

Worker Support of the Bolshevik Party in July 1917

After the ousting of Tsar Nicholas II in February of 1917,¹ the Russian people might be forgiven for thinking that the revolution had run its course. The tumultuous months that followed, however, quickly revealed that the revolution had just begun, with many political groups vying to fill the power vacuum. In particular, the months of April and May saw the Bolshevik party beginning to gain strength and popular support, being best positioned to tap into the building desire for action by the proletariat. However, this movement faced a crisis in early July, when a Bolshevik-led demonstration resulted in bloodshed. This development could easily have been the death knell of the Bolshevik movement; instead, the party recovered very quickly. This setback was insufficient to stop the party's later seizure of power in October.

I present two conflicting documents written by workers and workers' groups to demonstrate the intense controversy that erupted in July. These documents represent the voices of the proletariat, on whose support the Bolsheviks depended and for whose needs the Bolsheviks claimed to be fighting. I also present three documents—a factory workers' resolution and two personal anecdotes from the time period—to illustrate the strength of the Bolsheviks before the July Days and particularly how the movement got back on its feet so quickly.

During the month of June, dissatisfaction with the Provisional Government grew after a military offensive resulted in carnage for the Russian army. Many in the military mutinied; the Bolshevik leadership decided to fan this uprising into a full-scale rebellion against the Provisional Government, starting on the day of July 3. The Provisional Government managed to quell the revolt, killing hundreds in the process; Bolshevik party members were arrested and

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the Julian calendar.

Lenin was forced to flee. The credibility of the movement was further shattered by the spread of rumors that Lenin had received funds from Kaiser Wilhelm in Berlin.

The first document is a particularly forceful and well written criticism of the Bolshevik uprising. It was agreed to by the workers of the Russian Printing and Publishing Company in Petrograd, and published in the form of a workers' resolution approximately one week after the rebellion was quashed.² Notably, the writers do not seem to be angry about the general idea of a people's republic, but rather they fear that the disturbance was a strategic blunder for the mission of obtaining a Communist state. They refer to the demonstrators not as ignorant or treasonous but as "naïve,"³ implying that they may not disagree with the politics of the rebellion in any way. They also describe the deaths that occur as "fratricidal slaughter,"⁴ meaning that they consider the rebels (as well as the supporters of the Provisional Government) to be brothers in arms, despite their ineptitude.

That having been said, these printers very strongly believed that the rebellion was hare-brained and foolish. The resolution is full of hyperbole: the days of July 3-5 were supposedly "the most grievous and shameful page in Russian history."⁵ For a people with such a long and tortured history as the Russians, a superlative statement such as this cannot truly be taken literally. The writers of this resolution also use particularly personal language to show their level of indignation. They talk of "branding with shame and putting our curse on all the organizers of this provocational demonstration."⁶ The level of anger and the ease at which hyperbole is used illustrates the edginess of the situation in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik uprising.

² Likhtenshtein, A. "Resolution by the printing workers of the former Markus press, Petrograd, 13 July 1917" (13 July 1917) in Steinberg, Mark D. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, doc 56, p186.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

One should take careful note of the fact that this document was composed by printers. Because printers constantly worked with type, they were considerably more literate than the other workers, and thus more politically active. This explains the sophisticated, polished prose that the workers use to write this resolution. However, because of their slight intellectualism, printers constantly had to reassert that they were, in fact, members of the proletariat. They had to be careful not to espouse constitutionalist ideas or say anything anti-populist. Thus, they had to be very precise when criticizing the Bolsheviks after the July Days. In particular, in this document, they make sure to emphasize that their fears of counterrevolutionary actions were driving their disapproval of Bolshevik actions, rather than any desire to delay the formation of a Marxist state. In this case, this was probably not any significant distortion of their true beliefs, but the printers made sure to say so explicitly.

Furthermore, other documentary evidence seems to echo the printers, showing that the distaste for the Bolshevik uprising spread beyond this upper echelon of the proletariat. Notably, a resolution by the workers at the Petrograd Metal Works—including a large Bolshevik contingent—bemoans the violence of the “bloody” events.⁷ They emphasize their support for the Soviet, while referring to the demonstration as a “disorganizing activity.”⁸ The second part of this resolution, explicitly coming from this Bolshevik contingent, seems very concerned with the accusations that party members were “spying for the Germans,”⁹ and they call for Lenin and Trotsky to surrender. These demands and concerns are consistent with the general unease the proletariat felt on the subject of the violence of the July Days.

⁷ “Resolutions on the July Days by workers and employees of the Petrograd Metal Works and by the Executive Committee of Bolsheviks at the factory, 11 July 1917” (11 July 1917) in Steinberg, Mark D. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, doc 55, p184-185.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Though many workers' resolutions in the days after the July Days were critical of the Bolsheviks, the Bolsheviks also had their supporters. Notably, those who demonstrated during the turbulent days of early July tended to remain loyal to the Bolshevik party. In the days after the rebellion, workers from the Putilov factory—many of whom marched on the streets of Petrograd during the July Days—wrote an open letter try to explain themselves to the citizens of Russia.¹⁰ This choice of medium already reveals a great deal about their predicament. Choosing to write a “letter” instead of a “resolution” suggests that they expected a larger audience than any of the other workers' groups; given that these demonstrators were undeniably part of the topic of discussion, this assumption seems quite reasonable. That they chose to write something they intended to be read by all people—aside from reflecting the political activity of *all* workers—also suggests that they believed that they had a message to share, that the prevailing discussion did not favor them.

This letter is a longer document than the resolution by the printing workers, perhaps because readers of this letter would be willing to give more of their time to reading it. In about 500 words, they lyrically introduce themselves, plead their case, hearken back to historical events, and explicitly try to recruit others to their cause. Directly addressing the July Days, they unsurprisingly assert that they “were marching [in the demonstration] with the pure heart of loyal sons of the revolution.”¹¹ In trying to attach themselves to the more mainstream elements of the proletariat, the Putilov workers were adamant that they were marching *in support* of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, pointing to the slogan written on their signs, “All Power to the Soviet.”¹² They also try to shift some of the blame for the bloody result away from themselves,

¹⁰ Mudrov, I. “Letter to All Citizens from Putilov Workers (in explanation of 3, 4, and 5 July)” (11 July 1917) in Steinberg, Mark D. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, doc 57, p187.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

by claiming they only armed themselves for “self-defense”¹³ and by linking those that had fired against them with the army of Tsar Nicholas II on Bloody Sunday. In this way, this letter seems to be directly responding to accusations from people such as the printers of Petrograd, that the demonstrators themselves were responsible for the violence.

The contrasts between the ideologies promoted by the printers and those of the demonstrators are perhaps less revealing than the similarities between the two documents. In particular, the hyperbole of the printers is more than matched by strongly figurative language in the Putilov workers’ letter. It starts: “Citizens! Like a venerable oak standing in the middle of a forest, the giant Putilov factory stands in the middle of state industry, making the earth quake with the heavy blows of its hammers.”¹⁴ It takes a particular type of environment for this type of language—and for the printers’ hyperbole—to be persuasive instead of comical. Namely, this rhetorical structure would seem to be a good illustration of the level of emotion and passion in the debate of this time.

These two documents show that in the aftermath of the July Days, many workers were quick to separate themselves from the Bolsheviks and those they led. Many, including these printers and steel-workers of Petrograd, believed that the Bolsheviks were reckless and were causing damage to their own movement. The printers’ resolution and the letter also illustrate through their rhetoric how fervent and emotional the political environment was in these months. Taken together, these two trends would seem to prevent any sort of reconciliation between the Bolsheviks and those whom they had alienated in early July. Yet, the historical record shows that this was not the case. Within a few weeks, the Bolsheviks began to regain strength and popular support, well before the failed coup by Lavr Kornilov gave them their final boost. This

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

apparent contradiction motivates an investigation of the root causes of how Leninism was able to overcome the serious blunder of the July Days.

First, there is evidence from June that illustrates some of the characteristics of the Russian populace, especially of the workers, which would come to favor the Bolshevik party. At this point, the jubilation of the February revolution had worn off, and the people in the cities were getting impatient, ready to act. The Bolsheviks appealed to those who wanted quicker action, so this development was clearly beneficial to them. One example of this willingness to take radical action can be drawn from an anecdote written by a textile worker turned political activist named F. N. Samoilov in the Ivanovo-Voznesensk economic district northeast of Moscow.¹⁵ Writing several years after the fact, Samoilov describes a certain predicament: the local party headquarters was inadequate for their expanding operations. Their solution was simply to “requisition” the home of a local soldier.¹⁶ Without heed to morals or legalities, they took what they needed and did what needed to be done. Even though this anecdote does not reveal if these men were Bolsheviks—we only know that they were Social Democrats—this event illustrates the desire to make change, despite any obstacles, precisely the sort of mindset that Lenin could take advantage of.

Another fascinating personal account portrays the period before, during, and after the crisis of the July Days. It is the first-person account of Anna Litveiko, a working woman from Moscow who became politically active in her lamp factory from the days of the February Revolution.¹⁷ She describes the euphoria of those early days and her decision to align with the

¹⁵ Samoilov, F.N. “Bolshevik Activism in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, June 1917” (June 1917) in Daly, Jonathan and Trofimov, Leonid, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922, A Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009, doc 42, p95.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Litveiko, Anna “In 1917” (1957), in Fitzpatrick, Sheila and Slezkine, Yuri, *In the Shadow of Revolution*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, p49-65.

Bolsheviks instead of the Mensheviks. The time before July is portrayed as a very positive experience for her and her colleagues; the women would cheerily discuss what life would look like after the revolution, without war, or money, or even possibly clothing. The women would sing songs and, in an amusing episode, take joy in seeing her rude foreman get humiliated by being carried out of the factory in a large wheelbarrow.¹⁸

She then describes the sudden change that occurred in the aftermath of the July massacre. She depicts the secrecy that hung over every party meeting. There is a strong sense of disappointment, of a change for the worse. Nevertheless, within a few weeks, she had a new sense of confidence: “the day of reckoning was approaching,” she reported excitedly.¹⁹ Her story then jumps over the ensuing few months to October, when the excitement and anticipation of February largely seemed to resume. This memoir serves as evidence that, while the July Days were a serious Bolshevik blunder, they could not outweigh the natural advantages that the movement held.

This point is further illustrated in a final document, a workers’ resolution from Petrograd published in late July, about three weeks after the July Days.²⁰ It begins with a sort of preamble, or list of grievances, before it describes actions that they thought should have been taken, including the removal of the Provisional Government and the repeal of the recently instituted death penalty, among other demands. It is not wholly obvious on its face, but in fact, this resolution is a strongly Bolshevik document. It criticizes the arrest of “left-wing” (i.e., Bolshevik) politicians and the suppression of the left-wing press and complains that members of the Soviet seemed unwilling to take power. Furthermore, these workers used a phrase

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Resolution of a meeting of workers in twenty-seven small enterprises from the Peterhof district of Petrograd, 27 July 1917” (27 July 1917), in Steinberg, Mark D. *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, doc 58, p189.

identifying them to the trained eye as Bolshevik: they declare that the ruling power must rest “on the proletariat and the poorest strata of the peasantry.”²¹ Thus, that these workers fully supported the Bolsheviks is plain.

Of course, there had always been Bolshevik supporters, even during the darkest of the July Days. However, this document seems a bit calmer, and relatively less angry. Words like “protest” replace words like “curse” and “shame.”²² As such, the rhetorical environment may have retreated from its fevered pitch and a document like this could represent more of the mainstream, further evidence that the Bolsheviks were starting to recover what they had lost, putting the party in a favorable position upon the arrival of General Kornilov a month later. Despite these positive developments for the party, it is still noteworthy that the name of Lenin is never mentioned and the workers never refer to themselves as “Bolshevik.” That could possibly indicate that, while the Bolshevik party had begun to regain the people’s trust, the crisis still left an indelible mark on the movement that had yet to fully vanish.

The violence of July 3-5, 1917 was certainly a serious bump in the road for the Bolshevik movement. The demonstration and aftermath saw the death and arrest of countless party members and a serious assault on the reputation of its leader, Vladimir Lenin. The violence ignited a fierce debate between the demonstrators and the other workers of Russia, a debate that showed itself in letters and resolutions. This debate between workers was especially important because only with the passionate support of the proletariat could the Bolsheviks hope to rule. Although this dispute was passionate and zealous and hence seemingly irreconcilable, the movement began to get back on its feet very quickly. Two personal accounts illustrate some of the inherent advantages the Bolsheviks held, namely the willingness of the people to take radical

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

steps in the name of revolution. Finally, by the end of July, another workers' resolution shows us that the Bolsheviks had recovered most, though not all, of what they lost at the beginning of the month; it still took until October for the movement to reach its breaking point. Even though their support was built through the impatience of the people, the only action that the Bolsheviks could have taken in early July to accelerate the revolution would have been to wait.

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