Red Fortress: The Rise of Bolshevik Power, 1917–1924

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Introduction

This book tells the story of how a revolutionary party, propelled by crisis and conviction, built a new kind of state in the crucible of war. Between 1917 and 1924, the Bolsheviks transformed a collapsing empire into a centralized socialist polity that would dominate the twentieth century's geopolitics and define its debates about

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power, ideology, and violence. Red Fortress traces that passage from seizure to consolidation, showing how Lenin's leadership, War Communism, and a grinding civil war forged the core institutions and habits of rule that endured long after the guns fell silent.

The narrative is concise by design and source-aware by necessity. It follows the political decision-making of the Bolshevik leadership while keeping sight of the institutional machinery that made decisions operative: Sovnarkom's decrees, the party's organs, the Cheka and successor bodies, the Red Army, and the local soviets that mediated power on the ground. Along the way, it draws on party minutes, decrees, correspondence, memoirs, and contemporary journalism, as well as provincial reports where they illuminate how policies were interpreted outside Petrograd and Moscow. These sources are partial and often partisan; the book treats them critically, reading against the grain and setting testimony beside practice to reconstruct what officials intended, what they could actually do, and what they felt compelled to do.

At the core of the argument lies the interaction between ideological aspiration and the pressures of survival. The Bolsheviks believed they were inaugurating a new social order, yet the choices they made between 1917 and 1921—closing the Constituent Assembly, empowering extraordinary organs of repression, requisitioning grain, militarizing labor—were not simply matters of doctrine. They were also responses to the fragility of power amid invasion, sabotage, and revolt. War Communism was both a creed and a coping strategy, and its legacies outlasted its formal repeal: even as markets reappeared under the New Economic Policy, the party's monopoly on politics and its readiness to use coercion had become constitutive features of the regime.

Civil war made the state. The Red Army's emergence under Trotsky professionalized coercion; the Cheka's spread normalized emergency methods; and the party's reach into factories, villages, and the barracks created new channels of supervision and reward. At the peripheries—from Ukraine to the Caucasus—the center's policies met rival sovereignties and national aspirations, prompting a blend of accommodation and force that culminated in a federal union whose promise of autonomy was bounded by central control. In this contested terrain, the Bolsheviks learned the practices of rule that later generations would inherit: mobilization by decree, bargaining with local cadres, and the routine subordination of law to revolutionary expediency.

The period after 1921 did not end the revolution; it institutionalized it. NEP loosened economic strictures while tightening political discipline. The ban on factions, the rise of the Secretariat, and the routinization of cadre policy narrowed the space for internal dissent even as the leadership sought to stabilize society. The Comintern's creation projected the revolution outward, but domestic consolidation remained paramount. Lenin's final years, marked by illness and unfinished warnings about the apparatus, revealed a state that had grown beyond any single leader's grasp. Structures and

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procedures—some improvised in crisis—had become the architecture of governance.

This is, therefore, a study of formation more than of outcomes. It stops in 1924 not because the story of Soviet power ends with Lenin's death, but because by then the essential grammar of that power had been written. Later terrors, plans, and wars would elaborate a syntax already in place. The chapters that follow proceed chronologically with thematic pauses, anchoring major decisions in their immediate contexts while tracing how those decisions accumulated into institutions.

Finally, a caution against inevitability. Nothing in 1917 predetermined the particular state that emerged by 1924. The Bolsheviks made choices within constraints, and their opponents did too. Violence bred counterviolence; scarcity enabled command; ideology sharpened, but did not alone dictate, policy. To read these years as the roots of later authoritarianism is not to deny contingency, but to recognize how a specific blend of ideas and emergencies produced a durable system. This book aims to make that blend legible—clearly, compactly, and with due regard for the sources that allow us to see it.

CHAPTER ONE: Collapse and Dual Power: February–March 1917

The year 1917 dawned on an empire teetering on the brink. Three years of total war had stretched Russia's already fragile infrastructure and archaic political system to a breaking point. Millions of peasants, conscripted into the Imperial Army, faced the horrors of modern warfare with inadequate supplies and often incompetent leadership. Back home, cities swelled with refugees and workers, all contending with crippling inflation, food shortages, and the gnawing anxiety of a seemingly endless conflict. Tsar Nicholas II, a man ill-suited to the demands of autocracy in a crisis, remained stubbornly committed to divine right and detached from the growing discontent festering in his capital, Petrograd.

The immediate spark came in late February (early March by the Gregorian calendar). International Women's Day, February 23rd, saw women textile workers in Petrograd leave their factories, demanding bread and an end to the war. Their protests quickly snowballed, attracting thousands of sympathetic workers, students, and even some soldiers. The city's streets, usually under the firm control of the police and Cossacks, became a chaotic theater of demonstrations and clashes. The initial response from the authorities was predictable: disperse the crowds, by force if necessary. Yet, a crucial shift was underway.

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As the days progressed, the loyalty of the Petrograd garrison, a mixed bag of reservists and new recruits, began to fray. Many of these soldiers, often peasants themselves, harbored grievances similar to those of the striking workers. On February 25th, the unrest escalated dramatically. Shots were fired, but crucially, some regiments began to refuse orders to fire on the demonstrators. The dam broke on February 27th. Whole units mutinied, joining the workers and seizing arsenals. The police, once the iron fist of the autocracy, found themselves overwhelmed and targeted. The fortress of Peter and Paul, a symbol of Tsarist repression, fell to the insurgents. The city was, for all intents and purposes, in the hands of the revolution.

News of the Petrograd uprising reached Tsar Nicholas II, who was at the military headquarters in Mogilev, with a considerable delay and, initially, a degree of dismissiveness. He believed it to be another temporary disturbance that could be quelled with a firm hand. He ordered troops loyal to him to move on the capital, but these efforts were largely in vain. Railway workers, sympathetic to the uprising, delayed and diverted troop trains. Even those loyal units that did manage to approach Petrograd found themselves facing a city transformed, where revolutionary committees were already beginning to assert control. The Tsar's authority, once seemingly unshakeable, was dissolving with astonishing speed.

Meanwhile, in Petrograd, two distinct centers of power began to emerge from the revolutionary chaos. On one side stood the Provisional Committee of the State Duma. The Duma, a quasi-parliamentary body established after the 1905 revolution, had been repeatedly curtailed by the Tsar and largely dismissed by radical revolutionaries. However, its members, mostly liberal and moderate conservatives, saw an opportunity to bring order to the unfolding revolution and establish a more legitimate form of governance. They quickly formed a Provisional Committee, led by Mikhail Rodzianko, the Duma's chairman. Their initial aim was not to overthrow the monarchy, but to pressure the Tsar into reforms that would save the dynasty.

On the other side, and arguably with far greater revolutionary legitimacy, was the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. This body, spontaneously formed by striking workers and mutinous soldiers, drew its inspiration from the soviets that had briefly appeared during the 1905 revolution. It represented a direct, grassroots democracy, with delegates elected from factories and military units. The Petrograd Soviet convened for the first time on February 27th in the Tauride Palace, the same building where the Duma was meeting. Its initial composition was overwhelmingly Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary, with the Bolsheviks still a relatively minor force.

The emergence of these two bodies created a unique and inherently unstable political situation that historians would later term "dual power" (dvoevlastie). The Provisional Committee, soon to become the Provisional Government, sought to establish itself as the legitimate governing authority, aiming for a parliamentary republic and continued

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prosecution of the war. Its members, largely drawn from the propertied and educated classes, were wary of the revolutionary excesses they feared the soviets might unleash. They envisioned a gradual transition to a constitutional order, not a radical social upheaval.

The Petrograd Soviet, however, possessed the real power on the streets. Its control over the city's garrison, its ability to mobilize workers, and its moral authority among the revolutionary masses gave it a de facto veto over the Provisional Government's decisions. The Soviet viewed itself as the protector of the revolution's gains and the voice of the working class and peasantry. While it initially chose not to seize full power, preferring to oversee the Provisional Government, its very existence constrained the new government's actions and fueled an atmosphere of constant political tension.

The first major confrontation, and a clear illustration of dual power, came with the issuance of "Order No. 1" by the Petrograd Soviet on March 1st. This decree dramatically asserted the Soviet's authority over the military. It called for the election of soldier committees in all military units, stating that these committees, and not the officers, were to obey the orders of the Petrograd Soviet. Furthermore, it stipulated that all weapons were to be under the control of these committees and were not to be given to officers who remained loyal to the old regime. This order effectively undermined the authority of the Provisional Government over the armed forces and ensured that the military would remain a revolutionary force, responsive to the Soviet.

The Provisional Government, grappling with the collapse of the old order, found itself in a precarious position. On March 2nd, pressured by military commanders and Duma representatives, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, first for himself and then, persuaded by the unsuitability of his ailing son Alexei, for his brother, Grand Duke Michael. However, Michael, recognizing the widespread opposition to the monarchy, also refused the throne, effectively bringing 300 years of Romanov rule to an end. This act, while welcomed by revolutionaries, left a power vacuum that the Provisional Government was ill-equipped to fill independently.

The abdication of the Tsar removed the symbolic head of the old regime, but it did not resolve the fundamental questions facing Russia: peace, land, and bread. The Provisional Government, under Prime Minister Prince Georgy Lvov, largely represented the interests of the liberal bourgeoisie and aimed to continue Russia's participation in World War I, viewing it as a matter of national honor and obligation to the Allied powers. This stance immediately put it at odds with the popular desire for an end to the devastating conflict, a sentiment strongly echoed within the Petrograd Soviet.

Land reform was another contentious issue. Peasants, who made up the vast majority of the population, desperately desired redistribution of land owned by the gentry and the crown. The Provisional Government, committed to legal processes and property

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rights, moved slowly on this issue, preferring to defer it to a future Constituent Assembly. This delay only fueled peasant unrest and spontaneous land seizures, further eroding the government's authority in the countryside. The government's inability to address the core grievances of the populace created a fertile ground for more radical solutions.

The initial euphoria of the February Revolution, a largely bloodless affair in Petrograd, began to give way to a sense of unease and uncertainty. While censorship was abolished, political prisoners released, and freedoms of speech and assembly guaranteed, the fundamental problems remained. Food shortages persisted, inflation spiraled, and the war continued to drain the nation's resources and spirit. The Petrograd Soviet, while holding immense sway, was itself a diverse and often fractious body, debating the path forward with impassioned rhetoric but little concrete action beyond oversight.

The relationship between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet was a delicate dance of negotiation and mistrust. They shared the Tauride Palace, an architectural irony that underscored their uneasy coexistence. The Provisional Government sought the Soviet's support to lend legitimacy to its decrees, while the Soviet, reluctant to take full power itself, used its influence to push for more radical policies and to ensure the revolution's gains were not rolled back. This dynamic often resulted in policy paralysis, as each body tried to assert its will without provoking a decisive break.

Among the various socialist factions within the Soviet, the Bolsheviks were, at this point, a relatively small and disorganized group. Many of their leaders, including Lenin, were in exile abroad, while others were imprisoned or in internal exile. The party's immediate response to the February Revolution was cautious and, at times, confused. Some local Bolshevik committees initially supported the Provisional Government, believing that a bourgeois-democratic revolution was a necessary precursor to a socialist one. This nuanced position, however, would soon be dramatically challenged by the return of a figure who would irrevocably alter the course of the revolution.

The month of March 1917, therefore, concluded with Russia in a state of profound transition. The autocracy was gone, replaced by a novel and unstable system of dual power. The Provisional Government, striving for order and continuity, found its authority constantly challenged by the Petrograd Soviet, the embodiment of revolutionary aspiration. The fundamental issues of war, land, and economic crisis remained unaddressed, creating a volatile environment where the political landscape was shifting by the day. The stage was set for the return of key figures and the emergence of more defined ideological battles, promising to push the revolution beyond its initial, relatively moderate, phase.

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