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The Russian Revolution

Joseph Zajda, Australian Catholic University (Melbourne Campus)

E-mail: joseph.zajda@acu.edu.au

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The Russian Revolution in 1917 was a monumental political and social transformation in Russia, which brought down the autocratic monarchy; toppled Kerensky's Provisional Government and installed the Bolshevik Government under Lenin. It refers to the February and October 1917 revolutions. The February revolution resulted in the collapse of Tsarist autocracy, and establishment of the Provisional Government, which was led briefly by Kerensky. The October 1917 Revolution toppled the Provisional Government, and brought the Bolsheviks to power. It resulted in the formation of the Marxist-Leninist state—the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) in 1918, under the leadership of Lenin and the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922. Russia became the world's first socialist country.

Russia's entry into World War 1, in 1914, with its 5-million army, and the major defeats that followed (some 2.5 million were killed, and 2 million were taken prisoners), was one of the factors contributing to continuing unrest among the army and the people. The war resulted in a deep economic and social crisis, where Russia experiencing numerous internal and external conflicts. As a result of the war, Russia was economically ruined by 1917. The industrial output was seven-fold less than in 1913, and the agricultural output was 38% compared with 1913. The inflation became an astronomical *hyper-inflation*: if in 1917 the rouble fell 15 times from the 1913 exchange rate, by 1920, it fell 20,000 (1: 20,000). In short, the impact of the war on Russia and its people, ineffective leadership of Nicholas II, the lack of radical economic reforms, and the economic hardship experienced by the people set the stage for the 1917 revolution.

The February Revolution (the six days: 23-28 February), in Petrograd, was a spontaneous protest movement, involving huge masses of people. The event was characterized by massive strikes (306,000 of the workers, or 80% of the workers in Petrograd), and demonstrations, the use of army and the police to stop demonstrations, and the occupation of the State Duma in Petrograd. On February 1917 soldiers from the reserve regiments stationed in Petrograd joined the revolution. To stop the political and social chaos unfolding, the Provisional Committee of the State Duma was formed. It was hoping to convince the tsar to form a Ministerial Cabinet and lead urgently awaited reforms. However, the Provisional Committee of the State Duma was not representative of the people, and there was no support for its actions. At the same time, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies (*Petrosoviet*, like the one in 1905) was formed and the first meeting took place on 27 February. The Petrograd Soviet became a major political force, winning popular support. During a meeting in February between Chkheidze, the head of Petrosoviet, and the Provisional Committee of the State Duma, it was decided to form a Provisional Government. The period between February and October 1917 was characterised by a 'dual power' (*dvoevlastie*) political structure, representing the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. In reality there was no genuine representative government of the people. Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, the last Tsar of Russia, unable to return to Tsarskoe Selo (his palace

and home), and having been pressured by his generals and Ministers, abdicated on 2 March. The autocratic monarchy ceased to exist.

In 1917 most of tsarist Russia's administrative structures and organisations: the economy, the political structure, the army, the local government, and rural governance were disintegrating. Due to the absence of effective government, Russia was experiencing a great deal of turmoil—anarchy, uprisings, rebellions and terror swept across Russia, especially in rural areas, where peasants were looting and killing their landlords.

After February 1917, there was a rapid growth of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR) to some 800,000 members, followed by the Mensheviks—200,000. The Provisional Government, under Prime Minister Prince Lvov, a prominent member of the Constitutional Democratic Party, and led by liberals and conservatives, was set up in March 1917, which included Kerensky, the only socialist member, as the Minister for War (later Prime Minister). The Provisional Government, in order to demonstrate the democratic and liberal spirit of the reforms, released political prisoners, including Iosif Dzugashvilli ('Stalin', his new name of 'steel-like, as 'stal' in Russian means 'steel', hence the 'man of steel') in Siberia.

Crucial leadership roles in the October 1917 Revolution were played by both Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin, having learned that the February Revolution occurred (he did not believe that it could happen, yet it did), and the tsar abdicated, returned from exile in Switzerland, and travelling through Germany in a sealed train, arrived in Petrograd, at the Finland Station on 3 April. He made a revolutionary speech to a waiting crowd, and a delegation headed by Chkheidze, the head of Petrosoviet. On April 4, Lenin delivered a speech, known as *the April thesis*. After Lenin's inspiring April theses, the Bolsheviks adopted the three winning slogans—'peace', 'land', and 'bread'. In February 1917, Trotsky was in exile, and living in New York City. Inspired by the events of the February Revolution, he returned to Russia on 4 May, and on 8 October he was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet.

There was a great deal of growing discontent in Russia in 1917, due to economic hardship, political instability, and major military defeats during the First World. The army was demoralised and some divisions refused to fight, while many deserted. This political chaos resulted in a series of demonstrations during the June-July period. On 18 June there was a 500,000 strong demonstration, with another 500,000 strong demonstration on 4 July in Petrograd, with the slogan 'All power to the Soviet'. The Cossacks and cadets opened fire and some 700 were killed. The three major political groups involved were: General Kornilov (the extreme right), Kerensky (the centre, the reformer), and Lenin (the extreme left). Alexander Kerensky was elected Prime Minister of the Provisional Government on 8 July. After the July crisis, the dictatorship of the Provisional Government is established. All Bolshevik papers, including *Pravda*, were closed. Many Bolsheviks were arrested. Lenin and Zinoviev went into hiding. The military coup of Kornilov (25-27 August) was defeated by some 40,000 armed workers and soldiers. Kornilov's unsuccessful coup had seriously undermined Kerensky's Provisional Government. Kerensky's popularity among the masses had suffered a major setback.

The Provisional Government under Kerensky had lost the reform initiative. Although some progressive social legislations were adopted, the major policy issues remained unsolved—Russia's participation in the war, the urgent political and economic reforms, and the land reforms. Most importantly, the Provisional Government lacked the legitimacy in the eyes of the masses, following the power and leadership vacuum left by the abdication of Nicholas II and the government's continuing involvement in the increasingly unpopular war. Having failed to launch major reforms, which were expected, the government lost the support of the masses. Its socialist platform alienated the middle classes and the military. The time was right for seizing power. The Bolsheviks decided to act. Lenin's hour had arrived (the

surname “Lenin” was derived from the river Lena, in Siberia, where Vladimir Ulianov was exiled for his revolutionary activities).

The October Revolution

The preparations for the October Revolution occurred on 10 October, when the Bolsheviks’ Central Committee met and voted for the Revolution. The preparations of the Bolsheviks for the overthrow of Kerensky’s Provisional Government, represented, as depicted by various history textbooks, many voices, different political parties and factions and different ideas and strategies. Most authors agree that both Lenin and Trotsky (Lev Davidovich Bronstein) played a decisive role in orchestrating the attack on the Winter Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government. Lenin was an ideological leader, and Trotsky was a military organizer. On 8 October, Trotsky was elected Chairman of Petrograd Soviet, and established a Military-Revolutionary Committee (MRC). The MRC, under Trotsky’s leadership played a significant military role in coordination the October 1917 Revolution. Trotsky, undoubtedly, played a major part in the organization of the uprising. While the Bolsheviks were preparing to take over, the city was completely unaware that the Provisional Government was about to end. The Provisional Government had no chance, once the Bolsheviks had decided to seize the power. It could only count on the support of a small number of volunteers. In the end a very small group remained to defend the Winter Palace.

From 24 October, the detachments of MRC, consisting of the Red Guard-workers, soldiers, and sailors of the Baltic Fleet began to occupy central buildings and places in the capital: railway stations, bridges, the central telegraph office, and power stations. The Red Guards were now 75,000 strong. On 26 October, the Bolsheviks, and the Red Guards (12,000-16,000) took over the Winter Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government, and arrested the Ministers. Kerensky left earlier for the front. Lenin and his Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), were now in control of Russia.

Many Russian contemporaries, who lived at the time, already regarded the October 1917 events as another political *perevorot*, (coup), which temporarily brought to the top one of the Russian parties, namely the Bolsheviks (the term means ‘Majority Party’, although it was a minority party in 1917, not having a majority in the Congress of the Soviet). In 1917, during a political and leadership vacuum, the Bolsheviks ‘won’ over the other parties by arming itself with popular propaganda slogans for the masses, and by using conspiratorial and effective military strategies.

The October 1917 Revolution in Russian School textbooks

There are major ideological and methodological changes in the treatment of the Russian Revolution in school history textbooks in the Russian Federation (RF). Unlike Soviet prescribed school history textbooks (1950-1991), which were saturated by Marxist-Leninist ideology, and stressed the Bolsheviks’ significant role in the Revolution, the post-Soviet history textbooks adopted a more discursive description and interpretation of the Russian Revolution. The event was described as a ‘coup’ or takeover of the power and governance. It no longer was defined by a dominant ideology.

A more liberal and critical interpretation of the Russian Revolution was depicted in history textbooks. Compared with the Soviet historiography of the revolutionary masses storming the Winter Palace, with detailed description of key players, and the role of the Party in leading the ‘battle’, against the Provisional Government, the current narratives attempt to minimise the ideological and Bolshevik role, by allocation of less space to the event, and by re-defining the October Revolution as a coup. The Russian Revolution has been de-emphasised to such a degree that Russian secondary history teachers, when asked to list up to 5 significant events in Russian history of the past 100 years that the history textbooks either ignore or underemphasise, listed, among others, the October Revolution (Zajda & Smith, 2013).

In their prescribed history textbooks, Russian students discover that representatives of other influential parties, following the Bolshevik coup, left the 2nd Congress of the Soviet, held on 25 October. Of the 670 registered delegates only 300 were Bolsheviks, which meant that they had no overall majority. The new Soviet government of 1917 included Trotsky, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In Grade 9, in their prescribed textbook *Istoriia Rossii* (History of Russia), by Danilov, Kosulina & Brandt—the core history text, which is one of the key school texts, with the print run of 50,000 copies, students learn among other things, about the October Revolution. The October Revolution of 1917 is described in two paragraphs, a little more than in an earlier edition of 2001, which had a half page. Fifteen-year-olds now learn that the armed detachments of the Red guards took over the capital (Petrograd) and there was no opposition, and that the Winter Palace was taken during the night of 26 October:

The Winter Palace was defended by a small Junker (cadets) detachment and a volunteer women's battalion...Kerensky, prior to the storming of the Winter Palace, left for the front. The remaining members of government were arrested (Danilov, Kosulina & Brandt, 2011, p. 92).

Even less space is allocated to the October Revolution in the 2011 textbook by Kiseliiov & Popov, *Istoriia Rossii: XX-nachalo XXI veka*, for Grade 9 students. There is one paragraph (p. 73), describing the attack on the Winter in the section 'The Formation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship' (Stanovlenie bolshevitskoi diktatuty):

There were practically no battles for the Winter Palace. Its defenders surrendered to the Red Guards. The Ministers of the Provisional government were arrested and imprisoned in the Petropavlosk fortress (Kiseliiov & Popov, 2011, p. 73).

It is now well-documented that the Bolsheviks were able to seize power and topple the government with very small forces. While the Soviet textbooks persisted in a myth-making and nation-building narrative of 'storming' of the Winter Palace (the seat of the government), the reality was very different. It was a relatively bloodless and peaceful change of government. The army stood by, indifferent and demoralised, and the only defenders of the government were small detachments, including a women's battalion. This new portrayal of the events leading to and the 'taking' of the Winter Palace—as a relatively peaceful, and unopposed occupation of the seat of government is vastly different from the image of heroic storming ('*shturm*') of the Winter Palace, by the revolutionary sailors, soldiers, and the workers, depicted on the paintings, and in the cinema during the Soviet era.

The October 1917 Revolution in Soviet school textbooks

Under the Soviet regime, school education, through a centralised completely unified system of instruction, was one of the key means used to invent the Soviet state, and its biography or foundation narrative, beginning with its bloody revolutionary birth to its maturity in the continued building of the USSR. For seven generations, a traditional Soviet image of the October revolution was much more grandiose and heroic. The books had a familiar picture of the 'storming' of the Winter Palace on 25 October, 1917, taken from the film. The caption reads 'The Red Guards firing at the Winter Palace'. In the authoritative and prescribed Soviet school textbook (1956), only Stalin, and not the above mentioned leaders, was given a major role in the organisation of the October uprising, and Trotsky and his followers were labelled as 'traitors', the same Trotsky, who becomes the 'hero' of the Revolution in the post-communist history texts, was 'written out' of history:

The preparations for an armed uprising was going full speed ahead. According to plan, worked out by Stalin...Stalin was assisted by Ya. Sverdlov, F. Dzerzhinski, V. Molotov, G. Ordzhonikidze, M. Kalinin and others. The Provisional Government, warned by the traitors—

Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Trotsky, believed that the uprising of the proletariat will be on the day of the opening of the 2nd Congress of the Soviet—25th October. On the day it was preparing to rout the uprising...To prevent Kerensky from being able to deliver his speech on the day of the opening of the Congress of the Soviet, 25th October, the Central Committee of the Bolshevik's Party has issued the instruction to the Military-Revolutionary Soviet to commence the uprising immediately (Pankratova, 1956, pp.172-173).

At the same time, Soviet history textbooks attempted to discredit Kerensky and his Provisional Government. In the Soviet school history textbook, Kerensky is described, to quote Lenin, as a 'little Bonaparte' and a 'braggart—Kerensky', who headed the new government. There is no mention of his brief but eventful political life, except that he escaped from Petrograd, and organised a 'counter-revolutionary coup', led by general Krasnov. When the coup failed, Kerensky 'dressed in women's clothes' escaped (Pankratova, 1950, p. 180). In reality he escaped, dressed in a sailor's uniform and wearing automobile goggles, to avoid being recognised. The author remembers during his schooling in the USSR the way Kerensky was vilified in all Soviet school history textbooks, being labelled a counter-revolutionary, a coward and a traitor in the official discourse.

The 1917 October Revolution as a Foundation Meta-Narrative

From a cultural history perspective, one needs to ask an ideological question—What is the role of re-inventing the past and its significant and defining moments for a given nation? One answer could be an ideological succession, where in the place of the 'bourgeois subject' of a particular type, we promote an egalitarian ideal—captured by the slogan 'All power to the people'. To promote this new ideological shift, we need to use powerful instruments of propaganda. Hence, the 1917 re-enactment in art and cinema during the 1920s was designed to demonstrate the ultimate significance of the event, which would activate the imagination and the collective mind of the 1917 revolution's values to be fully realized in history. The Soviet revolutionary festivals became a nation-building exercise—avant-garde (futurism, cubism in art) experiments in mass pageantry. The purpose of this dramaturgical approach to historiography, a 'theatricalization of everyday life' was both egalitarian and utopian—to forge a 'new generation of harmoniously developed individuals' who would be active nation-builders (Schnapp, 1993, p. 90).

The most dramatic example of a historical repositioning of the Grand Narrative in Russia, where art was serving the state and its new ideology, was a modernist-inspired and hyperrealist, yet metaphoric, re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace, performed in Petrograd's Palace Square in 1920. This multimedia spectacle, performed before a public of some 100,000, involved '8,000 protagonists with gunfire, artillery, rockets and panoply of lightening effects' and its climatic moments, featuring 'a white truck carrying the fleeing Kerensky government with a platoon of Red Army trucks in hot pursuit' (Schnapp, 1993: 112). This represented a vivid example of myth-making of the Bolshevik revolution, and the triumph of the alienated proletariat and landless and illiterate peasants.

The above comparative analysis demonstrates that historians, based on the sources available, have made different interpretations of the October Revolution in Russia (Zajda, 2012a; Zajda, 2012b). Historiography has become an important dimension of historical thinking and re-imagining of historical events. As the above shows, there are ideological differences in representations of the revolution by historians. The event played a significant part in the nation-building process in the USSR. The latest Russian school textbooks, in their search for a foundation narrative, draw on significant events that may have played a role in this process.

SEE ALSO: ideology, Russia, the February 1917 Revolution, the October 1917 Revolution, World War I

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