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Revolution with Cannon Fodder

During the months of February and March of 1917, Russia went through a tumultuous period which ultimately resulted in the abdication of the czar (and the end of the Romanov dynasty) as well as the transition to the precarious state of "dual power." Late in February / early march (depending upon the calendar used) strikes lead by Petrograd factory workers blew over into full blown anti-government protests. Czar Nicholas II order troops to invade the city and Petrograd and restore order. However, despite their orders the troops sided with the protestors rather than repress them. The decision to mutiny against the czar was not only an understandable course of action but a predictable one given the status and treatment of Russian soldiers at the time. The large majority of the Russian military (most everyone except high-ranking officers) was composed of unlucky peasants or workers that had the misfortune of being conscripted and forced into the military. Once in the military, these people were subjected to harsh treatment by superior officers as well as intolerable wartime failures. Eventually it came to a boiling point for the Russian soldiers and resulted in the soldiers supported of the revolution which denounced the autocracy of the czar. Given the circumstances and information from surviving documents, the majority of soldiers supported the removal of the czar and the institution of a new government. However, not all of the soldiers agreed on the policies of the government to follow, let alone how it was formed and how it was run. The soldiers of Russian suffered under harsh conditions which eventually unified them in a desire to see the autocracy overthrown, but after the revolution of February there were some disagreements amongst soldiers on what to do next.

World war one was a horrendous war for the Russian soldiers and was a catastrophe for Russia from the start. After four short months from the beginning of the war in 1914, over four hundred thousand soldiers were killed and nearly a million wounded.[1] By the end of the war, over three million civilians and military personal of Russia were killed. The living conditions for the Russian soldiers were even more horrendous. One Russian soldier wrote to his family back home "Tell our friends and relatives to avoid military service like fire, because there is neither good footwear, nor clothing, nor food… I buy a few things myself [because] sticking to the rations can kill you quickly.[2] (War and Rev Pg 13). Furthermore, a great number of the soldiers were falling ill, which commonly resulted in death due to inadequate medical care and poor living conditions for the sick ." the conditions of the sick: they lie on straw, without mattress or pillows. There are two doctors and four physicians for the 500 sick people."[2] Such Horrendous conditions were responsible for much of the soldier's casualties and discontent. However, despite the fact that these horrendous conditions seems one step short of hell itself, there were other factors which made the situation for soldiers even worse.

The only thing worse than being sent to fight against a well trained army under the above mentioned conditions, is being sent to under said conditions without proper military training or weapons/ ammunition – which was the sad case for the Russia army. "we are still experiencing a shortage of shells and rifle bullets … it is very unpleasant that the enemy is driving us back."[2] Under these conditions, the soldiers knew that the Russian army was ill equipped to fight the German war machine. "There is some news- the plastun [Cossack] regiment refused to go on the offensive. They are saying 'we are not going with artillery'."[2] Apparently this regiment (which is the subject of a letter written by a soldier) felt that it was ill-equipped to follow orders due to a lack of artillery support. These terrible conditions and militaries failures are responsible for much of what the soldiers were forced to undergo, it is obvious as to why there were a lot of desertions amongst the military. Russia was attempting to fight world war one without the three B's (Bullets, Beans and Bandages) as a result the soldiers of Russia were paying for such inadequacies with their lives. Under these conditions which had lasted the length of the war, the soldiers

of Russia harbored much anger and resentment toward the autocratic regime which the soldiers felt was responsible for every blundering failure of the war. Eventually such anger and resentment of the regime grew to a boiling point and ultimately resulted in military support for the revolutionaries in February of 1917 as well as the mutiny against the czar.

The Russian soldiers blamed the autocratic regime and the czar for the failures of command, the failing war effort, as well as the terrible conditions in which the soldiers were forced to live. During the later part of the war, Czar Nicholas II decided to go to the front and take command of the troops. Such an action was a mistake for the czar for it associated him directly with military failures, and made him appear incompetent before the Russian soldiers. Evidence of this can be found in the record of a meeting of the ministers of Russia. "We the emperor is leaving [to assume command of the army], not a single military commander or commander of a ship would place his forces at risk… [and if the czar demands it] they will not allow him [the czar] on the ship… his popularity and authority have been shaken."[3] From these excerpts, it is clear that the ministers knew that the actions of the czar would decrease his popularity amongst the soldiers and the people and weaken his authority over all. Furthermore, many of the soldiers felt that the "autocratic- capitalist regime" was responsible for many of harsh treatment and abuses the soldiers endured from the high-ranking officers. "[Deputies!] We simply cannot endure the old authority and regime. The gentlemen officers are punishing us just as they always have and are not giving us any freedom our brothers have won"[4] Although this letter was written after the abdication of the czar, it clearly shows that the soldiers blamed the autocratic regime for "the old ways" and/or the terrible abuses they endured from their superiors. It was clear to the soldiers that they did not deserve such abuses, and such abuses lead directly toward resentment for the czar and the autocracy. The blame and resentment held by the soldiers against the czar and the regime served as the motivation for the mutinies later in February of 1917 in which the soldiers refused orders to put down anti-government protests and decided to assist the protestors against the police and other methods used by the czar to restore order.

However, one might imagine that the soldiers would garner anger toward the laborers and peasants because it was the workers who made the weapons, and it was the workers strikes which would stop the little flow of munitions to the frontlines. Considering such facts, it would seem that the soldiers would stand by the czar during any protest in order to restore order and get factory workers back to producing weapons. However, blaming the peasants and the workers for the food and munitions shortages was not always the case. The soldiers in a lot of cases saw the laborers and peasants as bothers being oppressed by the Autocratic regime - and such a stance was not far from the truth since the soldiers were usually impoverished peasants or workers that were conscripted into the military. Such a stance was exemplified in letters from soldiers to laborers "Comrade Workers! … We [Tsar Seko Garrison Soldiers Committee] know that you are right, comrades: the entire people groaned under the lash of the autocratic-capitalist regime."[5] The soldiers of Russian spared the laborers and the peasants of their harsh resentment and directed it more toward the "autocratic-capitalist regime." This attitude of brother hood held by the soldiers with respect to the peasants and workers provided for more motivation for the soldiers side with the people against the regime. Furthermore, there were rumors going around that the regime was actually treacherous and was working with the Germans to bring about destruction to the Russia people, and political agitators would play to these attitudes, (protestors shouted toward the soldiers to) " 'overthrow the criminal government' which had gone over to 'the side of the Germans'." In conclusion, the attitude of the soldiers with regard to the peasants was one of appreciation and brotherhood, and such attitudes lead them to mutiny against the czar with the revolutionaries and the protestors.

By February 1917, the Russian soldiers had enough of their predicament. Their frustration reached a boiling point to which the soldiers mutinied and directly refused orders from the czar to put down anti-government protests in the city of Petrograd. "When mounted police arrived the soldiers shot at them… when the commander [arrived] the soldiers shouted to him that they [did not wish] to act against the people."[6] Ultimately, as a result of the events in Petrograd, the Russian military refused to accept orders from the czar and allowed/supported anti-government protests. Eventually, without the power of

the military and without the support of most the people and the government officials, the czar was forced to abdicate. The abdication of the czar left a power vacuum that lead to a Russia's state of government known as dual power. Because of the abdication of the czar there was no official government to which the Russian military reported to, thus the military eventually began to report to this "dual power" government institution. The dual power government institution consisted of a Petrograd soviet which elected members (from laborers, soldiers, etc) and the self-proclaimed provisional government which composed of remnants of the Duma. The significance of this new system of government is that the soldiers now reported to a new regime, to which they had some political standing and interest. Furthermore, the soldiers were now able to voice their concerns under the new regime, and no longer could blame the Russian autocracy for military failures. However, once the autocracy disintegrated, the soldiers had the opportunity to help mold the new government that was to be formed.

Once the Provisional government and Petrograd soviet were established as part of the dual power system which exercised authority over Russia between February and October of 1917, the soldiers of Russia were not entirely supportive of specific policies. For example, the soldiers of Russia were not unified to support one stance toward the war. (At the time, the people of Russia debated over continuing or ceasing the war). The popular views amongst the soldiers there were either, pro-war or anti-war. The pro-war soldiers desired to continue fighting the war until a "glorious victory" was achieved. Some soldiers believed that "their [The Russian Peoples] entire future will be decided by this war. War to the end, to total victory. Freedom cannot be reconciled with disgrace. Comrade Soldiers of all Russia: We must give our homeland victory."[7] This excerpt came from a rifle division of the Russian military. However, despite the fact that there where those who voiced a pro-war posture, there were others of the military who deemed that the war was a horrendous catastrophe that Russia need to abandon as quickly as possible. "Enough of tormenting us and crippling Russia! We refuse to be cannon fodder anymore! We reject the war launched by the Russian government."[8] Some Russian soldiers opposed the war so much that they deserted and army and fled. This is not to say that the desertion or discontent for the war only

occurred after the February uprising, but were occurring for the majority of the time since the war had begun. Given these conflicting viewpoints, there were disagreements that occurred in the army about what the official stance the soldiers of the military took on the war issue. “Our elected deputies… have told your Petrograd deputies … that our 64th Division wishes to wage war to a victorious conclusion. But no, that's wrong, they, our deputies, are mistaken. We soldiers do not want the 64th Division to continue the war.”[9] The soldiers as a whole did not have one unified stance toward the war. These disagreements about the war were not very prominent during the February revolution or the month of March, but the existence of such disagreements should be noted when considering the actions of soldiers later that year.

Disagreement on policies amongst the soldiers was not limited to the subject of the war, the soldiers of Russia (as a whole) did not necessarily agree upon one form of government to replace the autocracy or one specific political party that should replace the old regime. For example, Two of major political parties that had risen after the February revolution composed of the social revolutionaries that was formed in the interest of the peasants, and the social democrats that was formed in the interest of the proletariat (or working laborers). The lack of unity amongst the soldiers in supporting one of the political parties to replace the old regime could seem surprising since the large majority of the Russian army was composed of peasants conscripted into the military. Given the two political groups, it would seem that the army would most likely support the social revolutionaries and denounce the social democrats. Some soldiers did denounce the Social democrats -not only as unfit to lead Russia into a new era but also as German conspirators intent on bringing Russia to ruin and ultimately under German control.[10] Those individuals amongst the soldiers who supported the social democrats were not uncommon. However, there were also individuals amongst the soldiers which felt that laborers/proletariat were more like “brothers” and sided with the social revolutionaries’ political interests. “We, the soldiers of Transport Repair Workshop No. 2, sincerely sympathize with the Great Cause and are walking hand in hand with the proletariat toward the attainment of a better future life.” (Voices pg 115) But ultimately, the Soldiers were composed of main elements of the general population of Russia, and there for contained elements

from every political party. Overall, there was a point at which the soldiers just pushed the political scene to the back and focused on the front (the war front). "We fervently ask the socialist Ministers a… to keep prevocational agitators [Bolsheviks or Mensheviks, Social Democrats or Socialist Revolutionaries, or Kadets away. -These provocateurs are hurting soldier moral and hampering the war effort]."[11] In conclusion, the mass of Russian soldiers did not official (or unofficially) set on supporting a political party or form of government at the end of the February revolution.

Overall, the soldiers of Russia before, during, and After the February-March period of 1917 were subjected to horrendous conditions. The majority of the soldiers blamed the czar and the autocratic regime for the horrendous conditions the soldiers endured and the numerous military failures which continuously plagued the Russian military. These horrendous conditions and continuing failures caused resentment against the czar and the old regime to grow until it finally reached a boiling point in February of 1917 and lead to a large mutiny. With all of the terrible troubles of the soldiers, it is not hard to imagine how their resentment to the regime was the motivation to their mutiny in 1917. After the February revolution, the situation of the soldiers improved moderately, but in a manner which did not go unnoticed. The primary way in which the status of soldiers improved was the manner in which they were treated, as the famous Order No. 1 outlawed specific kinds of abuses and offenses that the soldiers of Russia were subjected to by their higher ranking officers. However, despite the fact that the czar abdicated, and that the provisional government along with the Petrograd soviet claimed authority, the Russian soldiers did not as a unified whole desire to see any specific political party take power – at least not anywhere near the degree to which they unified to see the czar removed from power.

Bibliography

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[11] Sick and injured Russian warriors, "Letter to 'Comrade Patriots' from soldiers in the trenches, 27 June 1917." in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution 1917, (Jun. 27th, 1917) , doc. 37, p. 126