

A PEOPLE'S TRAGEDY

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
1891-1924

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the revolutionary movement. Few people believed, in its second week, that the Bolshevik regime could survive.

ii The Smolny Autocrats

Five days after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Alexandra Kollontai, the new People's Commissar of Social Welfare, drove up to the entrance of a large government building on Kazan Street. It had formerly housed the Provisional Government's Ministry of Social Welfare, and she was now coming to take possession of it. An old liveried doorman opened the door and examined Kollontai from head to foot. No woman in Russia had ever been appointed to the head of a ministry before, and, as he looked at her now, he might have been excused for thinking that she was just one more impoverished war widow looking for government aid. Kollontai demanded to see the highest-ranking official in the building, but the old man replied that visiting hours were over for the day. When she announced that she was the People's Commissar and demanded to be let in, he merely replied that petitioners were received between one and three and that it was already five. Kollontai tried to force her way through, but the doorman blocked her way and closed the doors in her face.

It was hardly an auspicious start to the new regime. The employees of the Ministry had joined a general Civil Servants' strike in protest against the Bolshevik seizure of power, and when Kollontai returned the next morning with a small detachment of soldiers to take over the building she found it almost deserted. Virtually all the officials had joined the anti-Bolshevik strike, and only the doormen, cleaners and messenger boys, who could not afford to go on strike, had turned up for work as usual. Since it was pointless to try to operate from this vacant building, Kollontai returned to the Smolny and set up office in a small room there. The old doorman in Kazan Street redirected the ragged children and widows, the refugees and ruined peasants who came to plead for aid to the Bolshevik headquarters.

The early weeks of the new regime were frustrated by similar strikes and campaigns of sabotage in all the major ministries and government departments, the banks, the post and telegraph office, the railways administration, the municipal bodies, the law courts, schools, universities and other vital institutions. Although these public employees held diverse political views, virtually all were agreed that the Bolshevik regime was illegal and had to be opposed. Trotsky was greeted with ironic laughter when he arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and introduced himself to a meeting of the officials as their new Minister; when he ordered them back to work, they left the building in protest. In the Anichkov Palace, where the country's food supply was administered, the Civil

Servants removed all the office furniture and locked away the account books in the palace safe. In the post and telegraph office they walked off with all the directories and piles of telegram blanks (on which some of them would later write their memoirs). The striking officials of the Medical Department even went so far as to remove the nibs from all the pens.³⁹

The refusal of the State Bank and the Treasury to honour the new government's cash demands was the most serious threat of all. Without money to pay its supporters, the Bolshevik regime could not hope to survive for long. Sovnarkom (the Council of People's Commissars) had made various requests for the transfer of ten million roubles, but each was refused by the bank officials as illegal. On 7 November the new Commissar of Finance, V. R. Menzhinsky, appeared at the State Bank with a detachment of sailors and demanded the money; but the bankers stood firm and, despite further armed threats, dismissals and ultimatums, continued their strike. Ten days later the Bolsheviks finally seized control of the bank and forced the employees, at the point of a gun, to open the vaults. Five million roubles were removed, taken off to the Smolny in a velvet bag and deposited on Lenin's desk. The whole operation resembled a bank hold-up. The Bolsheviks now took over the State Bank, making it possible for them to dip their hands freely into the nation's coffers; yet none of them had the slightest idea of how such a vast bank worked. 'There were people among us who were acquainted with the banking system from books and manuals,' recalled one of its new directors, 'but there was not a single man among us who knew the technical procedure of the Russian State Bank. We entered the enormous corridors of this bank as if we were penetrating a virgin forest.'⁴⁰

To their opponents, these first stumbling efforts to master the basic institutions of the state symbolized the Bolsheviks' fundamental weakness. Few people thought that the new regime could last. 'Caliphs for an hour' was the verdict of much of the press. The SR leader, Gots, gave the Bolsheviks 'no more than a few days'; Gorky gave them two weeks; Tsereteli up to three; while Nabokov refused to 'believe for one minute in the strength of the Bolshevik regime and expected its early demise'. Many of the less sanguine Bolsheviks were no more optimistic. 'Things are so unstable', wrote Lunacharsky to his wife on 29 October, 'that every time I break off from a letter, I don't even know if it will be my last. I could at any moment be thrown into jail.'⁴¹

It was not just the opposition of the Civil Service, or the Bolsheviks' own lack of technical expertise in running the complex machinery of the state, which seemed to signal their imminent downfall. The Bolsheviks had no means of feeding the cities or halting the collapse of the economy. They were isolated from the peasants, the vast majority of the population, who were almost bound to vote against them in the forthcoming elections to the Constituent Assembly.

Like the Paris Commune of 1871, Petrograd appeared like a tiny Red island in the middle of a vast Green ocean. The Bolsheviks also had to deal with the censure of the Western powers and the rest of the socialist intelligentsia. Gorky's newspaper, *Novaia zhizn'*, was the most prominent and outspoken mouthpiece of this opposition during the autumn and winter, and it says much for his skills as a politician that it did not fall prey to the Bolshevik censors, like most of the opposition press. Gorky's own column, 'Untimely Thoughts', with its bitter denunciations of the 'new autocracy', must have worn Lenin's indulgent fondness for the writer dangerously thin. Gorky himself often expressed surprise that the paper had not been closed down. 'Lenin and Trotsky', he warned as early as 7 November, 'do not have the slightest idea of the meaning of freedom or the Rights of Man. They have already become poisoned with the filthy venom of power, and this is shown by their shameful attitude towards freedom of speech, the individual, and all those other civil liberties for which the democracy struggled.'⁴²

None the less, in spite of their seemingly fatal isolation, the Bolsheviks managed to consolidate their dictatorship during the first three months of the new regime. By the time of its convocation, in January 1918, the Constituent Assembly, upon which the democratic opposition had pinned all its hopes, had already been made powerless by the rise of the one-party state and the spread of local Soviet rule through the provinces. How did the Bolsheviks achieve this? The absence of a serious military opposition during this critical period, when their power was weakest, no doubt helps to explain their success. The great White armies of the Civil War had yet to be formed and the main anti-Bolshevik forces were small Cossack armies engaged in local wars on the periphery of the Empire. Anti-Bolshevik forces in the centre of Russia were almost non-existent. The SRs and the Kadets, the most likely leaders of such a force, were so convinced of the regime's imminent collapse that they neglected to organize against it. Everyone naturally assumed that it would fall through its own internal weaknesses, so no one did anything to help bring this about. The Committee for the Salvation of Russia and the Revolution, organized by the SRs in the first few days after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, had no real forces behind it; while plans to set up a rival socialist government headed by Chernov at Stavka, the old headquarters of the army, never got off the ground.

But the crux of the Bolshevik success was a two-fold process of state-building and destruction. On the one hand, at the highest levels of the state, they sought to centralize all power in the hands of the party and, by the use of terror, to wipe out all political opposition. At the grass-roots level, on the other, they encouraged the destruction of the old state hierarchies by throwing all power to the local Soviets, the factory organizations, the soldiers' committees and other decentralized forms of class rule. The vacuum of power which this

created would help to undermine the democracy at the centre, while the masses themselves would be neutralized by the exercise of power over their old class or ethnic enemies within their own local environment. There was of course no master plan to this — everything was improvised, as it had to be in a revolution; yet Lenin, at least, had an instinctive sense of the general direction, of what he himself called the 'revolutionary dialectic', and in many ways that was the essence of his political genius. Local Soviet rule in the countryside, which was in effect the unfettered power of the village assembly to rule itself and divide the gentry's land, would undermine the need for the Constituent Assembly in the minds of the peasants, and thus destroy the political base of the SRs. The exercise of 'workers' control' through the factory committees would help to dismantle the old industrial infrastructure — what the Bolsheviks called the 'capitalist system' — while shifting the blame for the industrial crisis to the workers themselves. The spread of soldiers' power and of local peace initiatives at the Front, which the Bolsheviks encouraged, would undermine the plans of the old army commanders to mobilize the troops against the new regime and restart the war. And finally, the breakaway of the ethnic borderlands from the Russian Empire, which the Bolsheviks also supported at this time, would complete the fragmentation of the old imperial state and, according to Lenin, hasten the demise of feudal relations.*

No doubt Lenin viewed all these movements as a means to destroy the old political system and thus clear the way for the establishment of his own party's dictatorship. There is of course no proof of this — only the evidence of what actually took place and virtually everything else which we know of his previous thoughts and actions. It is hard to swallow the notion, which some historians on the Left have favoured, that Lenin was a libertarian at heart and encouraged all these localized forms of power in order to construct a new decentralized type of state, as set out in the *State and Revolution*; a plan which was only later blown off-course by the centralizing demands of the civil war. Lenin's conception of the revolutionary state had always been centralist in essence. He merely used the energies of these localist movements to destroy the *ancien régime*, along with the fragile democracy of 1917, while always intending to destroy these movements, in turn, as separate political forces. While he supported the peasants' movement against the gentry's estates, his ultimate aim was to replace the peasant smallholding system with collectivized farms. While he supported the

* The Declaration of the Rights of the Nations of Russia, proclaimed on 2 November, granted the non-Russian peoples full rights of self-determination, including the freedom to separate from Russia and form an independent state. Finland was the first to take advantage of this, declaring itself independent on 23 November 1917. It was followed by Lithuania (28 November), Latvia (30 December), the Ukraine (9 January 1918), Estonia (24 February), Transcaucasia (22 April) and Poland (3 November).

calls for 'workers' control', he no doubt did so in the knowledge that it would lead to chaos and thus strengthen the need to return to centralized management methods under the party's control. While he supported soldiers' power in so far as it destroyed the old imperial army, he arguably always intended to construct the Red Army on conventional lines. And while he encouraged the various national independence movements, his eventual aim was to abolish national states altogether. In everything he did, Lenin's ultimate purpose was the pursuit of power. Power for him was not a means — it was the end in itself. To paraphrase George Orwell, he did not establish a dictatorship to safeguard the revolution; he made a revolution to establish the dictatorship.

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The first priority of the Bolsheviks was the establishment of firm executive control. It took several weeks to break down the resistance of the Civil Service. The strike leaders and some senior Civil Servants were arrested; political commissars were appointed to oversee the bureaucracy; and junior officials willing to serve the Bolshevik rulers were promoted to senior posts. Overall, most Civil Servants in 1918 had been Civil Servants before 1917, especially in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. But where the old Civil Service was mistrusted (most notably in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) there was usually a thorough purge.⁴³ This established a pattern that was to repeat itself throughout the early years of Soviet state-building. It was a marriage of convenience between the Bolsheviks' demand for loyalty and the ambitions of the party's growing rank and file. One of its results was to promote third-rate party hacks, corrupt opportunists and semi-literate elements from the lower classes into positions of real power. This low cultural level of the Soviet bureaucracy was to be a permanent legacy of October which would later come to haunt the Bolshevik leaders.

Because of the Civil Service strike, which made it impossible to set up a system of cabinet rule, the MRC continued to function as the effective government until mid-November. By that time most of the People's Commissars had gained enough control of their respective ministries to enable the transfer of executive authority to Sovnarkom. But Sovnarkom was no ordinary cabinet government. For one thing, there was no clear division between the interests of the party and the government. The meetings of Sovnarkom, which were chaired by Lenin in the Bolshevik headquarters at Smolny, discussed party and government matters interchangeably; Central Committee resolutions were implemented as Soviet decrees. Everything about the early work of Sovnarkom presented a picture of hasty improvisation. Its meetings had no formal agenda and everything was discussed as 'urgent business', while Lenin drew up the appropriate resolutions and, when the moment was right, announced them to the meeting. They were usually passed without discussion, since few dared question Lenin's judgement.

There was, according to many observers, a conspiratorial atmosphere at

these meetings. It was as if the Bolsheviks were psychologically unable to make the transition from an underground fighting organization to a responsible party of national government. They could not bring themselves to exchange their leather jackets for ministerial suits. Simon Liberman, who sometimes sat in on the Sovnarkom meetings, recalled that:

despite all the efforts of an officious secretary to impart to each session the solemn character of a cabinet meeting, we could not help feeling that here we were, attending another sitting of an underground revolutionary committee! For years we had belonged to various underground organizations. All of this seemed so familiar. Many of the commissars remained seated in their topcoats or greatcoats; most of them wore the forbidding leather jackets.⁴⁴

The Bolsheviks never quite succeeded in ridding themselves of their underground habits. Even as late as 1921, Lenin still gave the impression of a party conspirator rather than a statesman. It was of course a common phenomenon — one might call it the Jacobin Syndrome — which in part explains the tendency of the revolutionary state to perpetuate violence and terror. But the Bolsheviks took it one step further than the Jacobins. Theirs was the first of the twentieth-century dictatorships (followed by those of Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and Castro) to glorify its own violent past through propaganda and the adoption of military symbols and emblems. It was as if this cult of violence was central to the Bolshevik self-image, an end in itself rather than the means.

Just as the party came to overshadow the work of Sovnarkom, so Sovnarkom came to overshadow the work of the Soviet Executive. Although the Bolshevik seizure of power had been carried out in the name of the Soviet Congress, Lenin had no intention of ruling through the Congress, or its permanent executive. He did not believe in the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, even when the parliament in question was a Soviet one with, technically at least, an inbuilt Bolshevik majority. In the first weeks after the October coup the Soviet Executive was a real parliamentary brake on Sovnarkom. The Left SRs, the Anarchists and the tiny group of Menshevik Internationalists grouped around Gorky's *Novaya zhizn'*, were a vocal opposition, which, if joined by the Bolshevik moderates, could almost overturn the Leninist majority. In mid-November, when the leaders of the Peasant Soviet, or rather its left wing,* were added to the

* The Right SRs had called a Second Congress of Peasant Soviets to rally support against the Bolshevik regime, but it was swamped by left-wing delegates from the soldiers' committees and the lower-level Soviet organizations, causing the Right SRs to walk out in protest. The left-wing leaders then passed a resolution to merge this 'Extraordinary' Congress with the All-Russian Soviet Executive.

Soviet Executive, the potential strength of this opposition was even further increased. On 24 November it actually gained a majority of one for a motion of censure against the Bolshevik closure of the Petrograd City Duma eight days before, although on a recount the decision was reversed.

Yet the merger with the Peasant Soviet was also a critical turning point in the demise of the Soviet Executive as a legislative institution (which was almost certainly what Lenin had intended). To the 108 peasant deputies were added a further 100 delegates from the revolutionary organizations in the army and navy, and half that number again from the trade unions. This more than tripled its size, to 366 members, which was far too many to serve as an effective executive body. The burden of decision-making was thus shifted to Sovnarkom. From mid-November the Soviet Executive began to meet less often (once or twice a week), while Sovnarkom meetings became more frequent (once or twice a day). The volume of legislative acts brought before the Soviet Executive also sharply diminished, as Sovnarkom began to rule by decree. On 4 November Sovnarkom decreed itself the right to pass urgent legislation without approval from the Soviet — a clear breach of the principle of Soviet power. The Bolshevik moderates voted with the opposition against the decree, but it was still passed by two votes in the Soviet Executive. Kamenev resigned as the Chairman of the Soviet Executive and joined the opposition in a concerted effort to defend the sovereignty of the Soviet. But the Leninists pushed on. Sverdlov, who replaced Kamenev, was an ardent advocate of the party dictatorship and faithfully carried out Lenin's instructions to bring it about by centralizing power through Sovnarkom. On 17 November he presented the Soviet Executive with a 'constitutional instruction': while formally reiterating that Sovnarkom was responsible to the Soviet and had to present it with all its legislative acts for approval, it did not specify when this had to be done. Sovnarkom, in other words, could publish a legally binding decree without the prior approval of the Soviet, which increasingly became its practice. On 12 December the Soviet Executive met for the first time in two weeks: during its recess Sovnarkom had begun peace talks with the Central Powers, declared war on the Ukraine and introduced martial law in Petrograd and Moscow. As Sukhanov protested, all these measures had been implemented without discussion in the Soviet. The principle of Soviet power, by which the Bolsheviks claimed their right to rule, had been buried; the Soviet Executive had been reduced to a 'sorry parody of a revolutionary parliament'.⁴⁵

From the first days of the new regime the Bolsheviks had set out to destroy, as 'counter-revolutionaries', all those parties which had opposed the October seizure of power. On 27 October Sovnarkom banned the opposition press. The ban was greeted with outrage. The Bolshevik moderates voted against it in the Soviet Executive on 4 November; the five resignations from the Bolshevik Central Committee that day, followed by an equal number of resignations from

Sovnarkom, were also partly in protest against the ban; while the Printers' Union threatened a national strike unless the freedom of the press was restored. But none of this was enough to prevent the MRC from sending in Bolshevik squads to smash many of the opposition presses, to confiscate their newsprint and arrest their editors. Most of the opposition papers were simply driven underground and soon reappeared with a slightly altered name. The SR paper, *Volia naroda*, reappeared the next day as *Volia*, and later on as *Narod*. The socialist paper, *Den' (Day)*, appeared as *Morning, Midday, Afternoon, Evening, Night, Midnight*, and so on.⁴⁶

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The opposition parties were sustained by the hope of political salvation through the Constituent Assembly. It was surely the true voice of the democracy. Every citizen was represented by it, regardless of class, whereas the Soviets were only representative of the workers, the peasants and the soldiers. The opposition believed that the Constituent Assembly was bound to be recognized as the highest sovereign power in the land: not even the Bolsheviks would dare to challenge that. In fact, the Bolshevik leaders were divided over their policy towards the Assembly, though we still do not know enough about their internal debates on this matter. Lenin had always been contemptuous of the ballot box and had made it clear as early as the April Theses that he viewed Soviet power as a higher form of democracy than the Constituent Assembly. There was no room for the 'bourgeoisie' in the Soviets and, in Lenin's view, no room for them either in the revolution. But the seizure of power had been partly justified as a measure to ensure the convocation of the Constituent Assembly: a great deal of fuss had been made about how the Provisional Government was planning not to convene it, and about how only a Soviet government could lead the country to the Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks could not renege on their promise without losing face. The moderates in the party, moreover, were all, to varying degrees, committed on principle to the Constituent Assembly. Kamenev, for one, was a consistent advocate of the idea that the Bolsheviks should compete for power within it and, like some of the Left SRs, even favoured the notion of combining Soviet power at the local level with the Assembly as a sovereign national parliament.

Given all this, Lenin had little option but to allow the elections to go ahead. Polling started on 12 November and lasted for two weeks, since the vast size of the country made it necessary to stagger the elections. The campaign was vigorous, sometimes violent, and the turn-out high. Most people knew that it was, in effect, a national referendum on the Bolshevik regime. The SRs received 16 million votes (38 per cent of the total), most of them cast by the peasants in the central agricultural zone and Siberia. But the ballot papers had not distinguished between the Left SRs, who supported the Bolshevik seizure of power, and the Right SRs, who did not. The split in the party had taken place

too recently for the printing changes to be made, except in one or two places. It is not at all clear, therefore, how much of the SR vote was opposed to the Bolshevik regime, although this was the crucial question of the whole election. The only thing that can be said with relative certainty is that the Left SRs had their main base of support among the younger peasant soldiers, whereas the Right SRs had their stronghold in the older peasants of the village. According to Oliver Radkey, the best authority on this subject, the peasants were more or less split down the middle between the two parties, although the Right SRs probably came out on top in the elections because they retained the bulk of the provincial party organizations and were thus better prepared for the campaign. The traditional voting habits of the peasantry, whereby the whole village assembly resolved to cast its votes for the same party, certainly favoured the Right SRs, since most of the village elders were inclined towards them. But even if the Right SRs did gain most of the peasant vote, they still lacked an outright majority in the Assembly. Only the support of the Mensheviks (who won 3 per cent of the vote), the Kadets (5 per cent) and the Ukrainian SRs (12 per cent) would give them that, though such was the gap between the Russian and the Ukrainian SRs on the question of national independence that even this was open to doubt.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the election results were a profound setback for the government's claim to rule in the name of the people. The Bolsheviks won just 10 million votes (24 per cent of the total), most of them cast by the soldiers and the workers of the industrial north. In Petrograd and Moscow they won a majority; but in the agricultural south, where their organization was extremely weak, they picked up hardly any votes. The Bolsheviks at once declared the results unfair: local reports on electoral abuses, which were bound to take place in a country as vast and backward as Russia, were rigorously collected and cited as evidence of the need for re-elections. Meanwhile, they stepped up their campaign of intimidation and threats against the defenders of the Assembly. The opening of the Assembly was postponed indefinitely by Sovnarkom on 20 November, just eight days before it was due to convene. On the following day Sovnarkom issued a decree giving electors the right to recall their deputies from all representative bodies, including the Constituent Assembly, provided this was supported by more than half the electorate within a given constituency. This meant, in effect, that Bolshevik activists were given the right to reverse the result of democratic elections by drumming up support in the factories and garrisons. It was obviously aimed against the Kadets, who had done rather well in the cities by rallying the right-of-centre vote. Trotsky defended the bill in the Soviet Executive as a 'painless' alternative to the outright closure of the Assembly in the event of it being opposed to the principle of Soviet power. It was a blatant threat that the Bolsheviks would not tolerate a hostile parliament. 'If the Kadets

were to have a majority,' he warned, 'then of course the Constituent Assembly would not be given power.'⁴⁸ As a physical reminder of this threat, the MRC burst into the Tauride Palace on 23 November and arrested the Assembly's three electoral commissioners. They were held captive and interrogated in the Smolny for six days, before being dismissed and replaced by the Bolshevik Uritsky.

The opposition parties were outraged by these acts of intimidation. It looked as if the Bolsheviks were slowly coming round to the view that the Assembly should either be postponed into the distant future or closed down altogether in the light of their party's poor performance in the elections. They immediately formed a Union for the Defence of the Constituent Assembly and called on their supporters to demonstrate in front of the Tauride Palace on 28 November with a view to forcing the parliament's opening. Large crowds turned out on that day, though nowhere near as many as the 200,000 claimed by some of the opposition press: a quarter of that number would be a more reasonable estimate, with most of them students, officers and striking Civil Servants, though there were some workers too, such as the printers and skilled artisans. A group of forty-five Assembly deputies, led by Schreider, the indefatigable Mayor of Petrograd, forced their way into the palace through the Bolshevik pickets, the Latvian Rifleman, and proceeded to the first point on the agenda of the parliament, the election of a Presidium. Of course they knew that they lacked the necessary quorum of 400 deputies, but it was at least a symbolic gesture. The next day they found the Tauride Palace surrounded by troops. The crowds were kept away and, although the deputies were once again admitted, they were soon ordered to leave.

The demonstration was immediately branded as a 'counter-revolutionary' act organized by the Kadets. The Kadet Party was outlawed and denounced, in the Jacobin tradition, as 'enemies of the people'. Dozens of its leaders were arrested, including several delegates to the Constituent Assembly: Shingarev, Kokoshkin, Dolgorukov, Panina, Astrov and Rodichev. Revolutionary justice did not recognize parliamentary immunity. Most of them were taken to the Peter and Paul Fortress, where they were kept for three months in fairly reasonable conditions (Dolgorukov found time to catch up with his reading and welcomed the freedom from telephone calls), although Kokoshkin and Shingarev both fell sick, the former with TB, and had to be transferred to the prison hospital (where they were later brutally murdered by a group of Bolshevik sailors). The Left SRs opposed the arrests as an act of terror, while Gorky denounced them as a 'disgrace to the democracy'. But the Bolshevik leaders were clearly intent on destroying the Kadets as the 'organized force of the bourgeois counter-revolution'. It was not so much a ban on a political party, as the declaration of civil war on a whole social class. Justifying the arrests in the Soviet Executive, Lenin called the Kadet Central Committee the 'political staff of the bourgeoisie'. Trotsky

even claimed that since the bourgeoisie was already passing away from the scene of history, the Bolsheviks' measures of violence against it were for its own good, since they would help to put it out of its misery even more quickly: 'There is nothing immoral in the proletariat finishing off a class that is collapsing: that is its right.'⁴⁹

The arrests of the supposed 'enemies of the people' did not end with the Kadets. Like the Jacobin Terror, to which the Bolshevik leaders continually appealed for justification, they soon spread into the ranks of the revolutionary movement itself. The Kadets were joined in the Peter and Paul Fortress by a number of SR and Menshevik leaders (Avksentiev, Gots, Sorokin, Argunov), as well as some of the leaders of the Peasant Soviet. Orders were even sent out for the arrest of Tsereteli, Dan and Chernov. By the end of December the prisons were so full of these new 'politicals' that the Bolsheviks began to release common criminals in order to make more room. Some of the richer political prisoners, such as the businessmen Tret'iakov and Konovalov, the former Minister of Trade and Industry, were released for a ransom.⁵⁰

Slowly but surely, the shape of the new police state was starting to emerge. On 5 December the MRC was finally abolished and, two days later, its duties transferred to the Cheka,* the new security organ that one day would become the KGB. From its very inception the Cheka worked outside the law: there was not even a published decree to mark its organization, only the secret minutes of Sovnarkom, to which the Cheka was supposed to be subordinated, although in reality it was virtually beyond political account. Lenin had stressed the need 'for a staunch proletarian Jacobin' to head the new 'Okhrana' and he found that man in Felix Dzerzhinsky, a forty-year-old Pole from the Lithuanian city of Vilnius who had spent half his adult life in various tsarist prisons and who thus perhaps had his own special motive to ensure that all these 'enemies of the people' suffered equally in jail. During his childhood Dzerzhinsky had wanted to be a Jesuit priest and, although he had long ceased to believe in religion, he carried that same fanatical spirit into his campaigns of political persecution. At the Sovnarkom meeting at which it was established he described the task of the Cheka as a merciless war against the internal enemies of the revolution:

We need to send to that front — the most dangerous and cruel of fronts — determined, hard, dedicated comrades ready to do anything in defence of the Revolution. Do not think that I seek forms of revolutionary

* Its full name was the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Struggle against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage.

justice; we are not now in need of justice. It is war now — face to face, a fight to the finish. Life or death!⁵¹

One might well ask why the Bolshevik moderates, who were openly opposed to the use of political terror and enjoyed widespread support among the party rank and file, failed to act as a more effective brake on the Leninist zealots. The answer surely lies in the psychological weakness of the moderates and the autocratic status of Lenin among the party leaders after the 'victory' of October.* None of the Bolshevik moderates had either the courage or the capacity for leadership to stand up against Lenin and run the risk of splitting the party. The five who had been brave enough to resign from the Central Committee on 4 November all sooner or later made their peace with Lenin: Zinoviev, who had always been a coward and an opportunist, was the first to recant on 8 November, and was readmitted to the Central Committee; Kamenev, Miliutin, Nogin and Rykov held out three weeks longer. To a greater or lesser extent, the fundamental weakness of all the moderates was their own intellectualism. While it made them uncomfortable with the idea of the Terror, it also deprived them of the means to take their fight against it beyond the realm of words. Lunacharsky was a perfect example. On 2 November he had burst into tears at a Sovnarkom meeting, and subsequently resigned as Commissar of Enlightenment, after hearing reports that the Bolshevik bombardment of the Kremlin had destroyed St Basil's Cathedral during the fighting in Moscow. 'I cannot bear it any longer,' he had written in *Novaia zhizn'*. 'My cup is full. I am powerless to stop this barbarism.' When these reports turned out to be false he had withdrawn his resignation; yet he remained just as frustrated by his impotence against the Bolshevik Terror. Gorky, one of his oldest political friends, who later plagued him with requests to save the country's writers and artists from persecution, summed up the situation of the moderates in a New Year's letter to Ekaterina:

It is clear that Russia is heading for a new and even more savage autocracy. Yesterday I called on the 'Commissar of Justice', a decent enough man but, like all the representatives of 'the authorities', utterly impotent. I pleaded with him to release Vernadsky, it seems without success . . . Lunacharsky's behaviour is astonishingly absurd and ludicrous — he is both a

* According to Lozovsky, the Bolshevik trade unionist who had resigned from Sovnarkom on 4 November, the 'hero-worship' of Lenin had become a basic expectation of party discipline. See his open letter of protest against the dictatorial methods of the Leninist wing in *Novaia zhizn'*, 4 November 1917.

comical and a tragic figure. All the Bolsheviks of his ilk have become repulsively pitiable and wretched.⁵²

The Left SRs, who joined Sovnarkom on 12 December, were paralysed by a similar impotence. They had been the only major group not to walk out of the Soviet Congress after the Bolshevik seizure of power, and this had led to their final break with the Right SRs. From that point on, the two were separate parties battling for control of the provincial SR organizations and the Peasant Soviet. Whereas the Right SRs were determined to keep the Bolsheviks isolated and focused all their hopes on the Constituent Assembly, the Left SRs believed that by joining the Bolsheviks in government — and the Cheka — they might be able to curb their worst excesses. Most of the Left SR leaders were still young enough to be excused for such foolish idealism: Steinberg, Karelin and Kalegaev were all in their twenties, while Spiridonova and Kamkov were only thirty-two. The Left SRs were inspired by what they saw as the revolutionary spontaneity of the Soviets. They tried to reconcile extreme libertarianism with the use of extreme terror for the promotion of that ideal. After October they flooded into the local Soviet organs, where they became the dominant party of the radicalized peasants and soldiers. The Decree on Land, which Lenin introduced at the Second Soviet Congress on 26 October, was in effect the agrarian programme of the Left SRs, as he himself admitted. It gave *carte blanche* to local peasant communities to seize and redivide all the private land. This was enough to persuade the Left SRs that a concordat with the Bolsheviks might be reached; and in mid-November, after they had led the Peasant Soviet into a merger with the All-Russian Soviet Executive, they began negotiations for their own entry into Sovnarkom. Kalegaev became Commissar of Agriculture; Steinberg the 'impotent' Commissar of Justice visited by Gorky; and five others took on minor posts, including the administration of the country's crumbling post and telegraph network. But the Bolsheviks retained the key government posts, and the Left SRs were really no more than a fig-leaf used by Lenin to conceal the nakedness of his dictatorship. Contrary to their naive expectations, the Left SRs were powerless to moderate the despotic extremes of his policies; and in almost every aspect these turned out to be diametrically opposed to their own revolutionary ideals. The semi-anarchist system of decentralized Soviets which they had envisaged was impossible to attain within the centralized structure of Lenin's Dictatorship of the Proletariat; their support for the peasant commune, the organization of the factories on anarcho-syndicalist lines, and the political autonomy of the national minorities were all incompatible with the long-term goals of Bolshevism; and their passionate commitment to civil liberties (Spiridonova had once demanded the destruction of the Peter and Paul Fortress as a symbol of the police state) was hardly reconcilable with the Bolshevik methods of rule.

With the Left SRs safely on board, Lenin stepped up his campaign of persecution against the Constituent Assembly. Despite their commitment to democratic freedoms, the Left SRs were just as determined as the Bolsheviks not to allow the principle of parliamentary sovereignty to supersede that of Soviet power. After the events of 28 November many Bolsheviks and Left SRs favoured the idea of driving the Kadets out of the Constituent Assembly, which could then be reorganized around their two parties into a Revolutionary Convention. Bukharin had proposed this in the Central Committee on 29 November. Like the French Convention of 1792, which had replaced the Legislative Assembly, this would be a much more pliant body for the Soviet dictatorship, yet it would preserve all the outward signs of a national parliament in order to appease what Bukharin called the 'constitutional illusions [that] are still alive in the masses'.⁵³

Lenin, meanwhile, was coming round to favour the outright abolition of the Constituent Assembly. On 12 December he published his 'Theses' on the subject, in which he argued that Soviet power had cancelled out the need for a 'bourgeois-democratic' Assembly. In any case, it was no longer truly representative because of the split in the SR Party and the leftward shift of the masses since October. The 'class struggle' and the defeat of the 'counter-revolution' demanded the consolidation of Soviet power and, unless the Assembly was ready to recognize this, 'the entire people' would agree that it was 'doomed to political extinction'. It was a declaration of intent to abolish the Assembly, unless the Assembly agreed to abolish itself. Lenin's ultimatum became the policy of the party, and this in turn became the policy of Sovnarkom. Ten days later, at a meeting of the Soviet Executive, the Bolsheviks and Left SRs both demanded the closure of the Constituent Assembly, unless it resolved to subordinate itself to the Soviets at its opening session on 5 January. A Third Soviet Congress was meanwhile convened for 8 January, two weeks earlier than originally planned, so that, as Zinoviev put it, 'the oppressed people may pass sentence on the Constituent Assembly'. Lenin drew up a 'Declaration of the Rights of the Working People' to be passed by the Constituent Assembly at its opening session. This spurious replica of the Rights of Man proclaimed Russia a Republic of Soviets and endorsed all the decrees of Sovnarkom, including the abolition of private landed property, the nationalization of the banks and the introduction of universal labour conscription.⁵⁴ It was the death sentence of the Constituent Assembly.

Petrograd was in a state of siege on 5 January, the opening day of the Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks had placed the capital under martial law, forbidden public gatherings and flooded the city with troops. Most of them were concentrated near the Tauride Palace, where the Assembly was due to convene. The palace was cordoned off with barricades guarded by Bolshevik

pickets. Its forecourt, where Chernov had once been held by the mob, was filled with bivouacs, artillery, machine-guns and field kitchens. It looked like an armed encampment. The Bolsheviks had set up a special military staff and called in their staunchest defenders — the Kronstadt sailors, Latvian Riflemen and Red Guards — to deal with any 'counter-revolutionary' actions by the Union for the Defence of the Constituent Assembly.

The Union had at one stage planned to start an uprising, but since they had no real military forces at their disposal, had abandoned the idea at the final moment in favour of a mass demonstration under the slogan of 'All Power to the Constituent Assembly'. During the morning a sizeable crowd gathered on the Mars Field and, towards noon, began to march in various columns towards the Tauride Palace. Some sources counted 50,000 marchers, but the actual number was probably less. It was certainly not as large as the organizers had hoped: far fewer workers and soldiers turned up than expected, so the crowd was largely made up of the same small active citizenry — students, Civil Servants and middle-class professionals — who had taken part in the earlier march on 28 November. As the demonstrators approached the Liteiny Prospekt they were fired upon by Bolshevik troops, hiding on the rooftops with their machine-guns. Several other columns of marchers, one including workers from the Obukhovskiy munitions plant, were also fired on. At least ten people were killed and several dozen wounded.

It was the first time government troops had fired on an unarmed crowd since the February Days. The victims were buried on 9 January, the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, next to the victims of that massacre in the Preobrazhensky Cemetery. The historic parallels did not go unnoticed. Several workers' delegations turned up for the funeral, and one laid a wreath with the inscription: 'To the victims of the Smolny autocrats'. Gorky, who had witnessed both massacres, underlined the parallels in *Novaia zhizn'*. It was the emotional climax of his bitter disillusionment with the revolution:

On 9 January 1905, when the downtrodden, ill-treated soldiers were firing into unarmed and peaceful crowds of workers by order of the tsarist regime, intellectuals and workers ran up to the soldiers — the unwilling murderers — and shouted point-blank in their faces: 'What are you doing, damn you? Who are you killing?' . . .

However, the majority of the Tsar's soldiers answered the reproaches and persuasions with dismal and slavish words: 'We've got our orders. We know nothing, we've got our orders'. And, like machines, they fired at the crowds. Reluctantly, perhaps with a heavy heart, but — they fired.

On 5 January 1918 the unarmed Petersburg democracy — factory

and white-collar workers — demonstrated peacefully in honour of the Constituent Assembly.

For almost a hundred years the finest Russians have lived by the idea of a Constituent Assembly . . . Rivers of blood have been spilled on the sacrificial altar of this idea, and now the 'People's Commissars' have given the orders to shoot the democracy which demonstrated in honour of this idea . . .

Thus, on 5 January, the Petrograd workers were mowed down, unarmed . . . They were mowed down from ambush, through cracks in fences, in a cowardly fashion, as if by real murderers.

And just as on 9 January 1905, people who had not lost their conscience and reason asked those who were shooting: 'What are you doing, idiots? Aren't they your own people marching? You can see there are red banners everywhere . . .'

And — like the tsarist soldiers — these murderers under orders answered: 'We've got our orders! We've got our orders to shoot.'

I ask the 'People's' Commissars, among whom there must be decent and sensible people: Do they understand that . . . they will inevitably end up by strangling the entire Russian democracy and ruining all the conquests of the revolution?

Do they understand this? Or do they think, on the contrary, that 'either we have power or everyone and everything will perish'?⁵⁵

By 4 p.m., when the opening session of the Assembly commenced, the atmosphere in the Tauride Palace was extremely tense. Many of the SR deputies had taken part in the morning's demonstration and were angered by the shootings. To add insult to injury, each of them had been bodily searched by the Bolshevik guards as they entered the palace. Contrary to the claims of the Bolshevik press, not all the arrested deputies had been released for the opening session: Argunov, Avksentiev and Sorokin were even reported as having made speeches in the Tauride Palace, when in fact they were still in the Peter and Paul Fortress. In the Catherine Hall, where the assembly was held, there were almost as many troops as there were delegates. They stood at the back of the hall and sat up in the galleries, drinking vodka and shouting abuse at the SR deputies. Lenin surveyed the scene from the old government loge, where the tsarist ministers had sat during the sessions of the Duma. He gave the impression of a general at the moment before the start of a decisive battle — and that indeed is what it was.

The SRs tried to take the initiative by opening the session with a debate of their own, but the Bolsheviks created such a din that their first speaker, Mikhailov, the oldest member of the Assembly, was unable to make himself

heard. Chernov, elected Chairman of the Assembly, made a long and ineffectual speech, as was his usual custom; it did nothing for the reputation of the then only genuinely democratic national parliament in Russia's history as it awaited its execution. Tsereteli then appeared, despite the Bolshevik order for his arrest, and did rather better, denouncing the regime with such a passion that even the hecklers on the Left were forced to shut up and listen. But the Bolsheviks soon after brought the conflict to a head. Raskolnikov, the leader of the Kronstadt sailors, introduced their Declaration of the Rights of the Working People. When this was rejected, by 237 votes against 146, the Bolsheviks declared the Assembly to be in the hands of the 'counter-revolutionaries' and walked out of the hall. A recess was called, while the Bolsheviks and Left SRs discussed what to do. The latter, wavering as usual, wanted to delay the dissolution, but Lenin was adamant: 'the situation is now clear and we can get rid of them'. It was resolved to dissolve the Assembly, although out of deference to the Left SRs, who briefly returned to the session, Lenin instructed the Red Guards not to use violence: when the deputies left, the palace was to be locked up and no one allowed to convene there on the following day. At 2 a.m., having satisfied himself that everything was under control, Lenin returned to the Smolny, and went to bed.⁵⁶

A little over two hours remained before the Assembly was closed down. After the Bolsheviks' departure, various SR speakers made their usual lengthy speeches, while the Red Guards continued to get drunk and heckle from the gallery. Some of them amused themselves by aiming their guns at the speakers. The SRs resolved to use up these final minutes rushing through decrees on land and peace so that the Assembly would at least go under with a symbolic record of popular legislation: they already had an eye to the fast developing civil war, in which they would need to mobilize the support of the democracy for the restoration of the Constituent Assembly. At 2.30 a.m. the Left SRs finally walked out of the hall, unconvinced by the desperate efforts of their old party comrades to push through in minutes what they had failed to do in six months of power under the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik Dybenko then gave the order to the leader of the Red Guards, an anarchist sailor named Zhelezniakov, to bring the meeting to a close. At 4 a.m. he mounted the tribune and, tapping Chernov on the shoulder, announced that 'all those present should leave the assembly hall because the guard is tired'. Chernov replied that the members of the Constituent Assembly were also tired but that this did not prevent them from 'proclaiming a law awaited by all of Russia'. The guards became angry, shouted 'Down with Chernov!', and gathered menacingly with their guns in the main body of the hall. Chernov kept the meeting going for a further twenty minutes; but he had never been noted for his personal bravery before the mob (witness 4 July), and finally agreed to adjourn the meeting until the following afternoon.⁵⁷ The only session of the Constituent Assembly had finally ended: it

was 4.40 a.m. on 6 January. The delegates sheepishly filed out and the Tauride Palace was then locked up, bringing the twelve-year history of this democratic citadel to a premature end. When the deputies returned the following day, they were denied admission and presented with a decree dissolving the Assembly.

Two days later, on 8 January, the Third Congress of Soviets convened. The Bolsheviks and Left SRs had packed the Congress with their own supporters: nine out of ten delegates came from these two parties. The Congress duly passed all the measures presented to it by the government representatives, including the bogus Declaration of the Rights of the Working People, which effectively served as the first constitution of the Soviet state. This was the only sort of 'parliament' Lenin was ready to work with — one that would rubber-stamp all his decrees.

* * *

Shortly after the closure of the Constituent Assembly Boris Sokolov asked an SR deputy from the Volga region whether his party would try to defend it by force. 'Do you realize what you are saying?' the deputy replied. 'Do you realize that we are the people's representatives, that we have received the high honour of being elected by the people to write the laws of a new democratic republic? But to defend the Constituent Assembly, to defend us, its members — that is the duty of the people.'⁵⁸ Most of the SRs were equally paralysed by the ideal of themselves as the leaders of 'the people', who would somehow come to their rescue. And as a result there was no military campaign to reverse the closure of the Constituent Assembly. No doubt any such campaign would have been doomed from the start, for the democratic leaders of Russia had no real military forces at their disposal. The Union for the Defence of the Constituent Assembly was dominated by SR intellectuals and could only muster the support of a few cadets. But their naive belief in the support of 'the people' was also disturbing, because it betrayed a complete failure to comprehend the revolutionary forces at work and thus boded ill for their chances in the coming civil war.

Sokolov, who was himself a Right SR, thought that the root of his comrades' passivity was their metamorphosis from an underground group of revolutionaries into the leaders of the Provisional Government. This is surely right. Their adopted sense of responsibility for the state (and no doubt a little pride in their new ministerial status) led the Right SRs to reject their old terrorist ways of revolutionary struggle and depend exclusively on parliamentary methods. It was this that had tied them to the Kadets and held them back from forming a purely Soviet government in 1917. 'We must proceed by legal means alone,' was how Sokolov characterized their thinking, 'we must defend the law by the only means permissible to the people's representatives, by parliamentary means.' They were doubtless sincere and held a deep conviction that, by refusing to fight the Bolsheviks using Bolshevik methods, they were saving Russia from the traumas of a civil war. Mark Vishniak, the Right SR and Secretary of the

Constituent Assembly, later acknowledged that their hands had been tied by their own insistence on the need to avoid a civil war at all costs. But there was also a large dose of foolish vanity in all this. The Right SRs were hypnotized by the 'sanctity' and the 'dignity' of the Constituent Assembly, the first democratic parliament in the history of Russia, and by the 'honour' which this bestowed upon them as its representatives. Carried away by such ideals, they deluded themselves into believing that Russia was firmly set on the same democratic path as England or America, and that the 'will of the people' was alone enough to defend its democratic institutions. They placed so much faith in their own democratic methods that they failed to see how the Bolsheviks' undemocratic methods could succeed in the long run.⁵⁹

Yet it was more than a problem of methods: the faith of the Right SRs in 'the people' was itself misplaced. There was no mass reaction to the closure of the Constituent Assembly. The demonstration of 5 January was much smaller and more middle-class than the Right SRs had hoped. Sokolov thought that the dominant mood in the capital was one of passivity. After nearly a year of political conflict, none of which had reversed the economic crisis, people could be excused for a cynical indifference towards politics and politicians. More pressing concerns, such as the daily hunt for food and fuel, occupied most people for most of the time. Even Gorky — a political animal if ever there was one — succumbed to the general mood. On 26 January he wrote to Ekaterina:

We are living here as the captives of the 'Bolsheviks', as the French call Lenin's venerable henchmen. Life is not much fun! And it's highly annoying, but what can we the people do? There is nothing we can do. 'He who survives will be saved.' We survived the Romanov autocracy, perhaps we'll survive Ul'ianov's. Life has become comic — and tragic. Don't laugh! *Novaia zhizn'* looks like going under. My mood is foul, added to which I am feeling bad physically. There are days when I wake up and don't even want to work. I don't seem to want anything any more, and am paralysed by apathy, which is totally alien to me.⁶⁰

There was an even more profound indifference among the peasantry, the traditional base of support of the SR Party. The SR intelligentsia had always been mistaken in their belief that the peasants shared their veneration for the Constituent Assembly. To the educated peasants, or those who had long been exposed to the propaganda of the SRs, the Assembly perhaps stood as a political symbol of 'the revolution'. But to the mass of the peasants, whose political outlook was limited to the narrow confines of their own village and fields, it was only a distant thing in the city, dominated by the 'chiefs' of the various parties, which they did not understand, and was quite unlike their own political

organizations. It was a national parliament, long cherished by the intelligentsia, but the peasants did not share the intelligentsia's conception of the political nation, its language of 'statehood' and 'democracy', of 'civic rights and duties', was alien to them, and when they used this urban rhetoric they attached to it a specific 'peasant' meaning to suit the needs of their own communities.⁶¹ The village Soviets were much closer to the political ideals of the mass of the peasants, being in effect no more than their own village assemblies in a more revolutionary form. Through the village and volost Soviets the peasants were already carrying out their own revolution on the land, and they did not need the sanction of a decree by the Constituent Assembly (or, for that matter, the Soviet Government itself) to complete this. The Right SRs could not understand this fundamental fact: that the autonomy of the peasants through their village Soviets had, from their point of view, reduced the significance of any national parliament, since they had already attained their *volia*, the ancient peasant ideal of self-rule. To be sure, out of habit, or deference to their village elders, the mass of the peasants would cast their votes for the SRs in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. But very few were prepared to fight the SR battle for its restoration, as the dismal failure of the Komuch would prove in the summer of 1918. Virtually all the resolutions from the villages on this question made it clear that they did not want the Assembly to be restored as the 'political master of the Russian land', in the words of one, with a higher authority than the local Soviets. In other words, they did not want to be ruled by a central state. As Sokolov later acknowledged from his experience as an SR propagandist in the army:

The Constituent Assembly was something totally unknown and unclear to the mass of the front-line soldiers, it was without doubt a *terra incognita*. Their sympathies were clearly with the Soviets. These were the institutions that were near and dear to them, reminding them of their own village assemblies . . . I more than once had occasion to hear the soldiers, sometimes even the most intelligent of them, object to the Constituent Assembly. To most of them it was associated with the State Duma, an institution that was remote to them. 'What do we need some Constituent Assembly for, when we already have our Soviets, where our own deputies can meet and decide everything?'⁶²

After their defeat in the capital the SRs returned to their old provincial strongholds to rally support for the restoration of democracy. It was to prove a painful lesson in the new realities of provincial life. They found the local peasantry largely indifferent to the closure of the Constituent Assembly and their own party organizations in a state of decay. By basing their party on the support of the peasants, the SRs came to realize that they had built it on sand.

In province after province the Right SRs had lost control of the Soviets to the extreme Left. In the northern and central industrial provinces, where the Bolsheviks and Left SRs could count on the support of most of the workers and garrison soldiers, as well as a large proportion of the semi-industrial peasants, most of the provincial Soviets were in Bolshevik hands, usually through the ballot box, by the end of October, and only in Novgorod, Pskov and Tver did any serious fighting take place. In some of these towns, especially where there was a garrison, the Bolsheviks simply used their military strength to oust the opposition from the Soviet and install their own 'majority'. Further south, in the agricultural provinces, the transfer of power was not generally completed until the New Year and was often quite bloody, with fighting in the streets of the main provincial towns (Orel, Kursk, Voronezh, Astrakhan, Chernigov, Odessa, Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, Sevastopol and others). In most places the extreme Left organized its supporters among the soldiers and workers into an MRC, which seized control of the government institutions after defeating the cadet or Cossack forces loyal to the city Duma. New elections to the ruling Soviet were then held which, in one form or another, were usually rigged. As in Petrograd, the SRs and Mensheviks often played into the hands of the extreme Left by boycotting the Soviet and these 're-elections'. Yet, without real military forces of their own, or a large and active citizenry willing to take up arms in defence of the democracy, they had little option. The political civilization of the provincial towns was not much more advanced than in backward peasant Russia and outside the capital cities there was no real urban middle class to sustain the democratic revolution. That was the tragedy of 1917.

iii Looting the Looters

For the first time in many years General Denikin found himself among ordinary Russians as he sat in a third-class railway carriage, disguised as a Polish nobleman, on his way to the Don:

Now I was simply a *boorzhu*, who was shoved and cursed, sometimes with malice, sometimes just in passing, but fortunately no one paid any attention to me. Now I saw real life more clearly and was terrified. I saw a boundless hatred of ideas and of people, of everything that was socially or intellectually higher than the crowd, of everything which bore the slightest trace of abundance, even of inanimate objects, which were the signs of some culture strange or inaccessible to the crowd. This feeling expressed hatred accumulated over the centuries, the bitterness of three years of war, and the hysteria generated by the revolutionary leaders.