1917: Revolution as Demobilization and State Collapse

Eric Lohr and Joshua Sanborn

Students in American university classrooms on the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution are animated by different concerns than students who sat in on lectures on the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution in 1967. Fifty years ago, the prospect of a Marxist revolution was a real promise (or threat). "Conscious" students knew not only about Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union, but also about Lenin, Trotskii, and Stalin. When they argued about 1917, they argued about dreams and their disappointments. They argued about classes and their conflicts. They read articles about workers in Vyborg and considered the implications of worker militancy (and quiescence) for Russia and the world.

It is now more than twenty-five years since the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was dissolved and fifteen new independent states began to carve out separate futures for themselves. "Conscious" students today still care about the world, and they have similar dreams about equity and liberation, but their formative years were marked by the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. There was no tipping of Marxist dominoes, only the spread of "state failure," with its associated ills: terrorism, civil war, refugee crises, and regional political conflicts. In recent months, they have watched as the postwar order has been undone by the rise of new right-wing narcissistic regimes fueled by social and political panic in the richest and most stable states in the world. What on earth would the Russian Revolution have to teach a new generation of students coming to maturity in these volatile times?

Plenty, we would argue. As with any rich and earth-shaking political event, the Russian Revolution generated a surplus of meanings and contains a wealth of lessons. For example, in courses about the Russian Revolution, our students have brought up difficult questions that have been in the headlines throughout their lives, such as the causes and consequences of the dismantling of state structures and militaries when regimes change (or are forcibly changed). More specifically, students note parallels with the dismantling of the central police and military institutions of post-invasion Iraq and the rise of extreme ideological movements like the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS in states that failed due to revolution, civil war, and foreign intervention. In this short "think piece," we aim to look back at 1917 through the prism of some of our students' contemporary perspectives and our own institutionalist perspective to focus on the relationship between enthusiasm and structures of power in moments of revolutionary state crisis. "Affective" mobilization—the process of persuasion and emotional engagement with a cause—is important, but it is only half of the story. For successful and durable change, it must be combined with "structural" mobilization—the maintenance or creation of institutions to sustain that political and social engagement and to channel, discipline, and direct the ensuing political power over a long period of time.

Slavic Review 76, no. 3 (Fall 2017)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.178

The phase of the revolutionary story that culminated in 1917 began in August 1914, with the entry of Russia into the Great War. The Romanov dynasty, for good reason, had resisted mass mobilizational movements throughout its history, and conservatives in the regime worried tremendously about the impact the war might have on their own political power.[1] World War I swept all of those objections aside. State and society for the most part worked together to mobilize peasants and workers into the army and women into industry. The regime even broke old taboos by mobilizing ethnicity and granting the state an unprecedented role in mobilizing the economy for military ends. Not even the tsar's attempts to reassert a monopoly of state and court control over these mobilizations in August and September of 1915 made much difference. Relief organizations, War-Industrial Committees, and the army itself grew and grew throughout 1915 and 1916. Even in opposition, political organizations blossomed. Parties continued to recruit members and instruct legislators, and congresses of interest groups and professional organizations met and pounded lecterns. By the start of 1917, the army was larger and better supplied with weapons and supplies relative to its competitors than at any other point in the war. In short, Russia was more structurally mobilized than it had been at any point in its history.[2]

The trajectory of affective mobilization was more complicated. Certain affective dispositions were consistently mobilized at a high level. Defense of the motherland was a shared and passionate goal for most sectors of Russian society. Other attitudes varied more widely. Most notably, a commitment to the monarch and his government was shaky at the start of the war and plummeted precipitously between 1915 and 1917. Simplifying a bit, one could argue that affective mobilization, overall, was declining quite significantly, especially during the trying winter of 1916–17, even as structural mobilization reached its peak.

When structural mobilization is strong and affective mobilization is weak, citizens are being forced to do things they really don't want to do and are compelled to make sacrifices they have little interest in making. This is an opportune moment for an uprising like that seen in Petrograd in February 1917. Urban women throughout Europe had been signaling for some time that they no longer believed the human and material sacrifices of the war to be

1. For a classic statement of this conservative avoidance of mass mobilization, even when Russian nationalist in form, see Hans Rogger, "Nationalism and the State: A Russian Dilemma," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4, no. 3 (April 1962): 253–64.

2. Anastasiia Sergeevna Tumanova, *Obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914-fevral' 1917 g.)* (Moscow, 2014); Anastasiia Tumanova, "Voluntary Associations in Moscow and Petrograd and their Role in Patriotic Campaigns during World War I (1914–February 1917)," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 62, no. 3 (2014): 345–70. This builds on a central argument of the classic study by Norman Stone that has had less influence on the field than it should have. See Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (New York, 1975). The most detailed elaboration of the argument that Russia's military effectiveness was much stronger than most scholars have granted is developed by David R. Stone in his new military history: *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (Lawrence, 2015). Many recent Russian publications have taken a comparable line, especially in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press

worth that tremendous cost.[3] In Petrograd, a multi-valent, multi-class "women's march" on February 23/March 8 (International Women's Day) quickly drew hundreds of thousands of other protestors into the streets. Professional revolutionaries considered this a "spontaneous" revolution, but we might better describe it as a "mobilization to demobilize," as an effort to act urgently, decisively, and publicly in the short term in order to upend a system that was relentlessly mobilizing them for war and forcing them to endure pangs of hunger and grief. This desire to ratchet down the constant mobilizational pressures they faced was precisely what made them "spontaneous" to members of socialist parties: they rebelled not to join the *aktiv* but to be allowed to demobilize and resume their normal lives.

This urge to demobilize, visible in the "down with the war" placards of the street protests, was also felt among the garrison soldiers. The soldiers stationed in Petrograd had been structurally mobilized, but their affective mobilization was weak. Most were either fresh recruits in training to be sent to the front or older men who felt they were being unfairly forced to serve. Finally, there were also groups of soldiers who had been caught deserting the army who were being held temporarily before being sent back to the front, where they were to face trial in their frontline units.[4] The policing function of the state, the upholding of military discipline throughout the armed forces, and ultimately the regime's authority all relied on the willingness of these garrison soldiers to enforce the total war effort. Instead, they too mobilized to demobilize. Very shortly after the first official orders to shoot civilian demonstrators were issued, garrison soldiers led by the Pavlovskii regiment took weapons and went into the streets to countermand those orders from below. Within a day, half the 150,000 man garrison was in open rebellion, with most of the rest staying neutral. The soldiers acted rapidly and violently, attacking officers who stood in the way, invading the Ministry of Internal Affairs, freeing prisoners, and storming into the Petrograd Soviet to demand the foregrounding of soldier concerns.

These attacks directly undermined the state as that institution maintaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Recent scholars have provided more detail on the great wave of violence, mob justice, and crime that swept immediately through Petrograd and eventually throughout the rest of the country.[5] Demobilized Petrograd garrison soldiers were prominent in the initial attacks on police and police stations. Far from trying to halt the rapid dismantling of all forces of order, the Duma's provisional committee ordered

3. See here especially Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004); Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

4. Aleksandr Borisovich Astashov, *Russkii front v 1914—nachale 1917 goda: Voennyi opyt i sovremennost'* (Moscow, 2014), 492–93. In this sense, the principle "last in, first to desert" is an important one. Previously exempt groups were finally called up to rear garrisons, but front commanders throughout 1917 tried to prevent them from being sent to the front, where they were seen as the least reliable and most likely to join the active opposition to the war.

5. See in particular, the forthcoming work by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution: Mob Justice and Police in Petrograd* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming, September 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the disarming of all police stations on February 28, a decision that left police even more vulnerable to violent attacks. On March 1, the criminal investigation bureau dismantled itself, and the Provisional Government issued a series of decrees in the first week of March abolishing the Department of Police, the Gendarme Corps, and the censorship offices. In practice, localities were left to create their own policing units.[6] To the (limited) extent that public order was upheld, it was by untrained and decentralized militias.

These were extraordinarily important developments that turned the arrow of structural mobilization sharply downward just as levels of affective mobilization (for the Revolution) surged upwards. Prior to the Revolution, the police had been essential to mobilization processes: they had corralled wayward conscripts, disciplined strikers who threatened the mobilization of the economy, and provided security amidst wartime dislocation. Now the police had almost entirely disappeared. The Provisional Government put a low priority on their work. Complaints about little to no pay for even fairly high-ranking militia members were frequent all the way up to October. Factories organized guards to prevent theft but did little beyond the immediate vicinity of the factories.[7] Nor did things change after the ouster of the Provisional Government. As the Bolsheviks would learn to their dismay in early 1918, militia volunteers had no interest in being the vanguard of mobilization for the Revolution.

The evisceration of the policing function had a dramatic and immediate effect, most notably in terms of the scale of public disorder. There was a massive wave of crime of all sorts. For the period March-April 1917, the number of reported murders was ten times higher than for the same period in 1916 and the number of thefts 14 times higher.[8] Among many others, the prominent Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli recognized the links between the severely weakened police and provincial government and the peasant land seizures, illegal cutting of forests, theft of inventories and implements, and redistributions of land by local peasant assemblies. In a July 20 circular, he demanded that provincial and district commissars punish attempts to seize the land "with the full force of the law."[9] But he was well aware that the state no longer had

6. Hasegawa, *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution*; Jonathan W. Daly, *The Watchful State: Security Police and Opposition in Russia, 1906–1917* (DeKalb, 2004): 206–7. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii (GARF) fond (f.) 1800 opis′ (op.) 1 delo (d.) 18 (Survey of the activity of the Department of General Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (February-June 1917)); Many experienced mid-level career police and gendarme officials pledged loyalty to the new order in petitions to be reinstated, but were denied. A great deal of effort was poured into lustration and prosecution of former police officials, thereby denying the new government some of the most experienced and skilled guarantors of its preservation of the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

7. GARF, f. 1791, op. 1, d. 1, list (ll.) 4–40 (MVD Temporary administration for militia affairs to commissars, May 4 and July 11, 1917). In July, one of the primary concerns of the Union of Militia Employees was simply getting cafeterias so the militia could be assured at least their basic food needs.

8. Lada Viacheslavovna Milovanova, "Grazhdanskaia militsiia v Rossii v 1917 godu (istoriko-pravovoi aspekt)," (Kandidat nauk, Moscow Academy of The Ministry of Interior [Moskovskii universitet MVD Rossii], 2004), 54.

9. GARF f. 1791, op. 1, d. 1, l. 46 (MVD Circular to provincial and regional commissars, July 20, 1917). Meanwhile, Lenin was advocating "the destruction of the apparatus

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the capacity to stop such actions, in large part due to the collapse of the other major disciplinary institution, the army.

Not surprisingly, the February revolution occasioned a pronounced slowdown in combat operations. Plans for an early spring offensive to support allied operations elsewhere on the continent were shelved quickly. The Germans, for their part, were aware that revolution worked in their favor and that they would only stimulate resistance by launching offensives. The decision by Aleksandr Kerenskii and the high command to initiate the June Offensive was the major exception to this rule; in any event there was no comparison between the heavy fighting in 1916 and the relative quiet of 1917.

The mass desertion of soldiers from the Russian Army both at the front and in the rear garrisons over the course of 1917 was the most significant instance of demobilization, and it added a great deal to the elements of state collapse noted in the previous paragraphs. Somewhere in the neighborhood of two million soldiers left their posts from March to October 1917.[10] From July through October, reports from the countryside increasingly noted the leading role of deserters and AWOL soldiers. Deserters repeatedly attacked villages and shtetls, stealing livestock and food. Demobilization and the collapse of state capacity were central to the beginnings of the agrarian revolution even before the Bolshevik Decree on Land.

The failure of the June Offensive and the shattering of the armed forces during the fall desertions and mutinies meant that the end of the war was nigh. Nevertheless, demobilization of a ten-million man army was a massive undertaking that would have taken tremendous planning and coordination even in the best of circumstances. Both the old regime and the Provisional Government fully recognized this and worked out comprehensive plans and schedules, including details about food provisions on the routes home, police and military presence at railway stops to preserve order, medical inspection stations to prevent the spread of epidemics, and plans for close coordination with the economic ministries and local private industries to determine the best destinations to match demobilized soldiers with the demand for labor.[11] This involved complex negotiations and close communications at all levels, but it was precisely this political and institutional process that Bolsheviks opposed prior to October and state failure made impossible. In fact, in the midst of the ongoing state collapse of 1917, Lenin worked on what would become his essay *State and Revolution*, where he expounded upon the idea of smashing the state and military structures as a revolutionary strategy and end in itself. As Aleksandr Bazanov has claimed, the Bolsheviks *de facto* endorsed desertion prior to their coup, and immediately afterwards endorsed a mass "spontaneous" demobilization against the wishes both of the commander in chief

of state power" as the fulcrum of his strategy. See: V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York, 1932), 9.

10. David Stone, *The Russian Army*, 285; A fuller description of desertion and its pattern during war and revolution can be found in Joshua Sanborn, "Le refus chez les soldats russes pendant la Grande Guerre," in Nicholas Beaupré, Heather Jones, and Anne Rasmussen, eds., *Dans la guerre 1914–1918: Accepter, Endurer, Refuser* (Paris, 2015), 275–91.

11. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (RGVIA), f. 2003, op. 1, d. 691 (Materials on the Demobilization of the Army, May 25–November 17, 1917).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(General Nikolai Dukhonin), and of most of the soldier military-revolutionary committees, which were still striving to keep soldiers in their defensive positions until a formal peace could be concluded with the Central Powers. The old Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik military-revolutionary committee leaders who had opposed immediate demobilization were swept out of power in elections called by the new regime. In these elections, the Bolsheviks effectively stood for spontaneous mass demobilization against those urging structured, planned demobilization. As Lenin stated: "The sooner we demobilize, the sooner the army divides into units, the sicker it becomes, the sooner the country will be ready for new challenges."[12] There is not space to fully develop the argument in this short thought piece, but we suggest that October 1917 was not so much a coup to seize control of an operating state and army as a chaotic structural demobilization of state and army. Lenin and the Bolsheviks tried to regain control of the process after October, but as Bazanov argues, these attempts had little effect, and they were tempered by Lenin's preference to dissolve the old army and start a new Red Army anew rather than make compromises with the old military structures and personnel.[13] The result was a chaotic, violent collapse of order at the fronts and throughout the country.

The Bolshevik takeover also led to an acceleration of state collapse. Faced with strong opposition to his seizure of power from state employees, Lenin chose not to negotiate. Instead, he empowered Felix Dzherzhinskii to respond by firing and arresting participants in these strikes.[14] The work of government was thrown into chaos and spiraled into near total dysfunction as large numbers of experts and administrators in charge of everything from railway administration to banking regulation and from taxation to sanitation planning were fired or left government service of their own volition. The rapidity and scope of the dismantling of the police, civil service, and military puts the Russian case on the far end of a comparative spectrum of revolutions. No prior revolution and few since have seen anything comparable. Far more common is the seizure of existing state and military structures and the expansion of both, as was most famously the case in the paradigmatic French case.[15] In this

12. E. N. Gorodetskii, "Demobilizatsiia armii v 1917–1918 gg.," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1958, no. 1: 7. S. N. Bazanov, "Demobilizatsiia Russkoi armii," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1998, no. 2: 27–37.

13. Bazanov, "Demobilizatsiia."

14. George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police: The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, December 1917 to February 1922* (Oxford, 1981), 14–15; Dmitrii Vasil′evich Antoshkin, *Professional′noe dvizhenie sluzhashchikh, 1917–1924 gg*. (Moscow, 1927).

15. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution* (New York, 1983); Clive Church, *Revolution and Red Tape: The French Ministerial Bureaucracy, 1770–1850* (Oxford, 1981); Carl E. Prince, *The Federalists and the Origins of the U.S. Civil Service* (New York, 1977); Martin Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland, 1912–1938: "Shaking the Blood-Stained Hand of Mr. Collins"* (Manchester, 2008); Charles Burton Burdick and Ralph Haswell Lutz, *The Political Institutions of the German Revolution, 1918–1919* (New York, 1966), 53–59; Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993); Stephen Velychenko, *State Building in Revolutionary Ukraine: A Comparative Study of Governments and Bureaucrats, 1917–1922* (Toronto, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sense, perhaps our students are right to look to the state failures and civil wars that they know best for comparisons to Russia's 1917.

We have presented a few specific examples to illustrate our argument that an underappreciated key to 1917 is the tension that existed between dramatically intensifying processes of affective Revolutionary mobilization and the collapse of the institutions that structure large scale social action for specific political purposes. This led to a new set of problems, above all widespread disillusionment and apathy. The mass crowds that thronged the streets in early 1917 dwindled by autumn-winter 1917–1918, as people retreated from public engagement, left the army for their villages, and turned their attention to matters of demobilization and survival. Participation in local Duma elections fell from spring to fall 1917. Even the Constituent Assembly election—the most democratic and potentially important national election in Russian history—drew the participation of only half of eligible voters. Two months later, the Bolsheviks (who received 24% of the vote) shut down the assembly after a single day of deliberations and abolished free electoral politics entirely, thereby deepening disillusion and withdrawal from politics. The grim struggle for survival among the ruins of a modern society and economy dominated the years of the civil war. As is common in collapsed-state conditions, tightly organized extreme groups that can keep even relatively small numbers of members mobilized do well while everyone else demobilizes and focuses on survival. These conditions were crucial for Bolshevik successes, especially in the first year following the state collapse of late 1917.

What, then, might students in 2017 learn from their century-old predecessors? First of all, it might be useful to remember that revolutions are not only about ideas and passions. They require institutional disciplinary structures to structure political change in meaningful and lasting ways. The Bolsheviks knew this well before 1917 and never forgot it. However, the Bolsheviks also believed that their own structures would work more effectively once the old state structures had been obliterated. This was a far more dubious premise—one in fact that had not really been tested in the history of revolutions to that date. Though the Bolshevik victory in the Revolution was indeed materially assisted by state collapse, it cannot be said that the revolutionary project was helped. Most citizens soon lost faith in the Revolution, and the grand dreams of communist peace and prosperity were shattered on the rocks of the poverty and endemic violence characteristic of a failed state. Struggles for social equity, it would seem, require as much attention to shoring up institutional structures as they do to amplifying discontent.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.178 Published online by Cambridge University Press