

The Bolshevik Takeover: September 1917

Although the Tsar had been overthrown months earlier, it was not until September 1917 that the Bolshevik party's rise to power began in earnest. The events of September marked the transition from small, radical party to ruling political majority. Just a few months earlier in July, the Bolsheviks had been on the wane after a series of politically unfavorable maneuvers. However, due to several events that allowed the Bolsheviks to shift the popular sentiment away from the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary dominated Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks were able to re-establish their voting base and take over. Once they had control of the Petrograd Soviet, they were politically positioned to take control of the rest of the government, and eventually the rest of Russia. The Menshevik alliance with the Provisional Government and dedication to their interpretation of Marxist theory, combined with the radicalization of Petrograd's working class and intense propaganda campaigns designed to discredit the Mensheviks and legitimize the Bolsheviks were all instrumental in allowing the Bolsheviks to finally become the dominant political party.

When the socialists took over power from the tsars, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were very similar; parties divided "not so much by slogans as by a different conception of their inner meaning."¹ In a provisional government where both were initially minorities, telling one group of newly formed socialists from another based on seemingly minor ideological differences was difficult for the general public. However, the more politically savvy Bolsheviks gradually realized that they could increase their

¹ Sukhanov, N. N. "The Dissolution of the Democracy After the Kornilov Revolt," chapter [24], *The Russian Revolution: 1917*, vol. 2, pp. 522-25. London: Oxford UP, 1955. Edited, abridged, and translated by Joel Carmichael.

power by positioning themselves as the only acceptable, legitimate alternative to the Provisional Government. Most importantly, the Mensheviks were ideologically bound by their interpretation of Marxist theory to follow the status quo, even if it was unstable and depended on a weak, nascent government. Worst of all was the fact that the Mensheviks' "Marxist theories were incomprehensible and irritating to the masses, which had just barely tasted the blessing of free political development."²

Even in their Party names, they can be seen as two opposing forces: the "majority" and "minority" fractions of a greater political party. The irony, of course is, that the Bolsheviks claimed the majority title long before they actually were a majority. The Mensheviks were too slow in protesting the Bolshevik claims of majority, and the titles stuck. This is a political play that clearly demonstrates both the politically ignorant and tolerant nature of the Mensheviks, and the quick acting, advantage-seeking Bolsheviks whose actions were, in Trotsky's words "completely out of proportion to the political influence of Bolshevism."²

Noted research historian Vladimir Brovkin, explains how the moderate stance of the Mensheviks, their "insistence on 'consciousness' by which they meant the moderation of the workers' 'excessive demands,' led workers to support the Bolsheviks who promised to fulfill those demands."³ Another historian, Ronald Grigor Suny, claims that the workers and the soldiers were very conscious of what they wanted in a new government and what policies they were willing to support and fight for. The key to Bolshevik success was that "more convincingly than any of their political opponents, the

¹ *Ibid.*

² Trotsky, Lev. "The Bolsheviks and the Soviets." *The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*. London, 1930.

³ Brovkin, Vladimir. *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*. Yale UP, 1997. JSTOR. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/235243>>.

Bolsheviks pushed for a government of the lower classes institutionalized in the soviets and advocated workers' control over industry and an end to the war. By early fall 1917 a coincidence of lower-class aspirations and the Bolshevik program resulted in elected Leninist majorities in the soviets of both Petrograd and Moscow and the strategic support of soldiers."⁴ I would tend to agree with this viewpoint: the Bolshevik focus on simple, easy slogans that were targeted towards the workers was much more effective than the Menshevik insistence on sacrifice and moderation in the name of abstract long-term goals.

Although a workers' Soviet (a workers' council) was created in 1905 in Petrograd, the real precursor to the Soviet that interests us is the Central Workers Group, founded in 1915 by Menshevik socialists as a liaison between the workers of the city and the Central Military Industrial Committee in Petrograd. As the historian Lewis Siegelbaum has said, "the workers' groups were the only national network of labor activists in Russia linked with a predominantly bourgeois organization"⁵. Because of this, the workers' groups were the natural starting point for the new socialist power base. It is important to remember that Lenin himself proposed "a dictatorship of the proletariat," so it was only natural to take advantage of these existing groups. Moreover, due to the closing of factories in Poland and the Baltic States during and after WWI, there were over 400,000 workers in Petrograd, 335,000 of which were concentrated in a few giant factories⁶, which made it easier to hold speeches and rallies to influence this extremely important political group.

⁴ Suny, Grigor. "Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics." *Russian Review*. Vol. 53. 1994. 167. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/130821>>.

⁵ Siegelbaum, Lewis H. "The Workers' Groups and the War-Industries Committees: Who Used Whom?" *Russian Review*. Vol. 39. 1980. 150-80. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/pss/128687>>.

⁶ Trotsky, Lev. "Shifts In the Masses." *The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*. London, 1930.

On orders of Alexander Protopopov, the Russian Minister of the Interior, the leaders of the Central Workers Group were arrested and detained on suspicions of revolutionary activity Jan 27, 1917. They were freed exactly one month later by a group of workers and soldiers as part of what is now known as the February Revolution, and that same day they began to work on electing a Workers' Soviet in Petrograd. An executive committee composed mostly of Mensheviks and chaired by important Menshevik leaders such as Chkheidze and Tsereteli led this new Soviet. This is an example of how the Menshevik movement was initially much more powerful than the Bolshevik movement.

Although the Petrograd Soviet voted to stay outside the new Duma, this did not stop it from participating Russian politics. The issuance of "Order Number One" which gave the Soviet ultimate authority over the armed forces and started a period of dual power between the Provisional Government and the Soviet shows that the newly minted Petrograd soviet was busy consolidating and protecting its power. However, "dual power" created an unstable situation as the Socialists attempted to hold power without actually seizing it. This is because the Mensheviks interpreted Marxism as forbidding them from interfering with what was seen as an ongoing capitalist phase leading up to the inevitable socialist revolution. Once the country was sufficiently developed, the Mensheviks would lead the revolution and take control. Trotsky himself called dual power "*Dual Impotence*" in June 1917, as he saw a situation where "the bourgeoisie assumed authority in the name of order and of a war for victory; yet without the Soviets it could

⁷ Trotsky, Leon. "The Struggle for State Power (2. The Farce of Dual Power)" (June 1917). *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/power/art02.htm>>.

not rule; the latter's relation to the government was that of an awed half confidence, combined with a fear lest the proletariat might... upset the whole business."⁷

A string of unsuccessful riots in April and July 1917 directed by Bolshevik leaders seriously damaged their cause. Trotsky describes their support base as having "dwindled by half."⁸ Fortunately for the Bolsheviks, the Provisional Government continued to make mistakes that were polarizing. Pro-Bolshevik writer Alexandra Kollontai later claimed, "In July the reactionary trend in the policy of the bourgeoisie was becoming increasingly obvious. The workers press was banned, Bolsheviks were arrested, and the death penalty was reintroduced for soldiers."⁹ This shows that not only was the Provisional Government struggling to control the workers and suppress the Bolsheviks, but also did not understand their popular base as well as they needed to. The reintroduction of the death penalty was an exceptionally glaring error, as it hastened the loss of soldier support for the Provisional Government. Despite their earlier failures, things started turning around for the Bolsheviks during the month of August 1917 as feelings of discontent intensified among the workers and the soldiers.

As a response to policies enacted by the head of the provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky, a group of dissident soldiers led by the rogue General Lavr Kornilov attempted to overthrow the Provisional Government in late August 1917. By August 27th, Kornilov had ordered his troops to advance on Petrograd, and Kerensky had no choice but to ask the Petrograd Soviet for help. The Soviet used its influence over the railway workers and many propagandists to halt the advance and foil the coup, which

⁸ Trotsky, Lev. "The Bolsheviks and the Soviets."

⁹ Kollontai, Alexandra. "Why the Bolsheviks Must Win" (December 1917). *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/bolsheviks-win.htm>>.

contributed to a Bolshevik revival. Even the Menshevik opposition realized this: Nikolai Sukhanov, an important member of the Petrograd soviet, said in his account of the revolution that “after the Kornilov Revolt Bolshevism began blossoming luxuriantly and put forth deep roots throughout the country”¹⁰ as it “revealed the fact that [the Provisional Government] had no forces of their own to back them.”¹¹ Another consequence of the Kornilov affair was that Bolshevik factions were able to gain control of weapons, which had been handed out to the Bolsheviks by a panicked Provisional Government. These weapons would prove useful during the October Revolution.

Another important event was the release of several key Bolshevik leaders after the Kornilov affair who had been imprisoned for previous actions, including Leon Trotsky himself. The release had been negotiated as part of the terms of aid to the Provisional Government, and is significant since it gave the Bolsheviks who were now in control of the hearts, minds and rifles of Petrograd a group of leaders. The revitalization of power that the Bolsheviks experienced from the restoration of their leadership, as well as the attention and support of the newly radicalized masses was instrumental in the Bolshevik takeover of the Petrograd Soviet. By emphasizing the Menshevik affiliation with the discredited Provisional Government and continuously portraying the Mensheviks as similarly weak and indecisive, the Bolsheviks were able to shift the public’s perception of their party, and make theirs the most relevant and progressive party in the eyes of the workers and soldiers.

The legitimization of the Bolshevik movement was a long time in the making, but finally came to be in a very short period of time. By continuing to position themselves as

¹⁰ Sukhanov, N. N.

¹¹ Leon Trotsky, “My Life” (1930). *Marxists Internet Archive*. 18 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1930-lif/>>.

the opposition party (or at least the party most vocally opposed) to the Mensheviks and the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks, were able to gain a majority in the workers' section. Political followed control quickly, if somewhat unexpectedly. As Trotsky explains in his autobiography [My Life](#):

The number of Bolsheviks in the Petrograd Soviet was increasing daily. We represented almost half of the membership, and yet there was not a single Bolshevik in the presidium. We raised the question of re-electing the Soviet presidium... We reckoned that we should be a hundred votes short of half, and were ready to consider that a success. But it happened that we received a hundred votes more than the coalition of the Socialist-Revolutionists and the Mensheviks. We were the victors.¹²

The rise of the Bolsheviks can be attributed to an intense campaign of propaganda, in the form of written material, as well as rallies and speeches designed to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Bolshevik movement. The campaign focused on portraying the current administration and their allies as incompetent, and then offering the Bolsheviks as the alternative party. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks claimed a kind of grassroots majority and an unofficial status as the real providers and protectors of the people. After the takeover, Alexandra Kollontai wrote an essay, where she states that:

In Petrograd, Moscow and throughout Russia large trade unions were formed with 100 to 200 thousand members (metal workers, textile workers, wood workers, etc.). Then under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, workers' and soldiers' clubs were set up with their own libraries, study courses, cheap canteens, etc. At the same time, the first steps were taken to organize a union of socialist youth, whose membership reached 50 thousand. The Bolsheviks also did a great deal of work among the soldiers at the front in order to strengthen the spirit of internationalism there also. Millions of copies of pamphlets and brochures were distributed which openly set out the problem of war as understood by socialist-internationalists.

¹² Trotsky, *My Life*.

Bolshevik-led meetings, congresses and conferences were also called for the same purpose.¹³

Kollontai writes this all retrospectively and after the fact, in a December 1917 essay titled “[Why the Bolsheviks must win](#)” using language that suggests pre-revolution legitimacy. She claims that the Bolsheviks were already acting in a mature, governmental fashion providing services and looking after the interests of workers and soldiers, the core of the Bolshevik support base. Interestingly, Leon Trotsky himself claimed a similar, if less substantial, Bolshevik political influence with Petrograd’s workers in August of 1917 in his essay “[With Blood and Iron](#).” He claims, “Factory committees ... are in an overwhelming majority made up of Bolsheviks. In the Petrograd trade unions everyday practical work, just like the ideological leadership, lies wholly with the Bolsheviks.”¹⁴

Despite their later claims, the key to the Bolshevik claim to legitimacy did not lie in their alleged grass roots support, but in their assertions of the illegitimacy and negligence of the Provisional government (and by extension, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries). To put it simply, they showed the people that they were worthy of rule by asserting that the Mensheviks and SRs were unworthy.

When the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks addressed each other in public, this stance was (at least in retrospect) fairly easy to see as well. The Bolshevik movement Kerensky, Miliukov, Tsereteli and others publicly called anarchy Trotsky defended as “the organized representation of the Petrograd proletariat” since he sees it as the only true people’s government. “And it is against this class organization of advanced workers that

¹³ Kollontai, Alexandra. “[Why the Bolsheviks Must Win](#).”

¹⁴ Trotsky, Leon. “With Blood and Iron” (August 1917). *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/08/blood.htm>>.

... [the Provisional Government] promises henceforth to fight with blood and iron.”¹⁵

Various Bolsheviks portrayed the Provisional Government as being the enemy of the people, and the Mensheviks as little better than weak collaborators who “sprinkle[d] the holy water of Menshevism on the repressions of dictators, who [were] out of control and who spread the disgusting slanders that the organized proletariat [was] sowing anarchy.”¹⁶

In his April 1917 letter to the workers, “[Against the Riot Mongers](#),” Lenin had taken great care to establish his organization’s international legitimacy.¹⁷ He refutes his opponents’ claims of his possible corruption or political impurity, and claims that “various socialists verified every step taken by the emigrants [Lenin] in connection with their journey” in defense of claims that he was only allowed back to Russia because he was a German spy. He further states recent events had “shown that Milyukov is either powerless against Britain and France, ... or that he does not want to take serious measures.” While he continues to denounce bourgeoisie violence, the most important theme is Lenin’s desire for legitimacy in the eyes of the people. While Lenin often argued for radical, anti-establishment action, it is interesting and informative to see him using the judgment passed on him and the circumstances of his return by foreigners and the Executive committee to argue for himself. This is an awkward position for him to be in, the public being more accustomed to Lenin the rabble-rouser and rebel. Because of this, although his arguments are sound, they come across as less than sincere. For the purpose of this paper, it is also of the utmost importance to recognize Lenin’s political maneuverability and his ability to switch easily between the radical action seeker, and as

¹⁵ Trotsky, Leon. “With Blood and Iron” (August 1917).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. “Against the Riot-Mongers” (April 1917). *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/14b.htm>>.

the legitimate, “true” voice of the proletariat. His ability to reposition himself depending on his needs was what allowed him to seize power and maintain it afterwards. Lenin never allowed himself to be seen as being politically in the wrong. By attacking the opposition from both sides depending on the situation, Lenin outmaneuvered the Mensheviks by consistently making his arguments more accessible and understandable to the common worker. For example, when the Mensheviks talked about sacrificing or doing something for the abstract “future revolution”, Lenin was usually able to counter it with an argument for supporting a revolution in the present. He always seemed to say the right thing at the right time, regardless of what he had said before, whereas the Mensheviks and their strict adherence to their central dogma were slow and lacking in appeal to the proletariat in comparison.

Because of their ability to switch their positions and political stances depending on what they were trying to accomplish, as well as their later silencing of the anti-Bolshevik press, it is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the Bolsheviks as having executed a masterful political plan without internal dissent. This is not the case, however. The first example of dissent within the Bolsheviks can be found in Lenin’s September 1917 letter to the Central Committee titled “[The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power](#).”¹⁸ He begins, very much in character, attacking the democratic conference which he claims, “is deceiving the peasants,” and the “wavering” Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. However, although it was published on September 12th, he states Bolsheviks must assume power immediately “because the impending surrender of Petrograd will make our chances a hundred times less favorable. And it is not in our power to prevent the surrender of

¹⁸ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power" (Sept 1917). *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/14.htm>>.

Petrograd while the army is headed by Kerensky and Co.” Most surprisingly, he tells the Central Committee “It would be naïve to wait for a “formal” majority for the Bolsheviks. No revolution ever waits for that.” His language is surprising, and dismissive of the idea that a majority is in fact more than a nuisance – curious words for a man who only a few months later will claim that his majority was there all along, formally and informally. It is also interesting to note how little influence the Bolsheviks had with the army – the official version of the story after the revolution states that there was always strong soldier support, since the Bolsheviks were the party of the worker and the soldier. However, even though Petrograd had a strong military presence and substantial garrisons, it ultimately fell to propagandists and rail workers to foil Kornilov’s attempted coup in August 1917.

Lenin and Trotsky were also able to suppress internal dissent, even though it was certainly present. In a statement issued on the 11th of October 1917, Kamenev and Zinoviev argued against Lenin’s plans for an uprising claiming two main reasons for likely failure were the Leninist beliefs that “(1.) The majority of the people in Russia are already on our side (2.) The majority of the international proletariat is on our side. Alas! Neither one nor the other is true.”¹⁹ Had those opposed to him been able to challenge his assertions of popular support more effectively, the outcome of the revolution might have been very different. No such organized opposition came, however, and the Bolshevik movement led by Lenin used their considerable political and propaganda expertise to silence their critics. Just before the Bolsheviks shut it down on the 26th of October, the newspaper Izvestia issued a final warning against Lenin’s efforts. Their last statement

¹⁹ The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution: Minutes of the Central Committee of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks), August 1917-February 1918, translated from the Russian by Ann Bone (London, Pluto Press, 1974), pp. 89-95.

reads: “To date, the Bolsheviks have seized Petrograd but not all of Russia. The danger of a bloody civil war is threatening. Bloodshed and pogroms- this is what we must prepare ourselves for. “²⁰ The Bolshevik political machine was too savvy and too tightly held by Trotsky and Lenin (who would go on to essentially outlaw dissent!) to allow such dissent, however, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In studying documents by prominent figures of history, it is possible to see the Bolshevik takeover of the Petrograd and Moscow Soviet not as an inevitable, well planned campaign by a majority party, but as a series of political and social manipulations that were designed to give legitimacy to the Bolshevik play for power by discrediting the Provisional Government, and by association, the Social Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. Although in retrospect prominent Bolsheviks would claim worker and military support at a grassroots level, it is certain that the Bolsheviks themselves did not necessarily believe they had reached a critical mass of support for a legitimate takeover, and therefore would require a more revolutionary (violent) takeover that did not bother with a “formal majority.” The Mensheviks, on the other hand, were limited in their effectiveness by their poor understanding of politics, their slow response speed, and their association with the provisional government. By tying the more gradual approach of the opposition parties to the blundering of the Kerensky government, and claiming a majority and more effectively marketing themselves to the all-important worker and soldier social groups, the Bolsheviks were able to wrest control of the Soviets, and eventually do the same with the rest of the Russian government in the October Revolution.

²⁰ *Izvestiya*, 26 October (8 November) 1917, p.1, in Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, vol III, p. 1801.

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