

The February Revolution of 1917: Spontaneous and Unorganised?

by

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INTRODUCTION

The events of the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia were some of the most important events in Russian history. This was because the February Revolution of 1917 had succeeded in breaking down the autocratic ruler from the Ramanov dynasty which had ruled the Russian Empire for nearly three centuries. The Ramanov dynasty was replaced by the formation of the Provincial Government and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. This paper is concerned with the events of the February Revolution of 1917, particularly in Petrograd, and it contends that the February Revolution of 1917 was not spontaneous, unorganised and leaderless. The discussion is divided into three main parts. The first looks at the events of the February Revolution in 1917. The second examines the participation and role played by the underground political parties such as the *Mensheviks*, the *Bolsheviks*, the *Mezbraiontsy*, the *Socialist Revolutionaries*, and the masses - workers and soldiers, particularly in Petrograd during the uprising. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn from the discussion.

THE EVENTS OF FEBRUARY REVOLUTION OF 1917

Generally speaking, the events of the February Revolution of 1917 initially took place in Petrograd on February 23, and from here, the strikes and demonstrations extended to all parts of the country. Before the February Revolution, there were two major strikes in Petrograd. The first was on January 9 when 137,536 workers from 114 factories went on strike to celebrate *Bloody Sunday* when the Tsar's police fired on the masses in 1905 and killed many.¹ Then, on February 14, the workers group followed up its efforts on January 9 with political strikes and a demonstration outside the *Duma*, the elected assembly. Such attempts, however, ended in failure, and many underground political leaders were arrested, exiled or imprisoned.

The strikes and demonstrations which took place during the February Revolution of 1917 can be divided into two main phases. In the first stage, on February 23, the *International Women is Day*, some of the women in several textile factories went on an economic strike as a result of food and fuel shortages, and it was estimated that about 90,000 workers went on strike on that day.² Moreover, the textile workers asked the metal workers in particular, and nearby factories workers, for support and participation in the strikes and demonstrations. These were evident with 200,000 workers participating in the demonstrations on the next day. By now, however, along with the economic demands, the workers on strike had a political agenda, to oppose the autocratic regime, and to further their political demands. On the following day, the workers were joined by white collar employees, teachers and students in mass demonstrations which converged on the city. The demonstrations had by now, reached their peak, and changed into general strikes in the city. However, the group of workers, students and teachers demonstrating was not strong enough to further their political struggle against the tottering Tsar because they lacked support from the common soldiers. However, in the second stage, the strikes and demonstrations assumed a political character, and were supported by the reserve army units from the Petrograd garrison. The common soldiers supported the workers because of disintegration within the rank and file of the army in the garrison and their top officers.³ As a result, the workers successfully forced Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate, and this was achieved with the support of the common soldier.

WAS THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION OF 1917 SPONTANEOUS ?

Generally speaking, there are two main interpretations regarding the February Revolution of 1917 among scholars. On the one hand, some historians have pointed out that the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia was spontaneous, unorganised and leaderless. For instance, Anthony Wood clearly suggested that *the revolution that broke out in Petrograd at the end of February 1917 apparently took everyone by surprise. On the whole there is little evidence that these initial outbreaks were the result of a conspiracy of the left wing.*⁴ In addition, Russian Scholar, Nicholas V. Riasanovsky stated that *the imperial regime died with hardly a whimper. Popular revolution, which came suddenly, was totally unprepared.*⁵

In Short, these view was largely based on the fact that many underground leaders were arrested or imprisoned in Siberia, such as Stalin and Kamenev, or exiled abroad, such as Lenin and Trotsky. As a result, the underground parties were weak, and the millions of common soldiers, factory workers and peasants who took over the streets, barracks and fields were unorganised, leaderless and happened naturally. In other words, there was a lack of political leaders to lead the masses, and no leadership from any underground political party.⁶

On the other hand, some interpretations only emphasised the role of non-Bolshevik party members such as the *Menshevik*, the *Mezhraiontsy* (*Mezhrayonka* or Inter District Committee which joined the Bolshevik party in August 1917), and the *Socialist Revolutionaries* in organising the strikes: These political parties had radical political demands during the February Revolution of 1917. In other words, these interpretations discredit the role played by the Bolshevik party, particularly the members of the *Vyborg* District Committee.⁷

These two interpretations, however, have been challenged. These challenges have shown that during the February Revolution of 1917, there did exist a core group of experienced revolutionaries who lead and directed the masses, even though most of the revolutionary elite from various underground political organisations were in exile, imprisoned or abroad. The initiatives to provide the masses with leadership, in particular, came from lower level revolutionary activists, while the top echelons of the revolutionary parties took little part in the uprising. In addition, the underground political parties, such as the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, the *Mezhraiontsy*, and Socialist Revolutionaries members competed against each other for supremacy during the February uprising.

The existence of radical groups or leaders during this revolutionary period was evident from the role played by the 'sub-elite' with some political experience, which definitely made them stand out from the masses. However, this 'sub-elite' could not be characterised as a revolutionary elite due to their lack of ideological preparation, political intelligence and organisational experiences.⁸ In particular, this 'sub-elite' comprised workers and members of the *Vyborg* District Committee or the Petersburg Committee of the Bolshevik Party, and during the revolutionary period, this 'sub elite' played an important role to ensure the continuity of the strike movement as well as providing the masses on the streets with leadership and responsibility in radicalising them. For example, in order to ensure the continuity of the strikes, this 'sub elite' met every night, discussed the events of that day and planned a strategy for the next day. In terms of leadership, this 'sub-elite' not only planned their strategy, but also implemented it themselves by being among the masses. In doing so, they went to the factories to call for strikes and took hold of the demonstrations to the centre of the city. In addition, when they went out into the streets and joined the masses, they related the specific grievances of the masses and broadened their demands to overthrow the autocratic ruler.⁹

Furthermore, the members of the *Vyborg* District Committee of the Bolshevik Party were deeply involved in the February Revolution, even though there were conflicts between the top leaders such as Shliapnikov, and the members of *Vyborg* District Committee, such as Kayurov, Chugurin, Kuklin and Gavvilar.¹⁰ In other words, the members of the *Vyborg* District Committee made their own decisions and did what they thought necessary in trying to lead the masses during the February Revolution of 1917. Therefore, the *Vyborg* District Committee of Bolshevik Party had their own strategies and plans. An example of this independence can be seen when the members of the *Vyborg* District Committee decided to call the workers out on strike on February 23, when International Women is Day was to be celebrated. On the evening of February 23, the members of the *Vyborg* District Committee held a meeting to continue the strike, to organise a demonstration on the following day along the main streets in the city, and to strengthen contacts among the soldiers. In addition, on the night of February 26, it was the *Vyborg* District Committee which planned actions for the following day, such as the seizure of weapons from the cartridge factory, takeover of the police station, and freeing of their leaders. On February 27, as planned, member of the *Vyborg* District Committee marched with the

workers and the soldiers towards the city centre, captured the cartridge factory, and distributed weapons among themselves.¹¹

In addition, the members of *Vyborg* District Committee viewed the *Mensheviks*, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the *Mezbraiontsy* as their competitors during the February Revolution of 1917. As a result, they intended to prevent the leadership of the revolution passing to these other underground groups. This is evidenced by the leaflet, issued on February 27 at the Finland Station, which the members of *Vyborg* District Committee used as their political centre. The leaflet was issued without first referring to the top leaders of Bolshevik Party. This leaflet was a counter to those issued by the *Mensheviks*, the *Mezbraiontsy* and Socialist Revolutionaries, and called for the immediate formation of the Soviet, the Provisional revolutionary government in *Vyborg* District.¹² In other words, it was a vital tool to forestall the *Menshevik*, *Mezbraiontsy* and *Socialist Revolutionary* intelligentsia gaining control of the masses. To a large extent, the competition between the Bolsheviks, the *Mensheviks*, the *Mezbraiontsy* and the *Socialist Revolutionaries* indicates that the underground groups were capable and willing to provide leaders for the masses, and that they did have their own strategies to gain support during the February uprising.

On the other hand, there was also the middle-level or 'sub elite', who were non-Bolshevik members, particularly from the *Menshevik*, the *Mezbraiontsy* and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries who provided leadership in trying to direct the masses. This is evident with the arrest of more than a hundred revolutionary leaders who had been suspected of being the ringleaders behind the unrest during the February Revolution.¹³ As Hasegawa has pointed out, this 'sub-elite' was active among the workers, and intended to take more radical actions. For instance, while, it was the *Mensheviks* who took the initiative to organise strikes during the February revolution, it was the *Mezbraiontsy* and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries who called for more radical action. Evidence of this was the leaflet, issued by the *Mezbraiontsy*, and distributed among the workers on February 23 and 24. This leaflet, which had been abandoned by the Bolsheviks, was adopted by the *Mezbraiontsy*, and called for radical demands such as the establishment of a Provincial Revolutionary Government, and latter, for non co-operation with the Provincial Government, and a complete break of soldiers from their officers. In addition, the leaflet contained such slogans as 'Down with Autocracy', 'Long Live The Revolution', and 'Down with the War'.¹⁴

Even though it is difficult to believe that a small revolutionary group such as the *Mezbraiontsy* were capable of organising the masses on such a scale as during the February Revolution, it does show that during the revolutionary period, the revolutionary parties were competing against each other in order to lead and direct the masses.

The workers, particularly skilled workers from the metal factories in the *Vyborg* District, also played a vital role in opposing the autocratic Tsar during the February uprising. The workers from various factories in Petrograd needed leaders or an organisation to direct, plan strategies and organise strikes during this period. It was evident that the workers were organised into *zemlyachestva* organisation, an organisation consisting of workers from the same village who worked in the same factories in Petrograd.¹⁵ For example, the natives of *Vysokovo* worked in the wagon shops, the *Kozins* in the shipyards and those of *Gorokhoro* in boiler factories. In Petrograd, the contingent of *Sormovo* workers were members of *zemlyachestva* organisation, and later, the workers from *Nikolaev* joined the *Sormovo zemlyachestva*: This organisation was referred to as the *Sormovo-Nikolaev zemlyachestva*. This organisation met once a week in the flat of one of the *Nikolaev* contingent, and held political discussions. The purpose of this series of discussions was to work out for themselves what their position should be on the cardinal political questions of the day.

The *zemlyachestva* organisation was important in two vital aspects in leading the workers during the February revolution. First, the *zemlyachestva* organisation became a means of ensuring a higher degree of workers' solidarity than could be provided by any formal organisation constituted for industrial or political action.¹⁶ This was partly because the workers only worked in factories with people who came from the same village, and the solidarity of the *zemlyachestva* had its source in the collectivism of the village community. In other words, the *zemlyachestva* organisation integrated the entire spectrum of social life - moral, cultural and political, and provided the means for ensuring that various activities were taken up collectively. Second, the *zemlyachestva* organisation provided political experienced for political organisers during the revolutionary period. This was because, in Petrograd, the members of *zemlyachestva* were employed at various factories, particularly in the *Vyborg* District.¹⁷ For instance, *Chugurin* was at *Alvaz*, *Kayurov* at *Erikson*, *Gordienko* at *Nobel* and *Skorokhodov* at *Duflon*. This group of experienced political organisers from *Sormovo* and *Nikolaev* were consequently in a position to exert influence

on a considerable number of Petrograd workers, and run worker's political discussions circle in the factories where they were employed. Hence, the workers were directed and knew what was exactly happening in the city through the role played by these experienced political figures within the *zemlyachesteva* organisation. Meanwhile, there was no doubt that German agents within the Helphand organisation gave financial support in organising strikes, even though this organisation may have transferred its support from one committee to the other because of political preferences.¹⁸ This financial support was important for the workers while they were on strike during the February Revolution. In fact, the Petrograd strikes of January 1916 were largely financed by the Helphand organisation, and in 1917, this organisation was still working in Copenhagen, and none of its agents in Russia had been caught.

Furthermore, the soldiers supported the workers during the February Revolution even though they fired on the crowd in the earlier stage of the revolution. For instance, on February 26, soldiers of the Volhynian Regiment opened fire on the crowd, and in other part of the city troops also fired on demonstration. However, this same regiment, a day later on February 27, switched allegiance to the insurgents' side when they declared that they would not fire on the demonstrators in the coming days due to a mutiny of the rank and file of the Petrograd garrison.¹⁹ On the eve of the February Revolution, the percentage of the workers in the reserve units in Petrograd increased considerably, and they were open to the political propaganda. This was accompanied by declining morale in the reserve units and the government policy of drafting strike participants as punishment: All this contributed to an increase of political propaganda in the army. In addition, the support of the soldiers came from the rank and file of the army, the young and the new recruits particularly from the Volhynian, Lithuanian and Preobrazhenskii regiments.²⁰ Therefore, the reserve unit army, at the rear, actively participated in the strikes, demonstrations and in the insurrection to bring about the collapse of the autocratic regime under the leadership of some of their officers. For example, Sergeant T.I Kirpichnikov was at the helm when the first soldiers began an uprising on February 27 in Petrograd. Then, a former Bolshevik and an officer in the machine gun regiment, Tarasov-Rodionov subsequently participated and provided leadership in the insurrection. Hence, during the February Revolution, there were leaders in the Petrograd garrison, ready and willing to lead the rank and file of the army,

and had not isolated themselves, as a consequence of this political propaganda, from the masses on strike.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the events of the February Revolution of 1917 was not spontaneous, without political direction, unorganised and leaderless. In other words, there did exist groups with political experience, particularly from the underground political organisations with an ability to lead the masses. The underground political parties were willing to provide the masses with leadership, and broaden the workers' economic demands, along with providing a political agenda to oppose the autocratic ruler once the strikes and demonstrations had covered the entire city. In the February Revolution of 1917, most factories workers in the capital of Petrograd participated in the strikes and demonstrations with both economic and political demands to oppose the Tsarist regime. Hence, the strikes and demonstrations required organisers, planning, agitators, orators and co-ordination of their activities; the actual leaders of the movement were lower level revolutionary activists who were closely connected with the workers.

Then, despite the Bolshevik Party as a whole being in disarray, the members of Vyborg District Committee of the Bolshevik Party were deeply involved in the February Revolution, in planning, arranging strategies, providing experienced political figures such as Kayurov, Chugurin, Kuklin and Gavvilar, and did what was necessary during the revolutionary period. More interestingly, even though the members of Vyborg District Committee were in conflict with the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, they were determined to prevent the leadership of the revolution passing to the Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mezhraintsy.

Finally, skilled workers in particular, and the workers as a whole in Petrograd played a major role in the breakdown of the Tsarist regime during the February Revolution: They were supported by the rank and file of the army at the rear. The workers in Petrograd, in particular, were organised into the *zemlyachestva* organisation which provided greater solidarity within the working class as well as political experience during the revolutionary period. The workers broadened their economic demands, along with political characteristics, under the political leadership from various underground organisations,

in particular the members of *Vyborg* District Committee of bolshevik Party. The rank and file of the army were largely of peasant origin, young and new recruits who were attracted to the political propaganda within the army unit. They were concerned with what was happening with the masses on the streets and did not isolate themselves during the revolutionary period.

NOTES

- 1 George Katkov. *Russia 1917 : The February Revolution*, Longmans, London, 1967, p. 249.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 4 Anthony Wood, *The Russian Revolution*, Longman Group Limited, London, 1979, p. 29.
- 5 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 2nd. Edition, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 505.
- 6 James D. White. 'The February Revolution and the Bolshevik Vyborg District Committee', in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XLI, No. 4, October 1989, p. 605.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 604.
- 8 Tsuyoshi, Hasegawa. 'The Problems of Power in the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia', in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, XIV, No. 4, 1972, p. 614.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 615.
- 10 James D. White. 'The February Revolution and the Bolshevik Vyborg District Committee', p. 607.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 611.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 615.
- 13 Tsuyoshi, Hasegawa. 'The Problem of Power in the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia', pp. 614-615.
- 14 George, Katkov. *Russia 1917 : The February Revolution*, p. 254.
- 15 James D. White. 'The Sormovo-Nikolaev Zemlyachesto in the February Revolution', in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, October 1979, p 477.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 482.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 483.
- 18 George, Katkov. *Russia 1917 : The February Revolution*, p. 259.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

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