Red Guards and Workers' Militias in the Russian Revolution

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Acknowledgments

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R.A.W.

Note on Spelling and Dates

Spelling is a simplified version of the Library of Congress transliteration system. Names and words with a common English spelling are used in the latter form (Trotsky, Soviet, Kerensky, Alexander). Russian place names in the text, especially of Petrograd districts, sometimes are modified, and in some instances rather arbitrary decisions were made whether to use noun or adjective forms (Petrogradskii district, but Vyborg rather than Vyborgskii district). Clarity of identification and ease to the reader were the guiding principles for these modifications. Where such changes were made in the text, strict transliteration was adhered to in the bibliographic materials (Kharkov in the text, but Khar'kov or Khar'kovskii in the notes).

All dates are according to the Russian calendar. In 1917 the Julian calendar in use in Russia was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar in use in the West.

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Introduction

"[The Vyborg] proletariat took into its own hands all the administration of the district. I, as the appointed 'commissar of the [Soviet] Executive Committee,' was only an assistant in that tremendous self-assertiveness exhibited by the proletariat in the district."

—*A. G. Shliapnikov, speaking of the February Revolution*

During my years of studying the Russian Revolution of 1917, I gradually developed an uneasy feeling that the extensive and varied writings on the subject—my own included—have tended to concentrate too much on the top political figures at the expense of the lower levels of society. The major figures seemed to function in a vacuum, as though suspended in midair, and the "dark masses" were largely unknown, their attitudes accepted by later historians to be as depicted by the political parties and the top political leaders—the Trotskys, Miliukovs, and Kerenskys. Both Western and Soviet historians have tended toward this distortion, with the result that readers have gotten little sense of how Ivan Ivanovich, the man in the Russian street, perceived the Revolution and his role in it. My concern about this omission has proved to be shared by other historians of the Revolution, many of whom have encouraged and lent support to the writing of this book.

One happy by-product of the post-Stalin era in the USSR is that historians there now give more attention to the local levels of political and other activity in the Revolution. Valuable document collections and many volumes of memoirs by participants, especially at the factory and district level, have been published, and this has greatly assisted the Western historian, whose use of most Soviet archival materials is either severely limited or refused altogether.

Coupled with contemporary 1917 sources and publications of the 1920's, these Soviet works have helped to make possible the study of the lower levels of popular participation in the Revolution of 1917. Still, when I first began my research I assumed that the material would be very limited, so I merely planned several articles on various aspects of the problem, to be completed quickly. The first article was on the district soviets (*raionnye sovety*) of Petrograd.[1] To my surprise, there was much more material available than I had expected, and turning next to workers' armed bands, I soon realized that I could not do justice to the topic in even a long article. Therefore I began to rethink the project, and the result is the present book.

This volume is, on one level, a history of the workers' militias and Red Guard in 1917, the story of voluntary armed bands and their role in the outcome of the Russian Revolution.* One of the overriding concerns of the Russian Revolution, as of any revolution, was the problem of armed force. During the first days of the Revolution there was a general concern with the question and a unanimity of opinion—the people must be armed in order to maintain public order and resist a possible tsarist counterattack. This era of common assumptions was short-lived, however, as the fear of a tsarist counterrevolution gave way to deep-seated class and political antagonisms, and as conflicting views of the goals of the Revolution became more clearly articulated. Some people hoped for a quick return to "normalcy," including the disbanding of armed groups, whereas others—especially among the industrial working class—felt deeply that their own possession of arms was not only a right but an absolute prerequisite for the defense of their newly found liberties. A. G. Shliapnikov, addressing a group of Vyborg-district workers on February 28 about the actions of the Petrograd Soviet, found arms and the organization of a militia to be the questions that interested them most.[2] Nothing moved them to action more

* The term "militia" (*militsiia*) came into use immediately in the February Revolution and was adopted—and is still used in the Soviet Union—in place of the word police. As we shall see, it had a wider range of meanings than simply "police," including that of a special paramilitary armed citizens' force for protection of the public order or of the interests of a particular group. The term "Red Guard" was adopted from a Finnish organization of that name formed during the Revolution of 1905 and the subject of considerable interest thereafter, including a book by G. V. Plekhanov.

surely than the threat of the loss of arms and of their own armed defense forces.

It did not take long in the rapidly developing—or deteriorating—situation of 1917 for this sense of the need for arms to defend one's liberties or viewpoint to take on more concrete forms. For the workers especially, a fear of counterrevolution helped create a feeling of the need not only to be armed but also to be organized for the defense of their rights against a class foe. And from here it was only a short step to the conception that such armed forces were necessary not merely to defend freedoms already won but to move Russia forward toward the goal of a government more attuned to the workers' aspirations—that is, as a force to be used in a new revolution. Moreover, one is struck by the workers' unquestioned assumption—fed by the Social Democratic parties, especially the Bolsheviks—that they represented the true interests of the Revolution in a way no other group did. Nor can one fail to notice a basic reality of political life in Russia in 1917: as Russian society lost its cohesiveness, as the power of the government became weaker with each passing day, and as the unreliability of the army as a force for internal power became more apparent, armed groups that were determined to enforce their viewpoint and that possessed even the rudiments of organization and leadership came to wield enormous power, power completely out of proportion to their size. And when such groups were located in Petrograd, they were a particularly potent force. Despite the crumbling of government authority in the provinces and the beginnings of separatist movements among the nationalities, Petrograd remained the center of political decision-making, and actions there influenced all of Russia. An armed force in Petrograd could sway the course of any new political revolution, since it was likely to begin there, as the February Revolution had. Moreover, the development of armed bands in Petrograd was imitated in the provinces, and these groups could be a powerful force bringing the rest of the country in the direction taken by the capital.

This volume is, however, more than just a history of worker armed bands. As I studied these bands I found them to be an excellent means of exploring an issue long debated among both participants and historians—the issue of spontaneity versus leadership in the Revolution. The armed bands were a complex combination of spontaneity, voluntaristic action, and initiative from below inter-

acting with ideas derived from outside political ideologies and attempts at control or influence by political parties. The relationship between the mass of the population and would-be leaders is one of the main problems of any revolutionary movement, and the Russians of the nineteenth century grappled with it over and over. It was one of the main causes for the split among the Populists in the 1870's, and was inherited by their Socialist Revolutionary (SR) successors, by the Marxists, and even by the liberals. The Russian Marxists especially gave a great deal of attention to this issue, both in theory and in practice. Several historians, most notably Leopold Haimson,[3] have argued persuasively that the intelligentsia in general and the Marxists in particular came to use "consciousness" (*soznatel'nost'*) and "elemental spontaneity" (*stikhiinost'*) as terms to describe the respective characteristics of the leaders and the masses, and to see these on the one hand as conceptual categories for explaining the world around them and on the other as the two poles of "awareness" and "feeling" that somehow had to be brought closer together in order to achieve a successful revolution and construct a new society. Different interpretations of these two attributes were critical in the conflict that led to the split of the Social Democratic Party into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and in Lenin's thinking about how to organize the new state after 1917.

Given the importance of the term "spontaneity" in the history of the Revolution and in our story, and the many connotations it carries in the historical literature, I want to clarify how it is used in this book. At the outset let me say that I am not concerned with the controversy over the extent to which "spontaneity" adequately conveys the nuances of the Russian word *stikhiinost'*. Rather, I will disregard—save for this passage—its revolutionary polemical history and will employ it as a good English word useful in analyzing the Russian Revolution of 1917, particularly the process of self-organization of armed bands. Several types of actions might be characterized as spontaneous in our usage: (1) complete spontaneity, in the sense of efforts on the part of individuals previously unassociated, or only loosely associated, to organize themselves without any instructions from outside into local bodies of authority in order to act in the face of momentous social and political events; (2) efforts on the part of people belonging to some existing social

entity (school, association, factory) and acting through its facilities to organize local bodies of authority composed primarily of people belonging to that entity, but operating without its formal sanction or traditional leadership and beyond its normal functions; (3) the self-authorized formation of local bodies of authority by some previously existing nongovernmental organization acting beyond its traditional sphere of competence; and (4) the formation of local bodies of authority (e.g. Red Guards) by low-level political leaders (e.g. factory or district party members) at least partly influenced by general party doctrine but acting on their own initiative, and whose actions or ideas about the role of these organizations are not guided by any central party leadership. I would also consider as spontaneous any example of extensive self-organization and initiative that was nonetheless responsive to appeals, urgings, or directives of higher authoritative political bodies (such as the Petrograd Soviet or a central party leadership). I would contrast this with efforts to organize a militia or other body by a central authority (such as the Petrograd Soviet or the City Duma*) using its own agents. In an extremely fluid situation, as we will see, the dividing line between spontaneous and directed action is often almost impossible to distinguish precisely, especially in retrospect. Spontaneous activity rarely leaves extensive or clear records.

The Revolution, by releasing the pent-up frustrations of the "dark masses," brought to a head the problems of leadership and organization, of how to harness the spontaneity of the masses. For one thing, the initial revolution in 1917 was made by those spontaneous masses, especially by the soldiers and the industrial workers, with only a minimal role played by intelligentsia leadership groups. Immediately, however, the masses looked for leadership and direction, whether from the State Duma, from the radical intelligentsia of the Petrograd Soviet, or from spokesmen arising out of their own ranks. Yet they also clung to their own autonomy. Thus, meshing spontaneity and leadership emerged as a basic problem for the Revolution from its beginning. This was the more difficult in

*The Petrograd City Duma (city council) was elected on a limited franchise before the Revolution and democratized in 1917 by the addition of representatives from the lower classes. Many other cities had similar *dumy*. The State Duma, however, was the lower house of the legislature formed in 1906; it is hereafter referred to simply as "the Duma."

that Russia lacked any substantial tradition of orderly public life, and had virtually no experience of the mass of the population participating in the political life of the country. The voluntary restraints on anarchistic self-assertion that exist in more developed political cultures were extremely weak in Russia. Moreover, there was the inescapable fact that in Russia in 1917 these "dark masses" were armed. Large numbers of individuals acquired arms in 1917, and when they began to organize themselves or be organized into armed bands a potent political force was created that made the problems of leadership more critical but no easier to solve. Most of these armed bands, formed at factories, were very much locally oriented and jealous of their autonomy, yet felt a need for some sort of larger structure, some kind of sanction or central leadership. This proved, in Petrograd especially, very difficult to achieve. The repeated efforts to do so, and the problems involved, make these groups an excellent case study of popular aspirations and the problems of leadership and spontaneity.

These armed bands also provide a good vehicle for studying the secondary and tertiary levels of political leadership, the group Tsuyoshi Hasegawa has so aptly dubbed "the sub-elite."[4] This is the leadership at the point where the masses and the political parties touched, where popular aspirations came into contact with party programs, where the leaders emerging from the workers interacted with the professional revolutionaries. The nature of this level of leadership, and of its relations with both higher political officials and the worker masses below, will be a recurring theme.

The armed groups were very sensitive to the ebb and flow of revolution: more than any other identifiable organization or grouping, their fortunes changed with the various periods of revolutionary crisis and relative quiescence. Factory committees, supply commissions, district soviets—all had ongoing and reasonably well defined functions and institutional bases. Strike committees and other ad hoc organizations came and went as needed. The workers' militia and Red Guard, however, had more permanence than the latter organizations but less stability than the former. Their fortunes rose and fell with the revolutionary crises and the mood of the populace, reflecting the degree of political intensity at any given moment and the extent to which the working class felt that its interests demanded the ultimate political expression—a rallying to arms. Thus

a study in detail of the formation of armed bands in the Revolution should help considerably our understanding of the social psychology of the Russian Revolution and contribute to a better understanding of the revolutionary process in general. The creation of these armed bands, their own self-assertiveness, the efforts to harness or control them, and their own efforts to seek political support and leaders to express and even define their interests—these are the main issues of this book.

The book is divided into two parts. The longer first part is a detailed study of the armed bands in Petrograd, an effort to get the fullest possible understanding of their organization, nature, aspirations, and role. The second part studies similar armed bands in the rest of the country. Two chapters in this part study the Red Guard in the provincial cities of Saratov and Kharkov to provide a basis for comparison with the Petrograd "model." These cities were chosen for reasons of geography, comparability in size, and availability of good sources on this subject. The third chapter provides an overview of the workers' militias, *druzhiny*,* and Red Guards in Russia, noting especially where similarities with and differences from the three "model" cities occur. This particular overall structure has been chosen in preference to the more commonly used eclectic pattern—drawing material helter-skelter from all over Russia, with a citation first from Petrograd, then from Astrakhan, then from Voronezh—that aims at building up a composite picture of the topic.[5] The problem with the latter approach is that though it gives an impression of completeness, it in fact fails to present a coherent image of any real organization that actually existed. What emerges is an artificial Red Guard that never existed anywhere, and not only is a certain reality sacrificed, but we are robbed of the ability to see the organization develop. The dynamics are lost.

The approach used in this book will, I hope, allow us to get a better picture of the Red Guard by studying a few actual workers' militias and Red Guard organizations in detail, tracing their evolution and role in the Revolution, and thereby gaining a sense of their dynamics. At the same time, this approach throws into sharper focus the similarities and dissimilarities across Russia. To the possi-

* *Druzhiny* (singular *druzhina*) were armed bands ("detachments" is the closest English translation) that took their name from the princely military retinues of early Russia. Members were called *druzhiniki*.

ble objection that Russia was a very diverse country and that any selection of cities is bound to be unrepresentative, there are, I think, adequate responses. First, one must acknowledge that the charge is partly true but that the problem of "representativeness" is probably unsolvable. Second, in view of the overwhelming importance of Petrograd and its Red Guard in the Russian scheme in 1917, it must be singled out for special study in order properly to examine the role of any group in the Revolution. After that, a study in detail of a couple of other cities allows comparison to see how typical Petrograd was and also allows a glimpse into revolutionary dynamics in provincial cities.

I hope that this approach will bring into sharper focus both the diversity and similarity in the Revolution across Russia, facilitating comparisons. Fundamentals of revolution and class conflict did impose some constraints on patterns of behavior for all inhabitants of the former Russian Empire, but local peculiarities existed also. I hope, too, that my approach will provide another benefit. In the West the Revolution has been studied only sketchily outside of Petrograd.[6] The chapters on Saratov and Kharkov do not pretend to be comprehensive studies, but they do provide pictures of the Revolution in those two cities. Because they are less well known than Petrograd, considerable information about the Revolution in general—the composition of their soviets, for example—has been included. Thus those chapters focus less narrowly on the workers' militia and Red Guard and should have additional usefulness as partial histories of the Revolution in two provincial cities.

1
The Coming of the Revolution

"The strikers . . . were dispersed in one place but quickly gathered in other places, showing themselves to be exceptionally stubborn." —*Police report, February 24, 1917*

Russia entered upon the Industrial Revolution late among the major European powers, really only in the 1880's and 1890's. Nonetheless, by the outbreak of war in 1914 a significant industrial capacity existed and also an important industrial working class. Russian industrialization, coming relatively late and involving extensive government subsidy and foreign investment, created certain special features in the economy and society, the most striking of which—and the most important for us—was the formation of very large factories and their concentration in a few places. The process tended to "organize" the workers by gathering them into large factories and subjecting them to the discipline and interdependence of the workshop. That many workers lived in barracks provided by the factory reinforced this "organization." Even when they lived in private quarters, this typically took the form of apartment buildings in working-class districts, usually in the same area as the factory, under conditions of serious crowding. Thus their nonworking as well as working experience tended to shape a sense of identity, of class-consciousness, and to group the workers in a way that would permit political mobilization under the right circumstances. Moreover, younger and single workers especially tended to live in barracks or factory-provided housing, and it was these workers who, as we shall see, were most likely to join armed bands such as the Red Guard in 1917. This concentration and "organization," added to the fact that industry tended to be concentrated in major cities,

especially but not exclusively in the capitals—Petrograd and Moscow—meant that workers were able to exercise an influence completely out of proportion to their numbers in the overall population when their discontents exploded into disorders. They represented a group much more dangerous to the existing political and social order than the vastly more numerous peasantry.

Virtually all Russian cities with any significant industrial activity tended to have clearly delineated factory and working-class districts. This was true of Petrograd as well. In the chapters that follow we will refer frequently to the districts (*raiony*) of Petrograd—to their workers' militias, to their Red Guard units and staffs, and to other aspects of their local organization, including soviets. These districts represented an important level of organization and self-organization. Therefore, we should look briefly at them and their socioeconomic characteristics.[1] In 1917 there were about 19 such districts in Petrograd, although the number varied from time to time because of shifting boundaries, consolidations, and divisions. Some, especially on the edges of the city, were known by more than one name. Generally the districts coincided with well recognized geographic and historical areas and/or with the old police districts. Some, in turn, were divided into two to four subdistricts (*podraiony*) that coincided with the former police subdistricts. On March 9, 1917, 51 such subdistricts existed.[2]

Most Petrograders still lived close to their place of work. Public transportation developed late in the capital, served the outlying factory areas poorly, and was expensive in relation to worker income. (It is easy for the modern reader to forget that for the poorer classes the tram was a luxury, a symbol of those better off; hence the symbolism in the descriptions of the overturning and stopping of trams during the February Revolution.) The tendency to live close to one's place of work gave the districts their distinctive social characteristics, but even working-class districts had a mixed population owing to the presence of factory owners and managerial personnel. For the same reason, the better areas also housed a large lower-class population: restaurant and food workers, shop clerks, workers in small manufacturing or craft enterprises, service workers, and menials and unskilled workers of all kinds. Moreover, the extreme housing shortage of Petrograd, even before the war worsened it, contributed to this intermixing as the cellars and garrets of better

housing blocks were rented to poor folk.[3] Still, the city did have distinct socioeconomic districts, and especially large factory and working-class districts. Socially and economically the districts broke down into three broad groupings. One group in the center of the city was primarily upper and middle class in composition, with a large number of government buildings. This encompassed especially the region on the left bank of the Neva River stretching back to the Fontanka Canal, although upper-class sections existed also east of the Fontanka and along the riverfront in the Vasil'evskii and Petrogradskii districts. A second area of much more mixed population, with larger lower-class and industrial areas as well as middle-class and some upper-class sections, stretched between the Fontanka and Obvodnyi canals on the left side of the Neva and included the island districts of Vasil'evskii and Petrogradskii across the Neva. Surrounding the city on all sides lay the factory and working-class districts. These three general groupings deserve closer inspection. (See Maps 1 and 2.)

There were three districts in the city center with almost no significant factories or industrial working class, although they had, as all districts did, a considerable miscellaneous lower-class population: these were the Admiralty, Spasskii, and Kazanskii districts. They occupied all but the western edge of the region between the Neva River and the Fontanka Canal. The heart of this area was the region stretching from the Winter Palace, the Admiralty Building, and the General Staff Building along the Nevskii Prospect, the most imposing and important street of the city and the symbol of privileged Russia. Here were to be found palaces, luxury shops and restaurants, and fashionable apartments. The area to the east of Gorkhovaia Street, reaching to Liteinyi Prospect and beyond, was especially fashionable. Some sections toward the western edges of these districts and along the Fontanka Canal could be considered inner-city slums, but the lower-class elements here were not organized by factory, were politically insignificant, and played little role in the Revolution or in the history of the Red Guard.

These three districts were bordered on all sides by several others of a more mixed population, including some with factories. On the western, or downriver, side, completing the area enclosed by the Fontanka Canal, was the Kolomenskii district. It, with the above three, made up the old Second City District. The Kolomenskii dis-