

The Flame That Turned Into a Fire:

An Analysis of the July Days, 1917

Nikita A. Khlystov

March 28, 2011

21.467J/17.57J: Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society

"Blood has flowed in the streets of Petrograd. A tragic chapter has been added to the Russian Revolution," declared Leon Trotsky following the events of July 3-7, 1917.¹ Known today as the July Days, this pivotal moment in the Russian Revolution saw half a million frustrated workers and soldiers take to the streets of the Russian capital Petrograd. Unlike in any previous protest of the revolution, these lower-class workers and troops were armed for a "forceful demonstration of opposition" to the Russian Provisional Government, demanding instead that all power be given to the All-Russian Soviet of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies.² The Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky immediately brought loyal troops and Cossacks to restore order. Soon after intense street fighting erupted, lasting for three days and resulting in hundreds of demonstrator casualties.³ The aftermath saw the Bolsheviks severely blamed and repressed for their supposed involvement in the events. This led many leading Bolsheviks to commit to an urgent course of armed revolution, which would ultimately result in the successful overthrow of the government in October.⁴

¹ Trotsky, Leon. "The July Uprising." *Leon Trotsky: The Struggle for State Power*. Marxists Internet Archive Library, 12 Sept. 2006. Web. 23 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/power/art04.htm>>.

² Steinberg, Mark. "Crisis and Upheaval: From the July Days to Bolshevik Power." *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001. 149-57. Print. p. 150, 152.

³ Feist, Joe M. "Railways and Politics: The Russian Diary of George Gibbs, 1917." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 62.3 (1979): 178-99. Print. p. 193; Kort, Michael. "The July Days." *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010. 103-05. Print. p. 104.

⁴ Steinberg, p. 155-6.

The major debate between contemporaries of this time period pitted impatient radicals who demanded that the Soviet urgently assume power against those who wished to extend the liberal coalition and maintain Russia's honor by continuing her involvement in World War I.⁵ As the events of the July Days unfolded, the latter group swiftly denounced the demonstrations. Crucially, however, the Bolshevik leadership refused to isolate the protestors and instead attempted to provide organizational measures to quell the violence.⁶ This left Bolsheviks vulnerable to accusations of supporting the demonstrations; thus, this divisive debate quickly evolved into a major confrontation. The Provisional Government took the opportunity to blame the Bolsheviks for an attempted overthrow, and proceeded to violently repress Bolshevik activism in the following weeks.⁷ Meanwhile the Bolsheviks, notably Trotsky, made a reconciliatory attempt to explain the limited scope of their involvement in the July Days; Bolshevik repression nevertheless continued, which caused greater numbers to join the radicalization.⁸ This debate continues even among historians today: some claim the demonstrations were fully led by the Bolsheviks, while others present evidence to the contrary. While it is clear from both primary and secondary sources that the Bolsheviks were fully aware of the events of July 1917, their direct involvement in and especially their leadership of these armed demonstrations remains disputed among modern scholars as much as it was between the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks in 1917.⁹

The July Days marked yet another expression of frustration by the Russian working class in 1917, caused by increasingly apparent shortcomings of the Provisional Government.¹⁰

⁵ Steinberg, p. 152-3; Kerensky in Daly, p. 91-93; Chekalov in Steinberg, p. 182-3; Mudrov in Steinberg, p. 187-8.

⁶ Trotsky.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Steinberg, p. 153-5; Trotsky; Likhtenshtein in Steinberg, p. 186.

¹⁰ Steinberg, p. 149-51.

With Russia embroiled for a fourth year in the bloodshed of World War I, the population had grown extremely war-weary.¹¹ Worse still, the Provisional Government under Kerensky intended to continue the war in order to honor Russia's allegiance to the western Allies; the fiasco that was Kerensky's attempted June offensive against the Germans all the further irritated troops and workers alike.¹² At the beginning of July, news that garrison troops from Petrograd would be imminently sent to the front to support the failed offensive, coupled with the increasingly stagnant policies of the Provisional Government and the lack of stability in the coalition of leading parties, brought frustrations to a boiling point.¹³

Thus, the demonstrations that began on July 3 (16) were of no surprise to anyone in Petrograd. Even an American engineer George Gibbs, who had arrived in Russia only in May of 1917 as a railroad advisor, noted in his diary that "things political were getting mixed," and that the "beginning of rioting in the streets" on July 4 (17) marked "the long-expected attempt of the Bolsheviks to get control of the government."¹⁴ Gibbs was a neutral observer with relatively simplistic views of the situation in Russia, unfamiliar with Russia's recent internal conflicts; a practical person, Gibbs wished that "the Russians would simply get on with the business at hand."¹⁵ Thus, he was naturally surprised at the unusually abundant open display of arms by the frustrated Bolshevik sympathizers during the July Days, a first for 1917. Gibbs remarked that "armored motor cars were dashing up and down...carrying machine guns and they looked wicked."¹⁶ The demonstrators were soon met by loyal troops, Cossacks, and Black Hundreds, and firefights soon broke out; after heavy rains on the third night and loyalist military

¹¹ Daly, Jonathan W., and Leonid Trofimov. *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: a Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2009. Print. p. 91; Steinberg, p. 150.

¹² Tereshchenko in Daly, p. 93-4.

¹³ Steinberg, p. 150-1.

¹⁴ Feist, p. 193.

¹⁵ Feist, p. 181.

¹⁶ Feist, p. 193; Steinberg, p. 151-2.

superiority, the demonstrators went home.¹⁷ In the four days of fighting, several hundred casualties including nearly a hundred deaths were reported.¹⁸

Despite the assumption that this was a long-expected Bolshevik-run armed demonstration, it is clear from Gibbs' accounts that the demonstrations, to which Gibbs in fact referred as "riots," were largely uncontrolled and aimless.¹⁹ Gibbs noted that many buildings were riddled with bullet holes, reflecting how rioters randomly shot at "bourgeois" quarters, in addition to the apparent lack of direction of the armored motor cars mentioned earlier.²⁰ Prominent Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, along with numerous socialists, reflected after the rebellions that "these were the actions not of a revolutionary crowd but of a blind and cowardly mob with absolutely no idea of what they were doing."²¹ There was an obvious lack of leadership, even though the demonstrators repeatedly and desperately turned to the Soviets to take supporting action.²² For the past several months, there had been a massive conflict brewing inside the Bolshevik party, as well as in the Soviet in general: those who had grown impatient enough to support the armed uprising grew increasingly at odds with those who remained by the side of the Provisional Government and counseled patience. Within the Soviet, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries immediately forbade the armed demonstration, and even helped the Provisional Government call in loyal troops and Cossacks.²³ Among the Bolsheviks, the leading figures saw these demonstrations as too spontaneous and prone to dangerous counterrevolution that would greatly weaken the Bolshevik party, while the

¹⁷ Steinberg, p. 153-4.

¹⁸ Feist, p. 193.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Steinberg, p. 152.

²² Ibid.

²³ Steinberg, p. 153; Boll, p. 1182.

workers' and soldiers' frustrations spiraled into demands to the Bolsheviks to take armed initiative.²⁴

This was the great debate at the time of the July Days, and immediately afterwards this disagreement became even more apparent. Primary sources, in particular the resolutions issued by the various soviets in Petrograd, demonstrate the extent to which the impatience of dissenting citizens had become radicalized. Soviet support for demonstrators already existed during the bloodshed, as a letter from July 4 issued by the workers of the Shlisselburg Powder Works demonstrates.²⁵ "Enough hesitation," declared the workers, and demanded that "executive power must rest in the hands of [the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies], for it truly expresses the people's will."²⁶ Additional sympathy came from the "venerable oak" of the Putilov factory in Petrograd.²⁷ These workers were actively involved in the armed demonstrations, and issued a letter addressed to the citizens of Petrograd on July 11 as an explanation for their actions of the previous week.²⁸ With their ostentatious vocabulary and proclamations, it seems clear that the letter was meant to impress the hesitant Petrograd citizens and convince them of the necessity of an armed demonstration. In particular, the workers claimed that they were actively involved in the February Revolution, and that their actions during the July Days were an inevitable and logical consequence of the government's "bureaucratically dead forms" and the Soviet's increasing self-isolation from the workers; effectively they announced their far-leftist criticism

²⁴ Steinberg, p. 154; Likhtenstein in Daly, p. 186; Kort, p. 104.

²⁵ Chekalov in Steinberg, p. 182-3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mudrov in Steinberg, p. 187-8.

²⁸ Boll, Michael M. "The Emergence of the Petrograd Red Guard (March-June 1917): A Study in the "Radicalization" of the Petrograd Proletariat." *The Journal of Modern History* 51.3 (1979): 1163-184. Print., p. 1180; Mudrov in Steinberg, p. 187-8.

of the Soviet in addition as the Provisional Government.²⁹ "Citizens, our renewed life is impatient," proclaimed the workers, and encouraged "active support of the Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution" in hopes of rekindling the revolutionary fervor that had stagnated by July.³⁰ Thus, the message of the workers is obvious: another revolution must urgently be started. The Putilov factory was clearly proud of its leader-like and progressive initiative that exceeded those of all the other soviets in this respect.

The impatience of the Putilov workers, along with armed divisions from the Vyborg and Kronstadt regions, climaxed on the night of July 4, when over thirty thousand workers and soldiers demanded admittance to the Soviet Executive Committee at the Tauride Palace.³¹ When the leader of the Social Revolutionary party, Viktor Chernov, remained steadfast in refusing to join the uprising, the meeting turned into a shouting match and shots were fired into the air; frustrations seethed as one demonstrator shouted at Chernov, "Take power, you son of a bitch, when it is handed to you!"³² Disillusionment with the Provisional Government, even though it was supposed to be the desired product of the February Revolution, was widespread among the communists; political action through reforms no longer was sufficient – it was time for another revolution.

However, the demonstrators never achieved the degree of organization necessary, rendering the radical protests of July a failed and therefore questionable attempt at revolution.³³ Scrutiny of the workers increased, with a significant number of socialists from both cities as well as the provinces expressing their disappointment and even disgust at the actions of the

²⁹ Mudrov in Steinberg, p. 187-8.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Boll, p. 1180.

³² Ibid; Steinberg, p. 153.

³³ Steinberg, p. 152-3.

demonstrators.³⁴ The printing workers of the former Markus press branded the demonstrations “the most grievous and shameful page in Russian history,” warning that the “provocational demonstrations” could directly lead to counterrevolutionary measures.³⁵ A resolution by the 22nd Railroad Battalion accuses the demonstrators of “leading wittingly and unwittingly to counterrevolution and anarchy” as a direct result of their producing “terror and violence against free citizens.”³⁶ While the soldiers seemed to support the Provisional Government, the fact that they issued a resolution and not a letter suggests that they may have had soviet tendencies. Furthermore, they recommend the application of the Soviet-style of debate; at meetings, the Soviet would debate until a majority was apparent, after which point the minority opinion must give up its position and align with the majority. This method was proposed here to resolve the tensions between the Provisional Government and the Soviet, where the population would freely choose between the two, and the minority faction must accept defeat and join the majority.³⁷ Thus, the nature of ideological split among the communists becomes apparent: revolutionary impatience stemmed primarily from urban factory workers and city garrison troops, while soldiers stationed elsewhere as well as press workers sought to discourage such dangerous sentiments.

In fact, this discouragement quickly spiraled into widespread and indiscriminate suppression of the Bolshevik party following the first week of July, despite the uncertainty as to the extent of Bolshevik leadership of the demonstrations.³⁸ A violent reaction by the Provisional Government, assisted by Cossacks and the Black Hundreds, spread throughout the country; a firestorm of libel was started by the right-wing press against Lenin for being a German agent,

³⁴ Steinberg, p. 155.

³⁵ Likhtenshtein in Steinberg, p. 186.

³⁶ Polkovsky in Steinberg, p. 202-3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Steinberg, p. 155-7; Kort, p. 104.

and the Bolsheviks along with Lenin incited the Petrograd demonstrations to further weaken Russia.³⁹ Immediately, blame was placed squarely on the shoulders of the Bolshevik party: the public opinion was that “blood flowed because of the Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks were acting under the orders of Wilhelm [of Germany].”⁴⁰ However, as Trotsky pointed out, it seemed that the blame was unsubstantiated: “all parties, including the Bolsheviks, took every step to prevent the masses from making the demonstration of July 3 (16).”⁴¹ At first glance, Trotsky, being a member of the Bolshevik party, may be regarded as a biased source, but his account is devoid of pompous vocabulary or apparent propaganda, and instead presents the events in a logical and well-explained manner. Most importantly, however, other primary sources mention (but do not explain) similar events. It did indeed appear that the demonstrations, as Gibbs noted, lacked sufficient leadership; just because the demonstrators were chanting Soviet slogans did not necessarily indicate Soviet leadership.⁴² The Soviet Executive Committee clearly refused to take charge, even with the support of several thousand ambitious and action-ready men; the hesitation of the Bolshevik leaders was obvious, otherwise the October Revolution would have taken place instead in July.

In particular, Trotsky explains that there was a critical moment where the Bolsheviks chose not to “decapitate [the protestors] politically...by refusing to direct them, to leave them to their fate,” and instead decided to help them by introducing “the greatest measure of organization attainable...to reduce to a minimum the number of probable victims.”⁴³ While the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks banned the demonstration and advocated the

³⁹ Kort, p. 104; Steinberg, p. 152-4; Trotsky.

⁴⁰ Trotsky.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Feist, p. 193.

⁴³ Trotsky.

suppression of the protests, the Bolshevik party refused to be an antagonist.⁴⁴ This naturally raised questions from the rest of the population, especially those who were not fully informed of the events. Indeed, it was simple enough for outsiders to blur the actual events (much as the press and the Provisional Government later did) and recognize only the Bolsheviks' intent to help the protest, whether or not their intention was to ensure the peace and safety of other Petrograd citizens. Hence, the Bolsheviks were faced with a difficult situation: while it was easily possible for the other parties to explain to civilians, especially politically unaware peasants, that the Bolsheviks organized the atrocities in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks would have needed to defend themselves with a much more detailed account, which most non-sympathizers would not have had the patience or desire to entertain.

In fact, these uncertainties continue to this very day: leading scholars on the history of the Soviet Union still disagree on the sophistication of the July Days leadership.⁴⁵ What is of interest, however, is that this lack of consensus continues to depend on the depth of research performed on the July Days. Historian Michael Kort's *Soviet Colossus* devotes three pages to this topic, and in a mere two sentences summarizes the events, saying that "troops were joined first by militant, pro-Bolshevik workers and then, after some hesitation, by the Bolshevik leadership."⁴⁶ Other sources assume a similar stance, such as American historians William Rosenberg and Diane Koenker in their analysis of social polarization in Russia during 1917, where they mention explicitly multiple times that the "urging of soldiers and Vyborg metalworkers ... that the Soviet take power [were] led by the Bolsheviks."⁴⁷ While indeed there was a degree of Bolshevik leadership, the Bolshevik leaders never joined the troops and

⁴⁴ Trotsky; Steinberg, p. 153; Kort, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Steinberg, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Kort, p. 104.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg, William G., and Diane P. Koenker. "The Limits of Formal Protest: Worker Activism and Social Polarization in Petrograd and Moscow." *The American Historical Review* 92.2 (1987): 296-326. Print. p. 315-6.

workers, as Trotsky's account and the Tauride Palace unrest attest.⁴⁸ None of these accounts provide any mention of the differing opinions within the Bolshevik parties, which perhaps allows the historians to simplify the situation in Russia to a conflict between the revolutionary Bolsheviks and the loyalist-leaning Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks.

Nevertheless, the primary sources available to modern scholars (such as the ones presented here) overwhelmingly support the conclusion that the movement was not organized beforehand by political leaders of any party, and that hesitation in the Bolshevik leadership is obvious.⁴⁹ Leading historian Mark Steinberg, in his *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, seems to have performed a more thorough review of these documents, and in contrast to his fellow historians, casts doubt upon the extent of Bolshevik involvement.⁵⁰ While he points out that there is "no disagreement [that] rank-and-file Bolshevik activists played a big role in these events [and that] many also looked to the party for leadership," the Central Committee including Lenin "evidently recognized that they still did not have enough support."⁵¹ Furthermore, Steinberg is correct in saying that a successful Bolshevik uprising in the name of the Soviet would place them "against the clearly voiced will of the Soviet leadership itself."⁵² In Steinberg's perspective, it was clearly disadvantageous for the Bolsheviks to seize power in July, despite "little doubt that the goal of overthrowing the Provisional Government was on the Bolshevik agenda."⁵³ Indeed, based on primary sources and Steinberg's reasoning, it is illogical to assume that the Bolshevik party formally led the July Days; instead, it seems reasonable that, despite the

⁴⁸ Trotsky; Boll, p. 1179-80; Steinberg, p. 152-3.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, p. 153-4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Steinberg, p. 154.

Bolsheviks being the only group not to actively protest the Petrograd demonstrations, the opposite is true.

Regardless, the press in July of 1917 found it to their advantage to print the simpler yet misleading version of the story, and accordingly Bolshevik support waned throughout Russia.⁵⁴ The reaction by the Provisional Government resulted in mass arrests of Bolshevik party leaders; Trotsky himself was imprisoned, while Lenin was forced to escape to Finland.⁵⁵ The military units involved in the July Days were disarmed and disbanded, and the Bolsheviks' Red Guard lost significant power. Kerensky rode this wave of support to become prime minister; the resigning Prime Minister Lvov proclaimed that "in order to save the country, it is now necessary to shut down the Soviet and shoot at the people."⁵⁷ Maxim Gorky observed that "everyone agrees that the Russian state is splitting all along its seams and falling apart like an old barge in a flood."⁵⁸ Indeed, widespread resentment of the Provisional Government reappeared among the working class and the military after the death penalty was restored for soldiers on the front; all street demonstrations were banned and military censorship of the press was reintroduced, effectively eliminating freedom of speech in Russia.⁵⁹ Given the events of the July Days, such a sharp reaction was a blunder that made the October Revolution inevitable. The protestors, who had been denied their demands and now were being severely repressed, had become extremely radicalized: to them, peaceful negotiation was no longer a possibility. Thus formed a crevasse in Russian politics; those who were impatient in July now were fully committed to a revolution, while the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries unwittingly signed

⁵⁴ Steinberg, p.154-5; Kort, p. 104-5; Feist, p. 194.

⁵⁵ Steinberg, p. 154-5.

⁵⁶ Kort, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Steinberg, p. 155-6.

⁵⁸ Steinberg, p. 155.

⁵⁹ Steinberg, p. 156-7.

themselves to eventual defeat by standing with the Provisional Government during these days.⁶⁰ Hopes for reform now became demands for revolution, and the people were determined to realize these demands; or, as Trotsky succinctly put it: "After the days of trial will come the days of progress and victory."⁶¹ Russia now was on the final road to revolution, one that would fundamentally and permanently alter Russian politics and culture.

⁶⁰ Steinberg, p. 157; Kort, p. 103.

⁶¹ Trotsky.

Bibliography

1. Boll, Michael M. "The Emergence of the Petrograd Red Guard (March-June 1917): A Study in the "Radicalization" of the Petrograd Proletariat." *The Journal of Modern History* 51.3 (1979): 1163-184. Print.
2. Chekalov, N. "Resolution on the July Days by Workers of the Shlisselburg Powder Works." Original publication date, 7/4/1917. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. By Mark Steinberg. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 182-83. Print.
3. Daly, Jonathan W., and Leonid Trofimov. *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: a Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2009. Print.
4. Feist, Joe M. "Railways and Politics: The Russian Diary of George Gibbs, 1917." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 62.3 (1979): 178-99. Print.
5. Kort, Michael. "The July Days." *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010. 103-05. Print.
6. Likhtenshtein, A., S. Dmitriev, P. Bogolomov, and R. Chernov. "Resolution by the Printing Workers of the Former Markus Press." Original publication date, 7/13/1917. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. By Mark Steinberg. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 186. Print.
7. Mudrov, I., and I. Smirnov. "Letter to All Citizens from Putilov Works (in Explanation of 3, 4, and 5 July)." Original publication date, 7/11/1917. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. By Mark Steinberg. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 187-88. Print.
8. Polkovsky, and Chvertko. "Resolution on the July Days by the Soldiers of the 22nd Railroad Battalion, 9 July 1917." Original publication date, 7/9/1917. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. By Mark Steinberg. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 201-02. Print.
9. Rosenberg, William G., and Diane P. Koenker. "The Limits of Formal Protest: Worker Activism and Social Polarization in Petrograd and Moscow." *The American Historical Review* 92.2 (1987): 296-326. Print.
10. Steinberg, Mark. "Crisis and Upheaval: From the July Days to Bolshevik Power." *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001. 149-57. Print.
11. Tereshchenko, Mikhail. "Russian Message to the Allies Following the July Days, July 19." *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History*. By Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov. Hackett, 2009. 93-94. Print.
12. Trotsky, Leon. "The July Uprising." *Leon Trotsky: The Struggle for State Power*. Marxists Internet Archive Library, 12 Sept. 2006. Web. 23 Feb. 2011.
<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/power/art04.htm>>.