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## One Hundred Years Ago: the Triumph of the February Revolution 1917

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In mid-February 1917, according to the Julian calendar of Russia, the authority of the tsarist autocracy held by a thread, frayed by hundreds of years of oppression of the Russian menu people. A chasm existed between the glamorous world of the landed aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie who lived well, and peasants and workers who struggled to survive in a merciless world of unremitting toil, sorrow and want, and whose only solace was offered by the Orthodox Church, acting as a shock absorber of the tsarist order. This chasm between the privileged, wealthy elite and the nether classes of the Russian peoples has prompted some historians to speak of two Russias: the one of shining light and culture; the other of darkness, struggle, and smouldering grievances.

In mid-February, or the beginning of March 1917, according to the western Gregorian calendar, these two worlds were about to confront one another. The principal stage of the first act of this confrontation was in Petrograd, formerly St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia, whose name had been changed at the beginning of the First World War, because it sounded too German. Petrograd itself was the perfect image of the two Russias. The central part of the city was the domain of the privileged classes, while the factory workers lived for the most part in the outer industrial suburbs. The wealth of the privileged was evident in the beautiful palaces of the aristocracy and royal family, the imposing government buildings, cathedrals, theatres, and the rich residential quarters of the well-to-do bourgeoisie. In the suburbs the Russian proletariat crowded into often filthy barracks and wooden hovels built up between soot covered factories launched during the first great surge of industrialisation toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The two Russias rarely mixed in Petrograd, except when workers ventured into the wealthy quarters as drozhki drivers, street cleaners or maids.

That was about to change. In 1914 Russia had gone to war with Imperial Germany, allied with France and Britain. The tsarist government could not cope with the extraordinary stresses of the war, which led to millions of casualties, disastrous military defeats, and economic chaos in the rear. Soldiers deserted the army in droves, while those who remained in the ranks were angry and mutinous. Workers too were at the breaking point. Prices for essential commodities inflated dramatically but not the wages to buy them. Food, coal for heating, clothing, even a room to live in, were dear or unobtainable.

The tsar's officials were aware of the dubious loyalty of the garrison troops in Petrograd. In December 1916 one regiment was sent away to avoid trouble. Some deputies in the Gerrymandered Russian legislative assembly, or Duma, recognised the precarious, explosive situation in Petrograd and in the country at large. But they were part of the Russia of Shining Light, and paralysed by fear of doing or saying anything which could provoke the dark-faced masses of the other Russia. All the tsarist government could think to do was find loyal troops to defend the capital against seemingly inevitable popular disorders.



*The French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, signaled the mounting danger to Paris*

Food shortages in the capital for the other Russia set off the revolutionary explosion. On 23 February, or 8 March (of the Gregorian calendar), it started. On that day which was International Women's Day, bread in Petrograd was almost unobtainable. Women waiting in long queues on a cold day had had enough and with striking men and women did the unthinkable. They crossed into that part of Petrograd where they almost never went except to serve the ruling elite. The bridges over the Neva were guarded, so they crossed over the river's thick ice. Instead of bowed heads of submission and brooms and brushes for cleaning, they held banners of the dreaded colour of red for revolution.



*Women waiting in long queues on a cold day had had enough and with striking men and women did the unthinkable*

By Saturday, 25 February, the movement had become general. Trams stopped running, students quit their classes at university, men and women downed tools and went into the streets of the Russia of Shining Light. «Can we do this?» they wondered. Their increasing numbers began to convince them that they could! And the tsarist elite, even the bourgeois deputies of the Duma, agreed. Martial law was declared and the tsar's gendarmes charged the crowds. Cossacks sent to help the police, instead of drawing their swords, dawdled on their horses and winked at the crowds.

The tsar, who was at army headquarters at Mogilev, south of Petrograd, telegraphed orders that on the morrow the «disorders» in the streets should be suppressed. The British ambassador who was on holidays in Finland rushed back to the capital. But what could he do, except send telegrams to London describing the sudden, terrifying collapse of the Romanov dynasty?

The French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, signaled the mounting danger to Paris. Duma stalwarts Pavel Miliukov, Aleksandr Guchkov and Vasili Maklakov warned that the situation was getting out of hand. These were Kadets and Octobrists of the Russia of Shining Light; they feared the masses and were never able to lead them.



*«We want bread and peace», the crowds chanted. In the workers' quarters people are in the streets and most of the factories have stopped working*

Socialists could take charge of the popular movement and lead a revolution, Paléologue warned in a telegram to Paris. There have been clashes in the streets; blood has been spilled. The spontaneity of the crowds and the speed with which the demonstrations launched, has frightened



the tsar's officials. «We want bread and peace», the crowds chanted. In the workers' quarters people are in the streets and most of the factories have stopped working.

The French military attaché later reported that during the shooting on 25 February a woman was seen to go to the aid of a wounded demonstrator, putting him on a sled. She cursed the soldiers and walked straight through their ranks. «How you can fire on your brothers?» she shouted at them. The shamed soldiers let her pass without a word said.

«There are no newspapers today», Paléologue signaled to Paris on Monday, 27 February: «it is difficult to know exactly what happened yesterday». The ambassador spoke briefly with Kadet deputy Maklakov. «We are now facing a political movement», Maklakov advised, «if we don't make prompt reforms, this movement will degenerate into riot and then from riot to revolution. It's not far».



*Most government ministers and officials have been arrested or have fled*

Too late Gospodin Maklakov. The Russia of Shining Light trembled in its death's rattle. On 26 February, one guards unit, the Volynsky, fired on the crowd, but then shamefaced, had gone back to its barracks declaring it would not do so again. Another unit, the Palovsky regiment, mutinied outright when ordered to shoot. On Tuesday, 28 February, the Preobrazhensky and Litvosky Guards regiments came out of their barracks and joined the revolution.

«The insurgents are masters of all the capital», Paléologue reported that day. The tsar, still at army headquarters, has given orders to one of his most decorated generals, N. I. Ivanov, to come to the capital «to re-establish order». Assuming he can get to Petrograd, the ambassador added, the general will find no loyal troops. Most government ministers and officials have been arrested or have fled.

On that same day, the head of the French military mission at Russian army headquarters, General Maurice Janin, signaled that the tsar had left for the capital. «I do not believe that [he] yet understands the situation. He left with the intention of breaking the resistance. Will he get [to the capital], and what will he find there if he does?» The chief of the general staff had tried to discourage the tsar, but to no avail. The brave General Ivanov, charged with the repression of the people, broke down in tears when he learned that there were no troops who would obey his orders.



*The soldiers of the tsar's army, had jumped their traces and felt the exhilarating sensation of revolt against the hated tsarist autocracy*

The tsar did not make it to the capital. If he had, he would have found the city had gone over to the revolution. In his last report at 22h00, on 28 February, Ambassador Paléologue reported that street fighting was continuing. Police stations are in flames, he wrote: intense shooting is going on around the service ministries. The «rioters» (émeutiers) are hunting down «traitors» and the tsar's gendarmes. *Mon Dieu*, how can this be? «The shooting is so intense in the streets around the embassy that it is difficult for me to obtain information and to send my telegrams to the central post office». The ambassador's trio of informants, this time no less than the president of the Duma, Mikhail Rodzianko, as well as Miliukov and Maklakov, «are completely disconcerted by the anarchistic role of the army». Koshmar! «This is not the way we foresaw the revolution», another informant said: «we were counting on the army».

«Today», Paléologue reported, «they [Rodzianko, et al.] no longer know how to re-impose discipline in the army». Nor would they ever be able to do so.



*In London, the foreign secretary, Lord Balfour, feared the terrifying spectre of «socialism and anarchy»*

The muzhiki, the soldiers of the tsar's army, had jumped their traces and felt the exhilarating sensation of revolt against the hated tsarist autocracy. They would never again pliantly take up the tsar's yoke. On 27 February, some socialists and trade unionists re-established a Soviet on the model of the 1905 Revolution. The Soviet of Workers' Deputies met for the first time that evening. In the following months Soviets, assemblies of popular self-government, would be set up across the country. On 28 February, as Ambassador Paléologue was reporting to Paris, the Petrograd Soviet came to terms with deputies of the Duma to form a Provisional Government, composed of members of the landed aristocracy and the bourgeois elite. The only member of the government, who called himself a socialist, was Aleksandr Kerensky, a so-called Trudovik, a *faux* socialist and blow-hard, who did not and could not represent the revolutionary mass movement any more than could Rodzianko, Guchkov or Miliukov. Their job would be to contain the revolution, and then stop it, making the soldiers go back to the front to continue the Allied war against Germany.

In London, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, being reminded of the French Revolution, warned of the «dangers» of «socialism and anarchy» in Russia. We have got to get our «socialists»—he meant Labourites and trade unionists—talking to Russian socialists to make them see reason. The French reaction was the same. «It would be of great value», Paléologue telegraphed to Paris, «if the French Socialist Party immediately addressed an appeal to the patriotism of Russian socialists for a continuation of the war to the end». These were the same French socialists who before 1914 had declared they would oppose an imperialist world war, and then had rolled over like docile pet dogs when the first «patriotic» calls for mobilisation were issued. The dog's whistle of patriotism might work with some socialists in Petrograd, but not with others whose names had yet to appear in French and British telegrams sent home. The governing elites in Paris and London expected the new Provisional Government to contain the

revolutionary movement and to keep Russia in the war. This was what France and Britain meant by «democracy» in Russia.



*The workers and soldiers of Petrograd had brought down the tsar, whose forebears had ruled Russia for three hundred years*

In the meantime, the tsar, who had wanted to repress the street demonstrations in the capital, no longer had the power even to command a train to Petrograd. He got as far as Pskov, southeast of the capital, and just as well too. In Petrograd and other places, soldiers were settling old scores with hated officers and gendarmes. Miliukov and others in the Duma wanted to save the dynasty by establishing a constitutional monarchy, but the revolution had already gone too far for that. On 2 March only a few days after declaring his intention to repress the demonstrations in Petrograd, «the emperor and autocrat of all Russia» abdicated.

*Svershilos'*, it was done. The revolution had taken its first steps. The workers and soldiers of Petrograd had brought down the tsar, whose forebears had ruled Russia for three hundred years. They had done it in seven days. The Duma elite of the Russia of Shining Light tried to organise a Provisional Government in the name of «democracy» to halt the revolution and to establish a «parliament» along western lines. The workers would be made to return to their soot-covered factories and the soldiers to their stinking trenches. Those who refused would be walked to the gallows or shot as in 1905 and the following years. The war would continue and wartime discipline would stop the «anarchy» in Petrograd and elsewhere.

If the Russian peasant and working classes had been mere passive bystanders to the February Revolution, it might have turned out the way Miliukov, Rodzianko, and their colleagues had intended. But the women, soldiers and workers in Petrograd who overthrew the tsar, were not passive witnesses. It was not just a circumstantial fluke that brought down the Romanovs.



Workers and soldiers had taken their future into their own hands in the name of their Russia. No one was sure where that future would lead, or to whom the masses would turn for leadership. Only time would tell who could command their loyalty.