

The Leaders of the February 1917 Revolution were not Acknowledged by those who later Gained Power

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Summary: For decades, Russia's February 1917 revolution in Petrograd was thought to have been leaderless, spontaneous and anonymous. Latterly, the role of a revolutionary group, led by men who took part in the 1905 rising in Nizhny Novgorod, and who based their activity in the Vyborg working-class district, has been recognised. The part of this group is traced through the twists and turns of the February days and the reasons for the earlier misconceptions are explored.



Tsar Nicholas II who ruled from 1894-1917 and whose power was swept away by the February revolution after he took command of Russia's armies in 1915 during Russia's war with Germany and her allies

The Accepted Interpretation

IN HIS PIONEERING WORK on the Russian revolution, published in 1935, W.H. Chamberlin stated that the collapse of the tsarist regime in February 1917 was 'one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time.' Subsequent historians have generally agreed with this verdict. But was the February revolution really as spontaneous and leaderless as Chamberlin maintained, and if not, where did the idea of a spontaneous and leaderless February revolution come from?

In studying the origins of the February revolution there are two distinct groups of people to look at: the liberals and the underground revolutionary parties. Both were involved in bringing the revolution about, and both contributed towards its outcome. The liberals were responsible for establishing the Provisional Government, while the revolutionary groups were involved in setting up the Petrograd Soviet. These two bodies were to compete for power in the months that followed, leading to the formation of the Bolshevik government in October 1917.

The Background to the February Revolution

The First World War created the conditions in which the overthrow of the Tsar could take place. By the beginning of 1917 the strain of the prolonged fighting had taken a heavy toll on the country. It had suffered enormous casualties; much of its territory was occupied by the armies of Germany and Austro-Hungary; millions of refugees had fled their homes; the economy was seriously disrupted and shortages of foodstuffs were becoming increasingly serious. Discontent, especially among the working population in the towns, was growing. This popular dissatisfaction was expressed in strikes and demonstrations, often led by members of the two main socialist parties, the Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

Despite the hardships and deprivations, there was still, by 1917, appreciable support for the war among the

Russian population, and this was reflected in both socialist parties. Both were divided into supporters and opponents of the war, and the same was true of the two wings of the Social Democrats, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Both contained pro- and anti-war factions, though among the Bolsheviks in Petrograd at the start of 1917 anti-war sentiment predominated.

The Worker Revolutionaries

Chamberlin's description of the February revolution as 'anonymous' implies that we do not even know the names of the workers' leaders who were involved in the February revolution. But in fact we know a great deal about that particular group of people because some of them published memoirs in which they revealed much about their personal backgrounds and what they did in the February revolution. The nucleus of the group was formed by the circle of friends around Vasily Kayurov, Ivan Chugurin, and Dmitry Pavlov. All three were skilled workers and were employed at factories in Petrograd, but they had also led extremely adventurous lives as revolutionaries. Their early years had been spent in and around the town of Nizhny Novgorod, where they had made the acquaintance of the writer Maxim Gorky. They had taken part in the 1905 revolution in Nizhny Novgorod, and had formed fighting detachments there to combat forces sent to quell the workers. In the years after the revolution the three had been separated, but all had continued to be involved in the Russian revolutionary movement. When they met up again during the war they formed

a formidable team as part of the Vyborg District Committee of the Bolshevik Party, and were among the most experienced revolutionaries one could find in Russia. They were not prepared to take orders from anyone, not even from the most senior Bolshevik leader in Petrograd at that time Alexander Shlyapnikov, who chronicled his conflicts with Kayurov and his friends in his memoirs. At the start of 1917, however, the Petrograd Bolsheviks were united in their efforts to mobilise the workers of Petrograd against the tsarist government and the war.

They intended to hold a series of demonstrations on significant dates, such as the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in 1905 (9 January), International Women's Day, and May Day. At the beginning of 1917 the Bolsheviks were planning an especially large-scale demonstration on May Day (which, according to the Western calendar would be on 18 April). This, they thought, might be the time when the decisive assault on the tsarist regime might begin.

liberals

The Liberal Opposition to the Tsar

During the war, however, the main threat to the tsarist regime came from the liberals. These were for the most part professional people, industrialists, financiers and senior officials in local government. Their grievance was

that the Tsar's government was not fighting the war effectively enough. At the end of 1916 a number of eminent liberal politicians, some of them members of the Duma, came together to discuss how to establish a new government in Russia that would fight the war to a victorious conclusion. The group included people such as Paul Milyukov, Alexander Guchkov, Alexander Konovalov and Michael Tereshchenko, all of whom were to be members of the Provisional Government in the following year. The group was closely associated with the War Industries Committees, organisations set up in 1915 to promote the production of shells, artillery and other manufactures needed for the war. They had even set up Workers' Groups to enlist the help of those among the industrial workers who supported the war. In this they had received the help of some Menshevik leaders.

The liberals had no doubt that in the near future the popular discontent would culminate in a revolution that would sweep away the existing order. The problem was that such a revolution was likely to impair the war effort and lessen Russia's chances of victory. To avoid this outcome, they thought it advisable to carry out a palace revolution that would depose the Tsar without involving the public at large. In this way there would be no disruption of the war effort. It was planned to capture the Tsar on his train and force him to abdicate in favour



Demonstrators on Nevsky Prospect during International Women's Day, 23 February. See the map on page 23

timeline: the February 1917 Russian Revolution

9 January	Demonstrations to commemorate 'Bloody Sunday'. 145,000 workers come out on strike.
23 February	Bolshevik Demonstration to mark International Women's Day. 128,000 workers come out on strike.
24 February	Demonstrations continue - 214,000 workers on strike. Cossacks called out.
25 February	305,000 workers on strike. The Tsar orders the immediate cessation of disorder in the capital.
26 February	307,000 workers on strike. Troops open fire on demonstrators. Police arrest workers' leaders.
27 February	386,000 workers on strike. Mutiny of the Volhynian Regiment. About 70,000 troops go over to the revolution. Establishment of Duma Provisional Committee. Creation of Petrograd Soviet. Tsarist ministers arrested.
28 February	394,000 workers on strike. 127,000 troops side with the revolution.
1 March	Petrograd Soviet issues Order No.1, allowing troops full civil rights when not on duty. 394,000 workers on strike. 127,000 troops side with the revolution.
2 March	Nicholas II abdicates in favour of his brother Grand Duke Mikhail.
3 March	Grand Duke Mikhail refuses to accept the succession.

of his son Alexis; the Grand Duke Michael would act as regent.

The February Days

Guchkov and his associates scheduled their coup d'état for March 1917. If it had gone according to plan it would have preceded the most likely crisis point at which a popular revolution would erupt - the Bolshevik demonstration planned for May Day. But something happened which upset everyone's plans. When Kayurov and his friends called a demonstration on 23 February to mark International Women's Day, they did not foresee that this would continue on the 24th, and would increase in scale. By the 25th they came to realise that they had a revolution on their hands.

But a dispute arose on how to proceed. Kayurov, Chugurin and Pavlov wanted to form fighting detachments, as they had done in Nizhny Novgorod in 1905, to do battle with the police who were firing on unarmed demonstrators with machine guns. They asked Shlyapnikov to give them the few guns which he had hidden away. But Shlyapnikov refused to do so. The government had now deployed troops on the streets and Shlyapnikov was hoping that they would come over to the side of the demonstrators. He was worried in case the armed revolutionaries got into conflict with the soldiers, because then it was unlikely that the army would side with the people. Kayurov and his fellow Bolsheviks were not convinced, and on the evening of the 26th decided to go ahead and form a fighting detachment whether Shlyapnikov liked it or not.

Sunday 26 February was the low point of the February revolution. On that day the troops had been ordered to fire on demonstrators, and a large number of casualties had resulted. The police had also arrested many of the revolutionary leaders and members of workers' organisations, including the Mensheviks active in the

Workers' Group of the War Industries Committee. Kayurov and his friends had been lucky to escape. The Vyborg District Committee now became officially the leading group of Bolsheviks in Petrograd, and responsible for the party's tactics in the crucial days of the February revolution.

On the morning of the 27th Kayurov and his associates led a raid on an arsenal, removed its stocks of rifles and mounted an attack on the prisons holding the revolutionaries, setting them free. They then went on to launch attacks on the police stations. And, as Shlyapnikov had hoped they would, the troops in Petrograd came over to the side of the revolution. The Mensheviks who had been freed from prison, however, did not take part in the fighting, but made their way to the Duma building and from there began to make arrangements for holding the first session of the Petrograd Soviet, an institution that had first appeared in the 1905 revolution.

The Petrograd Soviet

The 27th of February was the day on which the revolutionary movement triumphed. But victory had brought with it a change in the composition of the revolution's supporters. Now that the fighting, and its attendant dangers, were over many more people swelled the ranks of the revolutionaries. One of these was the Menshevik Nikolai Sukhanov, who attended the first session of the Soviet on the evening of the 27th and who became a member of its Executive Committee. A similar figure was the Socialist Revolutionary Alexander Kerensky, who was to become the Soviet's vice-chairman.

Kayurov viewed these developments with distaste and alarm. It seemed to him deplorable that people who had taken no part in the fighting should now be emerging from cover to assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement. He was disturbed that the new self-appointed leaders did not share the anti-war views of those like himself who had initiated the demonstrations. In a last effort to turn the tide and stop the drift towards a pro-war stance, Kayurov and his friends from the Vyborg District tried to persuade Shlyapnikov to issue a manifesto on behalf of the Bolshevik party. As Shlyapnikov was slow in doing this, the Vyborg Committee drew up the manifesto itself and distributed it on the evening of the 27th.

On that day the Vyborg Bolsheviks tried to consolidate their leadership of the revolutionary upsurge by setting up a Soviet in the Vyborg District. But the tide of events was against them. The crowds of soldiers and civilians who filled the streets flocked towards the centre of the city and towards the Soviet organised by the Mensheviks in the Duma building.

Events turned out as Kayurov and his friends had feared. The leadership of the February revolution was usurped by people who had arrived late on the scene and had taken no part in the street fighting. Worse, still, the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet were for the most part people who supported rather than opposed the war. For the time being Kayurov and the Bolsheviks of the Vyborg District had lost out, but later in the year the political climate was to change as the war became unpopular and support went to politicians such as

Lenin who held out the promise of peace.

The Tsar's Abdication

The sudden arrival of the revolution on the streets between 23 and 27 February had taken the liberals by surprise. The popular upsurge they dreaded had taken place before their plans could be put into effect. They now had to salvage what they could. But that was not inconsiderable. The mutiny of the troops had struck the death blow to the autocracy and on 1 March Guchkov travelled to the tsar's train at Pskov and came away with Nicholas II's abdication manifesto. This was much as Guchkov and the other liberal conspirators had planned, but the tsar had abdicated not in favour of his son, but of his brother, the Grand Duke Michael. At this stage, however, the liberals still could expect that Russia would be a constitutional monarchy.

In Petrograd on the 27th the Duma had met and formed a Provisional Committee, headed by the Chairman of the Duma Michael Rodzianko. This had acted as a temporary government of the country and entered into negotiations with the Executive Committee of the Soviet about what the programme of the new government should be. The next step, on 2 March, was to appoint the ministers of the new cabinet, and it was at this juncture that a significant change came about in the character of the government. For while some of the ministers were Duma members, some of them, like Guchkov, and Prince Lvov, were not. In this way the newly-formed Provisional Government could not be considered as a Duma institution, and therefore had dubious legitimacy.

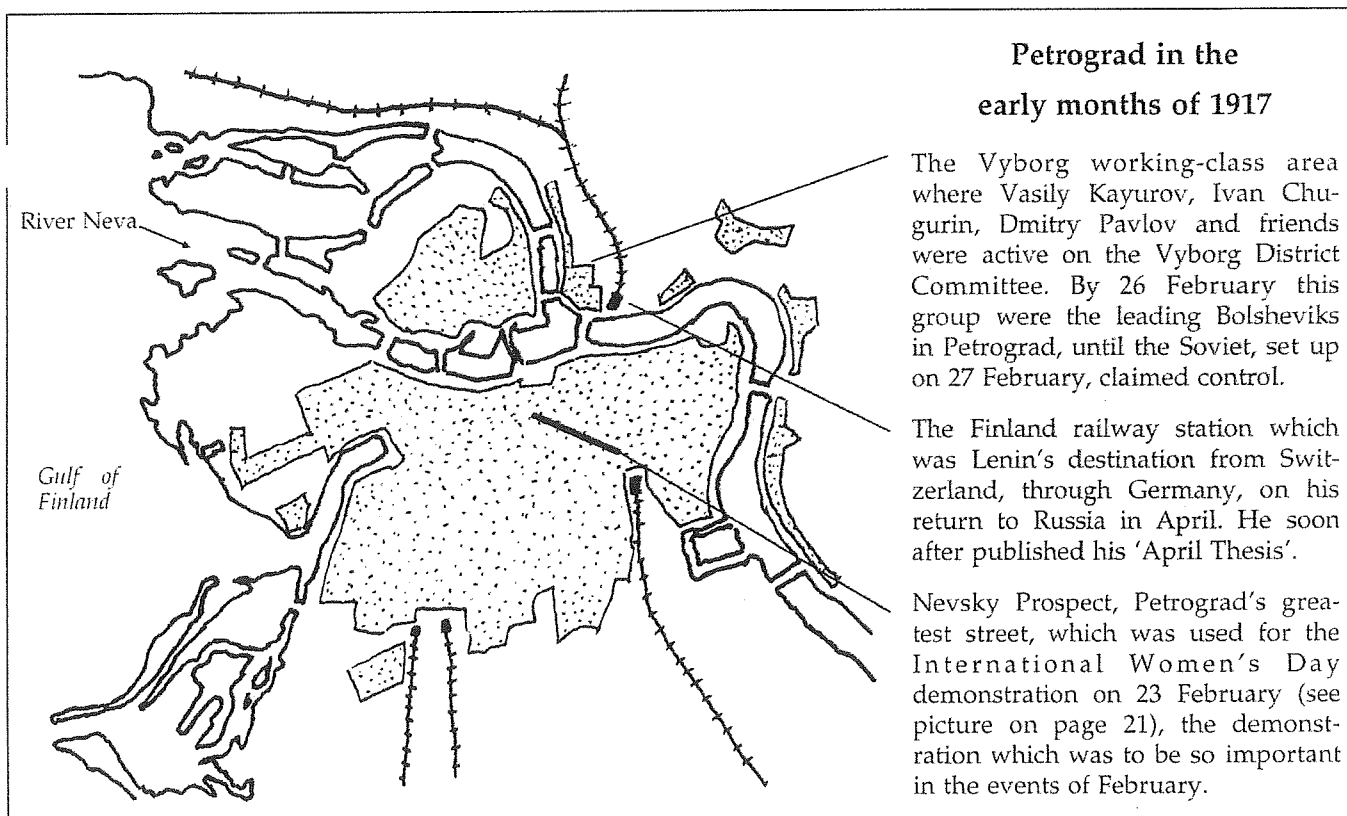
Legitimacy was further undermined when it became clear that the mood in the streets was against retaining the monarchy in any form. When the Grand

Duke Michael was asked on 3 March if he intended to become the new tsar he declined, thus confounding the expectations of Guchkov and his colleagues that the future form of government in Russia would be a constitutional monarchy. The Provisional Government was also weakened from the start by having a competitor in the form of the Petrograd Soviet, so that the kind of regime that the February revolution created was one that was inherently weak, and one that would be easily overthrown by the Bolsheviks eight months later.

The Origin of the Spontaneity Interpretation

To say, as Chamberlin does, that the February revolution was spontaneous, leaderless and anonymous implies that the whole episode came about by chance, and that the elements of planning and organisation were absent. But in fact the overthrow of tsarism was widely anticipated both by the liberals and by the organised workers, and both of these groups had in its own way planned and prepared for the event. It was mainly the precise timing of the February days that took those involved by surprise. Nobody had foreseen that the demonstration on 23 February would gather momentum in the manner it did, and that it would bring with it the defection of the troops from the government side.

But if Chamberlin's interpretation of the events is incorrect, or at least exaggerated, where did the idea come from that the February revolution was anonymous, leaderless and spontaneous? There are two main sources for this. One is the influential memoirs of the period written by Kerensky and Sukhanov. They started to be participants in events only on 27 February, when they became highly-placed members of the Petrograd Soviet. This puts them in an awkward position. They



did not want to say that they appeared only after the worst of the fighting was over and that they usurped the leadership of the workers' movement. What they said was that the revolution happened spontaneously, with no leaders and no preparation. In this way, it is implied, they had as much right as anyone else to assume leadership in the Soviet.

The other source is the early Soviet interpretation of the February revolution. After the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917 all the leaders wanted to be credited with a revolutionary pedigree. The prestige of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and other prominent Bolsheviks was measured by what part they had played in the various episodes of the Russian revolution. The problem with the February revolution was there was no credit in it to be had for any of the current Bolshevik leadership, because none of them had been present in Petrograd at the time. The Bolsheviks who had been there: Shlyapnikov, Kayurov, Chugurin, Pavlov etc. were never among the leaders. Hence the accepted doctrine in the Soviet Union in the 1920s was that because the Bolshevik party leadership was in prison or exile during the February revolution, the Bolshevik party had played no part in the events, and that therefore the revolution had been a spontaneous one. Shlyapnikov's memoirs, which told a different story, were criticised for having grossly exaggerated the degree of organisation in the February days.

That meant that when Chamberlin wrote his book on the Russian revolution in the 1930s the consensus among the sources he used was that the February revolution had no identifiable leaders, and he duly conveyed this conclusion to his readership. As very few new sources on the February revolution emerged from the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1960, Chamberlin's interpretation became the standard one. But a knowledge of how this interpretation originated in conjunc-

tion with a critical reading of the materials now available make it possible to reassess the relative degrees of organisation and spontaneity in the February revolution.

Words and Concepts to note

autocracy: a system of government by a ruler who has unlimited powers.

Duma: the Russian parliament established in 1906 and which lasted until 1917.

Soviet: the Russian word for a 'council'.

Questions to consider

- Why did Chamberlin's description of the February revolution remain unchallenged for so long?
- Was Shlyapnikov right to refuse to give guns to Kayurov and his associates on 25 February?
- Why was the support of the soldiers for the revolutionaries on 27 February so important?
- What was the effect of a more moderate leadership in the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government? Was it in the long-term interests of Soviet power?

Further Reading: E.N. Burdzhakov, *Russia's Second Revolution*, Bloomington, 1988; W.H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, 2 vols. New York, 1935, (reprint Grosset and Dunlap, New York, 1965); T. Hasegawa, *The February Revolution*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1981; G. Katkov, *Russia 1917: The February Revolution*, Collins, London, 1967; P. Miliukov, *The Russian Revolution*, Vol. 1: *The Revolution Divided: Spring 1917*, edited by Richard Stites, translated by Tatyana and Richard Stites, Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1978; R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990; A. Shlyapnikov, *On the Eve of 1917*, translated by Richard Chappell, Allison and Busby, London, 1982; N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917*, edited, abridged, and translated by Joel Carmichael, Oxford University Press, 1955.

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