PREFACE

The Russian revolutions of 1917, together with the ensuing long, devastating Russian civil war and foreign interventions, were seminal events in modern world history. The initial February 1917 revolution in the Russian capital city, Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) ended three hundred years of Romanov rule and replaced the incumbent emperor, Tsar Nicholas II, with a Western-oriented, predominantly middle-class Provisional Government. This temporary governing body, composed initially of Westernized liberals—and, after April 1917, also of moderate socialists—was projected to hold power until a representative empire-wide elective Constituent Assembly designed a permanent democratic political system for a new and free Russian republic. The October 1917 revolution that upended the Provisional Government and brought Lenin and the Bolsheviks (or Communists) to power derailed this alternative and, together with the brutal civil war that followed, set a path toward the formation of the mature, ultra-authoritarian Soviet political system that lasted for the better part of the twentieth century. Beyond this, it can be argued that the failure to establish the basis for some sort of moderate Russian democratic political and social system in 1917 following the implosion of the tsarist regime haunts the world to this day.

The October 1917 revolution—or the second stage of the "Great Russian Revolution," as the series of momentous political and social events between 1917 and 1922 in Russia are often collectively referred to—began as a bold and earnest, though

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ultimately failed, experiment in egalitarian socialism. In the aftermath of World War I the Soviet revolutionary model set off a high level of alarm among Western governments (the so-called global Red scare) and sparked the ignition of major labor unrest throughout the industrialized world. Yet, these dynamic echoes of events in 1917 Russia, which the Bolsheviks counted on for their own survival, ultimately failed. In March 1921, the party's recognition that worldwide revolutions on the Russian model were likely not imminent brought a temporary measure of moderation to the country's economic, cultural, and to a limited extent even political system (the so-called period of NEP).

During the 1930s through 1953 under Stalin, the Soviet regime was transformed into an all-powerful, highly centralized, ultra-authoritarian political system. In 1933, near global alarm about the further spread of communism helped propel Hitler to power in Germany, setting the stage for World War II. After the Allied victory in that war, in which the Soviet armed forces and civilian population ultimately played the decisive role and paid far and away the dearest price, the Stalinist political system spread into eastern Europe and parts of central Europe. Fear of its further expansion westward gave rise to the first Cold War between East and West lasting from 1954 to 1989. Then suddenly in 1991 the Soviet system unexpectedly imploded. Nonetheless, despite the demise of the USSR, studying the 1917 revolutions and civil war in Russia retains its importance given the centrality of these momentous events in shaping world history for most of the twentieth century.

Study of Russia's revolutionary experience yields fresh insights into issues that remain important and relevant today. For left socialists, the triumph of radical socialism in Russia retains its fascination because of the inspiration it affords for achieving revolutionary, egalitarian goals. For others, who don't view violent political and social upheaval as a promising way of resolving fundamental political, economic, and social problems, Russia's revolutionary experience in 1917 provides a vivid example of the critical importance of resolving problems before they become so overwhelming that popular revolution seems an attractive way of eliminating them or when democratic governments become so

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deeply politically divided and fundamentally unstable that they are susceptible to overthrow by would-be autocrats.

Study of the second phase of the "Great Russian Revolution" beginning in October 1917 provides significant insights into other key issues such as the often cardinal importance of single individuals in history—in the Russian case, of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and Leon [Lev] Trotsky—and the negative consequences of long, brutal wars, not only the "Great War" but also the bloody Russian civil war between the Reds (Communists) and the Whites or "White Guardists" (Communist enemies, domestic and foreign in the parlance of the Soviets). In the Petrograd region the massive impact of the fierce conflict between these two sides lasted from early 1918 through 1919. Finally, this second phase also offers timely insights into the complexities of modern state building.

All these factors contributed to my enduring fascination with the history of the Russian revolutionary era that was initially awakened early in the course of my graduate studies many decades ago. The focus of my first in-depth research project related to the subject was on key, then still barely researched issues pertaining to the origins and character of the abortive July 1917 armed uprising in Petrograd and the role of the Bolsheviks in engineering it. Most basically, I sought to better understand the central, then still unanswered question of whether the infamous insurrection in July was a failed Leninist military coup and precursor of the Bolshevik "seizure" of power in October 1917, as most Russian émigrés and Western observers contended, or rather a spontaneous explosion of popular political protest that the Bolsheviks tried to hold back, as generations of Soviet writers had insisted.

Some pertinent, little-used sources readily available in the West helped me to begin answering this question. Although these sources confirmed the seminal role played by Lenin in pointing the Bolsheviks toward an early socialist revolution at the Seventh All-Russian (Bolshevik) Party Conference in late April 1917, published records of that conference also reveal deep divisions over immediate revolutionary goals among members of the party Central Committee (CC) elected by it.[1] An even more important, rare but nonetheless accessible printed source of critical importance to

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that study were the minutes of weekly meetings of the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee (PK) in 1917.[2] These eye-opening records, first published in 1927, also mirrored the diversity of views about the further development of the revolution among Petrograd Bolsheviks between the February and October 1917 revolutions as well as the party's transformation from a small conspiratorial organization into a mass political party, firmly rooted in the capital city's tumultuous factories and military barracks. Further, they reveal the party's relatively decentralized, flexible, and democratic structure and operational style in 1917.

Moreover, they convey the excitement and energy of Petrograd Bolshevik leaders as they defended what they took to be their rightful prerogatives; assessed rapidly changing global, national, and local political realities; and debated alternate revolutionary strategies and tactics. As regards Bolshevik responsibility for the July uprising, I concluded that the abortive explosion was a valid reflection of popular frustration with the meager results of the February revolution in the revolutionary capital that had been encouraged and supported by local anarchist groups and radical elements in the Bolshevik Military Organization and the PK. To be sure, the uprising was in part a consequence of months-long Bolshevik anti-government agitation and propaganda; however, it erupted contrary to the wishes of a majority of the party's authoritative Central Committee. At that time, the CC was split between radicals who, like Lenin, were concerned that the overthrow of the Provisional Government at that moment would be opposed by the vast majority of peasants in the provinces and soldiers at the front and party moderates such as Lev Kamenev who, more fundamentally, were convinced that a socialist revolution in backward Russia was wildly premature. These findings were developed in my first book, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising.*

At the time that *Prelude to Revolution* was published and I started research for a companion volume on the October revolution, it appeared to me that since the character of the Bolshevik party in the spring and early summer of 1917—especially its tolerance of fundamental programmatic divisions and its decentralized structure and

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responsiveness to the popular mood—had contributed so mightily to the July debacle, subsequent restructuring more in keeping with the traditionally accepted Leninist authoritarian, monolithic model might explain its rapid recovery and ability to take power. This initial premise proved to be incorrect. To my surprise, it turned out that several factors proved to be of crucial import to its success in October: the party's continued acceptance of diverse opinions coupled with its relatively open and democratic operational style; the ongoing sensitivity of its decision making to rapid shifts in mass attitudes; and the broad, enduring popularity of its political program demanding immediate peace, land, and bread, and the transfer of governmental power to multiparty, exclusively socialist soviets pending convocation of a popularly elected Constituent Assembly.

A few examples that are developed and documented in my second book, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, illustrate this point.[3] At the end of August, Petrograd Bolshevik leaders were instrumental in marshaling the forces that stopped an attempted rightist military coup led by General Lavr Kornilov, commander in chief of the Russian army. Following this crucial victory, the party's standing at a popular level, which had stalled in the aftermath of the July uprising, soared once again. Basking in the glow of their central role in Kornilov's defeat, the Bolsheviks won majorities in the Petrograd, Moscow, and some regional soviets.

Roughly two weeks later, in mid-September 1917, Lenin, in two urgent letters from his refuge in nearby Finland to his Central Committee in Petrograd, demanded that it begin organizing the armed overthrow of the Provisional Government "*at once!*" Lenin's mid-September letters, like his April theses, had the seminal effect of refocusing the thinking of much of the Bolshevik party leadership in Petrograd leftward, toward the earliest possible removal of the Provisional Government. For the time being, however, his entreaties were ignored by members of the CC then still in the capital city. The preponderance of available evidence, I found, suggested that they were more attuned than Lenin to the limits of popular support for the party in the capital city, as well as to the strong, continuing attachment of the Petrograd masses to multiparty, exclusively socialist state power exercised through

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