Special Feature

Explorations in the Russian Revolution

(On the Occasion of its One Hundredth Anniversary)

—An Anarchist Interpretation—

Part III: The October Insurrection: Workers Revolution, Bolshevik Coup, or…?

By Ron Tabor

On the eve and in the early morning hours of October 25, 1917 (November 7 on the Western calendar), the Bolshevik Party, leading armed uprisings in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities in the Russian Empire, deposed the Provisional Government and proclaimed the establishment of a "workers'

and peasants' government." This government was to be based upon the soviets and the other mass organizations of the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants that were established during and after the February Revolution. In the Bolsheviks' view, the insurrections established the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia, which would, they hoped, spark similar revolutions elsewhere and eventually lead to the overthrow of the international capitalist system and the establishment of socialism/communism around the world.

Since then, historians and others interested in the topic have engaged in a debate over the precise nature of the October Revolution. On one side, many mainstream historians, such as Robert Vincent Daniels, in his book *Red October*, and Richard Pipes, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, describe the October overturn as a "Bolshevik coup." On the other side, an array of Marxists, including Leon Trotsky, in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, describe what actually occurred as a workers (or proletarian) revolution that was supported by the peasants. In my view, both positions, while accurate in some ways, ultimately mischaracterize the event. To see why, it is first necessary to address a methodological issue.

This issue involves the nature and limitations of our categories, the ideas and concepts we use to analyze the world in which we live. While we require categories in order to think, we need to realize that they can end up as intellectual traps that blind us to, rather than elucidate, reality. After all, such categories are abstractions, and abstractions, by definition, leave things – often, crucial things - out. I believe this is especially the case when we look at history, whose "grittiness" often resists easy categorization.

To make this more specific, we ought to recognize the limitations of the terms we use to characterize revolutions. For example, while the French Revolution is often described as "bourgeois" (if anything, the *prototypical* bourgeois revolution), the revolution was neither led by the bourgeoisie nor did that class provide the muscle in the streets of the cities and in the roads and lanes of the countryside that powered the revolutionary process. In fact, the bourgeoisie, in the sense of a class of capitalist manufacturers and industrialists, hardly existed in France at that time. Instead, the revolution was propelled and led by an ever-changing coalition of different social groupings and layers of French society, among them: aristocrats; bankers; merchants, large and small; a stratum of lawyers, doctors, and journalists; peasants; and small artisans and day laborers (the so-called "*sans culottes*").

While many, perhaps even most, of these sectors might be considered to have been "bourgeois" (if we use the term somewhat broadly), the French Revolution is considered to have been "bourgeois" mostly because of its program (that is, the establishment of political and civic equality - summed up in the slogan "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity") and its results, the fact that it cleared the way for the untrammeled development of capitalist society and the eventual economic, social, political, and cultural domination of the capitalist class.

Keeping these considerations in mind, when we seek to describe and characterize a given coup, rebellion, or revolution, we need to consider various questions before coming up with a final answer. Among these are: (1) which social strata or classes participated in the revolt; (2) which strata or classes provided the muscle for the revolt, e.g., by demonstrating,

striking, launching uprisings, carrying our guerrilla warfare, etc.; (3) which group or party, if any, led the revolt; (4) what was the official program of that group or party; (5) what was the actual program of that group or party; (6) which social strata supported the revolt and why; (7) what was the outcome of the revolt, specifically; (a.) which group, party, or social stratum wound up governing the society in which the revolt occurred; (b.) was that society radically transformed; and if it was; (c) how.

Using these questions as a kind of rubric, I propose to address first the issue of whether the October Insurrection can aptly be characterized as a Bolshevik coup or whether it should instead be considered a revolution.

If we think of a coup (technically, a "*coup d'etat*", from the French, "blow of state"), what usually comes to mind is a relatively rapid change in the political leadership of a country, that is, the deposition of one government and the establishment of another, via the actions of a small group of conspirators, usually or often military officers. In most cases, the resulting government is a military dictatorship or some other type of authoritarian regime. In addition, during such a revolt, the majority of the people of the country in which the coup occurs remain relatively quiescent, and the social system of the country is unaltered.
Looked at narrowly, there were certainly aspects of the Bolshevik seizure of power that might accurately be described as coup-like. For example, in Petrograd, the uprising was largely a military operation, carried out by workers' militias ("Red Guards") and

revolutionary units of the Russian army and navy under the de facto leadership of the Bolshevik Party. The party acted in the name and under the banner of the Petrograd soviet, in which it had, roughly a month earlier, become the majority party and whose Executive Committee and other leading bodies, including its Military Revolutionary Committee, it had taken over. Among other actions, the Red Guards and revolutionary units occupied key intersections, bridges, railway stations, and the postal and telegraph offices, took command of the military installations, arsenals, and fortresses, seized the prisons (and released the prisoners), invaded and occupied the several palaces of the Tsar, including the one in which the Provisional Government sat, and arrested some (but not all) of the government's ministers. Resistance was minimal, mostly from officer trainees (cadets) and students. There was limited fighting and little blood was shed. Similar and coordinated actions occurred in Moscow and in other cities and towns in Russia, although in Moscow, the fighting lasted for about a week and resulted in more casualties.

The coup-like characteristics of the revolt are readily apparent. First, the number of people who actively participated in the insurrections was quite small. Second, the uprisings, on the whole, were well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed; there was very little independent, spontaneous activity. Third, during the uprising, the majority of the urban population, including workers and soldiers, were quiescent and were not actively involved in the revolt. (In the rural areas, the situation was different, a point I will get to below.) Fourth, the ultimate outcome of the insurrection was the establishment of not merely an authoritarian state, but a totalitarian one, under the (very) tight control of a single party, the Bolshevik, renamed, in March 1918, the Communist Party. All of this was in stark contrast to the February Revolution, which, as we saw, was a spontaneous (and angry) uprising of an enormous number of people and

involved mass strikes, huge demonstrations, violent confrontations between the people and the armed forces of Tsar (and between different military units), the sacking of police stations and arsenals, chaos in the streets, and far more bloodshed

than occurred in October. So, to this extent, it is accurate to describe the October Revolution as a coup, and specifically, insofar as the eventual result was to enable the Bolshevik Party to establish its own control of the state, a Bolshevik coup.

However, if we look at the October event in a broader context, we can see that such a description is limited and distorting. Most obviously, the October Revolution eventually led to the radical economic, social, political, and cultural transformation of Russian society, something that has been considered, and ought to be considered, a social revolution. (Exactly what kind of social revolution it was is a different question.) In addition, the use of the term "coup" to describe the insurrection on the part of mainstream historians is meant to imply that the October Revolution was not a popular event, that is, that it was not supported by - indeed, that it was carried out against the wishes of - the majority of the people in the Russian Empire. As far as I have been able to determine, this is not the case. I have seen little reason to doubt that, whatever happened afterward, *at least at the time of the insurrection itself and for several months afterward*, the revolution was supported by a majority of the people of Russia.

This is suggested by several facts:

1. The Bolsheviks, who had for months made no secret of their goal of overthrowing the Provisional Government and replacing it with one based on the soviets, won majorities in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and in many other cities and towns around the country well before the October Insurrection.

2. These local majorities were confirmed at the meeting of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets, which met on October 25, the morrow of the uprising. The majority of the delegates at the congress were members or supporters of the Bolsheviks, and the congress both endorsed the uprising and approved Bolshevik-sponsored resolutions on the immediate tasks of the "soviet government."

3. When, on the day after the insurrection, the deposed prime minister of the Provisional Government ordered troops under the command of the Tsarist general, P.N. Krasnov to advance on Petrograd to arrest the Bolsheviks and the other participants in the soviets, disband the soviets, and crush the revolutionary government, the workers, soldiers, and sailors of Petrograd mobilized to defend the city and its revolutionary institutions and smashed the counter-revolutionary offensive.

4. No substantial sector of the popular classes (workers and peasants) rose up or took any other significant action to defend the Provisional Government.

5. When, in January 1918, the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly (for which the Bolsheviks had organized elections and which they had allowed to convene), this act, too, evoked no response from the broad layers of the population.

6. More generally, after the All-Russia soviet congress approved a Bolshevik-sponsored resolution endorsing the peasants' seizure of the land, there is every reason to believe that, at least at that time, the vast majority of the peasants, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the people of the country, supported the Bolshevik-led government and, by implication, the insurrections that had established it.

The popular response to the October Insurrection and the establishment of the soviet government is well explained by what had occurred during the nearly eight months since the February Revolution: in a nutshell, the utter refusal or inability of the Provisional Government to address the burning issues facing the country, on the one hand; and the deft strategy and tactics pursued by the Bolshevik Party during that period, on the other. Specifically, the Provisional Government did nothing to end Russia's participation in the war, stop the deterioration of the economy, resolve the "land question," or arrange for elections to the Constituent Assembly. Instead, aside from given long, often histrionic speeches, the government ministers spent much of the spring (secretly) promising the Allies that Russia would honor the imperialist commitments embodied in the secret treaties Russia had agreed to before the war
(though claiming only to be "defending the revolution"), while preparing for a massive offensive along the entire the Eastern Front. Such an offensive was indeed launched in June, but after a few days of advances, the Russian armies were stopped, then completely routed by the armies of the Central Powers, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives, an international embarrassment, and popular outrage. Among other things, this anger provoked, in early July, mass armed demonstrations of workers, soldiers, and sailors that nearly overthrew the Provisional Government, the so-called the "July Days".

These semi-insurrectional mobilizations frightened much of the population and led to public outcry against the Bolsheviks, especially after a rumor was circulated that the party had been receiving money from the Germans and were therefore "German agents." (As far as I know, whether the Bolsheviks were receiving money from the German government, and if so, how much and for how long, and whether any other organizations were also recipients of German largesse is still a topic of debate among historians; nothing has been definitively proven one way or the other. It is also doubtful, even had the Bolsheviks been receiving German money, that this would have made any material difference in the outcome of events. The Bolsheviks had substantial sources of funds at their disposal. Equally important, those who believe that German funds in any way influenced the policies and actions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks do not understand anything about either Lenin or the party he created and led.)

In the short-run, the July Days led to a weakening of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary forces (among other things, the party was outlawed and its publications suppressed, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders were arrested, and Lenin went into hiding; also, two insurrectionary regiments were broken up and their men sent to the front). But by late August, the fortunes of the Bolsheviks had recovered. This was the result of a plot instigated by the prime minister of the Provisional Government, the lawyer and former Duma deputy, Alexander Kerensky (who was close to, but not actually a member of, the Socialist Revolutionaries). He and the Supreme Commander of army, Lavr Kornilov, connived for the latter to march on the capital at the head of troops under his command, disperse the soviets, arrest the Bolshevik and other left-wing leaders, and restore "law and order." While Kerensky was under the impression that Kornilov intended to bolster Kerensky's position, Kornilov had other plans, viz., not only to disperse the soviets but also to overthrow Kerensky and the entire Provisional Government and to establish a military dictatorship. When Kerensky realized Kornilov's intentions, he called on the soviet leaders,

including the Bolsheviks (Trotsky and other arrested leaders were released from prison), to defend the city, the soviets, and the Provisional Government itself. Under the call of defending the revolution against the counterrevolution, the left-wing parties and organizations mobilized the workers and revolutionary soldiers to confront Kornilov's men on the outskirts of the city. When they explained to Kornilov's troops their commander's counter-revolutionary intentions (and also that there was no orgy of rape and pillaging in the city, as Kornilov contended), the soldiers refused to fight and the coup attempt collapsed.

One result of all this was the complete and utter discrediting of not only Kerensky and the entire Provisional Government but also the reformist socialist parties (the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries) that supported it and participated in it. These parties saw their support among the workers and peasants plunge, and after new elections to the Petrograd soviet, the number of their delegates in the body reflected this. The obverse of this was an upwelling of popular support for the Bolsheviks, who were now seen as the only significant left-wing opposition to the Provisional Government, the only true defenders of the revolution, and the only significant political force appearing to offer a solution to the economic, social, and political crisis facing the country. By mid-September, the Bolsheviks had become the majority party in the Petrograd soviet and in soviets around the country.

While there were other political tendencies that stood in radical opposition to the Provisional Government, such as the Menshevik-Internationalists, the Socialist-Revolutionary Maximalists, and various types of anarchists, they tended to act as small groups and individuals and were thus too small and too poorly organized to compete directly with the Bolshevik Party. However, they did play a significant role "on the ground" throughout the revolution, that is, in the barracks, factories, and streets [e.g., in the February Revolution and during the July Days], and in the local soviets, particularly the one at the Kronstadt naval fortress. Moreover, for much of the March-October period, they tended to act in a de facto bloc with the Bolsheviks, and most of them participated in and otherwise supported the October uprisings. A left-wing faction within the Socialist Revolutionary Party began to develop in late June/early July, but the split was not consummated until the October Revolution, so the emerging party, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, did not have a public presence until after the insurrection. In this situation, it was the Bolshevik Party that became the main beneficiary of the mass radicalization and groundswell of popular support that made possible and legitimated their seizure of power.

As these events played out in Petrograd and in other cities, equally dramatic developments were taking place in the countryside. The disintegration of the Russian army that had begun even before the February Revolution continued through the ensuing months and reached incendiary proportions in the late summer and early fall. Millions of armed soldiers, heavily influenced by the Bolsheviks' "defeatist" propaganda, abandoned their posts and headed home to their native villages, where they led the other peasants in mass uprisings, ousting and slaughtering

the landlords, burning down their estates, seizing the land, and dividing it among themselves. It was this soldier/peasant agrarian revolution that completed the liquidation of the Tsarist army, left the Provisional Government with few armed forces at its disposal, and ultimately made possible the Bolshevik seizure of power. Thus, the October Revolution had two distinct yet complementary facets: Bolshevik-led workers', sailors', and soldiers' uprisings in the cities and peasant insurrections in the countryside.

With this as background, we can now return to the question of the precise nature of the October Revolution. As I see it, a strong case can be made for the claim that, while the insurrection had coup-like characteristics, it was, in fact, a working class revolution that was supported by the mass of the peasantry. First, workers, along with revolutionary sailors and soldiers, carried out the armed uprisings in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities in Russia. Second, these actions occurred against the background of the revolutionary peasant movement just described. Third, the uprisings in the countryside and the Bolshevik seizure of power in the cities were supported, as registered by votes in the local soviets and at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, by the majority of workers and peasants in the country. Fourth, the insurrections resulted in the establishment of the soviets, which were seen by the people as their own revolutionary organs, as the official governmental authority in Russia. Fifth, the urban insurrections, and in some sense, the October Revolution as a whole, were led by a political organization that claimed to be, and saw itself as (by dint

of its ideology, program, and class composition), a revolutionary workers party, specifically, the "vanguard of the proletariat."

Yet, there are considerable reasons to hesitate to accept such a conclusion without caveats. Among them is the question: how politically conscious were those who participated in and/or otherwise supported the Bolsheviks' seizure of power? After all, the vast majority of the peasants and a significant percentage of the workers in Russia were illiterate, while many of those who were counted as literate were barely so. And in a country with poorly developed means of communications, in which news traveled extremely slowly, how much did they, the peasants in particular, really understand about what was happening in Russia in October 1917? Moreover, according to various accounts, the mass base of the Bolshevik Party at the time of the October Revolution consisted largely of a volatile layer of young male workers relatively recently arrived from the countryside and still retaining ties to their native villages. (The more fully "proletarianized" workers, that is, those with more experience in the factories and cities, along with the skilled workers, tended to support the Mensheviks.) So, of those workers and peasants who participated in and supported the insurrection, was their support based on a knowledgeable and informed understanding of what they were supporting, that is, who the Bolsheviks were and what they proposed to do? Or, was their support for the insurrection based on varying degrees of ignorance and a combination of enthusiasm, hope, and desperation in a political conjuncture in which the Tsarist, liberal, and reformist socialist parties had been discredited, while the only significant political force that seemed to offer a solution to the worsening crisis, along with the determination to implement it, was the Bolshevik Party?

To put the question more colloquially, there are grounds to question whether the workers and peasants who participated in and supported the October Revolution knew what they were getting into. Among other things, did they understand what the real program and goals of the Bolshevik Party were, that is, what the Bolsheviks, underneath the slogans and propaganda, actually intended to do? Let's look at this more closely.

For much of 1917, the Bolsheviks' main agitational slogan (that is, the catch-words they addressed to the broadest, least politically-educated layers of the population) was, "Peace, Land, and Bread." In other words, the Bolsheviks promised to withdraw Russia from the war, distribute the land to the peasants, and turn the economy around so that the workers and peasants would no longer face starvation. I think it is safe to presume that many of the people who voted for the Bolsheviks in the soviets and supported the October Insurrection did so because this is what they thought the Bolsheviks would deliver. Unfortunately, as things turned out, this is not what they got.

As far as "Peace" was concerned, although the Bolsheviks signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers in March 1918, thus pulling Russia out of the World War, in early July, the country was plunged into an even more brutal civil war that lasted over three years, resulted in millions of deaths, caused a famine that killed millions more, and led to the devastation of the country. Although the Bolsheviks do not bear sole responsibility for the conflict, their acts certainly contributed to its outbreak, while their policies and actions made it longer, more vicious, and bloodier than it might otherwise have been.

As for "Land," although the Bolshevik-led government approved the peasants' seizure and division of the land, it did not grant them title to it. Legally, the land was nationalized, that is, turned into the property of the state in name of the "whole people," while allowing the peasants to occupy and farm it. Yet, in the Bolsheviks' conception, this was intended as a temporary state of affairs. The party's program had long called for the land in Russia to be nationalized, while encouraging the peasants to join state and collective farms to learn the benefits of cooperation, the large-scale use of farm machinery, and modern agrarian methods to improve productivity. In fact, throughout most of their history as a faction and a party, the Bolsheviks had *opposed* the call for the peasants to seize the land and divide it among themselves; this was the program of Socialist Revolutionaries. In other words, the Bolsheviks appropriated the main planks of the agrarian program of the Socialist Revolutionaries

in order to win the support of the peasants. At the time, Lenin explicitly admitted this. The fact that the land was actually owned by the state became the legal justification for the Bolshevik policy of "forced requisitions" of the peasants' grain that began in July 1918 and effectively launched the civil war. Eleven years later, the same legal sleight-of-hand was used to legitimize the forced collectivization of agriculture, the herding of the peasants onto collective farms at gunpoint that led to another (de facto) civil war in the countryside, the execution and exile of huge numbers of peasant families, the destruction of millions of farm animals, and yet another famine. Estimates of the number of people who died in that cataclysmic event range up to 20 million. So, the peasants did not, ultimately, get the land. When they voted to approve the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, did they have any inkling that these developments lay down the road?

Finally, as should be obvious after the above, the Russian people did not get "Bread." Instead, they got mass starvation and the destruction of the country's economy. When they voted for and otherwise supported the Bolsheviks, is this what they intended? And would they have voted for them had they known what the actual outcome of the Bolsheviks' policies would be?

Similar questions can be raised about the soviets. As I discussed in my last article, in the aftermath of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks raised the call, "All Power to the Soviets." At this point, the thrust of their strategy was to "patiently explain" to the workers and soldiers that as a government of the capitalists, the Provisional Government would never accede to the people's demands and solve the problems facing the country. Instead, what was required, the Bolsheviks insisted, was for all power to be placed in the hands of the soviets, which meant the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the establishment of the soviets as the government/state of the country.

But as I also discussed, the soviets were an ambiguous phenomenon. First, they were not the purely spontaneous creations of the mass of workers, soldiers, and peasants, as they have often been portrayed in radical literature. Instead, at least in Petrograd and likely in other cities, the soviets were established at the instigation of the leaders of the reformist socialist parties; these politicians were the ones who called for elections to

the bodies and set the dates for their convocations. Second, the soviets were at least semi-hierarchical in nature; they involved discrete layers (rank and file observers, elected delegates, executive committees, with various subcommittees at the top). Third, the executive committees, along with their subcommittees, tended to be composed of and dominated by the members of the (educated) intelligentsia. Given all this, while the soviets might, under certain circumstances, provide the basis for building a truly libertarian, worker- and peasant-run society, they might also offer the means to construct a new, supposedly revolutionary but actually capitalist, state.

For their part, the Bolsheviks had a distinctly hierarchical (and, at bottom, coercive) conception of the revolutionary state they aimed to build. The Bolsheviks' proposed solution to Russia's economic crisis involved, among other measures, the nationalization of the banks, the compulsory organization of all businesses above a certain size into a single syndicate, the compulsory unionization of the population, the compulsory organization of the population in consumer cooperatives, and compulsory labor. While the Bolshevik Party called for the resulting economic apparatus to be brought under the control of the soviets, when Bolshevik leaders, such as Lenin, talked about the soviets' role, they generally described it as enforcing the "strictest accounting and control." They never described (and in my view, never envisioned) the soviets as self-determining political bodies, that is, structures through which the workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants collectively and democratically discussed the situation facing the country, debated the various proposals being proposed to address it, and made the ultimate decisions among them. From the Bolsheviks' standpoint,

those decisions were to be prerogative of the Bolshevik Party, as the embodiment, by dint of its correct grasp of Marxism, of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class.

So, when the workers and peasants participated in, voted for, and otherwise supported the October Insurrection, did they clearly understand what the Bolsheviks intended to do? Did they understand what the Bolsheviks' conception of the soviets was and what they aimed to do with them? Were they aware of - and if they were, did they understand - the differing conceptions of the soviets offered by the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and the more libertarian currents involved in the soviets and on the ground, such as the anarchists, on the other?

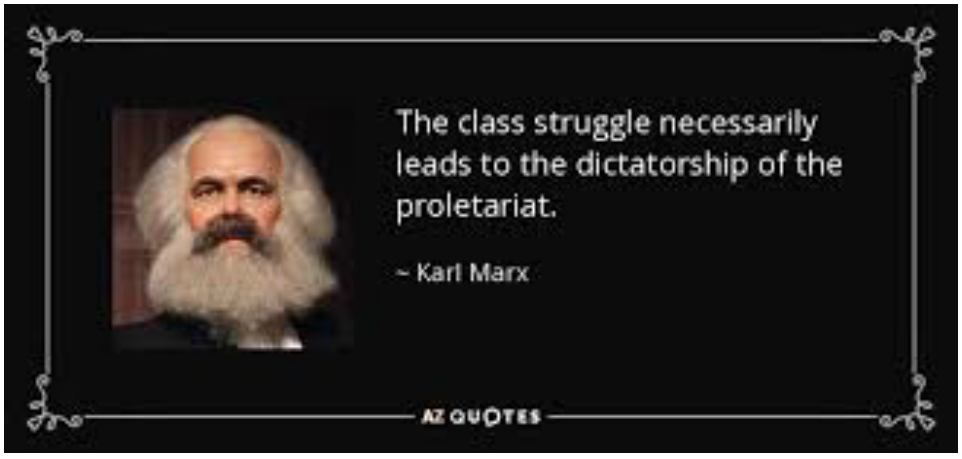
It is worth mentioning in this context a dispute that arose among the Bolshevik leaders, particularly Lenin and Trotsky, in the period immediately preceding the October Insurrection. In late September/early October, Lenin, who was still in hiding, became impatient and increasingly worried that if the Bolsheviks delayed too long, they might miss the most propitious moment to seize power. (Was he concerned that the movement of popular sentiment toward the Bolsheviks might prove to be temporary?) As a result, he wanted the party to seize power as soon as possible and in its own name. However, Trotsky, who had recently become chairman of the Petrograd soviet (and who had, by virtue of that, the soviet apparatus under his control), wanted to wait until the convening of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets to carry out the insurrection. Moreover, he wanted to do so in the name of the soviets, not in the name of the party. Ultimately, as we know, it was Trotsky's proposal that won the day and was successfully carried out.

Now, to Lenin and Trotsky and the other Bolsheviks who knew about this, this was seen as a minor tactical difference; either way, they figured, the result would have been the same. Moreover, they believed that their seizure of power was the only way to ensure the continued existence of the soviets. But the dispute raises some intriguing questions. If the Bolshevik Party had attempted to carry out the insurrection in its own name and not in the name of the soviets, would the level of popular participation and support have been as much as it was? Or, to put it the other way around, might the level of popular participation and support been significantly less than it was. (Trotsky's proposal suggests that he thought it would be.) And, if so, might the insurrection, for that very reason, have failed? This raises still other questions? Did those workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants who participated in, voted for, and otherwise supported the October Insurrection see it as giving power to the soviets or did they see it as giving power to the Bolshevik Party? Did they see any distinction between the two propositions? Did they realize that Lenin had indicated, even before the uprising, that the Bolsheviks were willing to seize and hold onto power by themselves, that is, without the support of any of the other parties represented in the soviets? Or did the people believe, as the Bolsheviks did, that the Bolsheviks' seizure of power was the only way to establish the full power on the soviets?

It is, unfortunately, impossible to answer these questions. Yet, their very plausibility reflects the fundamental ambiguity of the October Revolution. Moreover, they are crucial to understanding what happened in its aftermath. I believe a good case could be made for the claim that the October Revolution was carried out under false pretenses. I think there are valid reasons to believe that the workers and peasants who participated in and otherwise supported the October Revolution thought that when they fought to grant sole power to the soviets, they envisioned the soviets as continuing to exist as multi-party, multi-tendency bodies, not being turned into facets a new state apparatus under the control of a single party. (This was certainly the case with the libertarian left-wing groups and individuals, the Socialist-Revolutionary Maximalists and the various shades of anarchists, who participated in and otherwise supported the October uprisings but who wound up being among the Bolsheviks' first victims.)

I would also like to believe, and think there is good reason to believe, that the workers, peasants, sailors, and soldiers who participated in and supported the October Revolution, or at least the most politically astute among them, saw themselves as fighting to establish their own power to directly and democratically manage the affairs of the country. Along with maintaining the soviets as democratic, pluralistic bodies, this would have required the overcoming of the soviets' semi-hierarchical nature, which, to varying degrees, had enabled members of the intelligentsia to dominate them. But instead of their own direct and democratic rule, what the people got was a one-party dictatorship. To the Bolsheviks, there was no contradiction here. Since they, as the "vanguard of the proletariat" and the only correct interpreters of Marxism, embodied the true consciousness of the working class, the seizure and consolidation of state power under their control meant, by definition, the establishment of the "dictatorship of the

proletariat.” But many workers and peasants may not have seen it that way.



It is worth noting in this regard the make-up of the soviet at the Kronstadt naval fortress at the time of the October Revolution. The sailors and workers at Kronstadt were among the most politically conscious and revolutionary sectors of the Russian population, before, during, and after 1917. Trotsky periodically referred to them as the “pride and joy” of the revolution. Yet, according to Israel Getzler in his book, *Kronstadt 1917-1921*, while the Bolsheviks were largest single party in the Kronstadt soviet in late October 1917, their delegation made up only one third of the total number of delegates. In other words, the Bolsheviks did not represent the majority, but instead constituted a minority, of the Kronstadt soviet at the time of the October Insurrection. I suspect that this represents, in miniature, the actual balance of forces that obtained among the revolutionary workers, sailors, and soldiers in Petrograd and in other cities throughout Russia at the time of the insurrection.

In conclusion, it seems, on balance, most reasonable to consider the October Revolution to have been an ambiguous phenomenon, a historically unique combination of workers’ and peasants’ revolution and Bolshevik coup. On the one hand, based on the fact that the insurrection was carried out by plebian classes and that it was led by a party that claimed to represent the working class, the October Insurrection might be considered to have been a workers revolution that was supported by the peasants. On the other hand, contrary to the claims of the Bolsheviks and their apologists at the time and since, the uprising did not put the working class in power, nor did it

establish a socialist society or one moving in that direction. Most important, the October Revolution did not establish the direct and democratic rule of the workers and peasants. Instead, it put into power a political party that, while claiming to lead and to represent the working class, was actually led by radical members of the intelligentsia, who proceeded to carry out their own (de facto, anti-proletarian) program: the establishment of a state capitalist society under their rule. Once in power, the Bolsheviks, using the soviets, the factory committees, the trade unions, and other popular organizations as their starting point, built a new, extremely centralized, state apparatus that would eventually enable them to consolidate their totalitarian control over the workers, the peasants, and all of Russian society.

As it turned out, the wave of popular support and enthusiasm that made the October Revolution possible and lifted the Bolsheviks into power was, for a variety of reasons, to prove temporary. When it ebbed, and the Bolsheviks lost their majorities in the soviets around the country five-and-a-half months later, it was too late. Having gotten their hands on the power of the state, the Bolsheviks (now calling themselves Communists) were not about to let it go. How and why this happened will be the subject of my next article.
