

Bolsheviks in Power - Professor Alexander Rabinowitch's important study of the first year of soviet power

Frederick Choate, David North
9 November 2007

The following review is also available as a pdf.

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Bolshevik Rule in Petrograd*, Indiana University Press, 2007, 494 pp.

Published on the 90th anniversary of the October Revolution, *The Bolsheviks in Power* by Alexander Rabinowitch, emeritus professor at Indiana University, is a significant work of historical scholarship. It will serve, for many years to come, as an essential reference point for the study of the political and social aftermath of the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government and the establishment of the Bolshevik regime. In contrast to so many others working in the field of Soviet studies, who have adapted themselves to the prevailing climate of intellectual dishonesty and cynicism, Professor Rabinowitch has not compromised his integrity as a scholar.

In the preparation of this volume Rabinowitch has conducted an enormous amount of research that spans more than 20 years. The preface explains how he began to sketch the chapters of the present book not long after the publication of his two earlier works, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Rising* (1968) and *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (1976). Dissatisfied with the lack of needed archival material, especially with regard to 1918, Rabinowitch never expected that he would gain access to hitherto closed archives in the Soviet Union. In 1989, much to his surprise, a Russian edition of *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* was published in Moscow. Doors began to open. In 1991, he received permission to work in government and Communist party archives in Moscow and then in Leningrad. In 1993, he even gained access to the former KGB archives.

The book is an impressive scholarly achievement, but it is not without significant limitations. There is a notable absence of a theoretically-guided conception of events that would have enabled Professor Rabinowitch to draw together into a more integrated whole the vast complex of factual detail presented in his work. This is not an argument for subordinating factual narrative to a preconceived ideological scheme. Rather, it is a matter of uncovering and clarifying the historical context within which political decisions and actions were framed. To the extent that this contextual element is insufficiently developed, it leads on occasion to one-sided appraisals of the events that are being examined. While remaining true to his scholarly intentions, Professor Rabinowitch has not escaped entirely the pitfalls of an excessively empirical approach.

Nevertheless, his work is an important contribution to the study of the Bolsheviks' first year in power in Petrograd, the cradle of the revolution.

The list of the type of material Professor Rabinowitch has examined for the first time is long: minutes of meetings of the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee for 1918, and other citywide party forums; minutes of meetings of Bolshevik district party committees; protocols of meetings of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom); stenographic records

of key sessions of the Petrograd Soviet and its leadership bodies; minutes of meetings of Petrograd district soviets; internal memoranda; correspondence; personal files of key Bolshevik leaders; case files of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-revolution, Speculation and Sabotage (VCheka), etc. Added to this archival material is a massive list of other printed material: 51 newspapers (some exceedingly rare), 31 journals and periodicals, and 14 pages of bibliographic references to published documents, diaries and memoirs, secondary studies, reference works and many other books. What then, are the results of this prodigious research?

In his earlier two works, Rabinowitch established, to the chagrin of many mainstream historians, that the October Revolution was not a military coup led by Lenin and a small band of fanatics. To the contrary, he "found that, in 1917, the Bolshevik party in Petrograd transformed itself into a mass political party and that, rather than being a monolithic movement marching in lock step behind Lenin, its leadership was divided into left, centrist, and moderate right wings, each of which helped shape revolutionary strategy and tactics" (p. ix). He underscored the Bolsheviks' "organizational flexibility, openness, and responsiveness to popular aspirations," as well as their "extensive, carefully nurtured connections to factory workers, soldiers of the Petrograd garrison and Baltic Fleet sailors" (p. x). He unambiguously pointed to "the magnetic attraction of the Bolsheviks' promises of immediate peace, bread, land for the peasantry, and grass-roots democracy exercised through multiparty soviets" (ibid.).

Rabinowitch felt, however, that whatever the merits of this earlier analysis, it still left unanswered how such a democratic and decentralized party, with corresponding policies, could evolve in a relatively short time into, in the historian's view, an authoritarian and centralized organization. And what was the political process which led, relatively rapidly, to the breakdown of the Soviet democracy which the Bolsheviks had championed?

The four parts of the book attempt to answer these questions. Each of the four parts is about one hundred pages long, and tightly structured into three or four chapters. Keep in mind that the focus is on Petrograd, the timeframe is one year, and the analysis zooms in with sometimes dizzying detail on parties, organizations and people who are perhaps little known or who have been previously neglected.

This richness of detail raises the central interpretive problem to which we have already referred: when Rabinowitch focuses on the shifting structural relations between myriad party and soviet organizations, for instance, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of detail. At such moments, one senses that, despite the wealth of factual material - or even because of this wealth - it is hard to discern the precise theoretical framework that guides the author's presentation. Rabinowitch generally

attempts to maintain an honest and consistent objectivity, but the subject matter, the first year of Bolshevik power in Petrograd, cannot be fully explained by an overly empirical approach. Facts, as Carr recalled more than a half-century ago, are “nominated” by the scholar as being historically significant. This nominating process involves some sort of conceptual framework. What perspective, for instance, guides him in separating the essential from the inessential, the necessary from the contingent?

For the Marxist reader, much can be learned from the material Rabinowitch presents even if one disagrees at various significant points with his appraisal of their political meaning. We must keep in mind that, in the years this book was written, two crippling tendencies still dominated in historical writings about the Soviet Union: (1) the decades-old school of Stalinist falsification, still dominant in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere; and (2) a “pro-democracy,” rejectionist trend which viewed the Soviet Union as a human experiment run amok. For this tendency, figures such as Lenin or Trotsky are turned into arch-villains who interrupted Russia’s “normal development” into a Western democracy. Rabinowitch clearly rejects both trends, but undoubtedly has had to negotiate between them in his archival research. The simple fact of excavating so much archival material - of restoring the names, even, of the major participants, many of whom were erased from official Soviet history — is a major contribution. Let us turn, however, to the contents of his book.

The first part deals with the Bolsheviks’ overthrow of the Provisional Government on the eve of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, and the subsequent struggle to form a new socialist government. When Rabinowitch refers to the “Defeat of the Moderates,” he is not simply referring to more moderate forces outside the Bolshevik Party. He also deals at length with opposition to the policies of Lenin and Trotsky within the Bolshevik Party itself.

Rabinowitch consistently underscores the close collaboration throughout 1917 and 1918 between Lenin and Trotsky, leading the left wing of the party, “for whom the establishment of revolutionary soviet power in Russia was less an end in itself than the trigger for immediate worldwide socialist revolution” (p. 2). Spending less time on the center of the party (Berzin, Bubnov, Uritskii, Sverdlov), he devotes many pages to the activities of the “moderate” party leaders, including Kamenev, Zinoviev, Miliutin, Rykov, Nogin and Lunacharskii. They were in turn joined by important left Menshevik leaders in late July 1917, including Larin, Lozovskii and Riazanov. One senses that the historian’s sympathies are with the moderates, but it is difficult to see, based on the material presented by Professor Rabinowitch, how their efforts to effect a political compromise with the Mensheviks could have succeeded without annulling the overturn of the Provisional Government. The historian cites a “hard-line resolution” adopted by the central committee of the Mensheviks just two days after the overthrow of the Provisional Government that “prohibited negotiations of any kind with the Bolsheviks until their ‘adventure’ had been completely liquidated” (p. 27). Convinced that the Bolsheviks could be isolated, the Menshevik resolution went on to propose that the Bolshevik Military Revolutionary Committee (chaired by Trotsky) “surrender at once - in exchange for which its leaders would receive guarantees of personal safety until the Constituent Assembly had an opportunity to decide whether they should be tried” (p. 28).

It was widely recognized that the demands of the Mensheviks, if implemented, would lead directly to a counterrevolutionary bloodbath. Rabinowitch quotes the statement of A.A. Blum, a member of the more left-wing Menshevik-Internationalists, who warned delegates of the ACS (All-Russian Committee for the Salvation of the Homeland and the Revolution): “Have you given any thought to what the defeat of the Bolsheviks would mean? ... The action of the Bolsheviks is the action of workers and soldiers. Workers and soldiers will be crushed along with the

party of the proletariat” (p. 29).

It is striking that in the turbulent debates over the formation of a new government, demands made by Mensheviks, SRs, Vikzhel (railway union) representatives, and others to exclude Lenin and Trotsky were actually considered by some of the “moderate Bolsheviks.” Within the leadership of the Bolsheviks, Lenin was compelled to wage a desperate fight against the moderates. Rabinowitch notes that on November 1, 1917, at a crucial stage of this struggle, the only Bolshevik leader for whom Lenin found words of praise was Leon Trotsky. Throughout the tense battles within the party leadership in the days that followed the October Revolution, Lenin stood “arm in arm with Trotsky” against the compromisers (p. 35).

If a multiparty system had been implemented, with the exclusion (and probable arrest, if not execution) of Lenin and Trotsky, counterrevolution would have been not far behind. In the description of these struggles, one is struck by the intractable role of the Bolsheviks’ opponents, who erected many of the obstacles that could only be overcome with increasingly intransigent responses. As it was, an all-Bolshevik Sovnarkom was eventually formed. The relationship of this body to the Central Executive Committee (CEC) remained fluid and contentious.

The process of passing from “rebels to rulers” was far from simple. Food supply, fuel, transport, wages, housing, medical care and much more had to be organized, often by cadres lacking such experience. Increasing numbers of party personnel were transferred to work in the soviets or in the military, and many were sent to strengthen the revolution in other parts of the country.

Rabinowitch pays considerable attention to the elections to the Constituent Assembly, its tentative formation, and subsequent quick demise. In these endeavors, the alliance between the Bolsheviks and Left SRs (whose base was largely in the peasantry) was tempestuous: disagreements surfaced over the Cheka (the main security force), the response to large and potentially violent demonstrations in favor of the Constituent Assembly, and finally the dissolution of the Assembly itself, which occurred on January 6, 1918. Once again, strong opposition to Lenin’s policies emerged from within the Bolshevik Party, with Riazanov playing a prominent role.

However, Rabinowitch presents an evaluation of the struggle over the Constituent Assembly that sharply contradicts most conventional anti-Bolshevik accounts. First, he finds that “the results of elections to the Constituent Assembly were a strong endorsement of revolutionary Bolshevik policies and Soviet power by lower classes in the Petrograd region.” He notes the conclusion of a correspondent for the anti-Bolshevik *Novaia zhizn’* that “however we may feel about it, we cannot but admit one thing: even with respect to the Constituent Assembly, the workers of Petrograd recognize the Bolsheviks as their leaders and spokesmen for their class interests” (p. 69). Rabinowitch suggests a link between the outcome of the vote and the collapse of efforts by the railway union to bring about the speedy demise of the revolutionary socialist government.

In his extensive examination of the events leading up to the formal opening of the Constituent Assembly, Rabinowitch ably reconstructs the class divisions that were reflected in the clash of political tendencies. Workers in Petrograd appeared sympathetic to Bolshevik claims that right-wing forces, spearheaded by the bourgeois Kadet party, were planning to use the Constituent Assembly as a weapon against the revolution. The actual dissolution of the Assembly encountered no significant opposition. Rabinowitch concludes:

“Certainly, contributing to this result was the Bolsheviks’ strong popular support in the Petrograd region, as reflected in the mid-November elections to the Constituent Assembly, and the SR leadership’s rejection of efforts to provide military security coupled with the Bolsheviks’ and Left SR’s readiness to resort to force of arms to defend Soviet power. Most important, however, Sviatitskii was probably on target when he pointed to the Russian people’s fundamental indifference to the fate of the

Constituent Assembly, allowing Lenin to command that they all simply go home” (p. 127).

Part Two focuses on the difficult negotiations with Germany at Brest-Litovsk in order to bring an end to Russia’s participation in World War I, “without annexations or indemnities.” Rabinowitch describes vividly how Lenin came to the conclusion, by mid-December, that a revolutionary war against Germany was impossible and that Russia would be forced to accept a very painful annexionist peace in order to avoid complete catastrophe. Here Rabinowitch offers an unambiguous rebuff to two other historians, Volkogonov and Pipes: “Historians have disputed the evolution of Lenin’s thoughts on the peace issue. Some have suggested ... that October and perhaps even the sell-out at Brest were phases of a joint Bolshevik-German undertaking to destabilize Russia and end hostilities on the Eastern front.... [M]y reading of the available evidence leads me to conclude that Lenin came to power convinced of the need for immediate peace if revolutionary Russia was to survive but that this concern did not trouble him much because of his absolute confidence in the immediacy of decisive socialist revolutions abroad.” When Lenin concluded that the anticipated revolutions abroad might be delayed, he decided “that there was no alternative to accepting whatever peace terms the Germans offered. The stage was set for the most profound intraparty crisis of Lenin’s years as Soviet head of state” (p.141).

The crisis inside the Bolshevik Party was indeed sharp. At different times, Bukharin, Radek, Volodarskii and Riazanov led the “Left Communist” fraction which believed that a revolutionary war with imperialism must be pursued at all costs, up to and including the sacrifice of the revolution in Russia. The Left SRs also thought that yielding to Germany’s predatory territorial demands would be a colossal betrayal of the revolution. The debates within the Bolshevik Party and with other parties were tense and acrimonious. Trotsky, meanwhile, doubted that Germany could resume a military offensive due to domestic unrest; he hoped that the Bolsheviks could declare “no war, no peace,” and walk away from the negotiations, stalling for as much time as possible. The Bolshevik Party’s Central Committee agreed to this tactic on January 11, and the next day the Left SRs also endorsed it. Even Martov, despite his bitter opposition to the Bolsheviks, could not restrain his admiration of the revolutionary élan with which Trotsky had championed the anti-imperialist cause at the negotiations in Brest Litovsk. After hearing Trotsky’s speech at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, Martov “praised the ‘amazing steps’ toward universal peace taken by ‘the cultivators of the worldwide international revolution’” (p. 146). On January 28 the Germans were stunned by Trotsky’s declaration that the war had ended and Russia was demobilizing unilaterally. By February 16, Germany let it be known that the temporary truce was expiring and their offensive would resume on February 18. They soon began an advance which threatened the seizure of Petrograd.

In the days that followed, intense debate within the Bolshevik Party even included Lenin’s threat to resign if German conditions were not immediately accepted. In a famous vote on February 23, seven were in favor of accepting German terms (Lenin, Stasova, Zinoviev, Sverdlov, Stalin, Sokolnikov, and Smilga) four against (Bubnov, Uritskii, Bukharin, and Lomov), and four abstained (Trotsky, Krestinskii, Dzerzhinskii, and Ioffe) (p.174). Weeks later, when the onerous Brest Treaty was ratified at the Fourth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in Moscow, the Left SRs and Left Communists left the Sovnarkom. Meanwhile, the national government had been moved from Petrograd to Moscow because of the perceived vulnerability of Petrograd to German forces; there was, after all, no guarantee that Germany might not decide to try to strangle the revolution once again.

The difficulties the Bolsheviks faced at this time were staggering. The third part describes “Soviet Power on the Brink.” Here Rabinowitch introduces figures on population decline, unemployment, starvation, a

cholera epidemic, decline in party membership, unrest in the factories and fleet, deepening civil war, the assassination of Volodarskii (June 20) and Uritskii (August 30) in Petrograd, and the attempted assassination of Lenin (August 30) in Moscow.

From January to April 1918, for instance, approximately 134,000 workers, or 46 percent of Petrograd’s industrial labor force, were unemployed. As food shortages became acute, many of these unemployed workers fled Petrograd for the countryside, contributing to the decline in the city’s population from 2.3 million at the beginning of 1917 to just under 1.5 million in June 1918. Then, during the cholera epidemic in the summer, thousands more left the city for the rural areas. The Bolshevik Party, meanwhile, risked losing its crucial links with the proletariat: party membership began to dwindle in Petrograd, going from 30,000 in February to 13,472 in June, to about 6,000 in September. Active support among women factory workers almost evaporated: by September, only about 700 party members in Petrograd were women, and only about 50 were factory workers, at a time when 44,629 of 113,346 employed workers were women.

Rabinowitch describes vividly the responses of the Bolshevik Party and the Left SRs to these crises. It is in these chapters, however, that he strays from the admirably objective tone set throughout most of the book. Rabinowitch is sharply critical of Lenin’s policy of armed food procurement detachments sent from the city to seize grain surpluses from the peasantry. Lenin proposed that peasants be allowed to keep a subsistence amount for themselves, plus enough grain for seed, but that anything above that be confiscated, at gunpoint if necessary. Committees of the poor peasants (kombedy) were formed to assist in locating grain hoarded by wealthier peasants, especially those that employed hired labor (kulaks). Lenin was frank and honest in his policies, which were outlined, for instance, in a letter on May 22 “To Workers in Piter [Petrograd].” Rabinowitch, however, writes: “Baiting workers to join in a holy procession in the countryside, Lenin’s second letter was more brash and, if anything more alarmist and reckless than the preceding one. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two was this letter’s ferocious attack on the Left SRs, for it charged that they were now the party of the weak-willed, apt to defend kulaks, undermine absolutely essential forced grain procurement policies, and, overall, subvert Soviet power to the same degree as the domestic and international counterrevolution” (p. 271).

Lenin’s letter can be found in Volume 27, pages 391-98, of the English edition of his *Collected Works*. Let the reader decide if Lenin is “baiting workers” or if his letter is “alarmist and reckless.” Moreover, given the drastic situation in Petrograd, where starvation was severe, was Lenin being “ferocious” when he called the Left SRs “beskharakternyi” (lacking in character, weak-willed or spineless) for hesitating to pursue policies that were unpopular with many peasants? As Rabinowitch admits, Lenin would be the first to acknowledge that “terrible errors had been made ... because of the inexperience of our workers, [and] the complexity of the problem, blows meant for kulaks struck the middle peasantry.” Rabinowitch oddly follows Lenin’s admission with the question: “And who more than Lenin was responsible for the ‘terrible errors’?” (p. 286).

An even more significant lapse in judgment involves Professor Rabinowitch’s treatment of the so-called “Shchastny Affair.” While discussing the crisis in the Baltic Fleet in the spring and early summer of 1918, Rabinowitch examines the fate of a popular Russian officer, Aleksei Shchastny, who was in charge, among other things, of preparing the scuttling of the Russian fleet if it were threatened with seizure by the German navy. In May there were clashes between Shchastny and Trotsky over moving the flotilla of minelayers to Lake Ladoga, preparing the fleet for demolition, destroying a fort at Ino (near Petrograd), and the handling of orders regarding these actions. On May 22, Shchastny resigned. Rabinowitch then unequivocally writes: “Trotsky rejected [his resignation], ordered him to Moscow, set him up for arrest, and single-

handedly organized an investigation, sham trial, and death sentence on the spurious charge of attempting to overthrow the Petrograd Commune with the longer-term goal of fighting the Soviet republic” (p. 243). An endnote reinforces the charge: “For example, Trotsky was the sole witness allowed to testify at Shchastny’s trial, possibly the first Soviet ‘show trial.’ In 1995, Shchastny was cleared posthumously of all charges against him and officially rehabilitated” (p. 435).

Rabinowitch has written on this topic before, in two articles, one in English in 1999 and one in Russian in 2001. To his credit, he has read the 362-page dossier on the Shchastny affair in the Archive of the Russian Federal Security Service for St. Petersburg, which was declassified before the 1999 article. Without access to this material, it is impossible to answer all of Rabinowitch’s charges, but a couple of points must be made. For one thing, Rabinowitch does not advise the reader that Trotsky’s charges against Shchastny were printed in Volume 1 of *How the Revolution Armed* (New Park, 1979, pp. 173-82). Nor does he advise here, although he does in his article, that the charges were reprinted in Volume 17, Part I of Trotsky’s *Works* in 1926. In other words, far from hiding his testimony at the “sham trial,” Trotsky continued to present it to a mass audience. It is clear that Trotsky was most concerned that Shchastny was spreading rumors in the Baltic Fleet, accusing the Bolsheviks of preparing a filthy deal with the Germans, which included the possible destruction of the Russian Fleet. Shchastny even brought with him letters (later shown to be forgeries), claiming that the German navy was “demanding the complete disarmament of Kronstadt and of the vessels in the navy port” (ibid., p. 562). Given the extremely tense and confused atmosphere in the Baltic Fleet (which Rabinowitch documents well), given the volatility of charges that the Bolsheviks had betrayed the revolution at Brest-Litovsk and were continuing further betrayals, given the impending revolt among the mine-layers in Petrograd and at the Obukhov works, and given the undoubted machinations of British intelligence and naval officers such as Cromie, O’Reilly and Lockhart in Petrograd (also documented convincingly by Rabinowitch), shouldn’t the author be somewhat more circumspect in his condemnation of Trotsky? Isn’t it entirely possible that the investigation, trial and death sentence were justified given the circumstances at the time? Or, to quote Rabinowitch himself:

“On 22 June, the mine-layers, joined by frustrated workers from one of Petrograd’s largest factories, the Obukhov plant, initiated an armed uprising calling for the immediate formation of a homogeneous socialist Soviet government pending reconvening of the Constituent Assembly. Although successfully suppressed, the rebellion was symptomatic of the profound crisis of Soviet rule in Petrograd at this time.” (Alexander Rabinowitch, “The Shchastny File: Trotsky and the Case of the Hero of the Baltic Fleet,” *Russian Review*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Oct. 1999), pp. 633).

Moreover, to accuse Trotsky of participating in “possibly the first Soviet ‘show trial’” is simply not worthy of a historian of Rabinowitch’s caliber. There is a world of difference between the situation that confronted the Bolshevik regime in the explosive environment of a civil war, when everyone’s head was at stake, and those which faced Stalin in 1936. Rabinowitch may believe that Trotsky acted with excessive harshness, but he produces no evidence that suggests that Trotsky acted for reasons other than those that he presented in his speech before the revolutionary tribunal. Moreover, Rabinowitch knows well that virtually every figure mentioned in his book, who did not die of natural or violent causes before 1936, perished in real “show trials” that were conducted by Stalin years later during the Terror of 1937-38. Just a quick perusal of *The Bolsheviks in Power* yields the following list of those killed in Stalin’s show trials: Riazanov, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Zorin, Bukharin, Miliutin, Smilga, Krestinsky, Osinskii, Lozovskii, Dingel’stedt, Nevskii, Bokii, Kosior, Spiridonova, others. To suggest that, by defending the revolution with the prosecution of Shchastny, Trotsky was setting a precedent for this genuinely counterrevolutionary bloodbath, shows a

remarkable theoretical blindness. Given the extraordinary level of falsification that still surrounds the life of Trotsky, one can be sure that the Shchastny incident will be seized upon, especially in Russia, to legitimize the continuing demonization of the man who was, apart from Lenin himself, the Revolution’s most important figure. We hope that Rabinowitch will reconsider and present, in a subsequent edition of this book, a more balanced assessment of the Shchastny affair.

It is somewhat ironic that Rabinowitch concludes Part Three with a brief chapter on “The Suicide of the Left SR’s.” In it he reviews the assassination on July 6 of the German ambassador, Count Mirbach, ordered by the Central Committee of the Left SRs in hopes of provoking a German military attack. This assassination was seen by the Bolshevik Party as a “Left SR uprising,” which Rabinowitch calls into question due to the obvious lack of preparation by other Left SRs, especially in Petrograd. Here Rabinowitch is far more forgiving of Spiridonova and other Left SRs than he ever is with either Lenin or Trotsky. Inexplicably so.

The concluding part of *Bolsheviks in Power* deals with the launching of the “Red Terror” after the assassination of Uritskii on August 30, 1918, and the shooting of Lenin later the same day. In 43 pages Rabinowitch focuses on the daunting setbacks in the civil war as the main causes of the Terror rather than pressure from Lenin, the assassinations of Volodarski and Uritskii, and the near murder of Lenin. He soberly assesses the scale of the terror, and attributes much of its fury to “the impatience of a segment of Petrograd workers to settle scores with their perceived enemies that had been building during Uritskii’s tenure as head of the Petrograd Cheka” (p. 355).

The remaining pages then take a somewhat unexpected turn by focusing on the preparation and celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution. After asking what the workers of Petrograd had to celebrate in the fall of 1918, Rabinowitch proceeds to outline significant changes in the world situation, especially in Europe. German forces were in full retreat. In October and November, “the German war effort collapsed completely, the Habsburg Empire disintegrated, and democratic revolutions toppled the old order in Central Europe.... Petrograd Bolshevik leaders ... drew strength from the fact that Soviet power in Russia had survived for a full year (significantly longer than the legendary Paris Commune), and from the firm belief that they were the vanguard at the dawn of the global socialist millennium” (p. 356-57). Massive celebrations were planned involving plays, concerts, films, parades, fireworks, rallies, poetry readings and food - plenty of food. The third day of the celebrations was to be devoted to the children of Petrograd who had suffered extreme deprivation along with their elders.

There was, to be sure, a particular element of pride: “Petrograd authorities viewed the celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution as an opportunity to assert Red Petrograd’s aspiration to leadership of the worldwide socialist revolution over Moscow’s competing claim” (p. 371). According to many accounts, the celebrations over November 7-9 were massive, spectacular, and truly festive. Then, on the evening of November 9/10, word reached Petrograd that Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated and that a Soviet government on the Russian model had taken power in Berlin. Il’in-Zhenevsky, who was at a theater in Petrograd, recounts: “The announcement was met with a kind of roar, and frenzied applause shook the theater for several minutes.... Here it was, it had come, support from the proletariat of Western Europe.... It seemed that everything would develop differently from now on.... Our thoughts were far away, over there in Berlin, where red flags were flying in the streets, where a soviet of workers’ deputies was in session, where another knot had been tied in the world proletarian revolution” (p. 400).

Almost as an afterthought, Rabinowitch concludes that aversion to Bolshevik extremism was a significant factor in shaping the “moderate outcome of the 1918 German revolution.” Having stumbled over this

euphemism for what soon became the drowning of the socialist revolution in blood, he notes somberly: "Following their joyous celebration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution, in the absence of unification with their revolutionary German brethren, the Petrograd Bolsheviks remained on their own. Their lonely, costly struggle for survival resumed with scarcely a pause" (p. 401).

In his study, Rabinowitch provides much new material for thought. He gives valuable portrayals of the roles played by such figures as Riazanov, Uritskii, Volodarskii, Lunacharsky, Samoilova and many others. The orientation of the Bolsheviks toward the world socialist revolution is stressed consistently, and the daunting obstacles to survival until the revolution was extended into Europe are well illustrated. While he praises the moderate socialists, one can't help but sense that Rabinowitch knows that the socialist revolution would have been crushed had the moderates triumphed. For the Bolsheviks in Petrograd, the memories of the suppression of the Paris Commune were still fresh, and the ferocious White terror going on in nearby Finland in 1918 has been starkly described in *Year One of the Revolution* by Victor Serge, whom Rabinowitch cites. Would the Bolsheviks have fared any better if they had pursued a more moderate course?

Throughout the book, Rabinowitch shows that Lenin and Trotsky had much greater political acumen than their opponents, both within and without the Bolshevik Party. Almost as a reflex, however, he tries to show their flaws, whether real or alleged. The harshness he perceives in Trotsky's behavior (especially vis-à-vis Shchastny) overlooks the brutalization that had overtaken not only Russian society, but Western European as well during the First World War. Whereas one can sympathize with the determined struggle of Riazanov to eliminate capital punishment as a vestige of capitalist barbarism, and admire Uritskii and Volodarskii in their attempt to moderate the repression in Petrograd, the facts presented by Rabinowitch demonstrate that the opponents of Bolshevism were not following the rules of the Marquis of Queensbury. Tragically, Uritskii and Volodarskii were rewarded for their humanity with assassination.

Despite the limitations that we have noted, one must sincerely hope that *The Bolsheviks in Power* finds a large audience, and that it will contribute to a serious examination of the October Revolution and its consequences.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact