

# Reflections on the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and early Soviet state building in Petrograd

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2 December 2010

This report was presented by Professor Alexander Rabinowitch of Indiana University at a meeting at Humboldt University in Berlin on October 14. Professor Rabinowitch introduced the new German translation of his book, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Bolshevik Rule in Petrograd*. The meeting was hosted by the publisher of the book, Mehring Verlag, and the International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Fourth International. The meeting was a great success, with an audience of over 350. (See, “Great interest in lecture by Professor Rabinowitch in Berlin”)

To purchase *The Bolsheviks in Power* in English click [here](#), and in German click [here](#).

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This evening, I want to share with you some views on the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and early soviet state-building in Petrograd developed during nearly a lifetime studying various aspects of this still very controversial subject. But let me begin with a bit of background on the influences which shaped my thinking about this question *before* I began my professional investigations.

Undoubtedly the most important of these influences was my upbringing in a family of liberal Russian *intelligenty*. In 1932 my mother Anna Maiersohn, a native of Kiev, was an actress performing with a Russian theater troupe in Europe when she and my father, the well-known physical chemist Eugene I. Rabinowitch, were married. My father, born in Petersburg in 1898, had fled Russia in August 1918, two weeks before the start of the Red Terror there. In 1921, he was among hordes of young Russian émigrés who flocked to Germany and were able to enter German universities through the intercession of the leading social democrat Eduard Bernstein, then a member of the Reichstag. As a doctoral student at the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University), my father studied with such world-renowned scientists, then already Nobel laureates, as Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Max von Laue. And on the eve of World War II, after temporary appointments at the University of Göttingen, Niels Bohr’s Institute for Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, and the University of London, he received a permanent position in the chemistry department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston.

So it was that during my earliest formative years, my family was an integral part of a vibrant Russian émigré community on the east coast of the United States. We spent summers in the lush Green Mountains of southern Vermont where my father bought a *dacha* not far from that of Michael Karpovich, a moderate socialist in 1917, an eminent Harvard historian, and the acknowledged founder of advanced Russian historical studies in the United States.

Some of my most vivid recollections of that time revolve around endless lunches and dinners at which some of the most prominent Russians then living in the United States, from Kerensky to Nabokov, discussed issues related to Russian history, literature, and current events. These discussions sometimes erupted into lively arguments, but there were some matters about which everyone seemed agreed. Among these was that the October Revolution that had uprooted them was a military coup carried out by a tightly knit group of revolutionary fanatics led by Lenin, financed by the Germans, and devoid of significant popular support. Another was that everything that flowed from that revolution was an abomination and global threat.

Thus, while my lifelong interest in Russian history and culture undoubtedly grew out of these early family associations, especially from interaction with Karpovich and the Menshevik leader and archivist of Russian Social Democracy Boris I. Nicolaevsky, they left me with an uncompromisingly negative view of the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and the entire Soviet historical experience.

These critical attitudes were reinforced by the climate of hostility toward the USSR during my high school and college years [1948–1956] in the United States, which coincided with the McCarthy era and the Korean War. As an ROTC cadet, I was trained to think and prepared to train others to think of the Soviet Union as the incarnation of evil and the “free world’s” arch enemy. (At that time, participation in the ROTC, or the Reserve Officer Training Corps, enabled students like myself to delay military service until graduation from college).

I first began formal study of Russian history with Leopold Haimson at the University of Chicago and at Indiana University with the diplomatic historian John M. Thompson. Together they awakened my interest in the Russian Revolution as a seminal political and social phenomenon worthy of further study. Nonetheless, when the time came to pick a topic for my doctoral dissertation, my fundamental views about the Soviet Union and its birth remained unchanged. My first choice was a biography of Irakli Tsereteli, a prominent Georgian Menshevik and inveterate enemy of Bolshevism with whom I had first become acquainted in Vermont as a youth. After it became apparent that a full-scale study of Tsereteli required knowledge of Georgian, I focused my attention on Tsereteli during the political crises of spring and summer 1917, especially following the abortive July uprising when, as a cabinet member and de facto head of the moderate socialist bloc in the Petrograd Soviet and in the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Soviets (CEC), he led an effort to buttress the liberal-moderate socialist coalition Provisional Government and to criminalize the Bolsheviks.

How then did I come to shift my interest from Tsereteli during the middle quarter of 1917 to the Bolsheviks at that time? And, looking ahead, how did I come to break sharply with my initial views about the Bolshevik Party and about the revolution that brought it to power? I have often been asked these questions and the answer is really quite simple. My work with Haimson and Thompson had instilled in me a passion for gathering historical evidence as well as a commitment to being as honest as humanly possible in interpreting it. And the fact is that relatively quickly, I found that Tsereteli's commonly accepted view of the July uprising as little more than a failed Leninist coup was belied by the images that emerged starkly from the relatively limited body of primary source material then available to me—primarily contemporary newspapers, published documents and memoirs. Even before the fall of 1963, when I began a nine-month appointment as an exchange scholar in Moscow, my primary research interest had shifted from Tsereteli in 1917 to the Bolshevik role in the July uprising.

Some sources that had been readily available in the United States helped me to begin answering this question. Thus, although these sources confirmed the seminal and historically momentous role played by Lenin in pointing the Bolsheviks squarely toward an early socialist revolution at the Seventh (April) All-Russian [Bolshevik Party] Conference, published records of the conference also revealed the deep divisions still remaining among the party's top leaders at its close—most significantly, among members of the Central Committee elected by it. [1]

An even more important, readily available source was the detailed minutes of weekly meetings of the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee in 1917. First published in 1927 but rarely used, they also reflected the diversity of political views within the Bolshevik Party organization, as well as something else of enormous importance, namely the party's transformation from a small conspiratorial organization into a mass political party, firmly rooted in factories and barracks in the aftermath of the February Revolution, and its relatively decentralized, flexible, and democratic structure and operational style in 1917. [2]

Bolshevik memoirs published in the relatively free 1920s, and also available in major American repositories, reinforced these images. Ironically, Nicolaevsky, who shared Tsereteli's demonic view of Lenin and of his central role in organizing the July uprising, steered me to the memoirs of the historian of the Bolsheviks and of the Russian revolutionary movement V. I. Nevskii, with whom he once had personal ties, not realizing that they helped document the independent role of the Bolshevik Military Organization in encouraging the July uprising *against* the wishes of Lenin and the Central Committee. [3]

Although access to Soviet archives was out of the question for Western historians at that time, my months as an exchange scholar in Moscow during the 1963-64 academic year were indispensable in further clarifying still puzzling aspects of the Bolshevik role in the July uprising and broader questions stemming from my research regarding the structure and operation of the party and its relation to the revolution unfolding at a popular level.

For example, close comparison of the Central Committee's main newspaper, *Pravda*, and the Bolshevik Military Organization's *Soldatskaia Pravda* during the run-up to the July Uprising (*Soldatskaia Pravda* had not been available in the West), documented the growing divergence between the tactical caution of the Central Committee and the radicalism of the Military Organization. Moreover, the pages of *Soldatskaia Pravda* as well as of the no less rare Kronstadt daily *Izvestiia*

*Kronstadtskogo Soveta* during the weeks preceding the July uprising mirrored the sharply rising unrest among soldiers of the Petrograd garrison and Baltic Fleet sailors and helped reveal crucial connections between it and the Bolshevik Military Organization's separatism and escalating militancy. Complete sets of both papers were readily available in what was then called the Lenin State Library.

The findings of my doctoral dissertation research were reflected in my first book, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising*, published in 1968. Following its appearance, I was immediately labeled as a "bourgeois falsifier" by Soviet historians. However, most Western reviewers of the book seemed persuaded by my depiction of the July uprising as a valid reflection of popular frustration with the meager results of the February Revolution, which was encouraged and supported by radical elements in the Bolshevik Military Organization and Petersburg Committee. Most also accepted my conclusion that although the uprising was in part the outgrowth of months-long Bolshevik anti-government agitation and propaganda, it erupted against the wishes of the Central Committee, some of whose members, like Lenin, were fearful that the overthrow of the Provisional Government would be opposed by peasants in the provinces and soldiers at the front, and others, like Kamenev, who remained convinced that a socialist revolution in backward Russia was premature and viewed creation of a broad coalition of socialist parties in the Constituent Assembly as the key to meaningful political, economic, and social reform.

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In the aftermath of the July uprising, Lenin was accused of being a German agent and forced into hiding, many leading Bolsheviks were jailed, and the dramatic upsurge in popular support for the Bolshevik program came to a halt. At the time that *Prelude to Revolution* was published and I started research for my book on the October Revolution itself (*The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, 1976), it seemed to me that since the character of the Bolshevik Party in the spring and early summer of 1917 had contributed so significantly to the July debacle, especially its tolerance of fundamental programmatic divisions and its decentralized structure and responsiveness to the popular mood, subsequent *restructuring* more in keeping with the traditionally accepted "Leninist model" might explain its rapid recovery and ability to take power. This supposition proved *incorrect*. To the contrary, it turned out that the party's *continued* acceptance of diverse opinion coupled with its relatively open and democratic operational style; the *continuing* sensitivity of its decision-making to mass attitudes; and the enduring popularity of its political program calling for immediate peace, land, and bread, and transfer of power to multi-party soviets pending convocation of the Constituent Assembly proved to be critical to its success in October. Let me illustrate this key point with a couple of examples that are developed and documented in *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*.

In the aftermath of the July events, Lenin lost all hope that the existing, moderate socialist-controlled soviets could become revolutionary organs. Consequently, from a hideout in the countryside not far from Petrograd he called for the replacement of the slogan "All Power to the Soviets," by the new clarion call, "All Power to the Working Class led by its Revolutionary Party—the Bolshevik-Communists"; transfer of the party's institutional focal point from soviets to factory-shop committees; and preparation for an independent armed uprising as soon as such action was feasible. However, this course was effectively resisted at important party meetings in mid-July by moderate Bolsheviks in the Central Committee and, no less important, by Petrograd party leaders at all levels who

accepted Lenin's longer term theoretical views but were acutely aware of the continued attachment of factory workers, soldiers, and sailors to *their* soviets and, indeed, who themselves retained faith in the revolutionary potential of soviets. [4]

To be sure, at the Sixth All-Russian party congress in August, following fierce debate, the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" was officially withdrawn. But the congress reaffirmed the central importance of revolutionary work in soviets. In late August, Bolsheviks in the Petrograd city and national soviet leadership were instrumental in marshaling the forces that suppressed General Lavr Kornilov's attempted rightist coup, after which the party's standing at a popular level again soared. The slogan "All Power to the Soviets" was now quietly restored. Moreover, building on the warm glow of its central role in the triumph over Kornilov, the Bolsheviks won a majority in the Petrograd Soviet. Although not apparent at the time, this was a critically important step in the party's bid for power at the end of October.

Roughly two weeks later, in mid-September, Lenin suddenly abandoned a brief return to the moderate tactical course he had charted between April and July and in two urgent letters demanded that his comrades in Petrograd organize the overthrow of the Provisional Government *at once!* Lenin's extreme impatience to seize power without delay at this moment seems to have been triggered by such factors as the strong position of the extreme left in Finland, the winning of majority support for the Bolshevik program in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets as well as in a number of regional soviets, the massive expansion of turbulence among Russian peasants in the countryside and soldiers at the front and, perhaps most important of all, signs of revolutionary unrest in the German Fleet. [5]

This last factor was particularly important because of Lenin's firm belief that a socialist revolution in backward Russia would trigger decisive socialist revolutions in more advanced countries and, moreover, that the latter were *absolutely essential* for revolutionary Russia's survival.

Lenin's mid-September letters, like his April Theses, had the critically significant effect of refocusing the thinking of the Bolshevik Party leadership in Petrograd leftward, toward the early removal of the Provisional Government if not the independent seizure of power. In this sense, the immense historical importance of his leadership was reconfirmed. In the short run, however, his tactical demands were brushed aside by members of the Central Committee then in Petrograd and more attuned than Lenin to the limits of support for the Bolsheviks and to the strong attachment of Petrograd workers, soldiers, and sailors to multi-party, exclusively socialist power exercised through democratic soviets. Under the Central Committee's leadership, the party continued to participate in the so-called Democratic State Conference, hopeful that it would advance the revolution. [6]

(Parenthetically, I should say that over the years, I have weighed the question of whether the Bolsheviks could have seized power in mid-September countless times and on each occasion I have concluded that had they tried, they would have had suffered a defeat even greater than that which they sustained in July. Clearly, that the party did not attempt to seize power prematurely and, earlier, that it did not abandon the soviets, was due precisely to the fact it was *not* structured according to the traditionally accepted Leninist monolithic model.)

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During the second half of September, Lenin was living underground in

Vyborg, Finland. At the end of the month, he moved to a secret apartment on the northern outskirts of Petrograd. From these hideouts, in ever more insistent messages to the party's leadership bodies as well as essays intended for publication in the party press, he implored his colleagues in Petrograd to overthrow the Provisional Government without any further dallying. However, his entreaties and escalating rage were studiously ignored. Following the failure of the Democratic State Conference to take formation of a new, exclusively socialist government into its own hands, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Workers' and Soldiers' soviets, prodded by the Bolsheviks, had met with delegates to the Democratic State Conferences from the provinces, and scheduled a second nationwide Russian congress of soviets for October 20 (later postponed to October 25), to decide on a replacement for the new Provisional Government.

As for the Bolsheviks, answering the question of whether they would try to utilize the soviet congress to build a broader, comprehensive alliance of "democratic groups" which would limit itself to forming a caretaker, inclusive all-socialist coalition government pending early convocation of the Constituent Assembly—the goal of party moderates—or whether their aim at the congress would be the transfer of power to an exclusively soviet government of the extreme left pledged to immediate peace and a radical, internationally *resounding* program of social change—the objective of "Leninists in spirit" like Trotsky—was left to an emergency national party congress scheduled for 17 October. [7] For the time being, the entire Bolshevik leadership, in concert with the Left SRs, the Menshevik-Internationalists, and other left socialist groups, maintained a steady course aimed at facilitating the creation of a homogeneous socialist government at the soviet congress while using every opportunity to undermine the Provisional Government's authority peacefully.

On 10 October, a week before the scheduled party congress, Lenin argued his case for the immediate organization of the seizure of power at a conspiratorial meeting of the Central Committee. At its close, 10 of 12 members, (all but Kamenev and Zinoviev) voted in favor of making an armed insurrection "the order of the day," effectively preempting the party congress—which was never held. Yet, despite this green light for the organization of an armed uprising, little was done to accomplish this goal for nearly three weeks. There were several reasons for this. For one thing moderate party leaders such as Kamenev and Zinoviev did all they could to prevent the initiation of an armed uprising in the certainty that a direct, party-organized assault on the government *before* the approaching All-Russian Congress of Soviets would be disastrous and, moreover, that a majority of the party leaders nationally shared their views. [8]

Also working against implementation of the Central Committee's resolution of 10 October were reservations about trying to organize an armed uprising *before* the Congress of Soviets on the part of Central Committee members such as Trotsky and radically inclined Petrograd party leaders who were no less attracted than Lenin to the idea of an early socialist revolution in Russia as the spark that would trigger worldwide socialist revolutions. Nonetheless, despite these reservations, in response to the Central Committee's decision of 10 October, Petrograd Bolshevik leaders earnestly explored possibilities for toppling the Provisional Government at once and convened major strategy conferences for this purpose.

These soundings, however, forced them to conclude that the party was technically unprepared to start an immediate, classic armed uprising and, in any case, that workers, soldiers, and sailors generally would *not* be responsive to a call for insurrection *before* the Congress of Soviets. Moreover, they had to recognize a reality that Bolshevik moderates were

pressing with particular force, namely that by usurping the prerogatives of the Congress of Soviets they would jeopardize possibilities for collaboration with such important allies as the Left SRs and Menshevik-Internationalists. Further, they risked losing support in such mass organizations as trade unions, factory committees, and Petrograd city and district soviets. Most ominous of all, they would increase the risk of opposition by troops from the nearby northern front.

Consequently, for practical purposes the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd pursued a defensive strategy based on the principles that the soviets or its agencies, and not party bodies, should be employed for the overthrow of the Provisional Government; that in order to retain the broadest possible support, any attack on the government should be limited to actions that could be justified in terms of defending the soviets; that to undercut potential resistance and increase the possibility of success, every opportunity should be utilized to subvert the authority of the Provisional Government peacefully; and that the formal removal of the existing government should be linked with and legitimized by the decisions of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

Overall, this strategy was a natural, realistic response to the prevailing situation, accepted by moderates and Leninists alike, albeit obviously for different reasons. Essentially, it was an extension of the approach adopted in the aftermath of the Democratic State Conference only now, especially between 21 and 24 October, it was pursued much more aggressively. In the party's press and at huge public rallies, the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd, with the legendary Trotsky at the fore, attacked the policies of the government and reinforced popular support for its removal at the approaching national soviet congress. Simultaneously, using the Provisional Government's announced intention of transferring the bulk of the Petrograd garrison to the front as justification, and grounding its actions as defensive measures against the counterrevolution, the Bolshevik-dominated Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), established by the Petrograd Soviet on 9 October to monitor the government's troop dispositions, took control of most Petrograd-based military units.

In response, early on the morning of 24 October, a day before the opening of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, a large majority of which was poised to vote in favor of forming an exclusively socialist, soviet government, Kerensky attempted to curb the left. The MRC responded with decisive countermeasures, all justified in the name of defense, leaving the Provisional Government isolated and utterly helpless in the Winter Palace.

Not until Lenin's personal intervention before dawn on 25 October, after all this had been accomplished, did the unilateral effort to overthrow the Provisional Government that he had been demanding for well over a month begin, and by the following night it was over. What is commonly ignored in the relevant historical literature, however, is that only after the successful implementation of the "defensive" strategy begun in late September, Kerensky's natural but aggressive response to the MRC's usurpation of command authority over the Petrograd garrison, and the MRC's successful countermeasures, did Lenin's direct assault on the Provisional Government become feasible.

In retrospect, it is apparent that Lenin's basic purpose in insisting on the violent overthrow of the Provisional Government *before* the opening of the Congress of Soviets was to eliminate the possibility that the congress would form a socialist coalition in which the moderate socialists would have a significant voice. This strategy was brilliantly successful. On the eve of the opening of the congress, prior to the initiation of open military operations that culminated in the arrest of members of the Provisional

Government in the Winter Palace, the political affiliations of arriving delegates and their positions on the government question made it all but certain that efforts to establish a multi-party democratic socialist, caretaker government pledged to a program of peace and urgent reform pending timely convocation of the Constituent Assembly would bear fruit. After the military events of 25 October, this collaborative spirit of a broad spectrum of socialists evaporated. Even the Bolsheviks' closest allies, the Left SRs, felt betrayed and temporarily rejected joining a new Soviet government, thereby opening the door to the formation of an exclusively Bolshevik cabinet, the Sovnarkom, headed by Lenin.

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The Bolsheviks coming to power in October 1917, then, cannot be adequately characterized as no more than a successful Leninist coup any more than the July uprising was simply an unsuccessful one. Although neither were classic armed uprisings, the burden of the evidence indicates that both were genuinely valid expressions of widespread disenchantment among Petrograd's lower classes with the results of the February Revolution and of the immense popular attraction of the Bolshevik program. Moreover, both were attributable to critically important, often overlooked characteristics of the Petrograd Bolshevik Party organization in 1917 with vastly differing outcomes. Obviously, it is difficult to square this interpretation with the ultra-authoritarian political system which emerged from the October Revolution, which is what attracted me to continue studying it.

The first product of this new project, which has turned out to be as full of surprises as my work on the revolution, is *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. In this book, my central purpose is to clarify the seeming contradictions between my view of the Bolshevik Party and also soviets in 1917 as relatively democratically structured institutions and traditional conceptions of them as being strictly authoritarian in the aftermath of "October." I try to explain the *dynamics* of the way the party and soviets came to be structured and operated in the first year of Soviet rule in Petrograd. For this book, the opening up of Russian historical archives during the Gorbachev era came as an unexpected godsend. Suddenly, I could study intra-party debates over policy at all levels. Plus, I could examine changes in the internal workings of party bodies and soviets, from top to bottom, as well as of unions and to a limited extent even of such security agencies as the Cheka.

What I found was that the Bolsheviks came to power not simply without an authoritarian legacy but also without a preconceived plan or concept of how they would govern. Rather, changes in the structure and operation of the Bolshevik Party and of soviets in Petrograd, and their relationship to each other, were part of a gradual process, shaped less by ideology than by the impact of never-ending, dire emergencies, during which the Bolshevik's prime concern was simply how to survive. (Indeed, this factor was so pervasive in the new story I had to tell that my original title for *The Bolsheviks in Power* was *Price of Survival*.) Be that as it may, at the end of the first year of Soviet power, this transforming process was far from complete and, to my mind, not irreversible—which is why I am now continuing my research through 1919 and 1920.

#### Notes:

[1] Four moderates, Leo Kamenev, Viktor Nogin, Vladimir Miliutin, and Grigori Fedorov were members of the nine-man Central Committee elected by the conference.

[2] See P. F. Kudelli, ed. *Pervyi legal'ny Petersburgskii komitet bolshevikov v 1917* (Moscow–Leningrad, 1927). For newer, more complete, and greatly enhanced edition of these protocols see T. A. Abrosimova, T. P. Bondarevskaia, E. T. Leikina, and V. Iu. Cherniaev, eds, *Pervyi Petersburgskii Komitet RSDRP (b) v 1917 godu: Protokoly i materialy zasedanii* (St. Petersburg, 2003).

[3] In 1917, Nevskii had been a prominent leader of the Bolshevik Military Organization.

[4] I have in mind a two-day conference (13–14 July) of leading Petrograd and Moscow Bolsheviks organized by the party central committee and the last session of the Second City Conference of Petrograd Bolsheviks (16 July) that had been interrupted by the July uprising.

[5] Also evidently contributing to Lenin's impatience was anxiety lest the government somehow deflate the revolution, possibly by surrendering Petrograd to the Germans, and also that if the party dallied with the seizure of power it would begin to lose influence among the revolutionary masses and become powerless to halt Russia's slide into complete anarchy.

[6] The fullest day-by-day accounts of the proceedings of the Democratic State Conference can be found in *Izvestiia*, September 15–21, 1917.

[7] That a Bolshevik party congress was scheduled for 17 October is not disputed. However, exhaustive searches initiated by Moscow historians in the late Soviet era have so far failed to turn up documents clarifying the dynamics of its cancellation.

[8] For a long letter in which Kamenev and Zinoviev summarized their views and which they circulated among Bolshevik leaders on 11 October see Institut marksizma-leninizma pri TsK KPSS, *Protololy Tsentral'nogo komiteta RSDRP (b): Avgust 1917-fevral' 1918* (Moscow, 1958), pp. 86–92.



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