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A Leaderless Uprising:
The February Revolution (February 23rd-25th):

Multiple stresses on the Russian lower classes led to the February revolution in 1917. The military was fighting in World War I despite a poor industry; there were not enough supplies to feed and arm the troops. The situation led to low morale, mutinies, desertion, and depressing letters sent to families back home detailing horrid living conditions. The war also caused food shortages in the cities and rural towns. Women had to wait in lines for hours in order to obtain mediocre amount of flour and sugar[7].

The working class attributed most of their woes to the tsar, Nicholas II. The tsar and his ministers came off as callous and ineffective as the autocracy made mistakes in industry, the war, and policy again and again. In 1905, when 30,000 protestors came to the tsar asking for aid against food shortages, the tsar ordered his soldiers to open fire in an event known as Bloody Sunday, which acted as the catalyst of the 1905 Revolution[7]. As the Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist theorist Leon Trotsky described: "The war itself, its victims, its horror, its shame brought not only the old, but also the new layers of workers into conflict with the czarist régime. It did this with a new incisiveness and led them to the conclusion: we can no longer endure it. The conclusion was universal; it welded the masses together and gave them a mighty dynamic force12."

After continuous failure by the autocracy, educated elites and workers began to criticise the governent and form new political ideologies. Many were based on the writings of Karl Marx and were socialist in nature. Socialism advocates common ownership for all and gives much more political power to the working class. The Social Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and the Bolsheviks were three prominent socialist movements. The Social Revolutionaries (SRs) were populist in ideology and

felt that the peasant class needed more freedoms. The Mensheviks were devout Marxists; they felt that Russia needed to undergo a capitalist, "bourgeois" revolution before implementing a socialist goverment. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, were more leftist. They felt that the people of Russia could skip right over a capitalist period and enter straight into socialism. As the people under Nicholas II lost more and more confidence in their ruler, the new socialist parties were able to recruit members from the proletariat, peasant, and elite classes[7].

In an effort to boost morale, the tsar decided to become the Commander-in-Chief of the army in 1915. This decision was made despite objections from all of his ministers and advisors. Instead of helping his country, Nicholas's decision made the situation much worse. While he was away, his wife Alexandra appointed and promtly fired multiple Prime Ministers, ignored the suggestions of the Duma (a legislative body instilled after the 1905 revolution made up mostly of radical left representatives), and was generally ineffectual as the Russian populace continued to suffer under the strain of WWI[7].

In February of 1917, the pressures on the workforce were unbearably high; inflation was rampant, food was scarce, and the work day was brutal. Political protests were a common occurrence and the skilled workers were the core of the demonstrations. Historians Koekner and Rosenbery state that 320,000 workers participated in over 280 strikes in the few weeks before the February revolution6. Women were also very active in protests. As the men of Russia fought in the war, women took up the vacant skilled labor postitions. The revolution that resulted in the fall of autocracy started on February 23rd, a Soviet holiday known as International Women's Day. Thousands of housewives and women workers entered the streets, enraged over the need to stand in line for hours in the cold for bread and over the war that had consumed their husbands, fathers, and sons. "Down with high prices" and "Down with hunger" were their rally calls as they encouraged thousands of male workers to join them in a demonstration that ultimately brought the city of Petrograd to a halt in three days2.

According to some historians, the women acted against revolutionary leadership. Common thought among socialist revolutionary leaders was that the movement was still too weak to be

successful. Party leaders felt that a premature attempt would be deadly; they feared that the soldiers would not disobey their superiors if commanded to shoot at the socialist demonstrators8.Vasily Kayurov, an engineer and an overseer of the Vyborg District Committee Petrograd from the Bolshevik party, remarked on the actions of the women strikers on February 23rd:

> ...To my great surprise and indignation... several textile factories had gone on strike and that women delegates had come to ask for support from us engineers. I was extremely indignant at the behaviour of the strikers. On the one hand they were blatantly ignoring the instructions of the party's district committees, and also I myself had just the night before urged the women workers to show restraint and discipline, yet suddenly here was a strike. There seemed to be no purpose in it and no reason for it, unless one counted the particularly rapid growth of the bread queues, which were, in fact, the stimulus for the strike8.

The resulting masses in the streets caused by the women's call to action initially rattled the unprepared Soviet leadership. In Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, he noted the reactions of many prominent Soviet party leaders. Mstislavsky, a leader of the SRs, felt like the party leaders and their organizations were unprepared: “The revolution caught us, the party people of those days, like the foolish virgins of the Bible, napping12. The Petrograd Bolsheviks felt the same way. Kayurov stated; “Absolutely no guiding initiative from the party centres was felt ... the Petrograd Committee had been arrested and the representative of the Central Committee, Comrade Shliapnikov, was unable to give any directives for the coming day12.” There was a distinct lack of documentation from soviet parties due to the unexpected revolution, and historians often argue about exact times and events in the February Revolution as a result. Trotsky remarked on the leadership conundrum in *History of the Russian Revolution:*

> How scant are the records of the mass fighting in the February days-scant even in comparison with the slim records of the October fights. In October the party directed the insurrection from day to day; in its articles, proclamations, and reports, at least the external continuity of the struggle is recorded. Not so in February. The masses had almost no leadership from above. The newspapers were silenced by the strike. Without a look back, the masses made their own history11.

Since dates and events in the February Revolution are relatively vague in some cases, historians often debate about the soviet parties' actions and influences on demonstrators, and if the

subversive parties were in any way responsible for the revolt on International Women's day. James White listed how early Soviet historians changed their views on leadership in his paper, “The February Revolution and the Bolshevik Vyborg District Committee.” According to White, early documentors of the February Revolution did not emphasize the roles of the Bolshevik party13. Kayrov's memoirs (1923) supported this; he often spoke of the of lack of any Bolshevik party leadership in the earlier days of the revolution13. In 1927, the Soviet scholar E. Genkina only found memoirs stressing a lack of political organization8. On the other hand, a leader of the Petrograd Bolsheviks named A. Shlyapnikov gave the Bolsheviks a more prominent leadership role in the revolution in his book, *God Semnadtsatyi.* Shlyapnikov also noted that the revolution was joined by intellectual elites (and many socialist party leaders) only when it had succeeded on February 27th. Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa found that Shlyapnikov himself was unenthusiastic about the strike5; he and his fellow Petrograd Bolshevik leaders felt “that a movement not guided by the Bolshevik Party might eventually be detrimental to the cause of revolution.5”

In Michael Melancon's paper, “Who Wrote What and When?: Proclamations of the February Revolution in Petrograd, 23 February - 1 March 1917,” Melancon deduced that the Social-Democratic party was calling for the beginning of a revolution by releasing a leaflet on the 23rd of February which “requested Petrograd workers to show solidarity with international women's labor...by striking and demonstrating.” His research showed that a majority of the socialists, including the Mensheviks and the SRs, agreed with a February revolution but lacked a printing press for producing revolutionary media. According to Melancon, the only group of socialists who wanted to stall until a more opportune time was top Bolshevik leaders, who felt that May Day of 1917 would be a more appropriate time9.

In “The Mezhraionka, The Bolsheviks and International Women's Day: In Response to Michael Melancon,” D.A. Longley argued against Melancon's research. He felt that Meloncon's point regarding the lack of an available printing press for the Mensheviks and the SRs is not very strong; if the revolutionaries wanted a printing press, they would have gotten access to one by any means necessary.

He also cites many instances of the socialist party leaders feeling that a revolution at the time would have been incredibly immature, especially given the current strength of the parties and the limited contacts with the military. According to Ilia Gordienko, another Bolshevik worker-activist in the Vyborg District, the Mensheviks were actually opposed to organizing a politically supported strike on International Women's Day. They thought that the women should organize a rally; it "wasn't the men's business to impose[4]."

International Women's Day inspired thousands of workers to revolt without direct guidance from socialist party leadership. On the next day, more than half of the workers in Petrograd were out in the streets demonstrating. The people had spread across the industrial neighborhoods and were collecting in the center of the city, shouting "Bread!" "Peace!" and "Down with the Autocracy!11" However, there was still no central leadership. The police chief of Petrograd, Aleksandr Balk, documented his experiences with demonstrators of the February Revolution in his memoirs, which were written in 1929. He said of the demonstrators:

> On the main streets the masses grew thicker, and the police patrols were swallowed up by the crowds. The crowd could get out of control at any minute, but just like yesterday there were no leaders, and so far only scattered hooligan mischief occurred[1].

Given the rising chaos, soviet party leaders began to plan how to shape the movement. The Vyborg District Committee, a group of Bolsheviks located at the center of the strike, met on the night of the 24th to define party goals and set a plan of action. The meeting was far from organized, however. A member of the committee, N. Sveshnikov, felt the lack of direction. As he noted in his memoirs from 1923: "The atmosphere was exuberant, but we felt the absence of common leadership, and bad communications from other districts. The correct revolutionary direction of the Central Committee was badly needed5."

On the 25th of February, 240,000 workers were out on the streets—streetcars were stopped in their tracks, schools were closed, and most businesses were shut down11. The masses were much more serious about the rallies; the police chief Balk said the chants of the crowd "lacked the joyous mood of

the previous days[1]." Dangerous encounters between protestors and the police were occurring everywhere. Trotsky noted an encounter at the Alexander III monument in his book, *History of the Russian* Revolution: mounted police officers opened fire on the crowd. By the 25th, many soldiers were comrades with the demonstrators, lending them arms and force when needed. At the Alexander III monument, some protestors returned fire with these lent arms. The police officers then retreated, leaving the demonstrators with a sense of fearlessness. Balk witnessed a protestor steal a sword from the sheath of a police captain and kill the officer with it after he had harassed a flag bearer[1]. In both instances, the police received little to no support from military forces. The soldiers showed indifference to the police and often disobeyed them throughout the February Revolution. The workers picked up on the soldiers' feelings and attempted fraternization. Kayurov and a few of his cohorts approached a group of Cossack soldiers who were pursuing unruly demonstrators. Caps lowered with respect, they humbly asked; "Brothers-Cossacks, help the workers in a struggle for their peaceable demands; you see how the Pharaohs [policemen] treat us, hungry workers. Help us!" The Cossacks responded by stopping their pursuit12. Gordienko documented another event of fraternization with Cossack forces in his memoirs. After the soldiers had disobeyed their officers for the sake of the protestors, the protestors and soldiers rose their hands and voices together in solidarity[4]. This appeal of brotherhood to the soldiers was a strong force in building fraternization. In Balk's notes, he observed that by the 26th, there were very few soldiers in Petrograd still loyal to the tsar[1].

As the socialist party leaders recognized the chaos in the streets as a bona fide revolution, they began to organize elections to construct a soviet democratic body. Bolshevik orators pronounced to the masses: "Comrades, the time we were waiting for has finally come! The people have risen against their oppressors. Don't waste a minute! Create the workers' district soviets! Draw the representatives of the soldiers into them5." On the 25th, about 30 Bolshevik leaders met at the Petrograd Union of Workers' Co-operatives to start a soviet. Half were arrested later that day12. On February 26th, a soviet group known as the "Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party," most likely a group of Bolshevik origin, called

for elections of a “Provisional Revolutionary Government” by distributing Document A(appendix). Document A was a pamphlet that encouraged protestors to continue fraternization with the soldiers, told the revolutionaries to bear arms and fight for freedom, and asked local strike committees to elect representatives for the new soviet5.

The insurrection was considered successful after the city came to a complete standstill on the 27th of February. The autocracy fell when the tsar abdicated his position on the 2nd of March, and a politically moderate Provisional Government ruled in conjunction with the Soviet until the October Revolution, which finally put the Soviets in control of Russia.

The February Revolution was the end result of a society that had undergone too many stresses caused by a callous autocracy. Sick of standing in the cold for bread, the women rose first on International Women's Day. They inspired the men to march with them, and the workers continued to strike until Petrograd was no longer under the tsar's control. Scholars have debated about whether or not a socialist group had discreetly sparked the revolution and who guided it along the way. Most agree that the demonstrations and literature organized by soviet parties had educated workers about freedom and political rights, but the revolution itself started spontaneously and was fueled by the rage of the proletariat. They also agree that lower level socialist leaders saw the potential in the uprising and attempted to manage the masses while top socialists did not contribute until the revolution was successful.

The most important aspect of the February Revolution was that the residents of Petrograd started demonstrating without direct encouragement from party leaders. The revolution's success showed the citizens of Russia that they have a voice in their government; it gave the masses hope, confidence, and let them know they could change their political leadership if they felt they were being mistreated.

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APPENDIX

Document A

Russian Social Democratic Labour Party
Proletariat of all countries, unite!

Comrades!

The time has come to emancipate the enslaved people. The time of vengeance and reprisal with the tsarist government has come!

Patience has exceeded its limit.

The proletariat has risen with bare hands and open breast—and it has found a brotherly response in the revolutionary army. Only the corrupted hand of the police mercenaries did not hesitate to send volleys into the unarmed people who wanted freedom. The army is with you, comrades—and in this [lies] the guarantee of the victory for the *Second Russian Revolution.* By liberating the better fighters for freedom from the stone walls of the House of Detention and the Kresty the alliance between the army and the people has firmly been welded together.

You cannot go back. Going back is to betray the *soldiers who have revolted* and to condemn them to execution. We must complete the business we have begun. Petersburg workers, continue and expand the general strike, demonstration, fraternization with the soldiers and barracks, and prepare yourselves for an armed struggle. For the victory we need organization: we need a leading centre of the movement.

Start immediately in factories the elections to the factory strike committees. Their representatives will compose the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, which will create a Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Down with the war! Down with the tsarist monarchy!

Long live the Provisional Revolutionary Government!

Long live a democratic republic!

Long live the international proletariat!