



The July Days

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In the spring and early summer of 1917, it became more and more clear that the Provisional Government would not address any of Russia's crying needs. The war-weary soldiers' yearning for peace, the cry for bread from the workers of the cities, the peasants' calls for the aristocrats' land to be distributed to them – all were met with delay and diversion. The government made the continuation of the war its overriding priority. A government of the imperialist bourgeoisie, mortgaged to Anglo-French imperialism and with its own designs on the Turkish Empire and Eastern Europe, could not seriously contemplate a separate peace.

The Provisional Government headed by Prince Lvov united liberal aristocrats and landowners with manufacturers, bankers and merchants from the two main bourgeois parties – the Cadets led by Pavel Miliukov, and the more conservative Octobrists (Union of 17 October) led by Alexander Guchkov. These constituted the right wing majority of the government. Its left wing was represented by Alexander Kerensky, a member of the Trudovik (Toilers) Party, which was a radical peasant party in the post 1905 Dumas (parliaments).

Petrograd witnessed almost ceaseless demonstrations often swelling to half a million strong. Inflation soared and real wages fell. Unemployment increased rapidly. All these attacks drove the workers to strike, to march, and to create factory committees which took action to preserve jobs. The bourgeoisie's reaction was summed up by the Cadet daily *Rech*: "Russia is being turned into a kind of lunatic asylum."

The Menshevik leaders, who had, according to their long held political perspective, presented the bourgeoisie with control over "its" revolution, discovered that these gentlemen were not in the slightest bit grateful for it. Indeed almost from the outset they fomented economic chaos hoping to create the conditions for a restoration of "order". The Moscow industrialist Riabushinsky said: "The emaciated hand of hunger will seize the members of the different committees and soviets by the throat."

In the countryside peasant soviets began to spring up and – slowly at first – the peasants began to take things into their own hands. In March disorders were reported in 34 districts, in April 174, in May 236, in June 280 and in July 325. The landowners' manor houses went up in flames and the peasants began to occupy the lands robbed from them by the great Emancipation Swindle of 1861. The mir – the age-old village commune – took on a new life, and the rich peasants (kulaks), who had benefited from Tsarist land reforms and left their mir, were often obliged to return. Rent ceased to be paid. The news of this turmoil reached the young peasant conscripts at the front and magnified the wave of desertions. The deserters returning to their villages were different men to the boys who had left. Through military training they had acquired technical skills and discipline. They had seen the brutality and incompetence of their upper class officers. They had lost their unreasoning faith in the priests. Some had read – or had read to them – the leaflets and papers of the Bolsheviks. As the year progressed this radicalising of the multi-millioned peasant masses went on apace.

The historic party of the peasantry, the Socialist Revolutionaries (or SRs), still held the overwhelming allegiance of the peasants but events were to begin undermining this too. In early May a governmental crisis erupted. The Soviet had, under mass pressure, issued an appeal for a peace "without annexations and indemnities" and had renounced imperialist war aims. Miliukov, in transmitting this declaration to the Allies, assured them that the government would "fully observe the obligations assumed towards our allies." Mass demonstrations of soldiers and workers erupted under the slogans "Down with the Provisional Government!" and "Guchkov, Miliukov, Resign!"

Clashes occurred with bourgeois demonstrators. General Kornilov, then commander of the Petrograd garrison,

requested permission to fire on the anti-government demonstrators. This the government dared not do and the crisis was resolved only with Miliukov's resignation and the bringing into the government of another four 'socialist ministers', including the SR leader Victor Chernov as Minister of Agriculture, and the promotion of Kerensky to the War Ministry. Chernov and the SRs were thus put in a position of having to hold back the peasantry on behalf of the landowners and capitalists. At an Allied military conference in January the Tsarist high command had rashly promised their Anglo-French paymasters a spring offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. The Allies had no expectation of a Russian victory but merely hoped that the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of half-trained and badly armed peasants would hold up the Central Powers and deflect them from an offensive on the Western Front. Kerensky was determined to carry out this inheritance from the Romanovs. The ruling class saw the offensive as an opportunity to restore order at the front, in Petrograd and in the other major cities.

The seven million soldiers at the front greeted the news of the proposed offensive with apprehension. The huge Petrograd garrison, some 215,000 strong, heard it with overt hostility. The radicalisation of the soldiers was speeded up. In Petrograd the soldiers were represented in the Soviet. They had been guaranteed full civil rights when not on duty by the Petrograd Soviet's famous 'Order Number One'. Normal discipline had broken down and committees had to counter-sign every officer's order if it was to be carried out.

The Bolsheviks, whose struggle for workers' control was winning them ever stronger positions in the factories, now devoted a massive effort to increasing the party's position in the barracks and in the trenches.

On 31 March the Bolshevik Military Organisation was founded. A commission was appointed to direct its work. Its most prominent leaders were Nikolai Podvoisky and Vladimir Nevsky. Another key figure was the Kronstadt sailor Fyodor Raskolnikov. The Military Organisation published a popular daily paper from mid-April onwards with a circulation of over 50,000 - half in Petrograd, half at the front. It described the wretched conditions of soldiers' lives; printing hundreds of letters and resolutions from units the length and breadth of Russia, as well as agitating for the Bolsheviks' key slogans.

In early June as the preparations for the offensive began - including attempts to transfer weapons and men to the front from Petrograd - the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets convened in the capitol. It sat from 3 to 24 June. Of its 822 delegates with voting rights the SRs had 285, the Mensheviks 248 and the Bolsheviks 105. The rest belonged to smaller tendencies like the Mezhrayontsy (Interdistricters or 'United Social Democrats') led by Leon Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who had ten delegates.

The right wing socialist and populist parties still had a very sizeable majority. The Bolsheviks stood out as the clearest anti-Provisional Government force. When Tsereteli, the most vigorous Menshevik leader (and a minister), addressed the congress, Lenin made perhaps the most prophetic heckle in history.

Tsereteli: 'At the present moment there is no political party which would say: 'Give the power into our hands, go away, we will take your place.' There is no such party in Russia.'

Lenin: (from his seat) 'There is.'

The response of the majority of the delegates was laughter. In the next month however the attitude of the leaders of the majority soviet parties was to change first to fear and then to hatred as the Bolsheviks experienced a surge in their influence and an upsurge in the revolutionary workers and troops of Petrograd and the sailors of the northern fleet at Kronstadt and Helsingfors.

From early June Kerensky and the government were constantly trying to ship munitions, weaponry and units of the garrison to the front in preparation for the coming offensive. The All-Russian Soviet Congress on 8 June voted full support to Prince Lvov and the government, thereby effectively endorsing its plans for an offensive. The spontaneous pressure of the soldiers and sailors was for demonstrations against the renewed war and the attempts to disperse or disarm the revolutionary regiments who, with the workers, had made the February Revolution. The Bolshevik Military

Organisation stood on the left of the Party. Podvoisky advocated a mass armed demonstration to act 'as a battering ram that would effect a breach in the Congress'. This proposal caused a sharp disagreement between the left wing of the party led by Lenin and the right led by Kamenev. Lenin wished to undermine 'and if possible prevent' the new offensive with a massive anti-war demonstration whose central slogan would be the call to transfer all power to the soviets. This was designed to try and force the majority SR and Menshevik parties to break with the Provisional Government, with its Cadets and Octobrists, and take power. Hence the Bolsheviks supplementary slogan which made this clear: 'Down with the ten capitalist ministers!'

Armed counter-revolutionaries

Kamenev and the right were opposed to a demonstration at all but if it were called they insisted it must be disarmed. The Military Organisation insisted this was impossible. The central area of Petrograd was the scene of mounting patriotic demonstrations by right wing bourgeois forces. The officer cadet schools of the capital were nests of armed counter-revolutionaries that the Provisional Government protected.

The anti-semitic, proto-fascist Black Hundred organisation still existed in a scarcely underground form. Workers' and soldiers' demonstrations against the war and the government would undoubtedly be attacked. Lenin found himself opposed not only by Kamenev and the right, but even by Zinoviev, his closest co-thinker during the war, and by Krupskaya. Nevertheless a joint conference of the Central Committee, the Petrograd Committee and the Military Organisation bureau voted for a demonstration on 9 June.

The Bolsheviks were not the only force urging a demonstration. The Petrograd Anarchist-Communist Federation were agitating fiercely for an armed demonstration. But they posed as its immediate objective the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the destruction of the state and the installation of a Petrograd Commune.

Clashes between the anarchists and the troops loyal to the Provisional Government provided the pretext for the Soviet Congress passing a resolution banning all demonstrations. Faced with a ban voted for by all the workers' and peasants' parties except the Bolsheviks and the Mezhrayontsy, the Central Committee conceded to the soviet legality of the ban and abandoned the demonstration. The Party and the Military Organisation, despite their anger at the ban and indeed their disagreement at the retreat, carried out the manoeuvre in a disciplined fashion.

Delighted at their 'triumph' the Mensheviks over-reached themselves and proposed an official soviet demonstration on 18 June under the official slogans. This demonstration turned against its organisers' intentions and the platforms of official soviet delegates from all over Russia were obliged to witness a massive parade almost totally under Bolshevik slogans. Maxim Gorky's paper *Novaya Zhizn* conceded that it 'revealed the complete triumph of Bolshevism' amongst the Petrograd proletariat. Bewildered provincial soviet delegates said to Bolshevik demonstrators: 'In Petrograd you are the power but not in the provinces, not at the front. Petrograd cannot go against the whole country.' This was something that Lenin and the cooler heads on the left of the party realised. But in the Military Organisation the tremendous success of 18 June carried away what caution there was left. If April had seen the right of the Party nearly pull Bolshevism into the dead end of 'defending the fatherland', July was to see the left almost pull the party into the ditch of adventurism and putschism. Lenin, Zinoviev, Sverdlov and Stalin were to be obliged to bloc with the right to hold back the far left of the Party. They were to be aided in this difficult task by Trotsky whose closeness to, and solidarity with, the Bolsheviks during the 'July Days' was to seal his final and irrevocable rallying to Bolshevism.

By 19 June news of the offensive reached Petrograd further incensing the garrison. At first the news was of victories directed, as the offensive was, at war weary and demoralised Austrian troops in Galicia, many of whom belonged to the oppressed nations of the 'fossil monarchy'. Yet by 24 June the offensive ground to a halt and was followed by a massive German counter-attack on the northern front. By 3 July stories of the army's headlong retreat and disintegration began to filter back to the capital.

On 16 June an all-Russian conference of Bolshevik military organisations, with 107 delegates representing upwards of 30,000 members, met in Petrograd. It was the scene of repeated calls from rank and file delegates for the organisation of an immediate armed uprising. On 20 June the First Machine Gun Regiment was ordered to provide 500 machine

guns and two thirds of its strength for transfer to the front. This regiment, made up largely of working class soldiers, was a stronghold of the Bolsheviks. It refused the orders and turned to other regiments for support. This increased calls within the Military Organisation for an insurrection. At the session of the Military Organisation conference that day Lenin came out sharply against such an idea:

‘If we’re now able to seize power, it is naive to think that we would be able to hold it. We have said more than once that the only possible form of revolutionary government was a soviet of workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ deputies. What is the exact weight of our fraction in the Soviet? Even in the Soviets of both capitals, not to speak of others, we are an insignificant minority.’

A cold shower

Lenin concluded: ‘The proletarian party must fight for influence within the Soviet.’ It must ‘patiently, explain’ to the masses the errors and deception of the majority parties, ‘then they will come to the Bolsheviks.’ A participant later recalled that Lenin’s speech was like a cold shower and was received with disappointment and even with dissatisfaction.

In the Military Organisation a majority opposed Lenin’s position, as did a powerful faction of the Petrograd committee led by Latsis, Naumov and Stukov. Many of the people who had eagerly supported Lenin in April were now dismayed and began to pursue a divergent policy. Pravda and Soldatskaya Pravda carried on a different agitation. The former stressed the need for the immediate calling of elections to a constituent assembly and a mass campaign to win control of the Petrograd Soviet, whilst the latter carried articles which urged immediate action against the government.

On 3 July the Machine Gun Regiment planned a mass demonstration to the Congress of Soviets meeting in the Tauride Palace. Involved in this decision were the anarchists whose attitude was summed up by their spokesman Bleikhman:

‘Overthrow the Provisional Government, not in order to turn power over to the bourgeois soviet, but to take it into your own hands.’

The Bolshevik leaders Nevsky and Podvoisky, far from holding back the machine gunners, also urged them on but with a different objective. Their aim was to force the Soviet Congress to take the power.

‘Into the streets! Move out!’

On 3 July a postal workers’ strike gripped the capital. Machine gunners went to all the major regiments, factories and to Kronstadt urging them to ‘come out’. Some regiments flatly refused and proclaimed neutrality between the government and the insurgents. But the Moskovsky, the Finlandsky, Pavlovsky and Grenadier regiments agreed to take part in mass meetings. All the factories on the Vyborg side, 30,000 workers from the giant Putilov works and 10,000 Kronstadt sailors enthusiastically responded to the call. In Putilov the Bolshevik chair of the factory committee announced the vote with the cry ‘Down with the Provisional Government! Into the streets! Move out!’

By now the Bolshevik Central Committee became aware of what was going on. Lenin was temporarily across the border in Finland taking a brief rest when events began to move rapidly. The Central Committee came out against an armed demonstration and instructed party militants to oppose the demonstration. Latsis angrily replied ‘Again we must be fire hoses. How long will this last!’

But by now it was too late to put out the fire and in any case the majority of militants were quite carried away with the surging quasi-insurrectionary mood of the soldiers, sailors and workers. In general however the Bolshevik slogans ‘Down with the ten capitalist ministers!’, ‘All power to the Soviets’ and ‘Down with the offensive’ massively predominated over the anarchist influenced ones. In Kshesinskaya’s mansion, the Bolshevik headquarters, there was momentary confusion. The Military Organisation, the Petrograd Committee and the Central Committee met in joint session. Messengers rushed in reporting that barrack after barrack, factory after factory could not be restrained. It was obvious that the party must participate actively now and try to give the inflamed masses leadership. But what was to be the objective and how far the movement should still be reigned in? The answers to such questions were far from clear.

The target of the demonstrations was to be the All-Russian Soviet Congress meeting in the Tauride Palace. Obviously the demand was for them to take power. But if they would not? What then? No one had a clear answer to this question.

Seventy thousand demonstrators filled the centre of the city. In the bourgeois quarters around the Nevsky they were fired on by rightist elements, Black Hundreds or officer cadets eager to provoke the soldiers. Despite this, led by military bands, they reached and encircled the Tauride Palace. Delegations entered and pressed their demands upon the majority soviet leaders, Chkheidze, Tsereteli and Chernov. They were intransigent. The congress passed a resolution indignantly opposing all attempts to influence their will by force. Yet little force was being used beyond the huge numbers that filed past the palace and thunderously applauded speeches by Zinoviev, Trotsky and others.

The next day, 4 July, the demonstrations were far larger, reaching half a million or more. Significantly the numbers of soldiers were less and the proportion of workers much greater. Many regiments stayed in their barracks, refusing alike the calls of the Bolshevik agitators and the pleas for help of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Congress.

However at Kronstadt the sailors had commandeered several boats and soon 20,000 sailors and Kronstadt workers were disembarking along the Neva embankments. They marched en masse to Kshesinskaya's mansion to hear what the Bolshevik leaders had to say. Lenin had meanwhile hurried back from Finland. He was furious with the Military Organisation cadres. "You should be trashed for this!" he hissed as he stepped onto the balcony of the mansion to address the sailors.

The provocations against the demonstrators continued. On 4 July five were killed and 25 wounded. These treacherous attacks, plus the frustration of the refusal of the Menshevik and SR leaders to yield to their demands, led to ugly scenes outside the Tauride Palace. Victor Chernov was rescued from a crowd by Trotsky. Angry fist-shaking workers screamed at the terrified SR leader: "Take power when it's given to you, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Here was encapsulated the contradictions of mass consciousness at this stage of the revolution. The masses had lost confidence in the Menshevik and SR policies and slogans. They had firmly espoused the Bolshevik slogan of a soviet government but they had not yet lost their faith in the existing Soviet leaders, or rather, only through precisely this experience were the workers and soldiers shedding these illusions.

Despite the excitement of the anarchists and the optimism of many rank and file Bolsheviks, even in Petrograd the majority of soldiers and workers would not have supported a Bolshevik seizure of power against the Soviet. In Russia as a whole and at the front, a Bolshevik overthrow of the government and the dissolution of the Soviet Congress would have thrown the working class into confusion, pitting its more backward majority against its revolutionary vanguard and turning the overwhelming mass of the peasant soldiers against it.

The Bolsheviks and the Mezhrailonsky thus had to act responsibly towards this mass upsurge of the workers and soldiers. Firstly Lenin and the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks - aided by Trotsky, Lunacharsky and other Interdistricters - tried to avoid a disorganised mass uprising that would undoubtedly be subject to provocations by the rightists and which could not in reality culminate in the overthrow of the government. When the masses refused to heed the party they put themselves at the head of the demonstrations, fighting to make sure that they were as disciplined, as well guarded and as restrained as possible.

Lastly they utilised the July upsurge to put the maximum pressure on the right wing Menshevik and SR leaders to take the power, thus carrying to its culmination this tactic and exposing their unwillingness to do this to the whole of Petrograd.

However the fomenting of the mass insurgency by the left of the Party was a serious tactical blunder and the Party was soon to suffer for it. Yet even the repression that followed only helped to further expose the Mensheviks and SRs as wretched tools of the counter-revolution. If the first response of a section of workers and the majority of soldiers was disillusionment and suspicion of the Bolsheviks (Had they tried to seize power? Were they put up to it by the Germans?), the second response to seeing Chernov, Tsereteli and co raining blows on the Bolsheviks in common with

Kerensky, Miliukov and Kornilov was revulsion and indignation.

A counter-revolutionary orgy

The collapse of the July insurgency was as sudden as its upheaval. On the 4/5 July the Soviet Congress sat through the night delaying any definitive reply to any of the workers' demands. The worker and soldier demonstrators and delegations thinned and departed. Suddenly through the courtyard and corridors of the Tauride Palace the thunder of marching feet could be heard. Theodor Dan, a prominent Menshevik, mounted the rostrum in triumph to announce that 'Troops loyal to the (Soviet) Central Executive Committee have arrived!'

To the accompaniment of a regimental band the majority delegates rose to bawl the Marseillaise, casting malicious and revengeful looks at the Bolsheviks, the Mezhraiontsy and at Martov's 'Menshevik Internationalists'. Martov himself bitterly exclaimed: 'A classic scene of the start of counter-revolution!' And so it was momentarily. On 5 and 6 July what a Menshevik witness described as a 'counter-revolutionary orgy' reigned in central Petrograd. Workers and revolutionary soldiers were beaten up and thrown into the canals by Black Hundred gangs. The garrison commander seized the opportunity to disarm the Machine Gun Regiment and to send a force of cadets to smash Pravda's presses. Last of all the Bolshevik headquarters were seized and ransacked.

The Provisional Government had been able to win over some of the more backward regiments because of manufactured 'evidence' that Lenin was a German spy, and that the Bolsheviks were being paid by the Germans to sabotage the offensive. Warrants were issued for the arrest of Lenin and Zinoviev. Other leaders like Kamenev were arrested. The party reeled under the hammer blows of counter-revolution.

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