

How the Bolsheviks won leadership of the masses

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The Russian workers, particularly those in Petrograd, had suffered a very real setback after the mass street demonstrations of the July Days. Although the Bolshevik leadership had opposed any attempt to seize power as premature, given the balance of class forces across Russia, they had demonstrated at the head of the armed masses. Now as the demonstrators dispersed, recovering from its fright, the Provisional Government went onto the offensive. The bourgeois press accused the Bolsheviks of leading a failed putsch, slandered their leaders, like Lenin and Zinoviev, as 'German agents' attempting to sabotage the Russian military offensive then underway.

Key Bolshevik leaders such as Lev Kamenev, close allies such as Leon Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky from the Interdistrict Organisation (the Mezhrayontsy) and hundreds of rank and file Bolsheviks were arrested and imprisoned. Military cadets, former police officers and members of the proto-fascist Black Hundreds, carried out individual shootings and lynchings. In such witch hunt conditions the party decided that Lenin and Zinoviev should go underground, first in the countryside near Petrograd and later in nearby Finland.

The circulation of the party press halved in the month following the July Days. The morale of party members in the factories was shaken by the sudden turn around in the situation. Yet as early as mid-July Yakov Sverdlov, a superb organiser and the senior Bolshevik leader left at liberty in the capital, was able to report 'the mood in Petrograd is hale and hearty. We are keeping our heads. The organisation is not destroyed.' Less than a month later the tide had turned again and was now flowing strongly in favour of the Bolsheviks. By the end of August the party had 240,000 members, three times that in April. What had brought about this rapid and dramatic change?

The answer lay not simply in the steadfastness of the Bolsheviks cadres, embodied in organisers like Sverdlov, nor yet in the principled yet flexible character of Bolshevik tactics and strategy, important as these were. It lay in the failure of the counter-revolution to inflict a decisive defeat on the vanguard of the working class and stabilise the military, political and economic situation of the country. Firstly the 'Kerensky offensive' at the front rapidly collapsed in the face of mass mutinies and desertions by the Russian troops and a German and Austrian counteroffensive. Prince Lvov, who had headed the government since the February revolution resigned and Alexander Kerensky, the war minister, and the leading figure in the cabinet since early May, took over as premier.

Kerensky wanted to play the part Napoleon Bonaparte played in the French Revolution - that of stemming the revolutionary surge and isolating and destroying its most radical representatives the Bolsheviks, much as Napoleon crushed the remnants of the revolutionaries of 1792-4 (the Jacobins and their immediate successors). He demanded the banning of the Bolshevik party but the Mensheviks and SR ministers vetoed this, knowing that this would be a dangerous, even an impossible, step. He ordered the disarming

of the workers factory militia, the Red Guard, and in this he was successful. He ordered the despatch to the front of some of the most radical regiments in the city garrison. But as Trotsky later observed this was to send 40,000 thoroughly politicised agitators to the trenches.

The High Command piled on the pressure for Kerensky to 'restore order' in the army grew. Alexei Brusilov the army's commander-in-chief publicly demanded:

'There cannot be dual authority in the army. The army must have one head and one authority.'

He wanted the complete and total restoration of military discipline, including the officers' right to shoot 'mutineers'. However Kerensky, whose own role as would be Bonaparte and 'strongman' rested on a balancing act between the soviets and the counter-revolution played for time by dismissing Brusilov and replacing him with Lavr Georgievich Kornilov, hitherto commander of the Petrograd military district - a man of no less counter-revolutionary opinions but more limited intelligence - he was described by a fellow commander as having 'the heart of a lion but the brains of a sheep.'

No sooner was Kornilov appointed than the imperialist bourgeoisie and the landowners began to rally around him, giving him lavish receptions and calling him the 'saviour of Russia.' It was plain they saw him as their saviour from the working class and its soviets, i.e. as just the man to instal a counter-revolutionary dictatorship.

However - their ambitions aside- neither Kerensky nor Kornilov was a Napoleon. More important still the dynamic element of the Russian revolution, the proletariat and its Bolshevik vanguard, were far from being a spent force.

Despite the repression which closed the Bolshevik paper Pravda and temporarily drove most of the party leaders underground the Bolshevik Party survived the weeks of 'German Agent' hysteria that swept the country after the July days. Lenin and Zinoviev in hiding at Razliv, just across the Finnish border were able to send letters and documents. As early as 13 July the Party was able to hold a two day strategy conference of the Military Organisation, the Central Committee and the committees of the Petrograd and Moscow districts.

Mensheviks and counter revolution

Lenin prepared for this a document The Political Situation. It consisted of four theses. Thesis one proclaimed that 'the counter revolution has actually taken state power into its hands', and that Russia is 'virtually a military dictatorship' whose policy 'is preparation for disbanding the soviets'. Thesis two stigmatised the Mensheviks and SRs for having completely 'betrayed the cause of the revolution by putting it in the hands of the counter revolution' for which they now act as 'mere figleaves'. Thesis three proclaimed that all hope of a peaceful transition had vanished for good and that now an armed workers' uprising was necessary. Consequently Lenin argued that the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' must be withdrawn. The reason Lenin gave was that a) 'it was a slogan for the peaceful development of the revolution' and b) 'power has changed hands' and the Mensheviks and SRs have 'completely betrayed' the revolution. The fourth thesis explained that the Party must combine legal with illegal work aiming towards an insurrection the aim of which would be 'to transfer power to the proletariat supported by the poor peasants, with a view to putting our party programme into effect.'

Lenin was aware of the danger of separating the organisational form from its political leadership. Under reformist leadership soviets can play a reactionary role- as indeed they did in July 1917 in Russia. However, with a revolutionary leadership the soviets would, once again, play a revolutionary role. The struggle for new soviet actually became in August 1917, the struggle for Bolshevik leadership. The existing

soviets were renovated and cleansed of their reactionary leadership.

Lenin and the soviets

Lenin temporarily removed from the scene of action in the capital, for once misestimated the strength and completeness of the counter revolution. He was correct to characterise Kerensky's intentions as bonapartist but he judged this to be more complete than was in fact the case. There were, as yet, only conflicting elements of bonapartism rather than a finished bonapartist regime in Russia. These clashing elements went by the names of Kerensky and Kornilov. Their conflict, when it broke cover at the end of August, was to lead to a decisive weakening of the forces of the counter-revolution. In short the situation in Russia in July and August was more that of a 'democratic counter-revolution,' one that preserved the legality of the mass workers organisations - soviets, the workers parties, factory committees etc, but which directed severe repression against its vanguard, the Bolsheviki.

By the July meeting of the Bolshevik leadership Lenin had come to the conclusion that the key governmental slogans that the Bolsheviks had used to such good effect up to and in the July Days - 'All power to the Soviets' and 'Down with the ten capitalist ministers' were now outmoded. From hiding he warned the Bolsheviks:

'Too often has it happened that, when history has taken a sharp turn, even progressive parties have for some time been unable to adapt themselves to the new situation and have repeated slogans which had formerly been correct but had now lost all meaning?lost it as 'suddenly' as the sharp turn in history was 'sudden'.

Methodologically Lenin was right that when a major turning point occurs in a revolution the old slogans cannot simply be repeated unchanged in changed circumstances. The above slogans had been in effect a call on the Mensheviks and the SRs to take the power, with a promise that the Bolsheviks would, whilst remaining in complete opposition to them within the soviets, not attempt their armed overthrow and moreover defend their government against any attempt to do so by the counter-revolutionary forces. But the July Days proved that the Mensheviks and SR's would cling to their alliance with the bourgeoisie, even when hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers offered them the power. Lenin's analysis was as follows:

'The cycle of development of the class and party struggle in Russia from February 27 to July 4 is complete. A new cycle is beginning, one that involves not the old classes, not the old parties, not the old Soviets, but classes, parties and Soviets rejuvenated in the fire of struggle, tempered, schooled and refashioned by the process of the struggle. (?) We must, at the beginning of the new cycle, proceed from the triumphant bourgeois counter-revolution, which triumphed because the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks compromised with it, and which can be defeated only by the revolutionary proletariat. Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks must now prepare for an armed insurrection against the Provisional government and the present Soviet regime.'

In fact Lenin was not only overestimating of the completeness of the counter-revolution's triumph but also linking the call for power to the Soviets too narrowly to the perspective of a peaceful transfer, one which he had argued since April was possible. The dual power - or rather the pole of it represented by the workers' soviets, had indeed been greatly weakened by the Mensheviks and SR's support for the counter-revolution. But even now their support was far from total. They themselves had good cause, to fear the counter-revolution represented by Kornilov. He plainly wished to destroy the soviets and the soldiers' committees' altogether.

The triumph of the counter-revolution would mean the end of the right wing socialists and populists too.

Rumours of an impending coup were rife in the last weeks of August. If Kornilov actually moved to do this then it was likely the Mensheviks and the SRs ? or at least their followers - would have to fight. That or the Bolsheviks would completely outflank them by initiating and leading the workers resistance.

However Lenin was correct to warn the party not to fetishise the existing soviets with their Menshevik leadership. Lenin looked to other organs like the factory committees, where Bolshevik influence was growing massively, as a more revolutionary mass base for the Bolsheviks to strike for power.

But in fact the soviets proved more responsive, more democratic and more active as instruments of the revolution than Lenin supposed. Moreover the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' could and would take on different meanings to that of being simply a call for a Menshevik and SR government.

Thus it is noteworthy that the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd, whilst they de-emphasised the slogan in this latter form, never withdrew it in its broader meaning ? that the working class and the soldiers must break with the bourgeoisie and take power through their own democratic councils. At the Second City Conference of the Petrograd party many speakers came out against Lenin's position as argued for by Stalin. One delegate argued:

'There were moments when we had to fear the dispersal of the soviets but this time has now definitively passed.'

Volodarsky supporting him added:

'People who claim the counter-revolution is victorious are making judgments about the masses on the basis of their leaders. While the Menshevik and SR leaders are shifting rightwards, the masses are moving leftwards. Kerensky, Tseretelli and Avksentiev are caliphs for one hour. [?] Bearing this in mind, it is clear that the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' is not obsolete.'

The party's refusal to go all the way with Lenin was indeed fortunate since the Bolsheviks would soon have to deploy the slogan again. Briefly in September, it was used once more as a call on the Mensheviks and SRs to break with the Provisional Government and Kerensky. More famously it was used in October as a call for a Bolshevik majority government.

The whole debate shows how utterly false is the Stalinist and bourgeois historian's common viewpoint that the Bolshevik Party was a monolithic block under the iron grip of an always correct (or, for the academics, dictatorial) Lenin. As we saw in April, in the July Days and as shall see again in the run up to the October Revolution itself the party engaged in vigorous internal debates about the correct way forward. Lenin often had to argue hard for his line and was neither always successful nor always tactically right, despite his overall strategic brilliance.

The plot thickens

In fact Kerensky's bonapartism rapidly proved not so much a dictatorship as a precarious balancing act between revolution and counter-revolution. From 12 to 15 August he summoned a 'State Conference' in Moscow to mobilise support for his attempts at 'strong government.' Held in the Bolshoi Theatre, home of the Imperial Ballet, Kerensky tried to placate both the serried ranks of the representatives of big business and the officer corps to his right and the Menshevik/SR soviet delegates to his left. Referring to the July Days he ranted:

'May everyone know, and may those know who have already attempted to raise an armed hand against the people's government, that these attempts will be crushed by iron and blood' (?.) Our patience has reached a limit and anybody who exceeds that limit will come up against a force whose repressive strength

will remind these criminals of the old regime.?

Kerensky's hysterical assertions of power fooled neither side, but least of all did they convince the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie that he was the man of destiny, the man to save Russia. In fact during Kornilov's own highly theatrical arrival for the State Conference in Moscow was greeted by Radichev, a representative of the Cadet Party, with the significant cry - 'Save Russia and her grateful people will crown you!'

Meanwhile, the army high command and the bourgeois parties stepped up their plotting to carry out a full scale counter-revolution, to install a military dictatorship.

Even before July the Bolsheviks had established themselves as the leadership of key fighting units of the working class. Their influence in the factory committees had increased, with 82% of the delegates at the August All Russian Factory Committee Conference endorsing their call for soviet power. They led a successful general strike in Moscow against the State Conference, even though the strike had been fiercely opposed by the right wing leadership of the Moscow soviet.

More and more sections of workers were demanding a break from Kerensky and the Provisional Government. This was demonstrated by a frankly pro-Bolshevik resolution from the young workers of Putilov:

'We, the youth, having learnt from the experience of our fathers how dangerous it is to fraternise with the bourgeoisie, declare that it will be a fearful hour when we, the youth, for the salvation of the revolution take to the streets to destroy with our young hands those parasites who live off the blood and sweat of the toilers . [We express] our profound scorn for the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who continue to cohabit with the bourgeoisie and allow themselves to be led on a leash by Kerensky and Tseretelli.'

Major battles lay ahead and this was patently clear to the most class-conscious workers. But the July Days had taught the workers the need for discipline and clarity about their objectives, the need to avoid premature and sporadic outbursts.

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