

Uncontrolled Demonstrations during the July Days

Alexander Kerensky, the Provisional Government's Minister of War, urged the armed forces to make an offensive move against the Germans on the Galician front in June 1917. The resulting total failure of the attack had a destructive effect on morale in the Russian Army. In addition, successful German counter-attacks and the news of land seizures caused mass desertion of soldiers.¹ The resignation of the head of the Provisional Government and the withdrawal of the Cadet ministers at the beginning of July were followed by the street demonstrations known as the July Days. Although the demonstrations of 3-5 July were a great opportunity for the Bolsheviks to reach their goals, the lack of control over the crowd led to negative results as the Bolsheviks were blamed for the July Days by the Provisional Government and partially by the Soviet Executive Committee.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, a great orator and one of the notable Bolsheviks in the events of 1917, was also involved in the July Days. In a letter to his wife on July 5, he explains why the Bolsheviks did not achieve the changes they desired. According to Lunacharsky, "Black Hundreds, hooligans, provocateurs, anarchists and desperate people turned the demonstrations into something largely absurd and chaotic."² He claims he foresaw this because the crowd of half a million people was hard to control. According to Lunacharsky, Lenin and Trotsky knew the possible consequences of the movements, but still gave in to "spontaneity" in order to overturn the dual power.³ However, he nonetheless expresses a

1 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (2008), p. 57.

2 "From a letter by A.V.Lunacharsky to his wife" (5 July 1917, Petrograd), RGASPI, fond 142, opis' 1, delo 12, pp. 66-67; reprinted in Edward Acton and Tom Stableford, *The Soviet Union: A Document History*, v. 1 (Exeter, 2005), pp. 27-28.

3 Acton and Stableford, eds., *The Soviet Union: A Document History*, v. 1 (2005), p. 27.

belief that it was just to fight against anarchists' sporadic commands to mount offensives, which were exacerbated by the difficult social and economic conditions of Petrograd's lower classes.

Lunacharsky claims the proletariat and the revolution were perishing.⁴ He implies that lack of education of the masses was one of the reason why the demonstration turned into chaos. Since the mass did not have a clear goal and organization, anarchists and others were able to manipulate the crowd. As a possible solution, he assumes the masses should be educated in order to help the revolution. However, he concludes that it will not be easy because Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders agree only in words, not in deeds.⁵

Although the movement showed that the Bolsheviks had huge support, its consequences affected the Bolsheviks negatively. First of all, the Bolsheviks were blamed for the July days. Lenin and the other leaders had to go into hiding, and the pro-Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* was banned.⁶ Moreover, the Provisional Government now claimed that it had evidence proving that Lenin was a German agent.⁷ This, though temporarily, weakened the support from the workers and soldiers.

The endorsement of the weakly organized movement harmed the Bolsheviks, who sought to overturn the government. They lost their popularity among the proletariat, and the leaders had to flee. However, the effects of the failed movement were only temporary since a revolution was inevitable due to the crowd's attitude toward the Provisional Government.

4 "From a letter by A.V.Lunacharsky to his wife" (5 July 1917, Petrograd)

5 Ibid.

6 Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (1999), p. 42.

7 For more details, see Nikita Khlystov, "The Flame That Turned Into a Fire: An Analysis of the July Days, 1917," p.8; <http://web.mit.edu/russia1917/papers/0703-TheFlameThatTurnedIntoAFire.pdf>.

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Even though the government survived the July crisis, it yet had to face the Kornilov Affair and the October Revolution.

Works Cited

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