



08.03.1917

Bolshevik revolution in Petrograd

On 8 March 1917, riots broke out in Petrograd (formerly St Petersburg). Factory workers took to the streets demanding better wages and protesting against the tsar, who was on the front. It was hoped that the unrest could be controlled by the army, but some soldiers refused to follow the tsar's orders.

In the circumstances, the tsar abdicated at Pskov railway station on 15 March. He left the decision about Russia's future to his brother Michael Alexandrovich, but his brother refused the crown. Thus ended Tsarist Russia under the Romanov dynasty.



Over the following days, the Duma formed the Provisional Government. Almost simultaneously, a grassroots organisation called the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was set up. In effect there were two centres of power fighting each other, which paralysed the state and led to anarchy.

The Provisional Government introduced a number of long-awaited reforms but did not cease military operations, and as a result its popularity declined. The morale of soldiers on the front was low.

Such was the state of Russia when the émigré Bolshevik leaders Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky returned in the late spring of 1917. They openly voiced the view that Russia's defeat in the war would benefit the revolution. In fact Lenin's return was facilitated by the German government, which allowed his train to pass through German territory and partly financed his anti-war activities. The calculation that the Bolsheviks' return would cause political and military chaos in Russia had proved a realistic assumption.

Lenin formulated his power takeover agenda in his "April Theses", in which he justified the need for the next phase of the revolution. The Provisional Government's attempted military offensive in June 1917 failed, strengthening the Bolsheviks, who were promising to secure peace. They subsequently left the Entente and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the German Empire.

The October Revolution began in Petrograd during the night of 6-7 November 1917, when the Bolsheviks took over power in a military coup d'état by arresting the ministers of the Provisional Government. This revolution had a massive impact on the history of the 20th century. Almost all governments viewed it with irritation and fear, but for the proletarian left it spelled hope.

Lenin took control of the new revolutionary government. Two key decrees were issued on peace and land, respectively, and the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia (or the nations incorporated into the Russian Empire) was announced. The latter confirmed each of the nations' right to self-determination. However, after 1917 the Bolsheviks adopted a modified understanding of self-determination: the right to autonomy within the single revolutionary republic of soviets (workers' councils).

Having taken power by force, it was crucial for the Bolsheviks to maintain it. To that end, in December 1917 they set up a political police organization led by Felix Dzerzhinsky and known as the "Cheka". Censorship was introduced.

The introduction of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" under the surveillance of the Bolshevik party's leadership sparked a civil war that intensified in mid-1918. "White" armies backed by the Entente fought against the new authorities, though without success.

After losing the 1918 elections, the Bolsheviks decided to disband all political parties except their own. Soviet Russia introduced a one-party system, and people of "the wrong social origin" (lishentsy) were deprived of political rights.

Additionally, a decree was issued that stripped the Orthodox Church of all property and rights. In July 1918 the Bolsheviks murdered the tsar's entire family, and that September, after a failed attempt to assassinate Lenin, they announced the introduction of red terror.



Prof. Wojciech Roszkowski, Prof. Andrzej Nowak



References: