

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 148

“Peace, Land, and Bread”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“The existing government of landlords and capitalists must be replaced by a new government, a government of workers and peasants. The existing pseudo-government which was not elected by the people and which is not accountable to the people must be replaced by a government recognized by the people, elected by representatives of the workers, soldiers and peasants and held accountable to their representatives.”

Joseph Stalin. Editorial published in *Pravda* in October 1917.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 148. Peace, Land, and Bread.

When we left off, at the end of last week’s episode, the Kornilov Affair was over. Kornilov was relieved of his position as commander-in-chief of the Russian Army and placed under arrest, along with a few dozen other officers. Even from our perspective, a hundred years later, it’s hard to say what actually happened during the Kornilov Affair. Was it some sort of right-wing reaction, meant to strengthen the Army and weaken the socialists? Was it Kerensky trying to strengthen his own position by weakening the right wing? If it was either of those things, it backfired, because both the Army and the Provisional Government came out of this affair in weaker positions than they had when they went into it. The only faction coming out of this mess looking better is the Bolsheviks.

We’ll come back to them. Was this whole episode a comedy of errors caused by a misunderstanding? Or had Vladimir Lvov deliberately created a misunderstanding, for his own unfathomable reasons? Either or both are possible. But whatever the motives of the participants, there is no doubt that Russia herself is weaker and more divided, her government more shaky, her future more in doubt, than at any time since the February Revolution. About the only way

things could get any worse for the Russian state would be if the Germans chose this moment to go on the offensive.

And that's exactly what they did. On September 3, the German Army captured the city of Riga. This actually happened early in the Kornilov Affair, at about the same time Alexander Kerensky was first coming around to the view that the next threat was more likely a right-wing coup rather than another left-wing coup such as the Bolsheviks had attempted during the July Days.

You know, perhaps I should have mentioned the fall of Riga in last week's episode. I wanted to. But I didn't, because I couldn't find a way to connect it to the narrative of the falling out between Kerensky and Kornilov that led to the Kornilov Affair. This surprised me; it still surprises me, because I think the fall of Riga is a big deal. For you and me, it's a reminder that the Russian Revolution is taking place in the middle of the biggest war Russia has ever been involved in. For the Russians, it's an ominous sign that the uncertainty and instability of the past six months is fatally undermining the Russian Army's ability to defend the Motherland. And yet, there's little evidence that any of the key Russian leaders in Petrograd, including Kerensky, were willing to look away from their political concerns long enough to take note of the fact that a major city has fallen to the enemy. That fact alone speaks volumes about how dangerous the Russian political situation has become, and it may well be part of what set Vladimir Lvov or Lavr Kornilov or both of them down the path that led to the Kornilov Affair.

You probably know the city of Riga in our day as the capital of the nation of Latvia, the middle one of the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that lie side by side along the southeastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Riga sits at the mouth of the Daugava River, where it empties into the Gulf of Riga.

Riga offers a good harbor and it has been a trade city since ancient times. It was a stop along the trade route the Vikings used to get to Constantinople. German merchants were settling in Riga and along the Baltic coast by the eleventh century. There followed missionaries who worked to convert the pagan Baltic tribes that lived in this region to Christianity. Later came the Teutonic Knights and what have been called the Northern Crusades. Riga was for a time part of the Hanseatic League and a Free and Imperial City within the framework of the Holy Roman Empire. Later, the portions of the Baltic States south of Riga, that is, Lithuania and part of Latvia, became the Lithuanian portion of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The region from Riga north, that is, the rest of Latvia and Estonia, were occupied by Sweden during the Thirty Years' War.

Riga fell to Peter the Great in 1710, along with the rest of Sweden's Baltic holdings. The partitions of Poland brought the rest of the region under Russian control, though it's worth noting that there was still a substantial ethnic German population in this region, as much as 40% of the population of some of the cities, including Riga, as late as the early twentieth century. Some

expansionist-minded Germans coveted this region as a potential German annexation following victory over the Russians.

By the time of the Great War, Riga had a population of about half a million and was the home to more factories and more manufacturing than any other city in the Russian Empire apart from Petrograd and Moscow.

The importance of Riga at this moment in our narrative stems from the fact that Riga is now at the northern end of the Eastern Front. This has been the case for two years now. If you can remember all the way back to episode 122, that was in 1915, two years ago. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had begun a German offensive on the Eastern Front that led to a major Russian withdrawal, sometimes known as the Great Retreat. When the Great Retreat was over, the northern end of the German front line had almost reached Riga, and so the situation has remained for two years, until September 1917, when a rapid German assault captured the city in just two days, forcing the Russian Twelfth Army into retreat. I did briefly mention this two episodes ago, but it's worth taking a moment to consider the military implications.

Apart from the significance of Riga as a major city and port within the Russian Empire, its fall puts the Germans within 300 miles of Petrograd. The thought of German soldiers marching through the streets of the Russian capital was unthinkable, but after the fall of Riga, it was becoming perhaps a little less unthinkable. How did we get here? It's not so much that the German Army has suddenly gotten better, it's that the Russian Army is deteriorating. Morale is low; the desertion rate is high. We've seen this trend for years, and the Revolution and the subsequent fighting among political factions in Petrograd have been aggravating the problem. And, it has to be said, the Bolsheviks are having an impact. The Bolsheviks are sending agitators to the front line to preach the Bolshevik doctrine of defeatism, which is just what it sounds like, a message of peace, peace now, peace even if it means a Russian defeat. The war is being fought for the benefit of the aristocratic landowners and the capitalists, so don't trust your officers, lay down your arms, and let's just end this thing already.

The Twelfth Army, which was holding the northern end of the line, including Riga, was the army closest to Petrograd, and therefore the one that Bolshevik agitators had the easiest access to and the most contact with.

[music: *Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 5*]

The end of the Kornilov Affair was pretty much also the end of the Provisional Government. We saw last time how Kerensky had asked the Provisional Government to turn over its powers to him, and for the next two months, Kerensky will rule Russia as a virtual dictator, aided by a few close allies, and with the Provisional Government functioning mostly as a fig leaf. Of course, the Provisional Government never was anything more than a self-appointed committee of lawyer-legislators who were only able to lead the country so long as ordinary Russians showed a willingness to follow. The Provisional Government was popular at first, mostly because it wasn't

the Emperor, but when it didn't seem to be leading Russia anywhere, the Russian people stopped following it.

On the other hand, to call Kerensky a dictator is overstating his power. He was a dictator in the classic Roman sense of a leader for a time of emergency, but what powers he had came from the Provisional Government, which is another way of saying he didn't have very much power at all.

Kerensky was a man of the left himself, and he was always more concerned with shoring up his support among socialists than among the liberals and the monarchists. After the Kornilov Affair was over and Kornilov was safely in prison, Kerensky declared Russia a republic on September 14. It's hard to believe that it took six months just to make the call on whether the future of the Russian nation was a constitutional monarchy or a republic, but there it is. Grand Duke Mikhail, the deposed Emperor's younger brother, has been waiting in the wings all this time, carefully explaining to anyone who asked that he was ready to take the crown if and when the Provisional Government asked him to. Now he knows that they aren't going to. This basic inability to move forward on fundamental political reforms is an important reason why the Provisional Government has been losing support.

As I said, and strangely enough, the only faction that came out of the Kornilov Affair in a stronger position than when it went in is the Bolsheviks, strangely enough. The July Days were, well, just two months ago. The Bolsheviks had apparently attempted to seize control of the government by force, had failed, and had been exposed as working for the Germans. Or at least, funded by the Germans.

This made them look bad to their opponents, but remember that within the radical worldview of the Bolsheviks, Russia doesn't matter. Germany doesn't matter. The war doesn't matter. All that matters is bringing about the socialist revolution, toppling the governments of both Russia and Germany and moving on to the socialist promised land. From the Bolshevik point of view, the German government is foolishly funding its own demise along with the demise of the Russian Provisional Government. And that's great. Boo-yeah!

The Kerensky government, meanwhile, having denounced the Bolsheviks as German-funded traitors, had now armed the Bolsheviks when it looked like Kornilov's troops were marching on the capital. This was great propaganda for the Bolsheviks, who went from being traitors to being the only people you can really count on to defend the Revolution in a matter of weeks. They also got tens of thousands of rifles, which they, uh, didn't give back.

Besides having carved out this niche for themselves as the only people you can really count on to defend the Revolution, they also benefitted from being the largest opposition party, once the other socialist parties cast their lots with Kerensky and the Provisional Government. So if you were a Russian who opposed the monarchy, supported the Revolution, but thought the Provisional Government either incompetent or corrupted by capitalist interests, the only place to go to express your dissatisfaction was to the Bolsheviks.

And voters in local council elections in Petrograd and Moscow, Russia's two largest cities, were doing just that. In September elections in Petrograd, held just before the Kornilov Affair, the Bolshevik share of the vote went from 20% to 33%. In Moscow, from 11% to 50%. I should note, too, that turnout was plunging in local elections since the February Revolution. In the early days, turnout was usually over 80%. By now, it's under 50%.

In early October, the Bolsheviks took a majority of seats in the Moscow Soviet for the first time. A few days later, they took the majority in the Petrograd Soviet, giving them 13 out of 22 seats on the Ispolkom, the Executive Committee.

The voters were becoming disillusioned and frustrated and they were showing it by not showing up to vote, or, increasingly, by showing up and voting Bolshevik, probably as a statement of no confidence in the Provisional Government.

And in the aftermath of the Kornilov Affair and the arming of the Bolsheviks, the Kerensky Government pulled back on prosecution of the Bolsheviks, at the behest of the Petrograd Soviet. This in spite of the fact that the raid on Bolshevik headquarters at the Kshessinskaya Mansion had yielded a treasure trove of incriminating evidence. Instead of pushing forward with prosecutions for treason, the investigation was shut down. Most of the arrested Bolsheviks were released, except for 27, against whom charges had already been brought.

One of those released was Leon Trotsky who quickly became the leader of the Bolshevik contingent at the Petrograd Soviet, and then became chair of the Ispolkom, the Executive Committee, the day after the Bolsheviks took control. Lenin was still in hiding at that point, though Ispolkom was pressing the government to guarantee Lenin's safety and pledge to grant him a fair trial.

At the same time this was going on, Kornilov and a couple of dozen Russian officers were still in prison. You can imagine the effect this had on the morale of Army officers, that the leftists running the Soviet were oh-so-concerned that the traitor Lenin be treated fairly, while Kornilov the patriot cooled his heels in a military prison, awaiting an uncertain fate. General Mikhail Alexeyev, the man who had agreed to re-assume the position of commander in chief of the Russian military after that embarrassing episode when Kerensky offered the job to two other generals who turned it down, he resigned from the position himself just a couple of weeks later, in protest against the way Kornilov was treated.

The moderate leftists, like Kerensky, looked after their own while being deeply suspicious of the political right. And in guarding the right flank of the rapidly decaying Provisional Government so zealously against the much-feared counterrevolution, Kerensky was allowing the left flank to go unguarded, opening up an opportunity for the Bolsheviks.

The principal Bolshevik rallying cry until now has been "All power to the soviets," which meant different things to different people. Some heard in that slogan a call for "all power to the

socialists,” while more dedicated Bolsheviks heard in it “all power to Bolshevik-dominated soviets,” since the Bolshevik leadership maintained, even as they called for all power to the soviets, that the Bolsheviks would not necessarily support soviets controlled by other parties, even after the soviets got “all power.”

Lenin himself was still a fugitive, charged with treason, even as he led what was fast becoming the most powerful political party in Russia. From his Finnish hideaway, Lenin declared that the slogan “All power to the soviets” was now obsolete and should be discarded. It was still used, but now the main Bolshevik slogan is “Peace, land, and bread.” So let me say a few words about that.

“Peace” is easy enough to understand. As I’ve noted before, all the socialist parties oppose the war, but the parties supporting the Kerensky government oppose the war in principle while telling soldiers to keep fighting until the government can work something out. The government called for all belligerent nations to sit down and begin peace talks, but the French and especially the British wanted nothing to do with that idea. There was little enthusiasm for entering into a separate peace with Germany, and no evidence that the Germans were willing to agree to a peace without indemnities and annexations, as the socialist slogan had it. Socialists in Germany were getting more outspoken about ending the war, as we have seen, and by the autumn of 1917, German and Russian socialists were meeting at a conference in neutral Stockholm to look for a way out of the war, but that effort went nowhere.

Meanwhile, while every other political faction in Russia is saying, “Peace, but not yet,” the Bolsheviks were saying “Peace.” As in, just lay down your arms and stop fighting. It may not sound very practical, but it was becoming increasingly appealing to Russians who were getting tired and tired of the government’s excuses.

“Land” was shorthand for land reform, as well as for industrial reforms that would allow workers more control in the factories, and it’s the same story here. The position of the government and the other left-leaning parties was “Yes, reform someday, but not yet.” The Bolsheviks were saying, “Enough with the waiting, let’s do this thing already.”

And then there’s “Bread.” I’m going to go ahead and assume that anyone listening to this podcast already knows what bread is. Bread is likely the world’s oldest prepared food and has been around for at least 30,000 years. In contrast, recorded history only goes back about 6,000 years. Bread is found all over the world and is a staple food in many places, including Russia, a land that produces huge quantities of wheat and rye. Bread is a religious sacrament in nations that practice Christianity, including Russia. Offering bread and salt as a gesture of friendship and hospitality is an ancient Slavic custom, still practiced in, among other places, Russia. There’s a Russian proverb that says with a piece of bread in your hand, you’ll find paradise. Russian folklore claims that when we die, we’ll be weighed against the amount of bread we wasted in our lives to determine whether we go to heaven or hell.

And in many cultures and languages, Russian included, “bread” functions as a metaphor for survival, for earning a living, for prosperity. In the Bolshevik slogan, we’re talking about bread both in the literal and metaphorical senses. Food is in short supply in Russia, and bread is one of the foods that is hard to find, and expensive when you find it. You’ll recall that food shortages helped trigger the February Revolution, and the food situation has not gotten better under the new regime. Food rations have been shrinking all year and prices are skyrocketing. The railroads and the rest of the food distribution system are collapsing, and as winter comes, some parts of Russia face out-and-out starvation. These are bitter pills for a nation and a people that just a few years ago were major food exporters.

With food prices climbing, even factory workers, even professionals, are finding it hard to make ends meet. Factories are still closing for lack of coal, and even when they’re open, the workers find that the cost of food is eating up a larger and larger share of their pay packets. The economy is getting weaker and the Petrograd stock market is collapsing, meaning even the wealthiest Russians are feeling the pinch.

What I’m getting at here is that poor people are starving and the people in the middle can’t afford anything *but* basic foodstuffs, and even the rich are finding their wealth shrinking. And the Bolsheviks have summed up everyone’s woes brilliantly with one word: *bread*.

Calls for peace and for land reform, and by extension, economic reform, are calls for the Provisional Government to lead Russia forward, to a better place. The call for bread, by contrast, suggests not merely that life in Russia is not getting better, but that it’s getting worse. And the problems go beyond food distribution. Food shortages touch everyone and are a fundamental social problem, of course, but by autumn of 1917, Russia was facing not only the breakdown of food production and distribution, but of law and order.

I’ve mentioned a few times now the high rate of desertion in the Russian Army; hundreds of thousands just in the past year. I haven’t said much yet about where these deserting soldiers go. Desertion was a crime, and these deserting soldiers were liable for arrest and imprisonment if they were discovered. On the other hand, the government was losing its ability to track them down and arrest them. And many of them were armed. Some of these soldiers, the ones who belonged to ethnic minorities, might go home and join the fight for autonomy or independence for their local regions. Some rural soldiers took their rifles back to the farms and imposed their own do-it-yourself land reform. And some of them simply roamed across Russia, begging, stealing, and robbing, sometimes organized into bandit gangs.

Robberies of travelers on deserted stretches of road became common, and Russia has plenty of long stretches of empty road. Railroad robberies too, made easier by the fact that the stations are far apart and what trains remain in Russia frequently break down.

The American journalist and war correspondent John Reed, whom we last met in episode 115, when he was making his reputation by writing magazine pieces profiling Pancho Villa, arrived in

Petrograd at about this point in our narrative. Reed sent home dispatches describing how the newspapers in Petrograd were full of stories of violent crimes, how it had become risky merely to take a stroll across town, and relating how he'd witnessed a young man who had been caught stealing beaten to death by an angry mob.

The government had difficulty enforcing tax law, which meant it was short on money, which meant soldiers weren't always paid on time, war widows did not always receive their pension payments, and workers in the arms factories didn't always get their wages. The bread ration was reduced to one pound per day in October. Then a half a pound per day. Then there wasn't any.

In circumstances like this, where the government becomes unable to fulfill even the most basic of functions, public support for a change of government grows. Changing the government might be risky, but the risk has to be weighed against the certainty that the existing government was failing.

[music: *Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 5*]

As if to provide a pointed reminder of the Russian Provisional Government's increasing inability to function, on October 12, 1917, the German Army and Navy executed minesweeping and amphibious landings in the Gulf of Riga to capture the West Estonian Archipelago, which is a cluster of two large islands and many small islands at the mouth of the Gulf of Riga, in a brilliant operation ironically codenamed Albion, after the ancient name for the island of Britain.

The German High Seas Fleet may have been bottled into the North Sea, but the Kiel Canal made it possible to move Germany's heavy battleships into the Baltic, where the Russian Baltic Fleet was no match for them, outnumbered as it was and riddled with Bolsheviks. The operation forced the surrender of over 20,000 Russian soldiers on the islands, at a cost to the Germans of about 200 killed and a further 200 wounded.

The fall of these islands put the Russian military in a precarious situation. It gave the Germans a safe haven from which they could conduct further amphibious operations along the Russian Baltic coast, including potentially large-scale landings behind the Russian front line, possibly endangering Petrograd itself. The Russian Army, meanwhile, was being undermined by Bolshevik agitators, who now came to the front with the imprimatur of the Petrograd Soviet. It was not clear how much longer the Army could be counted upon to fight.

Kerensky knew it was only a matter of time before either the Army collapsed and the Germans marched into Petrograd or the Bolsheviks made another attempt to seize power. The opposition to the Bolsheviks was growing weak and fragmented. Everyone who had so far opposed the Bolsheviks to defend the Provisional Government had found themselves attacked as counterrevolutionaries by the very government they were trying to defend. There was no one left in Russian political or military circles willing to stick their head in that particular noose any longer.

In mid-October, Kerensky sent the British government a diplomatic cable warning them that unless he got help from his allies, “I don’t think I shall be able to keep the army in the trenches.” He met with the British ambassador, Sir George Buchanan and begged the British to open armistice talks with the Central Powers, or else, he warned, “Russia would be plunged into utter anarchy as soon as November.”

On October 18, Kerensky met with his ministers and suggested that the government evacuate Petrograd and relocate to Moscow. The suggestion was controversial within the government and it quickly leaked to the newspapers. This allowed the Bolsheviks on the Ispolkom the opportunity to condemn Kerensky as a defeatist and possibly a German collaborator. Ispolkom voted to oppose the move.

At about this same time, Lenin sneaked back into Petrograd to meet with the Bolshevik Central Committee and he made his case that the time had come to seize power from Kerensky and the Provisional Government. Zinoviev and most of the Bolshevik leadership were skeptical. They had already tried this twice, and had been beaten twice. At the moment, the momentum seemed to be in the Bolsheviks’ favor. They were gaining support all the time. Anyway, the Constituent Assembly election was now only about six weeks away. Why risk everything to overthrow a Provisional Government that would soon be shutting itself down?

Lenin loudly disagreed. There was no way the Bolsheviks were going to win a majority in the Constituent Assembly, where many of the representatives would be coming from rural parts of the country where there was zero Bolshevik presence. Also, if Kerensky succeeded in moving the government to Moscow, that would offer him the perfect excuse to postpone the election, or perhaps postpone the seating of the Constituent Assembly. After a long and angry debate, Trotsky proposed a compromise. There was going to be a meeting of the All-Russia Congress of Soviets on November 7. This was a body of about 800 delegates, representing soviets from across the nation. The first such meeting had been held in June; this would be the second one. Trotsky proposed that the Bolsheviks seize power in the name of the Congress of Soviets. The Central Committee agreed to Trotsky’s compromise.

On Sunday, November 4, Sir George Buchanan delivered the British government’s reply to Kerensky’s cry for help. In a testy meeting, Buchanan told Kerensky that Britain and France intended to press on with the war. The next day, Monday, November 5, Kerensky moved out of the Winter Palace, where he had been living since taking over in July and moved into the headquarters of the Petrograd Garrison.

On Tuesday, November 6, Kerensky received intelligence that a Bolshevik coup was imminent. He shut down phone and trolley lines and posted military cadets to guard the Winter Palace and key government buildings. Several Bolshevik leaders were arrested, though many were not, and Lenin himself, still a wanted criminal, once again evaded arrest. Kerensky wired General Cheremisov, the commander of the Northern Front, at his headquarters in Pskov and ordered that

loyal units be sent to the capital to defend it against the Bolsheviks. Cheremisov handed the cable to his aide and said, "This is political and has nothing to do with me." No troops were sent.

Kerensky had tried to cut off the Bolsheviks' ability to communicate, but they were able to put out a statement declaring that counterrevolutionaries, or "Kornilovists," as they put it, were mobilizing to crush the Congress of Soviets and the Constituent Assembly, and therefore it fell to the Bolsheviks to defend the Revolution. There's a heavy irony here. Just two months ago, the Kerensky government accused General Kornilov of plotting to overthrow it. Now the Kerensky government itself was being accused of "Kornilovism."

The following day, Wednesday, November 7, the day the Congress of Soviets convened, the Bolsheviks made their move. It was surprisingly simple. Before dawn, Bolshevik fighters took control of key positions from Kerensky's cadets by the simple technique of walking up to them and telling them, "We're here to relieve you." Bolsheviks took over the telephone office and disconnected government telephones. At 10:00 that morning, the Bolsheviks announced that they had taken control of the Provisional Government, although at that moment it was not yet true. The Provisional Government was holed up at the Winter Palace. All they had left to protect them were about two hundred soldiers and Cossacks, two hundred women fighters from one of the Women's Battalions Kerensky had organized, and a handful of army cadets. The Bolsheviks had the support of about 10,000 soldiers and sailors. The other soldiers in the Petrograd Garrison, numbering about 150,000, chose to sit this one out.

At 11:30, Kerensky sent cables to Russia's allies, asking them not to recognize the coming Bolshevik government. Then it was his turn to follow Lenin's lead and go undercover. Disguised as a Serbian military officer, Kerensky fled Petrograd in a car lent to him by the United States Embassy, one with little American flags flying from the fenders. Kerensky fled the city hoping to gather loyal soldiers under his personal command and march them into the capital to disperse the Bolsheviks. But in fact, there were few in the Russian military willing to rally to his cause. They remembered General Kornilov. Alexander Kerensky would never see Petrograd again.

Despite the Bolshevik proclamation, and despite Kerensky's departure, the remaining ministers of the Provisional Government stayed in the Winter Palace with their motley palace guard, as Bolshevik fighters gathered outside. But the Bolsheviks were reluctant to storm the palace. The cruiser *Aurora*, that ship full of Bolshevik sailors, was summoned once again to the Winter Palace. The Bolsheviks warned those inside that the cruiser would fire on them if they did not surrender.

They wouldn't. At this point the Provisional Government controlled nothing beyond the Winter Palace itself, but those inside were still hopeful Kerensky could return with a relief force. *Aurora* began firing blank shells after dark. In fact, that was the only kind she was carrying.

The confrontation lasted past midnight and into the small hours of Thursday, November 8. Inside the Palace, morale collapsed as the hours passed and no relief came. The army officers and

cadets inside began slipping away, until at last the Bolsheviks outside were simply able to rush the building. The Women's Battalion fought bravely, it is said, but the Palace fell with minimal casualties. Five killed and a handful of wounded. Some of the women fighters were reportedly raped after they surrendered. The ministers of the Provisional Government were placed under arrest.

And thus ended what is often called the October Revolution. It's called the October Revolution because it was still October by the Julian calendar even though it was November on the Gregorian calendar, in the same way that the February Revolution is called that even though it took place in March by the Gregorian calendar. Remember, I warned you a while ago that the Julian calendar was still lurking in the background.

So that's why the October Revolution was called "October," but why was it called a "Revolution?" It looks a lot more like a *coup d'etat* by a small but committed group of armed fighters on behalf of a single political party, one that no other political party approved of or agreed to. And yet, due to a combination of fanatical loyalty, careful planning, German money, a tremendous amount of luck and a willingness to lie brazenly about their intentions at a time when the other political parties were genuinely working together to come up with some sort of democratic solution for Russia, the Bolsheviks managed to pull off the seemingly impossible. Control of the Russian government was now theirs.

Meanwhile, the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets was meeting, even as the Bolsheviks were seizing power, and recall that this is the body in the name of which the coup was being carried out. Leon Trotsky declared it "the most democratic of all parliaments in the history of the world," which was certainly not true and Trotsky knew it. What he probably meant was, "Finally, a congress where we Bolsheviks hold the majority." It bears mentioning that the Congress was made up of representatives from local soviets and wasn't anything like proportional representation from all across the country. Many rural soviets and army committees had boycotted the Congress precisely because they refused to work alongside the Bolshevik contingents expected to be sent from Petrograd and Moscow soviets.

But the boycott had the effect of ceding control of the Congress to the Bolsheviks. Even as the coup against the Provisional Government was going on in the streets outside, the non-Bolshevik representatives were denouncing the Bolsheviks and calling for a halt to the takeover. Leon Trotsky told the dissenters they were on "the garbage heap of history."

In the end, the Congress declared the Provisional Government dissolved and approved a new Bolshevik government called the Sovnarkom, short for *Soviet Narodnykh Komisarov*, or the "Council of People's Commissars." Lenin wanted Trotsky to chair the Sovnarkom, but Trotsky refused, and the Bolshevik leadership insisted Lenin take the job himself.

In the days that followed, life in Petrograd returned to normal. The Petrograd stock market reopened and share prices remained steady. The Bolsheviks had won their prize, but what exactly

had they won? The old Provisional Government had pretty much lost its ability to govern the country. Creating a new Provisional Government with new Bolshevik ministers and styling it “Sovnarkom” wasn’t going to change that. Indeed, even the Bolsheviks and the Congress of Soviets agreed this was merely a new provisional government meant to keep the country running until that Constituent Assembly election happens, and that’s just a month away. The outside world had good reason to shrug off the coup as virtually meaningless.

No one believed the Bolsheviks would take a majority in the Constituent Assembly elections, the first real nationwide popular election in Russian history. Not even the Bolsheviks believed that. But the Bolsheviks, having grabbed the brass ring at last, had no intention of giving it up. And as Russia prepared for its first real election, the Bolsheviks were already exploring ways of annulling the outcome.

But that is a story for another episode. We’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d like to offer a special thanks to Ed for his donation, and thank you to Julie for being a patron of the podcast. Generous listeners like them help keep the lights on around here, and if you’d like to join them, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on Help the Podcast. You can also help out with likes and retweets and shares and all that good social media stuff. And of course, a rating and review at the iTunes store, which can help new listeners find the podcast.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the Western Front. After the failure of the Nivelle Offensive, earlier in 1917, it’s Douglas Haig’s turn to begin another British offensive. Have the British learned the lessons of 1916? Find out next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned the American journalist John Reed, who arrived in Petrograd, as it turned out, just in time to witness the last days of the Provisional Government and the October Revolution. An ardent socialist himself, Reed supported the Bolsheviks. He went to work for the new government, helping translate government statements and decrees into English.

He returned to the United States in 1918, fired up to bring news of the socialist revolution to his home country. Instead, he ran afoul of the new Espionage Act (more on that in a future episode) and he was put on trial, though he was acquitted on free speech grounds. In 1919, Reed would publish his most famous work, an account of the October Revolution entitled *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Facing further prosecution, Reed fled the US, returning to Russia later that year. His health deteriorated and he died of typhus in 1920, just days before what would have been his 33rd birthday.

As an American, Reed’s support was valuable to the Bolsheviks, as it helped them to emphasize the international character of the socialist revolution. He became the first American to be buried at the Kremlin Wall in Moscow.

Sixty years after Reed's death, the motion picture *Reds* was released in the United States. *Reds* is an historical epic about Reed and his part in the October Revolution. The film was a passion project of American actor and filmmaker Warren Beatty, who worked on it for a decade as co-writer, producer, and director, as well as playing the role of Reed in the film. *Reds* was a critical and commercial success. It received twelve Academy Award nominations and won in three categories, including a Best Director award for Beatty.

[music: Closing War Theme]