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The Mass Minority in Action: France and Russia

It might seem perverse to mention nonviolence in connection with the French Revolution, a notoriously blood-soaked event that produced, along with much else, the first instance of large-scale, organized revolutionary terror of the modern age. Let us nevertheless consider the best known of all the days of the revolution, July 14, 1789, commemorated in France as Bastille Day.

In June of that year, the Estates-General, an assembly representing the aristocracy, the clergy, and the bourgeoisie, had been summoned, as all French schoolchildren know, by the king to meet for the first time in one hundred and seventy-five years. Louis XVI hoped that if he granted the three “estates” an advisory voice in the country’s affairs, their members would agree to raise the new taxes needed to reduce the royal government’s perilously high debt, run up during the recent Seven Years’ War. Upon being summoned by the King to Versailles, however, the Estates-General immediately passed beyond the issues of taxes and budgets to launch a full-scale challenge to the absolute rule of the king. The representatives of the third estate, the bourgeoisie, declared themselves to be “the

nation,” and demanded that all three orders vote together, creating a body in which the third estate’s large numbers would give it the decisive voice. The king, in alarm, locked the third estate out of its meeting hall, and the body proceeded to the famous tennis court, where it took the solemn Tennis Court Oath, declaring that henceforth they were a National Assembly. Within days, the other two estates yielded to this *fait accompli* and joined the third, whereupon the king also acceded.

On July 11, however, the king reversed course, firing his minister of finance, Jacques Necker, who was popular in the estates and among the people, and summoning royal troops from the frontier. The stage seemed set for a decision by arms, pitting the royal forces against the Parisian rebels. In fact, however, such a contest would no more occur than had a battle on Salisbury field. Mirabeau, the renowned orator and schemer of the early years of the revolution (and something of a student of the Glorious Revolution), predicted in one of his speeches to the Assembly the course that events actually took. “French soldiers are not just automata,” he declared. “They will see in us, their relatives, their friends, and their families They will never believe it is their duty to strike without asking who are the victims.” The French commander in Paris, the Baron de Besenval, apparently was aware of the uncertain loyalty of his troops, because instead of sending them forth to defeat the enemy, he confined them to their barracks. There, some took a secret oath not to act against the Assembly. The king’s cavalry briefly got ready to attack a crowd in the Place Vendome, but Besenval’s Gardes Francaises appeared in the crowd’s defense and the cavalry fled.

On the fourteenth came the celebrated “storming” by the rebellious Parisians of the infamous royal prison the Bastille. The nineteenth-century French historian of the revolution Jules Michelet describes, with almost a touch of embarrassment, what it actually consisted of: “The bastille was not taken; it surrendered. Troubled by a bad conscience it went mad and lost all presence of

mind.” After a confused negotiation and a brief skirmish, the governor of the fortress turned it over to the angry crowd. Michelet describes the mood of the prison’s French defenders – called *invalides* – among whom were intermixed a few Swiss mercenaries:

Shame for such cowardly warfare, and the horror of shedding French blood, which but little affected the Swiss, at length caused the Invalides to drop their arms.

The Parisian rebels had been ready for a violent showdown but it never materialized; nor did the mighty ancien régime, for all its “absolute” power, ever pull itself together to strike a serious military blow against the revolution. Itself a kind of invalide, it in effect dropped its arms without a battle. The nineteenth-century historian of the revolution Thomas Carlyle commented acutely on the reason.

Good is grapeshot, Messeigneurs, on one condition: that the shooter also were made of metal! But unfortunately he is made of flesh; under his buffs and bandoleers, your hired shooter has instincts, feelings, even a kind of thought. It is his kindred, bone of his bone, the same *canaille* that shall be whiffed [fired upon with grapeshot]: he has brothers in it, a father and mother – living on meal husks and boiled grass.

It was with excellent reason that the Romantic poet Chateaubriand, in a comment that strongly resembles Adams’s observations on the American Revolution, later remarked, “The French revolution was accomplished before it occurred.” To the degree that a revolution in hearts and minds had taken place, his comments suggested, violence was unnecessary. Rifles were not fired but thrown down or turned over to the revolution. How can there be shooting if no soldiers will defend the old regime? Individual hearts and minds change; those who have changed become aware of one another; still others are emboldened, in a

contagion of boldness; the “impossible” becomes possible; immediately it is done, surprising the actors almost as much as their opponents; and suddenly, almost with the swiftness of thought – whose transformation has in fact set the whole process in motion – the old regime, a moment ago so impressive, vanishes like a mirage.

Must we conclude, then, that all revolutions are over before they begin – or, at least, before they are seen to begin? If so, revolutions would all be nonviolent. In France, however, the revolution soon descended into carnage, signaled on the very day of the Bastille’s fall by the beheading of two officials and public display of their heads on pikes. Still to come were the massacres in the prisons in September of 1792, the brutal war of repression in the Vendee, the wars against the other European dynastic powers, the execution of the king, the repeated intimidation of the new legislature by the Paris Commune, and, of course, the Jacobin terror. The revolutionaries would be more violent toward one another than they had been toward the old regime.

In the French Revolution, as in the English and the American, the stage of overthrow was nearly bloodless; but the stage of foundation was bloody – establishing a pattern that was to be repeated in more than one revolution thereafter, and never with more fearful consequences than in the Russian Revolution of 1917. (Let us here recall, too, that the foundation of the independent Indian state was violent. It precipitated the partition of India and Pakistan, which cost almost a million lives.)

Nonviolent Revolution, Violent Rule

The Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, through direct action in St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia. Their proclaimed goal was to relieve the desperate poverty and humiliation of the workers and peasants of Russia by overthrowing the czarist regime and establishing communism – all as a prelude to a wider

revolution that would bring communism to the rest of Europe and, in the not-too-distant future, the world. Little, if any, blood was shed in the revolution, although the Bolsheviks were quite prepared to shed it. However, having seized state power without violence, they instantly began, like the French revolutionaries, to defend and consolidate it with extreme violence, directed against not only their adversaries from the overthrown Provisional Government and the former czarist regime but also their fellow socialists. The Jacobin regime of Maximilien Robespierre ruled by terror for a little more than a year, then was overthrown in the reaction of Thermidor, in 1794. The regime founded by Lenin in 1917 did not meet its Thermidor for seventy-four years.

The sequence in which an unexpectedly nonviolent overthrow of Russia's ancien régime produced an unexpectedly violent new regime has given rise to unending interpretive debates, which have been all the more difficult to sort out because the principal actors, including, above all, Lenin, stuck with political theory rather than the facts of the case in their interpretation of their deeds. The Bolsheviks doggedly insisted they had unleashed force to seize power, even sponsoring a movie, the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's film *October*, that showed the imaginary battles they believed theoretically necessary. And, to complete the confusion, they falsely denied that, once in power, they ruled by force – a far more sweeping lie.

The regime's legions of subsequent detractors strove to disprove the claim that Bolshevik rule was based on consent but tended, on the whole, to confirm the claim that the takeover had been violent. As happened after the revolution of 1689, historians plainly recorded that the revolution had succeeded almost without bloodshed but theorists insisted that battles had been decisive. Especially problematic has been the assertion, made by many of the Bolsheviks' opponents, that the revolution wasn't a revolution at all but a mere coup d'état – a procedure that by definition is characterized by violence. (According to Webster's, a coup d'état is

“a sudden decisive exercise of force in politics; *esp.*: the violent overthrow or alteration of an existing government by a small group.”)

The issue does not admit of easy resolution. The Bolsheviks, an armed minority party, did indeed unilaterally seize power without seeking permission from anyone. When it was suggested to Lenin that he await the outcome of the forthcoming Russia-wide elections to a Constituent Assembly, his answer was, “No revolution waits for that.” The Bolsheviks were believers in violent revolution, even in flat opposition to the will of the majority. In July 1917, Lenin wrote, in words that scarcely could have been plainer, “In times of revolution, it is not enough to ascertain the ‘will of the majority’ – no, one must be stronger at the decisive moment in the decisive place and win. . . . We see countless instances of how the better-organized, more conscious, better-armed minority imposed its will on the majority and conquered it.”

In February 1917, in the fourth year of the First World War, protests against shortages of bread in the capital city of Petersburg led to workers’ strikes; the strikes led to demonstrations, and the demonstrations led to mass protest against both the war and the Romanov dynasty. For the second time since the new century began, the Russians were rebelling against the czar’s rule. In 1905, after political concessions by the regime had failed to appease the protesters, the government put down an impending revolution by force. In 1917, however, the troops would not fight. They were receptive to the revolutionaries’ socialist message of justice for the poor. Like many of James II’s troops in 1688 and the Gardes Francaises in Paris in 1789, they went over to the side of the rebels. Once again, the revolutionary spirit of a capital city spread to troops, rendering them useless to the old regime. Once again, defections were pivotal, and Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne, ending the dynasty.

Leon Trotsky, who had been a leader of the Petersburg soviet, or council, that had sprung up in 1905, had foreseen these defections and the reasons for them. In a speech he gave at his trial for his participation in the events of 1905, he proclaimed:

No matter how important weapons may be it is not in them, gentlemen the judges, that great power resides. No! Not the ability of the masses to kill others but their great readiness themselves to die this secures in the last instance the victory of the popular rising.

For:

Only when the masses show readiness to die on the barricades can they win over the army on which the old regime relies. The barricade does not play in revolution the part which the fortress plays in regular warfare. It is mainly the physical and moral meeting ground between people and army.

These Gandhi-like predictions (let us recall that the revolution of 1905 inspired Gandhi as he forged satyagraha in South Africa just one year later) came true in the revolution of February 1917. The defection of the Petersburg garrison played a decisive role. In its wake, leaders of Russia's consultative congress, the Duma, and the military command joined in counseling the Czar's abdication. From start to finish, the February revolution took less than a week. In the words of the socialist Sukhanov, a firsthand observer of and actor in the revolution, it occurred with "a sort of fabulous ease." The description of these events by Aleksandr Kerensky, the second leader of the government that succeeded the Czar's, shows a remarkable resemblance to descriptions of the more recent collapse of the Soviet regime: "A whole world of national and political relationships sank to the bottom, and at once all existing political and tactical programs, however bold and well conceived, appeared hanging aimlessly and uselessly in space."

The Romanovs were succeeded by a system of "dual power," consisting of two ambiguously connected governing bodies: a Soviet, which was the successor to the Petersburg soviet of 1905, and a Provisional Government, composed chiefly of liberals and socialists, some of them leaders of the old Duma, which had

melted away. The Soviet, though already exercising functions of government in the capital (to the extent that anybody did), was unwilling to claim full power, and invited the Provisional Government to share it. Broadly speaking, the Soviet directly represented workers, soldiers, and peasants, and the Provisional Government was the hope of the middle classes. In fact, both bodies were formally provisional, for both had agreed to yield to the Constituent Assembly, which was to be elected by all Russia in the fall and then was to establish a democratic, constitutional government for the nation.

The February revolution had revealed that the allegiance of the military – a largely peasant army, eleven million strong – was indispensable to victory. Other forces in society had, of course, played essential roles: members of the Duma eager to liquidate czarism, a radically disaffected intelligentsia, a peasantry eager and able to seize the land that it tilled, workers in the factories of Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities, and, of course, the radical political parties, including the Bolsheviks, Lenin’s centralized “party of a new type.” Yet “the decisive revolutionary agent,” in the words of the historian Martin Malia, was “the peasant in uniform,” for “it was his refusal to obey that neutralized the Imperial government.”

The Overthrow

While Russia waited for the election of the Constituent Assembly, the country’s politics swung between the extreme right and the extreme left. Although violence constantly threatened in this period, first from one side and then from the other, it never broke out to any great extent. The first and shortest swing was to the left. In late March, the Provisional Government sent its allies in the First World War a note that appeared to support imperialistic and annexationist war aims that were anathema to the left, which was dominant in the Petersburg Soviet, and demanded and obtained

the resignation of Minister of War Aleksandr Guchkóv and Foreign Minister Pavel Milyukov. (In the politics of the time, pursuing the war was the position of the right and ending it was the position of the left.) In June, another attempt to revive the war effort was made by the new minister of war, Kerensky (later prime minister of the Provisional Government), who sought to rebuild the prestige of the new revolutionary government by launching an offensive against Austria and Germany. It failed catastrophically, creating conditions for the next swing to the left – the “July days,” in which the Bolsheviks led armed demonstrations in the capital that, until the last moment, when the Bolsheviks backed off, gave every appearance of being an attempt to seize power. Now the pendulum swung back with equal force to the right. Lenin went into hiding, while much of the rest of the Bolshevik leadership, including Trotsky, was arrested. A right-wing czarist general, Lavr Kornilov, pursued tangled negotiations with the Provisional Government and then launched an insurrection against it. However, the forces he dispatched suffered a fate familiar to the student of revolutions: they melted away. In Trotsky’s words, “After the February days the atmosphere of Petrograd becomes so red hot that every hostile military detachment arriving in that mighty forge, or even coming near to it, scorched by its breath, is transformed, loses confidence, becomes paralyzed, and throws itself upon the mercy of the victor without a struggle.”

The way was open for the Bolshevik takeover, and the Party, whose most important leaders were now out of jail, began a debate on how to proceed. Lenin’s recommendation was simple and clear. He championed an immediate “armed insurrection” – in other words, a straightforward coup d’état.

We can (if we do not “await” the Congress of Soviets) strike suddenly from three points: Petersburg, Moscow, and the Baltic Fleet . . . we have the technical capability to take power in

Moscow . . . We have thousands of armed workers and soldiers who can at once seize the Winter Palace.

However, Lenin encountered strong opposition, not only from other socialist parties when they got wind of his planned coup but also from other Bolshevik leaders, two of whom, Aleksandr Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, resigned from the Party in protest. The Bolsheviks had “no right,” the pair wrote publicly, “to stake the whole future of the present moment upon the card of armed insurrection.” The Party, they observed, faced a basic choice between “the tactic of conspiracy and the tactic of faith in the motive forces of the Russian revolution.” The latter path was peaceable; the former led to rule by force, for without a broad coalition, as the Central Committee member Nogin wrote, the regime would “eliminate the mass organizations of the proletariat from leadership in political life . . . and can be kept in power only by means of political terror.” At one point, Lenin stood alone in the Central Committee in his championship of an immediate coup.

It was Trotsky who broke the impasse. More mindful of the importance of mass support than Lenin, he proposed an armed insurrection under the auspices of the upcoming second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in which the political strength of the Bolsheviks was then on the rise. In other words, he proposed that the Provisional Government be overthrown by a Bolshevik armed insurrection legitimated by the Soviet assemblies. (Hence the legendary slogan “All power to the soviets.”) But first Trotsky had to take over the Soviets. He promptly launched a successful effort to convene unilaterally an unauthorized, all-Russian Soviet that would be controlled by the Bolsheviks.

Events, however, played havoc with the expectations of all three factions of the Bolshevik Central Committee. Neither Lenin’s naked armed coup, nor Kamenev and Zinoviev’s peaceful, gradual

acquisition of power, nor even Trotsky's subtler, Soviet-sanctioned coup came to pass. Instead, something unplanned by anyone occurred. With Lenin still in hiding, the chief improviser on the spot was Trotsky. In a meeting of the Petersburg Soviet on October 9, a worker affiliated with the Menshevik Party, Mark Broido, proposed the foundation of a Committee of Revolutionary Defense to prepare Petersburg against the advancing German army. The Bolsheviks opposed the plan until it occurred to Trotsky that the committee, which came to be known as the Milrevkom, would, if taken over by the Bolsheviks, be an ideal instrument for overthrowing the Provisional Government. The committee was then established. So important did Trotsky consider the foundation of the committee that he later claimed its creation was as he said, in fact a "dry" or "silent" revolution that won "three quarters, if not nine-tenths, of the victory." He meant that, without a shot being fired, the Bolsheviks now had in their hands a military instrument in the capital with which, as soon as they chose to employ it, they could seize full power.

What happened next lays bare with particular clarity the process by which revolutionaries can neutralize or win over the armed forces of the existing government. (Of the revolutions discussed here, only the American, as noted, had no chance of winning over the opposing army.) The pivotal event – second in importance only to the foundation of the Milrevkom – was a meeting with the regimental committees of the Petersburg garrison, at which a motion by Trotsky was passed assuring the Milrevkom of "full support in all its efforts to bring closer the front and rear in the interest of the Revolution." In the independent socialist Sukhanov's words, "On October 21, the Petersburg garrison *conclusively acknowledged the Soviet as sole power, and the military revolutionary committee as the immediate organ of authority.*"

In Sukhanov's opinion, this decision was more than the prelude to the takeover: "In actual fact, the overturn was accomplished

the moment the Petersburg garrison acknowledged the Soviet as its supreme authority.” He marveled at the blindness of others to what was happening. An “insurrectionary act” had occurred. The Provisional Government did not respond. It was “busy with something or other in the Winter Palace” (its headquarters) and took no notice. But even the Bolsheviks, Sukhanov thought, were not quite aware of what they had done. “War had been declared,” Sukhanov, sounding like Lenin, notes, “but combat activities were not begun.” At such a moment, the “correct tactics” in the revolutionary guidebooks were to “destroy, shatter, paralyze” the enemy command, which in this case was the general staff of the army, still following orders from the Provisional Government. A mere “three hundred volunteers” could have carried out the task “without the slightest difficulty,” Sukhanov thought. Instead, he observed with a note of scorn, the Bolsheviks merely sent a delegation to the commander, Georgi Polkovnikov, demanding his obedience to the Milrevkom. Polkovnikov refused, but then entered into talks with the Soviet – talks that were still in progress four days later, when the events that have gone down in history as the October 25 Bolshevik takeover occurred.

Of the seeming passivity of the Bolsheviks, Sukhanov rightly comments, “This, to put it mildly, was hardly according to Marx.” To that observation, we can add only that it was hardly according to Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, or almost any other major thinker on revolution, either, since virtually all of them had taught that revolutions had to be decided by the use of force. The whole weight of this tradition bore down on the minds of the actors.

Sukhanov showed greater appreciation of Trotsky’s tactics in his report on another important episode in the preparation for the takeover. On October 23, the commander of the Peter-Paul Fortress in the center of Petersburg announced his refusal to obey a commissar sent by the Soviet. Here, surely, a military confrontation was called for, and indeed the Bolshevik Vladimir Antonov Ovsenko did recommend sending a loyal regiment to disarm

their reluctant comrades in arms. Trotsky had another idea. “He, Trotsky,” Sukhanov records, would “go to the Fortress, hold a meeting there, and capture not the body but the spirit of the garrison.” And he did. He made a speech there that won over the soldiers. Such was the true nature of the “fighting” that occurred in Petersburg in the days leading up to the October revolution.

Trotsky vs. Trotsky

In his book *The Russian Revolution*, Trotsky took note of Sukhanov’s bafflement regarding the Bolsheviks’ failure to unleash force immediately. “The Committee,” he explained, “is crowding out the government with the pressure of the masses, with the weight of the garrison. It is taking all that it can without a battle. It is advancing its positions without firing, integrating and reinforcing its army on the march. It is measuring with its own pressure the resisting power of the enemy, not taking its eyes off him for a second Who is to be the first to issue the call to arms will become known in the course of this offensive, this crowding out.” Then, making an addition to our list of observers in various ages who commented that the revolution was over before it seemingly began, he added that the Soviet’s “declaration of October 23 had meant the overthrow of the power before the government itself was overthrown.”

It was because so much had been accomplished beforehand that the twenty-fifth itself came and went with little violence. Sukhanov reports that on that day Trotsky boasted, “We don’t know of a single casualty,” and added, “I don’t know of any examples in history of a revolutionary movement in which such enormous masses participated and which took place so bloodlessly.” Trotsky identified this bloodless activity as the main engine of the revolution. “The unique thing about the October revolution, a thing never before observed in so complete a form, was that, thanks to a happy combination of circumstances, the proletarian vanguard had

won over the garrison of the capital before the moment of open insurrection.” In point of fact, the garrisons had also been won over before the moment of insurrection in both the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution. The difference was that Trotsky had deliberately engineered what had happened spontaneously in England and France. Although he didn’t put it in so many words, Trotsky had grasped what Mao and Ho would later formulate more explicitly – that even when the readiness and capacity to act violently is present, political action is still the most important factor in a revolutionary struggle.

Quotations from Trotsky attesting to the decisive importance of strictly political action in the revolution could be multiplied many times over. However, he also made statements of exactly the opposite import, claiming that revolutions could succeed only through armed insurrection. For example, after claiming that the main task of the insurrection – winning over the troops – had been accomplished before the twenty-fifth, he went on to add, “This does not mean, however, that insurrection had become superfluous... The last part of the task of the revolution, that which has gone into history under the name of the October insurrection, was therefore purely military in character. At this final stage, rifles, bayonets, machine guns, and perhaps cannon were to decide.” Elsewhere, he wrote, “Only an armed insurrection could decide the question.” And quotations of this kind, too, could be multiplied many times over. These assertions, however, are unsupported by evidence.

Why, we must ask, would Trotsky wish to contradict his own clearly drawn conclusions as well as the facts of history? One likely reason is that Trotsky wrote his history in the late 1920s, at the end of a decade-long, losing struggle with Stalin to become Lenin’s heir, and it was Leninist dogma that the October revolution had been the armed insurrection that Lenin had beforehand asserted it must be. As such it had already gone down in myth and story, including *October*, in which a proper battle is shown. (During

the filming, several people were accidentally killed, leading one wit to remark that more people died in the filming of the storming of the Winter Palace than in the actual event.)

A comical episode on the day of the takeover suggests that Lenin, who resumed command of the Party only the day before, never did understand the nature of Trotsky's accomplishment. On the twenty-fourth of October, Bolshevik forces began to move through the capital, taking control of key points, such as the central telephone office. They encountered no resistance, leading one observer to liken the takeover to a mere "changing of the guard." Could this be the "armed insurrection" that revolutionary doctrine called for? Lenin thought not. Where was the gunfire? Where were the bodies in the streets? In his history, Trotsky notes how different from expectation events turned out to be. "The final act of the revolution seems, after all this, too brief, too dry, too businesslike – somehow out of correspondence with the historic scope of the events. . . . Where is the insurrection? . . . There is nothing of all that which imagination brought up upon the facts of history associates with the idea of insurrection."

Although Trotsky doesn't say so, one imagination brought up on these "facts of history" was Lenin's. Emerging from his hiding place in disguise, he could make out nothing that looked to him like the battles he had insisted upon. In despair at what he misjudged to be the irresolution of his colleagues, he harangued them to act. "We are confronting questions that are not solved by consultations, not by congresses (even by congresses of Soviets)," he railed, "but exclusively by the people, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed masses." Failing to see in Trotsky's having captured the spirit rather than the body of the garrison the victory that had been won, he cried out, on the day that the revolution was being accomplished without violence, for the violent revolution he had always believed in.

Trotsky's lip service to Lenin's afactual dogma would have been reason enough, in the late 1920s in the Soviet Union, for him to

contradict his own plainly stated observations and conclusions, but there were other reasons as well. He had not shed blood in 1917, but by the time he wrote his history he had shed it abundantly – as commander and savage disciplinarian of the Red Army, as champion of “war communism,” in which workers were subjected to military discipline, as a practitioner of and apologist for the “red terror” that was inaugurated in the first years of Bolshevik rule, and as the pitiless suppressor of the democratic Kronstadt rebellion against the Bolshevik dictatorship, in 1921. The day after the October 1917 overturn, the Bolsheviks carried out a wave of arrests and closed down all the opposition newspapers. The new rulers immediately made known their intention to monopolize power. It was on this occasion that Trotsky made an infamous threat to the non-Bolshevik socialist parties, who asked the Bolsheviks to share power with them. He said:

And now we are told: renounce your victory, make concessions, compromise. With whom? I ask: with whom ought we to compromise? With those wretched groups who have left us or who are making this proposal? ... To those who have left and to those who tell us to do this we must say: you are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out; go where you ought to be: into the dustbin of history!

The Menshevik Party and others did in fact walk out of the meeting. Sukhanov, among those who left, later bitterly castigated himself for abandoning the field of the revolution to the Bolsheviks.

In short, while the Bolsheviks did not use violence to win power, they used it, instantly and lavishly, to keep power. Their insistence that they had needed violence to overthrow the Provisional Government provided cover of a sort for their unprovoked use of violence against their former revolutionary comrades who belonged to other parties. The repressive measures

of the first days of Bolshevik rule were only the beginning of a wave of repression that almost immediately outdid czarist repression by an order of magnitude. If there was in fact a “coup,” it was by the new revolutionary government against the other parties as well as opposition by ordinary citizens. The event was not so much a *coup d'état* as a *coup par l'état* – or a *coup de société* – for it consisted not in the violent seizure of the state by military forces but in the destruction of society by the state once it had been taken over by the Bolshevik Party. Here, truly, were the origins of totalitarianism, to use Hannah Arendt's famous phrase.

The next step was taken in January, when the long-promised Constituent Assembly chosen in Russia's first nationwide election finally met and was promptly dispersed by Bolshevik troops. Eventually, the forcible takeover of society by the state proceeded from mere repression to Stalin's full-fledged totalitarian “war against the nation” (in the words of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam).

But why would a party that had won power without bloodshed use it violently? The obvious answer is that the Bolsheviks' nonviolence was merely tactical. Indeed, it came as a surprise to them. Unforeseen in advance and forgotten later by Party theorists, the Bolsheviks' capture of the hearts and minds of the Czar's troops was an opportunity latent in events that the agile Trotsky had the wit to see and exploit. The nonviolence of October 25, you might say, belonged to the revolutionary situation, not to the ideology of the Bolsheviks, who believed in violence and used it unstintingly as soon as they deemed it necessary.

The curious record of the Bolsheviks' violence has a bearing on the question of whether October 25 was a mass revolution or merely a coup carried out by a small group of conspirators. Sukhanov, an anti-Bolshevik eyewitness, certainly believed that since the collapse of the Kornilov insurrection the workers of Petersburg had supported the Bolsheviks – “had been *their own people*, because they were always there, taking the lead in details

as well as in the preparation of the factory barracks.” True, the Party had won its support because it had been “lavish with promises and sweet though simple fairy tales”; nevertheless, “the mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks.” Yet just a few years later the distinguished historian (and first president of Czechoslovakia) Tomas Masaryk wrote in his work on the revolution, in direct contradiction of Sukhanov, “The October revolution was anything but a popular mass movement. That revolution was the act of leaders working from above and behind the scenes.” And many historians have since followed Masaryk in his judgment.

In *The Russian Revolution*, Trotsky quoted and debated Masaryk. He claimed that the lack of street demonstrations and violent mass encounters was proof not of lack of mass support but of near-unanimity. Only because the Bolsheviks won every contest in the bloodless struggle for popular allegiance, he argued, could the takeover occur with so little commotion. All of this sounds very like John Adams describing the revolution in hearts and minds that preceded the Declaration of Independence. Trotsky likened the day of the twenty-fifth to an endgame in chess: “At the end of October the main part of the game was already in the past. And on the day of insurrection it remained to solve only a rather narrow problem: mate in two moves.” He concluded, “As a matter of fact, it was the most popular mass-insurrection in all history.”

In sorting out these contradictory claims, the most important data are probably the results of the national elections to the Constituent Assembly. They permit two conclusions: first, that in the country at large the Bolsheviks were a minority, commanding only 25 percent of the overall popular vote, and, second, that in Petersburg and Moscow – the two primary scenes of the revolution – they enjoyed a majority. (The Social Revolutionary Party, a rival revolutionary party with a large rural constituency, won 42 percent of the national vote, and the rest was divided among other parties. In the all-important Petersburg garrison, the Bolsheviks won 71 percent

of the vote.) As a measure of public opinion, this election might be compared to a single photograph of a wrestling match taken with a flashbulb in a dark room, but its results are consistent with other evidence, such as elections to the Soviets in the period just before the takeover. There was factual support, in other words, both for Trotsky's and Sukhanov's claim that the masses supported the Bolsheviks and for Masaryk's claim that the Bolsheviks were in the minority. The Bolsheviks were, in fact, a mass minority. But that mass was concentrated where it most counted in 1917: in the revolutionary cities of Petersburg and Moscow, which were also the seats of government. (Much the same thing had happened in France, where the Parisian radicals assailed and dominated the National Assembly.) Thanks to the Bolsheviks, who evicted the Constituent Assembly at gunpoint, there are no other reliable election results to examine, but subsequent protests by factory and white-collar workers against the Bolsheviks strongly suggest that even urban support for them declined. Later, the leadership lost support among their own mass organizations, which they soon shut out of political life. What they did not lose – at least until late in the post-Cold War years – was the support of some hundreds of thousands or millions of Communist Party members and of the Red Army.

This pattern of minority mass support amid majority rejection or indifference, I suggest, is an important factor in explaining the paradox that a nonviolent revolutionary overthrow was followed by an act of revolutionary foundation that depended on violence beyond all historical precedent. If we fail to grant the Bolsheviks their measure of mass support, we cannot understand how they came to power in Petersburg without violence or why, once they were in power, they were able to impose their rule on almost the whole czarist empire with violence. In revolutions (as opposed to coups d'état), success in nonviolence depends on the extent of popular support – on the depth of what John Adams, Chateaubriand, and Trotsky (men so unlike in most respects) identified as the “revolution before the revolution,” in hearts and minds.

The overthrow in Petersburg could be nonviolent, just as Trotsky said, because the Party enjoyed wide and deep support on that particular urban stage. The consolidation of the regime was violent because such support was absent in Russia at large, and therefore could be imposed only by force – force that the Bolsheviks could unleash because of the mass minority support that they did possess. In the first case, their support was strong enough that at the crucial moment effective opposition never arose in the locality of the takeover; in the second, it was strong enough to win the civil war and fuel the totalitarian engine of repression nationally – something that a small, isolated band of “conspirators” could not conceivably have done. For it is also true that terror is necessary for rule in the same proportion as support is limited – unless, of course, the party in charge is willing to yield its power to the majority. But this the Bolsheviks were never prepared to do .

Denial that the Bolsheviks enjoyed a degree of mass support may be born, in part, of an understandable wish to deny the last shred of legitimacy to their brutal rule, but this denial is won at the cost of historical accuracy. Their message of proletarian revolution in fact won support in the cities of Russia. Let me avoid any misunderstanding. Lenin and Trotsky were two of the most violent men of their supremely violent century. Together with Stalin, they were in fact the most important figures in the formation of totalitarian rule, which originates with them and only then proceeds, whether in imitation (Mussolini, Mao) or in reaction (Hitler), to spread around the world. Acknowledging all this, however, is no reason to deny the popular character of the revolution at the time it occurred in the particular cities in which it took place.