

From the archives of the Russian Revolution

Trying Days

Leon Trotsky
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This is a new translation of an article by Leon Trotsky, published in Vperiod (Forward), Number 6, on July 22 (9 O.S.), 1917. Trotsky wrote this article after the July Days and before his arrest by the Provisional Government. Also included are the original notes that were published in L. Trotsky, Sochineniia (Works), Volume 3, Part I, Moscow-Leningrad, 1924.

On the streets of Petrograd, blood has been spilled [1]. A tragic chapter has been added to the Russian Revolution. Who is guilty? “The Bolsheviks,” answers the philistine, guided by his own press. The entire meaning of these tragic events is exhausted for the bourgeoisie and the politicians who serve them with the words: arrest the leaders, disarm the masses. The purpose of these actions is the establishment of “revolutionary order.” Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, arresting and disarming the Bolsheviks, are going to establish “order.” The only question is: What kind of “order,” and for whom?

Among the masses, the revolution aroused great hopes. Among the masses of Petrograd, who played a leading role in the revolution, hopes and expectations were particularly keen. The tasks of Social Democracy were to translate these expectations and hopes into definite political slogans, to direct the revolutionary impatience of the masses onto the path of organized political action. The revolution raises the issue of state power. We [i.e., *Mezhraiontsy*], like the Bolshevik organization, from the very beginning stood for the transfer of all power to the Central Office of the Soviets of Workers, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies.

From above, and this includes both the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, the masses were called upon to support the Milyukov-Guchkov government. Until the last moment, i.e., up to the hour of the resignation of the most brazen imperialist figures of the first Provisional Government, these two parties solidarized themselves with the government all down the line. Only after the restructuring of the government, the masses of the population learned from their own newspapers that they were not told the whole truth and that they were misled. Then they were told that they needed to trust a new “coalition” government.

Revolutionary Social Democracy predicted that the new government would be essentially no different from the old, that it would give nothing to the revolution and would again deceive the expectations of the masses. This was confirmed. After two months of a policy of impotence, calls for “trust,” verbose exhortations, and cover-ups of reality, the truth broke through the surface. The masses were again, and in an even sharper way, deceived in their expectations.

Impatience and distrust were growing among the masses of Petrograd workers and soldiers, developing not by days but by hours. These moods, nourished by the protracted war, which is hopeless for all participants, and by economic disorganization, which has nearly shut down the most important branches of production, found their immediate political expression in the slogan: Power to the Soviets.

The resignation of the Kadets [2], representing the ultimate revelation of

the internal bankruptcy of the Provisional Government, further strengthened the beliefs of the masses that they were right about the official leaders of the Soviet. The wavering of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks added fuel to the fire. In connection with the military offensive, the attacks on the Petrograd garrison, which turned into a slander campaign, pushed moods further in the same direction. The explosion was becoming inevitable...

All parties, including the Bolsheviks, took all available measures to keep the masses from demonstrating on July 3. But the masses came forward, and with weapons in their hands. All the orators and all the representatives of the districts were reporting on the evening of July 3 that the July 4 demonstration—in view of the ongoing crisis of power—was absolutely unavoidable, that by no appeals would it be possible to restrain the masses. That is why the Bolshevik Party, and together with it, our organization, decided not to step aside, not to wash our hands, and instead to do everything to channel the movement on July 4 in the direction of a peaceful mass demonstration. This was the only sentiment involved. It was clear that in the case of almost unavoidable attacks by counterrevolutionary gangs, bloody conflicts could arise.

It was possible, of course, to politically decapitate the masses, to refuse to give the masses any direction whatsoever, and to leave them to their own fate. But we, as a workers’ party, could not and did not want to carry out the policy of Pilate. We decided to be and stay with the masses in order to contribute to its turbulent movement the maximum possible organization in these conditions and thereby minimize possible victims. The facts are known. Blood has been spilled. And now the “leading” press of the bourgeoisie and the press that is serving it are trying to lay the whole burden of responsibility for events—that is, for the poverty, exhaustion, discontent and indignation of the masses—upon us.

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And in order to round off this work of counterrevolutionary mobilization against the proletarian party, there have emerged anonymous, semi-anonymous and confirmed scoundrels to launch a charge of bribery: the spilled blood is the fault of the Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks were acting on the orders of Wilhelm.

We are living through trying days. The persistence of the masses, their endurance, the faithfulness of their “friends”—everything is now being put to the test. We will pass through this test, strengthened and even more united, as we have passed through all the preceding ones. Life is with us and for us. The new restructuring of power, dictated by the hopelessness of the situation and the pathetic irresolution of the leading parties, will not change anything and will not solve it. A radical change in the entire system is necessary. We need a revolutionary government [*nuzhna revoliutsionnaya vlast*, literally “revolutionary power is needed”].

The policy of Tsereteli-Kerensky is now aimed at disarming and exhausting the left flank of the revolution. If they were able to establish

“order” with the help of these methods, they would be the first ones—after us—to be its victims. But they will not succeed. The contradictions are too deep, the tasks too great, to be solved with police measures.

After the trying days, there will be days of ascent and victory!

Notes

[1] This is a reference to the famous “July Days.” The continuous intensification of the class struggle, which marked the entire development of the revolution from February to July, was complicated in the second half of June by the huge factor of the offensive, and on the eve of the July Days, the Kadets fled the government. The demonstration of the St. Petersburg workers, especially the Putilov workers and revolutionary soldiers, led by the first machine-gun regiment, did not occur on the initiative of our party, as the White and compromisers’ press claimed at the time.

But as soon as the demonstration became a fact, and its lack of organization and spontaneity created the conditions for severe conflicts, the workers’ section of the Petersburg Soviet, on the instructions of the Central Committee, decided to take over the leadership of the movement. At its meeting of July 3, the Bolsheviks proposed to elect a commission of 25 people. In their speech, they (including Comrade Trotsky) pointed out that the actions of the masses are the result of the right-wing mistakes of the government. As a result of the debate, the following resolution was adopted:

In view of the crisis of power, the workers’ section considers it necessary to insist that the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies take all power into its own hands. The workers’ section undertakes to promote this with its strength, hoping to find in this full support from the soldiers’ section. The workers’ section elects a commission of 15 people, which is instructed to act on behalf of the section in contact with the Petrograd and All-Russian Executive Committees. All the other members of this assembly will go to the districts, inform the workers and soldiers about this decision and, while remaining in constant communication with the commission, strive to give the movement a peaceful and organized character.

The elected commission of the workers’ section was instructed to enlist representatives of the minority who left the assembly, if possible. Elected to the commission were Kamenev, Zinoviev, Trotsky, Zhukov, Enukidze, Ashkinazi, Panov, Paleansky, Kornev, Zalutsky, Karakhan, Ryazanov, Yurenev, Zof, and Nakhimson.

On July 4, the movement reached its point of culmination. Reflecting the spontaneous mood of the masses, it could not at the same time lead to decisive results, since at that time the proletariat was still too weak on a nationwide scale to seize power. On July 5, the movement began to recede, and the streets of St. Petersburg began to be gradually cleared of the many thousands of workers and soldiers. The frantic bourgeoisie and the Soviet majority prosecuted an incredible baiting of our party after these events and conducted systematic arrests and persecution of its organizations and leaders.

[2] The reason for the resignation of the Kadet ministers was their disagreement with the draft decree of the Provisional Government on Ukraine, which was proposed by the delegation of the Provisional Government sent by the latter for negotiations with the Ukrainian Rada.

The Kadets declared that the agreement concluded by Tereshchenko, Kerensky and Tsereteli destroys any power of the Provisional Government in Ukraine, that the form of management of the latter can be worked out only by the Constituent Assembly, and the declaration concedes a form of self-government for Ukraine. In addition, the Kadet ministers believed that the delegation did not have the right to enter into a declarative agreement, for it had the authority only to draft an agreement.

When the Provisional Government rejected the proposal of the Kadets, four of their ministers immediately resigned: Shingarev (Finance Minister), Manuilov (Minister of Education), Stepanov (Acting Minister of Trade and Industry) and Shakhovskiy (Minister of State Charity).

However, in reality, the reasons for the resignations were more serious. They were partly revealed by Lvov, the chairman of the government, who stated that “the cause of the crisis lies in the divergence of points of view: socialist and bourgeois.” The resignation of the Kadets was a political maneuver that aimed to shift full responsibility for the consequences of the unsuccessful military offensive and the growing economic turmoil on the so-called socialist part of the government.

Absolutely unsubstantiated is the point of view of Sukhanov, who puts the Ukrainian question to the fore and argues that the Ukrainian cause was not only an excuse, but also the real cause of the coalition’s rupture. Corresponding more to reality is the explanation given by Trotsky in his book “The October Revolution”:

When the Kadets, the most intelligent and far-sighted representatives of the coalition, realized that the failed offensive on June 18 could heavily impact not only on the revolution but also the ruling parties, they hastened to withdraw temporarily to the side, putting the entire burden of responsibility on their allies on the left (1918 Russian edition, page 23).

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