ments” were disappearing. Nabokov’s conclusion was immediate, if utopian: “intelligent people must find a painless way to end the war.” Guchkov’s reaction, typical of his class, was a despairing shrug and hope for a miracle.

In a preliminary statement, Robert Browder makes the point that Nabokov’s greatest weakness was his failure to comprehend “the motivations, aspirations and urgency of the masses.” The criticism is just and can be made against all Kadets, indeed against the entire Russian bourgeoisie. Quibbles about legal niceties that so concerned Nabokov and his friends had no meaning to the overwhelming majority of the Russian people in 1917. Nabokov, for all his passion, discernment and irony, was too much the civilised, elitist lawyer to survive the hurricane unscathed. His memoir tells why.

One final aspect should be noted. This is the second English language version in four years of Nabokov’s memoir. The first, edited by Andrew Field and with an introduction by Richard Pipes, was published in Australia in 1970, in the U.S. in 1972. The second version reviewed here is not superior in translation or style, though the notes are somewhat fuller. One may legitimately wonder why the job was repeated. Presumably a publishing coincidence.

Robert Johnston


It was with some trepidation over the prospective demolition of his own conclusions by extensive new research that this reviewer opened the pages of The Bolsheviks Come to Power. No cause for alarm. Prof. Rabinowitch’s work substantially supports, with additional documentation, my own thesis in Red October of the hesitancies and improvisations that served in place of decision and plan in the Bolshevik accession to power.

The Bolshevik Party, as Rabinowitch emphatically stresses, enjoyed neither the unity of will nor the singleness of response that ex post facto perceptions by both its heirs and its enemies attribute to its performance in 1917. In fact it is Rabinowitch’s thesis that the Bolshevik Party was successful in its pursuit of power precisely because of the un-Leninist looseness and openness that characterized it in 1917 and made it responsive to the mood of the masses. In this respect he points not only to the Bolsheviks’ obvious readiness to endorse radical attitudes among the populace, but also to the influence from below in dampening pessimism among the leadership from July to September and insurrectionism thereafter. This is a provocative thesis, not fully worked out as to its implications, nor sufficiently supported by the history “from below” that Rabinowitch sets out to emphasize. By and large his account remains within the vein of top-level political history in which Lenin ultimately figures as the epoch-making personality.

The Bolsheviks Come to Power is the second installment of an impressive monographic investigation of the party’s documented path to revolution in the Russian capital, following Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968). As such, it plunges into a detailed investigation of the Bolsheviks’ set-back and recovery from the July Days to the Kornilov crisis, a topic occupying the first half of the work. It is on this period that Rabinowitch makes his most original contribution, marshalling voluminous source material hitherto unused in Western languages to demonstrate the resiliency and popularity of the Bolsheviks as well as the persistent tactical controversy between Lenin and his more cautious lieutenants.

For the period from Lenin’s letters on insurrection up to the fall of the Winter
Palace, occupying the second half of this volume, Rabinowitch is on more thoroughly trodden ground, though he contributes much evocative detail from his exhaustive use of contemporary newspaper and memoir sources. The prime issue here, of course, is the degree of Bolshevik deliberateness and preparation in the accomplishment of the October take-over. Rabinowitch tracks very carefully the debates among the Bolsheviks from one party conclave to another during these weeks, but the full range of tactical alternatives developed therein is not altogether clarified.

There were not just two basic lines among the Bolshevik leadership—i.e., insurrection or holding back—but three: (1) the seizure of power by armed insurrection, consistently advocated by Lenin after the July Days except for the week or two following the Kornilov affair; (2) “power to the soviets,” to be achieved by voting themselves into authority and using force only to defend the result, followed by Trotsky and a majority of the Central Committee, not only in September but de facto right down to the moment of the take-over; and (3) avoidance of a crisis by a “democratic government,” restructuring the Provisional Governments to exclude bourgeois elements and include the Bolsheviks in an all-socialist coalition, advocated by Zinov'ev and Kamenev. What Lenin accomplished in the celebrated Central Committee meeting of 10 October was to pressure the middle-of-the-road majority to accept verbally the idea of insurrection, while in practice they continued their waiting game in expectation of achieving power through the Congress of Soviets.

In suggesting that the Central Committee was planning an insurrection “masked as a defensive operation on behalf of the soviets,” Rabinowitch, like many other writers, has succumbed to the Trotskyist falsification of history, the ex post facto claim that what Trotsky and the party leadership in Petrograd were aiming at was what actually happened. In fact there is absolutely no contemporary evidence—only Trotsky’s after-the-fact contentions—to support the “masking” theory of an insurrection deliberately timed to coincide with the Congress. (Soviet writers—and some Western texts—used to cite the statement from John Reed quoting Lenin, “November 6 will be too early. . . . November 8 will be too late. . . . We must act on the 7, the day the congress meets. . . .” Ten Days That Shook the World [New York: Vintage 1960], pp. 83-84. Reed’s account is unsubstantiated by any other documentation and is contradicted by all the rest of Lenin’s record. It is no longer referred to by Soviet writers. However, the notion of such a finely timed coup which Reed helped establish persists, perhaps because it seems more logical than the actual course of events. See R. V. Daniels, Red October [New York: Scribner’s, 1967], pp. 119-20). Lenin’s insurrectionary line insisted on action before the Congress of Soviets would get involved, whereas Trotsky’s line right down to the afternoon of 24 October was not based on insurrection, but only on defense of the Congress from the government. The coincidence of the insurrection with the opening of the Congress was a historical accident, planned or expected by no one.

The implications of Rabinowitch’s own detailed account of the events make it very clear that if Kerensky had not attempted his ill-advised strike at the Bolshevik press on the morning of the 24th, the Bolsheviks would not have been prepared to undertake any military initiative at all. As it was, they pulled out all the stops in their defensive preparations, and to their surprise, found the city of Petrograd falling into their hands with scarcely a struggle. The irony, as Rabinowitch recognizes in his concluding remarks, was that “only in the wake of the government’s direct attack on the left was an armed uprising of the kind envisioned by Lenin feasible.” Thanks to Kerensky’s provocation Lenin got the military take-over he wanted in the nick of time, just as the Congress was assembling. To associate themselves with the victory and stay in Lenin’s good graces, Trotsky and Co. hastened to restate their role in the proceeding days to make it appear to be a planned effort consistent with the way the revolution actually came