Disorder is the absence of the order you were looking for.

Jean-Paul Sartre

In a social revolution, ordinary people claim the right to decide matters which are traditionally considered to be beyond their competence. Rules and habits of obedience ordinarily taken for granted become issues, each to be debated and decided by individuals and groups unused to the exercise of significant political power. Peasants judge whether land should be privately or communally held; factory workers deliberate over the way that their factory should be run; soldiers and policemen decide whether or not to obey orders to arrest people who are taking food or other property which does not legally belong to them. To an English gentleman like Bernard Pares, the popular enthusiasm evident in the streets of revolutionary Petrograd in early 1917 seemed particularly childlike and foolish:

There were numerous little cliques which took high-sounding titles and regarded themselves as the saviors of the country. They indulged ad infinitum in the deplorable Russian habit of putting on paper schemes for the government of the whole world. One placard announced the United States of the World, to which was appended the statement: "Original subscribers become life members." All sorts of inappropriate bodies, such as the crew of a ship, formed what they called "universities," really centres of university extension. Amidst the orgy of fancies I remember coming across a placard, "The Land of the Happy Peasantry" this, on examination proved to come from an organization for propagating in Russia the excellent agricultural methods of Denmark. The illiterate were begged to learn to read and write as quickly as possible.1

The appropriate revolutionary response to such rudimentary political, cultural and economic efforts was a crucial question in the spring of 1917. In the discussion which follows, I propose to investigate Lenin's reaction to unauth-

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orized peasant "decision-making" on the land question in the context of Men-
shevik, SR and even Bolshevik fears of popular action which they did not
control.

Given the "orthodox" Marxist belief that the peasant was a petty bour-
ggeois whose interests could not be socialist, any Marxist with a revolutionary
peasant strategy would have been vulnerable to accusations of cynicism. And
when Lenin claimed that there was order in peasant attacks on property, and
rationality in the peasant's willingness to wage an unconditional struggle, he
was obviously aware that such arguments appealed to dissident rural elements.
The opportunism which is part of the behavior of any political activist clearly
determined many of his actions. At the same time, the disintegration of traditional
order and the increase in popular activity in time of revolution posed a
number of objective political problems. In 1917, Russian citizens were break-
ing pre-revolutionary laws on a massive scale, and soldiers and policemen were
refusing to punish them for doing so. In particular, peasants were forming
committees to claim their ancient "rights" to land which legally belonged to
others. In this context, it was significant that Provisional Government and So-
viet leaders were cautious on the issue of land reform and decisive in their rec-
ognition of the need to check illegal acts of land seizure by the peasantry. In
the revolution's opening months, Lenin would reverse these priorities, well a-
ware of the political gains to be made and unwilling to check the violation of
property rights before the triumph of a socialist revolution.

1. Petrograd Without Lenin
   A. The Provisional Government

   From the outset, the Provisional Government was more concerned to en-
act measures for the improvement of food production and supply than it was
to satisfy any peasant demand for land. Even the nationalization of Imperial,
appanage and cabinet lands on 9 March brought few direct popular benefits,
since it was subsequently decreed that Crown land would not be transferred
to the peasantry. The Kadets who shaped the Provisional Government's agrar-
ian policy did not propose the imposition of limits upon the property of the
landed gentry. The reasons presented to justify such priorities and preferences
were various: precise information on rural needs and demands was lacking
(and a system of land committees was proposed for the purpose of obtaining
it). It seemed obvious as well that production would fall if there was any sud-
den, large-scale transfer of property from one social group to another. To Pre-
mier G. E. L'vov, who had opposed Kadet programs for the compulsory ex-
propriation of gentry land since 1906, a decrease in the available supply of
food to the cities or to the front would create intolerable material hardship
and render the poorest and most primitive rural elements more vulnerable to
demagogic appeals. On the basis of democratic principle, Kadet Minister of
Agriculture A. I. Shingarev argued that only a Constituent Assembly which