

Russia 1917: A Revolution in two acts

The absolutist and autocratic monarchy of the czar Nicholas II had become seriously injured already in 1905 when the remote monarch, that set himself apart voluntarily from a reality in constant evolution in its country as in the rest of the world, refused to yield the power and repressed bloodily the popular uprising of February-May of that year.

The minimum reforms reluctantly undertaken by the monarch did nothing more than increasing the contradictions of an outdated system. Lenin, founder of the Bolshevik party, commanded a proletariat increasingly repressed, dissatisfied and poor and led them towards a growing subversion that finished in the fateful year of 1917, in the midst of the First World War – the “Great War” as it was called -- . The war complicated even further the shortages, the misfortune and the desperation of the people. Nicolas II had lost the confidence and the esteem of its subjects. His monarchy was not only irrelevant but it was identified with all the wrongs of society. The uprising was total and it was impossible to stop even by force.

On March 15, 1917, March 2, according to the Russian calendar, at night, Nicolas II finally abdicated his throne. “Everyone has betrayed me”, said the czar “around me there is nothing more than treason, cowardice and deceit”.

Thus finished a dynasty, that of the Romanoffs, that had lasted more than 300 years.

The news travelled through the world very fast. “La Révolution populaire triomphe in Russie”, was the headline of the Parisian newspaper *Le Journal* of March 17, 1917, upon giving account of the abdication of Nicolas II. The commentator of the newspaper did not hide his happiness with the events: “Salut a la Russie nouvelle!. Salut au peuple ruse, maître de ses destinées, conscient de son rôle et de ses devoirs. Honneur aux initiateurs du grand mouvement d’énergie, de droiture et de santé morale qui transfigure la nation amie, la rapproche encore de nous dans un commun idéal, et nous rapproche tous ensemble de la victoire!”.

“Vive la Russie Libre!” proclaimed across the front page the Russian newspaper “Feuille de Péetrograd” of March 18 upon giving account of the text of the abdication of the czar.

This was only the beginning.

The abdication, as a Russian politician said, had not been the result of a conspiracy or of a “coup” planned in advance, it was a movement that arose from the base and took quickly an anarchic character that left the authorities impotent. The revolution was going to run its full course until November when the Bolsheviks, that had been in the vanguard of the fight against the regime of the zar, gained absolute power.

Lenin had organized the peasants and workers in small soviets and its main political campaign was based on the phrase “All the power for the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers”. It went hand in hand with another that was also a pillar of the Bolshevik demands: “Peace!, Bread!, Land! ”.

At the end, almost nine months after the abdication of the czar, the Bolsheviks were victorious.

The popular discontent for the tragic participation of Russia in the war was so enormous that the first description that was given in some newspapers to the revolutionaries was that of “pacifists”. But they, supported by soldiers who were against the war and were also organized in “soviets”, was no more than one of the components of the popular movement against the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky, which was formed after the abdication of the czar.

A newspapers in the United States, the *Nashville Tennessean*, whose first page we reproduce here, headed its information of November 9, 1917 on the seizure of the power by the Bolsheviks, which happened November 7 (25 October according to the Russian calendar), in this way: “Petrograd again is in turmoil. The provisional government has been thrown out of power by the extreme radicals headed by Nikolai Lenine. Premier Kerensky has fled the capital; several of his ministers have been placed under arrest, and the Winter Palace, the seat of the government, has been bombarded by the guns of the cruiser *Aurora* and of the Saint Peter and Saint Paul fortress and forced to surrender to the revolutionists”.

The days that followed were of great confusion. Contradictory reports spoke on one hand that Kerensky had returned to Petrograd and had seized the power back from the Bolsheviks. On the other hand others reports indicated that Lenin continued firmly in control and the city was in the hands of its followers. Some sensationalistic headlines spoke of a “reign of terror” in a city that was little less

than in flames...But many of these news, of second or third hand, were based on stories of travellers that had abandoned the city.

Another American newspaper, for example, published as its main story a report by the Associated Press news agency which reproduced an article of a Danish paper which, at the same time, quoted a Swedish businessman: "A dispatch to the Berlingske Tidende says that Eric Hjorth, a Swedish director, who left Petrograd Saturday and arrived at Haparanda, declares that the situation in the Russian capital is terrible. Virtually all administration has ceased, the authorities having given up all attempts to continue work. Bolsheviki soldiers and sailors were sweeping thru the city like robber bands, committing all sorts of crimes and excesses. Food was exceedingly scarce and prices were so high that it was impossible to pay them. Nearly the entire population was awaiting the arrival of the Kerensky troops to be relieved of the terrorism".

A Spanish daily, "La Correspondencia Militar" emphasized, November 9, the four points of the program of the new authorities: First, an offering of immediate peace. Second, immediate distribution of land from the big estates to the peasants. Third, transfer of all the power to the Soviets. Fourth, immediate convocation of the Constituent Assembly.

In Central América, "La Estrella de Panamá" sentenced, November 12, in its front page under the title "A matter of hours" the following: "A wireless dispatch says that it's only a matter of hours before the Bolshevik revolution fails and the government of Kerensky be re-established".

But little by little things were becoming clearer. Kerensky launched his troops to reconquer the Petrograd, yes, but after four days of fighting they were defeated by the Bolsheviks.

It was not easy for them to consolidate power but gradually the state that Lenin had planned was taking shape.

Russia had changed totally the course of its history and opened a chapter in her that would not close until 74 years later.

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