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The Russian Revolution

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The Russian Revolution: Bolsheviks' Path to power

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Introduction

The Russian Revolution was caused by the consequences of World War I: economic crises, and demotivated soldiers. In both cases, governments – the Romanov Dynasty and the Provisional Government that first seized power from the Tsar – were unable to resolve these problems. But these factors alone were not sufficient enough to cause the Russian Revolution, rather they should be understood as preconditions. What was also needed was a strong party – the Bolshevik Party – willing and able to capitalize on such preconditions. First, this paper will argue that economic crises such as food shortages, inflation, and poor working conditions triggered mass discontent with the Tsar and the Provisional Government. Second, soldiers who were demotivated by war weariness, were disinclined to protect the political order during the February Revolution and the October Revolution. Finally, in the midst of crises, Kornilov Affair led to the defeat of elites – former members of zemstvo, bourgeois professionals, and military officers – by proletariat and peasants. The Bolshevik Party positioned itself to build on these preconditions and turned them into revolution.

Economic Crises

Economic anxiety greatly undermined public faith in the Tsar and then the Provisional Government. World War I stagnated Russia's economy, which influenced mass population to mobilize and participate in the Russian Revolution. In prior to World War I, Russia was one of Europe's fastest growing economies with economic activity expanding at a rate of four percent annually.¹ Industrial sectors were growing, social welfare budgets– health care and education – were expanding, while the debt-to-GDP ratio was declining.² However, the peasants grew weary of the Tsarist government after the government failed to manage the famine of 1891. By the autumn,

¹ Mark Harrison, and Andrei Markevich, "Russia's Home Front, 1914-1922: The Economy" (University of Warwick, 2012), 1.

² *Ibid*, 3-4.

famine spread to seventeen provinces with a total population of thirty-six million people.³ Peasants “lived on ‘famine bread’ made from rye husks mixed with the weed goosefoot, moss and tree bark, which made the loaves turn yellow and bitter.”⁴ Outbreaks of Cholera and typhus resulted in killing half a million people by the 1892, but the Tsarist government was too slow to respond, and the transportation system was unable to cope.⁵ Furthermore, the government banned using a word famine from newspapers which fueled public anger.⁶ In the midst of peasant misery, aristocrats enjoyed huge estates with well-furnished manors, and its banquets and concerts were carried on as usual.⁷

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 further contributed to peasants’ despair. Between 1913 to 1917, Russia’s average income per person, reduced by eighteen percent while the inflation rate increased significantly.⁸ By March 1917, the price level of 1913 had multiplied by a factor of 3.15.⁹ But by November 1917, the price level of 1913 had multiplied by a factor of 10.2.¹⁰ This significant inflation rate reflected Russia’s continued war effort: industries prioritizing producing war products over manufactured goods increased the price of commodities, and it depleted resources such as raw materials and fuel. Consequently, cost of production increased, and they were losing trade partners due to the continental war.

Food shortages were one the biggest economic challenges during the Russian Revolution when the war directly undermined Russian agricultural industries by reducing the supply and increasing the demand of grain. Military mobilizations disturbed the supply chain of agricultural

³ Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁸ Andrei Markevich, and Mark Harrison, “Great War, Civil War, and recovery: Russia’s national income, 1913 to 1928,” *Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 3 (2011): 680.

⁹ Mark Harrison, and Andrei Markevich, “Russia’s Home Front, 1914-1922: The Economy” (University of Warwick, 2012), 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

production because most of the fifteen million men and millions of horses joined from the countryside that was previously in charge of grain production.¹¹ Furthermore, by the end of 1915, Russian agricultural production decreased by nearly six percent, due to conceding large farmlands of Poland, Ukraine, Belorussia, and the Baltic to the Germans.¹² Meanwhile, demand significantly increased because fifteen million soldiers who joined the war, needed food supplies. Moreover, refugees who fled conceded Russian territories also put significant pressures on the food demand. The poor transportation system made food shortages even worse. The already poor railway system, due to Russia's slow industrialization, was further disturbed by the military transports taking priority over the commercial traffic.¹³ Foods produced in the countryside could not reach cities, which created further shortages.

In addition, governments were unable to resolve food shortages. Even after the February Revolution that started after large demonstrations demanding bread, the newly created Provisional Government exacerbated the problem. On March 1917, the Provisional Government introduced the food procurement plan, which imposed fixed prices of grain with state's monopoly over agricultural products.¹⁴ Under the food procurement plan, the government attempted to take control of supplying cheap agricultural products to the urban population and possibly resolve food crises. However, peasants disagreed with such a policy because the food procurement plan required their sacrifice. Peasants could not afford to sell grains at a low and fixed price because the cost of living was increasing. At the time, most industries prioritized war products over manufactured goods, which inevitably increased the price of commodities. Not only did the fixed prices not include the

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹² Andrei Markevich, and Mark Harrison, "Great War, Civil War, and recovery: Russia's national income, 1913 to 1928," *Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 3 (2011): 680.

¹³ Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *The Politics of Industrial Mobilization in Russia, 1914-17* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1983), 87-96.

¹⁴ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131.

inflation rate of the living cost, but also peasants believed the food procurement plan served the interest of the urban population and state bureaucrats.¹⁵

The peasants became further discontented with the state and resisted when the State Committee on Food Supply tried to carry out the food procurement plan. For example, at one village in Samara province, peasants mobilized whenever supply officials and soldiers came to the village to collect grains.¹⁶ Peasants claimed grain would be taken only over their dead bodies and officials ended up leaving the village without any collections.¹⁷ Furthermore, in Bolshiye Sundryri of Kazan province, the villagers protested against the grain monopoly by torturing chairman of the district supply committee, Zapolsky, who was roasted on a bonfire and then killed.¹⁸ Peasants also turned against landlords who were viewed as state representatives. A zemstvo, a local government during the Imperial Russia, leader named Ushakov was attacked by the mobs who broke into the house, dragged the furniture into the garden, and burned stocks of rye.¹⁹

Food shortages and other economic crises eventually led to social mobilization. On January of 1917, nearly 140,000 workers who constituted forty percent of industrial workers of Petrograd, demonstrated their frustration.²⁰ Shortly after, on February 22, 30,000 workers from the Putilov factory – Russia’s largest war plant – went on strike.²¹ A day after, they were joined by 78,000 to 128,000 workers from Petrograd, which officially started the February Revolution.²² The number of participants doubled by the next day to two hundred thousand workers, which led to the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty and establishment of the Provisional Government.²³ When such economic

¹⁵ Ibid: 132.

¹⁶ John L.H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution: a study in mass mobilization* (New York: Norton, 1976), 179.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 179.

¹⁹ Ibid, 210.

²⁰ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29.

²¹ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe, Volume II* (New York: W.W Norton, 2010), 932.

²² Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution, Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 221-22.

²³ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34.

crises persisted under the newly created Provisional Government, the Bolshevik Party led the October Revolution.

Military Dissidents

An even more significant cause of the Russian Revolution was that the Romanov dynasty did not have the capacity to control large demonstrations because large numbers of soldiers sided with rebels. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Russian soldiers were becoming demoralized by the constant defeats by the German army and questioned the legitimacy of the Romanov Dynasty. Russian soldiers could not wage a war against Germany on the Eastern front because Russia lacked weapons such as machine-guns and artillery shells, had a weak industrial base to supply the war, and had untrained military officials.²⁴ Although the Tsar ordered industrialists to expedite wartime production by expanding production of war materials, metal, textile, and chemicals, it was insufficient.²⁵ Shortages of rifles were common, which could be inferred from a comment from a British military attaché, General Alfred Knox. General Knox stated that “unarmed men had to be sent into the trenches to wait till their comrades were killed or wounded and their rifles became available.”²⁶ Shortages in guns and shells meant that Russians could not defend themselves against German heavy artillery bombardments, which buried Russian armies before they ever saw an enemy.²⁷ Moreover, lack of command and communication structures exacerbated shortages of artilleries where artillery officers hesitated to take orders from superiors in the infantry or the cavalry because of their sentiments of arrogance over other divisions of the army.²⁸ Furthermore, Russian military officials were inexperienced and poorly trained. British General Knox added that during the battle of Tannenberg, Russian Commanders Rennenkampf and Samsonov, who had a

²⁴ John Merriman, “A History of Modern Europe, Volume II.” *W.W Norton*: New York (2010), 929.

²⁵ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.

²⁶ Alfred Knox, *With the Russian Army, 1914-1917* (London: Hutchinson, 1921), 270.

²⁷ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.

²⁸ Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), 136.

background leading the cavalry division in Machuria, did not know how to wage a modern warfare.²⁹ Consequently, Russia suffered significant casualties in the Eastern Front. By the end of 1916, Russia lost nearly 5.7 million soldiers, 3.6 million dead or seriously wounded, and 2.1 million as prisoners of war.³⁰ Many soldiers were demoralized by war weariness and started to blame the Tsar Nicholas II who personally led the Russian army.

The Tsar compounded his mismanagement of the war effort by using his oppressive orders during an initial stage of the February Revolution, thus pushing soldiers to side with the rebels. When the February Revolution started on the 23rd of February, the Russian Duma wanted a peaceful resolution with protestors. The Duma chairman, M.V. Rodzianko, sent a telegram to Nicholas II asking for the approval of reforming the government into one that enjoyed public confidence.³¹ However, the Tsar dismissed the request by replying: “again this fat Rodzianko has written me lots of nonsense, to which I shall not even deign to reply.”³² The Tsar who was at the military headquarters during the revolt, completely miscalculated the scale of demonstrators demanding for reforms while showing complete mistrust of his senior policy adviser. When the Tsar ordered garrison reserves to take control over large demonstrations, the military commander, General S.S. Khabalov, took a passive approach.³³ He attempted to let the demonstrators run until they became exhausted without exerting force.³⁴ However, when he sent a telegram to the Tsar on the 25th of February detailing the disturbances, the Tsar ordered aggressive efforts to oppress demonstrators. The Tsar replied: “I order you to bring all of these disorders in the Capital to a halt as of tomorrow. These cannot be permitted in this difficult time of war with Germany and Austria. Nicholas.”³⁵ The

²⁹ Prit Buttar, *Collision of Empires: The War on the Eastern Front in 1914* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014), 201.

³⁰ Allan K. Wildman, *The end of Russian Imperial Army*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 95.

³¹ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.

³² Bruce W. Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 333.

³³ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bruce W. Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 327.

next morning, the military commander ordered soldiers to fire into the crowds. Suppression included using sabers and whips, and firing machine-guns, and firing from rooftops to break up crowds, which killed hundreds of people by the end of the day.³⁶³⁷

Brutal oppression had a severe consequence, which turned many soldiers toward mutiny. Most garrison reserves were newly recruited soldiers, mainly from the Petrograd region.³⁸ Not only were soldiers personally related to demonstrators, who were their families and friends, but also soldiers and protestors shared common interests: inefficacy of the government in resolving economic crises; food shortages and inflation, and the hopes of ending the war.³⁹ On the night of killing protestors, non-commissioned officers and soldiers each gathered to discuss over discontent with the order.⁴⁰ The next morning, the Volynsky Guard Regiment mutinied and killed the commanding officer, who ordered them to fire at protestors.⁴¹ After significant number of soldiers joining the protest, the Romanov Dynasty collapsed, and shortly after, the new leadership was established under the Provisional Government.

Bolsheviks as Alternative

In addition to all of these causes, the Russian Revolution would not have occurred had not the Bolshevik Party seized the opportunity created by social instability and inability of government to resolve crises brought on by the war. Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party emphasized the need for class based socialist revolution since the early 1900s. In Lenin's book *What is to be done?* of 1902, he writes "The fulfillment of this task, the destruction of the most powerful bulwark, not only of European, but of Asiatic reaction, would place the Russian Proletariat in the vanguard of the

³⁶ Allan K. Wildman, *The end of Russian Imperial Army* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 95.

³⁷ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution, Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 268-70.

³⁸ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39.

³⁹ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe, Volume II* (New York: W.W Norton, 2010), 932-33.

⁴⁰ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 39-40.

international revolutionary proletariat.”⁴² He argues that the Russian proletariat need to replace the capitalistic system and to establish a socialist society. He uses a word ‘destruction’ in achieving this goal, because without a complete destruction of the existing system, proletariats cannot have entire political control. However, the Bolsheviks’ influence weakened after the split in the Russian Social Democrat Labor Party in 1903.

The split occurred because two prominent leaders of the Russian Social Democrat Labor Party, Vladimir Lenin and Julius Martov, had an ideological feud over the definition of party membership. Lenin argued only highly trained professional revolutionaries could be party members, but Martov contended anybody could be a party member simply by agreeing to the party’s manifesto.⁴³ The underlying assumption was that Lenin sought military-revolutionary vanguard with strong leadership whereas Martov advocated broad-based party in the Western parliamentary style with a looser style of leadership.⁴⁴ Lenin’s view gained slender majority during the vote on this issue, and those who agreed with his view were called Bolsheviks, which means majoritarians.⁴⁵ Martov became the leader of the other faction who were called Mensheviks, which means minoritarians. A well-known British historian, Orlando Figes, argues that this naming disadvantaged Mensheviks over their rivalry with Bolsheviks, because Mensheviks had a permanent image of minority party even though at some point its membership far surpassed those of the Bolsheviks.⁴⁶

The split did not help neither Bolsheviks nor Mensheviks, because weakened party could not resist the Tsar who had a strong control over the country. Although Bolsheviks successfully

⁴² Henry M. Christman, *Essential Works of Lenin: What is to be done? And other writings* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 72.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Orlando Figes, *Revolutionary Russia 1891-1991* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 23.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

participated during the 1905 Revolution which forced the Tsar to adopt liberal reforms, the political power still remained in the hands of the Tsar.⁴⁸ It did not succeed in completely re-structuring the political system in the hands of proletariat, which Bolsheviks had been planning. When the Tsar began suppressing his political opponents, Lenin fled Russia on December 1907. While in exile, the Bolsheviks' influence in Russia was getting weaker. The Brussel Conference of 1914 further caused difficulty for Bolsheviks because non-Bolsheviks and international socialist parties pressured Bolsheviks to re- unite with Mensheviks.⁴⁹ Re-unification would have benefited Mensheviks at this point because its membership outnumbered Bolsheviks.⁵⁰ But Bolsheviks did not have enough rationale to resist the demand nor resources to manage its own party.

On the verge of assimilation with the non-Bolsheviks socialist party, outbreak of World War I saved the Bolshevik Party. Since the war began, socialist allies shifted their attention from Bolsheviks unification to more important issues of accommodating their proletariat supporters who are weary of the effects of the war (as described earlier). Socialist revolutionaries mobilized workers and soldiers in carrying out the February Revolution, which ended up establishing the Provisional Government.

Lenin who was in Switzerland at the time heard the news of Revolution from his comrade, M. G. Bronski. He immediately started to seek ways to return to Russia by discussing the issue with the German consul, Gisbert von Romberg, in Bern, Switzerland. The German government approved Lenin to travel across Germany in a sealed train, because Lenin advocated withdrawal of Soviet troops from the war and that would relieve Germany's Eastern Front. By the time Lenin returned on April 1917, the newly created government had a significant problem, which was the power-sharing between the Provisional Government and Socialist revolutionaries. Although bourgeois elites and

⁴⁸ Ibid, 104.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 141-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

liberals led by Kerensky governed the Provisional Government, de-facto power lied on Socialist revolutionaries – Petrograd Soviet including soldiers, workers, leftist socialists, Mensheviks, and tiny numbers of Bolsheviks.⁵¹

The Bolshevik Party grew in numbers after Lenin's return. The Party became largely popular because the Provisional Government could not solve problems of the war, and the Bolsheviks offered a solution that people wanted to hear – equal redistribution of wealth and ending a war. Bolsheviks used radical propaganda claiming that some industries made huge profits during the war years, but those profits were not shared equally among workers.⁵² Although the truth may be debatable, the conspiracy theory earned popular support. More importantly, Bolsheviks earned wider support by advocating to end the war. When the Provisional Government decided to launch military offensive on June, massive resentment occurred among Soviets.⁵³ Many anti-government protestors joined Bolsheviks who planned armed demonstrations against the government.⁵⁴ However, Bolsheviks' attempt did not succeed because Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks urged its supporters to side the Provisional Government while concerned about Bolsheviks' violent measures.⁵⁵

It was the Kornilov Affair that finally united Soviets together under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. The Kornilov Affair started when the Provisional Government collaborated with General Kornilov to reduce the power and authority of Soviets, and restore order amongst soldiers.⁵⁶ However, the affair gave an opportunity for Bolsheviks to mobilize large troops because Kornilov launched a coup against the Petrograd, after his miscommunications with Kerensky. In

⁵¹ James Mavor, *The Russian Revolution* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1928), 82.

⁵² Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 187.

⁵³ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe, Volume II* (New York: W.W Norton, 2010), 939-940.

⁵⁴ James Mavor, *The Russian Revolution* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1928), 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*: 90.

⁵⁶ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 202.

order to defend against the Kornilov mutiny, the Provisional Government permitted arming of workers.⁵⁷ Consequently, Bolsheviks armed the Red Guard whose membership reached twenty-five thousand within few weeks.⁵⁸ Even after the rebel was suppressed, the Red Guard kept their weapons and played a significant role in the upcoming Revolution. The leader of the Red Guard, Trotsky has noted that “the army that rose against Kornilov, was the army-to-be of the October Revolution.”⁵⁹ Eventually, the Red Guards and Soviets stopped Kornilov’s troop marching forward, and Kornilov was arrested by soldiers of his own battalion.⁶⁰

After the Kornilov Affair, the Bolshevik Party has gained wider popularity than ever before because the affair significantly undermined the legitimacy of the Provisional Government, and moderate socialist who collaborated with the Provisional Government, and the military high command who attempted to violently overtake the capital. On September 1917, the Bolshevik Party had won the majority of votes in Petrograd and Moscow for the first time.⁶¹ The Bolshevik party did not wait too long in utilizing the opportunity. Not everybody, including Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, agreed to the armed revolt.⁶² However, Lenin and other Central Committee members decided that it was necessary to overthrow corrupt and ineffective Provisional Government. On the evening of October 24, Lenin sent final written instructions to the Central Committee. “Comrades, ... we must at all costs, this very evening, this very night, arrest the government, having first disarmed the military cadets, and so on... to delay action is fatal.”⁶³ Lenin’s instructions, led Bolshevik leaders to mobilize the Red Guard who began taking over

⁵⁷ Abraham Ascher, “The Kornilov Affair,” *The Russian Review* 12, no. 14 (1953): 251.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204.

⁶¹ Abraham Ascher, “The Kornilov Affair,” *The Russian Review* 12, no. 14 (1953): 252.

⁶² V. I. Lenin, “Collected Works,” *Progress Publishers* 26 (1964): 216.

⁶³ Saul N. Silverman, *Lenin* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1972), 73-74.

government buildings. By the next day, the Winter Palace (the seat of the Provisional Government) was occupied by the Bolshevik party and successfully ended the Russian Revolution.

After the revolution, the Russian Constituent Assembly election was held in November 1917. Under the first free elections in Russian history, Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) won the most votes while Bolsheviks only winning quarter of the votes.⁶⁴ However, the Bolsheviks were unwilling to concede their power. Bolsheviks collaborated with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries (LSR) who split from the SR and nullified the election.⁶⁵ Both argued that the elections, which were remnants of the Provisional Government, put them at disadvantage, because peasants who supported the LSR could not vote for the LSR whose list had been halted before the split with SR.⁶⁶ Consequently, Lenin destroyed Constitutional Assembly election and formed Sovnarkom, a centralized autocracy with commissariats playing key roles, as the government of the new revolutionary regime.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Russian Revolution was one of the most important events that occurred in the early 1900s. It marked the beginning of the communist Soviet Union, and its fundamental ideology – Marxist-Leninist thought – significantly influenced other revolutionaries around the world. Lenin re-interpreted the Marxism and carried out successful revolution in a peasant-based society facilitated by few professional revolutionaries. It strongly influenced Mao Zedong in establishing the People's Republic of China, and Lenin's legacy still remains today.

The Russian Revolution happened because there were both necessary preconditions, economic crises and military dissidents, and a movement – the Bolsheviks – willing to capitalize on

⁶⁴ Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 331.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 332-333.

them. Since the beginning of World War I, the Romanov Dynasty failed to accommodate food shortages and military defeats, which catalyzed workers' protest. The Tsar's violent oppression further created military dissidents who joined demonstrators to overthrow the monarchy. But economic and military problems persisted even after the Provisional Government came to a power. The Provisional Government's June Offensive and involvement with the Kornilov Affair created many anti-government dissidents, which was utilized by the Bolshevik Party under the strong leadership of Lenin. In midst of crises, Bolsheviks could grasp the minds of Soviets with their revolutionary ideology and eventually led to the successful Revolution in Russia.

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