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The 1917 Russian Revolution from the perspective of white-guardist and bolshevik state building

Abstract

The 1917 Russian Revolution was one of the central events of the 20th century, resulting in a great deal of novel developments not only in terms of ideology and socio-economics, but also in the field of state-building. Very innovative was the Bolshevik state-building. Both in terms of power and administration and in terms of the identity of the state, the Bolsheviks were thinking in terms of a completely new and novel concept of the state. The camp of the opponents of the Bolsheviks was heterogeneous. They ranged from the hardest Russian etatists to anarchists of various bents kinds As a result, the White movement's ideology was strongly reflective (reactive) in its character. The majority of White leaders saw their own system as a military dictatorship restoring order. Officially, the generals claimed that their role was temporary, to be maintained only until the rule of law and the unity of the state are restored in Russia. It was, in fact, one of their paramount objectives to restore a "unified and indivisible" Russia. Although the factual existence of a military dictatorship did not mean that representative bodies in various forms and with various competencies did not exist at all, those bodies could never be equal partners of the leading generals. They were more akin to consulting bodies. Instead, amid the terror and the chaos of the Civil War, the ideology of 'the strong hand' and 'effective, stable power', without any additional adjectives became increasingly important in the ideology of the White movement.

Keywords: Bolsheviks, dictatorship, revolution, state-building, White Guardist movement

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Rewolucja październikowa 1917 r. w Rosji z punktu widzenia wizji budowy państwa postulowanych przez obóz białych i bolszewików

Streszczenie

Rewolucja październikowa 1917 r. to jedno z najważniejszych wydarzeń XX w., które przełożyło się na szereg innowacji nie tylko w sferze ideologii i ekonomii społecznej, lecz także w obszarze budowy państwa. Bolszewickie podejście do budowania państwa było wyjątkowo innowacyjne. Ich rozwiązania były rewolucyjne i nieszablonowe zarówno w kwestii podejścia do władzy i administracji, jak i w kwestii tożsamości państwa. Obóz przeciwników partii bolszewickiej był bardzo zróżnicowany. W jego skład wchodzili i najbardziej zagorzali etatyści, i anarchiści przeróżnej maści. Stąd też ideologia tzw. „białych" charakteryzowała się wysokim stopniem reaktywności. Większość liderów tzw. Białej Armii traktowało utworzony ruch jako dyktaturę wojskową mającą na celu przywrócenie dawnego porządku. Generałowie dowodzący ruchem twierdzili oficjalnie, że ich rola była jedynie tymczasowa i miała zakończyć się, gdy w Rosji zapanują porządek i jedność. Za jeden z nadrzędnych celów stawiali sobie przywrócenie „zjednoczonej i niepodzielnej" Rosji. Realne istnienie dyktatury wojskowej nie oznaczało braku obecności jakichkolwiek organów przedstawicielskich. Istniały one w różnych formach i miały różne zakresy kompetencji, jednak nie były one nigdy równorzędnymi partnerami generalicji na czele ruchu. Były one raczej czymś w rodzaju organów konsultacyjnych. Jednak w obliczu rozwoju wojny domowej zbierającej coraz bardziej obfite żniwa, hasła propagujące „rządy silnej ręki" i „skuteczną i stabilną władzę" – bez żadnych przymiotników dodatkowych – stawały się coraz istotniejszymi elementami ideologii ruchu białych.

Słowa kluczowe: bolszewicy, dyktatura, rewolucja, budowanie państwa, ruch Białej Armii

The 1917 Russian Revolution was one of the central events of the 20th century, resulting in a great deal of novel developments not only in terms of ideology and socio-economics, but also in the field of state-building. However, before I discuss state construction in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the concept of 'state collapse' the event that always precedes reconstruction must be clarified.[2] In the present paper, the term 'state collapse' refers to the temporary or permanent collapse of the fundamental – administrative and public service – structures of the state, which may be brought about by external or internal causes. The causes may be rather wide-ranging. The most typical cause is a lost war, often followed by internal unrest, revolutions or ethnic strife. When the state is reconstructed after such a blow, a great deal depends on the specific intensity of the shock and the characteristics of the society that has suffered it, the stability of its structure, its internal cohesion and capacity for regeneration.

The direct cause of the 1917 Russian crisis is best sought in the country's exhaustion caused by World War I, which had sharpened all the internal contradictions of Russian society to an extreme. That society had only recently suffered a complex process of transformation to capitalism, which had not even been fully completed when World War I began. The outbreak of revolutions usually also requires a serious crisis of legitimacy, such as the one that was indeed present in Russia of the period. The administrative structures of the centralised Russian state prior to the revolution had seemed solid for a long time, but it was precisely forceful (and excessive) centralisation that had resulted in a structure at a risk of easy total collapse should the centre of the system fail – and that was exactly what happened in the last month of the winter of 1917, but public opinion on the regime of Nicholas II had already been very low during the previous months. Yet the events that specifically set the process in motion were relatively unexpected. At the end of the winter, riots broke out in the capital due to shortages, which became difficult to overcome after a point. At that point, events took a radically different turn. The Tzar's entourage persuaded him to abdicate, and power passed to the Provisional Government.

2 The notion of „state colapse" in this context is relating with the notions of „failed states" or „state failure." These notions are popular in the literature from the early 1990th years. See S.B. Ratner, G.B. Helman, *Saving Failed States*, „Foreign Policy" 1993, 89.

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Another – partly alternative, partly supplementary – centre of power took shape in the Saint Petersburg Soviet.[3]

The events of early 1917 swept away not only the tzar's power but the entire central structure of the state's power, including the tzar's government and the national-level bodies of popular representation. That included the State Duma elected in 1912, whose members did form the Provisional Committee of the State Duma, which then declared itself to be the seat of executive power, but whose existence proved ephemeral: on 2 March 1917 according to the old calendar, it was replaced by the Provisional Government. On the one hand, the legitimacy of the Provisional Government was based on the above-mentioned Provisional Committee,[4] while on the other hand it was supported by the agreement that was made between it and the Executive Committee of the revolutionary Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

That step did not erase the Provisional Committee of the State Duma from the stage of history completely, and they attempted to keep working as a body legitimising the government and also as a body maintaining at least a minimal continuity with the previous system. Although the first government reshuffle (the one in May) was performed in its name, in reality they had little control over events by that time. Its bourgeois, right-wing political composition had made it obsolete, and the Provisional Government, which was increasingly forced to coordinate its actions with the Petrograd Soviet, was fully aware of this fact. Neither of the above-mentioned bodies wanted to initiate a new session of the Duma at all. As a result, by the summer, the members of the Provisional Committee only held meetings in various sub-committees, and even those were discontinued after General Kornilov's attempted coup in August.

Around that time, the notion of convening an All-Russian Constituent Assembly instead of reconvening the State Duma elected in 1912 was raised, and that body was indeed elected in November and December 1917, and the Assembly was convened – but only for a single day, because the Bolsheviks, who had seized power in the meantime, were not prepared to accept its moderate socialist majority. And the Constituent Assembly proved too weak to protect itself.

Around the country, the Provisional Government attempted to use its deputies and commissars to direct events to a favourable course, but with little success. That happened despite the fact that out in the country, the government was able to rely

3 About these events see G.A. Gerasimenko, *Narod i vlastj 1917*, Moskva 1995.

4 About this process see J. D. Chermenskij, *IV. Gosudarstvennaja duma i sverzhenije carizma v Rossiji*, Moskva 1976, pp. 283–290. and N. P. Jeroskin, *Istorija gosudarstvennich uchrezhdenij dorevolucionoj Rossiji*, Moskva 1983, p. 310.

on town dumas and the elected zemstva of the provinces, in which, traditionally, the majority was held by moderate socialist and liberal forces. The revolution at the beginning of the year had not swept away those bodies to the extent that it had destroyed the central agencies of state power, but that does not mean that they were able to exert a material stabilising influence on increasingly chaotic public life. The problem was that those bodies – which had been kept rather powerless by the tzar's regime – did not form a network that was able to grab and retain the power that had been wrested from the hands of the imperial centre.

In the revolutionary Russia prior to the October volte-face, bourgeois and moderate socialist politicians with an interest in halting and controlling developments by and large used the usual methods to try to steer events to a favourable course. They tried to use the remains of a national body of popular representation whose reputation had been somewhat better than that of the tzar to legitimize the new bodies of government, and they created a coalition government covering a wide spectrum of politics, and attempted to partly take over and partly create its own executive apparatus while making efforts to maintain the local government bodies that had previously carried greater prestige than the central government. Convening the Constituent Assembly was not a particularly innovative or novel idea, either, as in such situations, a path out of the crisis of legitimacy must always be drawn up. This body was fully consistent with the bourgeois revolutionary framework customary in Europe.

Yet, all those institutions and structures were insufficient to bring events and further radicalisation to a halt. The enormous country was increasingly mired in chaos, showing all the signs of a spontaneous Russian anarchistic revolt, a 'bunt'.[5] When, in October or November 1917, Bolshevik leaders decided to take power, the task they set themselves was, in essence, not hard at all: the power they imagined was lying in the street for the taking. Retaining that power was a different and much more difficult question, and the Bolsheviks finally needed a civil war lasting about three years to consolidate their position.

On 7 November 1917, the construction of the state in Russia entered a completely new phase. It was a much more novel and innovative, or creative phase than the previous one.[6] Both in terms of power and administration and in terms of the identity of the state, the Bolsheviks were thinking in terms of a completely new and novel concept of the state. For them, along with the actual territory and internal

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5 About the coplicated character of events see V.N. Brovkin, *Rossija v grazhdanskoj vojne: vlast i obchestvennije sili*, „Voprosi istoriji" 1994, 5, p. 27.

6 About this process see A. Bosiacki, *Utopia, władza, prawo. Doktryna i koncepcje prawne „bolszewickiej" Rosji 1917–1920*, Warszawa, pp. 53–94.

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subdivisions of the country, even its name was a subject of debate. As regards the state apparatus, the situation was clear – the Bolsheviks, who believed in the world revolution and wished to build a global socialist state, wanted very little to do with previous Russian traditions and experiences of operating the state. But even if they had wanted to continue any of that, it would have been difficult due to the boycott of a very wide range of officials and employees.

The Red camp, led by the Bolshevik Party, or to put it in different words, the state construction project of the Soviets, attempted to build partly on the experiences of previous European revolutions and partly on Russian revolutionary traditions. For the Bolshevik theoreticians, labouring under the spell of European radical socialist doctrines, the experience of the 1871 Paris Commune was particularly attractive. In addition, the experiences of the first Russian Revolution of 1905 were also important to them, as it was the time when the first workers' councils, the first soviets had been formed. At the same time, it must be taken into account that the system of institutions of the revolutionary soviet government took shape at the end of a world war, as well as at the beginning and then during a civil war, therefore it had a number of extraordinary characteristics and reacted to direct challenges to its power more frequently than to theoretical constructs.

The Bolsheviks timed the October takeover to coincide with the Second All-Russian Congress of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, as they wished to use that body to legitimise the entire sequence of events. By that time, the Congress was largely under Bolshevik influence.[7] The first national-level congress had taken place back in the summer of 1917, so it was an organisation whose creation was essentially connected with the February Revolution. On the other hand, in autumn 1917 it was not merely for propaganda or ideological reasons that Lenin issued the famous dictum: "All Power to the Soviets!".

The slogan was inspired, at least as much, by the intention to establish new state administration. The takeover itself was organised by the Military Revolutionary Committee, established not only in Saint Petersburg but also, in parallel, in Moscow. Indeed, sister organisations of that body were formed at the regional and local levels as well, and similar committees also operated within the army.[8] In theory, it was an emergency-type body, which received an extremely wide range of powers from its creators in order to perform the transition. This was particularly true of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the capital. However, as the government agencies of the new Soviet power were established as a consequence of the October events, it essentially became obsolete, and the Military Revolutionary Committee

7 A. Bosiacki, cit. op., pp. 53–69.

8 Ibidem, pp. 70–73.

of Saint Petersburg soon left the stage of history. It was not the case, though, around the country and within the army, where those committees continued their operation after January 1918, although under a different name. Those successor organisations were the famous and infamous revolutionary committees (abbreviated in Russian as *revkoms*), which, in theory, were instituted by the local Soviets, but which were actually often established by the Soviet government or the Bolshevik Party itself. In a few other cases, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs initiated their establishment. The essential feature of these emergency bodies, however, of which 26,459 operated around the country in 1919 and 1920, was that the Party usually delegated tested, reliable comrades to them. That comes as no surprise, as, in addition to general public administration, the revkoms often took part in maintaining law and order and restarting production. They mostly assumed that role when, due to the circumstances, local or regional soviets were unable to fulfil their tasks. This implies that they continued as emergency bodies of revolutionary executive power. They were essentially only dismantled after the end of the Civil War. The other organ or emergency executive power was the All-Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, i.e. the infamous Cheka, the most emblematic punitive institution of the Soviet internal apparatus.[9]

On the other hand, there was the Council of People's Commissars, legitimised by the All-Russian Congress of Soviets and its internal executive organisation, the Central Executive Committee (Russian acronym: VCIK). The Congress passed its establishment resolution on the night of the takeover. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin became the chairman of the body. Despite its name, the Council of People's Commissars was an executive governmental body, composed of the heads of commissariats that paralleled the divisions of ministries. The Bolsheviks, who wanted a clean break with the old world both symbolically and practically, were averse to the term 'ministry', and replaced it by the term 'people's commissariat'. Similar terminological shifts also took place in other areas of the administration of foreign and internal affairs. The new system of power also had the added characteristic of eliminating the position of a single head of state.

And yet the essential and characteristic feature of the new system was not so much the performance of those reforms, but the single-party system built on a Soviet-type state party. The Bolsheviks had already considered themselves the avant-garde of the working class previously, and, in practice, they saw their party as one of the tools of shaping history. Although a pure single-party system had not been one of their ideological goals to begin with, it still became a reality after the Revolution and the Civil War. The intertwining of the party and government agencies

[9] About these organs see A. Bosiacki, op. cit., pp. 74–76.

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appeared in the system quite early on, mainly at the levels of appointing personnel and decision-making. The decisive majority of Bolshevik leaders held important party and government administration positions in parallel. Lenin, for instance, was the leader of the Bolshevik Party and, at the same time, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars.[10] Similarly, Stalin was the Party's Secretary-General and also the government's Commissar for Ethnic Minority Affairs. Eventually, within or alongside the party, a complex party apparatus was formed, which employed several hundred thousand people by the end of the Soviet period, and which played a decisive role in controlling strategic planning, analysis and, first and foremost, personnel policy.

Finally, the transition to a federal structure, and the establishment of autonomies at various levels that the revolutionaries wished to use to resolve ethnic problems, also formed an important part of the Soviet-style state-building controlled by the Bolsheviks. Soviet federalism – despite its later formal character – was deeply integrated into the system's ideological self-image and also had a major effect on the external images, the scenery of Soviet power.[11] Despite all its later emptiness, it played an important role in the construction of nations and states for various ethnic groups and the selection of local administration cadres. Through that, in many respects it had oiled the gears for the independent state-building of the various nations after 1991, although at the time – directly after the Revolution – this was clearly not an objective for the Soviet leadership.

The camp of the opponents of the Bolsheviks was heterogeneous. They ranged from the hardest Russian statists to anarchists of various kinds.[12] They included Russian nationalists who believed in the restoration of a unified and centralised Russia but also ethnic movements organising to establish their own nation states. It is impossible to provide a brief presentation of the state-building ideas and practices of all the more significant anti-Bolshevik movements and groups. Therefore, I shall limit the discussion to the state-building attempts of the most efficient and striking alternative, namely the activities of the Russian White Guard generals.

The right wing (in the wide sense, i.e. conservative, liberal and extreme nationalist factions) of the highly varied anti-Bolshevik camp is usually referred to as the White Guardist movement, and it was a rather complex formation in itself.[13]

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10 T. Krausz, *Lenin. Társadalomelméleti rekonstrukció*, Budapest 2008, pp. 78–90.

11 Ibidem, pp. 205–220.

12 P. Miljukov, *Rossija na perelome. Bolsevistskij period russkoj revoljuciji II. tom. Antibolsevistskoje dvizhenije*, Paris 1927, pp. 1–3.

13 Complexly see G.A. Borgjugov, A.I. Ushakov, V.J. Churakov, *Beloje Delo. Ideologija. osnovi, rezhimi vlasti – Istoriograficheskije ocherki*, Moskva 1998.

The backbone of the movement was furnished by the old officer corps for whom the revolution had been a severe existential blow. It also had room for the old ruling classes who were also adversely affected by the revolutionary changes, as well the decisive majority of the Russian bourgeoisie and bourgeois intellectuals. As a result, the White movement's ideology was strongly reflective (reactive) in its character, and essentially it did not 'flee forward' as the Bolsheviks did, but rather attempted to decelerate or even completely reverse the processes set in motion by the revolution. However, there were only limited opportunities to do so.

Resistance against Soviet rule was initiated by a handful of White Guard volunteer officers in the autumn of 1917, who, under the leadership of generals Lavr Kornilov, Mikhail Alekseyev and Anton Denikin, retreated to Southern Russia and established the Volunteer Army. Together with the Cossack regions rising against the Bolsheviks, for a long time they formed the main centre of anti-Soviet resistance. They were later joined by the White Armies of North and Northweest Russia as well as the Siberian counter-revolution led by Admiral Alexander Kolchak.[14]

The construction of the state by the Whites was rendered more difficult by their ambivalent stance towards the legacy of the Provisional Government. For the majority of career officers, monarchists and the more radical right-wingers, the period between February and October 1917 was just as abhorrent as the months after the October takeover, as their world, and in particular the old army, had already disintegrated then. There were some, however, with a more nuanced view of the problem, including some leading generals, who took a wider view of the issues. Therefore, the White movement did not officially break ties fully with the February regime, in which several of them had actually played parts.[15] In the course of building a state administration, however, they had little interest in the heritage, and largely had no solidarity for the disbanded Constituent Assembly.

The majority of White leaders saw their own system as a military dictatorship restoring order. Officially, the generals claimed that their role was temporary, to be maintained only until the rule of law and the unity of the state are restored in Russia. It was, in fact, one of their paramount objectives to restore a "unified and indivisible" Russia.[16] Although the factual existence of a military dictatorship did not mean that representative bodies in various forms and with various competencies did not exist at all, those bodies could never be equal partners of the leading generals. They were more akin to consulting bodies. And even those were usually not established in elections, but rather appointed by the leaders. Less frequently,

14 In the complex form see I. Halász, *A tábornokok diktatúrái – a diktatúrák tábornokai*, Budapest 2005.

15 In actual fact, General Kornilov became the army's commanding officer during that period.

16 N. Katzer, *Die weisse Bewegung in Russland*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 1999, pp. 394–396.

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they were legitimised through delegation, or indirectly by municipal and/or corporative, professional bodies. The Special Commission (Russian: Osoboe Soveshchanie) in Southern Russia was a typical body appointed by the generals. The Supreme Council established later in Southern Russia, which represented the Cossack regions and the areas under the direct control of the Volunteer Army, or the State Economic Commission (Russian: Gosudoarstvennoe Economicheskoe Soveshchanie) operating in Siberia under Kolchak were organisations of a different type. Both of the latter were bodies that proclaimed their apolitical and strictly professional natures proudly, because at that time, the officers and monarchists that formed the backbone of the movement saw a residue of the months of the revolution in all "party--driven" initiatives.[17] As for the future, the leading generals and admirals did not exclude the possibility of establishing a national popular representative body based on general elections, but linking such an organ on any level to Soviet power or the 'single-day' Constituent Assembly whose composition had not been acceptable (as it had a socialist majority) was clearly out of the question. In general, they left the details open. It should be recalled at this point that a parliamentary establishment had no tradition to speak of in Russia, as the first State Duma had only been elected in 1906.

The 'commission-based' system of representation that was established essentially favoured strong players in the economy and professional corporations, and to a lesser extent the old municipalities, which the military leadership did not really need for legitimisation but rather for the mobilisation of resources in the Civil War. In addition, in the case of the White regimes we must also mention various government-type institutions (governments) whose members – as had become logical by then – were also appointed by the senior generals. In those bodies, the will of junior generals and high-ranking bureaucrats usually carried the day.[18] That structure of power was actually a fair expression of the partly elitist and oligarchic, partly bureaucratic-military character of the regimes of the White Guard generals.[19] The emphasis on consultative and professional processes did not simply match previous traditions of public administration in Russia or the needs of the Civil War, it also suited the mentality and accustomed work methods of the generals. Many White Guardists longed for restoration of an autocratic or constitutional monarchy, but the leading generals did not dare announce restoration of the Romanov Monarchy in view of their sceptical Western allies, the division of national

17 See above N. Katzer, op. cit., pp. 396–399. and I. Halász, op. cit., pp. 271–273.

18 V.D. Zimina, *Beloje dvizhenije i rossijskaja gosudarstvennosty v period Grazhdanskoj vojni*, Volgograd 1997, p. 320 etc.

19 Ibidem, pp. 380–381 and pp. 426–427.

public opinion, the discontent of the Cossacks and, not least, the political divisions within their own camp.

Instead, amid the terror and the chaos of the Civil War, the ideology of 'the strong hand' and 'effective, stable power', without any additional adjectives became increasingly important in the ideology of the White movement. The birth of the Russian White Guardist generals' dictatorships was not simply a reaction to Bolshevism but also wished to furnish a solution to the increasingly chaotic conditions that developed in the year of the revolution, and the disintegration of the Russian state. After a certain point, some Russian statist White Guardist ideologues with a wider perspective realised that there was more at stake than the restoration of the old structures of power, society and the old forms of ownership. Towards the end of the Civil War they realised that what they should be debating was not primarily the future forms of state and government, or the person suitable to fill the role of a future tzar or other dictator, but a rethinking of the social base of the new regime, the new, more modern forms of exercising power efficiently, and, last but not least, a new ideology of integration as well. Finally, though, the White movement, with its desire to reign in Bolshevism, understood as 'raging chaos', and its increasingly fetishistic desire for traditional law and order, 'a strong hand' and 'stable power' lost the race in the very field of state building against the very Bolsheviks they considered to be seditious, destructive elements.[20] During the Civil War, a level of chaos, violence and terror developed in the country that endangered the most fundamental structures of social coexistence. The main question was which camp would be able to control that destructive energy later on. Yet, in order to do so, they had to restore order among their own ranks, and 'restoration of order' on the national scale could only follow. In that very area, the Bolsheviks proved more successful after 1918. The Whites were hindered by their internal political heterogeneity, their provisional character, and their excessive reliance on the armed forces they finally failed to bring under control and discipline.

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20 A.I. Denikin, *Nacionalnaja diktatura i jejo politika. In Revolucija i grazhdanskaja vojna v opisanijach belogvardejcev*, Moskva 1991, pp. 5–7.

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