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T. H. Rigby
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PART ONE
SMOLNY: SOVNARKOM TAKES SHAPE

I

The origins of Sovnarkom

Throughout the night of 24–5 October 1917, the Bolshevik Central Committee was gathered in a small room on the second floor of the elite girls' school in the Smolny district of Petrograd, which had been taken over by the parties represented in the soviets and in whose imposing assembly hall the Second Congress of Soviets was to convene the following day. A few hours earlier Lenin had arrived incognito from another area of the capital, where he had been in hiding. Anticipating a majority in the Congress, goaded for weeks by Lenin and at last provoked into action by the preemptive moves of the Provisional Government, the Central Committee was presiding over the forceful seizure of power in the Russian capital.

Meanwhile, actual operations were being directed from a room on the floor above by the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Bolshevik-dominated Petrograd Soviet, which had succeeded during the preceding fortnight in bringing under its effective control, through its corps of several hundred 'commissars', a motley conglomeration of military and naval units accepting Bolshevik leadership and of armed factory workers organised in 'Red Guard' detachments.

Starting with the Telephone Exchange, these forces occupied one after another the key government offices, culminating a few hours later in the Imperial Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government itself was gathered, the only point where significant resistance was encountered and a few lives were lost. Most of the ministers were taken into custody but Prime Minister Kerensky escaped and, after several days organising abortive military counter-moves, went into hiding until his departure from the country in mid-1918.¹

It was not till late on the evening of 25 October, when the Winter Palace was already under attack, that the Second Congress of Soviets

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finally commenced, Lenin evidently having delayed the opening as long as possible with the object of presenting the delegates with a *fait accompli*. There was a substantial predominance of Bolsheviks and their Left Socialist-Revolutionary allies. After the election of a Bolshevik chairman and Bolshevik-dominated Presidium, the Congress exploded into violent recriminations between the Bolshevik leaders and Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary delegates, who bitterly opposed the Bolshevik assault on the Provisional Government, in which they were strongly represented. These exchanges led to the withdrawal of most of the moderate socialists from the Congress. Then, after a recess, the rump Congress reconvened at 3 a.m. to be told that the Winter Palace had fallen and the Provisional Government was under arrest, and they proceeded to formalise the situation by voting to approve a proclamation 'To workers, soldiers and peasants', drafted by Lenin.

Basing itself on the will of the vast majority of workers, soldiers and peasants, basing itself on the victorious rising of workers and of the garrison which has been achieved in Petrograd, the Congress takes power into its hands. . . All power in the localities passes to the soviets of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies, whose duty it is to establish genuine revolutionary order.²

The momentous first sitting of the Second Congress of Soviets closed at 5 a.m. on 26 October. The following evening it convened again for its second and final sitting, at which the basic planks of the Bolshevik platform found expression in decrees on peace (the warring nations were called upon to make peace without annexations or indemnities) and the land (private ownership of land was abolished without compensation and its use passed in effect to the peasants). The Congress went on to approve a resolution proposed by its Bolshevik chairman, Kamenev, on the formation of a Soviet government, called the 'Council of People's Commissars' (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov*) and headed by Lenin. Finally, it elected a Central Executive Committee of 101 members.

Apart from its outlandish and challenging name, there seemed on the face of it little to distinguish the new 'Soviet' Government from a modern 'bourgeois' ministry. It consisted of a Chairman (Lenin) and fourteen other members, all but three of whom were individually responsible for specific departments of government: A. I. Rykov (Internal Affairs), V. P. Milyutin (Agriculture), A. G. Shlyapnikov (Labour), V. P. Nogin (Trade and Industry), A. V. Lunacharsky

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(Education), I. I. Skvortsov-Stepanov (Finance), L. D. Trotsky (Foreign Affairs), A. I. Lomov (Justice), I. A. Teodorovich (Food Supplies), N. P. Avilov (Posts and Telegraphs) and I. V. Stalin (Nationalities).³ The remaining three, V. A. Antonov-Ovseyenko, N. V. Krylenko and P. E. Dybenko, constituted a Committee responsible for Military and Naval Affairs; this was indeed a departure from pre-revolutionary practice but it only lasted for a month or so, when separate Army and Navy portfolios were restored. The post of People's Commissar for Railways was temporarily unfilled. When the Council of People's Commissars (or Sovnarkom, to use its Russian acronym) is compared with the ministerial structure inherited by the Provisional Government from the Imperial regime, the conservative shape of the new government becomes even more apparent, for with minor exceptions the division of responsibilities among its members was identical.⁴

Was this, however, the whole story? Let us look at the preamble to the decree establishing Sovnarkom:

For the administration of the country up to the convening of the Constituent Assembly, a Temporary Worker and Peasant Government is to be formed, which will be named the Council of People's Commissars. Charge of particular branches of state life is entrusted to commissions, the composition of which should ensure the carrying into life of the programme proclaimed by the Congress in close unity with the mass organisations of working men and women, sailors, soldiers, peasants and office-workers. Governmental power belongs to the *collegium* of chairmen of these commissions, i.e. the Council of People's Commissars. Control over the activity of the people's commissars and the right of replacing them belongs to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies and its Central Executive Committee.⁵

Here, intertwined with the conventional model of a government consisting of members each personally responsible for a particular branch of administration, there are suggestions of a different model, in which government would consist of a cluster of 'commissions' integrated through their members with the revolutionary organisations of the masses. That such an alternative model was ever canvassed, or even clearly conceived, is impossible on present evidence to establish, since there is no record of any discussions among leading Bolsheviks about the structure of the government they were establishing. Bonch-Bruyevich's oft-quoted recollections on this point are in fact not very helpful. He recalls how Lenin, in the course of the seizure of power and the Second Congress of Soviets, outlined the

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new government structure in a verbal aside between telephone calls. In language very close to that used in the Congress Decree itself, Bonch-Bruyevich quotes Lenin as saying:

It is necessary to set up commissions for the administration of the country, which will be commissariats. The chairmen of these commissions we will name People's Commissars. The *collegium* of chairmen will be the Council of People's Commissars, to which will belong full power. The Congress of Soviets and the Central Executive Committee are to control its activity, and to them belongs the right of replacing commissars.

Bonch-Bruyevich goes on to draw the conclusion that Lenin had evidently found time during his years of exile to work out a quite precise blueprint for the future revolutionary government.⁶

This account, written some fourteen years after the incident it purports to describe, appears to reflect Bonch-Bruyevich's vast admiration for Lenin and his sense of Lenin's mastery and farsightedness more than a concern to reconstruct sequentially the background to the foundation of the Sovnarkom. If we assume that Bonch-Bruyevich has recalled Lenin's words more or less accurately, they are unlikely to have been uttered before 26 October, i.e. between the two sittings of the Congress, for it would appear that as late as a day or two earlier Lenin had been thinking along substantially different lines. This is the conclusion we must draw from a page of notes evidently jotted down by him on the night of 24-5 October, probably in the course of a preliminary Central Committee discussion of the structure of government to be proposed at the Congress.⁷ Fragmentary as it is, this document is of great interest since it provides the only existing evidence of the development of Lenin's thinking about these matters. It is therefore worth reproducing here in full.

Understandably enough, in view of the lack of other documentary evidence, some Soviet historians have tended to place more weight on these notes than they will really bear, and we should beware of making the same mistake. What we have here is obviously not a general plan of the future political structure, even a rough one, but rather a sheet of jottings on particular points, some of them related to the shape of the revolutionary government and some to various policy questions. Perhaps, therefore, we should hesitate to conclude from the fact that no mention is made here of a *Council* of People's Commissars that no such body was envisaged at this stage.⁹ It is obviously significant, however, that the only collective policy body mentioned in this document, the Commission on Legislative Pro-

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Lenin's Notes on the Structure of Government
 24-5 (?) October, 1917⁸

Appointments

Chairman of Commission of Revolutionary Order	[V. D.] Bonch-Bruyevich – Administrator of Affairs [<i>zaveduyushchii</i> <i>delami</i>] or 'People's Commissar for Revolutionary Order'
--	---

General [M. D.] Bonch-Bruyevich to check up and promote the principle of generally nominating commanders from below

Sokolnikov – Gazette of the Workers' and Peasants' Government
 +?

Immediate setting up . . . of Commissions of People's Commissars . . .
 (ministers and deputy ministers)

Kamenev – Commission on Legislative Proposals
 Chairman of
 'Commission on Legislative Proposals' (Under Minister-President)

Nadezhda Konstantinovna [Krupskaya – Lenin's wife] – Deputy Minister
 (under Lunacharsky)

organization of fraternization on all fronts . . . immediate introduction
 of minimum programme (of Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats)
 limitation of salaries to 500 roubles a month

2 stenographers for dictation and a *dictaphone*

bringing to light of stocks of raw materials and products in general

'Collection of Regulations and Enactments and *Acts* of the Government'

posals, was one that was *not* provided for in the decree setting up the Sovnarkom two days later. It is noteworthy that this potentially powerful body was not to be answerable to the People's Commissars collectively; it and its chairman were to come directly under the Minister-President' (*Ministr-predsedatel'*). The use of this traditional and prestigious title for the chairman of the government also arouses interest, though it would be risky to place much emphasis on points of nomenclature at this stage, when the concept of 'People's Commissar' had only just emerged. It is not clear from the references

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to 'Commissions of People's Commissars... (ministers and deputy ministers)' whether the title 'People's Commissar' was yet seen as limited to those performing the function of minister. The idea of a 'Commission on Revolutionary Order' was also one that was dropped by 26 October, and V. D. Bonch-Bruyevich, in whom Lenin appears to have reposed particular confidence at this time, did not gain a place in the Sovnarkom but instead became its chief administrative officer.¹⁰

It is evident, then, that Lenin's thinking about the shape of the revolutionary government altered in a number of respects, some very substantial, in the course of the seizure of power, and we must conclude either that his ideas were still rather tentative and fragmentary up to 24 October, or that over the next day or two he was brought by his colleagues or by circumstances to change his mind on the points mentioned – and perhaps on others for which we have no record of his thinking prior to 26 October.

These last-minute changes in the projected structure of government worked in the direction of simplification and closer approximation to pre-revolutionary patterns, and it would appear that suggestions for more radical structural change went by the board as the Bolshevik leadership sought to thrash out the practical implications of their assuming control over the administration. Two apparently important innovations were nevertheless incorporated into the new government. The first was the idea that, in the administration of his department, each member of the government (People's Commissar) should share authority with a 'Commission' of which he would be chairman. In the event these 'Commissions' rarely functioned as such, where they actually existed, although the subsequently established Boards (*kollegii*) introduced elements of collective decision-making into the leadership of the individual people's commissariats.¹¹

The other innovation was in terminology. In calling their government the 'Council of People's Commissars', the Bolshevik leadership were seeking to de-emphasise formal and structural similarities to 'bourgeois' governments and to proclaim and dramatise the revolutionary role and class content they believed it to embody. As Krupskaya put it: 'These ministers would have to create completely new forms of work, forms qualitatively different from the work of the old ministers, and foreign to the old bureaucratic spirit. While it was not a matter of the name, nevertheless it was necessary to call the ministers by a new name. . . .'¹²

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Both Krupskaya and Bonch-Bruyevich gave Lenin the credit for inventing the title of the new government, a view unanimously endorsed by recent Soviet historians. There was an earlier tradition, however, which attributed it to Trotsky, and this continues to be accepted by most Western scholars. This is an intriguing but scarcely vital question, on which conclusive contemporary evidence is lacking. Perhaps the most persuasive witness is A. A. Yoffe, who touched on this question in an article written for the second anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

I remember that once in a gathering of those people who had headed the revolution right from the beginning, we were trying to recall, for instance, who first thought up the titles 'People's Commissar' and 'Council of People's Commissars', and it was only after prolonged arguments and swapping of reminiscences, that we managed to establish that these were proposed by L. D. Trotsky.¹³

Perhaps the most that can be said is that these terms emerged in the course of the phrenetic discussions within the Bolshevik leadership on 25 and 26 October, that Trotsky probably first hit on the actual formula, but that others (including Lenin) may have helped suggest the ideas to his mind, and the formula must have won Lenin's support to have been adopted.

That the title of the new government contained the word 'soviet' (*sovet*) some have seen as designed to identify it with the new revolutionary institutions of the masses, as the topmost soviet in a hierarchy of soviets.¹⁴ This supposition seems highly dubious, since *sovet* is simply the usual Russian word for 'council', and the pre-revolutionary government executive had been called the *Sovet Ministrov* (Council of Ministers). There would in fact have been a sharper break with the old terminology if the new government had been called a Committee, Commission, or Board, rather than a Council. Admittedly, however, it might well have been so named had not the word 'soviet' meanwhile acquired revolutionary overtones.

No such doubt attaches to the deliberate choice of the term 'people's *commissar*' as a substitute for 'minister', in order to signal the new and revolutionary character of the office. The antecedents of this term may deserve a brief glance. The word 'commissar' (late Latin *commissarius*, French *commissaire*, English *commissary*, German *Kommissär*) has a long history in Europe in the meaning of an agent entrusted by higher authority with certain specific political or administrative tasks, frequently of an extraordinary or temporary

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nature. In this sense it passed into Russian in the early eighteenth century, and Peter the Great appointed *komissary* to run his reorganised *uyezd* administration in the provinces. While the term and its derivative 'commissariat' sometimes came to be employed for certain permanent jurisdictions, such as military provisions in England and police superintendents in continental Europe, other uses continued the earlier connotation of an *ad hoc* or plenipotentiary agent of some higher authority. For instance, a *commissaire des guerres* or *Kriegskommissär* was frequently attached to continental armies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, linking the troops to the civilian inhabitants and placing them under semi-political control. The term was thus well established at the time of the French Revolution, and it was natural that the Convention should describe as *commissaires* its agents assigned to the various departments and troop formations. Though some of its modern uses in France are more equivalent to the English word 'commissioner', the term *commissaires régionaux de la République* was used by the Liberation regime in 1944–6 to denote its corps of plenipotentiaries charged with taking over the regional administration from the Vichy-appointed prefects.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the Russian Provisional Government in 1917 called its agents deputed to various jurisdictions *komissary*, and that the term was taken up by the Bolsheviks; it was constantly on their lips during the seizure of power, since, as we have seen, the agents assigned to the various Red Guard and troop units by the Military Revolutionary Committee were so called. Thus there was no more obvious term available to the Bolshevik leadership as it cast about on 25 and 26 October for a substitute for the obnoxious word 'minister'. Yet it is striking that they kept sight of the historical precedents, and the example of the French Convention evidently clinched the decision in favour of 'commissar'. To continue the quotation from Krupskaya's memoirs,

... it was necessary to call the ministers by a new name, the same way as they were called in the Great French Revolution, it was necessary that the name should bear witness to the fact that they were plenipotentiaries of the revolutionary people. It was necessary to call them 'people's commissars'. The Council would be called not a Council of Ministers, but a 'Council of People's Commissars'.¹⁵

Confirmation that the Convention afforded the Bolshevik leadership with its principal model in designing the new forms of government

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is provided by Sukhanov, who was told as much at the time by one of the Bolshevik Central Committee members.¹⁶

The resounding and challenging title chosen for the new 'workers' and peasants' government' was politically most apt and successful; in fact, we may note in passing that its very success was soon to lead to some embarrassment. For during the days and weeks that followed, as one after another the various provincial centres passed under the control of the local Bolshevik-led soviets, the latter in many cases hastened to set up their own 'Councils of People's Commissars', which in a number of instances proved most reluctant to accept the authority of the 'Petrograd' Sovnarkom. Moscow still had its own Sovnarkom when the Soviet Government moved there in March 1918, and it was only after delicate negotiations that it allowed itself to be absorbed by the latter and assimilated to the emergent Soviet administrative hierarchy.¹⁷

Yet there was no doubt what the Bolshevik leadership meant by the term 'people's commissar' – they meant 'minister'. The two terms were in fact used interchangeably in the initial period. 'We must have a Minister for Trade and Industry', wrote Trotsky to Shlyapnikov on 5 November¹⁸ and about the same time Lenin wrote to A. G. Shlikhter, 'You are needed for Minister of Agriculture and must come immediately.'¹⁹ The new title quickly established itself, but, as we shall see in Chapter 3, ambiguous use of the terms 'ministry' and 'people's commissariat' persisted for several more weeks. In fact, as late as March 1918, following the resignation of several people's commissars, Sverdlov introduced the issue of nominating replacements under the rubric 'the general ministerial crisis' (*ob obshcheministerskom krizise*).²⁰

There remains one further formal aspect of the Council of People's Commissars as established by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets that requires comment: its provisional character. The Sovnarkom was described in the Congress decree, as we have noted, as a 'Temporary Worker and Peasant Government... up to the convening of the Constituent Assembly'. This at first sight curious concession to 'parliamentary cretinism' was tactically unavoidable, since the Bolsheviks had allowed themselves to become publicly committed, along with the other revolutionary parties, to the election of a Constituent Assembly and the entrusting to it of final responsibility for designing the future social and political order. Many of their own members and Left SR (Socialist-Revolutionary)

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allies accepted this commitment at face value, the machinery for holding the elections was already in existence, and flouting the prerogatives of the Assembly would therefore have introduced a further divisive factor into the situation which, on top of everything else, would perhaps have rendered the task of forming a Bolshevik government impossible.

Yet it is certain that Lenin had not the slightest intention of handing over power to the Assembly should the elections go against him, as indeed they did. His attitude is summed up by his comment shortly afterwards that it had helped 'prove to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be broken up'.²¹ In this case, as always, the question for Lenin was not the formal arrangements, but who would possess the organisational and coercive power to determine how these arrangements were to be implemented. His first task, therefore, was to win this power, even if one condition of this was that he should verbally qualify it by reference to the Constituent Assembly; it would later be a question of holding power and providing it with sufficient basis of support to enable him to deal with the Assembly as circumstances then required.²²