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Victor Serge's Account of the Seizure of Power

THE AUTHOR

Victor Serge (Victor Kibalchich) was born in Brussels December 30, 1890. His parents were exiled Russian revolutionaries. He was active in the movement at the age of fifteen as an anarchist. He was arrested in France in connection with the Bonnet case and was condemned to five years, which he served because he refused to denounce his comrades.

Freed in 1917 he went to Spain. As a printer in Barcelona he participated in an abortive insurrection. When the news of the October Revolution came he tried to reach Russia. He was arrested and interned in the Sarthe concentration camp in France. He was exchanged together with some Russians for officers of the French military mission in Russia. He travelled in the company of Rousekoff, whose daughter Liuba, he later married.

He joined the Third International and was given the direction of the French language bureau, and later of the "International Correspondence." He took part in the revolutionary struggle in Russia (during the defense of Petrograd from the Yudenitch offensive), and as a journalist, in the Austrian and German revolutions.

But he also took part in the faction struggles inside the party. In the latter part of 1927 he was expelled from the party and spent six weeks in prison.

Deprived henceforth of political activity, he lived by doing hack work (translations, etc.) which he was still able to procure, and devoted himself to his own literary and historical works: *The Year I of the Russian Revolution, Men in Prison, Birth of Our Power, Literature and Revolution, The Conquered City*, etc.

At the same time he tried to get permission to leave Russia. He received no answer, or at best equivocal answers for years, and finally a blank refusal. His friends in France made efforts in the same direction (letters to soviet authorities, visits to the ambassadors; only in the last few weeks (1933) did they have recourse to the press as a last measure) with no more success. The Committee which has taken up his cause includes such artists and writers as Paul Signac, Leon Werth, Georges Duhamel, Firmin Gémier, Victor Marguerite, Madeleine Paz, Luc Durban, Henry Poulaille, Charles Villard, etc. It has offered to stand all the expenses of reprinting Serge and his family.

On March 8, 1932, Serge was arrested and imprisoned once more. At the end of June he was exiled to Orenburg by executive order—renewable at will, and the same measure to be cancelled at will—from the G.P.U.

He is still in exile. The article printed here is a chapter translated from his best work: *"The Year One of the Russian Revolution."*

On the Eve of Battle

The conflict between the two powers—the Provisional Government headed by Kerenski, and the Soviet—entered a sharper phase in Petersburg after October 16, when the Military Revolutionary Committee was formed. The Committee was headed by Antonov-Ovseenko, Podvoiski, and Chudnovski. The Petersburg garrison had come over to the Bolsheviki. The government, citing the danger of a German offensive, tried to send the revolutionary regiments off to the front. The M.R.C. was equipped with liaison, information, and armaments departments. It began by appointing commissaries in every unit of the troops. The bourgeoisie was arming—but the appointment of commissaries at the armories put a stop to that. The delegates of the M.R.C. were welcomed by the troops who knew the Committee was opposed to the order sending them to the front. The M.R.C. simply refused to countersign the order. A refusal they were artful enough to explain as giving the Committee time to examine the question. . . . The M.R.C. assumed general power over the troops, and ended by ordering them not to pay any attention to the regular general staff. From then on the insurrection was, so to speak, latent. Two powers measured each other and two military authorities, the one insurrectional, deliberately cancelled each other's orders.

The Second All Russian Congress of Soviets was to meet in Petersburg on October 15. The Mensheviks managed to postpone the meeting until the 25th (Nov. 7, New Style), thus obtaining ten days grace for the bourgeois provisional government. No one doubted but that the congress, where the Bolsheviki were certain of a majority, would vote for the seizure of power. "You are setting the date of the revolution," said the Mensheviks to the Bolsheviki. In order that the foregone decision of the congress might be something more than a platonic expression of opinion it was necessary to support it by force of arms. As to the date for the insurrection two points of view were manifest; Trotsky wanted to tie up with the congress, believing that an independent insurrection of the party would have less chance of carrying along the masses; Lenin thought it "criminal" to temporize until the congress, fearing that the Provisional Government would forestall the insurrection by a vigorous offensive. Events failed to justify his fear, which was nonetheless legitimate. The enemy proved to be completely demoralized. In our opinion two perfectly correct conceptions, based on different considerations came into conflict on this point. The one strategic, based on the necessity for tying up the action of the party with an immediate demand intelligible to the widest masses ("All power to the Soviets"), certainly a condition for success; the other based on a general line, to eliminate every illusion of the possibility of proletarian power before the insurrection. Once this possibility is admitted in theory, why not admit the possibility of power without insurrection? That road could lead far. Since 1906 Lenin had attacked

odni Dom) thousands filled the auditorium, the galleries, the corridors; in the great hall clusters of human beings clung shakily to the steel framework of the building. . . . John Reed was there; his notes on this meeting, where Trotsky roused the crowd, deserve repetition: "The people around me appeared to be in ecstacy. It seemed that they were about to burst forth spontaneously in a religious hymn. Trotsky read a resolution to the general effect that they were ready to fight for the workers and peasants to the last drop of their blood. . . . Who is in favor of the resolution? The innumerable crowd raised its hand as a single man. I saw the burning

eyes of men, women, adolescents, workers, soldiers, mujiks. . . . Trotsky went on. The hands remained raised. Trotsky said, 'Let this vote be your oath. You swear to give all your strength, not to hesitate before any sacrifice, to support the Soviet which undertakes to win the revolution and give you land, bread, and peace.' The hands remained raised. The crowd approved; they took the oath. . . . And the same scene was repeated all over Petersburg. The last preparations were made everywhere; everywhere they made the last oath; thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of men. It was the insurrection."

Kronstadt and the Fleet

On the morning of the 25th the revolutionary forces of Kronstadt received orders to prepare to defend the Soviet Congress (for the offensive was launched under the formal cover of defense). Let us pause for a moment on the preparations at Kronstadt, of which one of the participants (I. Fierovski) has left an excellent account. The rational element, the element of coordination, the perfect organization of the insurrection as a military operation according to the rules of war, there appears most clearly; and the contrast with the spontaneous, badly organized movements so numerous in the history of the proletariat is striking. "Preparations for the march on Petrograd were carried on during the night. . . . The Navy Club was jammed with soldiers, sailors, and workers, all under arms, all ready for action. . . . The revolutionary general staff followed the plan of operations exactly, designated the various units and sections, made inventory of supplies and ammunition, assigned the different leaders. The night passed in feverish work. The following boats were ordered to support the operation: the torpedo boat midgetlayer Amour, the old cruiser Dawn of Liberty (formerly Alexander III), the monitor Vautour. The Amour and Vautour were to disembark troops in Petrograd. The cruiser was to take up a station at the entrance of the maritime canal, commanding the coastal railroad with its cannon. A feverish but silent activity went on in the streets. Army and Navy detachments marched toward the port. Only the serious, concentrated faces of the first ranks were to be seen by the light of torches. Neither laughter nor talk; only the martial tread of marching men, sharp commands,

and groaning passage of trucks interrupted the silence. In the port the boats were hastily boarded. The detachments drawn up on the docks waited patiently for their turn to embark. Is it possible, I thought in spite of myself, that these can be the last moments before the Great Revolution? Everything went off with such simplicity and order that one could believe that nothing more was at stake than some everyday military maneuver. How little this resembled the revolutionary scenes that one remembers from history. . . . 'This going off well.' This revolution went off in small proletarian style—with organization. That is why it conquered in Petrograd, so easily and completely. Let us borrow another significant scene from these memoirs. On board one of the boats headed for the insurrection; the delegate of the revolutionary general staff enters the officers mess. "Here the atmosphere is different. They are worried, careworn, puzzled. As I enter and salute the officers rise. They listen to my short explanation while standing. I give the order: 'We are going to overthrow the Provisional Government by force. Power will pass to the Soviets. We do not count on your sympathy; we don't need it. But we urge you to remain at your posts, filling your duties punctually and obeying our orders. We shall spare you superfluous trials. That is all.' — 'We understand, the captain replies. The officers file out to their posts; the captain mounts the bridge."

The Capture of the Winter Palace

Three comrades, Podvoiski, Antonov-Ovseenko, Lashevitch, had been entrusted with organizing the capture of the Winter Palace. Chudnovski, a Bolshevik from the earliest days, who was soon to die in the Ukraine, worked with them. The former imperial residence is situated in the center of the city on the banks of the Neva. It faces Peter and Paul fortress which lies across the river at a distance of six hundred yards. To the south the palace looks out on a vast paved square which contains the Column of Alexander I. Across this square in a semi-circle are the former army and foreign affairs buildings. In 1879 the revolver shots of the student Soloviev, from whom the Autocrat Alexander II fled, doubled over, pale with fright, echoed among these buildings. In 1871 the explosion of a dynamite charge set by the carpenter Stephen Kaitourine under the imperial apartments, blasted through the square. Here on January 22, 1905, troops opened fire on the crowd of the hymn singing workers come to petition their "Little Father Tsar." There were fifty deaths and more than a thousand wounded—the autocracy was shot fatally of all, by its own bullets. On the morning of the 25th of October Bolshevik regiments acting in concert with the Red Guard, began to encircle the Palace, now the seat of Kerenski's ministry. The attack was planned for nine o'clock in the evening, although Lenin, ever impatient, urged them to attack sooner. While a wall of steel gradually surrounded the Palace, the Congress of Soviets met at Smolny,



A reproduction of the mural made by Diego Rivera for the International Workers School.

tack met only feeble resistance. Grenades exploded on the great marble staircases, there was hand to hand fighting in the corridors. In the shadows of a great anti-chamber a single file of cadets crossed bayonets before a panelled door. It was the last rampart of the last bourgeois government of Russia. Antonov-Ovseenko, Podvoiski, and Tchudnovski pushed past the motionless bayonets. "I am with you," one of the youths whispered. Inside was the Provisional Government; thirteen pitiful, shaking ministers, thirteen fear-strained faces hidden in the shadow. As they went out of the Palace surrounded by Red Guards, a cry for their death went up. The soldiers

and sailors had slight desire to see a massacre. The Red Guard kept them close. "Don't soil the victory of the proletariat with excesses." Kerenski's ministers were sent off to Peter and Paul Fortress, the former Bastille through which so many Russian heroes had passed. There they joined the last ministers of the Tsar. That was all. In the neighboring sections of the city traffic had not even been interrupted. On the wharfs sight-seers looked on quietly. A detail of organization: in order that momentary successes of the enemy might not interfere with their work the military leaders of the insurrection had prepared two reserve headquarters.

The Congress of the Soviets

While the reds surround the Winter Palace the Petrograd Soviet meets. Lenin comes out of hiding. Lenin and Trotsky announce the seizure of power. The Soviets are going to offer a democratic peace to all belligerent powers; secret treaties will be published. Lenin's first words emphasize the importance of the bond between the peasants and the workers, which is yet unsealed:

"In Russia the immense majority of the peasantry has said: 'Enough of this game with the capitalists, we shall march with the workers.' A single decree abolishing the landowners' estates will gain us the confidence of the peasantry. They will understand that their salvation is with the workers. We shall set up workers control of industry. . . ."

The All Russian Congress of Soviets does not open until evening in the great white ball room at Smolny, illuminated by enormous chandeliers. Five hundred and sixty-two delegates are present; three hundred and eighty-two Bolsheviki, thirty-one non-party sympathizers with the Bolsheviki, seventy Left Social Revolutionaries, thirty-six center Social Revolutionaries, sixteen right Social Revolutionaries, three nationalist Social Revolutionaries, fifteen United International-

ist Social Democrats, twenty-one Menshevik partisans of national defense, seven Social Democrats from various national organizations, five anarchists. The room is crowded and feverish. The Menshevik Dan opens the congress in the name of the former All Russian Executive; cannon thunder on the Neva as the officers are elected. The resistance of the Winter Palace drags on. Kamenev, "dressed in his best and in a holiday mood," resigns as president. He proposes a three point agenda: "Organization of Power; War and Peace; The Constituent Assembly." The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries take the floor first. For the former Martov, their most gifted and intelligent leader, whose physical sickness seems, in spite of his great personal courage, to be sickness of the idea he serves, "Martov, planted as usual with his hand on his hip, pale, trembling and queerly twisted, shaking his ruffled hair, urges a peaceful solution of the conflict." A little later! Mistslavski takes the floor for the left Social Revolutionaries. His party mistrusted the Provisional Government and was favorable to the seizure of power by the Soviets, but had refused to join in the insurrection. He speaks in nuances. All power to the Soviets, certainly! All the more so since they have already seized power. But

all military operations must be immediately stopped. How can anybody think in the middle of a cannonade? To which Trotsky replies, "Who is embarrassed by the sound of cannon? To the contrary, we shall work all the better." The cannon glare in the windows. A sailor from the cruiser Aurora appears in the hall to reply to the Mensheviks and the right Social Revolutionaries who are denouncing "this crime against Country and Revolution." "A bronzed figure he was," Mistslavski relates, "his gestures were curt, his words cut through the air like a knife. Stocky and strong, he mounted the platform, his hairy chest showing beneath the high collared shirt that curved gracefully about his shaggy head. The hall crackled with excitement. . . . 'The Winter Palace is finished,' he said, 'the Aurora is firing at point blank range.' 'Oh! groans the Menshevik Abramovitch, on his feet, distracted and wringing his hands, 'Oh! The man from the Aurora responds to this cry with a graceful gesture of magnanimity that consoles him in a loud whisper that trembles with suppressed laughter. 'They are shooting blank cartridges. No harm must come to the ministers and the woman's national.' A turmoil ensues. The national de-ensist Mensheviks and the right Social Revolutionaries, sixty delegates altogether, go out. 'To die with the Provisional Government.' They don't get far; their straggling cortege found the streets barred by the Red Guard and they dispersed." Late in the night the Left Social Revolutionaries decided to follow the Bolsheviki and remain in the Congress.

Lenin did not mount the rostrum until the following day when the decrees on land, peace, and workers' control of production were voted. His appearance was the signal for a tremendous acclamation. He waited calmly for it to end, looking out over the victorious crowd. Then he said quite simply, without any gesture, his two hands resting on the pulpit, his shoulders slightly inclined forward toward the crowd: "Now we shall construct the socialist society."

Peace Parade Bluff in Facts & Figures

(Continued from Page 1) do McNutt, national chairman of the American Youth Congress, representing more than 2,000,000 organized youth, called upon the youth of America to "prepare for war by marching for peace."

lic statements of its overzealous national chairman who deals out their "2,000,000 organized youth" with such a free hand. Knitgoods Union Protests We have received another letter, a press release from the Knitgoods Joint Council: "For immediate release. The following letter was sent by the Joint Council of Knitgoods Unions to the People's March for Peace Committee protesting the unauthorized use of the names of their affiliated locals, 155 and 2085 United Textile Workers of America, as endorsers of the People's March for Peace Committee: "Mr. S. B. Solomonick, Trade Union Organizer "People's March for Peace Committee "Dear Sir: "We are in receipt of your communication with reference to the People's March for Peace Parade to be held next Saturday, October 26, and note that two of our affiliated locals, 155 and 2085, United Textile Workers, are listed as endorsers of your organization. "While our organization is opposed to war and is at all times ready to take action in support of peace, we cannot permit the names of our affiliated locals to be used as endorsers of an organization about which we know nothing and of a parade in the arrangement of which we have not even been asked to participate. "We want to protest this unauthorized use of the names of our locals. We believe that such methods of obtaining endorsers act against attempts of sincere labor organizations to organize movements for peace. . . . Yours truly, Joint Council, Knitgoods Workers Union, Morris Lispy, President, Lewis Nelson, Manager."

Worker we cannot say. We can only guess how fifteen became fifty thousand. The parade came off under the appropriate slogan of Waldo McNutt: "Prepare for war by marching for peace." (How true, how true. The prodigal son of the American Youth Congress speaks truer than he knows.)

France Faces Civil War

(Continued from Page 1) any organization acting contrary to public order or the republican form of government. These decrees will no doubt meet with the satisfaction of the gentlemen of the Front Populaire whose fight against fascism has consisted mainly in demands that Laval dissolve the Fascist League. The Front Populaire, after all, regards itself as the chief defender of the republican form of government, of democracy in France. Such decrees, surely, can't be pointing their finger at Monsieur Cachin who promised that the "Bolsheviks of France" who "love their country," "must always do their best for our people, for the national unity of our own France" ("Humanite, Oct. 8), or at Monsieur Thorez who declaims again and again: "Safety lies not in Rome or in Berlin. I repeat, I, whose heart beats in tune with that of Moscow, that safety is in our Paris, in our France!" ("Humanite, Oct. 13). Or at Vaillant-Couturier, for whom "the interests of France coincide today with the interests of humanity" ("Humanite, Oct. 4). Or any of these gentlemen like Monmousseau who are "for union at any price" ("Humanite, Oct. 5) with the bourgeoisie or its flunkies?

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The Art of Insurrection

(Continued from Page 4) and the garrison was that they were "isolated" from those classes from whom they intended to take the power! But was it really possible to rely upon the sympathy and support of the dark masses in the provinces and at the front? "Their Bolshevism," wrote Sukhanov scornfully, "was nothing but hatred for the coalition and longing for land and peace." As though that were little! Hatred for the coalition meant a desire to take the power from the bourgeoisie. Longing for land and peace was the colossal program which the peasant and soldier intended to carry out under the leadership of the workers. The insignificance of the democrats, even the most leftward, resulted from this very distrust—the distrust of "educated" sceptics—in those dark masses who grasp a phenomenon wholesale not bothering about details and nuances. This intellectual, pseudo-aristocratic, squeamish attitude toward the people was foreign to Bolshevism, hostile to its very nature. The Bolsheviki were not lily-handed, literary friends of the masses, not pedants. They were not afraid of those backward strata now for the first time lifting themselves out of the dregs. The Bolsheviki took the people as preceding history had created them, and as they were called to achieve the revolution. The Bolsheviki saw it as their mission to stand at the head of that people. Those against the insurrection were "everybody"—except the Bolsheviki. But the Bolsheviki were the people.

SPARTACUS YOUTH LEAGUE
MASQUERADE BALL
 at
GERMANIA HALL -- 144 E. 16th St.
 DANCING :: ENTERTAINMENT :: PRIZES
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 9th 1935
 Admission 20 cents
 At door: 25c with costume; 30c without costume.
 Tickets obtainable at 55 East 11th Street