

Military Resistance 13A5

**“The Fate Of Every Revolution
At A Certain Point Is Decided By
A Break In The Disposition Of
The Army”**

**“In The Streets And Squares, By The
Bridges, At The Barrack-Gates, Is
Waged A Ceaseless Struggle Now
Dramatic, Now Unnoticeable – But
Always A Desperate Struggle, For
The Heart Of The Soldier”**

**“There Ring Out In The Barrack
Room The First Voices Of Open
Indignation, And In Those Voices –
To Be Forever Nameless – The Whole
Army With Relief And Rapture
Recognizes Itself”**

**“Soldiers With Rifles In Their Hands Are
Coming Over To Us!”**



Soldiers' wives demand increased rations in a demonstration along the Nevskii Prospekt following the celebration of International Women's Day, February 23, 1917. (Photo by K. Bulla. Courtesy of the Central State Archive of Kino-Photo-Phono Documents, St. Petersburg.)

Around the barracks, sentinels, patrols and lines of soldiers stood groups of working men and women exchanging friendly words with the army men. This was a new stage, due to the growth of the strike and the personal meeting of the worker with the army. Such a stage is inevitable in every revolution.

But it always seems new, and does in fact occur differently every time: those who have read and written about it do not recognise the thing when they see it.

**[Excerpts from: The History of the Russian Revolution By Leon Trotsky
Volume One: The Overthrow of Tzarism: February 23-27, 1917]**

Feb. 23:

“It Had Not Occurred To Anyone That It Might Become The First Day Of The Revolution”

The 23rd of February was International Woman’s Day.

The social-democratic circles had intended to mark this day in a general manner: by meetings, speeches, leaflets.

It had not occurred to anyone that it might become the first day of the revolution.

The temper of the masses, according to Kayurov, one of the leaders in the workers' district, was very tense; any strike would threaten to turn into an open fight.

But since the committee thought the time unripe for militant action – the party not strong enough and the workers having too few contacts with the soldiers – they decided not to call for strikes but to prepare for revolutionary action at some indefinite time in the future.

On the following morning, however, in spite of all directives, the women textile workers in several factories went on strike, and sent delegates to the metal workers with an appeal for support.

It was taken for granted that in case of a demonstration the soldiers would be brought out into the streets against the workers.

What would that lead to? This was wartime; the authorities were in no mood for joking.

On the other hand, "reserve" soldier in wartime is nothing like an old soldier of the regular army. Is he really so formidable?

In revolutionary circles they had discussed this much, but rather abstractly. For no one, positively no one – we can assert this categorically upon the basis of all the data – then thought that February 23 was to mark the beginning of a decisive drive against absolutism. The talk was of a demonstration which had indefinite, but in any case limited, perspectives.

Thus the fact is that the February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organisations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat – the women textile workers, among them no doubt many soldiers' wives.

The overgrown breadlines had provided the last stimulus. About 90,000 workers, men and women, were on strike that day.

On that day detachments of troops were called in to assist the police – evidently not many of them – but there were no encounters with them.

A mass of women, not all of them workers, flocked to the municipal дума demanding bread. It was like demanding milk from a he-goat.

Red banners appeared in different parts of the city, and inscriptions on them showed that the workers wanted bread, but neither autocracy nor war.

Woman's Day passed successfully, with enthusiasm and without victims. But what it concealed in itself, no one had guessed even by nightfall.

**Feb. 24:
"Down With The War"**

“How Many Clearly Realised What Was Being Ushered In By This Sympathetic Waving From Sick Soldiers To Demonstrating Workers?”

On the following day the movement not only fails to diminish, but doubles.

The slogan “Bread!” is crowded out or obscured by louder slogans: “Down with autocracy!” “Down with the war!”

Continuous demonstrations on the Nevsky – first compact masses of workmen singing revolutionary songs, later a motley crowd of city folk interspersed with the blue caps of students.

“The promenading crowd was sympathetically disposed toward us, and soldiers in some of the war-hospitals greeted us by waving whatever was at hand.”

How many clearly realised what was being ushered in by this sympathetic waving from sick soldiers to demonstrating workers?

But the Cossacks constantly, though without ferocity, kept charging the crowd. Their horses were covered with foam. The mass of demonstrators would part to let them through, and close up again. There was no fear in the crowd.

“The Cossacks promise not to shoot,” passed from mouth to mouth. Apparently some of the workers had talks with individual Cossacks. Later, however, cursing, half-drunken dragoons appeared on the scene. They plunged into the crowd, began to strike at heads with their lances. The demonstrators summoned all their strength and stood fast. They won’t shoot.” And in fact they didn’t.

Throughout the entire day, crowds of people poured from one part of the city to another. They were persistently dispelled by the police, stopped and crowded back by cavalry detachments and occasionally by infantry.

Along with shouts of “Down with the police!” was heard oftener and oftener a “Hurrah!” addressed to the Cossacks.

That was significant.

Toward the police the crowd showed ferocious hatred. They routed the mounted police with whistles, stones, and pieces of ice. In a totally different way the workers approached the soldiers.

“Around The Barracks, Sentinels, Patrols And Lines Of Soldiers Stood Groups Of Working Men And Women Exchanging Friendly Words With The Army Men”

Around the barracks, sentinels, patrols and lines of soldiers stood groups of working men and women exchanging friendly words with the army men.

This was a new stage, due to the growth of the strike and the personal meeting of the worker with the army.

Such a stage is inevitable in every revolution.

But it always seems new, and does in fact occur differently every time: those who have read and written about it do not recognise the thing when they see it.

“The Revolution Does Not Choose Its Paths: It Made Its First Steps Toward Victory Under The Belly Of A Cossack’s Horse”

In the State Duma that day they were telling how an enormous mass of people had flooded Znamensky Square and all Nevsky Prospect, and the adjoining streets and that a totally unprecedented phenomenon was observed: the Cossacks and the regiments with bands were being greeted by revolutionary and not patriotic crowds with shouts of “Hurrah!”

To the question, “What does it all mean? the first person accosted in the crowd answered the deputy: A policeman struck a woman with a knout; the Cossacks stepped in and drove away the police.”

Whether it happened in this way or another, will never be verified. But the crowd believed that it was so, that this was possible.

The belief had not fallen out of the sky; it arose from previous experience, and was therefore to become an earnest of victory.

The workers at the Erikson, one of the foremost mills in the Vyborg district, after a morning meeting came out on the Sampsonievsky Prospect, a whole mass, 2,500 of them, and in a narrow place ran into the Cossacks.

Cutting their way with the breasts of their horses, the officers first charged through the crowd. Behind them, filling the whole width of the Prospect galloped the Cossacks.

Decisive moment!

But the horsemen, cautiously, in a long ribbon, rode through the corridor just made by the officers.

“Some of them smiled,” Kayurov recalls, “and one of them gave the workers a good wink”

This wink was not without meaning. The workers were emboldened with a friendly, not hostile, kind of assurance, and slightly infected the Cossacks with it.

The one who winked found imitators. In spite of renewed efforts from the officers, the Cossacks, without openly breaking discipline, failed to force the crowd to disperse, but flowed through it in streams.

This was repeated three or four times and brought the two sides even closer together. Individual Cossacks began to reply to the workers' questions and even to enter into momentary conversations with them.

Of discipline there remained but a thin transparent shell that threatened to break through any second.

The officers hastened to separate their patrol from the workers, and, abandoning the idea of dispersing them, lined the Cossacks out across the street as a barrier to prevent the demonstrators from getting to the centre.

But even this did not help: standing stock-still in perfect discipline, the Cossacks did not hinder the workers from "diving" under their horses.

The revolution does not choose its paths: it made its first steps toward victory under the belly of a Cossack's horse.

A remarkable incident!

And remarkable the eye of its narrator—an eye which took an impression of every bend in the process. No wonder, for the narrator was a leader; he was at the head of over two thousand men. The eye of a commander watching for enemy whips and bullets looks sharp.

It seems that the break in the army first appeared among the Cossacks, those age-old subduers and punishers.

This does not mean, however, that the Cossacks were more revolutionary than others.

On the contrary, these solid property owners, riding their own horses, highly valuing their Cossack peculiarities, scorning the plain peasants, mistrustful of the workers, had many elements of conservatism.

But just for this reason the changes caused by the war were more sharply noticeable in them.

Besides, they were always being pulled around, sent everywhere, driven against the people, kept in suspense - and they were the first to be put to the test.

They were sick of it, and wanted to go home.

Therefore they winked: "Do it, boys, if you know how—we won't bother you!"

All these things, however, were merely very significant symptoms. The army was still the army, it was bound with discipline, and the threads were in the hands of the monarchy.

The worker mass was unarmed. The leaders had not yet thought of the decisive crisis.

On the calendar of the Council of Ministers that day there stood, among other questions, the question of disorders in the capital. Strikes? Demonstrations? This isn't the first time. Everything is provided for. Directions have been issued.

In the fall of 1916 this part of the government's work had assumed an aspect of particularly careful planning. A commission under Khabalov's chairmanship had completed by the middle of January 1917 a very exact plan for crushing a new insurrection.

The city was divided into six police districts, which in turn were subdivided into rayons. The commander of the reserve guard units, General Chebykin, was placed at the head of all the armed forces. Regiments were assigned to different rayons.

The Cossack cavalry was at the disposal of Chebykin himself for larger-scale operations.

The order of action was planned as follows: first the police act alone, then the Cossacks appear on the scene with whips, and only in case of real necessity the troops go into action with rifles and machine-guns. It was this very plan, developed out of the experience of 1905, that was put into operation in the February days.

The difficulty lay not in lack of foresight, nor defects of the plan itself, but in the human material.

The swollen reserve units were made up of a human mass which had either escaped training almost entirely, or succeeded in getting free of it. But for that matter, substantially the same thing was true of the entire army.

On the first day, the 23rd, the police operated alone.

On the 24th, for the most part the cavalry was led into the streets, but only to work with whip and lance.

The use of infantry and firearms was to depend on the further development of events. But events came thick and fast.

Feb. 25:

“The Soldiers Are Sullen” “Anxiously The Workers Ask Them: ‘Comrades, You Haven’t Come To Help The Police?’”

“A Worm Is Gnawing Them, And They Cannot Stand It When A Question Hits The Very Centre Of The Pain”

On the 25th, the strike spread wider. According to the government's figures, 240,000 workers participated that day.

The soldiers show indifference, at times hostility, to the police.

It spreads excitedly through the crowd that when the police opened fire by the Alexander monument, the Cossacks let go a volley at the horse “Pharaohs” (such was the nickname of the police) and the latter had to gallop off. This apparently was not a legend

circulated for self-encouragement, since the incident, although in different versions, is confirmed from several sources.

A worker-Bolshevik, Kayurov, one of the authentic leaders in those days, relates how at one place, within sight of a detachment of Cossacks, the demonstrators scattered under the whips of the mounted police, and how he, Kayurov, and several workers with him, instead of following the fugitives, took off their caps and approached the Cossacks with the words: “Brothers-Cossacks, help the workers in a struggle for their peaceable demands; you see how the Pharaohs treat us, hungry workers. Help us!”

This consciously humble manner, those caps in their hands – what an accurate psychological calculation! Inimitable gesture!

The whole history of street fights and revolutionary victories swarms with such improvisations.

“The Cossacks glanced at each other in some special way,” Kayurov continues, “and we were hardly out of the way before they rushed into the fight.”

And a few minutes later, near the station gate, the crowd were tossing in their arms a Cossack who before their eyes had slaughtered a police inspector with his saber.

Soon the police disappear altogether – that is, begin to act secretly.

Then the soldiers appear “bayonets lowered.

Anxiously the workers ask them: “Comrades, you haven’t come to help the police?”

A rude “Move along!” for answer. Another attempt ends the same way.

The soldiers are sullen.

A worm is gnawing them, and they cannot stand it when a question hits the very centre of the pain.

The police are fierce, implacable, hated and hating foes. To win them over is out of the question. Beat them up and kill them.

It is different with the soldiers: the crowd makes every effort to avoid hostile encounters with them; on the contrary, seeks ways to dispose them in its favour, convince, attract, fraternize, merge them in itself.

In spite of the auspicious rumours about the Cossacks, perhaps slightly exaggerated, the crowd’s attitude toward the mounted men remains cautious. A horseman sits high above the crowd; his soul is separated from the soul of the demonstrator by the four legs of his beast. A figure at which one must gaze from below always seems more significant, more threatening.

“A Great Role Is Played By Women Workers In The Relationship Between Workers And Soldiers”

The infantry are beside one on the pavement – closer, more accessible.

The masses try to get near them, look into their eyes, surround them with their hot breath.

A great role is played by women workers in the relationship between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: “Put down your bayonets – join us.”

The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd.

The barrier is opened, a joyous and grateful “Hurrah!” shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded.

Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals; the revolution makes another forward step.

The indulgence of the Cossacks, the wavering of certain infantry lines – these are but much-promising episodes repeated by the thousand voiced echo of the sensitive street.

Enough to inspire the revolutionary crowd, but too little for victory.

Especially since there are episodes of an opposite kind. In the afternoon a detachment of dragoons, supposedly in response to revolver shots from the crowd, first opened fire on the demonstrators near Gostinny Dvor. According to Khabalov’s report to headquarters three were killed and ten wounded.

A serious warning!

The first three days were days of uninterrupted increase in the extent and acuteness of the strife. But for this very reason the movement had arrived at a level where mere symptomatic successes were not enough. The entire active mass of the people had come out on the streets. It was settling accounts with the police successfully and easily.

In the last two days the troops had been drawn into the events – on the second day, cavalry, on the third, the infantry too.

They barred the way, pushed and crowded back the masses, sometimes connived with them, but almost never resorted to firearms.

Those in command were slow to change their plan, partly because they underestimated what was happening – the faulty vision of the reaction supplemented that of the leaders of the revolution – partly because they lacked confidence in the troops.

But exactly on the third day, the force of the developing struggle, as well as the czar's command, made it necessary for the government to send the troops into action in dead earnest. The workers understood this, especially their advance ranks; the dragoons had already done some shooting the day before. Both sides now faced the issue unequivocally.

February 26:

“In The Streets And Squares, By The Bridges, At The Barrack-Gates, Is Waged A Ceaseless Struggle Now Dramatic, Now Unnoticeable – But Always A Desperate Struggle, For The Heart Of The Soldier”

The sun of February 26 came up in a fog of uncertainty and acute anxiety.

The troops come decisively into action. They are given strict orders to shoot, and the soldiers, mostly training squads – that is, non-commissioned officers' regimental schools – do shoot.

According to the official figures, on this day about forty are killed and as many wounded, not counting those led or carried away by the crowd. The struggle arrives at a decisive stage.

Will the mass ebb before the lead and flow back to its suburbs?

No, it does not ebb.

It is bound to have its own.

This is because, in spite of the shooting, it keeps its faith in the army.

It counts on victory and intends to have it at any cost.

The pressure of the workers upon the army is increasing countering the pressure from the side of the authorities.

The Petrograd garrison comes into the focus of events.

The expectant period, which has lasted almost three days, during which it was possible for the main mass of the garrison to keep up friendly neutrality toward the insurrection, has come to an end.

“Shoot the enemy!” the monarchy commands.

“Don't shoot your brothers and sisters!” cry the workers.

And not only that: “Come with us!”

Thus in the streets and squares, by the bridges, at the barrack-gates, is waged a ceaseless struggle now dramatic, now unnoticeable – but always a desperate struggle, for the heart of the soldier.

In this struggle, in these sharp 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.

Reports about their moods were made to the authorities by a well informed agent in the Bolshevik organisation, Shurkanov. "Since the army units have not opposed the crowd, wrote this provocateur," and in individual cases have even taken measures paralyzing the initiative of the police officers, the masses have got a sense of impunity, and now, after two days of unobstructed walking the streets, when the revolutionary circles have advanced the slogans "Down with war" and "Down with the autocracy!" the people have become convinced that the revolution has begun, that success is with the masses, that the authorities are powerless to suppress the movement because the troops are with it, that a decisive victory is near, since the troops will soon openly join the side of the revolutionary forces, that the movement begun will not subside, but will ceaselessly grow to a complete victory and a state revolution."

A characterization remarkable for compactness and clarity! The report is a most valuable historic document. This did not, of course, prevent the victorious workers from executing its author.

A new relation of forces was mysteriously implanting itself in the consciousness of the workers and soldiers.

It was precisely the government's offensive, called forth by the previous offensive of the revolutionary masses, which transformed the new relation of forces from a potential to an active state.

The worker looked thirstily and commandingly into the eyes of the soldier, and the soldier anxiously and diffidently looked away. This meant that, in a way, the soldier could no longer answer for himself.

The worker approached the soldier more boldly.

The soldier sullenly, but without hostility – guiltily rather – refused to answer.

Or sometimes now more and more often – he answered with pretended severity in order to conceal how anxiously his heart was beating in his breast.

Thus the change was accomplished.

The soldier was, clearly shaking off his soldiery.

In doing so he could not immediately recognise himself.

The authorities said that the revolution intoxicated the soldier.

To the soldier it seemed, on the contrary, that he was sobering up from the opium of the barracks.

Thus the decisive day was prepared – the 27th of February.

However, on the eve of that day an incident occurred which in spite of its episodic nature paints with a new colour all the events of the 26th.

Towards evening the fourth company of the Pavlovsky regiment of the Imperial Guard mutinied.

In the written report of a police inspector the cause of the mutiny is categorically stated: "Indignation against the training squad of the same regiment which, while on duty in the Nevsky, fired on the crowd."

Who informed the fourth company of this?

A record has been accidentally preserved.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, a handful of workers ran up to the barracks of the Pavlovsky regiment. Interrupting each other, they told about a shooting on the Nevsky. "Tell your comrades that the Pavlovtsi, too, are shooting at us – we saw soldiers in your uniform on the Nevsky."

That was a burning reproach, a flaming appeal.

"All looked distressed and pale."

The seed fell not upon the rock.

By six o'clock the fourth company had left the barracks without permission under the command of a non-commissioned officer – Who was he?

His name is drowned forever among hundreds and thousands of equally heroic names – and marched to the Nevsky to recall its training squad.

This was not a mere soldiers' mutiny over wormy meat; it was an act of high revolutionary initiative.

On their way down, the company had an encounter with a detachment of mounted police. The soldiers opened fire.

One policeman and one horse were killed; another policeman and another horse were wounded.

The further path of the mutineers in the hurricane of the streets is unknown.

The company returned to the barracks and aroused the entire regiment. But their arms had been hidden. According to some sources, they nevertheless got hold of thirty rifles. They were soon surrounded by the Preobrazhentsi.

Nineteen Pavlovtsi were arrested and imprisoned in the fortress; the rest surrendered.

According to other information, the officers on that evening found twenty-one soldiers with rifles missing. A dangerous leak!

These twenty-one soldiers would be seeking allies and defenders all night long.

Only the victory of the revolution could save them. The workers would surely learn from them what had happened. This was not a bad omen for tomorrow's battles.

Nabokov, one of the most prominent liberal leaders, whose truthful memoirs seem at times to be the very diary of his party and of his class, was returning home from a visit at one o'clock in the morning along the dark and watchful streets. He was "perturbed and filled with dark forebodings."

It is possible that at one of the crossings he met a fugitive Pavlovetz. Both hurried past: they had nothing to say to each other.

In the workers' quarters and the barracks some kept watch or conferred, others slept the half-sleep of the bivouac, or dreamed feverishly about tomorrow.

Here the fugitive Pavlovetz found shelter.

"All The Thoughts Of The Workers Were Concentrated On The Army"

Pouring through the streets, colliding with the enemy, pulling at the arms of soldiers, crawling under horses' bellies, attacking, scattering, leaving their corpses on the crossings, grabbing a few firearms, spreading the news, catching at rumours, the insurrectionary mass becomes a collective entity with numberless eyes, ears and antennae.

At night, returning home from the arena of struggle to the workers' quarter, it goes over the impressions of the day, and sifting away what is petty and accidental, casts its own thoughtful balance.

The general strike had issued in revolutionary demonstrations by immense crowds, and the demonstrations had led to a collision with the troops. To continue the struggle to day would mean to summon an armed insurrection. But nobody had formulated this summons. It had grown irresistibly out of the events, but it was never placed on the order of the day by a revolutionary party.

All the thoughts of the workers were concentrated on the army.

"Don't you think we can get them started?"

Today haphazard agitation would no longer do.

"The Leaders Of The Workers Fumed, Looked For Firearms, Demanded Them From The Party. And The Answer Was: The Soldiers Have The Firearms, Go Get Them"

The Vyborg section staged a meeting near the barracks of the Moscow regiment. The enterprise proved a failure.

Is it difficult for some officer or sergeant major to work the handle of a machine gun? The workers were scattered by cruel fire.

A similar attempt was made at the barracks of Reserve regiment. And there too: officers with machine gun interfered between the workers and soldiers.

The leaders of the workers fumed, looked for firearms, demanded them from the party.

And the answer was: "The soldiers have the firearms, go get them."

That they knew themselves. But how to get them?

Isn't everything going to collapse all at once to day? Thus came on the critical point of the struggle.

Either the machine gun will wipe out the insurrection, or the insurrection will capture the machine gun.

"The Fate Of Every Revolution At A Certain Point Is Decided By A Break In The Disposition Of The Army"

There is no doubt that the fate of every revolution at a certain point is decided by a break in the disposition of the army.

Against a numerous, disciplined, well-armed and ably led military force, unarmed or almost unarmed masses of the people cannot possibly gain a victory.

But no deep national crisis can fail to affect the army to some extent.

Thus along with the conditions of a truly popular revolution there develops a possibility – not, of course, a guarantee – of its victory.

However, the going over of the army to the insurrection does not happen of itself, nor as a result of mere agitation.

The army is heterogeneous, and its antagonistic elements are held together by the terror of discipline.

On the very eve of the decisive hour, the revolutionary soldiers do not know how much power they have, or what influence they can exert.

The working masses, of course, are also heterogeneous. But they have immeasurably more opportunity for testing their ranks in the process of preparation for the decisive encounter. Strikes, meetings, demonstrations, are not only acts in the struggle, but also measures of its force.

The whole mass does not participate in the strike. Not all the strikers are ready to fight. In the sharpest moments the most daring appear in the streets. The hesitant, the tired, the conservative, sit at home.

Here a revolutionary selection takes place of itself; people are sifted through the sieve of events.

It is otherwise with the army.

The revolutionary soldiers – sympathetic, wavering or antagonistic – are all tied together by a compulsory discipline whose threads are held, up to the last moment, in the officer's fist. The soldiers are told off daily into first and second files, but how are they to be divided into rebellious and obedient?

The psychological moment when the soldiers go over to the revolution is prepared by a long molecular process, which, like other processes of nature, has its point of climax.

But how determine this point?

A military unit may be wholly prepared to join the people, but may not receive the needed stimulus. The revolutionary leadership does not yet believe in the possibility of having the army on its side, and lets slip the victory. After this ripened but unrealized mutiny, a reaction may seize the army.

The soldiers lose the hope which flared in their breasts; they bend their necks again to the yoke of discipline, and in a new encounter with the workers, especially at a distance, will stand opposed to the insurrection.

In this process there are many elements imponderable or difficult to weigh, many crosscurrents, collective suggestions and autosuggestions.

But out of this complicated web of material and psychic forces one conclusion emerges with irrefutable clarity: the more the soldiers in their mass are convinced that the rebels are really rebelling – that this is not a demonstration after which they will have to go back to the barracks and report, that this is a struggle to the death, that the people may win if they join them, and that this winning will not only guarantee impunity, but alleviate the lot of all – the more they realize this, the more willing they are to turn aside their bayonets, or go over with them to the people.

In other words, the revolutionaries can create a break in the soldiers' mood only if they themselves are actually ready to seize the victory at any price whatever, even the price of blood.

And the highest determination never can, or will, remain unarmed.

The critical hour of contact between the pushing crowd and the soldiers who bar their way has its critical minute.

That is when the grey barrier has not yet given way, still holds together shoulder to shoulder, but already wavers, and the officer, gathering his last strength of will, gives the command: "Fire!"

The cry of the crowd, the yell of terror and threat, drowns the command, but not wholly.

The rifles waver.

The crowd pushes.

Then the officer points the barrel of his revolver at the most suspicious soldier. From the decisive minute now stands out the decisive second. The death of the boldest soldier, to whom the others have involuntarily looked for guidance, a shot into the crowd by a corporal from the dead man's rifle, and the barrier closes, the guns go off of themselves, scattering the crowd into the alleys and backyards.

But how many times since 1905 it has happened otherwise! At the critical moment, when the officer is ready to pull the trigger, a shot from the crowd – which has its Kayurovs and Chugurins – forestalls him. This decides not only the fate of the street skirmish, but perhaps the whole day, or the whole insurrection.

“They Did Not Want To Fight With The Germans, And Still Less With The Petrograd Workers. They Hated The Ruling Class Of The Capital, Who Had Been Having A Good Time During The War”

“There Ring Out In The Barrack Room The First Voices Of Open Indignation, And In Those Voices – To Be Forever Nameless – The Whole Army With Relief And Rapture Recognizes Itself”

The feelings of the soldiers in those hours were less active than those of the workers, but not less deep.

Let us recall again that the garrison consisted mainly of reserve battalions many thousands strong, destined to fill up the ranks of those at the front. These men, most of them fathers of families, had the prospect of going to the trenches when the war was lost and the country ruined.

They did not want war, they wanted to go home to their farms.

They knew well enough what was going on at court, and had not the slightest feeling of attachment to the monarchy.

They did not want to fight with the Germans, and still less with the Petrograd workers. They hated the ruling class of the capital, who had been having a good time during the war.

Among them were workers with a revolutionary past, who knew how to give a generalized expression to all these moods.

To bring the soldiers from a deep but as yet hidden revolutionary discontent to overt mutinous action – or, at least, first to a mutinous refusal to act – that was the task.

On the third day of the struggle the soldiers totally ceased to be able to maintain a benevolent neutrality toward the insurrection. Only accidental fragments of what happened in those hours along the line of contact between workers and soldiers have come down to us.

We heard how yesterday the workers complained passionately to the Pavlovsky regiment about the behaviour of its training squad. Such scenes, conversations, reproaches, appeals, were occurring in every corner of the city.

The soldiers had no more time for hesitation. They were compelled to shoot yesterday, and they would be again today.

The workers will not surrender or retreat; under fire they are still holding their own.

And with them their women-wives, mothers, sisters, sweethearts.

Yes, and this is the very hour they had so often whispered about: “If only we could all get together ...”

And the moment of supreme agony, in the unbearable fear of the coming day, the choking hatred of those who are imposing upon them the executioner’s rôle, there ring out in the barrack room the first voices of open indignation, and in those voices – to be forever nameless – the whole army with relief and rapture recognizes itself.

Thus dawned upon the earth the day of destruction of the Romanov monarchy.

Feb. 27:

**“Soldiers With Rifles In Their Hands Are Coming Over To Us!”
“It Was Not Easy To Tell Who Was Shooting Or Where. One Thing Was
Clear: The Past And The Future Were Exchanging Shots”**

One after another, from early morning, the Reserve Guard battalions mutinied before they were led out of the barracks, continuing what the 4th Company of the Pavlovsky regiment had begun the day before.

In the documents, records, memoirs, this grandiose event of human history has left but a pale, dim imprint.

The oppressed masses, even when they rise to the very heights of creative action, tell little of themselves and write less. And the overpowering rapture of the victory later erases memory’s work.

Let us take up what records there are.

The soldiers of the Volynsky regiment were the first to revolt.

As early as seven o'clock in the morning a battalion commander disturbed Khabalov with a telephone call and this threatening news: the training squad – that is, the unit especially relied on to put down the insurrection – had refused to march out, its commander was killed, or had shot himself in front of the troops. The latter version, by the way, was soon rejected.

Having burned their bridges behind them, the Volintzi hastened to broaden the base of the insurrection. In that lay their only salvation.

They rushed into the neighbouring barracks of the Litovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments “calling out” the soldiers, as strikers go from factory to factory calling out the workers.

Some time after, Khabalov received a report that the Volynsky regiment had not only refused to surrender their rifles when ordered by the general, but together with the Litovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments – and what is even more alarming, “having joined the workers” – had wrecked the barracks of the political police.

This meant that yesterday's experiment of the Pavlovtsi had not been in vain: the insurrection had found leaders, and at the same time a plan of action.

In the early hours of the 27th, the workers thought the solution of the problem of the insurrection infinitely more distant than it really was. It would be truer to say that they saw the problem as almost entirely ahead of them, when it was really, nine-tenths behind.

The revolutionary pressure of the workers on the barracks fell in with the existing revolutionary movement of the soldiers to the streets.

During the day these two mighty currents united to wash out clean and carry away the walls, the roof, and later the whole groundwork of the old structure.

Chugurin was among the first to appear at the Bolshevik headquarters, a rifle in his hands, a cartridge belt over his shoulder,” all spattered up, but beaming and triumphant.”

Why shouldn't he beam?

Soldiers with rifles in their hands are coming over to us!

In some places the workers had succeeded in uniting with the soldiers, penetrating the barracks and receiving rifles and cartridges. The Vyborgtsi together with the most daring of the soldiers, outlined a plan of action: seize the police stations where the armed police have entrenched themselves; disarm all policemen; free the workers held in the police stations, and the political prisoners in the jails; rout the government troops in the city proper; unite with the still inactive troops and with the workers of other districts.

The Moscow regiment joined the uprising not without inner struggle.

Amazing that there was so little struggle among the regiments.

The monarchist command impotently fell away from the soldier mass, and either hid in the cracks or hastened to change its colors.

“At two o’clock,” remembers Korôlev, a worker from the “Arsenal” factory, “when the Moscow regiment marched out, we armed ourselves ... We took a revolver and rifle apiece, picked out a group of soldiers who came up some of them asked us to take command and tell them what to do, and set out for Tikhvinskaia street to shoot up the police station.”

The workers, it seems, did not have a moment’s trouble telling the soldiers “what to do.”

One after another came the joyful reports of victories.

Our own armoured cars have appeared!

With red flags flying, they are spreading terror through the districts to all who have not yet submitted.

Now it will no longer be necessary to crawl under the belly of a Cossack’s horse. The revolution is standing up to its full height.

Toward noon Petrograd again became the field of military action; rifles and machine guns rang out everywhere. It was not easy to tell who was shooting or where. One thing was clear: the past and the future were exchanging shots.

On Sampsonievsky boulevard the workers came up to a barrack occupied by the bicycle men, some of whom crowded into the gate.” Why don’t you get on the move, comrades?”

The soldiers smiled “not a good smile,” one of the participants testifies and remained silent, while the officers rudely commanded the workers to move on. The bicyclists, along with the cavalry, proved to be the most conservative part of, the army in the February, as in the October revolution.

A crowd of workers and revolutionary soldiers soon gathered round the fence. “We must pull out the suspicious battalion!” Someone reported that the armoured cars had been sent for; perhaps there was no other way of getting these bicyclists, who had set up the machine guns.

But it is hard for a crowd to wait; it is anxiously impatient, and quite right in its impatience. Shots rang out from both sides. But the board fence stood in the way, dividing the soldiers from the revolution. The attackers decided to break down the fence. They broke down part of it and set fire to the rest.

About twenty barracks came into view. The bicyclists were concentrated in two or three of them. The empty barracks were set fire to at once.

Six years later Kayurov would recall: “The flaming barracks and the wreckage of the fence around them, the fire of machine guns and rifles, the excited faces of the

besiegers, a truck load of armed revolutionists dashing up, and finally an armoured car arriving with its gleaming gun mouths, made a memorable and magnificent picture.”

This was the old czarist, feudal, priestly, police Russia burning down, barracks and fences and all, expiring in fire and smoke, spewing out its soul with the cough of machine-gun shots.

No wonder Kayurov, and tens, hundreds, thousands of Kayurovs, rejoiced!

The arriving armoured car fired several shells at the barracks where the bicyclists and officers were barricaded.

The commander was killed. The officers, tearing off their epaulets and other insignia, fled through the vegetable gardens adjoining the barracks; the rest gave themselves up. This was probably the biggest encounter of the day.

“The Czarist Garrison Of The Capital, Numbering 150,000 Soldiers, Was Dwindling, Melting, Disappearing. By Night It No Longer Existed”

The military revolt had meanwhile become epidemic.

Only those did not mutiny that day who did not get around to it.

Toward evening the Semenovskiy regiment joined in, a regiment notorious for its brutal putting down of the Moscow uprising of 1905. Eleven years had not passed in vain. Together with the chasseurs, the Semenovskiy late at night “called out” the Izmailovskiy, whom the command were holding locked up in their barracks. This regiment, which on December 3, 1905 had surrounded and arrested the first Petrograd soviet, was even now considered one of the most backward.

The czarist garrison of the capital, numbering 150,000 soldiers, was dwindling, melting, disappearing. By night it no longer existed.

After the morning’s news of the revolt of the regiments, Khabalov still tried to offer resistance, sending against the revolution a composite regiment of about a thousand men with the most drastic orders.

But the fate of that regiment has become quite a mystery.

“Something impossible begins to happen on that day,” the incomparable Khabalov relates after the revolution, “... the regiment starts, starts under a brave, a resolute officer (meaning Colonel Kutypov), but ... there are no results.”

Companies sent after that regiment also vanished, leaving no trace.

The general began to draw up reserves on Palace Square, “but there were no cartridges and nowhere to get them.” This is taken from Khabalov’s authentic testimony before the Commission of Inquiry of the Provisional Government.

What became of the punitive regiments? It is not hard to guess that as soon as they marched out they were drowned in the insurrection.

Workers, women, youths, rebel soldiers, swarmed around Khabalov's troops on all sides, either considering the regiment their own or striving to make it so, and did not let them move any way but with the multitude. To fight with this thick swarming, inexhaustible, all-penetrating mass, which now feared nothing, was as easy as to fence in dough.

Together with reports of more and more military revolts, came demands for reliable troops to put down the rebels, to defend the telephone building, the Litovsky Castle, the Mariinsky Palace, and other even more sacred places.

Khabalov demanded by telephone that loyal troops be sent from Kronstadt, but the commandant replied that he himself feared for the fortress.

Khabalov did not yet know that the insurrection had spread to the neighbouring Garrisons.

The general attempted, or pretended to attempt, to convert the Winter Palace into a redoubt, but the plan was immediately abandoned as unrealizable, and the last handful of "loyal" troops was transferred to the Admiralty.

Here at last the dictator occupied himself with a most important and urgent business he printed for publication the last two governmental decrees on the retirement of Protopopov "owing to illness," and on the state of siege in Petrograd. With the latter he really had to hurry, for several hours later Khabalov's army lifted the "siege" and departed from the Admiralty for their homes.

It was due only to ignorance that the revolution had not already on the evening of the 27th arrested this formidably empowered but not at all formidable general. This was done without any complications the next day.

Can it be that that was the whole resistance put up by the redoubtable Russian Empire in the face of mortal danger?

Yet that was about all - in spite of its great experience in crushing the people and its meticulously elaborated plans.

When they came to themselves later, the monarchists explained the case of the February victory of the people by the peculiar character of the Petrograd garrison.

But the whole further course of the revolution refutes this explanation.

True, at the beginning of the fatal year, the camarilla had already suggested to the czar the advisability of renovating the garrison. The czar had easily allowed himself to be persuaded that the cavalry of the Guard, considered especially loyal, "had been under fire long enough" and had earned a rest in its Petrograd barracks.

However, after respectful representations from the front, the czar agreed that four regiments of the cavalry Guard should be replaced by three crews of the naval Guard.

According to Protopopov's version, this replacement was made by the command without the czar's consent, and with treacherous design: "... The sailors are recruited from among the workers and constitute the most revolutionary element of the forces."

But this is sheer nonsense.

The highest officers of the Guard, and particularly the cavalry, were simply cutting out too good a career for themselves at the front to want to come back.

Besides that, they must have thought with some dread of the punitive functions to be allotted to them.

In these they would be at the head of troops totally different after their experience at the front from what they used to be on the parade grounds of the capital.

As events at the front soon proved, the horse Guard at this time no longer differed from the rest of the cavalry, and the naval Guard, which was transferred to the capital, did not play an active part in the February revolution.

The whole truth is that the fabric of the régime had completely decayed; there was not a live thread left.

It is impossible to say who thought of leading the mutinous troops to the Tauride Palace.

This political line of march was dictated by the whole situation.

Naturally all the elements of radicalism not bound up with the masses gravitated toward the Tauride Palace as the centre of oppositional information. Quite probably these elements, having experienced on the 27th a sudden injection of vital force, became the guides of the mutinous soldiers.

This was an honourable role and now hardly a dangerous one.

In view of its location, Potemkin's palace was well fitted to be the centre of the revolution.

The Tauride is separated by just one street from the whole military community, containing the barracks of the Guard and a series of military institutions.

It is true that for many years this part of the city was considered both by the government and the revolutionizes to be the military stronghold of the monarchy. And so it was. But now everything had changed.

The soldiers' rebellion had begun in the Guard sector. The mutinous troops had only to cross the street in order to reach the park of the Tauride Palace, which in turn was only one block from the Neva River. And beyond the Neva lies the Vyborg district, the very cauldron of the revolution.

The workers need only cross Alexander's Bridge, or if that is up, walk over the ice of the river, to reach the Guards' barracks or the Tauride Palace. Thus the heterogeneous, and in its origins contradictory, north east triangle of Petrograd – the Guards, Potemkin's

palace, and the giant factories – closely interlocked – became the field of action of the revolution.

In the Tauride Palace various centres are already created, or at least sketched out – among them the field staff of the insurrection. It has no very serious character.

The revolutionary officers – that is, those officers who had somehow or other, even though by mistake, got connected with the revolution in the past, but who have safely slept through the insurrection – hasten after the victory to call attention to themselves, or upon summons from others arrive “to serve the revolution.”

They survey the situation with profound thought and pessimistically shake their heads.

These tumultuous crowds of soldiers, often unarmed, are totally unfit for battle.

No artillery, no machine guns, no communications, no commanders.

One strong regiment is all the enemy needs!

To be sure, just now the revolutionary crowds prevent any planned maneuvers in the streets. But the workers will go home for the night, the residents will quiet down, the town will be emptied. If Khabalov were to strike with a strong regiment at the barracks, he might become master of the situation.

This idea, by the way, will meet us in different versions throughout all the stages of the revolution. “Give me a strong regiment,” gallant colonels will more than once exclaim to their friends, “and in two seconds I will clean up all this mess!”

And some of them, as we shall see, will make the attempt. But they will all have to repeat Khabalov’s words: “The regiment starts, starts under a brave officer, but ... there are no results.”

Yes, and how could there be results?

Where could the monarchy get that salvation regiment, ready and able to enter a prolonged and desperate duel with a city of two million?

“A Revolution Is Always Distinguished By Impoliteness, Probably Because The Ruling Classes Did Not Take The Trouble In Good Season To Teach The People Fine Manners”

The revolution seems defenseless to these verbally so enterprising colonels, because it is still terrifically chaotic.

Everywhere aimless movements, conflicting currents, whirlpools of people, individuals astounded as though suddenly gone deaf, unfastened trench coats, gesticulating students, soldiers without rifles, rifles without soldiers, boys firing

into the air, a thousand-voiced tumult, hurricanes of wild rumour, false alarms, false rejoicing.

Enough, you would think, to lift a sword over all that chaos, and it would scatter apart and leave never a trace.

But that is a crude error of vision. It is only seeming chaos.

Beneath it is proceeding an irresistible crystallization of the masses around new axes.

These innumerable crowds have not yet clearly defined what they want, but they are saturated with an acid hatred of what they do not want.

Behind them is an irreparable historic avalanche.

There is no way back.

Even if there were someone to scatter them, they would be gathering again in an hour, and the second flood would be more furious and bloodier than the first.

After the February days the atmosphere of Petrograd becomes so red hot that every hostile military detachment arriving in that mighty forge, or even coming near to it, scorched by its breath, is transformed, loses confidence, becomes paralyzed, and throws itself upon the mercy of the victor without a struggle.

Towards evening of the 27th, a stream of soldiers, workers, students and miscellaneous people flows toward the Tauride, Palace. Here they hope to find those who know everything – to get information and instructions.

From all sides ammunition is being carried by armfuls into the palace, and deposited in a room that has been converted into an arsenal. At nightfall, the revolutionary staff settles down to work. It sends out detachments to guard the railway stations, and dispatches reconnoitering squads wherever danger lurks. The soldiers carry out eagerly and without a murmur, although very unsystematically, the orders of the new authorities.

But they always demand a written order. The initiative in this probably came from the fragments of the military staff which had remained with the troops, or from the military clerks. But they were right; it is necessary to bring order immediately into the chaos.

The revolution begins a search for enemies. Arrests are made all over the city – “arbitrarily,” as the liberals will say reproachfully later.

But the whole revolution is arbitrary.

Streams of people are brought into the Tauride under arrest such people as the Chairman of the State Council, ministers, policemen, secret service men, the “pro-German” countess, whole broods of gendarme officers. Several statesmen, such as Protopopov, will come of their own volition to be arrested: it is safer so. “The walls of the chamber which had resounded to hymns in praise of absolutism, now heard but sobbing and sighs,” the countess will subsequently relate.

“An arrested general sank down exhausted on a nearby chair. Several members of the Duma kindly offered me a cup of tea. Shaken to the depths of his soul, the general was saying excitedly: Countess, we are witnessing the death of a great country.”

Meanwhile, the great country, which had no intention of dying, marched by these people of the past, stamping its boots, clanging the butts of its rifles, rending the air with its shouts, and stepping all over their feet.

A revolution is always distinguished by impoliteness, probably because the ruling classes did not take the trouble in good season to teach the people fine manners.

The first night of the triumphant revolution was full of alarms. The improvised commissars of the railway terminals and other points, most of them chosen haphazard from the intelligentsia through personal connection, upstarts and chance acquaintances of the revolution -- non-commissioned officers, especially of worker origin, would have been more useful -- got nervous, saw danger on all sides, nagged the soldiers and ceaselessly telephoned to the Tauride asking for reinforcements.

But in the Tauride too they were nervous. They were telephoning. They were sending out reinforcements which for the most part did not arrive. “Those who receive orders,” said a member of the Tauride night staff, “do not execute them; those who act, act without orders.”

The workers' districts act without orders. The Revolutionary chiefs who have led out their factories, seized the police stations, “called out” the soldiers and wrecked the strongholds of the counter-revolution, do not hurry to the Tauride Palace, to the staffs, to the administrative centres.

On the contrary, they jerk their heads in that direction with irony and distrust: “Those brave boys are getting in early to divide the game they didn't kill – before it's even killed.”

Worker-Bolsheviks, as well as the best workers of the other Left parties, spend their days on the streets, their nights in the district headquarters, keeping in touch with the barracks and preparing tomorrow's work.

On the first night of victory they continue, and they enlarge, the same work they have been at for the whole five days and nights.

They are the young bones of the revolution, still soft, as all revolutions are in the first days.

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U.S. soldier in Bejjia village Iraq, Feb. 4, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

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