

Joan Kjaer:

I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're happy to have you with us here at MERGE in downtown Iowa City. For those of you watching our livestream on Facebook or listening to the podcast, thank you for joining us.

Russia, as we know, is very much in the news these days, and we'll spend part of our program discussing its present role on the world stage. But first, we want to step back in the complicated history of Russia's last century to get a better understanding of how Czarist Russia, ruled for over 300 years by the Romanov dynasty, became the world's first communist state. We're fortunate to have Michael Zmolek from the University of Iowa Department of History in the first part of our program. Michael teaches courses on the Russian Revolution, so Michael, we're going to let you take it away. Set the scene for us: what was happening in the late 19th century and the early 20th century that took us to this October 1917 revolution?

Michael Zmolek:

Well, it's not something I think I can cover in an entire semester, so it's kinda hard to cover in 25 minutes, but let me start by just kind of situating where we were 100 years ago today.

Today would have been on the Julian calendar October 19th, 1917, a hundred years ago. Obviously, November 1st on the Gregorian calendar. We were about two days away from a resolution, which Trotsky wrote for the Military Revolutionary Committee, that basically was a declaration that the provisional government of Russia no longer held power, and that the Petrograd Soviet was the absolute power in the country. Then four days later we had the storming of the Winter Palace and the Bolsheviks essentially assuming power at that point. That's where we were 100 years ago today.

One of the things in teaching this class that really stands out to me is, and I think it's particularly important for Americans to try to wrap our heads around, the level of violence that was going on in Russia in the 50 years leading up to the Russian Revolution. You had a peasant-based movement called the Narodniks, you had young revolutionaries that called themselves Nihilists. They were engaged in terrorist campaigns. Even women were recruited to become terrorists. They were, in a sense, considered heroes of the people if they attacked public officials.

Of course, the regime itself was very brutal. Russia was one of the last states in Eastern Europe to abolish serfdom. It was not until 1861 when the Czar, finally, after a century or more of discussing the idea of abolishing serfdom, issued the Emancipation Edict, in which serfs in Russia were declared no longer serfs. It happens to be the same decade of the Civil War in the United States, the end of slavery, so there was some correlation there.

Sadly, what happens then is the government imposes huge indemnities on the peasants. The poorest peasants, they remain part of a village commune, a collective known as the Mir. They were given small plots of land, but it wasn't enough land to pay the taxes that they were expected to pay the government.

So if you were an extremely poor peasant, you were still in this situation of grinding poverty.

Imagine being a peasant, a self-subsistent producer having to pay these huge taxes. You've been told you're liberated, but now you're suffering the Russian winters. You can imagine the sort of hardships that were being endured. It was out of [inaudible 00:03:27] that image that eventually a party known as the Socialist Revolutionary Party emerged, and then alongside them the Social Democratic Party emerges in the early 20th century, these two major parties.

In 1903 at a conference in London and Brussels, the Social Democratic Party splits. This is a Marxist party, so Marxist ideas are now well established in Russia. There's this idea of organizing the proletariat, the working class, which is the small but rapidly growing class in Russia, and it's considered that they will lead the revolution.

Two years later it is 1905, and this is coming on the end of a war with Japan, which is a humiliation, which serves to further discredit the Czar's regime, there's a huge demonstration for bread in St. Petersburg. It's met with gunfire. Hundreds of people perish. Then a general strike is called, and what this results in is concessions by the Czar that he didn't want to make granting greater civil liberties and creation of a Duma, a parliamentary system in Russia.

We jump ahead, then, to 1912. The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, who had separated in 1903, formally split. We get to February 1917 in the midst of this First World War. Though, I think one has to try to really wrap your head around Russia during the First World War. You still have this enormous discontent among the peasantry. You have these socialist ideas percolating throughout the working class and among peasants. You have a regime that's been trying to push back the reforms that it granted, and meanwhile, it's fighting a war with Germany, which it's losing. In the World First World War, you have two million Russian soldiers die, and up to as many as two million civilians dying as well.

What you have in 1917 in the cities in Russia is extreme hardship, inflation, food shortages, and a situation among the soldiery, where, like in other countries during the First World War, there's an increasing sense of futility: "Why are we fighting this war? Why are we going off to die in large numbers? What are we fighting for?" In France, soldiers in the First World War were being sent to the front, and at periods of the war, as they were marching off, they would bleat like sheep to mock their commanders, because they were saying, "We're just being sent to the slaughter."

It's in this context that we have, first of all, the February Revolution of 1917. There was a strike at the Putilov factory in what was then called Petrograd. Then a group of women organized a bread march demanding bread, and the repression of that protest touched off a wave of strikes that led to what was called the February Revolution, and the Czar's abdication on March 2nd, 1917.

What results then is you have a provisional government. You have committee of the Duma, a self-appointed committee claiming the mantle of state power, but at the same time during this period, something rather amazing has been happening: that is in the vacuum of power in the country, ordinary workers and peasants, and soldiers, have been organizing democratic participatory-democracy councils known as "soviets" and these are organized throughout the country.

Around this time in 1917, a new soviet emerges in Petrograd known as the Petrograd Soviet, and it essentially becomes the focal point of this movement of soviets. It's well understood at this point that that's where the strength, the allegiance, and the legitimacy in the eyes of the population lies. However, there's a power-sharing agreement made between the Duma committee and the Petrograd Soviet, and that's the provisional government.

We jump ahead to July of 1917. A strike by an artillery regiment leads to another massacre, response with force by soldiers of the government, and touches off a wave of indignation, but the Bolshevik Party, which has really been a minority party at this point, goes through a period after this, because they're accused of instigating this uprising, which they deny. At the same time, there's the accusation that the Bolsheviks are serving as agents of the Russian government. There's some documents that show they've accepted some money from the Russian government, other parties have done so as well. And of course, we know that Lenin had come back to Russia in April on a sealed train from Switzerland coming through Germany by some kind of arrangement with the German government. At that point in July, it's the low-point for the Bolsheviks. They're seen as potential German agents. There's newspaper cartoons calling for Lenin to be hanged. Lenin, of course, has gone into hiding. Other leaders, Trotsky and Kamenev, are arrested, so many of the Bolshevik leaders of this period are in prison.

Then what happens in August is a very complicated affair known as the Kornilov affair. In July, Aleksander Kerensky, who is a socialist, and is a member of both the Duma committee and the Petrograd Soviet, comes to power as the new Prime Minister, and he appoints General Kornilov, who's well-known to have supported and pushed for summary executions on the battlefield, that is when soldiers desert. Russia was suffering huge numbers of desertions during the war. They would just be shot on sight for desertion. Obviously, this is extremely unpopular among the general population, but Kornilov and Kerensky scheme to bring troops back from the front, and send other detachments of troops to Petrograd to deal with the Petrograd soviets and all of these socialist revolutionaries, and suppress the whole revolution.

In the middle of the affair, as things get going, Kerensky ... There's different interpretations of this. What I think probably happened is that Kerensky learned of plans that he would not only be deposed, but executed once the affair was over. So he switches sides in the middle of it, and he throws his weight behind the revolutionaries. What the revolutionaries are able to do in Petrograd is to

organize, because now the socialists, particularly the Bolsheviks, have been organizing through soviet councils within the military, as well as in train stations and different public services, and they're able to shut down the coup before it happens, effectively. There's relatively little fighting that happens and the troops that are sent there, mostly, are not able to get there.

Kerensky, having initially supported this, is now seen as the enemy of the revolution by all these revolutionaries in Petrograd. And the Bolsheviks go from in July being at their low-point, to all of a sudden being the rising star, because they're the ones who had worked most closely with soldiers in the soviet councils within the military, and in the factories and so on.

That then brings us to September. And in the events of September, Lenin is still in hiding. He switches his position. He had been saying that it was premature to have a revolution a few months earlier, now he's suddenly calling for an insurrection immediately. He sees the opportunity is ripe. The Bolshevik central committee actually doesn't agree with him and they actually don't even publish his papers. So one of the things that tells us is that the Bolsheviks were not a monolithic party. There was a lot of internal dissension, there was a lot of debate, there was a lot of fluidity to this party during this period.

We have to fast-forward into October. What precipitates the October Revolution of October 24th and 25th, again on the Julian calendar, 1917, is a move by Kerensky to, once again, go in and send soldiers in to suppress the revolutionaries, because by now the papers are full of excitement. They realized that an insurrection is coming. The Bolsheviks are publicly denying that anything's happening, but behind the scenes, Lenin in particular is pushing for it. There's debates, and they're trying to seize the opportunity.

The Bolsheviks kind of wait for this to happen, but once it comes out that Kerensky is ready to start re-arresting top leadership of the Bolsheviks, the wheels kick into gear once again. And so once again, when the troops are sent for this counter-coup, this counter-revolution, they're basically unable to get to Petrograd. What Kerensky's left with is a very small force, one of which is a women's battalion, guarding the Winter Palace.

On the night of October 24th to 25th, the Bolsheviks are able to organize the takeover of all the public facilities, the telegraphs, the telephones, the railway stations, until by the morning of the 25th, they basically got control of the city. The last thing, and there's some long delays late into the night of the 25th, is to wage a siege on the winter palace; and the Bolsheviks come to power.

One of the key things to understand about all this, though, is about public perceptions: who was supporting what. There's this slogan "all power to the soviets" that has been a popular slogan amongst all the socialist parties for a long time, since the soviets began forming. And there's a period when the Bolsheviks, Lenin in particular, were saying, "We don't support the slogan anymore. We should not support the slogan." What he meant by that is he did

not want to work with the other socialist parties, he saw the Bolsheviks as the only party that was legitimate, that was really of, and by, and for the working class, and of course, presumably, the peasants as well.

As events unfolded into the events of October 24th and 25th, however, an opportunity opened up that I don't think Lenin perceived in advance, and that is that, in preparing the city for the defense of Petrograd against first of all the German advance--because the Germans have now taken Riga, they've taken islands--they've basically got the Russian fleet bottled up in the Gulf of Finland. There's this sense that the Germans might take Petrograd, also that Kerensky might allow the Germans to take Petrograd to have the Germans deal with those socialists, the revolutionaries.) The soldiers who are being prepared for the defense are seeing this as defending Petrograd from the outside and potential internal enemies, but also the provisional government of Kerensky's regime is seen as a potential threat. At one point, a member of the pre parliament is calling for the soldiers also to be prepared for an insurrection. So the soldiers have got the Germans, they've got the provisional governments, and they've got the Bolsheviks as all potential threats.

At any rate, the Petrograd soviet is the one that organized something called the Military Revolutionary Committee. It's not designed specifically to stage a Bolshevik insurrection, but by now, the Bolsheviks are nearing a majority vote within the Petrograd soviet and, obviously, they're the sort of movers and shakers who organize events on these dates of the 24th and 25th. What happens then on the 25th is, when the smoke clears ... I should back up

As the guns are going off, and the Winter Palace is being attacked on the night of the 25th, the Petrograd soviet is in meeting. It's the council of soviets, actually. It's supposed to meet at 2 p.m. and it starts meeting late in the evening. This is the all-Russian council, all the different Soviets. Lenin has been adamant that the insurrection happen before this meets so that, once it happens, once it meets, it's a moot point, as to whether or not there should be an insurrection. But the insurrection is still in the last stages: the taking the Winter Palace is happening as they're meeting as they can actually hear the gunfire. There's these dramatic debates that go on, and there's probably a majority opinion for peaceful negotiations. I think there's a tremendous fear among even a large share of the Bolsheviks, but also the Mensheviks, the socialist revolutionaries, that this is going to descend into chaos and a bloodbath.

Initially, the Bolsheviks say, "Yeah, we'll vote for resolutions for peace." And then the Bolsheviks put forward a more strident resolution supporting the insurrection and its outcomes. Those never get voted on, because eventually it's announced that the Winter Palace has been taken: it's all over. Pandemonium erupts in the Petrograd Soviet. Lenin gets up and declares a new soviet state is being born. Trotsky, of course, comments that, in the history of revolutions, this is the most bloodless revolution that he's seen, and so on.

That takes us up to the 25th of October. And if it all stopped there, who knows? I would make a couple of observations about how all this shapes what comes next. The Bolsheviks sort of hijacked the Military Revolutionary Committee. They turned it into an instrument of insurrection when that wasn't what it was intended for. In the subsequent debates, Trotsky makes his famous speech when the Mensheviks and the socialist revolutionaries walk out of the Petrograd Soviet in protest, and Trotsky says, "Go to where you belong, to the dustbin of history. You're done." And later, some of them would regret having done this because they felt if they had stayed, they might have been able to shape events. The only party that stayed with the Bolsheviks up until early the following year in 1918 was the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, but then they were out by early 1918.

Some of the Bolsheviks organized something called the Left Workers Opposition. They were also outed by 1921, and so you ended up a party dictatorship. I would argue, this is not what people thought they were fighting for in the events of 1917 October. The slogan "all power to the soviets" to most of the participants meant, literally, that state power was going to be devolved to the local level, and that local workers' councils would have prime authority over the state, that ordinary working people would have, for the first time in history, you might say, the highest power in the land. This sounded like a really good idea. How it would work, I don't think anybody had any kind of blueprint for all of this was going to function.

But obviously, for the Bolsheviks, they found themselves with heavy internal opposition not only from other socialists, but from the Kadet party, from the conservatives, from the army. And they delay, but eventually make peace with Russia, which is a very popular move.

The other slogan was "Peace, Bread, and Land." Peace: the soldiers wanted peace. They didn't want to keep getting sent to the slaughter in the war. The workers wanted bread, and the peasants wanted land. So by promising and by satisfying those three groups, the Bolsheviks maintained some level of popularity through that period.

But then, as soon as the First World War is over, the former Czarist generals organize soldiers and begin recruiting among the peasantry for recruits, and they are aided by the then imperialist powers of the UK, France, Japan, also Czechoslovakia, and about 13,000 US soldiers enjoin the invasion of Russia during this period to try and, in the words of Winston Churchill, "strangle the baby in the cradle," the baby of Bolshevism. And that is the even bigger trauma to Russia's history: figures approach ten million deaths in the Civil War between 1918 and 1921.

That is the period in which, by now, the Bolsheviks organized a secret police force. It was initially very small, 26 guys, it was called the Cheka. Of course, its function grows and grows as it becomes seen by the party to be necessary to deal with political opponents with force and violence. And so you get the Red

Terror during the Civil War, and that continues, and the White Terror during the Civil War from the Czarist generals who were equally guilty of many atrocities.

I don't know if I should just pause.

Joan Kjaer: That was amazing, and thank you.

In these last minutes we have, tell us about Lenin. What is the story of Lenin? Did he, at that moment in 1917, do you think he actually believed that the Bolshevik party would be able to succeed? That he would be the new leader of this land?

Michael Zmolek: There was this term, the 'absolute guarantee.' The absolute guarantee of the Russian Revolution was simultaneous or subsequent revolutions across Western Europe. Lenin defended the idea that he could lead a revolution in Russia with the notion that it would be the spark that would light this global revolution that would spread across Europe and the world. I have no doubt that he believed this, and I also have no doubt that he was severely confounded and disappointed when that didn't happen. They knew this by about 1919 or '21, that this wasn't going to spread, which was a huge problem for this revolution. That was not the plan, for Russian revolutionaries or European revolutionaries. There was never this idea of socialism in a single state.

But I think his behavior is like that of a fanatic: somebody who has a vision that he is not going to give up on at all costs. His followers, those who subscribed to him, were overwhelmed by his charisma and his personality, and his opponents were very, very profoundly disturbed by where this was going. This was a huge debate in socialist and Marxist circles during this period. How could you have a revolution in backward Russia? Marx said it should happen in a very advanced society. Socialism could only come about when capitalism matured to the point where it made sense. How did that make sense in a mostly peasant, backward Russian society? But Russia is saying, "No, we'll light the match. We'll get the thing started and it will spread."

Personally about Lenin, his brother had been involved in these terrorist activities. His older brother, Sasha, had taken part in the attempt on the Czar's life in 1887 and was executed against the pleadings of their mother, who tried to reason with the officials. I think that's an event that shaped his life too. It kind of underscored his deep loathing for the Czarist regime. Another big debate was the use of violence. The Bolsheviks were not terrorists initially, but they were not above petty crime, bank robberies and so forth, to raise money for their activities. But they did end up committing more atrocities than even the Narodniks who preceded them.

Joan Kjaer: What remains of those early ideals today?

Michael Zmolek: When I taught a class in the spring called Socialism and Capitalism, we spent a period talking about Western Europe and how social democracy is an idea, which is the idea of socialists voting themselves into power. How the ideas of socialism, of public welfare, of healthcare for all, education for all, of voting rights for all and so on, were largely achieved in Western Europe under the influence of social democrats. And many of those ideas became ideas that in the programs themselves were pushed through, not by the social democratic parties, but even by liberal and conservative parties. So I think you can argue that many of the goals of socialism have been achieved in many countries.

And communism, because it remained in this very repressive political system until its fall in 1991, became this sort of embarrassment for people who supported these kind of ideals. There's a lot more to be said there, but one of the things that I want to add is that in order to understand the appeal of communism in the early 20th century, even while some of the pogroms, the gulags, and so forth were going on, you have to understand this is the first country to declare equality for women and it declared itself the enemy of all empires. When Churchill is on a train in Missouri with Truman in the 1940s and he gives his famous Iron Curtain speech, a lot of Americans were like, "What is he talking about?" He's the leader of this vast empire that's enslaving millions of people, and he's condemning the Soviet Union, which pits itself against all of that.

Outside of the Soviet Union, the first socialist revolution had a great deal of import for those reasons.

Joan Kjaer: How could we thank you, Michael, for walking us through this? My gosh. You've been listening to Michael Zmolek from the history department here at the University of Iowa, and I could listen to you, honestly, for hours, but I'm sure you're ready to turn it over to our next group here.

In this next segment, we're going to be talking about social and cultural fallout from the revolution, and its aftermath. We're going to be looking at the lives and legacies of Russian writers and musicians.

This is the end of the first segment. Thank you for joining us here at MERGE. Stick with us, in just a moment we'll start part two. Thank you.