Russian Foreign Policy, 1905–14

Like the other powers, Russia stumbled into the First World War. The tsarist government contributed its share to international alignments, tensions, and crises, and in the fateful summer of 1914 it decided to support Serbia and thus resort to arms. Yet its part of the celebrated “war guilt” should not be exaggerated or singled out. Russian ambitions and eagerness for war were no greater than those of other countries, while Russian preparedness for an armed conflict proved to be less. The empire of the tsars took no part in the race for colonies overseas which constituted an important aspect of the background of the First World War. Russian interests and schemes in the Balkans and the Near East were paralleled by those of Austria-Hungary and eventually also to some extent by those of Germany. The Pan-Germans were authentic cousins of the Pan-Slavs; and — a point which Fay and many others failed to appreciate — it was the German government, not the Russian, which enjoyed widespread popular support in its own country for a strong national policy. The fatal conflict erupted first between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, and both states can be charged with a responsibility for its tragic outcome which preceded Russia’s. Even the early Russian mobilization found its counterpart in the Austrian. Besides, it deserves to be noted that in the summer of 1914 only Austria-Hungary, of all the powers, desired war, although it thought merely of a quick destruction of Serbia, not of a continental conflagration.

In the course of a personal meeting shortly before the opening of the Portsmouth Peace Conference, Emperor William II of Germany talked Nicholas II into signing a defensive alliance, known as the Treaty of Bijkéti. However, that agreement proved to be stillborn, because leading officials in both governments expressed strong objections to it and especially because France refused co-operation and held Russia to its obligations under the treaty of 1891–94. The years that followed the Russo-Japanese War witnessed an alienation of Russia from Germany, a virtual breakdown of Russo-Austrian relations, and at the same time a further rapprochement between Russia and France as well as the establishment of an Anglo-Russian Entente. The agreement with Great Britain, signed on August 31, 1907, was a landmark in Russian foreign policy, for it transformed a relationship of traditional and often bitter hostility into one of cordiality. That result was achieved through compromise in those areas where the interests of the two countries clashed: in Persia, Russia was assigned a large sphere of influence in the northern part of the country, and Great Britain a smaller one in the southeastern section, while the central area was declared neutral; Russia agreed to consider Afghanistan outside its sphere of influence and to deal with the Afghan ruler only through Great Britain, Great Britain in turn promising not to change the status of that country or interfere in its domestic affairs; both states recognized the suzerainty of China over Tibet. Because Great Britain and France had reached an agreement in 1904, the new accord marked the emergence of the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Great Britain, poised against the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. On the Russian side, the Entente meant an effective military and political alliance with France and only a vague understanding with Great Britain. Yet, as already indicated, that understanding represented a major reorientation of Russian, as well as British, foreign policy, and it helped to group Europe into two camps. It should be added that the alignment with France and Great Britain gained in popularity in Russia in the years preceding the First World War. It attracted the support of liberals, of many radicals, of business circles closely linked to French and British capital, and also of numerous conservatives who veered toward Pan-Slavism or suffered from tariff wars with Germany and objected to tariff arrangements with that country as detrimental to Russian agriculture.

Alexander Izvolsky, the Russian minister of foreign affairs from 1906 to 1910, not only made an agreement with Great Britain, but also developed an active policy in the Balkans and the Near East. In fact he, his successor Sergei Sazonov who headed the ministry from 1910 to 1916, and their various subordinates have been described as a new generation of Russian diplomats eager to advance Russian interests against Turkey and Austria-Hungary after a quarter-century of quiescence. To be sure, as early as 1896 the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Alexander Nélivod, had proposed to his government that Russia seize the Straits, but that proposal was never implemented. Izvolsky devised a different scheme. In September 1908, in Buchach, Moravia, he came to an agreement with the Austrian foreign minister, Count Alois von Aehrenthal: Russia would accept the Austrian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which Austria had been administering according to a decision of the Congress of Berlin; Austria-Hungary in turn would not object to the opening of the Straits to Russian warships. Austria-Hungary proceeded to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina before Russia could prepare diplomatically the desired reconsideration of the status of the Straits — a betrayal of the mutual understanding, according to Izvolsky, but not according to Aehrendahl. Betrayed or not, Russia was left holding the bag, because other powers, especially Great Britain, proved unwilling to see Russian warships in the Straits. The tsarist government experienced further humiliation when it hesitated to endorse the Austrian coup but was finally forced to do so after receiving a near ultimatum from Germany.

The years following the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed repeated tensions, crises, and conflicts in the Balkans and the Near East.
Like Austria-Hungary and Russia, Germany also pursued a forward policy in that area. William II visited Constantinople and made a point of declaring his friendly feelings for Turkey and the Moslems; German interests pushed the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railway—a project they had initiated as early as 1898—and more German military experts came in 1913 to reorganize the Ottoman army. Two important Balkan wars were fought in 1912 and 1913. First Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro combined to defeat Turkey and expand at Turkish expense. Next, the victors quarreled and the Bulgarians suffered a defeat by the Serbians, the Greeks, and the Montenegrins, as well as by the Rumanians and by the Turks, who resumed hostilities to regain some of their losses. The Balkan wars left a legacy of tensions behind them, in particular making Bulgaria a dissatisfied and revisionist state and further exacerbating the relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia.

When the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, was assassinated by Serbian patriots on June 28, 1914, and Austria delivered a crushing ultimatum to Serbia, the Russian government decided to support Serbia—the alternative was another, and this time complete, defeat in the Balkans. With the alliances operating almost automatically, Germany backed Austria-Hungary, while France stood by Russia. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, Germany on Russia on August 1 and on France on August 3. The German attack on Belgium brought Great Britain to the side of France and Russia on August 4. Europe entered the First World War.

**Russia in the First World War**

From the summer of 1914 until its collapse during the months that followed the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1917, the Russian army fought tenaciously and desperately under most difficult circumstances. The improvised offensive into East Prussia, which opened the hostilities and helped France at the most critical moment, ended in a shattering defeat of the Russians in the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. This offensive, General Michael Aleksyev’s epic retreat in Poland in 1915, the repeated offensives and counteroffensives in Galicia, and heavy fighting in numerous other sectors of the huge and shifting Eastern front cost the Russians enormous casualties. Quickly the Russian army ran out of its supply of weapons and ammunition, and for a period of time in 1915 up to 25 per cent of Russian soldiers were sent to the front unarmed, with instructions to pick up what they could from the dead. Although later the Russian supply improved, the Russian forces remained vastly inferior to the German and the Austrian in artillery and other weapons.
The Allies could help little, for the German navy controlled the Baltic, and approaches through the Black Sea were cut off when Turkey joined the Central Powers in the autumn of 1914. The so-called Gallipoli campaign of the Allies, which aimed to break the Turkish hold on the Straits, failed in 1915. Bulgaria joined the Central Powers in October 1915 to help crush Serbia. The Rumanian entry into the war on the side of the Entente at the end of August 1916 led to a catastrophic defeat of the Rumanians and served to extend the Russian front. Yet the Russian troops went on fighting. In fact, they generally outfought the Austrians, and they also scored successes on the Caucasian Front against Turkey. More important, in spite of many defeats and the necessity of retreating, they continued to force Germany to wage a major war on two fronts at the same time. As a British historian put it: "Despite all defects and difficulties, the Russians fought heroically, and made a decisive contribution to the course of the war." In the field of diplomacy, devoted during those years to the prosecution of the war and the formulation of war aims, the Russian government made a striking gain when in the spring of 1915 Great Britain and France agreed to the Russian acquisition of Constantinople, the Straits, and the adjoining littoral at the peace settlement. Italy, which joined the Entente at the end of August 1916, acquiesced in the arrangement.

While the Russian command made its share of military mistakes, the political mistakes of the Russian government proved to be both greater and more damaging. Nicholas II and his ministers failed to utilize the national rally that followed the outbreak of the war. In fact, they continued to rely on exclusively bureaucratic means to mobilize the resources of the nation, and they proceeded to oppress ethnic and religious minorities in the areas temporarily won from Austria as well as in home provinces. In particular, they failed to make the necessary concessions to the Poles. Russian defeats, the collapse of Russian supply, and the utter incompetence of the war minister, General Vladimir Sukhomlinov, as well as of some other high officials, did lead, to be sure, to certain adjustments. The Duma was finally called together in August 1915 for a short session, Sukhomlinov and three of his colleagues had to resign, and the government began to utilize the efforts of society to support the army. These efforts, it should be added, which were led by public figures and industrialists such as Guechkov, had developed on a large scale, ranging from work in the Red Cross to widespread measures to increase production of military matériel. The Zemstvo Union and the Union of Towns, which joined forces under the chairmanship of Prince George Lvov, and the War Industry Committee, led by Guechkov, became especially prominent.

But the rapprochements between the government and the public turned out to be slight and fleeting. Nicholas II would not co-operate with the newly created, moderate Progressive Bloc led by Milloukov, which included
peasant brought to court for stealing a bolt from the railroad tracks to weight his fishing tackle fails to see his guilt, explains that enough bolts are left for the train, and in describing his activities constantly refers to "we," meaning the peasants of his village, the people. Again, it can be argued that on the eve of the revolutions Russia exhibited progress and vigorous activity in intellectual as well as in other matters, strainings against the confines of the established order. But, contrary to the Soviet view, this intellectual development did not lead ineluctably to Bolshevism. More than that, the cultural climate of the "silver age" indicated that the Russian educated public was finally moving away from the simple materialistic, utilitarian, and activist beliefs professed by Lenin and his devoted followers. It would appear that the Bolshevists had to succeed soon or not at all. How they did succeed will be told in the next chapter.

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1917

The collapse of the Romanov autocracy in March 1917 was one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time. While almost every thoughtful observer in Russia in the winter of 1916-17 foresaw the likelihood of the clash of the existing regime no one, even among the revolutionary leaders, realized that the strikes and bread 1905 which broke out in Petrograd on March 8 would culminate in the mutiny of the garrison and the overthrow of the government four days later.

The enemies of Bolshevism were numerous, but they were also weak, poorly organized, divided, and apathetic. The strategy of Lenin was calculated to emphasize their divisions, neutralize their opposition, and capitalize on their apathy. In 1902 in What Is To Be Done? Lenin had written, "Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!" On November 7, 1917, the wish was fulfilled and the deed accomplished.

As has been indicated in preceding chapters, the constitutional period of Russian imperial history has continued to evoke much controversy, to cite only the contributions by Haimson and other American scholars. Optimistic students of the development of Russia from the Revolution of 1905 to the First World War and the revolutions of 1917 have emphasized that Russia had finally left autocracy behind and was evolving toward liberalism and political freedom. The change in 1907 in the electoral law indicated that the Duma could no longer be abolished. Moreover, the reformed Russian legislature proceeded to play an important part in the affairs of the country and to gain ever-increasing prestige and acceptance at home, among both government officials and the people, as well as abroad. As an Englishman observed, "the atmosphere and instincts of parliamentary life" grew in the empire of the Romanovs. Besides, continue the optimists, Russian society at the time was much more progressive and democratic than the constitutional framework alone would indicate, and was becoming increasingly so every year. Modern education spread rapidly at different levels and was remarkably humanitarian and liberal — as were Russian teachers as a group — not at all likely to serve as a buttress for antiquated ideas or obsolete institutions. Russian universities enjoyed virtually full freedom and a rich creative life. Elsewhere, too, an energetic discussion went on. Even the periodical press, in spite of various restrictions, gave some representa-
tion to every point of view, including the Bolsheviki. Government prohibitions and penalties could frequently be neutralized by such simple means as a change in the name of a publication or, if necessary, by sending the nominal editor to jail, while important political writers continued their work. To be sure, grave problems remained, in particular, economic backwardness and the poverty of the masses. But, through industrialization on the one hand and Tolstoy's land reform on the other, they were on the way to being solved. Above all, Russia needed time and peace.

Pessimistic critics have drawn a different picture of the period. Many of them refused even to call it "constitutional," preferring such terms as "Scheinekonstitutionalismus" — that is, sham constitutionalism — because, both according to the Fundamental Laws and in fact, the executive branch of the government and the ministers in particular were not responsible to the Duma. In any case, the critics asserted, whatever the precise character of the original arrangements, they were destroyed by the arbitrary electoral change of 1907, and by Nicholas II's entire authoritarian and reactionary policy. On the whole, the government refused to honor even its own nigardly concessions to the public. Nonentities, like Goremykin and Sukhomlinov, and the fantastic Rasputin himself, were logical end products of the bankruptcy of the regime. Other aspects of the life of the country, ranging from political terrorism, both of the Left and of the Right, to Russification and intolerable "special regulations" to safeguard order, emphasized further the distance that Russia had to travel before it could be considered progressive, liberal, and law-abiding. Social and economic problems were still more threatening, according to the pessimists. Fundamental inequality and widespread destitution could not be remedied by a few large-scale "honest" industries and a redivision of the peasants' inadequate land. Workers in particular, including those concentrated in St. Petersburg and in Moscow, were becoming more radical and apparently more willing to follow the Bolsheviki. Moreover, the government never wanted real reform, because it remained devoted to the interests of the landlords and, secondly, of the great capitalists. Russia was headed for catastrophe.

The optimists, thus, believe that imperial Russia was ruined by the First World War. The pessimists maintain that the war provided merely the last mighty push to bring the whole rotten structure tumbling down. Certainly it added an enormous burden to the load borne by the Russian people. Human losses were staggering. To cite Golovin's figures, in the course of the war the Russian army mobilized 15,500,000 men and suffered greater casualties than did the armed forces of any other country involved in the titanic struggle: 1,650,000 killed, 3,850,000 wounded, and 2,410,000 taken prisoner. The destruction of property and other civilian losses and displacement escaped count. The Russian army tried to evacuate the popu-

lation as it retreated, adding to the confusion and suffering. It became obvious during the frightful ordeal that the imperial government had again failed in its tasks, as in the Crimean War and the Russo-Japanese War, but on a much larger scale. As mentioned earlier, the Russian minister of war and many other high officials and generals failed miserably in the test of war, Russian weapons turned out to be inferior to the enemies', Russian ammunition in short supply. Transportation was generally bogged down and on numerous occasions it broke down altogether. In addition to the army, the urban population suffered as a result of this, because it experienced serious difficulties obtaining food and fuel. Inflation ran rampant. Worst of all, the government refused to learn any lessons: instead of liberalizing state policies and relying more on the public, which was eager to help, Nicholas II in an anachronistic gesture handed over supreme power to the reactionary empress, and through her to Rasputin, when he assumed command at the front.

The February Revolution and the Provisional Government

The imperial regime died with hardly a whimper. Popular revolution, which came suddenly, was totally unprepared. In the course of the momentous days of March 8 to 11, 1917 (February 23 to 26, Old Style) riots and demonstrations in the capital — renamed "Petrograd" instead of the German "St. Petersburg" during the war — occasioned by a shortage of bread and coal assumed a more serious character. On March 10 reserve battalions sent to suppress the mutineers fraternized with them instead, and there were no other troops in the city. Resolute action, such as promptly bringing in loyal forces from elsewhere, might have saved the imperial government. Instead, with Nicholas II away at the front, authority simply collapsed and many officials went into hiding. Seemingly with one mind, the population of Petrograd turned to the Duma for leadership.

On March 11 members of the Duma sidestepped an imperial dissolution decree, and the next day they created a Provisional Government, composed of a score of prominent Duma leaders and public figures. Prince George Lvov, formerly chairman of the Union of Zemstva and Towns, assumed the positions of chairman of the Council of Ministers, that is, prime minister, and of minister of the interior. His more important colleagues included the Cadet leader Milukov as minister of foreign affairs, the Octobrist leader Guechov as minister of war and of the navy, and Alexander Kerensky, the only socialist in the cabinet — associated with the Socialist Revolutionary party — as minister of justice. The new government closely reflected the composition and views of the Progressive Bloc in the Duma, with the Cadets obtaining the greatest single representation.
The Provisional Government was quickly recognized, and hailed, by the United States and other Western democracies. But, in spite of its rapid and general acceptance in Russia and abroad, the new government had to deal from the very beginning with a serious rival: the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, which was modeled on the 1905 Soviet. The new Soviet was formed on the twelfth of March, established itself in the Duma building, and proceeded to assert its authority. True, dominated by moderate socialists until the autumn of 1917, it did not try to wrest power from the “bourgeoisie,” for it considered Russia unprepared for a socialist revolution, but it made its weight strongly felt nevertheless. In fact, the Provisional Government had been set up by the Duma in consultation with the Soviet and had to take its unofficial partner into account in all its policies and activities. Moreover, the Soviet acted authoritatively on its own, sometimes in direct contradiction to the efforts of the ministers. Notably, as early as March 14 it issued the famous, or notorious, Order No. 1 to the troops which proclaimed that military units should be run by elected committees, with officers entitled to command only during tactical operations, and which played a role in the demoralization and eventual collapse of the Russian army. Following the Petrograd lead, Soviets began to be formed all over Russia. The first All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which met in the capital on the sixteenth of June, contained representatives from more than 350 local units. The delegates included 285 Socialist Revolutionaries, 243 Mensheviks, and 105 Bolsheviks, as well as some deputies from minor socialist parties. The Congress elected an executive committee which became the supreme Soviet body. Soviets stood much closer to the restless masses than did Lvov and his associates, and thus enjoyed a large and immediate following.

The Provisional Government lasted approximately eight months: from March 12 until November 7, 1917. Its record combined remarkable liberalism with an inability to solve pressing, crucial problems. The new regime promoted democracy and liberty in Russia. All citizens achieved equality before the law. Full freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, unions, and strikes became a reality. Town and country administration was revamped to make it more democratic, with zemstvo institutions finally introduced at the level of the volost, that is, the township or canton. In addition to equal rights, ethnic minorities received autonomy, while Poland was de-
Russian jurists tried to draw a perfect electoral law, time slipped by. When a constituent assembly finally did meet, it was much too late, for the Bolsheviks had already gained control of Russia.

The Bolshevik victory in 1917 cannot be separated from the person and activity of Lenin. He arrived, together with some of his associates, at the Finland Station in Petrograd on the sixteenth of April, the Germans having let them through from Switzerland in hopes that they would disorganize the Russian war effort. In contrast to the attitude of satisfaction with the course of the revolution and co-operation with the Provisional Government prevalent even in the Soviet, Lenin assumed an extreme and intransigent position in his “April Theses” and other pronouncements. He declared that the bourgeois revolution had already been accomplished in Russia and that history was moving inexorably to the next stage, the socialist stage, which had to begin with the seizure of power by the proletariat and poor peasants. As immediate goals Lenin proclaimed peace, seizure of gentry land by the peasants, control of factories by committees of workers, and “all power to the Soviets.” “War to the palaces, peace to the huts!” shouted Bolshevik placards. “Expropriate the expropriators!”

Although Lenin found himself at first an isolated figure unable to win a majority even in his own party, events moved his way. The crushing burden of the war and increasing economic dislocation made the position of the Provisional Government constantly more precarious. In the middle of May, Mililukov and Guchkov were forced to resign because of popular agitation and pressure, and the cabinet was reorganized under Lvov to include five socialists rather than one, with Kerensky taking the ministries of war and the navy. The government declared itself committed to a strictly defensive war and to a peace “without annexations and indemnities.” Yet, to drive the enemy out, Kerensky and General Alexis Brusilov started a major offensive on the southwestern front late in June. Initially successful, it soon collapsed because of confusion and lack of discipline. Entire units simply refused to fight. The Germans and Austrians in turn broke through the Russian lines, and the Provisional Government had to face another disaster. The problem of national minorities became ever more pressing as ethnic and national movements mushroomed in the disorganized former empire of the Romanovs. The government continued its increasingly hazardous policy of postponing political decisions until the meeting of a constituent assembly. Nevertheless, four Cadet ministers resigned in July because they believed that too broad a recognition had been accorded to the Ukrainian movement. Serious tensions and crises in the cabinet were also demonstrated by the resignation of the minister of trade and industry, who opposed the efforts of the new Social Democratic minister of labor to have workers participate in the management of industry, and the clash between Lvov and Victor Chernov, the Socialist Revolutionary leader who had become minister of agriculture, over the implementation of the land policy. The crucial land problem became more urgent as peasants began to appropriate the land of the gentry on their own, without waiting for the constituent assembly.

The general crisis and unrest in the country and, in particular, the privations and restlessness in the capital led to the so-called “July days,” from the sixteenth to the eighteenth of July, 1917, when radical soldiers, sailors, and mobs, together with the Bolsheviks, tried to seize power in Petrograd. Lenin apparently considered the uprising premature, and the Bolsheviks seemed to follow their impatience adherents as much as they led them. Although sizeable and threatening, the rebellion collapsed because the Soviet refused to endorse it, because some military units proved loyal to the Provisional Government, and because the government utilized the German connections of the Bolsheviks to accuse them of treason. Several Bolshevik leaders fled, including Lenin who went to Finland from whence he continued to direct the party; certain others were jailed. But the government did not press its victory and try to eliminate its opponents. On the twentieth of July Prince Lvov resigned and Kerensky took over the position of prime minister; socialists once more gained in the reshuffling of the cabinet.

Ministerial changes helped the regime little. The manifold crisis in the country deepened. In addition to the constant pressure from the Left, the Provisional Government attracted opposition from the Right which objected to its inability to maintain firm control over the army and the people, its lenient treatment of the Bolsheviks, and its increasingly socialist composition. In search of a broader base of understanding and support, the government arranged a State Conference in late August in Moscow, attended by some two thousand former Duma deputies and representatives of various organizations and groups, such as Soviets, unions, and local governments. The Conference produced no tangible results, but underlined the rift between the socialist and the non-socialist approaches to Russian problems. Whereas Kerensky expressed the socialist position and received strong support from socialist deputies, the Constitutional Democrats, army circles, and other “middle-class” groups rallied around the recently appointed commander in chief, General Lavr Kornilov. Of simple peasant origin, Kornilov had no desire to restore the old regime, and he could even be considered a democratic general. But the commander in chief, along with other military men, wanted above all to re-establish discipline in the army and law and order in the country, disapproving especially of the activities of the Soviets.

The “Kornilov affair” remains something of a mystery, although Urvaitsev’s testimony and certain other evidence indicate that Kerensky, rather than Kornilov, should be blamed for its peculiar course and its...
being a fiasco. Apparently the prime minister and the commander in chief had decided that loyal troops should be sent to Petrograd to protect the government. Apparently, too, that "protection" included the destruction of Soviet power in the capital. In any case, when Kornilov dispatched an army corps to execute the plan, Kerensky appealed to the people "to save the revolution" from Kornilov. The break between the prime minister and the general stemmed probably not only from their different views on the exact nature of the strengthened Provisional Government to be established in Russia, and on Kerensky's position in that government, but also from the strange and confusing activities of the man who acted as an intermediary between them.

The revolution was "saved." From the ninth to the fourteenth of September the population of the capital mobilized for defense, while the advancing troops, faced with a railroad strike, encountering general opposition, and short of supplies, became demoralized and bogged down without reaching the destination; their commanding officer committed suicide. Only the Bolsheviks really gained from the episode. Their leaders were let out of jail, and their followers were armed to defend Petrograd. After the Kornilov threat collapsed, they retained the preponderance of military strength in the capital, winning ever more adherents among the increasingly radical masses.

The Provisional Government, on the other hand, came to be bitterly despised by the Right for having betrayed Kornilov — whether the charge was entirely justified is another matter — while many on the Left suspected it of having plotted with him. The cabinet experienced another crisis and was finally able to reconstitute itself — for the third and last time — only on the twenty-fifth of September, with ten socialist and six nonsocialist ministers, Kerensky remaining at the head. It should be added that the Kornilov fiasco, followed by the arrest of Kornilov and several other generals, led to a further deterioration of military discipline, making the position of officers in many units untenable.

The October Revolution

The Bolsheviks finally captured a majority in the Petrograd Soviet on September 13 and in the Moscow Soviet a week later, although the executive committee elected by the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets continued, of course, to be dominated by moderate socialists. Throughout the country the Bolsheviks were on the rise. From his hideout in Finland, Lenin urged the seizure of power. On October 23 he came incognito to Petrograd and managed to convince the executive committee of the party, with some division of opinion, of the soundness of his view. Lenin apparently considered victory a great gamble, not a scientific certainty, but he correctly estimated that the fortunate circumstances had to be exploited, and he did not wait to wait until the meeting of the constituent assembly. His opinions prevailed over the judgment of those of his colleagues who, in more orthodox Marxist fashion, considered Russia insufficiently prepared for a Bolshevik revolution and their party lacking adequate support in the country at large. Leon Trotsky — a pseudonym of Leon Bronstein — who first became prominent in the St. Petersburg Soviet of 1905 and who combined oratorical brilliance and outstanding intellectual qualities with energy and organizational ability, proved to be Lenin's ablest and most active assistant in staging the Bolsheviks' seizure of power.

The revolution succeeded with little opposition. On November 7 — October 25, Old Style, hence "the Great October Revolution" — Red troops occupied various strategic points in the capital. In the early night hours of November 8, the Bolshevik-led soldiers of the Petrograd garrison, sailors from Kronstadt, and the workers' Red Guards stormed the Winter Palace, weakly defended by youngsters from military schools and even by a women's battalion, and arrested members of the Provisional Government. Kerensky himself had managed to escape some hours earlier. Soviet government was established in Petrograd and in Russia.