

### **Was the October Revolution a coup?**

In an attempt to discredit the Bolsheviks, no effort has been spared to falsify the historical record. The usual trick is to describe the October Revolution as a coup d'état, that is, a movement carried out by a small minority using conspiratorial methods behind the backs of the majority. The Bolsheviks, so the argument goes, seized power from the Provisional Government which issued from the February Revolution and which, supposedly, represented the democratic will of the people. If only Lenin's "conspiracy" had not prospered, the story goes, Russia would have entered on the road of Western parliamentary democracy and lived happily ever after. This fairy story has been repeated so many times that it has been uncritically accepted by many. Like any other fairy story its purpose is to lull the wits to sleep. And also like any other fairy story, it is convincing only to very small children. The first thing which springs to mind is: if the Provisional Government really represented the overwhelming majority, and the Bolsheviks only an insignificant group of conspirators, how did the latter succeed in overthrowing the former? After all, the government possessed (at least on paper) all the might of the state apparatus, the army, the police and the Cossacks, whereas the Bolsheviks were a small party which, at the beginning of the revolution in February had only about 8,000 members in all Russia. How was it possible for such a tiny minority to overthrow a mighty state? If we accept the argument of a coup, then we must assume that Lenin and Trotsky possessed magical powers. This is the very stuff of fairy tales! Sadly, it has no place in real life, or in history.

In reality, the conspiracy theory of history explains nothing. It merely assumes what has to be proved. Such a superficial mode of reasoning, which assumes that every strike is caused by "agitators" and not by the accumulated discontent in a factory, is typical of the police mentality. But when it is seriously advanced by self-styled academics as an explanation for great historical events, one can only scratch one's head in bewilderment - or else assume that an ulterior motive is present. The motive of the policeman who seeks to attribute a strike to the activities of unseen agitators is quite clear. And this mode of argument is really no different. The essential idea is that the working class is incapable of understanding its own interests (which are, naturally, identical to those of the bosses). Therefore, if they move to take their destiny into their own hands, the only explanation is that they have been misled by unscrupulous demagogues.

This argument, which incidentally can be used against democracy in general, also misses the point. How could Lenin and Trotsky "mislead" the decisive majority of society in such a way that in the short space of nine months, the Bolshevik Party passed from an insignificant minority to win the majority in the soviets, the only really representative organs of society, and take power? Only because the bourgeois Provisional Government had revealed its complete bankruptcy. Only because it had failed to carry out a single one of the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. And this can be demonstrated very easily by one fact alone: the Bolshevik Party took power in October on the basis of the programme of "Peace, Bread and Land". This is the most graphic illustration of the fact that the Provisional Government had failed to achieve any of the most burning needs of the Russian people. This, and this alone, explains the success of the Bolsheviks in October.

The most striking thing about 1917 is precisely the active involvement of the masses at each stage. This, in fact, constitutes the essence of a revolution. In normal periods the majority of men and women are prepared to accept that the most important decisions affecting their lives are taken by others, by the "people that know" - politicians, civil servants, judges, "experts" - but at critical moments, the "ordinary" people begin to question everything. They are no longer content to allow others to decide for them. They want to think and act for themselves. That is what a revolution is. And you can see elements of this in every strike. The workers begin to participate actively, speak, judge, criticise - in a word, decide their own destiny. To

the bureaucrat and the policeman (and some historians whose mental processes function on the same wavelength) this seems like a strange and threatening madness. In fact, it is precisely the opposite. In such situations, men and women cease to act like automatons and begin to behave like real human beings with a mind and a will. Their stature is raised in their own eyes. They rapidly become conscious of their own condition and their own aspirations. Under such conditions, they consciously seek out that party and programme that reflects their aspirations, and reject others. A revolution is always characterised by the rapid rise and fall of parties, individuals and programmes, in which the more radical wing tends to gain. In all Lenin's speeches and writings of this period, we see a burning faith in the ability of the masses to change society. Far from adopting "conspiratorial" methods, he based himself on appeals to the revolutionary initiatives of the workers, poor peasants and soldiers. In the April Theses he explained that: "We don't want the masses to take our word for it. We are not charlatans. We want the masses to overcome their mistakes through experience." (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 36, p. 439, henceforth referred to as LCW.) Later on he said: "Insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. Insurrection must rely upon a revolutionary upsurge of the people." (LCW, Vol. 26. p. 22.)

The fact that Lenin here counterposes the masses to the Party was no accident. Although the Bolshevik Party played a fundamental role in the Revolution, this was not a simple one-way process, but a dialectical one. Lenin pointed out many times that the masses are a hundred times more revolutionary than the most revolutionary party. It is a law that in a revolution, the revolutionary party and its leadership come under the pressure of alien classes. We have seen this many times in history. A section of the leadership at such moments begins to doubt and hesitate. An internal struggle is necessary to overcome these vacillations. This occurred in the Bolshevik Party after Lenin's return to Russia, when the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd (mainly Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin) adopted a conciliatory attitude to the Provisional Government and even considered fusing with the Mensheviks. The line of the Party was only changed after a sharp internal struggle in which Lenin and Trotsky joined forces to fight for a second revolution in which the working class would take power into its hands.

In this struggle, Lenin appealed directly to the advanced workers over the heads of the Central Committee. He said that "the 'country' of the workers and the poor peasants is a thousand times more leftward than the Chernovs and the Tseretelis, and a hundred times more leftward than we are". (LCW, Vol. 24, p. 364.) The motor force of the revolution at each stage was the movement of the masses. The task of the Bolsheviks was to give a clear political and organisational expression to this movement, to ensure that it was concentrated at the right moment for the seizure of power, and to avoid premature uprisings which would lead to defeat. For a time this meant actually holding the masses back. The key Vyborg Committee in Petrograd stated in June: "We have to play the part of the fire-hose." (Quoted in M. Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, p. 200.) Podvoisky admitted at the Sixth Party Congress in August: "We were forced to spend half our time calming the masses." (Ibid., p. 200.)

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1. Prove this guy wrong.
2. What kind of sources does he use to prove his point?
3. Do you see any problems with that?