

When Slogans Aren't Enough: The Bolsheviks Come up With Ways to Keep the Revolution Going

By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

By the end of October, 1917 Lenin was aware that the initial triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution did not mean that the entire population of Russia had been converted to Bolshevism. In fact, the Russian people were more anti-Bolshevik than Lenin and his followers would have liked. The tsar was gone and a revolution had swept across the nation. To gather national support for the revolution, Lenin resorted to slogans. The most important slogan was "Bread, Land, Peace and All Power to the Soviets." Lenin soon realized that slogans alone would not be enough. He had to keep the revolution moving ahead while at the same time taking every precaution to keep the Bolshevik in power. In 1793, the French revolutionaries resorted to a Reign of Terror to keep themselves in power. In 1917 the Bolsheviks resorted to their own ways to keep the revolution going, including terror. Fitzpatrick writes in *The Russian Revolution*, "The Bolsheviks used two kinds of terror in the Russian Revolution: terror against enemies outside the party, and terror against enemies within."

While October symbolized a Bolshevik victory, this also meant was that any hope for a liberal democratic order was dashed. An agreement was reached with the left wing Socialist Revolutionaries in late November of 1917, and peace negotiations were conducted with the Germans to end World War I. As far as the Lenin and the Bolsheviks were concerned, the revolution was over. The Russian state, however, was in a state of disintegration. Many Bolsheviks began to speak of elections for a Constituent Assembly. Lenin, however, had no use for a parliament, regardless of whether it was elected democratically or not.

On November 25, 1917, the Russian people held the first free election in the nation's history. When the vote was over, the Bolsheviks had only received one quarter of the vote. The other socialist parties, mainly the Socialist Revolutionaries, received 62 percent of the vote. Bolshevik support was heaviest in the cities, especially Moscow and Petrograd, while the Socialist Revolutionaries vote was largely rural. Lenin accepted these figures as accurate, but maintained that the most advanced elements had voted for the Bolsheviks and him. After the Constituent Assembly met only once, in January 1918, Lenin dissolved it by issuing his draft decree and sent heavily armed guards to prevent its meeting again. Those who were not Bolsheviks were angry when they witnessed this unconstitutional act, but there was no public outburst. Why the delegates did no more than weakly protest is clear: the Bolsheviks had already taken action on what interested the people most - Bread, Land and Peace.

The period of Soviet history which runs from November 1917 to the end of 1920, came to be known as the period of war communism. The term implies that the main features of the period were determined by military events. Russia did enter a period of Civil War and foreign powers were on Russian soil. But the period of war communism also refers to the fact that the Bolsheviks were engaged in a campaign to convert the population to their way of thinking. On March 8, 1918, the Congress resolved that the Party be named, from that point on, the Russian Communist Party, with the word 'Bolsheviks' added in brackets. The capital was moved from Petrograd to Moscow in the heart of European Russia. Lenin felt that all of this was necessary in order to keep the revolution going and to secure his aims and goals.

The Bolsheviks were convinced that a world revolution was about to begin, first in Germany and then England and ultimately the United States. This vision led the Bolsheviks to speed

up the construction of a socialist state in Russia. It also led them to take a more casual attitude toward international affairs. They expected the reign of capitalism to end shortly.

By 1920 the government had taken over all businesses employing more than ten workers. Labor was compulsory and strikes were outlawed. The state organized a barter system which replaced the free market. Internal trade was made illegal and only the government food commissary could buy and sell. Money disappeared as the state took over distribution and production. Church and state were separated by decree and judges were removed and replaced by members of the local soviets. Nine opposition parties were liquidated.

The Russian countryside was subjected to severe requisitioning by the government. It organized the poorer peasants against the *kulaks* (wealthy peasants). Bitter class hatred resulted in the villages and set the stage for a civil war in the countryside. Lenin knew he had to act to keep the revolution secure and to avoid a civil war. In December 1917 the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, better known by its acronym as the CHEKA, was set up. The organization established its headquarters in Lubyanka Street, Moscow. Lubyanka Street would be the end of the road for thousands of victims. It was not simply a prison but rather a complex system of offices and departments responsible for administering the vast bureaucratic empire known as state security. The CHEKA was ordered to act as the revolutionary conscience and to protect the revolution. By mid-1918, the CHEKA aimed its attention to whole sectors of society rather than individuals. In this way, Lenin hoped, counter-revolutionaries would be eliminated. Hated and feared by almost everyone, the concept of killing people, not because of what they had done, but because of who they were or who they knew was introduced by the CHEKA.

The government had to function, and the Bolsheviks knew this. They also knew that without direct experience, their task was going to be difficult. What made matters worse was the war. Lenin knew that peace was necessary in order for the Bolsheviks to govern. The Russians began to negotiate with the Germans and Austro-Hungarians, negotiations which dragged on until 1918, hoping that a revolution would break out in Germany. And on March 3, 1918, the Russians signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This treaty deprived Russia of the entire Ukraine, the Baltic provinces, Finland and other territory that Russia had spent 300 years trying to acquire. One third of Russia's population was gone, 80 percent of its iron, and 90 percent of its coal. Many communists resigned in protest, as they could not accept peace with Germany. During the months which followed Brest-Litovsk, disorder in the countryside and class warfare was made worse by open Civil War.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was judged a betrayal by the Allies and there was a sizable outcry within Russia itself. There were hundreds of army officers who had sacrificed a great deal in the war, and now it seemed the Bolsheviks had just given away everything they had fought for. To these men the Bolsheviks were German agents. Combining forces with the Cossacks, who feared the loss of their land and privileges, army officers formed the White Army to engage in a war against Trotsky's Red Army. Lacking sufficient organization, unable to coordinate their movements and torn apart by different political goals, the White Armies ultimately failed to challenge the Bolshevik government. Just the same, in the three years of civil war, the Whites posed a serious threat to Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Thanks to the leadership of Trotsky, the Red Armies were victorious over the Whites. The White Army could never gain the support of the peasantry. They could have done this by reallocating the land, something which the Bolsheviks had always talked about. Instead, the Whites restored the property of landlords in areas they temporarily controlled. The peasantry, meanwhile, had enough of the Reds and the Whites. Furthermore, the White

Army lacked a skilled and highly organized command. Finally, the intervention of allied troops was ineffectual. When the allies threw their support behind the Whites, more harm was done than good. The Red Army could speak of themselves as the protectors of the nation while portraying the Whites as the agents of foreign governments.

The struggle for power in Russia did not end with the civil war. Food shortages were common and sanitation was non-existent. Class hatreds were exploited on an unparalleled scale. Industrial production stood at one eighth of its pre-1914 level. Agricultural output and the distribution of essential goods had broken down across the nation. The new Bolshevik regime was losing support as people tired of revolution. From 1914 Russia had been in turmoil as war, revolutions, famine, civil wars had plagued the nation. Industry and agriculture was crippled, the distribution of essentials was near breakdown and the communist regime under the Bolsheviks was in trouble. When a large-scale anarchist revolt broke out early in 1921 and could not be suppressed until mid-1922, Lenin himself became frightened about the future of his regime. The mutiny of the sailors at Kronstadt near Petrograd in March 1921 triggered a change in general policy. According to Fitzpatrick, the sailors called for, "...a true soviet republic of workers and peasants." These soviets (councils) were to be chosen by universal suffrage and secret ballot. They also agitated for free speech and assembly, the liberation of political prisoners and for the abolition of grain requisitioning. Trotsky came to believe that what was needed was the education of the working class. Trotsky and others also realized that a European revolution was not going to take place. Governments across Europe were already persecuting Bolshevik sympathizers. The Bolshevik recognized that Russia would have to go the socialist revolution alone.

It was the Kronstadt incident that led directly to the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and an opportunity for the government. Lenin recognized the need for reconstruction. It was also necessary, thought Lenin, to appease the peasants and to avert the possibility of another Kronstadt. Since the world revolution never did take place, it was the resources from the capitalist west that were badly needed to assist Russian reconstruction. So, the adoption of NEP coincided with an Anglo-Russian trade treaty. Under NEP, the government stopped its policy of requisitioning the peasants' entire crop and instead began to take only what was needed to meet the minimum requirements of the army and urban workers. The peasants were still forced to pay a heavy tax but they were now allowed to sell the remainder of their crop. They could sell either privately or to the state. Peasant agriculture became capitalist and the profit motive reappeared. With NEP, the earlier policy of war communism was abandoned. In the end, NEP helped the rich peasant at the expense of the poorer peasant, who had become hired, landless laborers. Lenin himself described NEP as a partial return to capitalism and urged the communists to become good at business. Lenin even secured the services of American efficiency experts in order to speed up the development of Russian capitalism. He also admitted that it would probably take two or three decades for the peasant to be convinced that cooperative agriculture would be more efficient.

Over the course of five years, NEP allowed industrial and agricultural output to rise to its pre-war levels. In this sense, NEP did achieve economic recovery. But, NEP was also bitterly disliked by leading communists who saw it as a reversal of everything they believed. Those who took advantage of NEP were called NEP men and were often persecuted by hostile officials who tried to limit their profits, tax them heavily and drag them into court. To further complicate matters, there was a factional dispute within the Communist Party. One group favored the increase of private enterprise and supported NEP as the new road toward socialism. Another group favored the liquidation of NEP men and the *kulaks* and a return to Marxism at home and the fostering of world revolution.

The turbulent conflicts of those years resulted from the clash of personal ambitions. At stake was the future of the huge country. Most important, the future of the New Economic Policy (NEP) had to be decided. The NEP, introduced at the end of the Civil War to help galvanize the failing economy, allowed for the limited liberalization of markets and private enterprise. Debates attempting to determine whether the party should build on the NEP's success or scale it back continued. NEP was not the only question to agitate communist leaders in the early twenties. Lenin died in January 1924. After his death, there were many questions. Who would be Lenin's successor? How would industry be organized? What direction would Russian foreign policy take? The answers to these questions were to be solved by the then Secretary of the Communist Party, Joseph Stalin.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Stalin should choose the dictatorial path that he did. Daniels writes, "Once a revolution has undergone an extremist phase, it is difficult to avoid some form of post-revolutionary dictatorship. The experience of extremist dictatorship and terror becomes part of a country's stock of political precedent and methods." The Bolsheviks chose terror in order to consolidate their power and to continue the revolution. Even the adoption of the New Economic Policy and its relative relaxation of the grip on the Russian people could not stem the tide of dictatorship and the resultant terror produced by the need to continue the revolution.

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