

Forum: Special Conference devoted to the Russian Revolution Centenary

Issue: Russian revolution: lessons for the 21st century

Student Officer: Pavel Chernov



Introduction

The Russian revolution was a true milestone of modern-day history. Without the Russian revolution, there would be no USSR, the Cold war, the real-life attempt of implementation of the Marxist principles and the creation of communist economy. Were there no Russian revolution, the present international relations would look entirely different. What is more, the questions for the whole human society that were raised by the Russian revolution - social injustice, the role of government in economy, equality of all people - are still vital for many states. This is why the actual events of the year 1917 deserve special heed.

Definition of key terms

The Bolsheviks – the representatives of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, which under control of Lenin replaced the Provisional government in Russia, cementing their hold of power in the country.

Petrograd - Saint-Petersburg; was renamed after Germany stated a war against Russia, so that Russian capital would not have a German name.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin - the founder of the Bolsheviks party and the visionary of the October revolution.

Nicholas II - the last Russian emperor, considered to be largely responsible for the outbreak of the Russian revolution. Even though there is still dispute about his role in the revolutionary events of the first decades of the 20th century, his being in charge is often characterized as weak and unreasoned. He abdicated his throne and was later murdered by the Bolsheviks.

Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky - the head of the Russian provisional government from July to October 1917. After the October revolution he fled to Paris, and then to the USA.

February Revolution - the uprising in Russia in March, 1917, which ultimately led to the abdication of Nicholas II, establishment of the Provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet, which led to dual share of power.

October Revolution - a coup d'état organized by the Bolsheviks on November 7, 1917, which concluded the period of dual power and let the Bolsheviks cease the rule.

The Russian Provisional Government - the Duma ministers, who, as they claimed, assembled temporarily to manage Russian internal and external policy until the Constitutional Assembly representing the will of all Russian citizens is organized.

Background information

The Russian revolution was verily the time of great perplexity. Internal strife within the society, coupled with the hazards of the First World War, has led to a dissention among the Russian population.

1) Before the February Revolution

Before the February revolution Russia was an Empire, the emperor being Nicholas II. His rule was becoming more and more unpopular among the citizens due to several historical events taking place at that period. Russia was defeated in the Russo-Japanese War, which led to the annexation of South Sakhalin, great moral defeat, and loss of fleet.

Since Russian Empire was a part of the Triple Entente, Nicholas II approved the Russian mobilization on 30 July 1914, which led to Germany declaring war on Russia. The lack of food and other supplies on the Home Front, a desperate need for modernization in the army, lack of military equipment, and weak morale (partly as a result of Bolsheviks influence) - all these led to thorough mistrust for the emperor, who declared himself the Commander of the army, losing his authority as all failures of the army were blamed on him.

2) The February Revolution

On 23 February women marched through the Nevsky prospect to protest against injustice and inequality in rights. They were joined by some of the workers. The next morning thousands of workers went to the streets. The demonstrations had a very palpable political character. The mutiny of the Petrograd garrison turned the disorders of the previous four days into a full-scale revolution. The tsarist authorities were verily deprived of military capacities in the capital.

On 27 February a Petrograd Soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies was assembled. They passed Order Number 1, which was aimed to sway the soldiers on the side of the Soviet by declaring "democratization" of the army, which equalized the soldiers and the officers during the civil service. Many a man misinterpreted this Order, which caused a bitter conflict within the army. At that time, the Duma deputies agreed to form a Provisional Government. The two bodies could not work together effectively, since the Soviet had a larger support of the population and also because of totally diverse views of the people that the governments encompassed.

Emperor Nicholas II decided to abdicate in favor of the Grand Duke Mikhail, but Mikhail decided to step down as well.

3) The Provisional government

Throughout June, July, and August 1917, factory workers around Russia felt unsatisfied with the growing shortages of food and supplies. This caused the workers to vocally rebel against those whom they saw as their oppressors.

From September and October 1917, a mass strike was organized by the Moscow and Petrograd railroad workers. They took over production in numerous factories, promoted these strikes through factory workers' committees, which, on behalf of the workers, were to negotiate more appropriate working conditions.

Due to frustration caused by the loss of men at the First World War and hunger, "hunger riots" or "pogroms" became a frequent event. In these riots, citizens seized food and resources from shop owners who they believed to be charging unfair prices.

a) July days

On 16 July, spontaneous demonstrations of workers and soldiers started in Petrograd. The workers wanted the full power to be granted to the Soviet. On 17 July, over 500,000 people participated in what was intended to be a peaceful demonstration in Petrograd, the so-called July Days. The Provisional Government ordered an attack on the demonstrators, causing a massive murder.

On 7 July, the government ordered the arrest of Vladimir Lenin. He had to go undercover and hide from the officers seeking for him. On 12 July, the Provisional Government published a law introducing the death penalty at the front.

The Provisional government realized that without support from the workers and peasants they could not hold the power. For that reason, new ministers entered the Provisional

government, many of them being socialists (though not Bolsheviks). The head of the new Provisional Government was Alexander Kerensky.

As a response to such severe actions against the Bolsheviks, workers in Moscow began a protest strike of half a million workers. They were supported by strikes and protests in numerous cities.

b) Kornilov affair

So as to "restore peace in Petrograd", general Kornilov was preparing his soldiers to move into Petrograd and assist the Provisional Government. Kerensky, who first relied on Kornilov, suddenly grew afraid that the general, upon entering the city, would become a dictator himself.

Thus, Kerensky was forced to turn to the Petrograd Soviet and its authority and ask for help. The Petrograd Soviet had taken measures to defend against Kornilov's advancing troops. They infiltrated the army to sabotage or convince the troops to halt. Meanwhile, in Petrograd the Bolsheviks were freely giving arms to the public so as the latter could defend themselves in the face of Kornilov's army. Even though none of the arms was used against the Kornilov's troops due to the latter having dissolved by the middle of September, from now on the Bolsheviks had armed garrisons under their flag.

4) The October revolution

The October Revolution was led by the Bolsheviks with Lenin in charge. It was not as spontaneous as the February Revolution and was a result of deliberate planning and coordinated activity of the Lenin's party.

On 7 November 1917 (25 October in the Old style), Bolsheviks started the revolt against the Provisional Government. The October revolution ended the phase of the revolution ignited in February, and replaced the ministers with the Soviet, which now enjoyed the full power.

Soviet membership was initially freely elected, but soon it became apparent that the Bolsheviks had little support outside of the capital, so they limited the entry of other fractions into the government. This inspired tension in the society. The Bolsheviks' quest for unlimited power and unwillingness to cooperate with other forces has fanned the flame of the Civil war.

Major countries and organizations involved

- Russian Empire
- Germany

It has been argued that the financial and logistical assistance of German intelligence via their key agent, Alexander Parvus, was an indispensable assistance to the Bolsheviks, but there is little evidence supporting that claim.

- The Russian Provisional Government
- The Petrograd Soviet

Relevant treaties

Milyukov note - the Milyukov note was a document issued by the Provisional government on the 20 April 1917. The note said that Russia was going to continue its offensive in the First World War, which galvanized the public. This resulted in the bolstering of support for the Bolsheviks in Russia, and a widespread mistrust for the Russian Provisional Government.

April Theses - a series of directives issued by Lenin upon his return to Petrograd from Switzerland. Lenin urged the Soviets to take power, reject the Provisional Government and stop the "capitalist war" (First World War), provide the people with enough land so that they could work there properly. These directives were gladly embraced by general public.

The Triple Entente - the series of treaties among the Russian Empire, the French Third Republic, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain, which led to the establishment of Entente as one of the blocs in the First World War. Later, Russia's allies in the Entente played a major role since they immediately supported the Provisional government and then rejected the October revolution.

Possible lessons to be learnt from the Russian Revolution

- a)** The government has to pay special attention to the economic stability

Economic hardship was the main reason for the revolution. In Revolutionary Russia, the word “capitalist” was an offensive one. This shows how people were frustrated with the economic system. Other countries suffering from poverty, such as Germany and Hungary, have been inspired to conduct short-lived revolutions against the existing regimes.

- b)** Entering the war while the domestic situation is in jeopardy might not be beneficial for the government

The First World War was a defeat for Russia, even though France and the Great Britain were the victors. The First World War had a huge impact on Russia, territories being taken by Germany and people being killed.

- c)** Propaganda can be an effective mean to sway the public into one or another opinion and this may be considered risky and unsafe, since propaganda could be used for the rapid spread of radical ideas

Propaganda was one of the key methods that the Bolsheviks relied on. Mass demonstrations, vivid posters and simple slogans - this is what helped the party to find support needed.

- d)** Without proper and prompt reforms the government can become unpopular

At first, the society was optimistic about the Provisional government. It was the lack of reforms that was a herald of its downfall.

- e)** All groups of population must receive education

A vast majority of Russian population was illiterate before the Revolution. Aside from not being able to read and write properly, these men were incapable of using modern equipment or new techniques. This could not harbinge the economic prosperity of the state.

- f)** To maintain peace in the country it is necessary to share power among different institutions, otherwise it may lead to civil war

The main factor that led to the Civil war was the unwillingness of the Bolsheviks to cooperate with other parties, monarchist and constitutional democrats primarily, and other socialist parties as well.

g) Famine and poverty can impel people to follow populist claims

“Factories to workers, land to peasants!”, “All power to the Soviets!”, “Down with capitalist ministers!”- these claims were too tempting for the poor and desperate not to follow.

Useful and Reliable sources

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