

Russia, 1917

On the centenary of the Russian Revolution, we continue our series of articles focusing on the events of 1917

The February Revolution

The Russian Revolution is often thought to have begun in the streets of Petrograd. In the traditional interpretation of the events, women (in particular) began to demonstrate because of a shortage of bread. The demonstrations spread, so the interpretation goes, until groups of soldiers joined in and fired on the police. This started a mass mutiny in the garrison which soon forced the tsar to abdicate.

However, how could disturbances in one city bring down the autocracy in a week when it had survived much worse in 1905? Modern historical research has revealed that behind the scenes, Duma (parliamentary) politicians and the army general staff were decisive in forcing the tsar's abdication. They thought they were nipping social revolution in the bud. Instead, they were starting a massive upheaval.

From February to October

The revolution went through three main phases.

Revolution

After a brief moment of widespread euphoria following the abdication, the left began to set the agenda. Soviets were set up everywhere. In addition, local committees — peasant (parish) committees, factory committees, regimental committees and battleship committees — turned the formerly passive population into radical revolutionaries. Peasants refused to pay rents, workers demanded higher wages and soldiers and sailors refused to obey the authority of officers.

Counter-revolution

Alarmed by this, the Provisional Government (PG) and the property owners fought back. When an attempted coup led by Kronstadt sailors in July was a failure, the right began to assert its authority. This opened a second phase of counter-revolution. This phase culminated in an attempted right-wing coup by the country's leading general, Kornilov, in late summer.

Revolution

The coup's failure showed the masses it was now or never when it came to achieving their objectives of land seizure, self-government, better living standards and an end to the war. A wave of radicalisation, with land seizure by peasants in the forefront, swept the country from September on.

The October Revolution

Why was it the Bolsheviks who came to the fore in this situation? In the first place, despite some hesitation in the leadership, they were more determined and confident in taking bold action to support Soviet power than any other party. The promises of the other two major forces on the left — the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks — had been undermined by their participation in the PG which had delivered little to the masses.

As the popular movement gathered strength after September, so the Bolshevik leaders — who were reluctant to take radical steps despite a thunderous series of exhortations by Lenin from his safe house in Finland — edged towards taking power. In the event, the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd

Soviet was the agency which overthrew the PG, not the Bolshevik party. However, with Lenin back in Petrograd, it was the Bolsheviks who quickly came to control the Soviets. Many of the supporters had expected Soviet power, not Bolshevik power.

Dates according to Russian calendar. For Western dates, add 13 days, e.g. 25 October = 7 November.

Jan–Feb 1917

Escalating series of worker demonstrations in Petrograd

2 March

Tsar abdicates. Provisional Government proclaimed in agreement with Soviet

18 June–30 June

Russian military offensive begins and quickly turns into a serious defeat

23 July Trotsky arrested (released 4 September)

31 August–5 September

For first time, Bolshevik resolutions are passed by the Moscow and Petrograd Soviets

early October

Bolshevik Central Committee puts armed uprising 'on the agenda'. Petrograd Soviet sets up Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to defend the city in the event of a German attack

12 November

Constituent Assembly elections begin. About 40% of vote goes to Socialist Revolutionaries and 25% to Bolsheviks, 10% to Liberals and right-wing parties

6 January 1918

Constituent Assembly dispersed after one day

1917

1918

26–7 February Group of Pavlovsky Guards fire on police and start a mutiny. Petrograd Soviet set up

4 April Lenin unveils his strategy in the April Theses

early July 'July Days'. Failed seizure of power by sailors of Kronstadt. Lenin withdraws to Finland. Kerensky becomes prime minister

26–30 August Kornilov attempts to suppress the Petrograd Soviet but fails and is arrested

8–9 September Bolsheviks become leaders of Petrograd Soviet

24–6 October Kerensky orders troops to control key points in Petrograd. MRC orders its forces to counter the PG troops. PG ministers arrested. Kerensky escapes to seek help. Soviet Government of Peoples' Commissars (Sovnarkom) set up with Lenin as chair

20 November Bolsheviks overthrow the army general staff

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