

**A SHORT
HISTORY
OF**

I.B. TAURIS

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Geoffrey Swain





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– *James Harris, Senior Lecturer in Modern European History,
University of Leeds*

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LONDON · NEW YORK

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Timeline

Note: until 1 February 1918 Russia used the old Julian Calendar, meaning that events took place 13 days before the date in those countries using the modern Gregorian Calendar. 1 February 1918 old style became 14 February 1918 new style.

1905

9 January	Bloody Sunday and the start of the 1905 Revolution.
16–17 February	Elected factory delegates debate their response to Bloody Sunday.
13–19 October	The general strike which forced the Tsar to issue his October Manifesto, promising to involve an elected assembly in future legislation.
13 October– 3 December	The St Petersburg Soviet represents workers in discussions with the city authorities, before its Chairman Trotsky and other leaders are arrested.

1906

23 April	Reform of the Fundamental Law details the limited powers of the State Duma and formalises the undemocratic franchise for its election.
27 April–9 July	Sessions of the First State Duma. The Duma was

dissolved when it insisted on pushing ahead with land reform.

1907

- 20 February–
3 June Sessions of the Second State Duma reveal that the Social Democrats found it easier to work with peasant representatives than liberal ones. The Duma was dissolved when it refused to pass the government's proposal for land reform.
- 15 November Opening of Third State Duma on a revised and more restrictive franchise. The government's land reform was passed.

1908

- 10–16 December Congress of Women's Organisations.

1909

- 1–6 April Congress of Factory Panel Doctors – adopted Theses on Social Insurance.
- 28 December–
6 January 1910 Temperance Congress.

1911

- 15–29 January Congress of Handicraft Trades.
- February–March The petition campaign highlights disagreements between reformist and revolutionary worker activists.

Timeline

1912

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 4 April | Lena Gold Fields massacre. |
| 3 June | Closure of the Third State Duma; one of its last acts was to pass a social insurance law. |
| 1 November | Fourth State Duma opens. |

1913

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| January | First elections to insurance councils; only eight factories involved. |
| September | Elections to insurance councils in St Petersburg; reformists defeated. |

1914

- | | |
|-------|---|
| March | Elections to St Petersburg city and provincial insurance boards; reformists defeated. |
|-------|---|

1915

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 27 September | Meeting of St Petersburg factory delegates to appoint representatives to War Industries' Committee. Reformists defeated; no support for war effort. |
| 29 November | Rerun of these elections after Gvozdev's intervention. War effort supported. |

1916

- | | |
|------------|---|
| October | Elections to St Petersburg city and provincial insurance boards; reformists defeated. |
| 1 November | Liberal leader Pavel Milyukov asks in Duma whether it is 'stupidity or treason' that guides the Tsar's poor handling of the war effort. |

17 December Murder of Rasputin held to be responsible for the Tsar's stubborn refusal to work with the Duma and liberal opinion in pursuing the war effort.

1917

26–27 January Arrest of leading members of the Workers' Group on the War Industries' Committee, allegedly planning protests when the Duma session reconvened on 14 February.

22 February As political turf wars caused the distribution of already limited food supplies to collapse, striking workers from the Putilov Works warn their representatives in the Duma that revolution is imminent.

23–28 February Workers' demonstrations provoke the February Revolution and the overthrow of the Tsar. The key turning point came on 26–27 February when first one and then many military units refused to fire on the demonstrating workers.

27 February Moves to re-establish the St Petersburg, now Petrograd, Soviet.

28 February Duma commissioners take over the government ministries.

1 March Petrograd Soviet extended to involve soldiers as well as workers. To reassure those soldiers who had mutinied by refusing to fire on workers, the Soviet passes Order No. 1, insisting that military orders stemming from the Provisional Government, still in the process of formation, had to be endorsed by the Soviet.

2 March The membership of the First Provisional Government agreed: there will be no ministers representing the Soviet, but the Socialist Revolutionary and Duma deputy Kerensky will join the liberals as a lone socialist voice. The Tsar abdicates.

Timeline

10 March	Soviet issues Declaration of the Rights of Soldiers, pre-empting the work of the government's commission on army reform.
10–11 March March	Petrograd returns to work. A series of liberal reforms establish Russia as a democratic state, freed of religious and social oppression.
14 March	Soviet resolution calls for a democratic peace.
24 March	Foreign Minister Milyukov tells press of Russia's need to acquire territory from Austria–Hungary and Turkey.
4 April	Lenin reads out his April Theses, having returned from exile the previous day. His journey from Switzerland, in a sealed train across Germany, caused much controversy.
19 April	Despite a common statement by the Soviet and Provisional Government on war aims being agreed on 27 March, Milyukov wrote to the Allies suggesting that obligations undertaken by the Tsar would be honoured; the Tsar had signed secret treaties on the acquisition of territory from Austria–Hungary and Turkey.
20–21 April	Demonstrations by soldiers and workers in protest at Milyukov's apparent determination that the Provisional Government to ignore the Soviet's call for a democratic peace. Soon afterwards, Milyukov resigned.
4–28 May	All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies.
5 May	Formation of the First Coalition Government. For the next two months, guided by Tsereteli, the Soviet Executive works to prove itself a loyal partner in government.
12 May	Kerensky commits the Russian Army to an offensive and starts a series of tours of the front.
23 May	The Bolshevik Military Organisation resolves to oppose any attempt to involve troops from the Petrograd garrison in the offensive.
27 May	The Conference of Petrograd People's Militias protests at Tsereteli's decision to wind up the

	workers' factory-based volunteer Red Guards and impose a professional civic militia.
3–24 June	First All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets.
10 June	A planned Bolshevik demonstration demanding a Soviet Government is called off after an appeal from the First Congress of Soviets.
16–23 June	First All-Russian Conference of the Bolshevik Military Organisation.
18 June	A demonstration organised by the First Congress of Soviets is hijacked by the Bolsheviks – banners demanding a Soviet Government clearly predominate.
18 June	Offensive starts on the Eastern Front. After some initial success, it was clear within a fortnight that it had failed.
30 June	Soviet tries to persuade the First Machine Gun Regiment, based in Petrograd, that it should be 'reorganised' and some of its units sent to support the offensive. In response, the machine-gunners threaten to overthrow the government.
2 July	Liberal ministers leave the First Coalition Government because of an agreement negotiated by its socialist members to recognise a degree of autonomy for Ukraine.
3 July	Bolsheviks win control of the Workers' Section of the Petrograd Soviet, but not its Soldiers' Section.
3–4 July	The July Days. Workers join soldiers and sailors protesting at the plans to deploy garrison troops to the front and demanding that a Soviet Government be established. Lenin insists insufficient preparations have been made to enforce the formation of a Soviet Government and calls the demonstrations off. In the aftermath, leading Bolsheviks are arrested and Lenin goes into hiding.
8–24 July	Negotiations to establish a second Coalition Government headed by Kerensky. During these

Timeline

	negotiations, on 18 July, General Kornilov is appointed Supreme Commander.
17 July	Inter-district Conference of Soviets re-established and quickly falls under Bolshevik leadership.
7 August	Second Conference of Factory Committees, dominated by Bolsheviks.
10 August	Kornilov and Kerensky meet to discuss Kornilov's 'programme', which included the restoration of the death penalty and the establishment of military rule over the war economy.
12–15 August	The Moscow State Conference gives Kornilov a hero's welcome.
23 August	Ministry of Labour circular clarifying the limited powers of factory committees.
23–24 August	Talks between Kerensky's representative and Kornilov seem to go well: most of Kornilov's 'programme' would be introduced and any Bolshevik protest firmly resisted.
26–27 August	Kerensky warned that Kornilov is in fact preparing to stage a military coup. In response, he calls on the Soviet to defend the revolution.
1 September	Petrograd Soviet votes for a Soviet Government, a vote repeated on 9 September.
14–22 September	Democratic Conference backs the proposal for a third Coalition Government headed by Kerensky.
24 September	Bolsheviks vote not to participate in the Pre-parliament, to which the Third Coalition Government would have some responsibility.
25 September	Third Coalition Government formed.
6 October	Commander of the Petrograd Military District told to prepare to move garrison troops to the front.
7 October	The Bolsheviks walk out of the Pre-parliament.
10 October	Lenin attends a meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee which puts an insurrection 'on the order of the day'.
12 October	Trotsky, now Soviet chairman, established the Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee

	(MRC) to prevent garrison troops being redeployed.
16 October	The Bolshevik Central Committee again debates insurrection. The following day, Zinoviev and Kamenev make public their opposition to an insurrection.
17–22 October	First All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees.
18–21 October	Conference of the Petrograd Garrison.
21–23 October	MRC deploys commissars to all garrison units.
24 October	Kerensky closes the Bolshevik press and demands the arrest of the MRC commissars. Soldiers and Red Guards reopen the Bolshevik press and prevent the arrest of commissars. The cruiser <i>Aurora</i> supports the MRC. The Pre-parliament passes a vote of no confidence in Kerensky. Delegates to the Second Congress of Soviets vote to establish a Soviet Coalition Government. Lenin urges the Bolsheviks to seize power.
25 October	MRC takes control of strategic points of Petrograd. Troops loyal to Kerensky defend the Winter Palace, which surrenders only between 2 am and 3 am on 26 October. Second Congress of Soviets votes to establish a Soviet Government, but does not discuss its composition.
26 October	The newly formed Left SR (Socialist Revolutionary) party declines a Bolshevik invitation to join them in government. At 2.30 am on the morning of 27 October, the Bolsheviks announce the composition of their purely Bolshevik administration.
28 October	The Railway Workers' Union (Vikzhel) calls for the formation of a Soviet Coalition Government.
29 October	Officer cadets loyal to Kerensky try to overthrow the Bolsheviks. Talks brokered by Vikzhel begin with the aim of forming a Soviet Coalition Government.
30 October	A military advance by troops loyal to Kerensky

Timeline

	is defeated on the outskirts of Petrograd by Red Guard units organised by the MRC and commanded by Lt.-Col. Muraviev.
31 October– 4 November	Talks on the formation of a Soviet Coalition Government continue. Agreement seems possible, but Lenin uses party discipline to prevent it.
4 November	Those Bolsheviks opposed to Lenin resign from his government in protest.
11 November	Extraordinary Congress of Peasant Soviets backs Left SRs.
12 November	Elections to Constituent Assembly begin.
14 November	Bolsheviks and Left SRs agree in principle to form a government. A Left SR appointed commissar of agriculture.
14–16 November	Contradictory instructions from the Bolshevik Government and the Fifth Congress of Petrograd Factory Committees on workers' rights.
20 November	Once the armies deployed in the North and West come out in support of the MRC, Lenin feels strong enough to arrest Kerensky's Supreme Army Commander and push ahead with armistice talks.
27 November	Second Congress of Peasant Soviets confirms backing for Left SRs.
2 December	Armistice agreed with Germany and Austria-Hungary.
9 December	Left SRs formally join government with four portfolios.
15 December	The Left SR commissar of justice achieves the release of political prisoners arrested by the MRC.

1918

4 January	After a trial of strength with the Bolsheviks, the Left SRs secure the right to be represented in the Cheka, the new secret police.
5 January	Constituent Assembly dissolved, after which

	the Third Congress of Soviets and the Third Congress of Peasant Soviets merge to form a new sovereign Soviet Executive.
7–14 January	First Trade Union Congress restricts the power of factory committees.
28 January	Peace talks at Brest-Litovsk break down and Trotsky announces a policy of ‘no peace, no war’.
1/14 February	Russia moves from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar.
16 February	Germany announces it will resume fighting on 18 February, which it does.
18–19 February	Bolshevik and Left SR members of the government vote to seek new terms with Germany. When those terms are known, on 23 February, Lenin persuades the Bolsheviks to accept them, but the Left SRs will not.
3 March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed, endorsed by the Fourth Congress of Soviets on 15 March. The Left SRs leave the government.
13 March	First meeting of the ‘Workers’ Conference of Factory Representatives’, reflecting loss of Bolshevik support in factories.
15 May	Discussions begin with the German ambassador about a possible trade treaty. This marks the end of a period when Trotsky had suggested that the ‘breathing space’ offered by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk might only last ‘a couple of months’ and contacts with Britain and France had continued.
8 June	Building on ‘production brigades’ established the previous month to extract grain from the peasantry by force, ‘committees of the poor’ are established by the Bolsheviks to support the expropriation of grain from ‘kulaks’ (rich peasants). On 11 June the Left SRs announce that the Peasant Section of the Soviet would resist this policy.
24 June	Left SRs call for an end to Lenin’s ‘breathing

6 July

space' and for terror to be used against 'representatives of German imperialism'.

Left SRs assassinate the German ambassador. Bolshevik gerrymandering of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets has convinced them there was no democratic way of preventing Lenin's Russia from becoming 'a colony of German imperialism'. The Left SR attempt to impose a new coalition of equal numbers of Left SRs and anti-Lenin Bolsheviks fails.

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that the events of 1917 in Russia set the political map for the rest of the twentieth century. The October Revolution of that year set in train the communist experiment, and the triumph of communism in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s prompted, as a reaction, the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe and culminated in the barbaric horrors of World War II. Then, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the obsession during the Cold War was the expansion of communism and its containment. Most of the history of the twentieth century can be traced back to the events of the night of 24–25 October 1917 when the street action which brought the Bolsheviks to power took place.¹ So how did Lenin and the Bolsheviks win and consolidate their power?

Writing history is all about editing the past to make sense of it. Writing a Short History of the complex events which occurred in Russia between February 1917 and July 1918 inevitably means that much has to be left out; however, even in a Short History there is a duty to suggest some interpretive guidelines through the maze of confusion that is the Russian Revolution. The interpretation offered here is simple and twofold. It is argued first, as Soviet scholars once argued, that the October Revolution represented the culmination of those revolutionary ambitions first articulated by Russia's masses during the failed 1905 Revolution; the essence of 'October' was a popular revolution against a discredited Provisional Government which restored the revolution to the path it had been on when the Tsar was overthrown in February. Second, however, and quite unlike