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**FROM FEBRUARY TO OCTOBER:
A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE REVOLUTIONARY EVENTS OF 1917***

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Abstract. This article deals with the revolutionary events in Russia in 1917. The author explores why a revolutionary situation developed in the country and how the democratic February Revolution soon was followed by the Bolshevik coup d'état in October, paying special attention to interactions between the metropolises and the provinces. Marasanova concludes that the events in Petrograd determined the dynamics of the situation in Russia in 1917, while the province followed the city's lead. Further, the disobedience of lower army ranks to their officers played a key part in the revolutions.

Keywords: Russia, 1917, revolutions, capital, Russian regions.

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**ОТ ФЕВРАЛЯ К ОКТЯБРЮ:
НЕСКОЛЬКО СЛОВ О РЕВОЛЮЦИОННЫХ СОБЫТИЯХ 1917 ГОДА**

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Аннотация. Рассматривая революционные события в России в 1917 году, автор анализирует причины складывания революционной ситуации в стране и быстрого перехода от буржуазно-демократической революции в феврале к захвату власти большевиками в октябре; особое внимание уделяется сравнению динамики развития событий в столицах и провинции. Исследователь приходит к выводу о том, что

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определяющими в 1917 г. являлись события в Петрограде. Провинция следовала за столицей в революционном вихре, и ключевую роль в произошедшем сыграли нижние армейские чины, вышедшие из-под контроля офицеров.

Ключевые слова: Россия, 1917, революции, столица, российские регионы.

The question of **why and how** the Bolsheviks were able to come to power continues to interest historians and the non-scholarly public. The basic facts are known, but their interpretation varies to a great extent, often more in relation to the present rather than to the past.

In Soviet historiography, February did not attract any research attention for a long period. The All-Union Scientific Session about the February Bourgeois-Democratic Revolution occurred only in connection with the event's fiftieth anniversary in 1967. Since then special works about the events that preceded October 1917 began to appear (see Mints 1970, Pushkareva 1982).

In recent decades, a significant number of works on the topic of the Russian revolutions have been published, including translations of foreign authors and emigrant historians, and regional studies. The reasons for the rapid fall of the monarchy, the effects of the 1917 revolutions, the role of individuals and parties to the revolution, and the regional specificity of the transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Republic remain relevant for historical study.¹

Back in 1917, neither the government nor the revolutionaries were ready for a peaceful resolution of conflicts and contradictions. The State Duma had become a staging ground for the expression of public opinion and self-promotion rather than an area of constructive work. Under such circumstances, the most acute forms of conflict became inevitable. People and social groups felt disoriented and dissatisfied. As a result, outbursts of social angst merged into a single stream that, while it imperfectly reflected the specific social environment, culminated in a raging storm of discontent.

This growing tension was noticeable even before the revolutionary conditions of 1917. Only the ensuing war, and not the efforts of authorities, was capable of temporarily quelling the renewed rise in protest activity in 1914. A majority of Russians believed that the war was justly waged in order to strengthen Russia's imperial position, unify the Orthodox world, and protect the unfortunate Serbs. Likewise, most Russians interpreted the war as a Second Patriotic War by analogy with the War of 1812. However, as military operations continued into a series of failures for the Russian army, socioeconomic conditions deteriorated, setting the stage for increased

¹ See, for example, Pipes 1994, 305–367; Katkov 1997; Ol'neva 2005.

antigovernment activity. Ultimately, the war allowed no space for Russia to resolve its preexisting problems, which only aggravated with time.

Protest activity by workers escalated in the industrial centers. 1063 strikes occurred in Russia in 1915, fifteen times the rate of strikes during the first six months of the war. At the same time, the number of strikers increased to 569,000. In 1916 the strike movement gained even greater momentum, with 1542 strikes and 1,172,000 participants. On average, there were 129 strikes per month that year, more than in any other country in the world. Economic strikes prevailed, while spontaneity and lack of organization no longer defined labor unrest on this scale. The Petrograd and Moscow industrial regions, along with the textile centers of Vladimir and Kostroma guberniias, were especially active in the labor movement. If in late 1914 there were no strikes in the relatively calm Yaroslavl guberniia, in 1915 there were nine, and twenty-four in 1916. In large cities, especially in Petrograd, the number of political actions was even higher, and a combination of strikes and political demonstrations began earlier in the capital than in the provinces. (Novikov 2003; Meierovich 1995, 94–110).

In the countryside, peasant **farming began to collapse**. Discontent among the peasants grew, and resistance to military mobilization and grain requisitions became increasingly frequent. A few years earlier it would have been impossible to imagine a peasant who did not remove his cap to the sound of the imperial “God Save the Tsar!” anthem. In 1915–16 such cases were no longer singular events.

The difficulties of wartime were aggravated by the **frequent turnover** of key management personnel both in the center and the provinces. Premiers, ministers, and governors changed positions repeatedly. Thus Moscow saw three governor-generals, while Kostroma and Yaroslavl experienced three governors each during the war. This situation reflected the instability of the broader political system. Moreover, no wartime premier even remotely equaled the active Sergei Witte and Peter Stolypin in quality of leadership (Marasanova 2013, 132–139).

The revolution in Petrograd succeeded surprisingly **quickly** in just three days from February 27 to March 2, and was relatively bloodless. During the February coup in Petrograd, 1,382 people were killed or wounded. Undoubtedly, World War I accelerated this chain of events, while the recent experience of 1905 taught revolutionaries what should be done and what strategic locations needed to be seized. What would have taken months, if not years, to achieve in the early twentieth century and during the 1905 Revolution, occurred in mere days and hours in Petrograd in February 1917. During March the revolution spread throughout the country.

At the same time, the Provisional Government had **no real plan of action**. The duties of the dismissed governors were assigned to the chairmen of the provincial zemstvo boards, who were assigned the title “guberniia commissars of the Provisional Government.” County commissars chaired the county zemstvo boards, but found themselves unable to get things

working properly. Overall, the new authorities relied on the old government apparatus in the provinces, while postponing further changes until the convening of the Constituent Assembly.

In spring and summer 1917, the Provisional Government managed only to maintain its personnel, while losing control of the situation in the country, the regions, and the army. The transfer of the post of prime minister from Prince Lvov to Alexander Kerensky did not improve the situation. The latter became the Minister of Justice and provided amnesty not only to political prisoners, but also to many criminals. Kerensky also disappointed the Russian society as a military and naval minister. As chairman of the government (or minister-chairman), his loss of popularity among the army ranks meant an overall loss of influence in the country (Fediuk 2009).

The endless leapfrog in the post of prime minister and ministerial portfolios took place against the backdrop of an impending catastrophe, which was acutely perceived both in the capital and in the provinces. Frustration and anarchy reigned throughout the country. While food and fuel were in short supply, the population had ample weapons on their hands.

The most impressive political force in 1917 was the Russian **army**, which in fact made the revolution. This is evidenced by the following statistics: in Yaroslavl province the Bolsheviks had roughly 700 members, while the provincial military forces numbered 50,000 individuals by fall 1917. On a countrywide scale, there were 20,000 Bolsheviks to seven million individuals in a military that could, but did not want to fight any longer. Soldiers refused to attack or go to the front lines. Recruits expressed dissatisfaction about food, housing, and the military draft itself.

The system of **Soviets** overcame one serious shortcoming of the former state administration. Namely, it included uyezds (counties) and volosts in the general system of power along with provinces. By the summer, Soviets were established in both cities and rural areas. The end of the dual power did not abolish this new infrastructure, which became the basis of the new state system after October 1917. **The Bolsheviks** were not the initiators or “conductors” of these events, but when almost everyone “sings,” i.e. shows dissatisfaction, a conductor-organizer is not usually required. Relying on the Soviets, the Bolsheviks got a historical chance to take power into their own hands, and they did not let this opportunity go to waste.

To conclude, the defining events in 1917 were the events in Petrograd. The province followed the city’s lead in a revolutionary whirlwind. Furthermore, the army, in particular the mutinous lower ranks, played a key part in the revolutions.

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