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June 18 - On Soldiers' Discontent and Order No. I

Order No. I was issued to the Russian public on March 1st 1917 by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Its basic tenets were simple: political representation for soldiers, expansion of soldiers' civil liberties and protection of the soldier's dignity vis-à-vis their officers. In other words, "... Order No. I amounted to a charter of soldiers' power and rights"¹. More importantly, it set up the Petrograd Soviet as the de facto political authority over soldiers, authority that revolutionary soldiers welcomed as demonstrated in the Resolution of the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment of June 18th. It can be argued that this deferment of authority to the Petrograd Soviet and its consequences undermined the Provisional Governments' authority as evidenced in mid-1917 literature like the aforementioned soldiers' Resolution.

First and foremost Order No. I redefined soldier-officer relations in the Russian army. It instituted the protection of soldiers' dignity via explicit abolishment of "titles for officers", "Rude behavior [towards officers]" and "the use of the familiar

¹ Mark Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 68

‘you’ ... [in addressing soldiers of lower rank]”.² It also extended soldiers’ civil liberties in stating that:

“... outside service and line duties in their political, civic and private lives soldiers cannot in the slightest manner be deprived of those rights which are enjoyed by any citizen”.³

This extension of rights to soldiers served to entrench the Petrograd Soviet’s moral authority in the minds of revolutionary soldiers; they were already seeing the fruit of the February Revolution. More importantly however, Order No. 1 established the Petrograd Soviet as the political authority over soldiers’ both in the spirit and the letter of the document. As regards the former, the order was a welcome and benevolent revolution in soldier’s working conditions and liberties as already explained; as regards the latter, the order established a rather informal form of political control over soldiers’ representation and concerns. Soldiers were to “elect committees of selected representatives” to the Petrograd Soviet.⁴ They were also, as military units, “... subordinate to the Petrograd Soviet” and were to obey the orders of the Military Commission as long as they did not “... contradict orders and decisions ...” of the Petrograd Soviet.⁵ These three key statements of the Petrograd Soviet’s authority over all soldiers presented a *fait accompli* to the Provisional Government in terms of where

² “Order No. 1” (1st March 1917) in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 33

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33

soldiers' allegiance lay in political matters. Henceforth, soldiers would direct their grievances and resolutions to the Petrograd Soviet or the appointed committees.

It is therefore no surprise that the Resolution of the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment of June 18th issued at a meeting of the soldiers two days prior conveyed a deep sense of soldiers' deference to the Petrograd Soviet. The Resolution demands that, "... the All-Russian Soviet of Soldiers', Workers', and Peasants' Deputies seize all power."⁶ Another equally unequivocal statement of the soldiers' allegiance is the emphatic assertion that the Provisional Government has done nothing to advance the gains of the February Revolution and should in fact step down. The soldiers say:

"... [Has] anything good been done for our revolution by our rulers ... no, nothing. We consider the fault for all this to be ... in particular those ten bourgeois who now sit in the ministry ...we hotly protest any kind of bourgeois ministry, and we demand that the ten bourgeois make way."⁷

This excerpt captures the fact that unlike March, when Order No. 1 was released amidst a mood of excitement for the February Revolution, June was a much more somber month in 1917 Russia with the air rife with criticism of the Provisional Government from all revolutionary quarters. In particular, revolutionary soldiers

⁶ "Resolution of the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment" (18th June 1917) in Mark Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 125

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125

viewed the Provisional Government as a class enemy to the revolution as evidenced by the reference to the 'ten bourgeois' ministers.

In this Resolution of June 18th, the soldiers further complain, "We see the rich lining their pockets from this criminal war..."⁸ in alluding to the bourgeoisie's support for Russia's involvement in World War I. The Provisional Government insisted on pursuing the war to its bitter conclusion as a show of solidarity with Russia's Western allies. This position did not resonate with most revolutionary soldiers' interests. It was considered by and large by the soldiers as a means to protect and advance the bourgeoisie's classical class interests of profiteering from the backs of the lower and larger classes. It therefore alienated the Provisional Government from soldiers whose heightened sense of despondency with the war caused distrust of the Provisional Government as the legitimate guardian of the revolution, further undermining its authority and augmenting that of the Petrograd Soviet.

The soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment elaborate on their sense of despondency by saying, "Our most crucial issues have not been resolved at all yet, the slaughter continues ..." ⁹. This despondency was the result of ever-worsening starvation and astronomical growth in the number of fallen soldiers at the war frontlines. It was not uncommon for soldiers to express such deep

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125

sympathy for their fellow soldiers, peasants in the same social class as them, being recruited and sent to the frontlines barely trained or equipped to handle the very capable German troops. The soldiers' outcry was against disenfranchisement by the ruling class, the bourgeois Provisional Government, who were not directly involved in the conflict, yet were adamantly in support of it. How could Russian soldiers respect the authority of a government indifferent to their welfare but instead concerned with maintaining international alliances?

They could not and they did not. In fact, so irreverent were the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment to the Provisional Government and the class they represented that in their closing remark they wrote:

“We will die, but we will vanquish the most accursed,
the most evil of our enemies – the bourgeoisie.”¹⁰

For revolutionary soldiers, this meant doing away with the Provisional Government even if the price was as steep as death.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125