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# The role of the Bolsheviks in preserving Russia's integrity (February-October 1917)

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## Abstract

This article presents the authors' view on the understanding the deep revolutionary crisis during the first eight months of 1917. The purpose of the study is to show a deep split in society as a result of the collapse of the monarchy, the intensification of power struggles between different political forces in Russia in 1917, the decentralization of the state, the transformation of the Bolsheviks into the main subject of preservation of the integrity of the country. In February 1917, anarchy, chaos, and the beginning of the process of decomposition of the state's integrity became a threat to the country. Bolsheviks' political activities of 1917 were the only way out of the critical situation faced by Russia, which allowed to save the link of several episodes of the Russian history that was almost devastated by the events of February 1917.

**Keywords:** Revolution, 1917, integrity of Russia, February, October, people, elite, Bolsheviks, Public Security Committees (KOBs), zemstvos, City Dumas.

# El papel de los bolcheviques en la preservación de la integridad de Rusia (febrero-octubre de 1917)

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta la opinión de los autores sobre la comprensión de la profunda crisis revolucionaria durante los primeros ocho meses de 1917. El propósito del estudio es mostrar una profunda división en la sociedad como resultado del colapso de la monarquía, la intensificación de las luchas de poder, entre diferentes fuerzas políticas en Rusia en 1917, la descentralización del estado, la transformación de los bolcheviques en el tema principal de preservación de la integridad del país. En febrero de 1917, la anarquía, el caos y el comienzo del proceso de descomposición de la integridad del estado se convirtieron en una amenaza para el país. Las actividades políticas de los bolcheviques de 1917 fueron la única forma de salir de la situación crítica que enfrentó Rusia, lo que permitió salvar el vínculo de varios episodios de la historia rusa que fue casi devastada por los acontecimientos de febrero de 1917.

**Palabras clave:** Revolución, 1917, integridad de Rusia, febrero, octubre, personas, élite, bolcheviques, Comités de Seguridad Pública (KOB), zemstvos, Dumas de la ciudad.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the research is defined by the mechanisms of state collapse, the increase of the power struggle between various political forces, the rise of the anarchy and chaos threat at the monarchy collapse, and the integrity of the Russian state.

The events of the Russian Revolution of 1917 are interpreted differently by various researchers. They are often perceived by the modern Russian society as a conflict between the Bolsheviks and the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire [27, p. 40-41; 23, p. 75-76, 104]. None of the opposing forces notices that eight months had passed from overthrowing tsarism to the Bolshevik victory, whilst Russia had turned into ruins.

The paper reflects the authors' position on the development of the revolutionary process in Russia — starting from the February events up until the Revolution in October 1917. The failures of acting authorities in February 1917, rejection of the elite by the masses, and the break of relations between the central and regional authorities put Russia on the brink of territorial collapse, as well as the loss of social traditions. Bolsheviks' attempt of 1917 was the only way out of the critical situation faced by Russia, which allowed to save the link of Russian history that was almost devastated by the February events.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The historiography of the October Revolution notes the fundamental significance of the February events in crushing the Russian Empire. Russian historiography of the February-October Revolution of 1917 is quite extensive. At the same time, the real stage of studying the events of February 1917 in Soviet historiography began in the 1960s, when historians were granted access to archived

materials. This was when Soviet historians started publishing works of a problem-historiographical nature dedicated to the assessment of their view on the most important problems of February. I. I. Mints' work "History of the Great October" holds a special place in the Soviet historiography. It combines main information on the history of the fundamental revolutionary parties, the authorities, and the status of their party representatives [21, p. 877, 878].

What really distinguishes most of the Soviet historiography is the lack of attention to the conflicts that took place in 1917 between the central and regional, local authorities. According to those authors, the entire political dispute was limited to the confrontation between the Provisional Government and the Soviets. Other government structures (Public Security Committees, zemstvos, and City Dumas) were hardly mentioned. The Soviet historians perceived these as local authorities of the Provisional Government. [30, p. 123]. V.I. Startsev refuted this and noted that there was no government apparatus at the local level, the local authorities acted independently of the government [36, p. 203]. Even commissars in governorates and uyezds, the only official local representatives of the government, were nominated by the local community and were more closely associated with it than with the center [38, p. 204].

To identify the nature and consequences of the revolutionary events of 1917 and to preserve the integrity of the Russian state during the eight months studied, it was important to understand the sticking points that had existed between the central and the local authorities. This point leads us to realize the two main problems: the relationships

within the elite and the confrontation that started between the people and the local revolutionary elite. The pioneers in studying the regional authorities were G.A. Gerasimenko and V.P. Buldakov, who gave a detailed account of the activities of the above mentioned KOBs and zemstvos. They were among the first to admit that KOBs and zemstvos had become a very important part of the revolutionary confrontation [7, p. 58; 2, p. 6].

The Bolsheviks who came to power did not deal with a functioning state system, but with the anarchy. V.A. Nikonov said that the course chosen by the Bolsheviks, who had decided to run the country alone, had not been optimal [23, p. 13, 1066, 1076]. Extremely left radicalism was personified by V. Lenin, but he was not its only representation. The right, conservative forces of the revolutionary ecosystem were shown through the activities of General L. Kornilov, his supporters, and democratic, moderate-socialist centrism, and the researcher B.I. Kolonitsky connected it to A. Kerensky. [16, p. 6].

Modern Bolshevik supporters stressed that the Bolsheviks were usually condemned for the events of October 1917 and were accused of starting a civil war. But the Bolsheviks deserve praise rather than condemnation for not leaving the people in a critical situation without leadership [4, p. 307; 1, p. 7]. Despite the diversity of views on the role of the Bolsheviks in preserving the integrity of Russia during the revolution, it should be noted that its contemporaries already had an understanding that the revolution had been the result of a complex combination of various factors and the role of participants in various

events. This is confirmed by works that are sources of clarification of the life perception of the revolutionary era - A.I. Kerensky, V.I. Lenin, P.N. Milyukov, M.V. Rodzianko and others [13; 17; 18; 31; 29].

For foreign historians, studying the role of driving forces during the Great Russian Revolution is not new, but various researchers introduced the use of such phrases as the integrity of Russia and its preservation by the Bolsheviks only partially [27; 12; 31; 33; 37; 43]. A. Graziosi's positive attitude to the counter-revolutionary nature of the Bolsheviks emerged in the work "The Great Peasant War in the USSR", which tells about the irreconcilable struggle of the two most powerful forces put forward by the Revolution — peasants and Bolsheviks. The author defines the Bolsheviks as a small but active stratum of the political elite, the most striking feature of which was the undoubted ability to form a state, which became a paradoxical feature of the Russian Revolution [10, p. 14-15].

E. Carr estimates the October events as a positive development [11, p. 545, 548, 550]. R. Pipes supports the conclusion that the arrival of the Bolsheviks to power has made other parties unable to cope with the power of the masses [26, Pt. 2, p. 81; 27, p. 606]. S. Fitzpatrick pointed out that the Bolsheviks revolutionized the society as well by transferring land to peasants and factories to workers [44, p. 816-831]. O. Figes studied the role of peasantry in the Revolution through the prism of the actual confrontation between the countryside and the cityside. The Revolution of 1917 made the community an autonomous force that was rapidly democratized, allowing for unprivileged elements and women to govern in the countryside [43, p. 9, 29].

S. Badcock argued that the Russian Provisional Government, contrary to common sense, democratized and decentralized local governance. This led to the loss of the central authorities' ability to run the province [3, p. 105, 111].

The historical review confirms the need to study the events of the possible decentralization of the state by forming new assessments of the events separating the February and October events of 1917. The very theme of the Russian Revolution of 1917 was reformatted; the representation of the source base was achieved through rethinking and introduction of new documentary sources into scientific circulation. These mechanisms led to a redefinition of research tasks and further guidelines for the development of the problems of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Taking into account the fundamental, methodologically verified achievements of foreign researchers on the Great Russian Revolution, it should be admitted that they have made a positive contribution to the scientific understanding of the revolutionary processes in Russia.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study of the events of 1917 and the role of the Bolsheviks in them requires the use of the principle of historicism. It allowed us to build the logic of the events that took place in the revolutionary system, not in isolation from the main trends in the development of Russian society in the declared chronological framework, but in accordance

with the real historical situation of the time. The principle of consistency lets us study the peculiarities of the influence of the revolutionary situation on the integrity of the country as a whole and the role of the Bolsheviks and opposition forces in the regions, taking into account the specific historical conditions in a chronological sequence.

The principle of objectivity implies the examination of all the facts related to a particular event, the identification of the most important facts and events that determined the trends in the historical process [14, p. 48]. The revolution is a process of change of power, accompanied by broad political and social changes in society. The whole process of the Russian Revolution led to territorial losses or the complete disappearance of Russia from the map. The people prevented this collapse. They were the main subject of the revolution, led by the Bolsheviks, who retained control over the situation in society, returning order to the state.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

The process of the Russian Revolution of 1917 could lead to territorial losses or the complete disappearance of Russia from the map. In February 1917, Public Security Committees were formed. In March to April 1917, the higher authorities split into the Provisional Government and the governorate authorities. These events occurred at the same time as the senior positions of both levels of state

administration were occupied by representatives of the united camp of liberals. The regional leaders of Constitutional Democratic Party went into conflict with the Minister-President of the Provisional Government, knyaz G. E. Lvov, and refused to obey the first order of the knyaz that arrived to them — to appoint the heads of the respective provincial executive boards as the heads of the governorates and uyezds. They explained it with the fact that the administration had been established by that time, and it had already assumed full powers [6, p. 79]. Their hostility towards the central government was reinforced further with a telegram of the Minister of Internal Affairs' chairman D. M. Shchepkin dated March 14, which denied the KOBs the state funding, except in cases of specific orders of the commissars, who were considered by the central government as their appointees [8, p. 20]. A storm that started among the regional heads led them to refuse the principle of double subordination to the commissars, the center, and the regions. Since then, the commissars were the subordinates of these organizations, and at the end of March, the government had to agree to appointing the commissioners in the regions instead of the center. KOBs were making the commissars their subordinates only [30, p. 203].

The united country started to split into separate governorates, the government was losing that smallest influence it had on the local life of each territory. The process wasn't one-sided. The government wasn't the only one who was losing control — the regional leaders could no longer count on the support of the center when confronted with crisis situations. The collapse didn't stop at the governorization.

By summer, the destructive process had reached the uyezds. The reason for the collapse of the state lied in the mutual claims of intelligentsia in the uyezds, which were based on disagreements between the Liberals and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The latter began to actively seize the uyezds and later the governorate's authorities through them [7, p. 181, 246].

The lower classes (peasants and soldiers) ignored the orders of the new authorities because they thought of the intelligentsia that came to power as their enemies [2, p. 120]. The conflict between the elite and the people unfolded through the volost KOBs, which were in unconditional subordination of the peasants themselves, who formed the system of peasant self-government [32, p. 114]. The elite, which was part of the individual parties, was equally distant from the people.

Thus, by the fall of 1917, Russia had become a conglomerate of separate uyezds and volosts, many of which had actually been functioning as independent states. Today, the root of the differences between the authorities is made up as separatism. The cause of the crisis was much deeper. Separatism was favored only by several large regions [35, p. 35]. At the same time, the tone of the collapse affected all regions.

The only party that saw the situation in the most adequate fashion was the Bolsheviks [17, p. 35]. They realized that of all the parties, peasant and soldier activists were ready to go with them for the longest time. Thus, for example, the workers took a stand-alone position, which manifested itself in the fact that they did not fully obey the Bolsheviks and fought independently for working control over

production [5, p. 13, 16, 28]. Bolsheviks deployed party structures to centralize governance in the country [6, p. 235-236].

The aim of the Bolsheviks coming to power from the first days was to make the governorate authorities, which started the collapse of state structures in March 1917, obey, although now in the form of the Councils (the Soviets) of Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies, the Central Government, the Council of People's Commissars (the Sovnarkom). The actions of the Bolsheviks were the beginning of the country's unification. The key events of the October took place not in Petrograd, but in the provinces. The Bolshevik party, along with the Central Government, simultaneously seized power in most of the governance centers. This could be accomplished due to the coordination of the Central Committee and regional committees which were an intermediate link between the CC and the governorate committees, responsible for activity in several neighboring governorates, in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (b). Thus, there were 13 governorate united under the Moscow Regional Committee [27, p. 21-23, 30, 45-47].

The regional committees controlled the actions of party workers in governorates under their jurisdiction and were developing passwords for all governorate centers and major uyezd cities that were in their control. Each city had a separate password developed for them. There were no other forces in the country capable to restore order besides Bolsheviks.

Any revolution is a process of change of power, accompanied by broad political and social changes in society. One specific aspect of

February was the transformation of the people into the main subject of the Revolution, which was, however, not the result of the implementation of liberal ideas by the new government, but its loss of control over society. The sour relations between the two forces — the new revolutionary elite and the people — caused the political collapse of "February" Russia. The problem was to preserve the integrity of the state. A vast gigantic empire was self-decomposing both at the political system, as well as at all social levels. In our view, only the Bolsheviks in this situation put forward democratic slogans that were clear to the people, including the renunciation of war, the immediate granting of land to peasants, the resolution of the food issue, national equality, working control, the overthrow of the Provisional Government, and the transfer of power to the Soviets. The people accepted these slogans and supported the Bolsheviks at the crucial moment. This is one of their reasons for their relatively easy coming to power. The main link that ensured the transition of power was the interaction of the middle party level and regional committees with regional party structures.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Summing up, we would like to note that the problem of preserving Russia's unity has always been a pressing one for the country. Preservation of the Fatherland's territory, saving it for descendants has always been considered by the Russian generations as

a national task. Events of 1917 helped Russia continue to exist as an independent and integral state. This is an indisputable significance for Russian history. Transition of power to Bolsheviks in October 1917 was generally of progressive significance because it prevented the inevitable collapse of the country while continuing the political processes initiated in February 1917. The victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917 made it possible to preserve the integrity of the Russian state thanks to the technological overcoming of the consequences of the events of February 1917: working locally, strengthening organizational discipline within their ranks, finding compromises with the opposition.

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