

The Psychological Front: The Fight for Russian Military Power (April-May 1917)

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"Give 'em all the same grub and all the same pay/And the war would be over and done in a day."
- Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet On The Western Front*, Ch. 3

While the abdication of the Czar was favored by commissioned and non-commissioned soldiers alike, the loss of the senior leader dismantled the chain of command, redefining the loyalty of a military spread thin between a foreign war and civil unrest. The nascent provisional government claimed jurisdiction over the troops, but lacked the established authority to command soldiers. Tainted by association with the Czar, police lost credibility and were unable to control the angry mobs, leaving the military to maintain order in the streets. Whoever controlled law enforcement controlled the laws. Therefore, within the turbulence of the power vacuum, winning the favor of the military was of paramount importance to anyone desiring to govern Russia. This paper will examine the tactics used by the various players competing for the loyalty of the armed forces, and will argue that by the end of the October revolution, Bolsheviks were able to commandeer military power by superior propaganda techniques and by sharing goals that aligned with the self-interest of the masses of non-commissioned soldiers.

In 1914, five months into WWI, 400,000 Russian soldiers were dead—roughly the same number of Americans that died from total US involvement in WWII. Most of the Russians dying were peasants or workers, drafted from the lower classes. By 1915, Russia's resources were so limited that they were sending soldiers to the front unarmed and without proper provisions (Wildman, 1980). One soldier later recalls in a letter to his state Duma representative,

Chkheidze, "There [were] no machine guns or other weapons at the front, but in [the] tyrant's nest there was a machine gun at every window, and they armed all guards with the latest weapons."¹ Starvation and disease were also rampant. These hard times weakened the soldiers' loyalty to the Czar and sowed a bitterness that would later resurface as animosity towards other forms of authority. Although the plight of soldiers improved by 1916 due to success on the front and advancements in Russia's industrial capabilities, the will of the soldiers had already been broken. Unruliness and breaches in military discipline occurred with increased frequency, and disillusioned soldiers were fleeing the battlefield in the thousands.

Although the majority of soldiers stayed to fight, the loyalty of many of them was questioned when Czar Nicholas ordered them to fire on the protesting mobs of civilians. During the February Revolution, soldiers made minimal efforts to defend the throne because the majority of the military wanted Nicholas II's reign to end. Indeed, the shaky foundation of the new government, the hostile public sentiment to all authority in general, and the exhaustion of fighting an unpopular and underfunded war made many soldiers reluctant to follow orders from their superiors. This disruption of power made the non-commissioned soldiers more vulnerable to the influence than they would have been with a clearly established authority, and so the Central Powers, the Provisional Government, the commissioned officers, and the Bolsheviks all fought desperately to obtain or maintain control of the enlisted soldiers.

The Central Powers knew morale among the Russians was low and wanted the Russian Provisional Government to surrender or retract their declaration of war as soon as possible. Out of all the Allied Forces, Russia shared the largest border with Germany and Austria-Hungary. If Russia relinquished its assault, the Central Powers could focus their attention on their western

¹ "Letter to Chkheidze from Soldier to Workers Transport Repair Workshop" (April 3, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, 1917, doc. 28, p. 115

front. With this in mind, Austria-Hungary and Germany made efforts to deplete the already war weary Russian soldiers' will to fight. One example of this was the upsurge in fraternization between Russian and Austrian troops². Along with this, soldiers were subjected to peace propaganda from Central powers. A letter from soldiers of the 64th infantry division to Minister of War, Aleksandr Guchkov embodies the sentiment felt among many Russian soldiers on the front: "we should not strike each other, just as they, Austrians, daily broadcast from their trench to ours; 'Russia, don't fire, let's have peace!' And it's true, we do need peace."³

The Central Powers further encouraged public resistance of authority by allowing the radical Bolshevik instigator, Vladimir Lenin, safe travel through Germany, so that he could proselytize his gospel of dissent on Russian soil. Bolsheviks and other leftist groups were already making bold calls for peace, brokering fraternization sessions and saturating the army with communist propaganda against the war and the Provisional-Government. The soldiers greeted the Provisional Government with both optimism and uncertainty. Countless letters were written to the state Duma and the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' thanking them for ending the Czar's reign. An emblematic example of this is demonstrated through a letter from Sergeant Ia. Mazur of the Soldiers of the Mortar Artillery Division, "On behalf of soldiers of the Mortar Artillery Division, I beg to express to the Soviet of Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies, in your person, our deep gratitude for the freedom you have won for us."⁴

Within the newly forming government, a fierce battle over ideals escalated, and skirmishes over power between the Duma and the Soviets ensued. In March, the Soviet of

²F. Zakharin, "Fraternization on the Western Front" (April 1917), in Trofimov, J. D. (2009). *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922 A Documentary History*. Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc.

³" Letter to Minister of War Aleksandr Guchkov from Soldiers of the 64th Infantry Division" (April 13, 1917) Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 30, p. 117

⁴ "Letter to Soviet from Sergeant Ia. Mazur on behalf of Soldiers of the Mortar Artillery Division" (April 11, 1917) , in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc.29 p.117

Workers' and Soldiers' boldly instated Order No. 1, claiming total jurisdiction over the military. "In all their political actions military units are subordinate to the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and their committees...Orders of the military commission of the state Duma must be obeyed, except when they contradict orders and decisions of The Soviet of Workers' and Soldier's Deputies."⁵ This power move won favor with non-commissioned soldiers by establishing radically egalitarian rules of military conduct. The amount of authority officers commanded was significantly reduced: "all types of arms like rifles, machine-guns, armored vehicles and others must be at the disposal and under the supervision of company and battalion committees and in no case to be given to officers even when they ask for them." Major decisions that traditionally had been made by commanding officers had to now be ratified by the soldiers' committees. Along with this, respectful addresses to high ranking officers and subjugating addresses to soldiers were replaced with mandatory addresses that suggested a relationship closer to mutual status. Ironically, the Soviet's grab for power weakened its control over the military. With the chain of command upside in a state of decay, orders mandated from superiors were marginalized into weak suggestions. An intelligence report summarizing the conditions on the front describes widespread "refusals to carry out orders, [and] threats to the commanding personnel."⁶

Eventually, many enlisted soldiers grew disillusioned with the provisional government over the latter's support of the war effort. The Czar entered the war intending to disarm

⁵ "Order No. 1" (March 2nd 1917) in Sakwa, R. (2001). *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Doc. 2.1 p.32

⁶ "Condition of the Troops in the Rear" Siegelbaum, L. (2010). *Revolution in the Army*. Retrieved February 21, 2010, from Seventeen Moments in Soviet History: <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1917armyrevolt&Year=1917>

Germany's military power, annex the lower reaches of River Neman, Galicia, part of Silesia, and relieve pressure on the western front for Allied Forces. The Provisional Government saw similar benefits in the Czar's war and continued the endeavor with even higher ambition. Since much of the unrest that fueled the revolution was caused by an unpopular and expensive war, many soldiers were hoping the new government would end the fighting as soon as possible. These hopes were crushed in April of 1917 when the Bolsheviks intercepted Foreign Minister Miliukov's Note, a telegram to the Allied Forces proclaiming the new government's war efforts and Russia's new desire to also annex Turkish Armenia and Constantinople and its environs (Sakwa, 2001). The Bolshevik propaganda machine spread word of the government's intentions throughout Russia, inciting a new distrust of the provisional government. Foreign minister Miliukov resigned soon after to distance himself from the vulnerable provisional government, but the damage had already been done. The masses began to view the government with cynicism and look towards the Bolsheviks for hope.

The Bolshevik challenge to the provisional government had begun in early April, before Miliukov's Note, with Lenin's April Thesis. By early April, World War One had taken the lives of 775,400 Russian soldiers, wounded 348,000 and left 3,343,900 prisoners of war (Sakwa, 2001). Over seven million men, half of the able men of working age, were serving in the military. Rapid inflation upset economy in war-torn regions near the front, and military order was rapidly decaying due to war exhaustion, bad nourishment, disease, and distrust of officers. The masses, military and civilian alike, wanted to end the war, but few of the top government officials were seriously considering this option. Previously, Lenin was considered a fringe radical whose ideas were too extreme for the other members of his extremist Bolshevik party. His April Thesis is considered by many historians (Daly and Trominov, 2009) to be the turning

point that legitimized his views, spurring members from the Soviets to begin following his cause. On April 4th, at the All-Russian Conference of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers', Lenin released the blueprints for ending the war and inciting a socialist revolution, "to explain the inseparable connection between capital and the imperialist war, to prove that without the overthrow of capital it is *impossible* to conclude the war with a really democratic, non-oppressive peace... This view is to be widely propagated among the army units in the field. Fraternization."⁷ Lenin's call to action was popular because it called for an end to an unpopular war and clearly stated a revolutionary mission which gave an impression of order. The current democratic government was disorganized and lacked a clear direction. Many Russians wanted the order of a powerful leader who was not tainted by association with the Czar and could provide much needed direction.

On the front, Bolsheviks had unleashed a propaganda offensive on the minds of soldiers. A prevailing feeling at the front was summarized in a letter to representative Chkheidze from Soldiers of the 2nd Battery Assembly, Caucas army, "We are all peasant farmers, workers, or employees... Our lack of enlightenment and our economic impotence allowed the ever powerful and rich to exploit our labor. This corrupted our whole life." ⁸ Most enlisted soldiers were uneducated, and many wanted ways to educate themselves. Bolsheviks provided education through communist literature and other publications. This proved to be a very effective tactic. An intelligence report ("Condition of the Troops in the Rear" (October 13, 1917) in Siegelbaum,

⁷ "Lenin's 'April Thesis'" (April 4th 1917) Trofimov, J. D. (2009). *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922 A Documentary History*. Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc. p. 70 Doc. 28

⁸ "Letter to Chkheidze from Soldiers of the 2nd Battery Assembly, Caucas army" (April 3, 1917) in Steinberg, M. D. (2001). *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

2010) claimed that by October “Those who read moderate [non-socialist] newspapers are looked upon as "bourgeoisie" and "counter-revolutionists.””

While the enlisted soldiers were being wooed by the Bolsheviks, the commanding officers mostly remained loyal to the provisional government. However, with their credibility damaged by association with the Czar and their authority greatly reduced from Order No. 1, their voice was weak. The overall opinion of officers was elegantly voiced in a written appeal to all soldiers of the 12th Army from the 186th Artillery Division on May 4, 1917:

The time is not far off when the German hordes, having beaten our allies, will be thrown back to our front... We will end the war then... we will end it not as free citizens, master of the Russian land, [but] as slaves to the bloody emperor Willhelm... The country is experiencing a severe economic crisis. The moment is coming when the homeland will be in no condition to give us food and ammunition. It will be 1915 all over again, and the enemy will drive us out, hungry, unclothed and unarmed... Thirty-four months of suffering and the millions of lives of our fathers and brothers demand demands two to three months of concerted effort so we can be free-- otherwise it will be inaction and slavery... The blood of our brothers has still not dried on those fields where we fought, and it calls out to us... It begs us to defend our freedom. But we are silent... We were strong when we were slaves. We fought like lions when we were surrounded by betrayal, but now that we are free, we have become weak, like rebellious slaves... No, comrades. Let the whole world know that this is wrong.⁹

The officers’ calm reasoning of self sacrifice for the greater good could not compete with the loud, self-serving promises of the Bolsheviks. The troops were weary of “self-sacrifice,” and the identity of the “greater good” was in a state of shapeless metamorphosis.

Out of the competing forces, the Bolsheviks won the favor of the enlisted soldiers. Unlike the provisional government and commissioned officers who argued for the welfare of the

⁹ Chairman, Vice Chairmen, and Secretaries of the General Assembly, “Appeal to all soldiers of the 12th Army from the 186th Artillery Division” (May 4, 1917) in Steinberg. *Voices*, doc. 32, p.120

Russian nation, the Bolsheviks argued for the welfare of the Russian people. The soldiers wanted books; the communists gave them communist literature. The soldier's wanted peace; the Bolsheviks promised peace. The soldier's felt residual anger towards the elites that had mistreated them; the Bolshevik's promised to turn the hierarchy upside down. The Bolsheviks promised bread and land to starving soldiers who owned very little. In the chaos of the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks won the favor of the soldiers by shouting the loudest and aligning their interests with the interests of the people they hoped to command.

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