

# On the eve of revolution: The Bolshevik Party, factory committees, and the mass movement of the working class

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*Two further lectures will be delivered on October 28 and November 4. In the spring, the ICFI presented the first part of the lecture series, consisting of five lectures. All of the lectures are available on the WWS. To register for the lecture series, visit [wsws.org/1917](http://wsws.org/1917).*

## Introduction

The centenary of the Russian revolution, which the International Committee of the Fourth International has been commemorating on the *World Socialist Web Site*, has attracted renewed interest around the world. It has also occasioned the revival and propagation of all the old slanders and falsehoods about what actually occurred in the final months of the year 1917.

The *New York Times*, a leading voice of American imperialism with close connections to the military and intelligence establishment, has spared no effort this year to denigrate the Russian Revolution in a long series of articles under the caption, “Red Century.” Similar efforts are underway around the world.

In many cases, the *New York Times* simply regurgitates and embellishes, after 100 years, the propaganda of the White Guardists who attempted to overthrow the Soviet government during the Russian Civil War: the Bolsheviks were “German agents” funded by “German gold,” the Bolsheviks lacked mass support, the October Revolution was the work of a tiny conspiracy of alien extremists, and so forth.

The historian that the *New York Times* is promoting as an authority on the Russian Revolution, Sean McMeekin, might be called a “neo-White-Guardist” in this respect. According to the narrative presented by McMeekin, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was a stab-in-the-back to a nation weakened by war and deprivation, a “hostile takeover” that McMeekin characterizes as an “audacious, chancy, and close-run affair.” [1]

McMeekin does not hide his political sympathies. “Despite growing pains, uneven economic development and stirrings of revolutionary fervor,” he writes, “imperial Russia in 1900 was a going concern, its very size and power a source of pride to most if not all of the czar’s subjects.” [2] The trouble with the Russian imperial government, according to McMeekin, was that the tsar listened to his “liberal advisers,” instead of what McMeekin refers to as the “pointed warnings of Rasputin.” Soviet power, he writes, was not “a product of social evolution, class struggle, economic development, or other inexorable historical forces foreseen in

Marxist theory,” but, quoting the reactionary historian Richard Pipes, the villainous work of “identifiable men pursuing their own advantages.” The October Revolution, according to Pipes, represented “the capture of governmental power by a small minority.” [3]

McMeekin tries to dress up these claims by attributing them to “serious historians.” Without a doubt, there are a number of individuals with lofty academic credentials who are promoting these claims around the world. However, all serious and honest historians—whether their political sympathies are with the Bolsheviks or against them—must grapple with overwhelming factual evidence of mass support for the Bolsheviks in the period leading up to October 1917.

To borrow a phrase from the American Trotskyist James Cannon, the October Revolution was a “conscious operation.” As the historian Rex Wade observes:

Many writers on the revolution have portrayed the workers as a passive and undifferentiated mass easily manipulated by radicals and the Bolsheviks. They were far from that. They took an active role in the revolution through factory meetings and committees, through their various organizations, through their support for one party or another, and through the informal street and factory gate meetings that were common. Their participation in the various great demonstrations of 1917, February and later, was a reflection of a decision that this advanced their interests, not a simple manipulation by political parties: they *chose* to participate. [4]

This lecture will deal with some of the most important forms that the mass movement behind the Russian Revolution took, including the factory committees and the phenomenon of workers’ control. I will focus on the critical role they played in the period after the July Days through to the eve of the Bolshevik insurrection, and in particular during the Kornilov affair.

## The Bolsheviks and the working class

Petrograd at the beginning of the year 1917 was one of the world’s great industrial powerhouses. It was not a provincial backwater; it was the fifth-largest city in Europe. Production of war materials for the tsar’s armies was concentrated in factories, many of which ran on state-of-the-art electric power, with the broad introduction of automatic machines. While much of the Russian Empire was indeed mired in terrible rural poverty and backwardness, Petrograd stands out of this landscape with its vast factory districts, legions of workers, and relatively advanced level of manufacturing technology.

By 1917, the Petrograd metropolis had drawn in hundreds of thousands of impoverished farmers from the surrounding countryside, proletarianizing them at an accelerating rate. In the 15 years before the war, the ranks of factory workers in Petrograd grew from 73,000 to 242,600. By 1917, the number had grown to 417,000. [5] In Russia as a whole, the working class in Russia numbered about 2 million in the year 1917, up from 1.5 million in 1905. [6]

Metalworkers predominated in the working class of Petrograd, and the machinery they operated must have appeared at the time like something out of science fiction: “up-to-date drilling machines, turret lathes, vertical boring mills, self-acting planing machines and horizontal milling machines.” [7]

Petrograd at the beginning of the year 1917 was a city of immense internal tensions and contradictions. Petrograd’s ruling elite lived lives of almost fairy-tale luxury. They were addressed by their court ranks and adorned themselves with knightly orders. Maids and chauffeurs waited on them in their gold-encrusted palaces. In the same city, in the shadow of the smokestacks in the factory districts, giant tenements reared up next to some of Europe’s biggest concentrations of heavy industry. The price of rent in Petrograd was astronomical. Many workers shared the rent of a single bunk in a shared room, with one worker sleeping while the other was on his or her shift. [8]

The factory work itself was physically crushing, the air poisonous, and the conditions unsafe. Industrial accidents were common; workers were struck by the machines or they simply dropped from exhaustion. Ten to 12 hours of bone-smashing work in one of Petrograd’s factories brought a worker a handful of kopecks, scarcely enough to pay for food and rent. Families crowded together, often without adequate sanitation, ventilation, or running water. The infrastructure in the proletarian districts was neglected or nonexistent. Many workers, despite the low wages, starved themselves to send a few rubles to the countryside, where relatives anxiously depended on them. To meet the high cost of living and rent, tens of thousands of Petrograd women were drawn into the workforce at even lower wages than the men.

For the working class of Petrograd, virtually all forms of political expression were banned. Workers were instructed to approach management with grievances in person, one at a time. If workers attempted to go on strike, they risked beatings at the hands of the police, imprisonment, or exile to Siberia. In June 1915, the police opened fire at striking weavers in Kostroma, killing four and wounding nine. Two months later, troops opened fire on workers in Ivanovo-Voznesensk. Sixteen workers were killed and 30 were wounded.

The tsarist authorities maintained a network of informants and secret police in the factory districts. Workers that were branded as “political” were blacklisted, and no factory would hire them. Industries associated with the war effort were under military discipline, and dissent of any kind was labeled as treason. In thousands of cases, the tsarist authorities conscripted workers who were suspected of political activity into the army and sent them to the front.

The bosses ruled over the factories like miniature dictatorships. The foremen rounded up the workers at the start of the shift in a most degrading manner and herded them into the machinery. The workers referred to these factory taskmasters as “mini-tsars” (as American workers today might refer to a particularly abusive manager as a “mini-Trump”).

At the end of the shift, workers were searched as they exited the factory, allegedly to prevent them from stealing. The Petrograd workers of course resented the low wages and dangerous conditions and lack of political freedom, but they hated especially the searches, because they felt that the searches robbed them of some part of their essential dignity as human beings.

Despite these oppressive conditions, a vibrant political underground

existed in Petrograd. Words like “socialism,” “Marxism,” and “revolution” were in circulation. Despite the odds, factories did go on strike, and if there was a strike, there is a strong probability that (1) there was a Bolshevik cell in the factory, and (2) there were workers involved in the strike who had experience in prior strikes. [9]

However, the Bolsheviks were not a trade union movement. The Bolsheviks not only organized strikes on economic and workplace issues. Wherever possible, they attempted to impart to the economic struggles of the working class an independent political character. The Bolsheviks worked to educate workers regarding history, politics, and culture. They made every effort to bring into the working class a knowledge of the history of its own struggles, an understanding of the political and economic situation and developments in Russia and Europe, and an appreciation of the independent political and social interests of the international working class as opposed to the other classes and strata in society—in other words, to develop socialist consciousness in the working class.

Since the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks had insisted on a distinction between spontaneous consciousness and socialist consciousness. “[T]he *spontaneous* development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology,” Lenin wrote in *What is to be Done*. This is because “the spontaneous working class movement is trade-unionism ... and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task ... is to *combat spontaneity*, to *divert* the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie,” and to bring it instead under the wing of the revolutionary party. [10]

Trotsky includes the following table in the *History of the Russian Revolution*. [11] A distinction is drawn between economic strikes and political strikes. An economic strike concerned wages, hours, or conditions. A political strike, on the other hand, challenged government policy, protested the persecution of other workers or their leaders, or marked the anniversary of an important historical event, such as Bloody Sunday. [12] Of course, many strikes contained both political and economic demands, and the consciousness of individual workers involved in a given strike may have gone beyond the demands raised by the leadership. However, the growth of political strikes is an important barometer of political consciousness in the working class movement over this period.

With words that have a certain resonance today, Trotsky describes the resurgence of the revolutionary working class struggle after the period of reaction that followed the 1905 revolution.

Great defeats discourage people for a long time. The consciously revolutionary elements lose their power over the masses. Prejudices and superstitions not yet burnt out come back to life. ... Skeptics ironically shake their heads. So it was in the years 1907-11. But molecular processes in the masses heal the psychological wounds of defeat. A new turn of events, or an underlying economic impulse, opens a new political cycle. The revolutionary elements again find their audience. The struggle reopens on a higher level. [13]

I want to refer to a brief excerpt from the memoir of Alexander Buiko, a Bolshevik metalworker who actually worked in the Putilov factory before the revolution. In this passage, he describes his efforts to win over his fellow metalworkers, among whom he encountered some of the old craft prejudices common among what were then referred to as “skilled workers.” It provides some sense of the years of patient work the Bolsheviks conducted at the ground level. Buiko writes:

historian Stephen A. Smith writes:

If a young man began a conversation with an older skilled fitter or turner he would be told: “Learn first how to hold a hammer and use a chisel and a knife, then you can begin to argue like a man who has something to teach others.” For many years we had to put up with this. If you wanted to be an organizer, then you had to know your job. If you did, then they would say of you—He’s not a bad lad—he works well and he’s got a smart brain when it comes to politics. [14]

In its campaigns in the working class, the Bolshevik Party insisted that workers of all races, backgrounds, and sexes must unite in a common struggle against capitalism and war. The Bolshevik Party featured a remarkable number of women leaders under the circumstances—Nadezhda Krupskaya, Alexandra Kollontai, Elena Stasova, and others—and published a newspaper addressed to working class women: *Rabotnitsa*. [15]

The daughter of a worker, Klavdiya Nikolaeva, was born in 1893 and joined the Bolshevik Party in 1909, which would have been around age 16. In 1917, at around age 24, she served on the editorial board of the journal *Rabotnitsa* in Petrograd—a major political responsibility. The Bolshevik Party included many such young leaders, who can only be described as political prodigies. After the revolution, Nikolaeva supported Trotsky and was a member of the Left Opposition.

Even if all workers did not necessarily agree with the Bolsheviks at first, through a long period of persistent underground work, the Bolsheviks became associated in the minds of Petrograd workers with the most far-reaching demands for political emancipation, social reorganization, peace, equality, and human progress. The Bolsheviks gained respect as the most serious, the most courageous, and the most principled fighters for the interests of workers.

Trotsky cites the words of a police report concerning the Bolsheviks in the period leading up to the war: “The most energetic and audacious element, ready for tireless struggle, for resistance and continual organization, is that element, those organizations, and those people who are concentrated around Lenin.” [16] By early 1917, the names of factories such as the Aivaz, Baranovskii, Vulcan, Nobel, New Lessner, Phoenix and Puzyrev had become synonymous with strong contingents of militant workers who were members or sympathizers of the Bolshevik Party. [17]

In February 1917, as we know, the working class of Petrograd did overthrow the tsarist regime, and this great seething political underground burst above ground. The February Revolution was indeed carried out by “[c]onscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin,” as Trotsky writes. [18] However, the mass revolutionary movement of the working class in February was not yet united and guided by the Bolshevik Party. Consequently, while the workers were successful in toppling the tsar, the February Revolution brought forth a heterogeneous proliferation of workers’ struggles and organizations of all shapes and sizes, throughout Petrograd and throughout the country, including labor unions, factory committees, and soviets.

### **The factory committees and workers’ control**

The revolutionary workers of Petrograd during and after February raised numerous and varied demands, both political and economic. Following the February Revolution, one particularly colorful demand was that workers receive full pay for the days they spent overthrowing the tsar.

During the February Revolution, there was a widespread phenomenon known as “carting out.” The workers in Petrograd’s factories literally grabbed the managers and foremen, put them in wheelbarrows, wheeled them out of the factory, and dumped them outside. The practice of “carting out” caught on quickly and became quite widespread. The

“Carting out” was a symbolic affirmation by workers of their dignity as human beings and a ritual humiliation of those who had deprived them of this dignity in their day-to-day working lives. [19]

In other words, the workers were not content to simply to depose the tsar, it was necessary to depose all the “mini-tsars” in the factories as well.

At many factories, workers went further. Having “carted out” the bosses, they asserted “control” of their factories, and the factory committees were the form workers used to exercise this control. Factories throughout the former tsarist empire followed suit. The form and structure of these committees differed from factory to factory and from city to city, but what distinguished the factory committees from the labor unions was the concept of “workers’ control.”

The factory committees seized and opened the books of their factories. In some cases, they discovered that when the employers had been insisting that wages remain low due to the alleged unprofitability of the factory, the bosses had been raking in profits. The factory committees took stock of the finances and inventory. Capitalists and reactionaries were continually trying to discredit the workers’ movement by sabotaging production and distribution, and the committees blocked and exposed these efforts. The committees unilaterally asserted control over hiring and firing. They declared that they had the right to fire abusive managers and rehire the workers who had been blacklisted.

This phenomenon was accurately predicted by Trotsky before 1917. In his dispute with Lenin over the slogan of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,” Trotsky foresaw that “the proletariat will be pushed toward. . . power by the whole course of the revolution.” [20] It would not be able to stop artificially at overthrowing the tsar and the creation of a bourgeois-democratic regime. As the leading social force in the revolution, the working class should not and could not be restrained from taking class measures to secure and advance its interests, beginning with the workplace.

When discussing a whirlwind of social struggles like 1917, one encounters difficulty in making universal characterizations. For each general characterization, there are exceptions, regional variations, and shifts and fluctuations over time. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and unaffiliated workers were all active in both the labor unions and the factory committees.

Nevertheless, taking Russia as a whole in 1917, it can be said that the labor unions tended to be more conservative or “politically neutral,” and to favor the policies of the Mensheviks and the SRs. Meanwhile, the factory committees were a bastion of Bolshevik support. The Bolsheviks encouraged the formation of these committees. Delegated assemblies of factory committees repeatedly endorsed Bolshevik resolutions.

The Provisional Government sought to combat the factory committees by granting them legal recognition while at the same time limiting them essentially to the role of trade unions. In his speech to a congress of factory committees on June 13, Lenin urged workers to reject such efforts. “Comrades, workers, see that you get real control, not fictitious control,” Lenin declared, “and reject in the most resolute manner all resolutions and proposals for establishing. . . fictitious control existing only on paper.” [21]

The factory committees spread rapidly, and at a June conference of factory committees, 100 percent of factories with more than 5,000 workers were represented. Delegates attended these conferences fresh from the assembly lines, having been elected by their co-workers on the shop floor.

The employers, of course, fought as best they could against the formation of these committees. There is an account of one leather manufacturing workshop with 19 workers where the workers attempted to form a committee, and the employer fired the entire workforce. [22] In other cases, management tried to fire the leadership of the committees, and workers were compelled to strike to reinstate the leaders.

When workers and their families were starving, factory committees attempted to procure food and organize the food supply. The factory committees imposed labor discipline at the factories, and they waged a campaign against alcohol abuse. In the chaos and anarchy of the revolutionary period, the workers' committees kept the production lines going, producing desperately needed tools, clothing, and commodities.

Perhaps most disturbing to the authorities, many factory committees declared that they had no confidence in the armed forces of the Provisional Government, and so they formed their own armed militias called Red Guards. It was the Bolshevik factories in particular where the Red Guards were formed the most consistently and where they were the most militant.

In the Peterhof district on April 26, the workers set limits on who could join the Red Guards:

Only the flower of the working class may join. We must have a guarantee that no unworthy or wavering people enter its ranks. Everyone wishing to enroll in the Red Guard must be recommended by the district committee of a socialist party. [23]

Men as well as women served in the Red Guards. Red Guards provided security for the factory districts and defended workers' homes and workplaces from a wave of arson attacks by far-right forces. The Red Guard proclaimed that only the working class can defend and advance the gains of the Russian Revolution against the forces of counterrevolution. The Mensheviks denounced the Red Guards and blamed their formation on "Leninist agitation."

The factory committees took up cultural questions with great interest. In the Putilov works, workers founded a cultural club that had a library and a buffet. [24] This club had a membership of 2,000. The club defined its aim as to "unite and develop the working class public in a socialist spirit, to which end are necessary general knowledge and general development, resting on basic literacy and culture." [25]

On Vasilevskii Island a club named New Dawn was founded in March 1917 that soon had 800 members from the Pipe works. This club organized a geographical expedition, a steamer expedition, lectures, and a brass band concert for workers. [26]

When the Gun works club was opened, there was a recital of arias from operas by the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky and a performance by a band of workers of the Internationale and the Workers' Marseillaise. "The club had a library of 4,000 books, a reading room, a small theatre, and a school. Evening classes were held in literacy, legal affairs, natural sciences, and mathematics." [27]

At workers' clubs in Petrograd, plays were staged by the famous Russian writers Alexander Ostrovskii, Lev Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, as well as the German playwright Gerhard Hauptmann and others. [28]

The Bolsheviks, as we know, refused to support the Provisional Government or the war. Throughout the year, they carried out a political struggle in the working class in opposition to all other tendencies. Under the impact of events, the factories one by one began to swing to the Bolshevik Party. In the *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky singles out one organizer in particular for praise at the Putilov works:

The Putilov factory with its 40,000 workers was a stronghold of the Social Revolutionaries during the first months of the revolution. But its garrison did not long defend it against Bolsheviks. At the head of the Bolshevik attack most often was to be seen Volodarsky, a tailor in the past. A Jew who had spent some years in America and spoke English well, Volodarsky was a magnificent mass orator, logical, ingenious, and bold. His American intonation gave a unique expressiveness to his resonant voice, ringing out concisely at meetings of many thousands. "From the moment of his arrival in the Narva district," says the worker Minichev, "the ground in the Putilov factory began to slip under the feet of the Social Revolutionary gentlemen, and in the course of something like two months the Putilov workers had gone over to the Bolsheviks." [29]

In the US during the war, Volodarsky was active in the International Trade Union of Tailors and the Socialist Party. He wrote for a newspaper in New York. He joined Trotsky's Mezhrainontsy after his arrival in Russia and then joined the Bolshevik Party with Trotsky. He was assassinated by SRs in 1918.

The Putilov Works Committee urged workers to attend evening classes: "Let the idea that knowledge is everything sink deep into our consciousness. It is the essence of life and it alone can make sense of life." [30]

Questions of culture and enlightenment are now most vital burning questions.. .. Comrades, do not let slip the opportunity of gaining scientific knowledge. Do not waste a single hour fruitlessly. Every hour is dear to us. We need not only to catch up with the classes with whom we are fighting, but to overtake them. That is life's command, that is where its finger is pointing. We are now the masters of our own lives and so we must become masters of all the weapons of knowledge." [31]

The literacy rate among Putilov fitters was as high as 94.7 percent, according to one survey. Among Petrograd metalworkers in general, it was 92 percent. This is compared to 17 percent at the same time in the countryside in European Russia. [32]

In many ways, the expression of workers' control after February was a reflection in the workplace of the "dual power" that existed on the political plane. Certain aspects of control in the workplaces passed *de facto* into the hands of the revolutionary workers, but the legal ownership and right of disposition remained *de jure* in the hands of the capitalists.

Trotsky called the phenomenon of worker's control, under the right conditions, a "school for planned economy." Along these lines, during 1917, the Putilov Works Committee gave the following detailed instructions about setting up shop committees:

[I]t is necessary that these committees, which look after life at the grass roots, should display as much independence and initiative as possible. The success of the labor organizations in the factories fully depends on this. By becoming accustomed to self-management, the workers are preparing for that time when private ownership of factories and works will be abolished, and the means of production, together with the buildings erected by the workers' hands, will pass into the hands of the working class as a whole. Thus, whilst doing the small things, we must constantly bear in mind the great overriding objective towards which the working people [*rabochii narod*] is striving. [33]

The ruling class, reeling from the February Revolution, was compelled to acquiesce to workers' control for a short period of time. But as soon as the capitalists had regained their balance, they were determined to reassert their prerogatives.

"The contradictions, irreconcilable in their essence, of the regime of workers' control will inevitably be sharpened to the degree that its sphere and its tasks are extended, and soon will become intolerable," Trotsky later wrote. [34] Trotsky explained that there were only two ways out of this "dual power" situation: either the capture of political power by the working class or a counterrevolutionary dictatorship.

### **The Kornilov Affair**

In Russia in 1917, the latter alternative took the form of the attempted putsch by General Kornilov, known as "The Kornilov Affair." The context for this coup has already been discussed in the previous lecture.

By all accounts, Lavr Kornilov was a thuggish and unappealing character. His colleague General Evgenii Martynov described him as an "absolute ignoramus in the realm of politics," while General Mikhail Alekseev described him as a "man with a lion's heart and the brains of a sheep." [35] Kornilov was fond of parading himself with troops arrayed in ethnic uniforms brandishing sabers, fiercely glaring at crowds of his supporters. A short, bandy-legged man physically, he cultivated the image of a vicious attack dog. He was a sympathizer of the Black Hundreds, the Russian equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan.

Kornilov's military career was not particularly illustrious. He was captured by the Austrians while wandering in the woods in 1915 but managed to escape. During the failed Kerensky offensive, he distinguished himself by ordering retreating troops to be fired upon indiscriminately. The soldiers naturally hated him for this, but in far-right circles, it made him a national hero. After abandoning Riga later in the war, Kornilov ordered his officers to randomly shoot soldiers on the side of the road for cowardice, even though the soldiers in fact had fought valiantly. When officers refused to carry out these atrocities, Kornilov flew into a rage and threatened to court-martial the officers for insubordination.

Kornilov's political program was crude but simple. While the two-faced Alexander Kerensky purported to negotiate with the "moderate" socialist parties such as the Mensheviks and SRs, Kornilov would stoop to doing no such thing. As far as Kornilov was concerned, all socialists—Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and SRs—were "Russia's internal enemies" and very likely the paid spies of foreign powers. Kornilov would march on the capital, smash the workers' organizations, hang the leaders, and use artillery against anyone who attempted to stand his way.

Among the elite tsarist military castes, the government bureaucrats, the landowners, and the business and banking magnates, Kornilov rapidly became imbued with the halo of a national savior. The entire mainstream press supported him. He even enjoyed the support of leading SRs, including Boris Savinkov as well as Kerensky himself.

Kornilov's march on Petrograd was preceded by a series of intrigues between Kerensky and Kornilov. Kerensky was no less a "Kornilovite" than Kornilov. The dispute between the two men was over which of them would be at the head of the government of "blood and iron" that they both agreed was necessary to crush the workers of Petrograd. It was Kerensky who appointed Kornilov to the head of the army on July 31 (18, O.S.), seeking to use Kornilov's growing support within the political establishment for his own benefit.

On August 24 (11, O.S.), Kornilov told his chief of staff that it is "high time to hang the German agents and spies headed by Lenin" and to disperse the Petrograd soviet "in such a manner that it could not reassemble anywhere." [36] On August 25 (12, O.S.), Kornilov ordered

the army to march on Petrograd. He declared: "The corps will be in place in the suburbs of Petrograd by evening of August 28. I request that Petrograd be proclaimed under martial law on August 29."

The troops dispatched to Petrograd included the Caucasian Native Cavalry Division, the tsar's "Savage Division." Kornilov's supporters could barely conceal their eagerness for the upcoming bloodbath in the capital. They boasted openly: "Those mountaineers don't care whom they slaughter." [37] One recalls the slogans later in use by the White Army: "We have no restrictions! God is with us ... slash right and left!" [38] The modern equivalent would be the slogan associated with the American occupation forces in Iraq: "Kill them all and let God sort them out!"

What was Kornilov planning to do with the military in Petrograd? When the 1905 revolution was defeated in Russia, the military shelled the Presnya district in Moscow. The entire factory district, packed with workers and their families, was reduced to rubble. Punitive expeditions fanned out across the railway lines: "The troops would come into a railway station and just start shooting everybody, whoever happened to be near—women, children, railway workers, whoever was there, just gun them down. Some were hanged along the way, to terrify people." [39]

It is worth remembering the year 1871 was the same distance away from 1917 as 1971 is to today. The massacre of the communards in Paris had occurred during the lifetimes of many members of the Bolshevik party, and the leadership never lost sight of that danger. When the counterrevolutionaries seized power in Finland in 1918, Victor Serge estimates that, in total, over 100,000 Finnish workers were massacred.

It should also be remarked that among Kornilov and his supporters, there was a strong component of pathological anti-Semitism. The British war correspondent John Ernest Hodgson, who spent some time with the Kornilovite general Anton Denikin, made the following observations:

I had not been with Denikin more than a month before I was forced to the conclusion that the Jew represented a very big element in the Russian upheaval. The officers and men of the Army laid practically all the blame for their country's troubles on the Hebrew. They held that the whole cataclysm had been engineered by some great and mysterious secret society of international Jews, who, in the pay and at the orders of Germany, had seized the psychological moment and snatched the reins of government. All the figures and facts that were then available appeared to lend colour to this contention. No less than 82 per cent of the Bolshevik Commissars were known to be Jews, the fierce and implacable "Trotsky," who shared office with Lenin, being a Yiddisher whose real name was Bronstein. Among Denikin's officers this idea was an obsession of such terrible bitterness and insistency as to lead them into making statements of the wildest and most fantastic character. [40]

During the Civil War, the White Armies massacred Jews throughout European Russia and exhorted their followers to destroy "the evil that lurks in the hearts of the Jew-communists." Many historians will, from their respective vantage points, deplore the violence of the Russian Civil War, but it should be remembered what Trotsky and the Red Army were up against. It should come as no surprise then that many White Army leaders, later in their careers, would support and collaborate with the Nazis. [41] These were the forces that were marshaled behind the Kornilov putsch.

When Kerensky was first informed by Prince Georgy Lvov of Kornilov's demands, Kerensky thought it was a joke and so he burst out laughing. Prince Lvov gravely informed him that it was no laughing matter, and that Kerensky himself if he valued his life would leave Petrograd as fast as possible. To lead the march on Petrograd, Kornilov

chose General Aleksandr Krymov, who declared that he would not hesitate, if necessary, “to hang the entire Soviet membership.” [42] On the day of August 28, the stock market in Petrograd soared upwards in anticipation of Kornilov’s imminent triumph.

As word reached the factory districts, the factories one by one started blaring their alarm whistles. The workers of Petrograd had been through 1905, and they knew what Kornilov would do if he was allowed into the city. The Bolshevik leaders in the factory districts had been warning about this danger all year. The Bolsheviks had explained that the ruling class was simply biding its time, and sooner or later, it would abandon its fake reforms and fake coalitions and attempt to crush the working class with force. Workers heard the alarms and came out into the streets, and the Bolshevik leaders were already at their posts issuing orders for the defense of the city. Within hours, the city was firing on all cylinders, and the organized working class rose up with full force.

In May, when Menshevik leader Irakli Tsereteli and the Soviet leadership were persecuting the more radical sailors of Kronstadt, Trotsky came to the sailors’ defense. Trotsky warned Tsereteli that “when a counter-revolutionary general tries to throw a noose around the neck of the revolution, the Kadets will soap the rope, and the Kronstadt sailors will come to fight and die with us.” [43] And Trotsky was right on all counts: he was right about the counter-revolutionary general, he was right about the Kadets, and he was right about the Kronstadt sailors. When they received word that Kornilov was at the gates, the Kronstadt sailors marched into the capital, armed to the teeth, ready to give their lives to defend it.

The sailors from the *Aurora* sent a special delegation to the prison where Trotsky was being held to ask his advice: should they defend the Winter Palace, or should they storm the Winter Palace? Trotsky told them that they should deal with Kornilov first and then square their account with Kerensky.

The Bolshevik Party spearheaded the efforts to defend the city. The entire population of the city was mobilized, digging trenches, stringing barbed wire, and organizing the delivery of supplies to the fortifications. The Menshevik-Internationalist Nikolai Sukhanov later observed:

The committee [for Struggle Against the Counterrevolution], making defense preparations, had to mobilize the worker-soldier masses. But the masses, insofar as they were organized, were organized by the Bolsheviks and followed them. At that time, theirs was the only organization that was large, welded together by an elementary discipline, and linked with the democratic lowest levels of the capital. Without it, the committee was impotent. Without the Bolsheviks, it could only have passed the time with appeals and idle speeches by orators who had lost their authority. With the Bolsheviks, the committee had at its disposal the full power of the organized workers and soldiers. [44]

When Kornilov’s supporters tried to dispatch telegrams, the telegraph workers refused to send them. When they stepped into their cars and demanded to be taken to government buildings, the chauffeurs refused to transport them. When they tried to have leaflets printed, typesetters refused to touch the machines. When officers ordered their soldiers to support Kornilov, the soldiers seized and detained the officers. Workers in the factories associated with the war industry produced weapons for themselves and carried them into the field.

Following the July Days, the Provisional Government had attempted to disarm the Red Guard companies, but was only successful in driving them underground. Workers allowed the authorities to confiscate the older and less useful weapons but concealed the most valuable weapons wherever

they could. During this period, the Bolsheviks developed the Red Guard from an armed militia of the factory districts into the core of a Bolshevik army. The Red Guard companies, like the factory committees, were formally non-party, but Bolshevik workers increasingly constituted the core of each company as well as the leadership. The Bolshevik Party provided the Red Guard detachments with military instructors and, wherever possible, weapons. Military drills were conducted at first inside workers’ flats and tenements, and then openly in the factory yards.

With Kornilov marching towards Petrograd, companies of Red Guards emerged onto the streets armed with rifles and machine guns. Tens of thousands strong, the Red Guards quickly established control over all the key strategic locations in Petrograd. In the factory districts, the Red Guards established recruiting stations, and long lines formed of volunteers.

Railway workers sent warnings along the tracks that nobody should transport any soldiers. They filled railway cars with lumber and placed them across the tracks, and tore up miles of railway lines in every direction. In some cases, they loaded Kornilov’s troops onto the trains and then transported them in the opposite direction, away from Petrograd. Krymov’s forces quickly became stranded along hundreds of miles of track.

Revolutionary orators from Petrograd then made their way to the stranded trains and began addressing the troops. One can imagine Krymov’s dismay when the soldiers under his command began holding mass meetings to decide what to do, electing committees, arresting officers, and passing resolutions. One by one, red flags started to appear over Kornilov’s divisions. Even the so-called Savage Division, after meeting with Muslim delegates to the Soviet Congress, raised the red flag. Within days, Kornilov’s coup had evaporated.

## Conclusion

Trotsky later observed: “The army that rose against Kornilov was the army-to-be of the October revolution.” [45] In stopping the advance of Kornilov, the working class flexed its muscles for the first time under the leadership and direction of a revolutionary Marxist party. Having measured their strength with the forces of the counter-revolution, the Petrograd workers looked around and took stock of the situation. Led by the Bolsheviks, they were stronger than Kornilov. They were stronger than Kerensky and his supporters among the SRs and Mensheviks. There was no social force that could stop them. The mood was elated. Workers and soldiers regarded themselves as heroes, having saved the country from a terrible disaster. The sentiment recalled by a soldier of the armored-car division, quoted by Trotsky was—“Well, if there is such bravery, we can fight the whole world.” [46]

The Bolsheviks had correctly warned that there could be no “coalition” with the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie was determined, at the first opportunity, to stomp the working class back down into slavery. All the parties that had supported compromise with the bourgeoisie were discredited, including the Mensheviks and the SRs. As the Bolsheviks had warned, the choice was between a counterrevolutionary dictatorship and workers power. The workers saw that they had no choice but to take power for themselves.

The SR party, which was based in the peasantry and the enlisted soldiers, suffered a massive collapse. A section of the SR leadership was deeply implicated in the Kornilov putsch, and support for the party had already been declining as a result of its failure to secure any significant land reforms. “The masses, having lost confidence in the parties of the Soviet majority, saw with their own eyes, the danger of counterrevolution,” Trotsky writes in *Lessons of October*. “They came to the conclusion that it was now up to the Bolsheviks to find a way out of the situation.” [47]

In the wake of the defeat of the Kornilov coup, Bolsheviks won

majorities in the Moscow and Petrograd soviets, as well as a growing number of regional soviets. At a trade union congress in the Urals representing 150,000 workers, Bolshevik resolutions carried. One soldier of the Moscow garrison recalled that “all the troops acquired a Bolshevik color. ... All were struck by the way in which the statement (of the Bolsheviks) came true ... that General Kornilov would soon be at the gates of Petrograd.” [48] An All-Russian conference of factory and shop committees passed a resolution declaring that workers’ control “is in the interest of the whole country and ought to be supported by the revolutionary peasantry and the revolutionary army.” Trotsky recalls: “This resolution, opening the door to a new economic order, was adopted by the representatives of all the industrial enterprises of Russia, with only five votes opposing and nine abstaining from the vote.” [49]

The emergence of a Bolshevik majority in the soviets was a turning point in the Russian Revolution. Prior to the Kornilov affair, the Bolsheviks had been a minority in the system of soviets established after February. On October 8 (September 25 O.S.), to arguably the most important post in revolutionary Russia—the post of chairman of the Petrograd soviet—the new majority elected Leon Trotsky, who had served as the soviet’s leading spokesperson during the 1905 revolution. At the time of his election, Trotsky, newly released from prison, was still technically under indictment by the Kerensky government for high treason. When he ascended the platform, he was greeted by the workers’ and soldiers’ delegates with what one observer called “a hurricane of applause.” [50]

“Bolshevism took possession of the country,” Trotsky writes. “The Bolsheviks became an unconquerable power. The people were with them.” [51] The rapid swing from minority to majority prompted the emergence of a sharp controversy in the Bolshevik leadership over what to do next. That controversy will be the subject of the next lecture.

In an article published this year titled, “The February Revolution and Kerensky’s Missed Opportunity,” the *New York Times* conveniently leaves out the name “Kornilov” entirely. [52] The establishment of Soviet power after October is deplored yet the alternative is simply omitted. But the *New York Times* knows better, since in 1917, as a matter of fact, the *New York Times* endorsed Kornilov, declaring that he “is merely the representative of those forces which, long blamably quiescent, have at last coalesced to stop the rapid deliquescence of Russia, to keep it a nation, to halt its dissolution, to save it, in a word.” [53]

McMeekin is more explicit. This is what he writes about the Kornilov affair: “In a shortsighted move, Kerensky allowed the Bolshevik military organization to rearm, thus acquiring the weapons they would use to oust him two months later.” [54] The meaning here is plain. To refuse to “allow” the Bolsheviks to take up arms means to “allow” Kornilov into Petrograd.

If Kornilov had not been stopped, we naturally would not be learning about the October Revolution of 1917 today. In the absence of the October Revolution, our world would obviously look very different. The year 1917 would not mark the foundation of the first socialist workers state. Instead, 1917 would mark the foundation of the 20th century’s first genocidal dictatorship, not in Spain or Italy or Germany, but in Russia in 1917.

The Kornilov coup of August 1917, if successful, would have brought into power a gang of deranged generals, pathological anti-Semites, and religious zealots, who openly boasted about the bloodbath they were preparing in Petrograd. After putting all the socialists up against the wall, they would have fanned out across Eastern Europe and Asia, exterminating socialists wherever they could find them. And they would have enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the Russian capitalists, generals, and aristocrats for this project, together with the support of France, Britain, and the United States.

When one hears denunciations of the Bolsheviks from the likes of the

*New York Times*, what they ~~are~~ really saying is that ~~they~~ would prefer Kornilov. The *New York Times* was outraged by Kornilov’s defeat in 1917, and a hundred years later they are still angry about it. Fortunately for the working class in Petrograd, and fortunately for human civilization on Planet Earth, Kornilov was stopped in 1917, and he was not permitted to put his program into effect.

In the days of the old Southern slavocracy in the United States, it was against the law to teach a slave to read. The slaveowners were terrified of what might happen if political consciousness developed among the slaves. In the same way today, in 2017, every effort is made to cut off workers and youth from the history and traditions of the Russian Revolution. The ruling classes are terrified of what might happen if the oppressed masses of humanity discover what politically conscious workers, organized and theoretically guided by a revolutionary Marxist party, can accomplish. This is what accounts for the new wave of falsifications and slanders directed against the Bolsheviks in the year 2017.

The Bolshevik Party led a politically conscious mass movement. The impact of this movement across time and geography is without parallel. This was the most powerful and progressive movement in world history—so far. The international working class, as it rises to confront the challenges of the 21st century, can and must go further.

The Bolshevik program represented nothing less than the reorganization of human civilization on the entire planet on a more advanced and rational level, putting an end to imperialist war and the exploitation of man by man. Their aim was to bring down all the governments, open all the borders, and stop all the wars. And this program found mass support, not only in Russia but around the world, because it intersected with the objective interests and struggles of the most powerful and progressive social force in world history—the international working class.

#### Endnotes:

[1] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. xv.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. xii

[4] Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 97.

[5] S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 9–10.

[6] Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), p. 26.

[7] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 29.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[10] V.I. Lenin, “What Is To Be Done?,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), pp. 384–85.

[11] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 27.

[12] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 49.

[13] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 28.

[14] Cited in Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 29.

[15] Wade, *The Russian Revolution 1917*, pp. 117–118.

[16] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 28.

[17] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 52.

[18] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 110.

[19] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 57.

[20] Accessed at: [www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/rrev-o21.html](http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/rrev-o21.html)

[21] V.I. Lenin, “Speech at Conference of Shop Committees,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 557.

[22] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 80.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

- [27] Ibid.
- [28] Ibid., p. 97.
- [29] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 304.
- [30] Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 95.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Ibid., p. 34.
- [33] Ibid., p. 81.
- [34] Leon Trotsky, “The Question of Workers’ Control of Production (1931),”  
 Accessed at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/310820.html>
- [35] Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004), p. 97.
- [36] Ibid., p. 109.
- [37] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 506.
- [38] ?. ?????, ?????? ? ????? ?????? 1918–1922, ?????, 2004, p. 174. (Cited on Wikipedia at:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_Terror\\_\(Russia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Terror_(Russia)))
- [39] Fred Williams, “The Legacy of 1905 and the Strategy of the Russian Revolution,” *Why Study the Russian Revolution?* Vol. 1 (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2017), p. 60.
- [40] John Ernest Hodgson, “With Denikin’s Armies: Being a Description of the Cossak Counter-Revolution in South Russia, 1918-1920,” (London: Temple Bar Publishing Co., 1932), pp. 54–56. (Cited on Wikipedia at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton\\_Denikin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Denikin))
- [41] Nikolai Markov, for instance, was a figure associated with the Black Hundreds and the far-right Union of the Russian People. He was close to General Nikolai Yudenich, who supported the Kornilov revolt and later was a leader in the White army. In 1928 he became a supporter of the Nazi Party, and he conducted propaganda tours for the Nazis during the 1930s. During the Second World War, the Nazis raised the Russian Protective Corps (*Russkii Korpus*) in occupied Serbia, formed of 11,000 White émigrés. The unit was commanded by Boris Shteifon, a tsarist general who served in the White army and then later collaborated with the Nazis. Anastasy Vonsyatsky was a White officer who was evacuated from the Crimea along with other participants in the White insurrection under General Pyotr Wrangel. After emigrating to the United States, he became a leader of the Russian Fascist Party.
- [42] Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, p. 109
- [43] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 595.
- [44] Cited in Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, p. 132.
- [45] Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 431.
- [46] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 562.
- [47] Leon Trotsky, *Lessons of October* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2016) ePub edition, Chapter 6. (ISBN 978-1-893638-63-1).
- [48] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 562.
- [49] Ibid., p. 673.
- [50] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921* (New York: Verso Books, 2003), p. 237.
- [51] Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 672.
- [52] John Quiggin, “The February Revolution and Kerensky’s Missed Opportunity,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2017.
- [53] “Why Korniloff Rebelled” (*New York Times*, September 12, 1917).
- [54] Sean McMeekin, “Was Lenin a German Agent?” *New York Times*, June 19, 2017.

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