

# Story of the February Revolution

**Russian workers went on strike on International Women's Day 1917. They ended up toppling tsarism.**

by [Kevin Murphy](#)

That the most important strike in world history started with women textile workers in Petrograd on International Women's Day 1917 (February 23 in the old Julian calendar) was no coincidence. Working up to thirteen hours a day while their husbands and sons were at the front, these women were saddled with a life of singlehandedly supporting their families and waiting in line for hours in the subzero cold in hopes of getting bread. As Tsuyoshi Hasegawa states in his [definitive study](#) of the February Revolution, "No propaganda was necessary to incite these women to action."

Russia's deep social crisis stemmed from the [tsarist regime](#)'s failure to enact any meaningful reforms and the economic chasm between the wealthy and the rest of Russian society. Russia was ruled by an autocrat, [Tsar Nicholas II](#), who repeatedly dismissed the Duma, a powerless electoral body that by law was dominated by men of property.

On the eve of the war, strike activity rivaled that of the 1905 Revolution and workers erected barricades on the streets of the capital. The war gave tsarism a temporary reprieve, but mounting military defeats and some seven million casualties brought unprecedented accusations of regime corruption from virtually every section of society. So deep was the rot that the future prime minister, [Prince Lvov](#), led a conspiracy — though without taking action — to deport the tsar and incarcerate the tsarina in a monastery. [Rasputin](#), a charlatan monk who had gained enormous influence in the tsar's court, was murdered not by anarchists but by monarchists in December 1916.

On the Left, the Bolsheviks were the dominant force in a wider milieu of revolutionaries leading the largest strike wave in world history (the pro-war segments of moderate socialists often refrained from strike action).

For years they'd battled tsarism. Thirty political strikes had been launched in the half-decade since the [1912 Lena Goldfield massacre](#) of 270 workers, and they'd braved round after round of tsarist secret police (Okhrana) arrests. The breakdown of arrested revolutionaries in 1915 and 1916 registers the relative strength of the Left in Petrograd: Bolsheviks 743, non-party 553, Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) 98, Mensheviks, 79, Mezhrayonsty 51, anarchists 39. With some six hundred Bolshevik members in metal, engineering, and textile factories in Vyborg, the district was by far the most militant throughout the war.

On January 9, 1917, the twelfth anniversary of the bloody Sunday massacre that sparked the 1905 Revolution, 142,000 workers struck. When the Duma opened on

February 14, another 84,000 workers walked out, an action led by pro-war Mensheviks.

Mounting food shortages caused the government to conduct grain requisitioning in the countryside. As Petrograd bakeries closed and supplies dwindled to a several weeks' supply, tsarist authorities exacerbated the crisis by claiming there were no shortages. The Okhrana reported numerous clashes between police and working women on Petrograd bread lines. Mothers "watching their half-starving and sick children are perhaps much closer to the revolution than Messrs. Miliukov, Rodichev and Co. and of course they are much more dangerous."

On February 22, the Bolshevik Kaiurov addressed a Vyborg women's meeting, urging women not to strike on International Women's Day and to listen to "the instructions of the party." Much to Kaiurov's chagrin — he would later write that he was "indignant" that Bolshevik women ignored party directives — five textile mills struck the next morning.

Women instigators in the Neva Thread Mills shouted, "Into the streets! Stop! We've had it!" pushed the doors open, and led hundreds of women to nearby metal and engineering works. Pelting the Nobel Engineering factory with snowballs, throngs of women convinced workers there to join, waving their arms and yelling, "Come Out! Stop Work!" Women also marched to Erikson works, where Kaiurov and other Bolsheviks met briefly with factory SRs and Mensheviks and unanimously decided to convince other workers to join.

Police reported crowds of women and younger workers demanding "Bread" and singing revolutionary songs. Women grabbed red banners from men during the march: "It's our holiday. We'll carry the banners." At Liteinyi Bridge, despite repeated charges by the demonstrators, police blocked them from marching to the city center. By late afternoon hundreds of workers crossed the ice and were attacked by police. In the center "one thousand, predominantly women and youths" reached Nevsky Prospect but were dispersed. The Okhrana reported that demonstrations were so provocative that it was "necessary to reinforce police details everywhere."

Sixty thousand of the 78,000 strikers were from the Vyborg district. Although anti-war and anti-tsar slogans were raised, the most prominent demand was for bread. Indeed, tsarist authorities considered this just yet another bread riot, although they were alarmed at the hesitation of their trusted Cossack troops to charge the demonstrators. That night, Vyborg Bolsheviks met and voted to organize a three-day general strike with marches to Nevsky.

The next day, the strike movement doubled to 158,000, making it the largest political strike of the war. Seventy-five thousand Vyborg workers struck, as did twenty thousand each from the Petrograd, Vassilevski, and Moscow districts, plus nine thousand from Narva. Working-class youth street fighters took the lead, battling police and troops at bridges and for control of Nevsky in the city center.

At the Aviaz factory, Menshevik and SR speakers called for the removal of the government, pleaded with workers not to engage in irresponsible acts, and urged them to march to the Tauride Palace, where Duma members desperately tried to persuade

tsarism to make concessions. Bolsheviks in Erikson implored workers to march to the Kazan square and to arm themselves with knives, hardware, and ice for the impending battles with police.

A mass of 40,000 demonstrators fought police and soldiers on the Liteynyi Bridge, but were again rebuffed. 2,500 Erikson workers were confronted by Cossacks on Sampsonievsky Prospect. Officers charged through the crowd, but the Cossacks followed cautiously through the corridor just opened by the officers. "Some of them smiled," Kaiurov recalls, "and one of them gave the workers a good wink." In many places women took the initiative: "We have husbands, fathers, and brothers at the front . . . you too have mothers, wives, sisters, children. We are demanding bread and an end to the war."

Demonstrators made no attempt to fraternize with the hated police. Youths stopped street cars, sang revolutionary songs, and threw ice and bolts at the police. After several thousand workers crossed the ice, fierce battles raged between the demonstrators and police for control of Nevsky. Meanwhile, workers managed to hold rallies at the traditional revolutionary sites of Kazan and at the famous "hippopotamus" [statue](#) of Alexander III in Znamenskaya Square. The demands became more political as speakers not only demanded bread but also denounced the war and autocracy.

On the 25th, the strike became general, with over 240,000 factory workers joined by office workers, teachers, waiters and waitresses, university students, and even high school students. Cab drivers vowed they would only drive the "leaders" of the revolt.

Again workers began by rallying at their factories. At a boisterous Parvianen Factory meeting in Vyborg, Bolshevik, Menshevik, and SRs orators urged workers to march to Nevsky. One speaker ended with the revolutionary verse: "Out of the way, obsolete world, rotten from top to bottom. Young Russia is on the march!"

Demonstrators engaged in seventeen violent clashes with the police, and soldiers and workers managed to free comrades grabbed by the police. Rebels gained the upper hand, overwhelming tsarist forces on many bridges or crossing the ice to the center. Taking control of Nevsky, demonstrators again rallied at Znamenskaia. Police and Cossacks whipped the crowd, but when the police chief charged he was cut down — by a Cossack saber. Women workers again played a crucial role: "Put down your bayonets," they urged. "Join us."

By evening, the Vyborg side was controlled by the rebels. Demonstrators had sacked the police stations, captured revolvers and sabers from tsarist sentinels, and forced the police and gendarmes to flee.

The rebellion pushed Tsar Nicholas II to the brink. "I command the disorders in the capital end tomorrow," he proclaimed, and ordered the commander of the Petrograd garrison, Khabalov, to disperse crowds with firepower. Khabalov was skeptical ("How could they be stopped the next day?"), but accepted the directive. At city hall, the minister of interior, Protopopov, urged the autocracy's defenders to suppress the disorders: "Pray and hope for victory," he said. Early the next morning, proclamations

were posted banning demonstrations and warning that the edict would be enforced with arms.

Early on Sunday the 26<sup>th</sup>, police arrested the core of the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee and other socialists. Factories were closed, bridges were raised, and the city center was transformed into an armed camp. Khabalov telegraphed headquarters that “it has been quiet in city since morning.” Shortly after this report thousands of workers crossed the ice and appeared on Nevsky singing revolutionary songs and shouting slogans, but soldiers systematically fired on them.

Detachments from Volynsky Regiment were tasked with preventing rallies in [Znamenskaya Square](#). Mounted patrols whipped the crowd, but failed to disperse them. The commander then ordered troops to fire. Although some soldiers shot into the air, fifty demonstrators were killed in and around Znamenskaya, and dispersed workers hid inside houses and rushed into cafes. Most of the slaughter was carried out by crack loyalist units used to train noncommissioned officers.

Yet the bloodletting didn't quash the rebellion.

A police report describes the rebels' astounding level of resilience and sacrifice:

In the course of the disorders it was observed as a general phenomenon, that the rioting mobs showed extreme defiance towards the military patrols, at whom, when asked to disperse, they threw stones and lumps of ice dug up from the street. When preliminary shots were fired into the air, the crowd not only did not disperse but answered these volleys with laughter. Only when loaded cartridges were fired into the very midst of the crowd, was it found possible to disperse the mob, the participants . . . would hide in the yards of nearby houses, and as soon as the shooting stopped come out again into the street.

Workers appealed to the soldiers to put down their arms, attempted conversions that involved a struggle for the very heart of the soldier. As Trotsky [remarked](#), the contacts “between working men and women and the soldiers, under the steady crackling of rifles and machine-guns, the fate of the government, of the war, of the country, is being decided.”

On the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Vyborg Bolshevik leaders met in a vegetable garden on the outskirts of the city. Many suggested that it was time to call off the revolt, only to be outvoted. The most vociferous advocate for continuing the battle was later discovered to be an Okhrana agent. From a military perspective the revolution should have ground to a halt after the 26th. But the police could not crush the rebellion without the support of thousands of soldiers.

The previous afternoon workers had approached the Pavlovsky barracks: “Tell your comrades that the Pavlovsky, too, are shooting at us — we saw soldiers in your uniform on the Nevsky.” The soldiers “all looked distressed and pale.” Similar pleas resounded throughout the barracks of other regiments. That evening, Pavlovsky soldiers became the first to join the rebels (though, realizing they were isolated, they returned to their barracks and thirty-nine leaders were promptly arrested).

Early on the 27th, the revolt reached the Volynsky regiment, whose training corps had fired on demonstrators at Znamenskaya Square. Four hundred mutinied, telling their lieutenant, “We will no longer shoot and we also do not wish to shed our brother’s blood in vain.” When he responded by reading the tsar’s order to suppress the rebellion, he was summarily shot. Other Volynsky soldiers joined the rebellion and then moved to the nearby barracks of the Preobrazhensky and Lithuanians regiments, who also mutinied.

One participant later described the scene: “A truck packed with soldiers, rifles in hand, parted the crowd as it roared down Sampsonievsky. Red flags waved from the bayonets of rifles, something never seen before . . . the news the truck brought — that troops had mutinied — spread like wildfire.” While a punitive detachment led by General Kutepov went unchecked for hours — firing on demonstrators and trucks filled with workers — by evening, Kutepov wrote, “a large part of my force mixed with the crowd.”

That morning, General Khabalov had strutted around the city barracks threatening soldiers with the death penalty if they rebelled. That evening, General Ivanov, whose troops were en route to support the tsar’s loyalists, telegraphed Khabalov to assess the situation.

Ivanov: In what parts of the city is order preserved?

Khabalov: The whole city is in the hands of revolutionists.

Ivanov: Are all the ministries functioning properly?

Khabalov: The ministries have been arrested by the revolutionists.

Ivanov: What police forces are at your disposal at the present moment?

Khabalov: None whatever.

Ivanov: What technical and supply institutions of the War Department are now in your control?

Khabalov: I have none.

Apprised of the situation, General Ivanov decided to retreat. The military phase of the revolution was over.

The paradox of the February Revolution was that while it swept away tsarism, it replaced it with a government of unelected liberals who were horrified by the very revolution that had placed them in power. On the 27th “were heard sighs . . . It’s come, or indeed frank expressions of fear for life,” wrote a liberal Duma deputy. This was interrupted briefly by joyful, but inaccurate, news that “the disorders will soon be put down.” Another observer noted that “they were horrified, they shuddered, they felt themselves captive in hands of hostile elements traveling an unknown road.”

During the revolution, “the position of the bourgeoisie was quite clear; it was in position on the one hand of keeping their distance from the revolution and betraying it to tsarism, and on the other of exploiting it for their own purposes.” This was the assessment of Sukhanov, a leader of the Petrograd Soviet who was sympathetic to the Mensheviks and would play a crucial role in handing power over to the liberals.

He would get plenty of help from more moderate socialists. The Menshevik leader Skobelev approached [Rodzianko](#), chairman of the Fourth Duma, to secure a room in the [Tauride Palace](#). His purpose was to organize a soviet of workers’ deputies, in order to maintain order. Kerensky allayed Rodzianko’s fears that the soviet might be dangerous, telling him, “somebody must take charge of the workers.”

Unlike the workers’ soviet of 1905 that emerged as an instrument of class struggle, the soviet formed on February 27 was established after the revolt, and leading members in its executive committee were almost exclusively intellectuals who had not actively participated in the revolution.

There were other shortcomings as well: representatives for the 150,000 soldiers in Petrograd were vastly overrepresented in this workers’ and soldiers’ soviet. It was overwhelmingly male, the handful of women delegates among the 1,200 delegates (eventually almost 3,000) woefully underrepresented. The soviet didn’t even discuss the March 19 women’s suffrage demonstration, in which 25,000 participated, including thousands of working-class women.

The Petrograd Soviet did approve the famous [Order Number 1](#) — which empowered soldiers to elect their own committees to run their units and to obey officers and the [Provisional Government](#) only if the orders did not contradict those of the soviet — but this order was enacted on the initiative of radical soldiers themselves.

Still, the soviet’s formation forced the liberals and their SR ally [Kerensky](#) to act. Rodzianko argued that “if we don’t take power, others will,” because there was already “elected some sort of scoundrels in the factories.” “Unless we formed a provisional government at once,” Kerensky wrote, “the soviet would proclaim itself the supreme authority of the Revolution.” Under the plan, a self-nominated group calling themselves the Provisional Committee would act as a counter to the soviet. But the plotters were not very confident in their own plan; they let the Menshevik and SR leaders of the soviet do their dirty work.

The Menshevik algebra of revolution mandated that the “government that was to take the place of Tsarism must be exclusively bourgeois,” Sukhanov wrote. “The entire state machinery . . . could only obey Miliukov.”

Negotiations between the soviet executive and the unelected liberal leaders took place on March 1. “Miliukov perfectly understood that the Executive Committee was in a perfect position either to give power to the bourgeois government or not give it,” but, Sukhanov added, “the power destined to replace tsarism must be only a bourgeois power . . . We must steer course by this principle. Otherwise the uprising will not succeed and the revolution will collapse.”

Soviet leaders were willing to drop even the minimal “three whales” program that all the revolutionary groups had agreed to (the eight-hour day, the confiscation of landed estates, and a democratic republic) if the liberals would only take power. Frightened by the prospect of having to rule, Miliukov stubbornly insisted on making a last-ditch attempt to save the monarchy.

Incredibly, the socialists conceded and allowed the tsar’s brother, Michael, to decide for himself whether he should rule. Receiving no assurances of his personal safety, the Grand Duke politely declined. All these backroom negotiations were, of course, conducted outside the purview of the workers and soldiers.

The “[dual power](#)” system that emerged from these discussions — the soviet on one side and the unelected Provisional Government on the other — would last for eight months.

[Ziva Galili](#) has described these negotiations as “the Mensheviks’ finest hour.” Trotsky [likened it](#) to a vaudeville play divided by halves: “In one, the revolutionists were begging the liberals to save the revolution; in the other, the liberals were begging the monarchy to save liberalism.”

So why did the workers and soldiers, who had fought so valiantly to overthrow tsarism, allow the soviet to hand power over to a new government that represented the men of property? For one, most workers had yet to sort out the policies of the various socialist parties. Additionally, the Bolsheviks themselves were not very clear about what they were fighting for, in part because they had retained a (quickly outdated) understanding of the revolution as bourgeois-democratic, in which a provisional revolutionary government would rule. What this meant in practice, particularly after the Provisional Government’s formation, was open to different interpretations.

Although Bolshevik militants played a critical role throughout the revolutionary days, they often did so in spite of their leaders. Women textile members struck in February over the objections of party leaders who considered the time “not yet ripe” for militant action.

The leadership of the Bolshevik Bureau (Shliapnikov, Molotov, and Zalutsky) was also lacking. Even after the February 23 strike, Shliapnikov argued it was premature to call for a general strike. The Bureau failed to produce a leaflet to give to the troops and refused demands to arm the workers for impending battles.

Most of the initiative came from either the Vyborg district committee, who acted as de facto leaders for the city party organization, or from rank-and-file members — especially on the first day, when women ignored party leaders and played a decisive role in sparking the strike movement.

Throughout March, confusion and division roiled the Bolsheviks. When the Petrograd Soviet handed over political power to the bourgeoisie on March 1, not one of the eleven Bolsheviks in the executive committee opposed it. When left Bolsheviks delegates in the soviet put forward a motion calling for the soviet to form a government, only nineteen voted in favor, and many Bolsheviks voted against. On March 5, the Petersburg Committee supported the soviet call for workers to return to

their jobs, even though the eight-hour day, one of the revolutionary movement's main demands, had yet to be instituted.

The party bureau under Shliapnikov moved close to the radicals in Vyborg, who were calling for the soviet to rule. But when Kamenev, Stalin, and Muranov returned from Siberian exile and took over the bureau on March 12, the party's policies veered sharply to the right — to the delight of Menshevik and SR leaders and to the ire of many party militants in the factories, some of whom urged the expulsion of the new triumvirate.

Lenin was among the irate. On March 7, [he wrote](#) from Switzerland, “This new government is *already* bound hand and foot by imperialist capital, by the imperialist policy of *war* and plunder.” Kamenev, by contrast, argued in [Pravda](#) on March 15 that “free people” will “stand firmly at their posts, will reply bullet for bullet, shell for shell.” And in late March, Stalin spoke in favor of unifying with the Mensheviks and argued that the Provisional Government “has taken the role of fortifier of the conquests of the revolution.”

Lenin was so concerned with the leadership's right turn that on March 30, he [wrote](#) that he preferred an “immediate split with anyone in our Party, whoever it may be, to making concessions to the social-patriotism of Kerensky and Co.” No lawyer was needed to clarify Lenin's words or about whom he was speaking. “Kamenev must realize that he bears a world-historic responsibility.”

The essence of [Leninism](#) from 1905 emphasized total distrust of liberalism as a counterrevolutionary force and a sharp critique of those socialists hell bent on trying to appease it. And yet Lenin's own 1905 formulation that called for a provisional revolutionary government to carry out a bourgeois revolution had contrasted with what he termed Trotsky's “absurd and semi-anarchist ideas” calling for a “socialist revolution.” Lenin himself now moved toward this absurd idea for socialism while conservative Old Bolsheviks understandably accused him “Trotskyism.”

In many ways the coup d'état of early March was typical of those over the last century — a small unelected clique usurping power for their own class purposes at the expense of a movement that placed them in power. There were two major differences, however. One was that there was a party of the working masses that would fight relentlessly for its interests. And second, there were soviets.

The Russian Revolution had only just begun.

source: Jacobin

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