

The spring of 1917 was a time of monumental change for Russia. The long-standing oppressive Romanov dynasty had fallen and Imperialist Russia had effectively come to an end. In its place, a new political system jointly run by the Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies was erected. The overjoyed Russian citizens believed their nation had experienced a rebirth. In the midst of this political revolution, soldiers remained in the trenches fighting against the central powers in World War I. Severe supply shortages, horrible treatment from officers, and the constant fear of death caused soldiers to question this new regime that they had once celebrated. Propaganda proliferated, and soldiers accused government officials of being German spies. Fraternization and desertion became commonplace. Ultimately, the ineffective political system of dual power was unable to remedy any of the deep-rooted problems in the Russian military, resulting in its further destabilization.

In truth, this intense discontent among Russian soldiers was not a new development. Many soldiers had loathed the Romanov dynasty, but speaking out against the government and military was seen as treason, so few accounts detailing soldiers' injustices existed. Complaints that were sent to the government were done so anonymously, so that the soldier's identity would remain protected. On December 15, 1912, the newspaper *Russkii invalid* announced that the discharge of Russia's active-duty soldiers would be delayed for six months. Soldiers were outraged that officials believed that "not a single ordinary soldier will be offended that he will have to serve a few extra months for the glory of the Russian army."¹ One soldier reveals the hatred with which he regards his service in the army, lamenting that "day after day, since I entered the military service, I have been cursing the day I was born," and that his commanding

¹ "Anonymous Letter by a Soldier" (December 22, 1913), in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History, doc. 12 p. 5

officer regularly “beat all human feelings out of me... just because he has a right to.”²

The February Revolution was viewed as a celebrated release from the yoke of the oppressive monarchy, inspiring sentiments of brotherhood and nationalism among Russian soldiers. Soldiers now had meaningful causes to fight for, as they wanted to protect their new state. Soldiers at the front declared that only “for such a homeland can one die in peace, conscious of a duty fulfilled.”³ Delegates from the 8th Siberian Rifle Division appealed to soldiers, workers, and Russian citizens to “not dishonor themselves from a shameful peace,” and recognized that “discord and disagreement will lead us to defeat and the restoration of the overthrown order.”⁴ The delegates appealed to soldiers’ fears by reminding them of the possibility of a return to monarchy if they did not fully support the new war effort. They acknowledged the two strengths of the Russian army to be “the discipline of the troops and the talent of our military leaders.”⁵ Ironically, it was the former that was soon severely disrupted as morale declined.

Although the “beautiful sun of freedom”⁶ that rose from the revolution inspired soldiers, within a month after the February Revolution, they began showing signs of disenchantment with the war effort. They felt that this new sun had “begun first to be obscured by fluffy clouds, then by storm clouds, and now by sinister thunderclouds that could block it out and hide it completely.”⁷ Several factors contributed to their deep unhappiness, and there was much disagreement over who was to blame. In a furious tirade to Chairman Nikolay Chkheidze of the

² Ibid.

³ Soldiers of the administration of the 17th Mortar Artillery Division, “Telegram to the Executive Committee of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies” (March 9, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 21, p. 106

⁴ 8th Siberian Rifle Division, “Appeal to soldiers, workers, and other citizens of Russia” (March 16, 1917), in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 23, p. 107-108

⁵ 8th Siberian, “Appeal,” in Steinberg, Voices, p. 107

⁶ “Sick and injured Russian warriors,” Letter to Chkheidze (March 31, 1917), in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 26, p. 110.

⁷ Ibid., p. 111

Soviet of Workers' Deputies, a group of "sick and injured Russian warriors" castigated him and the Petrograd Soviet for causing the disintegration of the Russian army, and charged them with being "overt German spies and provocateurs."⁸ The soldiers were incensed because they risked their lives fighting at the front, and felt the war was not justified. They did not believe themselves to be traitors to the country, but rather, fortunate for being the "lucky descendants of our grandfathers and fathers,"⁹ holding a deep reverence for their homeland. They accused the Petrograd Soviet of betraying Russia and framed them as the enemy. The sharp-tongued soldiers played on the theme of good versus evil, and by calling themselves "warriors,"¹⁰ they asserted themselves as the true virtuous heroes of their country. While the soldiers were anti-Bolshevik, they also remained vehemently opposed to autocratic rule. The Bolsheviks, and Lenin in particular, claimed that the goal of socialism was to make everyone equal, but these soldiers believed it was merely a thin veil for a secret plan to make everyone subordinate to the Bolshevik leaders.

What is interesting about this letter to Chkheidze is that it reflects a different viewpoint than what was commonly held by Russian soldiers. Indeed, many soldiers thought the system of dual power was ineffective. However, most people blamed the Provisional Government, not the Petrograd Soviet. Rather than trying to coexist, the two governments were engaged in a power struggle. For instance, "Order No.1," mandated by the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, was the most bold and transparent attempt of the Petrograd Soviet to assert its authority over the Provisional Government and render it an incomplete state. It mandated that all "military units are subordinate to the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies" and that "orders of the Military Commission of the State Duma must be obeyed, except when they

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 110

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 110

contradict orders and decisions of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies,"¹¹ directly undermining the power of the Provisional Government. These laws, which were put into effect before the "Russian warriors" wrote to Chkheidze, are likely one of the main causes of their anger. However, within the same proclamation, soldiers are granted many new freedoms that they did not enjoy before. More respect was given to the soldiers, as they no longer had to call their commanding officers by titles, and officers were no longer permitted to show rude behavior or use the familiar "you" when addressing soldiers. This law was made in response to complaints of soldiers being abused by their officers, in which the soldiers claim the "gentlemen officers are issuing punishments just as they always have and are not giving us any of the freedom that our brothers have won."¹² Overall, while providing soldiers with new freedoms, this mandate primarily served to further deteriorate the government's control of the army and weaken Russia's military might.

The regiments of soldiers were very isolated on the war front, and thus were disconnected from the political system. Most of what they learned was from hearsay, and propaganda was rampant. These limitations, combined with the ghastly conditions they endured on a daily basis, made them extremely susceptible to influence from others, often resulting in the formation of radical ideas. The "Russian warriors" had adopted an elaborate conspiracy theory accusing the Petrograd Soviet of being puppets of the Germans, and accused them of having "prepared in advance for the event of revolution by treating entire bands of well-organized people who worked fearless... in the State Duma... and it was these bands, under [the Soviet's] leadership,

¹¹ The Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, "Order No. 1" (March 2, 1917), in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and the Fall of the Soviet Union*, doc. 2.1 p. 33

¹² Soldiers of the 61st Siberian Rifle Regiment, "Letter to the Petrograd Soviet" (March 18, 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 24, p.108

that took the Russian revolution into their own traitorous hands in one fell swoop.”¹³ However, this theory is not completely unfounded, as secret police had long existed within the Russian government and police force (for example, the Okhrana). The soldiers also make a direct reference to Lenin’s questionable source of funding, and point out that the Petrograd Soviet is now “conducting an underground, traitorous, hypocritical tactic using the same German money.”¹⁴ There was extreme distrust in the Petrograd Soviet, and these soldiers believed its sole purpose was to “dig a grave for the Russian people as quickly as possible.”¹⁵ To them, it was the Provisional Government that was “crystal-pure”¹⁶ and most closely aligned itself with the wishes of the masses. It is somewhat surprising that these soldiers held the Provisional Government in such high regard, as it was often accused of being ineffective and being too closely tied with the former tsarist regime.

While these soldiers were opponents of Lenin, Lenin was extremely successful in garnering the support of thousands of other soldiers. One vehicle through which Lenin gained momentum for his impending revolution was through the April Theses. In it, he called for power to be transferred to both the proletariat and the poor. He openly supported fraternization, which was denounced by the government, calling for a “really democratic, non-oppressive peace”¹⁷. He criticized the Provisional Government, denouncing it as imperialistic, and concluded that the “Soviet of Workers’ Deputies is the only possible form of revolutionary government.”¹⁸ Furthermore, he called for the abolition of the police, the army, and the bureaucracy, insisting that every person be armed instead. Despite his radical ideas, Lenin was one of the only people

¹³ “Sick and Injured,” Letter, in Steinberg, *Voices*, p. 111

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Vladimir Lenin, “April Theses” (April 4, 1917), in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and the Fall of the Soviet Union*, doc. 2.2 p. 34

¹⁸ Lenin, “April,” in Sakwa, *Rise*, p. 34

to directly address the problems that the peasants were suffering from, unlike the government, and he called for an end to the increasingly unpopular war, which he labeled as an extension of capitalism.

Fraternization, or inappropriate formation of social relations with the enemy, became rampant during the springtime and severely crippled the power of the Russian army. Trench warfare was brutal, and by springtime, most soldiers had grown weary and lost all energy to continue fighting, especially after losing thousands of fellow soldiers on the battlefield. During the months of March through May, there were several reports by Colonel Bazarevskii of both successful and failed fraternization attempts. Initially, it was the Germans who attempted to initiate conversation and suggested peace by carrying white flags. The standard response to these attempts was rifle and machine-gun fire by the Russian troops. However, in a few incidents, the Germans exchanged bread and sausages with the Russians, and once on the sector of the 21st Corps, three Russian soldiers took a boat intending to visit the Germans, “but turned back following admonitions and threats on the part of their comrades.”¹⁹ A more personal account of Russian soldiers’ attempts at fraternization is detailed in “Fraternization on the Western Front.” In this particular incident, the Kara regiment waited in the trenches watching the Germans for several days—neither one initiated fire against the other. Feelings in the air were tense, although soldiers tested the waters by walking out into the neutral zone. Finally, they met with each other, and although they could not speak each other’s language, the Russians read the Germans’ eyes and took their “tears of joy” as a sign of conciliation. Soon, everyone exchanged handshakes. The Russians treated their “recent enemies” to tobacco, and in a slap to the Russian government’s face, used “newspapers with appeals from the Provisional

¹⁹ Colonel Bazarevskii, “Excerpts from a report on fraternization at the front between March 1 and May 1, 1917”, in Robert Paul Browder and Alexander Kerensky, eds., The Russian Provisional Government, 1917, doc. 793 p. 902.

Government: 'War to the victorious end!''²⁰ as rolling paper. In their second fraternization, they had interpreters and wrote a treaty, which mandated several orders banning the soldiers from firing at each other.

Lenin openly embraced this situation. He published an article "On the Meaning of Fraternization," in which he contended that fraternization was "a road to peace" and "the revolutionary initiative of the masses."²¹ He sympathized with the soldiers and said that he understood why they cursed the war. He concluded that fraternization was not enough, and that the solution was "transfer of all state power to the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies."²²

Government officials were extremely unhappy with this development. In an order of General Gurko concerning fraternization, the general called such associations unacceptable and claimed that Germans were using these meetings to "determine with the utmost accuracy the whole grouping of our troops, the entire disposition of our forces."²³ He believed that Germans would benefit from a temporary peace with the Russians so that they could focus fully on defeating the French and English, before returning in full force to defeat the Russians. Indeed, it only took a few short months before both the army and government completely disintegrated.

The Russian government lost its credibility with the Russian army after it failed to meet its promises of change to the soldiers. While new legislation such as Order No. 1 signaled signs of improvement, these changes were largely unsubstantial. The country remained in a state of distress, as soldiers continued to suffer from a deficiency of supplies and horrific conditions on the battlefield. Both the Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers'

²⁰ "Fraternization on the Western Front" (April 1917), in Daly and Trofimov, doc. 36 p. 86

²¹ Vladimir Lenin, "The meaning of fraternization" (April 28, 1917), in Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian*, doc. 795, p. 904

²² *Ibid.*

²³ General Gurko, "Order of General Gurko concerning fraternization" (April 23, 1917), in Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian*, doc. 794 p. 903

Deputies bickered constantly, each one attempting to undermine the power of the other. Perhaps if there had been a single source of power, decisions would have been made more quickly, effectively, and transparently. Soldiers had seen no clear end in sight to the war, and the government failed to generate a reason powerful enough to keep the soldiers fighting. These multiple problems ultimately culminated in the severe destabilization of the Russian army, leaving the Russian state extremely vulnerable.