor of the Bolsheviks. On Oct 21, Military- Revolutionary Appointing Committee began appointing its commissars in the Petrograd garrison and some government institutions.

The attempt of the Military District Headquarters of Provincial Government to use the personnel of military and officers' school ended in failure. The Cossack regiments on which Military District Headquarters has relied refused to defend the Provisional Government and declared their "neutrality"

Lenin's plan for the uprising was being carried out successfully. All the key government offices, the power stations and utilities were occupied during the night and in the morning. All the approaches to the winter palace were guarded by workers and soldiers.

The armed rising of workers, sailors and revolutionary soldiers in Petrograd triumphed on October 25. In the historic address, Lenin stated that the Provisional Government has been deposed and that state power had passed to the Military Revolutionary Committee<sup>7</sup>, organ of the Petrograd Soviet. The address said the immediate offer of democratic peace, abolition of landed proprietorship, workers' control over production and the establishment of soviet power has been secured. The resolution passed by Petrograd Soviet on Oct 25 indicated major tasks of the new powers and expressed that a Soviet Government would be formed with firmly advance toward socialism. This is the only means to save the country from the untold miseries and horrors of war.

## 7. SOVIET POWER ESTABLISHED IN MOSCOW

Preparations for the armed uprising were started simultaneously by the Moscow Bolsheviks and their leading organs equal importance was given to Moscow with the seizure of power in Petrograd. Petrograd MRC by October 31 the revolutionary forces had made substantial progress that could feel counter revolutionary forces hopeless. The struggle would end only with the surrender of the committee for public security, disarming of the forces and recognition of the soviets as the sole authority on Nov 2, although the fighting continued while the negotiations were underway to cease the bombardment of the counter revolutionary strong points.

Soviet power was thus established in Moscow. The victory of the Socialist Revolution in Petrograd and Moscow and the decisions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> All Russian Congress of Soviets paved the way for the revolution's triumphant procession through out the country.

## 8. CONCLUSION

With the Government Petrograd Soviet now in control of government, garrison and proletariat, the Second All Russian Congress of Soviets held its opening session on the day, while Trotsky dismisses the opposing Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) from Congress. The Second Congress of Soviets consisted of 670 elected delegates; 300 were Bolshevik and nearly a hundred were Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, who also supported the overthrow of the Alexander Kerensky Government. When the fall of the Winter Palace<sup>8</sup> was announced, the Congress adopted a decree transferring power to the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, thus ratifying the Revolution. The transfer of power was not without disagreement. The center and Right wings of the Socialist Revolutionaries as well as the Mensheviks believed that Lenin and the Bolsheviks had illegally seized power and they walked out before the resolution was passed. 8 November 1917, the Congress elected a Council of People's Commissars with Lenin as leader as the basis of a new Soviet Government, pending the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, and passed the Decree on Peace and the Decree on Land.

This new government was also officially called "provisional" until the Assembly was dissolved. The Council of People's Commissars now began to arrest the leaders of opposition parties. Dozens of Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadet) leaders and members of the Constituent Assembly were imprisoned in The Peter and Paul Fortress. These were to be

<sup>7</sup> MLC (Military Revolutionary Committee) was the name for military organs created by Bolsheviks Party organization under the soviets in preparation for the October Revolution (October 1917 – March 1918).

<sup>8</sup> Winter Palace was the official residence of Russian Imperial Rulers - the Czars/Tsars - located on the bank of the Neva river in St. Petersburg is the present day Hermitage Museum.



followed by the arrests of Socialist Revolutionary Party and Menshevik leader. There is also strong anti-Bolshevik opposition within Petrograd. On 20 December 1917 the Cheka was created by the decree of Vladimir Lenin. These were the beginnings of the Bolsheviks' consolidation of power over their political opponents. The Red Terror was started in September 1918.

The Decree on Land ratified the actions of the peasants who throughout Russia seized private land and redistributed it among themselves. The Bolsheviks viewed themselves as representing an alliance of workers and peasants and memorialized that understanding with the Hammer and Sickle on the flag and coat of arms of the Soviet Union. Wages were fixed at higher rates than during the war, and a shorter, eight-hour working day was introduced.

The success of the October Revolution transformed the Russian state into a soviet republic. A coalition of anti-Bolshevik groups attempted to unseat the new government in the Russian Civil War from 1918 to 1922. The war was fought mainly between the Red Army ("Reds"), consisting of the uprising majority led by the Bolshevik minority, and the "Whites" – army officers and Cossacks,<sup>9</sup> the "bourgeoisie", and political groups ranging from the far Right to the Socialist Revolutionaries who opposed the drastic restructuring championed by the Bolsheviks following the collapse of the Provisional Government to the soviets (under clear Bolshevik dominance) This armed uprising was fought against the antagonizing Bolshevik economic policies. This all amounted to large-scale discontent. The Government firmly denounced the rebellions and labeled the requests as a reminder of the Social Revolutionaries, a political party that was popular among Soviets before Lenin, but refused to cooperate with the Bolshevik Army. The Government then responded with an armed suppression of these revolts and suffered 10 thousand casualties before entering the city of Kronstad. This ended the rebellions fairly quickly, causing many of the rebels to flee to political exile.

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<sup>9</sup> Cossacks are a group of predominantly located in Ukraine and in Russia. Cossack hosts in the Russian Empire occupied effective buffer zones on its borders