

How the Revolution was Won

James O'Toole



The Petrograd Soviet

The story of the 1917 Russian Revolution is the story of a risen working class and also the story of the rise of Bolshevik Party. This article focuses on the crucial role played by the Bolsheviks. From participation in the first protests of February to the taking of power by the soviets — or worker's councils — in Autumn 1917, the Bolsheviks made themselves the party of the masses.

Without the Bolshevik Party the Revolution could not have triumphed. One of their political opponents, the Menshevik Nikolai Sukhanov, acknowledged their key role: '(T)he Bolsheviks were working stubbornly and without let up,' he recalled. 'They were among the masses, at the factory-benches, every day without pause. Tens of speakers, big and little, were speaking in Petersburg, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses they had become *their own people*, because they were always there, taking the lead in details as well as in the most important affairs of the whole factory or barracks.... The mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks. It was in the hands of the party of Lenin and Trotsky.'¹

Winning the mass of people to socialist revolution wasn't easy. The Bolsheviks began the year as an organisation that was underground and in exile. But by the year's

end they were the party that embodied the hopes and aspirations of millions of workers, peasants and soldiers. This is the story of that revolutionary year and the Bolsheviks' rise to ascendancy in the workers' movement.

The February Revolution

Bolshevik activists had staked their whole lives on the revolution. They dedicated thousands of books, pamphlets and newspapers to 'preparing' the revolution. They went to jail, were sent into exile and were executed for the cause. They knew the revolutionary rupture would come — they just didn't know exactly when. A few weeks before the February revolt broke out Lenin had warned that party activists 'must not be deceived by the present grave-like stillness in Europe. Europe is pregnant with revolution.'²

At the start of 1917 the revolt was brewing. Raskolnikov, the Bolshevik sailor, reported that 'there had been more and more frequent talk in the proceeding period of an inevitable armed rebellion.'³ The Bolsheviks called a strike in January on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday (a massacre of unarmed protesters by the Tsar in 1905) and hoped the strike would escalate into an uprising. But no one knew the revolution would begin on International Women's Day. On International Women's Day — February 23rd protests by working class women — textile workers demanding 'bread and herring' were joined by other factory workers. The women workers threw snowballs at windows in the factory districts calling on people to join their protests and the movement escalated. By the end of the day over 90,000 workers were on strike and protesting in the streets.

Tsarist forces were caught off guard when

¹Sukhanov, N. *The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record*. (Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 529.

²Lenin, 'Lecture on the 1905 Revolution' <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jan/09.htm>.

³Raskolnikov, F. F. *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917* (New Park, 1982), p.1.

protesters refused to leave the streets despite their being fired on by police. Chants of 'Down with the Tsar' and 'Down with the War' began to mix with the demands for food. The war had meant a huge reduction in the living standards of workers as the whole of production was subordinated to the escalating war effort. The sons of desperate workers and peasants were dying at the front for a political regime that was far removed from the interests of the majority of people and which defended an economic system that served only to enrich a tiny elite of landowners in the countryside and big capitalists in the cities.

'On the 25th, the strike spread wider,' Trotsky wrote. '240,000 workers participated that day. The most backward layers are following up the vanguard. Already a good number of small establishments are on strike. The streetcars are at a stand still. Business concerns are closed. In the course of the day students of the higher schools join the strike. By noon tens of thousands of people pour to the Kazan cathedral and the surrounding streets. Attempts are made to organise street meetings; a series of armed encounters with the police occurs. Orators address the crowds around the Alexander III monument. The mounted police open fire. A speaker falls wounded.'⁴

Faced with growing resistance from workers and from soldiers who had joined the protests, the hated Tsarist police soon disappeared from the streets. The movement continued to escalate. On February 27th protestors broke open the prisons, releasing countless revolutionary activists, and as news of the upheaval spread across Russia more and more protests and strikes broke out. Agitators from all the left-wing parties began to hold meetings on every street corner.

By the 27th the strike involved nearly a half million workers, and once the garrison had joined the revolution the Tsarist regime was finished. There was no going back. In a matter of days the workers and soldiers had shaken a dynasty that had ruled with an iron fist for centuries. But who led the February

revolution? Leon Trotsky explains:

The mystic doctrine of spontaneousness explains nothing. In order correctly to appraise the situation and determine the moment for a blow at the enemy, it was necessary that the masses or their guiding layers should make their examination of historical events and have their criteria for estimating them. In other words, it was necessary that there should be not masses in the abstract, but masses of Petrograd workers and Russian workers in general, who had passed through the revolution of 1905, through the Moscow insurrection of December 1905, shattered against the Semenovskiy regiment of the Guard. It was necessary that throughout this mass should be scattered workers who had thought over the experience of 1905, criticised the constitutional illusions of the liberals and Mensheviks, assimilated the perspectives of the revolution, meditated hundreds of times about the question of the army, watched attentively what was going on in its midst — workers capable of making revolutionary inferences from what they observed and communicating them to others. And finally, it was necessary that there should be in the troops of the garrison itself progressive soldiers, seized, or at least touched, in the past by revolutionary propaganda...

To the question, Who led the February revolution? we can then answer definitely enough: Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin. But we must here immediately add:

⁴Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch07.htm>.

This leadership proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution.⁵

Socialist organisations played a huge role in preparing the revolt. Before the 1914 war the Bolsheviks had grown on the back of a massive strike wave that was only cut off by the outbreak of hostilities. At first the war had given a lift to the ‘patriotic socialists’ and temporarily marginalised the Bolsheviks, but by late 1916 they were on the rise again. By 1916 the Tsar was so desperate for troops that he was compelled to make it legal for socialists to serve in the army, and the Bolsheviks sent activists out to agitate among the soldiers. On the homefront socialists had established branches in many of the Petersburg factories.

The Bolsheviks issued leaflets, started a journal, and continued to campaign against the state. They also used various legal formations, including insurance organizations, workers’ co-operatives, and cultural and educational clubs and circles. By the end of 1916, there were 86 sick-fund organizations, most of them organized by the Bolsheviks, with 176,000 members (or 45 percent of the working class) in Petrograd.⁶

A week before the revolution, the Moscow Okhrana (the secret police) reported that

[t]he state of extreme agitation of the working mass and in social circles, the aggravation of the bread shortage in Moscow,

and the activities of revolutionary circles could create, under a new onslaught of strikes and demonstrations, a much more serious threat to official order and public security.⁷

Socialist activists were arrested on the morning of International Women’s Day giving out leaflets calling workers to walk out. Once the protests began socialists called meetings in every factory and on every street corner. A Bolshevik activist, A. Kondrat’ev, described the meetings:

The speakers were Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries. The slogan was to march to Nevsky... One speaker ended with the revolutionary verse: ‘Out of the way, obsolete world, rotten from top to bottom. Young Russia is on the march!’ The atmosphere was tense... There was comradesly enthusiasm. We would live or die together in the struggle.⁸

By March the whole country was up in arms as news of the revolution travelled from town to town and out into the villages. But the tasks of the revolution weren’t complete — this was only the beginning.

The Provisional Government and Dual Power

The capitalist class in Russia was weak. The country was an unusual ‘combined and uneven’ mashing together of a feudal economy, based on the exploitation of peasants, with a capitalist economy, based on big capitalist factories employing thousands of workers and funded by foreign capital. The Russian capitalist’s desire to conquer political power was tempered by their fear of the masses. If they rose up they might stir a rebellion from

⁵Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch08.htm>.

⁶Yanowitz, ‘October’s Forgotten Vanguard,’ *International Socialist Review* 75 (Jan. 2011) <http://isreview.org/issue/75/februarys-forgotten-vanguard>.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

below which they couldn't control. This fear of the masses imbued in them an instinctive conservatism. The capitalist liberal's first instinct was to hand power to another member of the royal family. When it became clear that the crowds of workers and soldiers wouldn't tolerate any Romanov government the capitalist parties were forced to establish a Provisional Government composed of more 'liberal' capitalist politicians.

The government would be headed by Prince Lvov. Trotsky explained the nature of this new regime:

They were big landlords and industrialists, opposition deputies in the Duma, leaders of the Progressive Bloc. The fact is that, with one single exception, the revolution accomplished by workers and soldiers found no reflection whatever in the staff of the revolutionary government. The exception was Kerensky.⁹

Kerensky was a provincial lawyer who had defended left-wing activists in the past, but he jumped at the chance to join the government as Minister of Justice, believing he could link the new government to the revolution. His role in the government was to grow over the course of 1917.

While the ruling classes plotted, the masses were busy building their own 'democracy from below' in the form of mass assemblies called 'soviets'. Soviets were formed in all the major workplaces and among the soldiers. The failed Russian Revolution of 1905 had seen workers form these mass circles. The call for a soviet committee came from the reformist socialists like the Mensheviks, who wanted to contain the movement in the name of support for the Provisional Government. But once the committee was formed the masses began electing their own delegates, flooding the sessions of the soviet. The reformist politicians soon found themselves 'prisoners' of the revolution from below.

The February Revolution, although driven by the masses, had led to a situation of 'Dual Power' — the Provisional Government was moving to consolidate the old state machinery while the masses were forming their own circles. The elite understood this, and rallied to the Provisional Government. Even the council of the United Nobility backed the new 'revolutionary' government. There were thus two rival centres of executive power side-by-side. The journey from February to the October Revolution was at bottom a contest over which of these powers would come out on top. Society cannot tolerate two masters.

There was a problem though: no party in Russia was calling for the soviet assemblies to assume power. The Mensheviks were calling for support for the Provisional Government, believing that the next 'stage' of societal evolution was a capitalist regime within which they could form a western-style parliamentary opposition. But this meant trying to solve the 'Dual Power' dilemma in the interests of the *capitalist liberals*. If the problem of 1917 was the problem of Dual Power then support for the Provisional Government would lead to the victory of the landowners and capitalists.

Even the Bolshevik Party was confused! The Bolshevik newspaper, under the influence of leading cadre like Stalin and Kamenev, called for support for the Provisional Government as long as it stood up for the revolution. But this was to misunderstand the entire problem of Dual Power.

As Trotsky notes:

For Bolshevism the first months of the revolution had been a period of bewilderment and vacillation. In the 'manifesto' of the Bolshevik Central Committee, drawn up just after the victory of the insurrection, we read that 'the workers of the shops and factories, and likewise the mutinied troops, must immediately elect their representatives

⁹Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch10.htm>.

¹⁰Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch15.htm>.

to the Provisional Revolutionary Government.¹⁰

The April Days

The landlords and capitalists in the Provisional Government had no intention of ending the war. This became public knowledge when a note from Minister Miliukov revealed the aims of the government. People poured onto the streets demanding his resignation. A General, Kornilov, wanted to move cannon onto the streets and shoot people down, but fear of provoking an uprising stayed his hand. The government had no choice but to back down. Miliukov resigned.

At the end of April many of the soviets declared themselves against the participation of socialists in the government. But outside of a growing militant minority most workers thought the entry of socialists into the government would be a good thing. The experience of socialist 'Ministers' would bolster the ranks of that militant minority over the coming months.

Socialists took six Ministries. Prince Lvov remained as Premier. By the 11th of May the new government revealed there was to be no change in policies! Kerensky toured the front calling for a new offensive and an *escalation* of the war effort. The entry of the reformist socialists into the government didn't make the state any less capitalist or the war any less imperialist. Dual Power still existed. They had just gone over to the other side.

Lenin returns

Lenin took a sealed train through German territory to return to Russia in April. His mission was urgent: he had to win the Bolshevik Party to socialist revolution in order to set the party to the task of winning over the masses of people. In his 'April Theses' Lenin explained the tasks that lay ahead for the revolution. Lenin argued that:

- 1) The war was an imperialist war. Revolutionary defencism (the argument to continue fighting at the front to defend the revolution and Provisional Govern-

- ment) meant support for the imperialist war. Only when power was in the hands of the working class could revolutionaries talk about 'defence' of the revolution.
- 2) The revolution was passing from the first phase, which transferred power from the Tsar to the landlords and capitalists, to a second phase which meant the transfer of power to the workers and poor peasants.
- 3) Revolutionaries could not support the Provisional Government.
- 4) The Bolsheviks needed to explain 'soviet power' to the masses.
- 5) They needed to argue for a republic made up of soviet assemblies.
- 6) Confiscation of all landed estates.
- 7) For a single national bank under the control of the soviets.
- 8) It was not the immediate task to 'introduce' socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.
- 9) Lenin also argued for a new socialist international to replace the 2nd International – the grouping of Labour Parties which had supported the war.

Lenin's position was greeted with anger from the Mensheviks and caused confusion in the Bolshevik ranks. He was denounced as an 'anarchist', with critics charging that that his exile had disconnected him from Russia. Lenin understood that the revolution required the solving of the Dual Power dilemma — society could only have one master. Either the soviets would take power or the counterrevolution would rally behind the Provisional Government, biding their time until they could destroy the revolution. There was no middle course.

But Lenin was arguing against his own prior position. The Bolsheviks had argued for years that the coming revolution was a 'bourgeois revolution'. What differentiated them from the Mensheviks was that they understood the Russian bourgeoisie would not fight the Tsar.

The allies of the workers would have to be the poorer peasants. This alliance between a workers' revolution and a poor peasants' revolt was to push the revolution as far as they could but was *not to* immediately fight for socialism — because Russia was too underdeveloped. The strength of the Bolshevik position was the focus on people power from below; its weakness was the argument to *limit* the struggle. The Dual Power dilemma offered only two options: either the soviets would take power or the Provisional Government — acting on behalf of the ruling classes — would destroy the soviets.

The workers and peasants were to fight for power but limit that fight to what? In reality Lenin was willing to let reality decide. The point was to push as far as they could and then see where they stood. When February arrived the lack of a clear theory led to confusion in the Bolshevik ranks. Before Lenin's return many of the Bolshevik leaders on the ground were on the right of the party and had supported (albeit 'critically') the Provisional Government.

But what about the problem of Russia's backwardness?

Lenin's study of the world economy during the war meant he began to understand the Russian Revolution as part of a *world-wide* revolt against capitalism. The Russians could start the revolution, which — spreading to other countries — could then rescue Russia from its underdevelopment. A German revolution would give Russia a highly developed socialist neighbour to assist them.

Trotsky had already developed this perspective after the 1905 revolution — he called it his theory of 'Permanent Revolution'. The Russian economy was a hybrid of feudalism and capitalism. The key was to understand Russia as integrated into a world economy that was ripe for socialism. Lenin set about winning the Bolshevik Party to this *internationalist* perspective.

Over the course of a few weeks Lenin won over the party. The party was now equipped to intervene in the revolution. He had to win the party to the perspective of 'soviet power'

so that they could start patiently explaining that perspective to the mass of workers, soldiers and peasants.

The June Offensive and the July Days

The government planned a June offensive at the front. They hoped to stir up a wave of patriotism to marginalise the anti-war Left. Instead it had the opposite result. Anti-war socialists made up two-thirds of the soviet by the end of June. The first Congress of All Soviets was held that month, with over 305 local soviets representing over 20 million people taking part. The Bolsheviks represented one-fifth of all delegates.

That fifth represented the most militant workers and soldiers — a minority who were pushing the Bolsheviks to call an immediate protest behind the banner of 'soviet power'. When the conservatives in the soviet demanded that the protest be called off, the Bolsheviks submitted — fearing a break of the most militant fifth from the rest of the working class. A pre-mature explosion by a minority might jeopardise the whole revolution. Many workers tore up their Bolshevik Party membership cards in frustration. But the desire for a protest was so strong that soviet leaders were forced to call an official protest for June 18th.

About 400,000 people marched through Petersburg on June 18th. As the massive crowd approached the platform the Mensheviks and soviet leaders were distraught — all the banners were Bolshevik! Banner after banner called 'Down with the War', 'Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers' and for 'All Power to the Soviets'. The protest showed that the militant Petersburg workers were with the Bolsheviks. They just had to win over the majority.

Understanding that the Bolsheviks represented a minority gave the Right an opportunity. If the militant minority could be provoked into a premature revolt they could be *smashed*. The German ruling class managed this successfully a few years later, in 1919, when they dismissed a popular left-wing official knowing the most angry workers would pour into the streets. This uprising was then

used as an excuse to allow right-wing militias to kill the leading German revolutionaries — Rosa Luxemburg had her head smashed in.

The Russian counterrevolution almost got their chance in July. The Bolsheviks knew there was going to be a mass protest by armed workers and sailors. They also knew that they would have to join the protest to make sure the workers weren't in the hands of agent provocateurs. But unlike the German socialists they planned to diffuse the anger. The militant minority of workers were right to demand soviet power but mistaken to attempt it immediately, without support from the population at large.

Lenin spoke to the crowds on Tuesday July 4th, requesting that all protests be peaceful. The Bolshevik sailor, Raskolnikov, was in the protests with the Kronstadt sailors. Earlier he had given a speech to the sailors convincing them that 'only the Provisional Government and the bourgeoisie standing behind it stand to gain from a bloodletting of the working class.'¹¹ When armed sailors marched to the soviet there were shots fired at them. Raskolnikov and other Bolsheviks went along the lines urging restraint. When the protesters arrested a leader of the soviet Trotsky was able to argue for his release. The Provisional Government had ordered that any ship coming to aid the protesters was to be sunk. An angry young sailor came to the soviet to demand the arrest of those who gave that order. He was told by the soviet leaders that they supported the order. He, like many others, began to understand the Bolsheviks were telling the truth. But although the broader masses were learning the nature of the soviet leaders the most militant workers were frustrated and demoralised. They had marched to demand that the soviets take power, but the soviet leaders refused. Demoralised and without a plan for pushing events forward they went home.

The July days was a severe test for the revolution: one false move and the whole thing would have been lost, very likely through a massacre of the most militant workers. The only way the Bolsheviks could guide those protests was by having built up

trust and loyalty among the workers over two decades of hard work. Workers trusted them. In the days following, the mainstream press ramped up their slander against the Bolsheviks — they were denounced as 'German Spies!' Many Bolsheviks were arrested by the Provisional Government. Lenin went into hiding.

The Kornilov Coup

While the Bolsheviks were explaining to the masses the necessity of ending Dual Power with a transfer of power to the soviets, sections of the ruling class were plotting to destroy the revolution. In August General Kornilov marched on Petersburg with the declared intention of hanging every soviet delegate from the 'end of a rope'. He wanted to dismiss the Provisional Government and institute a dictatorship.

The Provisional Government, now led by left-wing lawyer Kerensky (who also wanted exclusive power), went into a panic. How could they organise to defend their own power against Kornilov? They turned to the soviet leaders. Every one of them knew they needed the Bolsheviks. It was the Bolshevik Party alone that had the authority among the masses required to organise an effective defence of the city. Without the Bolsheviks Kerensky's neck was in a noose — soon to be followed by all soviet delegates and militant workers.

Bolshevik activists were released from prison and immediately began organising the defence of the revolution. They would stand side by side with workers who still supported Kerensky but they did *not* support Kerensky. There is a difference, as Lenin explained:

The Kornilov revolt is a most unexpected (unexpected at such a moment and in such a form) and downright unbelievably sharp turn in events. Like every sharp turn, it calls for a revision and change of tactics. And as with every revision, we must be extra-cautious not to become unprincipled.

¹¹Raskolnikov, F. F. *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917*, p. 147.

It is my conviction that those who become unprincipled are people who slide into defencism... into *supporting* the Provisional Government. Their attitude is absolutely wrong and unprincipled. We shall become defencists *only after* the transfer of power to the proletariat, after a peace offer, after the secret treaties and ties with the banks have been broken — only afterwards...

Even now we must not support Kerensky's government. This is unprincipled. We may be asked: aren't we going to fight against Kornilov? Of course we must! But this is not the same thing; there is a dividing line here, which is being stepped over by some Bolsheviks who fall into compromise and allow themselves to be *carried away* by the course of events.

We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, *just as* Kerensky's *troops do*, but we do not support Kerensky. *On the contrary*, we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential, and must not be forgotten.

What, then, constitutes our change of tactics after the Kornilov revolt?

We are changing the *form* of our struggle against Kerensky without in the least relaxing our hostility towards him, without taking back a single word said against him, without renouncing the task of overthrowing him, we say that we must *take into account* the present situation. We shall not overthrow Kerensky right now. We shall approach the task of fighting against him

in a different way, namely, we shall point out to the people (who are fighting against Kornilov) Kerensky's *weakness* and *vacillation*.¹²

The united front against Kornilov would demonstrate to workers the weakness of the Kerensky government and his allies in the soviet. After the coup Lenin understood there was a strong desire for unity amongst workers so he proposed a deal to the Mensheviks — if they formed a completely socialist government the Bolsheviks promised not to overthrow it.

The deal was based on certain conditions: that the government would take instructions from the soviets, that the working class would be armed, that they would end the war and finally that the Bolsheviks could stay outside the government and support it from opposition (only as long as it fulfilled all those conditions). This final condition was necessary as the Bolsheviks did not want to run the capitalist state machinery but would campaign 'peacefully' for soviet power. Once the Bolsheviks became the soviet majority the soviets could force government policy and eventually transfer power to the assemblies.

The Mensheviks rejected the deal. Their whole record of action throughout 1917 indicated they would reject it. They refused to break from the capitalist liberals and the official state. But workers now understood that the Mensheviks weren't really interested in a fully left government. This won even more workers over to the Bolsheviks. Why did Lenin propose a deal that the Mensheviks were bound to reject? The key strength of Lenin's deal was that the Mensheviks were seen to have *rejected* Lenin's proposal.

The capitalist liberals organised a 'parliament' at the start of October. The mass of people had no interest in it. All the counter-revolutionary elements in society were gathering around this body. The whole direction of the body was anti-soviet. The Mensheviks recognised this and yet remained inside. The Bolsheviks walked out of

¹²Lenin, 'To the Central Committee of the RSDLP' <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/aug/30.htm>

the first meeting to jeers from the right wing. They had no interest in this fake democracy.

October

By October the masses were joining the Bolshevik Party in their tens of thousands. Even beyond those activist layers the votes for the Bolshevik Party increased dramatically in the soviets. In the election to the Petersburg soviet the Bolsheviks had 66% of the votes by October. The factory committees were almost 100% Bolshevik.

The election of Trotsky as head of the Petersburg soviet completely transformed its role. As the Menshevik Sukhanov writes:

Now he (Trotsky) became chairman of the Petersburg soviet: there was a hurricane of applause when he appeared. Everything had changed. Since the April Days the soviet had gone against the revolution and been the mainstay of the bourgeoisie. For a whole half year it had served as a bulwark — against the people's movement and their wrath... Now it was once again a revolutionary army inseparable from the popular masses of St. Petersburg. It was now Trotsky's guard, ready at a sign from him to storm the Coalition, the Winter Palace and all the citadels of the bourgeoisie.¹³

During the Kornilov days a right-wing Menshevik had proposed the formation of a Military Revolutionary Committee to defend the soviets. The Bolsheviks voted for the committee and joined it. Even though they were the minority on the committee, control soon passed to the Bolsheviks because of their organisational skills and connections with the soldiers. This committee was to organise the seizure of power.

Mass meetings all over St. Petersburg

In the days leading up to the October Revolution the Bolsheviks aimed to carry out a show of strength without calling people on to the streets and provoking a premature and disorganised action. Mass meetings were organised all over St. Petersburg. At every meeting thousands of workers voted for soviet power.

Trotsky spoke to a crowd of thousands: 'Let this vote of yours be your vow — with all your strength and with any sacrifice to support the soviet'. Every single hand was raised in support. The result was the same at every mass meeting. People wanted the second revolution. They wanted their soviet assemblies to take power.

On Oct 21st the Military Revolutionary Committee met with representatives of the soldiers. They voted overwhelmingly to support the soviets and to defend the revolution. The Provisional Government was already overthrown but could not grasp the reality. They were expecting the revolution to take the form of street protests like the July Days but October was *organised* and *calm*.

The government decided to act. They smashed up the Bolshevik printing press and began moving troops from the front into the city. Trotsky argued at the soviet that they had to move quickly to defend the Congress of All Soviets. On Oct 24th the soviet issued instructions for the soldiers to be ready. The gunboat *Aurora* was called up onto the river Neva. These sailors would fire a shot to signal the start of the attack on the Winter Palace.

The revolution itself went off like clockwork. They took over the telegraph exchange and all key points across the city. It took until the next morning to take the Winter Palace and arrest the government. Power had been transferred to the working class. Only eleven people died on the night of the revolution — all on the side of the revolutionaries. Never had a revolution had such mass popular support and yet been so organised. The Bolshevik Party was one

¹³Sukhanov, N. *The Russian Revolution 1917* p. 528.

with the militant masses. The Mensheviks walked out of the soviets in protest. No one cared.

How the revolution was won

Without a guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.¹⁴

Trotsky's quote captures the necessity of a revolutionary organisation — without organisation revolutionary potential can be squandered, dissipating like steam. But the metaphor of steam and piston still implies a 'separation' between the working class and its organisation. The most militant workers merged with the Bolshevik Party — the militant masses of Russia became Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were the most militant workers. Soviets without Bolshevik leadership would not have taken power.

Without socialist organisations active for twenty years among the masses, the protests by working class women in February would not have been joined by so many other workers. If the Bolshevik Party had not changed course in April the masses would have been left confused and leaderless. In the July days the militant minority of the revolution would have marched into a trap, to be drowned in blood as the leaders of the German Revolution were. In August Petersburg would have ended up in the hands of a Kornilov dictatorship. In October soviets led by Mensheviks

would have conceded the power of the working class to the government, paving the way for a complete victory of the counterrevolution and reaction.

At every turning point the revolution depended on the Bolshevik Party to win.

'Without a party, apart from a party, over the head of a party, or with a substitute for a party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer,' Trotsky wrote in his *Lessons of October*. 'That is the principal lesson of the past decade. It is true that the English trade unions may become a mighty lever of the proletarian revolution; they may, for instance, even take the place of workers' *soviets* under certain conditions and for a certain period of time. They can fill such a role, however, not apart from a Communist party, and certainly not *against* the party, but only on the condition that communist influence becomes the decisive influence in the trade unions. We have paid far too dearly for this conclusion — with regard to the role and importance of a party in a proletarian revolution — to renounce it so lightly or even to minimize its significance.¹⁵

On October 26th Lenin stood on the platform as the session of the soviet burst into song. They were singing the 'Internationale', the great anthem of the global workers' movement. The 'grey wolves' — workers and soldiers in grey overcoats, those who had so terrified the liberals and reformists — sang with tears in their eyes. Their revolution had won. Many difficult days lay ahead. But for now, a world ravaged by war and desolation found a bright new hope — the working class had taken power.

¹⁴Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch00.htm>

¹⁵Trotsky, *Lessons of October* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch8.htm>