

**WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!**

***K. SVERDLOVA***

**Yakov**

**SVERDLOV**

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**ЯКОВ МИХАЙЛОВИЧ СВЕРДЛОВ**  
*На английском языке*

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This biography of Yakov Sverdlov, one of Lenin's faithful followers and comrades, was written by Klavdiya Sverdlova, his wife and companion. She shared his life in the revolutionary underground and suffered arrest and exile with him.

Sverdlov's was an inspiring life: he was an eminent Communist Party leader, a prominent revolutionary activist and a man of great personal charm.

The book is intended for the general reader.

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# Chapter One

## COMRADE ANDREI

### OUR FIRST MEETING

I<sup>1</sup> met Yakov Sverdlov long ago in Ekaterinburg, the town in the Ural Mountains that is now Sverdlovsk. Those were unforgettable days, the days of the first Russian revolution.

October 1905... A wave of mass political strikes and demonstrations was sweeping the country, an armed uprising against the Tsarist autocracy was close at hand, and the villages were alight with the blaze of peasant revolt.

I was released from prison in Ekaterinburg in the middle of October, pending my trial. They had arrested me in spring when our underground press had been discovered; as a member of the Ekaterinburg committee of the RSDLP<sup>2</sup> I had been involved in our printing activities.

My first move when I left prison was to make careful contact with my comrades on the Ekaterinburg Party committee, to decide our most fundamental and pressing problem — what to do next. I did not think that I could continue to work in Ekaterinburg; although the

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<sup>1</sup> Klavdiya Timofeevna Sverdlova (née Novgorodtseva) was Sverdlov's wife, companion and comrade. Andrei Sverdlov, their son, recorded her memoirs and supervised their publication during her lifetime. She died in 1960. — *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> The RSDLP (Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party) was renamed in 1918, after the Great October Socialist Revolution, becoming the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) — RCP(B). After the formation of the USSR the Party changed its name to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) — CPSU(B). In 1952 it became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) — *Ed.*

local gendarmes and their spies did not know that I was a committee member, my face was too familiar — I had become fully convinced of that on the day of my arrest. An agent of the secret political police had taken me to prison and stayed while the chief warden filled in my form. I sat with a large woollen shawl thrown over my head and answered his interminable, tedious questions in monosyllables. When he came to my distinguishing features and asked me to remove the shawl so that he could check the colour of my eyes and the shape of my nose — it all mattered to them — the agent interrupted him with a sneer.

“Leave her be,” he commanded. “We know her looks by heart.”

It would be hard to leave my town, the town of my childhood and youth, where I had become deeply involved in revolutionary work and had joined the Bolshevik Party, where I had friends and comrades. But I knew that it was inevitable — I would have to move to another town where the secret police did not know me, make contact with the Party there and start my work anew.

So it was decided. But no sooner had I made up my mind and was ready to set off at any moment, that I suddenly heard that Comrade Andrei wanted to meet me.

I had never seen this Comrade Andrei, although I knew that it was Yakov Sverdlov’s party name, the one he was using when he appeared in Ekaterinburg at the end of September 1905, sent by the Party’s Central Committee to represent them in the Urals.

Even in prison, news about the new Central Committee representative had reached me, and when I came out the local committee was buzzing with talk about him. It seemed remarkably inadvisable for me to see him. After all, it had been decided that I was to leave, the committee approved and I no longer belonged to the local organization. Did Comrade Andrei want to meet me out of pure curiosity? But supposing the spies used

me to get on to his trail — was it really worth risking such a valuable member of our organization for one single pointless meeting? That is roughly how I saw it, and I said as much to the comrade who brought me the news.

But my protests fell on deaf ears. It seemed that Comrade Andrei's rule was to talk to every party member who left the town and he was particularly determined to see me because I had been on the Ekaterinburg committee. I would have to be extremely careful, do everything possible to avoid being shadowed and not give the spies any help. Andrei and the committee could guarantee the strictest security for our meeting and the rest was up to me.

This left me no room for argument, so a few days later I made my way to the rendezvous point at the agreed time to meet a member of our organization. On the way I did all I could to confuse my tracks, going from one street to another by way of courtyards and alleys, and I did not go to the assigned place until I was sure I had not been tailed.

My comrade was already there. He took my arm, and we set off down the main street, pushing through the noisy, jolly crowd, looking for all the world like a courting couple.

When we reached the dam across the Iset River my friend pointed out a young man — a very young man, really only a lad — who was strolling along in a carefree sort of way. There was nothing striking about him at first glance. He was of average height, slender and smart. His cap was pushed back slightly from his forehead and waves of thick black hair stubbornly jutted out from under it. A simple black Russian blouse fitted his lean body snugly, his jacket was thrown across his shoulders, and his entire compact and dynamic physique radiated youthful energy. His clothes, though well-worn, were clean and neat.

My first general impression was favourable — but he

was so very young! Could this really be the same Comrade Andrei that I had heard so much about? I looked enquiringly at my companion. He silently gave the slightest of nods, let go of my arm and slowed his pace, so that I left him behind. Just then Comrade Andrei noticed us and turned off into a quiet side street, where I joined him.

Our conversation got off to a lively start, as though we had long been good friends. His voice was really charming — a deep velvety bass, which at first seemed to sit oddly with his slight build.

Many years have passed and little details about our meeting have slipped my memory, but I do know that Sverdlov made an indelible impression on me that day.

“So you’re leaving the Urals,” he began. “You’re all ready to cut and run.”

Cut and run — the very idea! I put my detailed and well-considered arguments to him, convinced that my reasons for leaving were unimpeachable.

Andrei was a good listener, immediately getting to the kernel of any issue, and able to provide the very words one was seeking.

He heard me out and then said: “The point is that people who know the local conditions are vital to the Party these days. You ran a study circle in the Yates factory, you know the Verkhny Isetsk plant, you know the people and understand the work here. And you’re known to the local workers and the organization. Now, where will you be of most use — here or elsewhere? Clear as day. It’s essential to the Party that you stay in Ekaterinburg.

“You could be caught, you could be followed, you won’t be able to visit people, attend workers’ groups or go to conspiratorial meetings in private flats... True enough, fine reasoning, taking things as they were, but things are changing all the time. Revolution is coming on the crest of a great wave and it’s spreading to all cor-



ners of the country, to the Urals, to Ekaterinburg. Every day more and more people, politically conscious workers mostly, are joining the movement. So even if they increase the number of spies, which is not so easy and takes time, there still won't be one spy for everybody. They'll get confused and dash from one suspect to another — and that will only make our task easier. And besides," Andrei smiled "what are spies for if not to be taken for a ride? The more certain you are that you could be followed, the craftier and more careful you'll be — and the more smartly you'll fool them."

That is how our forthright and resolute Andrei scotched the ideas that I and many others in the area had about the rules of conspiratorial behaviour, showing us that those rules could be a hindrance in this new situation. After this conversation I saw clearly that the expansion of the revolutionary movement posed new problems and demanded a new approach.

Sverdlov was hardly twenty then, but in one brief conversation he taught me to see our work as part of a movement involving all Russia's proletariat and peasantry; he opened up new horizons for me.

And I stayed in Ekaterinburg.

That is how I began my work with Comrade Andrei — with Yakov Sverdlov.

At that time our revolutionary activity in the Urals faced a number of problems that were strictly local. The proletariat there was not only unusual in itself, it had a unique history.

Russian metallurgy began in the Urals in the early eighteenth century, with the construction of huge mining and metallurgical enterprises. As Russian capitalism developed, the centre of the industry moved south and several new factories appeared, with more advanced equipment. The system in those southern factories was purely capitalist: the worker bound himself to his master

by the sale of his labour. After the abolition of serfdom<sup>1</sup> the Ural workers no longer belonged body and soul to their master and no longer had to do obligatory labour in the factories, but numerous vestiges of serfdom still held the whole vast area, as big as several European states combined, in a firm and intricate grip. The factory workers were in a state of semi-servile dependence, attached to their masters by the chains of hoary custom. Unlike other workers, they had been born and raised in the very factories where generations of their own families had laboured in eternal slavery for generations of masters.

They were not freed from obligatory labour in the factories until 1863; then they received plots of land and pasture in the areas which belonged to the factories, and were accorded water and wooding rights on their masters' lands. And this bound them to their factories no less firmly than serfdom had.

But garden plots and pasture alone could not feed the worker's family; the factory remained his main source of income, and there things went from bad to worse. South Russian metallurgy was successfully competing with the Urals, forcing the owners there to install new machinery and cut down their work force in order to preserve their profits.

This further embittered the workers and increased their determination to oppose the status quo. Strikes and walkouts, the usual methods of attack, were not always successful, though, for certain owners had no objection to shortening the working day or closing down completely for two or three days. Only long strikes, where the workers were fully behind their leadership,

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<sup>1</sup> Serfdom was a complex, typically feudal juridical system, all-embracing and terribly inhumane. It ensured that the peasant was totally dependent on his lord and could not leave the land he was assigned to. He was thus held "in servitude" on that land. — *Ed.*

were worthwhile.

The matter was further complicated in that the factories were not in the towns but were scattered throughout the area, often tens of hundreds of miles away from each other, from inhabited areas, and from the railways.

Meanwhile echoes of the shots fired on the Palace Square in St. Petersburg on January 9, 1905 reached us.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionary activity in Russia took an upswing, and the Ural workers reacted with enthusiasm. Occasional strikes broke out, which, though not always successful, spread from one factory to another and brought the class struggle, like a consuming fire, to the area.

We social-democrats had to find a way of mastering the workers' ancient hatred of the factory owners and the Tsar's local officials, the police and the bureaucrats in particular, and of organizing it to sustain the class struggle. To do this we would have to be on continual guard against other political elements in the area — the Socialist-Revolutionaries,<sup>2</sup> the Mensheviks,<sup>3</sup> the anar-

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<sup>1</sup> A peaceful mass demonstration before the Winter Palace was fired on by Tsarist troops, leaving many dead and wounded. — *Tr.*

<sup>2</sup> The Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) were a petty-bourgeois party founded in 1902. They wanted to abolish the traditional landowning system on the principle of "land divided equally among those who work the land." Their basic method was individual terrorism. After the defeat of the revolution, between 1905 and 1907, the majority of SRs adopted a bourgeois liberal position. In the bourgeois democratic revolution of February 1917 the SR leaders joined the bourgeois Provisional Government, where they pursued a policy inimical to the peasant movement, and stood behind the bourgeoisie and the landlords in their attacks on the working class, which at that time was preparing for the coming socialist revolution. After October 1917 the SRs were involved in armed resistance to Soviet power. — *Ed.*

<sup>3</sup> At the Second RSDLP Congress in 1903 the Leninist group obtained a majority of votes when elections to the cen-

chists and the petty bourgeoisie, whose influence extended to some of the less perceptive members of the proletariat.

## LEADING THE URAL WORKERS

Organization was what the Bolsheviks, the workers and all the people of the Urals needed above all else. At the outset of the 1905 revolution the social-democrats had a fairly well-developed network of local groups but they were dispersed, had poor communications and often found themselves acting independently under their various leaderships.

In those days the revolutionary scene was changing so rapidly that it was imperative for us to exert every effort, not to spare ourselves, to grasp the political situation in depth and correctly assess each new event, exploiting the revolutionary ferment among the workers to lift the whole movement to a new level. And this was precisely the time when the local RSDLP committees could barely cope with their normal daily workload. Certainly they put out leaflets, led the workers in individual strikes and demonstrations, even occasionally formed combat groups — but they in no way represented the organizational force that was needed to support and direct all local political activity. We did not even have a Party headquarters in our area. That is why we in the Urals were in such desperate need of organizers, agitators and propagandists, experienced men who understood the local situation, could talk to the workers in their own language and pull the Party groups together.

And that was why the Party Central Committee had sent us Yakov Sverdlov. Though he was young he was a tried and tested organizer with a firm hand and consid-

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tral Party organs were held. Hence they became known as “the Majority” (Bolsheviks). Their opportunist opponents were known as “the Minority” (Mensheviks). — *Ed.*

erable practical experience.

Shortly after his arrival in town he began to appear at study groups, at the homes of various Party members and at committee meetings. With his remarkable memory he could fix someone in his mind for years to come after only one meeting. I was often amazed by the ease and speed with which he could recall literally everything about a comrade he had last seen 10 or 12 years previously, without recourse to notes.

Even in those days he had uncommon intuition and could go to the root of a man's character, size up his abilities and give each of us the very task we could do best. He attended a few workers' study groups and was soon urging the younger members into active Party work. Before long a reliable nucleus formed around him, a group of experienced underground workers released from prison in October and young Bolshevik organizers with close links among the workers.

Sverdlov's influence on our Bolshevik groups and on the growing revolutionary movement was the greater because he had already done a lot of organizational work as Comrade Andrei, and his practical experience was founded on extensive theoretical knowledge. He assiduously studied revolutionary theory and applied what he learned on practice, for he always maintained that life should be checked against books and books against life.

From the first day of his revolutionary career Sverdlov took his lead from *Iskra*<sup>1</sup> and the works of Lenin, Marx and Engels. He viewed all of Lenin's articles in the Bolshevik newspapers *Proletary* (The Proletarian) and, later, *Novaya Zhizn* (New Life) as Party directives, tried to link them directly and profitably to our daily work and insisted that we do the same. He also had great regard for the Central Committee letters which we occa-

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<sup>1</sup> *Iskra* (The Spark), the first underground Marxist newspaper in Russia, was founded by Lenin in 1900. — *Ed.*

sionally received in Ekaterinburg and later in Perm, usually written by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and closest collaborator, who for many years was the main channel of communication between the Central Committee and the local Party groups.

Sverdlov had an unusually attractive personality. While in the Urals he often had to visit our members and certain workers in their homes; he was soon in great demand among the workers. On the evenings when he was expected the samovar would glisten, all would be tidy and spotlessly clean and the table would hold the best of the household's meagre store. He always had a kindly word for his hostess and a joke for the children, and would help with the samovar and the stove.

People valued his sincere and passionate conviction, for he was also sensitive and considerate, and respected the opinions of others. He was upright and truthful, never stooped to deceit, and took no pleasure in intrigues or political gamesmanship. He never promised anything lightly; his word, once given, was binding.

He found his direction, his *raison d'être* and his satisfaction entirely in his work for the people, in the name of the Party. He once wrote that when people are striving to fashion their lives anew one could not avoid being caught up in their struggle and deriving great pleasure from one's own part in it. His attitudes became popular among his comrades, who turned away from petty egotism and began to work furiously, committing themselves utterly to the revolution.

Sverdlov was good at cheering people up, at restoring both their energy and that vital self-confidence and faith in their own abilities. He was trusted and was often asked to give advice on personal questions as well as on Party affairs.

He was an irrepressibly cheerful person with tre-

mendous *joie de vivre*.<sup>1</sup> I lived and worked with him for 14 years and never once saw him gloomy, sullen or out of temper. He seemed immune to fatigue, dejection and confusion. Once, many years later, he was telling me and a group of close friends about his escape from exile in Narym, how he had almost drowned when his boat capsized on the River Ob during a storm. He was pensive for a moment, then smiled brightly, shook back his thick hair and said:

“And do you know what I was thinking about, with death staring me in the face? I was thinking that it could be worse — I mean, death did not seem so bad!”

He was the centre of attention wherever he went. He was a hard taskmaster but work with him was enjoyable and effortless.

At the beginning of October the whole country was gripped by a general political strike, which even reached to the Urals, making yet greater demands on us and on the entire Party. The autocracy staggered under this heavy blow, and the Tsarist government, frightened out of its wits by the scope of proletarian unrest, was forced into making concessions. The only way the autocracy could protect itself was by issuing the Manifesto of October 17, 1905, which made a great show of granting civil freedoms to the people. Only the liberal bourgeoisie and the Mensheviks were enthusiastic about this document; the Bolsheviks and politically conscious workers understood the motive behind it, but we would have to explain to most of the workers and to the people as a whole exactly how fraudulent it was.

On the following night the Ekaterinburg committee published a proclamation showing the Manifesto in its true light, sent agitators round the factories, agreed the slogans which were to go on the banners, and called a mass meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Joy of living, Fr. in the original.

On the morning of October 19 there was unprecedented animation in the town. Excited crowds filled the main streets but, although there were no police in sight, public order was impeccable. The town's central square was particularly crowded, for factory workers, a lot of students, a number of office workers and even some shop assistants had gathered there, prompted by the committee. Party activists rapidly constructed a makeshift platform. Andrei was there, naturally, and was the first to speak.

He had not said more than a few words before a gang of thugs burst on to the square, brandishing clubs and using the most dreadful language. They went straight for Andrei but did not get to him, because there was a guard around the platform and some of them were armed. Several shots were fired, which caught the attackers by surprise. They drew back and some actually ran away, because, though full of bravado, they were cowards at heart. But our men were timid and indecisive, so inexperienced that they had not expected to do any real fighting, so the ruffians collected themselves for another attack. Then a Cossack troop came rushing to their aid.

That evening a meeting of the Ekaterinburg committee and the active Party nucleus was held.

We found it hard to look one another in the face, and some even felt that all was lost after such a total defeat at the hands of the black hundred.<sup>1</sup>

This was the first time I had seen Sverdlov in such a situation. It was then that I clearly understood why we had accepted his authority so readily. He led the meeting and gave no sign of being even slightly disconcerted; he was calm and cheerful. The first thing he said was that

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<sup>1</sup> The black hundred consisted of armed bands of ruffians formed by the police and various monarchist groups between 1905 and 1907 to combat the revolutionary movement. Their members were drawn from the petty bourgeoisie, tramps, criminals and other reactionary elements. — *Ed.*



it would be unforgivable to let occasional setbacks get us down — it would hardly halt the revolution if one of our meetings was routed.

He pointed out our mistakes, saying that we had only ourselves to blame. The workers' group from the Verkhny Isetsk plant, the strongest in Ekaterinburg, could have defended us, but it had arrived late due to our bad organization. We would have to think about that. But his main point was that we had been badly lacking in preparation, determination and the ability to protect ourselves.

Sverdlov was unusually collected and controlled at that time and helped us to calm down and regain our self-assurance. He would not permit anyone to panic and encouraged us to learn from our temporary setbacks. Indeed, the black hundred attack on a peaceful demonstration opened many people's eyes and the discovery that the police and clergy had been in collusion with those thugs scandalized not only the workers but the public as a whole, including the intelligentsia and even members of the liberal bourgeoisie. There was a general desire to get to the bottom of what had happened, and our contacts with the ordinary people expanded as a result. The same thing was happening all over Russia.

Sverdlov never lost an opportunity to speak at mass meetings. He did so almost every day, sometimes several times a day. He spoke to workers, to the urban middle class, even to shop assistants, for he realized how attractive the idea of democracy was to the people at large. But the proletariat was, naturally, always his first consideration.

His speeches always emphasized the connection between the workers' daily struggle to improve their lot and the proletariat's political conflict. He would also explain the Party's political program and eloquently urge his audience to prepare themselves for a decisive clash

with the autocracy. He followed Lenin's teaching on the transition from bourgeois to socialist revolution.

Andrei seemed to become more popular with the workers every day; he was their favourite speaker at all big meetings and was expected to chair those gatherings too, which he did superbly well.

The Third Party Congress in 1905 called on the Party to start planning for an armed uprising. We in Ekaterinburg also helped. We obtained our weapons from the Izhevsk armaments factory and transported them so secretly that none fell into police hands.

The larger weapon consignments were entrusted to our bolder and more resourceful comrades. One of them once had to move a large wicker basket of arms which was too heavy for one person to lift. So he kitted himself out as a rich merchant and got a bridal costume for one of our girls. The "happy couple" piled the arms into the capacious sort of trunk that would normally contain the dowry of a merchant's daughter, and then went to the station. They promised some porters a fine tip if they were careful with the trunk, saying that it was full of cut glass, silver and other valuable houseware. Our smiling comrades in all their finery followed the porters, arm in arm, and nobody ever suspected the kind of dowry that was in that splendid trunk.

We reorganized our armed patrols to good effect; before long they were making short work of all black hundred attempts to break up our meetings.

Throughout October and November 1905 Sverdlov largely confined his work to Ekaterinburg. The committee was also working hard, training workers and students as propagandists and agitators, forming strong patrols, encouraging trade union activity and organizing a Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Party membership increased, our strength began to impress the workers and the best, the most politically conscious among them, joined us.

A network of study groups already existed in the town. The better ones were beginning to amalgamate. Under Sverdlov's guidance they became a Workers' University, sometimes also known as the Party School. It had 35 students drawn from the workers' study groups and the Ural Mining College, and a curriculum which covered the program and tactics of the Party, political economy and the European labour movement, which was the speciality of Nikolai Baturin, one of the more indispensable teachers. Sverdlov gave lessons on the Party program and tactics. The school offered propagandists a theoretical training that was firmly based on the realities of the contemporary political situation.

Workers and artisans began to show increasing interest in trade union activity, which had been rare in the Urals before 1905. The committee did all it could to encourage that interest and helped to form more unions. Sverdlov felt he could not tell the workers often enough how much better equipped they would be to fight against capitalism once they were unionized.

In October 1905 the clash with Tsarism was reaching a peak, and it was then that Soviets of Workers' Deputies began to form in all parts of the country. Sverdlov founded the Ekaterinburg Soviet, calling a mass meeting and inviting all the factory workers to send representatives to the Soviet. He was its first leader.

## **THE END OF OUR "FREEDOMS"**

In December 1905 a Bolshevik Party Conference gathered in Tammerfors, a small town in Finland. It was attended by representatives of Party groups in Russia and chaired by Lenin.

Sverdlov was to represent the Ural Bolsheviks. I remember his departure from Ekaterinburg. He had never before been able to participate in a nation-wide Bolshevik conference; this would be his first chance to realize

his dream of meeting Lenin.

That meeting with Lenin filled his mind and monopolized his conversation in the days before he left — but he was to be disappointed, for a general railway strike delayed him and he arrived in Tammerfors after the conference had ended and most of the delegates, including Lenin, had left.

On his way back to the Urals, however, Sverdlov was in Moscow as the heroic proletarian uprising there drew to a close. He spoke at several mass meetings but could not stay long, as he was needed urgently in the Urals. One of the most remarkable stages in the Ural workers' fight against Tsarism during the first Russian revolution had begun.

On December 9, 1905 the state cannon factories at Motovilikha, the largest in the Urals, went on strike, in response to the Perm Party committee's call for solidarity with the general political strike. The walk-out turned into a revolt and really frightened the local authorities. On December 12, Strizhevsky, the Governor of Perm Province, encoded this panic-stricken telegram to the Ministry of Internal Affairs:

“The workers of Motovilikha, prompted by the revolutionaries, have stopped work in support of the railway strike, have taken over the factory and are running it on their own initiative. Groups of youths from the factories are walking about with rifles; the populace is being urged to rise. The police are powerless...”

Order was to be restored at the factories at all costs; police and soldiers were sent out against the rebels, and for two days the workers fought nobly against an enemy that was many times stronger. Numerical superiority proved decisive, however, and the Motovilikha revolt drowned in blood. The workers' leaders, the flower of Motovilikha, either perished or were thrown into prison. Few escaped. The Motovilikha Party organization was in ruins and the entire Perm Party network seemed to be

doomed.

News of the rising reached Sverdlov while he was still in Moscow. The revolution was facing a crisis: the defeat of the December uprising in Moscow, the suppression of the Motovilikha revolt, the all-out government attack on the working class, were all eloquent proof of this. Tsarism was marshalling all its forces to crush the revolution.

The Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, considered these events calmly and concluded that the proletariat, in Russia and elsewhere, had learned a tremendous amount from the 1905 revolution, which had revealed the strong and weak points of the Russian working class. They agreed that all possible profit should be extracted from this experience to prepare for the coming power struggle. The workers and peasants, with no panic or confusion, slowly beat a fighting retreat before the brutal onslaught of the bourgeoisie and the autocracy. Sverdlov was entirely guided by Lenin's assessment, and dedicated all his will and energy to rebuilding the Ural Party organization as quickly as he could. He had to decide how to help the new revolutionaries who emerged during the recent conflict to recover from the blow, how to transfer them as smoothly as possible to underground activity, how best to deploy our members in this new and more complex situation.

While still on his way back to us, Sverdlov was already deciding on a fundamental reform of the Ural Party organizations to suit the altered circumstances.

Meanwhile Ekaterinburg was in the final throes of its constitutional illusions. There were no more open meetings; the Bolsheviks could no longer speak in public. Although Sverdlov reported on the Moscow events at a broad-based Party gathering, this was the last of its kind for a number of years.

January 1906 saw the first indiscriminate searches and arrests in our town. But we were not caught by sur-

prise.

The gendarmes and police intended to make their first attack against our headquarters, thus disabling the committee at one blow. They mustered in considerable force and one night they and the Cossacks descended on the Verkhny Isetsk settlement and surrounded the block which housed our commune. All movement in the nearby streets was halted. Despite the late hour a crowd of workers gathered behind the police lines and news of the raid was all over town by the next day.

Then there was an organized assault on our HQ; the gendarmerie's tactical geniuses had obviously been working hard. While one group was breaking down the gates, others were scrambling over the fence and throwing themselves into an all-out offensive. Absolutely no one could escape and the officer in charge was already rubbing his hands, anticipating his superior's compliments on the capture of the entire leadership of the Ekaterinburg Bolshevik Party. After all, it had long been common knowledge that we were in that house.

His fury knew no bounds when they searched the place and found not only none of us there but not even a single scrap of paper to give us away.

Sverdlov's far-sightedness had triumphed. Immediately on his return from Moscow he had begun to transfer the organization to a clandestine footing, beginning, of course, with its central nucleus. He advised that a watch be put on our headquarters; then we dispersed to several secret addresses. The once-hospitable house stood empty.

Our transformation into an underground organization was made easier by the fact that none of us had really believed in the constitutional freedoms promised in the Tsar's Manifesto. Sverdlov never tired of explaining that the final victory of the revolution was still distant and that we should be prepared to change direction many times before then, reacting to circumstances. If

any of our comrades became over-enthusiastic about those "freedoms," Sverdlov would remind him that the state system, the autocratic regime with its landowners and bureaucracy, still existed, that the secret service, the police, the prisons, had not disappeared and that we therefore had no right to abandon our underground apparatus. In this Sverdlov followed Lenin, who, even at the height of the 1905 revolution, had always insisted that the Tsar's "freedoms" were no cause for celebration and that the Party's underground organization should be maintained intact.

Our local Party groups followed these directives, while holding their legal channels open and using them whenever possible. We still had our clandestine meeting places, and our system of contacts and passwords had been much improved, so that we were ready to go underground at any time.

By then Ekaterinburg had become the centre of Party activities in the Urals, sending out trained people to numerous local Party groups; Sverdlov had not been thinking exclusively of our town but of the area as a whole when he had put such emphasis on the training of organizers, propagandists and agitators, and when he had founded the Ekaterinburg Party School.

After he got back from Moscow he suggested to the local Party committee that they should redistribute trained Party workers in the area. The committee considered his plan closely and approved it. Our Bolsheviks, well-trained and well-informed, went out to other towns and factories, while the outlying groups sent Party members to us. This had a double advantage: it strengthened the local groups and also protected our revolutionaries against police persecution and arrest. Our comrades were going to places where they were not known to the gendarmes and their spies, and were thus able to function more confidently and under less strain. It was the most thorough re-allocation of duties the Party in

the Urals had ever experienced, yet our work continued throughout without a hitch.

## LEAVING EKATERINBURG

In the meantime the committee was becoming increasingly worried about Sverdlov's continued presence in Ekaterinburg, where his position became more insecure with every passing day, which made his work more difficult. It was, after all, a fluid situation; our so-called constitutional freedoms were being revoked. During the revolution we had felt that it did not much matter if the secret service had a lead on some of us, but now that the forces of reaction were again gathering strength and any one of us might be arrested at any time, such a casual attitude had become inadmissible.

Every spy, every detective in town was out looking for Andrei, their zeal fed by the promise of reward. Moreover, he had spoken at so many meetings during the days of "freedom" and so many people knew him by sight that he could easily have been identified and arrested.

We protected him as best we could, of course, and few people knew where he went, where he slept, or who his contacts were. Visitors saw him only if the strictest secrecy was observed: no addresses were ever given and no rendezvous points agreed in advance; his contacts were brought to him by particularly dependable comrades. All the same, we knew that he would be exposing himself to great risk if he stayed in Ekaterinburg any longer.

The committee ultimately decided that it was time he left for Perm, where hardly anyone would recognize him — although everyone had heard of him — and where he would be safer. This move was essential to the future of our work. By 1906 Sverdlov was in effective control of all Party activities in the Urals, was continually on the



move, visiting towns and remote factories, and generally directing all our work. For him unity was an issue of paramount importance and now unity was in sight. There were reliable Party members in every area of importance and it was time to form a regional Party organization.

At that time Perm served as the administrative centre for almost the entire Urals and had the huge Motovilikha Factory nearby. Therefore it was the obvious place to establish the regional Party HQ.

So Sverdlov was to go to Perm — but how? He obtained a passport through Lev Gerts, the student, son of a local school mistress, but the problem was in getting him out of Ekaterinburg, where there was only one railway station, which, though little frequented, had its own police guard. Absolutely no one escaped this man's notice and he could certainly recognize Andrei, having often seen him during the days of "freedom." One of our most artful comrades was given the job of somehow getting this gendarme out of the way or at least of distracting his attention while Andrei got on the train.

When the day came, the comrade in question turned up at the station looking like a lord. His beautiful fur coat with its beaver collar hung open, revealing an expensive suit, an impressive waistcoat and the gleam of a golden watch chain. We had borrowed it all from a rich liberal sympathizer, who had no idea, of course, of how we were going to use the outfit he had lent us.

Tapping the floor nonchalantly with his ivory-headed cane, the "gentleman" entered the first class waiting room in the grand manner and beckoned to the gendarme.

"I say, my man — get me a first class ticket for Perm and look sharp! You can keep the change."

The gentleman looked so fine and behaved with such style, and the wallet from which he casually drew the money to pay for his ticket was so plump — the gendarme was most impressed. On top of that the generous

gentleman gave a condescending nod towards the refreshments counter and treated him to a couple of glasses of brandy, tossing some silver coins at the attendant.

The guard, bubbling over with enthusiasm, galloped off to the ticket window, pushing at anyone in his way, and thrust the money over the counter. Incidentally, the police, gendarmes and other guardians of public order were always happy to run errands like that for people with money.

Although he did his job with all dispatch, it took him five or ten minutes to get hold of the ticket, during which time the train pulled in and Andrei boarded it unnoticed, his face swathed in a scarf as though he had toothache. In all the confusion before the train left the "gentleman" passed the ticket to Andrei through a third party, the flag went up, the train gave a whistle and Sverdlov left Ekaterinburg safely on a ticket bought for him by an over-zealous official.

I had been ordered to find a safe place for Andrei in Perm and had arrived there a few days before. At first I took a room in a hotel — a "rooming house" as they were called in those days — feeling justified in taking such a risk because we both had false papers and were practically unknown in the town. We stayed there for a week or so. As a rule underground workers never did this, and it was but a poor second best, but there were no reliable clandestine flats in Perm and I could never have recommended a place that was, or could have been, under police surveillance.

We had lived together in Ekaterinburg, and continued to do so in Perm. We had never legalized our relationship and in fact it was hard for a revolutionary in Tsarist Russia to have a legal wedding. Of course we were against a church wedding in principle — and moreover a man with false documents who took himself off to church and gave his real name would have been ar-

rested immediately.

We certainly did not feel that it was a vital omission — our family was so much closer-knit than many that were bolstered by all the formalities. The “irregularity” of our position only distressed us when we were later separated by the police and denied even the right of seeing each other.

The re-allocation of our Party duties meant that Sverdlov, in addition to directing Party activity in the Urals, had to revive the organizations in Perm and Motovilikha. My duties were confined to Perm.

## **IN PERM**

As soon as he arrived in Perm Sverdlov began to rally the Bolshevik forces in Motovilikha, while also keeping an eye on Perm and on the Lysva, Chusovaya and Kizel factories. He was in control of the whole Urals organization and under his supervision the preparations for the regional Party Conference made good headway.

The day after his arrival he walked to Motovilikha with Misha Turkin, a young factory worker and RSDLP member. Sverdlov called together five or six people there and directed each of them to re-establish his contact with members of the local Bolshevik organizations who had escaped arrest and to enlist new members from among those who had proved themselves during and after the Motovilikha rising.

A few days later there was a larger meeting, where Sverdlov announced that a strong local underground organization was to be formed. He drafted a plan then and there, describing the structure he had in mind and suggesting a suitable system of communications between members.

There followed several brief meetings with Party members and young people with revolutionary potential. He gave detailed instructions to each, making sure

that they knew how to talk to the workers, what to look out for and what issues to raise. Then he sent them out to all parts of the factory.

After he had made contact with the Party activists in this way Sverdlov began to make himself known to the workers, visiting them at home, encouraging them, giving them confidence in themselves and in the coming victory of the proletariat.

The organization quickly picked up. New young Party members took the place of those who had been arrested and comrades from other towns converged on the area. Sverdlov's arrival had re-invigorated the Motvilikha Bolsheviks.

Our work in Perm was proceeding with equal success. Sverdlov supervised the Perm committee, keeping an eye on every aspect of its day-to-day activities. He formed a reliable core of staunch Bolsheviks there too and built up a viable underground organization. In the spring of 1906 we set up a large underground press, with some 80 kilograms of type and a good stock of paper.

At last the tremendous efforts of Sverdlov and numerous others were rewarded — it was time to unify the Ural Bolshevik movement. In February 1906 the first Ural Regional Conference was convened — a monument to their powers of organization.

About 25 RSDLP representatives attended — from Perm, Ekaterinburg, Nizhni Tagil, Ufa, Vyatka, Tyumen and elsewhere. I could not be there but I later heard from delegates that Sverdlov had, in effect, run the conference. He had tabled almost all the motions that were passed, motions based on Leninist principles and charged with a militant Bolshevik spirit, which had an immense effect on the local Party activities and served as guidelines for our agitators and propagandists. Even the subsequent years of reaction could not break the strong Bolshevik organization that emerged from that conference.

A new RSDLP Regional Committee was elected, which, under Sverdlov's guidance and following Leninist precepts, was to devote its energies to preparing the people for a new revolutionary upsurge.

The Ural organization was becoming increasingly vital to the Party as a whole. Indeed, when the First RSDLP Conference of Military and Combat Groups met in Finland in 1906, it used the funds of the Ural combat group, which were delivered by one of its members. The conference made considerable use of the experience of our combat group and of the rules of procedure agreed on in Perm and in the South Urals. At its close the Conference used money donated by the Ural Bolsheviks to publish its proceedings.

Our unremitting fight against the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks took up a great deal of our time and energy in those days. The influence of the SRs in the Urals had been undermined during the 1905 revolution but the Mensheviks were in a different position. In the autumn of 1905, when the revolutionary fervour was at its height, a number of them had often given their support to the Bolsheviks but it took only a few setbacks to make them panic. Hard on their leaders' heels they began to complain stridently that we should never have taken up arms. Discord and disorganization were their entire contribution to our efforts; we disagreed with them on every fundamental issue.

At that time it was essential that the strength of the proletariat should not be dissipated; we had to totally discredit the Menshevik ideology and wrest away from them the few local workers who were still under their influence. Our efforts, of course, depended on unity of spirit within our own organization.

But the Bolsheviks who had rallied around Sverdlov were so unanimous in their views, so firmly grounded in Leninist principles, that by the end of 1906 there was not one functioning Menshevik group in the Urals.

For example, we beat them thoroughly in April 1906, when we had to elect a Perm delegate to the Fourth RSDLP Congress. The hustings were held out of town at a mass meeting. Voting was by a show of hands.

There seemed no doubt that Sverdlov would be nominated but the Motovilikha workers protested against his candidature, pointing out that in the present situation there was a good chance that he would be arrested.

Everyone who had worked with him had great faith in his organizational talent; only recently they had seen him rebuild a viable Bolshevik organization in the area under extremely difficult circumstances. The Motovilikha workers carried the day and even Sverdlov had to agree, much as he wanted to attend the Congress and meet Lenin. So instead of Yakov Sverdlov they elected Yakovlev as their delegate — and I was Yakovlev.

It was obviously impossible for the Congress to be held on home territory — we were, after all, living under Tsarism — so it was convened in Stockholm.

It was not very easy to get there. I not only had to be continually on my guard against the secret police, who considered every Bolshevik fair game, but I also encountered all sorts of obstacles set up by the Mensheviks, who should themselves have had a hand in convening the Congress. And I could not decide what to take — I only possessed a simple cotton blouse, a cheap light coat and a head scarf. But my comrades outfitted me and I set off for my first rendezvous in Petersburg.

As he saw me off, Sverdlov repeated over and over again that they were counting on me to stick by Lenin, not to miss a word he said, to listen to everything and remember everything, because when I came back I would have a lot of questions to answer. He also warned me to keep a sharp eye on the Mensheviks and their tricks.

I got safely to Petersburg, but unpleasant things began to happen almost as soon as I arrived. It was a Men-

shevik-held rendezvous, and they would stoop to anything to assure themselves a majority at the Congress. I was met by a rather nasty person who kept tugging at his sparse gingery beard and spitting. On hearing that I was a Bolshevik, he announced that I could not go to the Congress with full discretionary powers and an effective vote; if I chose to attend, it would be with an advisory vote.

I made it quite clear that this was not so and decided not to move until I was assured of this by the Perm Bolsheviks who had elected me.

The answer was quick in coming and the Menshevik then had no choice but to tell me where the next rendezvous point was. It was in Helsingfors, and the Party name of my contact there was "Devil."

This "Devil" turned out to be a wonderful comrade and a charming person, a firm follower of Lenin's line. He made me very welcome and advised me to stay until some more people arrived, so that I would not have to go on alone. A small group of delegates gathered within the next couple of days.

We were deep in conversation as soon as we boarded the boat for Sweden, and before long it emerged that apart from a woman called Sablina we were all novices — none of us had been abroad before. Possibly because she was more experienced — or, more likely because she was so charming — Sablina became the leader of our little group almost immediately. Her knowledge about Party affairs was staggering; she knew literally everything that was going on in every local organization. I myself was amazed by how knowledgeable she was on the state of affairs in the Urals, by the inside information she obviously drew on when asking about our Regional Conference and about Comrade Andrei. I simply could not resist finding out, when we were quite alone, how she had got all those details.

"But, Comrade Olga, aren't you Klavdiya Novgo-

rodtseva?" she asked with a smile.

I was completely taken aback, since I had told no one, not even our Devil, my real name.

Sablina continued: "I think it's time I introduced myself. My name's Nadezhda Krupskaya."

That brought everything into focus — this was Lenin's wife, companion, helpmate, the object of Sverdlov's high esteem, whose letters had guided our work like beacons. That meeting was the beginning of a very long friendship between us.

I learned from our talk that both she and Lenin knew about Sverdlov's activities in our area and followed them with interest, discovering what they could from people who had met him in the Volga region or in the Urals.

The time seemed to fly on that short journey to Stockholm. We had just missed the opening of the Congress; it was in progress when we arrived. It was there, in Sweden, that I finally saw Lenin for the first time.

It was a complex situation, for the Menshevik delegates were in the majority and we had some difficult moments with them. Almost every evening, after the close of the day's business, the Bolshevik delegates would gather at some quiet little restaurant. Lenin would come, there would be a keen exchange of opinions and the next day's plan of campaign would be agreed. There was nothing official about those gatherings — the conversation was lively and relaxed. In the centre of it all was Lenin, giving every speaker his full attention, tossing off pertinent rejoinders, giving sound advice, clearing up the most involved questions.

When our discussions were over Lenin would eagerly encourage Sergei Gusev, the Moscow delegate, to sing something. Gusev would begin, others would join in, and those irrepressible songs of Russia and the revolution would ring out for hours.

One thing was patently obvious: Lenin, who was so



unaffected and sensitive towards people he felt an affinity with, could be implacable and merciless in like measure towards the opportunists, the traitors to the revolution. He tore the effusive Menshevik phrasemongering to shreds; their leaders often seemed to be in complete disarray during their bitter engagements with him.

As they held the majority of votes, the Mensheviks introduced motions on every important issue but we Bolsheviks had already decided to ignore them; we would take our lead only from Lenin. I explained this to the committee on my return to Perm.

Of course, Sverdlov and the others completely approved. They called a meeting, fairly broad-based for those days, where I reported on the Congress. I concentrated on explaining the resolutions that Lenin had put forward, showing that I thought they should be viewed as Party directives, and subjected the Menshevik motions to the sharpest possible critique.

Sverdlov followed me on to the rostrum; he confined his talk exclusively to the practical conclusions to be drawn from Lenin's line at the Conference, and the effect that it would necessarily have on our activities in the future.

The overwhelming majority of those present agreed with us and the Perm organization, along with its committee, remained firmly Bolshevik and Leninist, despite the Menshevik stance of the Fourth RSDLP Congress.

## **THE HUNT IS ON**

It took the police a very long time to track Sverdlov down, although they were looking for him with undiminished eagerness and the price on his head was a great incentive for their spy network. The places where he met his contacts and where he held meetings were kept such a close secret that not even the Perm committee ever knew where he was going.

Our meetings were also carefully guarded. When Andrei spoke to the workers, they would gather close round him, not allowing the police to get near. Afterwards they would hide him in the crowd, give him a change of clothes and remove him to somewhere safe.

The secret police were mad with frustration. This criminal, this revolutionary known throughout the Urals, this Andrei was going about his business literally under their noses. Their informers were constantly sending in reports that Andrei had appeared to give a speech at this factory or that but they never got there in time to arrest him.

Telegrams flew out of Perm in all directions, even going as far as the Volga. The provincial police administration were in a panic, were demanding his arrest, but time went on and he was still at large.

It would be hard even to summarize Sverdlov's travels in the spring and summer of 1906. One day he would be chairing a Party committee meeting in Perm and the next, it seemed, he was in Ekaterinburg. By the time the police got on to his trail, he was in Ufa. They sent a telegram to Ufa — and he was back in Perm.

He would turn up in Tirlyan, Alapaevsk, Sysert, Kushva, Nizhnyaya Tura... He would hold instructional sessions for the local Bolsheviks, lead meetings, chair committees, speak to the workers.... And meanwhile the secret police were vainly rushing from one end of the Urals to the other.

One day he went to a large gathering of workers at the Rezhevsk plant. Andrei was to speak by the pond; police look-outs encircled the place. They did not dare to arrest him then and there in front of the workers, but calculated that it would be easier when the crowd began to disperse. They waited for two hours, the meeting ended, but no one was there. By then Sverdlov was far away — some friends had rowed him across the pond during the meeting to where some horses were hidden.

There was an underground Party meeting near Nizhni Tagil, by the River Vyika. The writer, A.P. Bondin, who was present, remembered how silence fell when Andrei began to speak. "His eyes, profound and wise behind his glasses, seemed to rivet the attention of his listeners. His measured speech was easy on the ear, and so persuasive...

"Sverdlov spoke about the clash with capitalism, about ways of nationalizing agriculture through revolution, about arming the workers, about the merciless battle against traitors and informers."

But that was one of Andrei's last speeches in the Urals before the fall of Tsarism.

Every day it became more difficult to work undercover. The secret police were sending even more informers out to join our ranks and demanding an extra effort from the established ones. One of them actually wormed his way into the Perm committee. His name was Yakov Votinov and he held a particularly trusted position, being in charge of our cache of weapons.

In April an entire propagandist group was arrested along with its leader, Sasha Sokolov. Summaries of the discussions that had taken place, some underground literature and copies of the Party program were confiscated. The committee realized from the subsequent searches and the questioning that the prisoners underwent, details of which filtered out to us, that this had not been a chance arrest — it bore the mark of an experienced informer.

Sverdlov became even more circumspect. He never spent two nights in the same place and tried not to go out during the day. He continued to travel, taking even greater precautions than before. But, though he could slip through the spy network, it was more difficult to protect himself against an informer who was working alongside him, pretending to be an ally and a comrade.

On June 10, 1906 Sverdlov returned to Perm after

one of his trips. It had been decided that we would leave that night; we simply could not remain there any longer. A committee meeting had been arranged to reallocate our duties among the others, to agree on who should be sent to other towns and who should be summoned to Perm.

Sverdlov and I had considerable difficulty in getting to the flat where the meeting was to be held. We had decided to go together but as soon as we went out we found ourselves followed by not one but several spies. By changing cabs a number of times and going through courtyards and alleys, we finally lost them; at the town boundaries we checked that our shadows really had gone.

“That doesn’t look good,” Sverdlov said. “I mean, they were after us all right, but they didn’t get us... it’s very odd. Think about it — they were literally on our heels, but didn’t touch us. I wonder what their game is.”

It seemed highly suspicious to me too. It was obvious that there was something unpleasant afoot; they surely had some reason for not arresting us. For some time we had been convinced that there was an informer on the committee; we even suspected who it was and had begun to check on him and exclude him from certain activities. Now it seemed clear that he had let the secret police know about our meeting in advance, but they no doubt wanted to know our plans, to hear Sverdlov’s instructions to the committee and so had decided to let us hold our meeting and arrest us as we left.

Sverdlov summed it up: “There’s not much to discuss; we have no alternative. We can’t throw it all up and clear off. We’ll have to carry on and get away as quickly as we can, try to outrun them. A huge risk, I know, but there’s nothing else for it.”

We got to the meeting place without further complications; there did not seem to be any spies around the house. Evidently, if the police knew about our arrange-

ments, they had posted their lookouts at a distance, so as not to alarm us prematurely.

Our comrades had already assembled, and Sverdlov began the meeting without wasting any time. All the issues were quickly decided; Sverdlov, calm and unruffled as ever, told everyone exactly what he expected of them.

At the end he advised them to wait for five or ten minutes after we had gone and then to leave in ones and twos as usual. I could see why: we had to make our way quickly to the Kama wharf where it would be easier to disappear, before our informer could get away from the meeting and let the police know that we had left.

But for once we underestimated our opponents. Andrei was considered such a fine catch that the beaters were out in force. They had even brought in spies from Ekaterinburg who knew his face.

Not quite half-way to the wharf we noticed that we were being followed. As we had feared, they had surrounded the entire block in case the informer did not reach them in time to let them know when we had left.

“We’ll have to take a chance,” Sverdlov whispered to me. “Down that alley, take the first cab we see.”

We turned down an alley where we could see a cab stand, but strangely enough the place suddenly began to fill with people. Some suspicious-looking types came towards us, we heard steps behind us; civilians and military alike were converging on this absolutely unremarkable little street. We could see police in the dim distance.

Then a cab appeared. Sverdlov calmly asked him to take us to the wharf, but he brusquely replied that he was not free. So did the next. We knew that it was all over. Now we had to keep calm, keep calm — we quickly said all that we had to say to each other, walking arm in arm and looking so unconcerned that the officer who was going to arrest us hesitated as he came near, and actually went by.

I thought that maybe we had got away with it, but a few steps further on a voice was raised behind us: "Well come on, then, get them!" They swooped down on us from all sides, pushing Sverdlov into one cab and me into another. Some policemen jumped on to the footboards, there was a whistle, and off we went at full pelt.

The secret police could really congratulate themselves: Andrei, the elusive Andrei, was in their hands at last! But their joy was short-lived — they could arrest Sverdlov and throw hundreds of Bolsheviks into prison, but they could not reverse the course of history or strangle the powerful revolutionary movement that now had a hold on the entire Ural proletariat.

About the middle of 1906 the movement lost its impetus, while the forces of reaction grew even more savage. But the intensified official campaign against us only proved how firmly rooted the Ural Bolsheviks were, how sound and capable their core — the core that Sverdlov, on the orders of the Central Committee, had created and fostered.

## **Chapter Two**

# **SVERDLOV'S EARLY LIFE AND REVOLUTIONARY APPRENTICE- SHIP**

### **CHILDHOOD**

When Comrade Andrei appeared in the Urals few of us knew much about him. Sverdlov did not like to talk about himself but he would sometimes casually refer to an event in his past, and we slowly pieced together those details, sparse, fragmentary and unsatisfactory though they were. It is only because I lived with him, talked to his family and sought out the relevant documents that I am able to give a reasonably full account of his early life.

He was born on May 23 (June 4 New Style) 1885 in Nizhni Novgorod (now Gorky). It was then a typical large town of the Volga area, with muddy streets, mostly unpaved, two- or three-storey stone houses in the centre and tumbledown shacks on the outskirts; there was uproarious debauchery when the famous fair was on and somnolent stupor the rest of the year; summer brought noisy chaos on the wharves and dead silence in the streets and alley-ways.

But a new and powerful mood was beginning to permeate this town of merchants and entrepreneurs. One of Tsarist Russia's industrial giants, the Sormovo ship-building yards, was growing on its outskirts. Working under dreadful conditions there, the workers soon recognized their common cause and united in a determined fight for their rights. By the turn of the century Sormovo had become the natural centre of Nizhni Novgorod's revolutionary movement.

The Tsarist government, however, believed that the town was politically reliable, and often sent students ar-

rested at demonstrations and other untrustworthy members of the intelligentsia to serve their exile there; revolutionaries who had lived out their exile but lost the right to live in Moscow or St. Petersburg settled there too, all of which bolstered the workers' revolutionary spirit.

The Sverdlov family were crowded into one room adjoining a small engraving shop in the centre of town, on Bolshaya Pokrovskaya street. Mikhail Israilovich, Yakov's father, was a skilful engraver; Elizaveta Solomonovna, his cultivated and intelligent mother, was a perfect housewife. But life was very hard and if the children were always tidily dressed and never went hungry, it was only thanks to the tireless devotion of their parents. The really remarkable thing about this family, however, was that Elizaveta's unfailing gentleness towards each of her children made them not only love her but want to help her in every possible way. The children learned to look after themselves at an early age. They helped with the cooking, mending, washing and darning, and also often lent a hand in the workshop. They were never idle, never did anything just to pass the time but still remained normal children, lively and full of fun. Hard work only made them healthy and well-balanced, and they had a lot of friends. It was fun to visit their house because it was always crowded with cheerful people.

Yakov was mischievous and dynamic, the acknowledged leader of the boys on his street. They especially liked to go down to the Volga, where he would take on students from the Navigation College in furious rowing and swimming races and often beat them. He was popular because he was fearless and imaginative, direct and honest.

One of his closest companions was Vladimir Lu-



botsky,<sup>1</sup> and another close friend of the family and regular visitor to the house was Maxim Gorky.

As a child Yakov knew what poverty meant; he saw an unjust world where most people had nothing and worked for the rich who had everything.

It was difficult for his parents to buy school uniforms and pay the fees, but they managed to give their children an education by denying themselves and watching every penny.

Yakov practically taught himself to read. At primary school he was unusually quick, and was equally adept in secondary school but, as his interests widened and his intellect matured, he became increasingly aware that what he was studying was stale and conformist and that his indifferent and callous teachers made unfair distinctions between rich and poor children. To find the answers that school could not give, Yakov and Vladimir took to reading books strictly forbidden to schoolboys.

Yakov's class teacher disliked this stubborn, inquisitive pupil with his abrupt and baffling questions. There were often unpleasant scenes, and Yakov would be sent to the director, would be punished yet again.

Yakov and Vladimir found out about the revolutionary underground when they were 15 or so; they would go into the Lubotsky's garret when it was dark and sit in the light of a kerosene lamp, reading the leaflets that were being distributed to the schools, in great agitation. A new world was opening up before them.

In 1900 a terrible blow fell — Yakov's mother died. The bereaved husband found it hard to feed his large family and run the house; life became grim. Yakov had to be taken from school at the end of his fourth year.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lubotsky (Zagorsky) was an active member of the Bolshevik Party. In 1918 he became the secretary of the Moscow Party Committee. He died on September 25, 1919, victim of an SR bomb thrown into the Committee headquarters.

This caused him little grief, however, for he was tired of his sneering teachers and aware that they would not tell him the things that he wanted to know, particularly about the revolutionary movement, which fascinated him increasingly.

Leaving home to ease his father's financial burden he moved to the outskirts of Kanavino, to a predominantly working class district, and became a chemist's apprentice.

Although the work was arduous and irksome, giving him almost no free time, Yakov did not let it depress him. He was a voracious reader and wanted his workmates to share his enthusiasm. He read aloud to them, started discussions and encouraged them not to spend their time gambling or standing on street corners. He was so amiable, so full of life, that they soon grew to like and trust him. Young as he was, the senior apprentices often deferred to him, charmed by his obvious sincerity, and enjoyed attending his reading circle.

He openly and fearlessly complained to their employer about the long hours, the exhausting work, the beggarly wages and the poor food; that was something new to his workmates. He roused and defended them, allowing no injustice to them or to himself to pass unmentioned. His employer did not take kindly to the behaviour of his ungovernable young apprentice and, after yet another disagreement, Yakov found himself on the street. He was fifteen years old. Regular work was hard to come by but he scraped a living by coaching younger boys, copying out lines for actors and reading proofs.

While he was still in Kanavino two things had changed the course of his life — his intimate daily contact with the workers and his discovery that the assistant pharmacist was a social-democrat, the first he had met.

In 1901 he and Vladimir Lubotsky joined the Nizhni Novgorod social-democrat underground. Yakov was given the job of distributing Party leaflets and proclama-

tions, which he did by contacting his childhood playmates and so inspiring them with his enthusiasm that they went to work with a will. In no time the leaflets were in letter boxes and on fences all over town.

Zinovi and Sofya, the two eldest members of the Sverdlov family, had left home,<sup>1</sup> but Yakov often went to visit the three younger children. They became his willing assistants, especially Sara, who could always be trusted to deliver secret messages. She knew who she should give her note to and who should not have it; she would swallow it rather than let the police get their hands on it.

Yakov got on well with his father, who in his heart approved of the activities of his beloved son and wished he could help him in some practical way. He was hurt deeply when Yakov, joking about the apprentices in his father's workshop, called him an exploiter.

The Sverdlovs' home had become the secret meeting place of the local Bolsheviks; the attic served as a refuge. Most people who went there would leave after a day or two but those who were in hiding from the police would stay longer.

Yakov's father pretended not to notice when strangers went up to his attic, when Sara took bread upstairs, when cautious footsteps could be heard overhead. He once said casually: "We mustn't seal up that round window in the attic. We could have a fire or anything could happen — we'll get out on to the roof and jump into the street, you see?" — and he gave a knowing smile.

Yakov treated his father's workers as comrades. They used the workshop to make Party seals, official stamps for passports and type for the underground press. Yet all this work was done so secretly that if the

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<sup>1</sup> The members of Sverdlov's family were: Sofya (1882 — 1951), Zinovi (1884 — 1966), Veniamin, a Bolshevik (1887 — 1940), Sara (1890 — 1964) and Lev (1893 — 1914). His father died in 1921. — *Ed.*

police had searched the place they would have found nothing at all suspicious.

In those days the RSDLP was in its infancy. In January 1900 Lenin was dedicating all his energies to founding a political newspaper that would have a nation-wide circulation and serve to rally, instruct and unify the largest possible number of people. These intense efforts culminated in the publication of *Iskra* whose first issue came out in December 1900. In its pages Party members and workers alike found the answers to their most pressing problems, and pointers for the future.

Nizhni Novgorod did not escape the prevailing mood; Maxim Gorky was at the centre of the first disturbances there. On November 7 the news spread that he was to be expelled from the town. A large group of young people went to the station, undeterred by the blinding blizzard and the raging wind which swept down on them as they crossed the River Oka. They found Gorky and crowded around him; some shouted revolutionary slogans, others sang songs.

After the train had left, the crowd, still singing, proceeded down the main street, gathering force as it went and bringing public transport to a halt. The demonstration ended in a spontaneous meeting in the town square. The police had not expected a protest on this scale and were so taken aback that they arrested no one, though they did collect the names of those they considered to be the ringleaders.

Lenin later commented that this was one of the first popular protests against the abuses of Tsarism.

Sverdlov, then 16 years old, was among those arrested almost a month later for their part in the demonstration. He was held only briefly but his name shortly afterwards appeared in *Iskra* for the first time, in a report on the arrests.

## A REVOLUTIONARY COMING OF AGE

As time went on the Nizhni Novgorod Party committee began to give Sverdlov more responsibility. In addition to distributing Party literature, obtaining type for the press and supervising the production of official stamps and passports, he became a propagandist at the Sormovo plant.

He soon realized that his knowledge was insufficient to answer all the workers' questions. He began to study political economy, the history of culture and of the labour movement in Western Europe; he read the *Communist Manifesto* and, later, *Capital*.

He could easily have lost his bearings among the various political trends and fine distinctions but he chose *Iskra* as his guide. He always carried it with him and referred to it when speaking to the workers or arguing with older colleagues if they displayed Menshevik leanings. *Iskra* gave him the confidence he needed. When he read articles such as "The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement," which appeared in its first issue, he saw a personal challenge in its call for people who would devote their whole lives to the revolution. It was a challenge that he was eager to accept.

As the scope of Party work grew, Sverdlov's role increased. He established more study circles at Sormovo and provided them with reading matter. He performed his duties quickly and cheerfully, never rejecting any necessary task as too minor for him. His energy, which carried him daily all over the town and the shipyards, constantly amazed his colleagues.

Lenin once said about him: "He dedicated himself entirely to the revolution in the very first period of his activities, when still a youth who had barely acquired political consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Within two or three years Sverdlov had collected a group of young revolutionary workers round him. He in-

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin. *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p. 90.

structed and helped them, fostering their devotion to the Party committee, and found that their worldly wisdom, their warm-hearted solidarity and their resolute attitude helped him, in turn, to mature as a revolutionary.

A student from the Kazan Veterinary Institute, a social-democrat called Ryurikov, had been exiled to Nizhni Novgorod. His death in April 1902 shocked the town. The Chief of Police realized that his funeral could turn into a demonstration; the local Party group had already decided to send representatives. The funeral was postponed on official instructions for four days.

Although it had been forbidden to hold a funeral service in the town itself, a large crowd gathered at the cemetery where he was to be buried. At the end of the service someone began to sing the revolutionary funeral march "You fell in the sacred and glorious strife"... Black bands with handwritten inscriptions were produced and leaflets passed from hand to hand. The graveyard was surrounded by police, a report was filed and Sverdlov's name again appeared on police records. As his arrest seemed imminent he went into hiding for a few days, for local demonstrations were being planned for May Day and he had no intention of missing them.

Perhaps the most notable among the many May Day demonstrations in that memorable year was the one organized by the RSDLP at the Sormovo plant, which Gorky later described in his novel *Mother*. The thousands of workers at the demonstration were charged by the police and army and its leaders, Pyotr Zalomov and others, were thrown into jail.

The police began a search for Sverdlov as one of the known organizers of the demonstration. On 5 May he and his younger brother Veniamin were arrested during another demonstration in the town centre. Crowds of people were out taking their evening stroll when suddenly a group of about 30 young people had lifted a red banner bearing the slogan "Down with the Autocracy"

and begun to march, singing revolutionary songs, with Vladimir Lubotsky at their head. They went towards Bolshaya Pokrovskaya Street, where the Sverdlovs lived.

After what had happened at Sormovo the police were at the ready. They quickly surrounded the group and tried to load them into prison carts but the demonstrators insisted on going on foot. They tried to sing but their escort silenced them with fists and revolver butts. A large crowd followed, turning the arrest itself into a demonstration and Lubotsky hit a police officer in self-defence, which was to cost him dearly.

The court passed savage sentences on the participants in the two demonstrations: six of the Sormovo workers, including Pyotr Zalomov, and Lubotsky and Moiseev were stripped of all civil rights and sentenced to permanent exile in Siberia.

After two weeks in prison Sverdlov returned to work with renewed energy but was more cautious than before. He valued his regained freedom mainly because when free he was able to work for the Party. He had already learned not to postpone anything until the following day, for he knew that by then he could well be in prison again.

Lenin's book *What Is To Be Done?* appeared in Nizhni Novgorod in 1902. Sverdlov read it repeatedly, thoroughly weighing Lenin's project for a Russian Marxist party.

He was by then in the habit of studying every evening. Although he often arrived home late after an exhausting day that police spies had made even more difficult, he never went to bed without spending an hour or two with a book on history or political economy or with one of the works of Lenin or Marx, making notes and often returning to puzzling or significant passages.

After the 1902 demonstration police surveillance in-

tensified and more spies appeared on street corners. But the workers too were beginning to feel their strength. They were drawn to the underground in ever greater numbers and the demand for illegal literature increased. Police persecution and arrests could not halt the growth of the Nizhni Novgorod movement.

The secret police began to keep a particularly close watch on Sverdlov, having realized what a dangerous enemy of the regime this young man was.

The Party was learning from its experience, becoming more proficient. Towards the end of 1902 the local committee gave Sverdlov the tremendously important job of setting up a large underground press.

The committee had already chosen what they felt was a suitable place — a flat in a large respectable house in the town centre, owned by a sympathizer who was herself above suspicion, as she had never done any Party work. But Sverdlov went to look at the place and immediately saw that it would not do. He had noticed two details, of the kind essential to the success of any clandestine undertaking. There was a concierge constantly on guard, like a veritable Cerberus, who knew all the tenants and took a dim view of any shabbily-dressed visitor. There was also a policeman permanently posted on a nearby corner.

Sverdlov's suggestion to site the press in the workmen's quarter in Sormovo, where the police felt considerably less secure than they did in town, was taken up instead. Sverdlov made regular visits to Sormovo. He obtained the texts to be printed, provided ink and paper and supervised the work. At the end of the working day he would always stay to talk, passing on Party news and the latest developments in the labour movement at home and abroad. As the existence of the press had to be kept a strict secret, those who worked on it could not go to meetings and even tried, if possible, not to leave the flat at all. Sverdlov therefore was their only contact



with the Party and its activities.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL REVOLUTIONARY**

Even when first founding the Bolshevik Party, Lenin had put great emphasis on the training of professional revolutionaries — totally committed people, who would have a complete understanding of the Party's needs, would be thoroughly grounded in theory and practice and would behave with discipline and courage. They would be informed and resourceful opponents and serve as an example to all, even gaining the respect of their enemies.

Many young Bolsheviks, including Sverdlov, wanted to respond to Lenin's call, to become the kind of revolutionary that he envisaged. All Sverdlov's previous experiences in the Party had prepared him to become a professional revolutionary, totally committed and constantly vigilant.

With no permanent home, he lived where he could, staying overnight with friends when he had to. Having no regular income, he often went hungry. There were occasions when he had to reach a friend's flat late at night by way of a drain pipe, only to leave at dawn so as not to arouse the neighbours' suspicions. But he never complained.

In 1904 the Northern RSDLP Committee, which had jurisdiction over the Bolshevik organizations in the Upper Volga area, transferred Sverdlov to Kostroma. He stayed briefly in Yaroslavl, established contact with the Party groups there, then continued to his destination.

Kostroma was then one of the country's major textile centres, with 12,000 factory workers out of a total population of 40,000 and appalling working conditions. In 1903 the factory workers, driven to desperation, had organized several strikes and demonstrations, which

were violently suppressed by the police with army reinforcements. But the workers were too ground down by backbreaking labour, too accustomed to looking starvation in the face to be afraid. Demonstrations flared up again and again; the police began to arrest the leading workers and destroyed the local social-democrat organization.

At that point Sverdlov arrived in Kostroma. With his characteristic eagerness and determination he began by establishing revolutionary groups in the factories and furnishing the workers with political literature. He brought the local social-democrat students together and trained them as political agitators. He gave them Lenin's works to read and especially emphasized the value of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. His next aim was to establish an underground press and he also sent Bolshevik agitators to address the workers at every opportunity. By the end of 1904 the Kostroma Party organization was manifestly more energetic and effective than before.

The following year began with an event which outraged the world. On January 9, 1905, Bloody Sunday, thousands of peaceful demonstrators were shot down in St. Petersburg. This destroyed all the faith the workers still had in the Tsar, and in Petersburg, Moscow, Baku and other large industrial centres strikes flared up and developed into armed clashes between the army and police and the workers. Lenin's articles in the newspapers *Vperyod!* (*Forward!*) and *Proletary* (*The Proletarian*) offered a detailed plan of action, which encouraged the people to take up arms against the autocracy.

Meanwhile the Kostroma committee was printing leaflets urging support for the Petersburg workers. Mass meetings were held on the outskirts of town, in caves, on the banks of the Kostroma; the bitterly cold weather seemed to deter no one from attending. Sverdlov spoke at almost every meeting.

The police, however, had discovered his whereabouts through an intercepted letter. He noticed that he was being followed and towards the end of April 1905 moved to Yaroslavl, where he helped to prepare the May Day demonstration. He had to leave before it took place because the police were on his trail again. Returning to Nizhni Novgorod, he attended a number of meetings organized by the Sormovo RSDLP committee that were really unusual.

The little river near Sormovo grew deep and rough in spring when the snow melted. On warm spring evenings workers of all ages would crowd into boats which rocked on the water. Some people brought balalaikas and accordions, and revolutionary songs, militant and triumphant, would resound across the river.

On an agreed signal the boats would quickly come together, the oars would be raised, the songs cease and the fiery speeches begin, turning the occasion into a Bolshevik meeting. If danger threatened, the boats would instantly disperse, making the job of the police impossible.

In early 1905 Sverdlov was pursuing two ends: to defend at every opportunity Lenin's insistence on concerted action in the imminent revolution and to prepare for the Third RSDLP Congress, which was held that April in London.

The Congress met in the face of Menshevik opposition; under Lenin's guidance it adopted the Bolshevik platform. The coming revolution was the major topic of discussion. It was decided that the Party and the working class should prepare an armed uprising, which the working class would lead.

When the Congress proceedings and accounts of Lenin's contributions to the discussions became available, Sverdlov went into immediate action. He did all he could to translate the decisions of the Congress into reality by bringing the local Bolsheviks closer together,

conducting propaganda among the workers and fighting the Mensheviks tooth and nail throughout the Volga area. He travelled through Nizhni Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Saratov and Samara, before receiving orders from the Central Committee to station himself in Kazan.

In those days Kazan had little in common with Nizhni Novgorod or Kostroma, having no large factories and a comparatively weak Bolshevik organization. Previous to 1905 the workers had gone on strike only to make economic demands; indeed, there had been no significant working class demonstrations of strength there before Bloody Sunday. As the summer wore on, however, political demands arose more often at mass meetings held outside the town and at brief gatherings in the factories. A split had occurred within the Kazan committee between the Bolsheviks on the one hand and the Mensheviks and pro-bourgeois conciliators on the other.

This was the situation that Sverdlov found when he arrived. He joined forces with S.A. Lozovsky, V.M. Likhachev and other reliable Party members to strengthen the organization and eject the Menshevik element. He was soon made a member of the Kazan committee and took an active part in the local Bolshevik newspaper, *Rabochy* (The Worker), often writing editorials for it. Along with other Bolsheviks, he also contributed articles to the legal paper, *Volzhsky Listok* (The Volga Broadsheet). His numerous leaflets, distributed among the workers by the Kazan committee, were very popular.

Contact with the people was still one of his major priorities: he organized Marxist study circles in the factories and expanded the system of agitation and propaganda among the workers and the soldiers garrisoned in the town. He was himself, along with Lozovsky and Likhachev, a fine agitator. He began to call himself Andrei, a name that was to become esteemed among work-

ers throughout the Urals; the Kazan workers respected him because he always had something new and relevant to say to them.

The Third Party Congress had urged that preparations for an armed uprising be initiated; the Kazan Bolsheviks responded. Sverdlov concentrated his attention on the local garrison, forming Party groups there, which met even more covertly than usual, under the supervision of the most reliable Party workers. Although he could not risk arrest by visiting the barracks himself, Sverdlov was in direct control of the relevant section of the committee, and wrote a number of leaflets addressed to the soldiers.

Lenin wanted the Urals to become a stronghold of Bolshevism; but for this the social-democrat groups, then in disarray, would have to merge into a viable organization as soon as possible. The realization of Lenin's plan fell to the Ural Bolsheviks, whom Sverdlov was to unify and organize, and that is what brought Comrade Andrei to us in 1905. While he made an invaluable contribution to the local revolutionary movement, he also learnt a great deal from our militant Ural workers.

## Chapter Three

# PRISON AND FREEDOM

### THE FIGHT CONTINUES

When the prison doors closed behind Sverdlov on June 10, 1906, he was aware that they would not open for a long time. Insufficient evidence would not save him from being held, tried and given a severe sentence.

At first the police had no material proof that he had been campaigning against the government. He had a false passport and they did not even know his real name. He had managed to destroy all incriminating documents, and when they searched him they found only a few insignificant notes. All that was irrelevant, though; they knew they were at last holding Comrade Andrei, who had eluded them for so long.

Meanwhile there were more arrests. Ultimately 36 people were charged with membership of a criminal organization, which, "taking the name of the Perm RSDLP committee, did knowingly incite the populace to overthrow the government, subvert the monarchy and set up a democratic republic, with the aim of establishing a socialist order in Russia." Most of the accused were 22 or 23; the eldest was 30, and Shura Kostareva was only 17. Sverdlov had had his twenty-first birthday the week before his arrest.

As a result of these arrests and the discovery of our press, the prosecution finally managed to lay hands on some documents, including the drafts of leaflets and the committee's accounts for May. Although they were not signed, a handwriting expert testified that Sverdlov had written them, but this was still not adequate grounds for accusing him of leading the Ural Party organization, and none of us would give any information about our roles within the Party. It was a Bolshevik rule not to admit

anything that would help to reveal the secrets of our underground network — the fainthearted who broke under questioning were always expelled. But the gendarmes did not need us to tell them Andrei's role.

We were transferred from cell to cell, from prison to prison, and still the investigations continued. The trial finally took place in the autumn of 1907, a year and a half later. We received varying sentences: Sverdlov was given two years in a strict security prison in addition to the 18 months that he had already been detained; my sentence was 12 months in a strict security prison, making two and a half years in all. But we counted ourselves lucky, for it was the last trial in which Bolsheviki received such comparatively light sentences; later defendants were condemned to convict labour or to longer prison terms.

Strict security imprisonment was the harshest kind, reserved for particularly dangerous enemies of the autocracy. In principle, prisoners should have been held in solitary confinement, but, as the only strict security prisons in the Urals, in Perm and Ekaterinburg, were both permanently overcrowded in those days, there were no individual cells available.

While awaiting trial we were held first in Perm and later allocated to prisons all over the Urals. At the end of 1906 a number of the accused, including Sverdlov, were transferred to a penal institution in Nikolaevka, a place which had the most dreadful reputation. We had heard that prisoners were brutally beaten and tortured there: one method was apparently to take prisoners to the yard in sub-zero temperatures and douse them with water. Sverdlov and others had been condemned to this hellhole.

He was put into solitary confinement immediately on arrival but the other political prisoners chose him as their spokesman, so that he did not have to suffer in total isolation from his comrades. Taking advantage of his

position, he visited the other cells, checked on the food and the condition of the sick, and obtained books for the prisoners.

The trial was held after Sverdlov had spent about a year in Nikolaevka. He was then moved to the overcrowded prison in Ekaterinburg, where I had been for some time, to serve the remainder of his sentence in one of the ordinary cells there.

For Sverdlov the fight continued even in prison. He maintained his links with the outside world — no easy task in his circumstances, as he was allowed no parcels and few visitors. Only members of his immediate family would be permitted to see him, and he had been out of touch with them since leaving Nizhni Novgorod, though his youngest sister did visit him once, in the spring of 1907.

We were able to keep up spasmodic and precarious contact, exchanging a few words through my casement when he was taken to the exercise yard, or passing occasional notes to each other. Though we spent over two years in the same prisons, we met rarely, and then thanks to the “liberal” condescension of the prison authorities. And how immeasurably brief those meetings were! We were never left alone together, were never able to express even a hundredth part of all we wanted, needed so badly, to say.

Many of the political prisoners, especially those whose families lived nearby, were in a much better position than Sverdlov. They regularly received parcels and were sometimes allowed visitors, who could keep them in touch with the outside world. Notes would covertly change hands in any of a dozen cunning ways: hidden in pots with a false bottom, in loaves, in the covers of books, which prisoners in those days were still permitted to receive, in the birch-bark containers used in the Urals for milk or beer.

It was also sometimes possible to bribe certain of the



junior warders, who often had a hard time managing on their less than ample wages. Some of the prison administrative staff also secretly sympathized with the political prisoners and were brave enough, as the opportunity arose, to do various jobs for them.

As his communications with the outside world expanded and stabilized, Sverdlov began to send his advice and instructions to those comrades who had not been arrested. He also used his contacts to inform the organization of decisions taken by the imprisoned Bolsheviks, to tell them the results of their debates and to get the drafts of political leaflets out to them. He gave those who were leaving the prison advice on contacts to make and methods to adopt.

But he was still behind bars, and longing to be free, to return to the battle. His inventive mind was constantly turning over outrageously daring plans of escape, although he soon came to see that escape in the near future was out of the question. He then turned his attention to his colleagues' education, and continued his own study of revolutionary theory; he read extensively, made notes and prepared articles. I have before me one of his notebooks from those days, which contains synopses of Lenin's *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats, What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, and also of works by Kautsky, Plekhanov, and Mehring, of Louis Paul's *L'Avenir du Socialisme, The History of Trade Unionism* by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Charles Gide's *La Coopération*, Victor Clark's *The Labour Movement in Australasia*, Rozhkov's *The Economic Development of Russia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, and Werner Sombart's *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*.

Sverdlov read works such as *What Is To Be Done?*, *Capital* and the letters of Marx and Engels several times while in prison, each time making new notes and synopses. He made sure somehow that his personal copy of *Capital*, studded with pencil marks and comments, was

never taken from him when he was moved from one prison to another.

His cellmates could hardly believe his diligence. He often worked far into the night, taking advantage of the sleepy silence in the cells. Sverdlov's working habits were, of course, familiar to me; I often remember him returning home after an exhausting meeting and immediately taking up a book. Maybe it was hereditary or maybe the result of long practice, but he seemed to find five hours' sleep sufficient.

He had what I can only describe as a tremendous thirst for life; he tried to live every moment to the full and hated wasting time. Never lukewarm about anything, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to whatever he was doing, be it work, study or even relaxation when he found time for it.

From prison he wrote: "Life is a wonderful thing — varied, interesting, inexhaustibly profound. No matter how hard we try, we can only grasp a tiny part of it — but it is our duty to make that tiny part as large and as interesting as we can..."

## **MOSCOW**

Sverdlov was released in September 1909 and went back into the thick of things without delay, finding that the situation in the country and in the Party had changed beyond recognition during his imprisonment. The police had ruthlessly crushed the Party, arresting the local leaders and destroying the workers' newspapers. Underground work was even more difficult than before.

The suppression of the first Russian revolution between 1905 and 1907 had totally demoralized the Mensheviks, who were now urging the working class to compromise with the bourgeoisie. They had taken a liquidationist position, openly insisting on the abolition of our underground network. Meanwhile Trotsky and his fol-

lowers were sitting on the fence, recommending conciliation with the liquidationists — simply playing into their hands.

Even some Bolsheviks had begun to vacillate, advising us to stop using legal methods of furthering the class struggle.

The Party was undergoing a crisis, and it was clear to Lenin that only by relentlessly opposing opportunism, in whatever guise and from whatever source, could the organization emerge from that crisis and lead the people to victory in the forthcoming revolution.

Sverdlov was released with no money at all, with the clothes he had on, a change of linen and a bundle of books. He had nowhere to live; he did not even have a coat to protect him from the autumn chill.

Fortunately there were still a few comrades left in Ekaterinburg. They scraped some money together and begged a second-hand coat from a rich liberal sympathizer; it had to be taken up, for it reached to Sverdlov's heels, but was more or less wearable. Indeed, it served him long and faithfully, accompanied him to prison and exile, and was still with him when he became Chairman of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee. He just never troubled to buy another.

Although he could have stayed in Ekaterinburg for a while, living with his colleagues, he had definitely decided in prison that he could no longer work there; reaction was rife and almost every policeman, every spy, knew his face. Besides, he felt unprepared — he needed to study the latest Party literature, to find out from the Central Committee where they felt he would be most useful. So he stayed only long enough to collect his fare for Petersburg, which seemed the best place to contact the Central Committee. He knew that I was waiting for him there.

I had been released the year before, in the autumn of 1908, and had settled in the capital, where I joined the

local Party organization through Baturin, a comrade from the Urals, and began my work anew.

I soon found a job, as a clerk in the Provincial Book Wholesalers, with pay which was meagre but regular. I took a small room on Vassilyevsky Island, and began to wait for Sverdlov with mounting agitation, naturally enough, because, except for a few fleeting moments under a warder's eye, we had not met for almost three and a half years. One evening when I came home I found him waiting for me.

That evening and the next few days seemed to fly by — we had so much to say to each other. Of course we were comrades in arms, and good friends, but we were also in love, and our love was a constant source of joy and strength to us. Sverdlov once wrote to me from prison: "I am doing all I can to conserve my strength, and knowing that you're there gives me that air of cheeriness and optimism that is a vital part of me."

Sverdlov's full and interesting letters reflect their author so clearly; it is unfortunate that I no longer have them all. I kept them with me during my days in the underground, when I was imprisoned, transported and in exile, and in the years when every scrap of paper had to be destroyed in case the gendarmes laid their dirty hands on it; I gave them to friends for safe keeping; I made secret caches; then I spent years collecting them together. It is hardly surprising that some of them are lost.

Sverdlov confided his plans to me; more than anything else he wanted to go abroad, if only for a month or two, and meet Lenin. In prison his long-standing dream had grown into a consuming desire.

But it was not to be, for at that time every Party worker of note was needed in Russia and money was short. And he was soon to be arrested again and exiled, to enjoy a few days of freedom and then to be sent back for a second term of exile in Siberia.

A number of colleagues in Petersburg advised him

to go to Finland and meet Sergei Gusev,<sup>1</sup> who was in close touch with Lenin and the Central Committee.

Sverdlov did not hesitate. His reputation had preceded him, and Gusev welcomed him with open arms, immediately invited him to stay and produced the most recent Party magazines and newspapers. He also brought him up to date with developments within the Party. He was a particularly useful informant because he had recently visited a number of Party organizations at Lenin's request and was well acquainted with the situation at the grassroots.

Sverdlov stayed there for about a week. On the first Sunday I went to Finland — not a complicated trip in those days — to spend a few hours with him. As I had suspected, he was deep in study and working between 16 and 18 hours a day, hurrying to make up for lost time.

In the late autumn of 1909 he suddenly received orders from the Central Committee to go to Moscow, where the Party was in disarray, having suffered several major setbacks of late. Sverdlov's assignment was to set things right.

He left for Petersburg without delay, with a passport in the name of Ivan Ivanovich Smirnov. We had one more day together and parted, not knowing what the future would bring. A day later he was in Moscow and set to work to re-establish broken contacts, bring the more politically conscious workers into the Party and give new life to the Moscow area RSDLP committee and Party bureau. His experience and energy brought rapid results.

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei Gusev became a Bolshevik in 1902. After the 1917 revolution he was a member of the RSFSR Revolutionary Military Committee (Revvoyensoviet) and of the Central Control Committee, and was also an alternate member of the All-Russia Communist Party Central Committee. Towards the end of his life he worked on the Presidium of the Comintern Executive Committee.

But Moscow was teeming with informers (or, as the Moscow Bolsheviks put it, completely “spyified”) and it was not long before he was betrayed to the secret police. He was arrested on December 13, 1909 at a meeting of the Moscow Party Committee, only three months after his release from prison.

## **BACK BEHIND BARS**

When the gendarmes arrested the Moscow committee they did not find any incriminating documents nor did their search of Sverdlov’s flat or their interrogations reveal anything.

I have before me the record of one of his last interrogations, dated January 13, 1910; it now belongs to the USSR Museum of the Revolution. It shows, incidentally, that this 25-year-old man was in police custody for the seventh time. The record is brief; it consists of one sentence, written in a clear firm hand: “I hereby refuse to testify, Yakov Sverdlov.” This meant that the charges had to be based on the reports of informers, which no court would accept as sufficient evidence. Sentences of imprisonment, convict labour and exile for life could only be given by a court. The police had to content themselves with exile by administrative order.

In all the years he spent in prison and exile, it was rare for Sverdlov to ask a personal favour of the Tsarist administration. But the idea of going abroad had seized him again, this time so strongly that he wrote on March 17, 1910 to the police department:

“Shortly before my arrest I spent three and a half years in prison, which did considerable harm to my already weak constitution. The spring weather has further impaired the condition of my lungs.

“On these grounds I request the Police Department not to exile me to some distant part of the Empire, if such is to be my sentence, but to permit me to emigrate.”

Sverdlov's file also includes a certificate from Koleznikov, the prison doctor, who could hardly be accused of over-indulgence towards Bolsheviks, stating that "Sverdlov suffers from chronic catarrh of the upper left lung, apparently tubercular in origin." But despite this the request was not granted.

The police had no intention of letting him emigrate now that they had caught him. It was fine that he was ill, and all the better if it was serious; they counted on illness taking its toll in the dreadful Siberian environment where so many dedicated champions of the working class perished, victims of some grave illness from which they could easily have recovered if their conditions had been even slightly improved.

I heard from Sverdlov regularly up to December 1909, when we suddenly lost touch. Fearing that he had been arrested, I took a week's leave and went to Moscow, where I met his sister, Sara, who confirmed my suspicions. Sverdlov was in the police cells on Arbat street. It seemed so unfair that he had enjoyed only three months of freedom after three and a half years in jail.

I asked to see him, if only briefly, but was refused. Even close relatives needed official permission and we were not even legally married. I persisted in going to the police station, and standing in the yard for hours in the snow, not really knowing what I was hoping for. But one day my patience was rewarded — Sverdlov saw me and had time to shout that he was going to be exiled, that I was to keep calm and wait for news. Then they dragged him away from the window.

On March 31, 1910 the Ministry of Internal Affairs exiled him to Naryn territory for three years. The following August I was taking a holiday in Ekaterinburg, when who should appear but Sverdlov! He had escaped after less than four months in exile.

He did not plan to stay in Ekaterinburg, for he valued every moment of freedom, was desperate to make

contact with the Central Committee and get back to work. Besides, he was known in the town; it would be terribly risky to stay, especially now that he was a fugitive. We left immediately for Perm, intending to go on from there as soon as we could.

During his brief time in Ekaterinburg Sverdlov had met a few of his old colleagues, including Mikhail Permyakov, who gave him his own passport, which he used until he was arrested again.

The scenery on the boat ride from Perm to Nizhni Novgorod along the Kama and Volga rivers was truly lovely. Sverdlov had long wanted to make this trip and it was all the more wonderful because we did it together.

After a few days in Nizhni Novgorod, where we stayed with Sverdlov's father, whom he had not seen for over five years, we proceeded to Moscow. Sverdlov had an arrangement to meet one of the leaders of the regional Party group. Not wanting to take any unnecessary risks, he asked me to go to the rendezvous in his stead. After numerous attempts I still had not succeeded in making contact with this comrade; we never knew whether he had been arrested or had simply gone away. A week passed; there was no point in staying and my leave was almost over. We went on to Petersburg.

## ARREST IN PETERSBURG

We needed money to live, so I went back to work. We stayed with Glafira Okulova,<sup>1</sup> who was living with her two children in a smallish flat. Her husband, Ivan Teodorovich, had been sent directly from Ekaterinburg

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<sup>1</sup> Glafira Okulova (Teodorovich) was a member of the Party from 1899. After the October Revolution she served on the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and on a Revolutionary Military Council attached to one of the Fronts. Towards the end of her life she worked in the Museum of the Revolution in Moscow.



prison to a term of forced labour.

Okulova had heard a lot about Sverdlov from her husband's prison letters and she was glad to take us in. Her life was extremely difficult at that time, as she had two small children to provide for and was also trying to send money to her husband. We would both often come home late after work, worn out, to find the children fast asleep. On the evenings when he was free, Sverdlov would give the children their supper and put them to bed.

As he had hoped, he was able to reach Lenin and the Central Committee through his Petersburg comrades. He first contacted Mikhail Olminsky<sup>1</sup> and they soon became close friends. Olminsky felt that Sverdlov was too careless of his own safety and especially foolhardy to stay with Okulova, the wife of a well-known Bolshevik, whose flat could well be under police surveillance. Sverdlov took this to heart, and we tried several times to find another flat but failed.

This was how Lenin viewed the changed political situation in November 1910: "The three-year period of the golden days of the counter-revolution (1908-10) is evidently coming to a close and being replaced by a period of incipient upsurge. The summer strikes of the current year and the demonstrations on the occasion of Tolstoy's death are a clear indication of this."<sup>2</sup>

Sverdlov was of the same opinion. He wrote on October 31, 1910 to his friends in Narym:

"It gets better every day — our links expand, grow stronger and more stable. And there has been a noticea-

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Olminsky was one of the earliest revolutionary activists in Russia, first arrested in 1885. He was one of Lenin's closest confederates, helping to found the Bolshevik newspapers *Zvezda* and *Pravda*. After the October Revolution he headed the History Department of the Communist Party Central Committee.

<sup>2</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 16, p. 339.

ble change in the atmosphere during the last couple of weeks. A number of comrades have returned to us and the organization is heaving, if you'll pardon the expression, with young workers and the formerly benighted masses. Groups are springing up in the colleges and institutes to discuss social issues. There are more strikes. This all clearly shows that things are looking up — it's not just wishful thinking, it's absolutely, palpably real..."

The growing revolutionary mood among the people prompted the Central Committee to increase their demands on the Petersburg Bolsheviks, Sverdlov among them. It was a time to stand up and be counted, to come out into the open, to abandon the hints and innuendoes that we had used when writing for the legal liberal press. The Bolsheviks should speak to the workers again through their own newspaper *Zvezda*.<sup>1</sup> The cream of the Party should be united and a militant monolithic organization created, capable of leading the working class in its mood of mounting revolutionary enthusiasm.

The Central Committee heard that Sverdlov was back in Petersburg and looked to him to restore the local organization, which had suffered at the hands of the secret police. He was also to help create *Zvezda*.

On their advice he proceeded with extreme caution; it was known that the organization in Petersburg, like its Moscow counterpart, was rotten with informers. The Central Committee itself arranged his first secret appointments with Bolshevik workers from the local factories; he had decided to begin his reconstruction work in Petersburg in this way.

Sverdlov's understanding of the political situation enabled him to turn any event into an agitational vehi-

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<sup>1</sup> *Zvezda* (The Star) was a legal Bolshevik paper, the precursor of *Pravda*. It began publication in December 1910 in Petersburg, under the supervision of Lenin, who was abroad at that time.

cle. He proved invaluable, for example, in the Bolshevik campaign during the State Duma<sup>1</sup> debates on the abolition of capital punishment.

He also gave detailed advice to the workers when they began to set up their own Bolshevik groups, explaining the importance of a broad base and helping them to establish efficient communications and plan their public addresses. He was in close contact with the Bolshevik deputies in the Duma.

I was able to help him in two ways. I checked all his contacts in advance, as a security measure. In the evening after work I would go to the working class districts on the city limits, give the password and question the person I found there closely on his political background and role in the Party. Only when I was convinced of his reliability would I arrange the meeting with Sverdlov. If the flat seemed totally secure Sverdlov would go there; otherwise they would meet at the house of some comrade already known to be trustworthy. Of course I named no names; I spoke only of Comrade Andrei, a Party worker, which gave Sverdlov some measure of security against betrayal. Through each of these individuals he made further contacts among the Petersburg factory workers.

I also helped him put his letters to Lenin and the Central Committee into his own special code. There is even a mention of this, referring to me by name, in police records dating from 1910.

At times the informers in our ranks managed to complicate our work considerably. We needed to act in total secrecy, while at the same time we had a bitter fight on our hands against the liquidationists and those who wanted to recall our deputies from the Duma.

*Zvezda* was also a bone of contention; the Menshe-

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<sup>1</sup> The Third State Duma (a kind of parliament — *Tr.*) sat from November 1, 1907 to June 9, 1912. Bolsheviks stood for election in order to use it as a platform. — *Ed.*

viks tried to take it over and turn it into a mouthpiece of liquidationism. But Sverdlov, Olminsky and Poletaev, in recruiting the editorial board and chief editor, did their best to ensure that the paper would be truly Bolshevik. In early November 1910 Sverdlov reported to the Central Committee:

“Dear comrades, first about the paper... A group of objectors invited me, as you said they would, to a meeting to elect a candidate for the editorship. It pains me to report that there was absolutely no one in any way suitable... Baturin would have been more or less adequate and I wanted to put his name forward but was not sure that he would want me to...”

This letter was never dispatched. On the evening of November 14 I came home from work and settled to the arduous task of encoding it but it was not even half finished when there was a hammering on the door and the gendarmes burst in. During the time it took them to get to our room I managed to destroy the half-coded letter and the code itself. That was most important. The police discovered the original, written in Sverdlov’s hand but it had no address and no signature. They turned the place upside down, broke the furniture, tore the paper off the walls and slit open the mattresses, but found nothing else — not for the first time — because we had been expecting a raid since November 9, when Sverdlov noticed that he was being followed. At first he eluded them with his usual skill but he knew that he was a marked man; the remarkably zealous informers soon put the police on to his trail again. At that stage we began the essential business of passing everything we could to our colleagues.

One would have thought that, once his whereabouts were known, arrest would follow shortly. We were sufficiently familiar with the gendarme mentality, however, that we were not surprised when they held back. They thought he did not suspect he was being followed and

were waiting for him to betray his contacts to them first.

We were sure that it was only a matter of time and hurriedly began to look for a place where Sverdlov could go into hiding for a while. But they forestalled us. After first arresting him not far from our flat, they came and took me.

After only three months, in February 1911, I was released, expelled from Petersburg and sent to Ekaterinburg under strict police surveillance. I had got off so lightly because they could hardly detain a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy, as I then was, especially as there was little material evidence against me.

Until his trial Sverdlov was kept in solitary confinement. Immediately before his arrest — and in fact during all our years in the underground — we were in bad financial straits. Sverdlov had no regular source of income and depended, when driven to it, on tiny and erratic sums made over to him as a professional revolutionary by the Party from its own meagre reserves. My income was less than generous and it was hard to make ends meet.

When I was released I got a little money together and sent it to him, insisting that he spend it primarily on food, as I was concerned for his health. He reassured me but once admitted: “Not scrimp on food? I confess — through scrimping I have bought over eight rubles’ worth of books, including the fourth volume of Mehring’s *Theories of Surplus Value*, and a change of linen — you know how badly off I am in that line.”

Meanwhile my confinement was approaching, which disturbed Sverdlov greatly, especially as he was in prison and unable to help directly. He tried to give me moral support by quoting medical texts on the subject of hygiene and the care of infants. He also went into the question of marriage and birth in some detail, studying the opinions of Plato, Thomas More, Tolstoy and various contemporary sociologists — for Sverdlov never

considered any issue superficially.

Our son was born on April 4 (April 17, New Style), 1911. Long before that, however, Sverdlov was reflecting on how to bring the child up as a “real” human being. On March 29, 1911 he wrote:

“Upbringing is the decisive, if not the exclusive, influence. Inherited traits are merely potential — they can be realized or not, depending on several circumstances, which we can summarize as ‘environment.’”

There was so much tenderness, so much concern in every line of those letters, such bitterness at being separated from his wife and child at such a difficult time. “I can’t tell you,” he wrote, “how much it hurts to sit here uselessly when the dearest person in the world is in distress, when all I want is to look after you. But here I am, a thousand miles away... I’d do anything, absolutely anything, to make things easier for you. I’m trying to think of something cheerful to write but I can’t — not because I’m lacking myself in that respect, for what we have between us makes me rich indeed. If we were together, how different things would be! But I want you to feel the strength of my love from far away — may it warm you, ease your sufferings, make them easier to bear.”

Though we spent little time together, there was no happier or closer-knit family, and no better father than Sverdlov.

Thinking about his wife and child did not prevent him from working with his usual concentration. In almost every letter he asked for more books and reported on those he had read. In his first letter to me, dated March 1, 1911, he asked for Bebel’s *Aus meinem Leben*, Spinoza’s *Ethica*, the letters of Marx to Sorge and of Lassalle to Marx. Later he asked me to send a one-volume edition of Heine in German, and “as many German books as you can,” then Finn’s *Industrial Development in Russia in the Past 20 Years*, Marx’s *Theory of Surplus Value*, Parvus’ *Der Weltmarkt und die Agrarkrisis*, Bernstein’s

*Historical Materialism*, and the third volume of *Capital*.

He wrote: “There is not much change here. I am working an average of ten hours a day... I am still reading a lot, though at times my brain refuses to come to grips with a complicated concept and then I take up a more mechanical task, such as making notes. I can hardly wait for some maths books to arrive.”

With the approach of spring Sverdlov’s impatience to hear his sentence grew. He was not afraid of Siberia.

## Chapter Four

# NARYM AND PETERSBURG

### SIBERIAN EXILE

Sverdlov was exiled to Narym territory by order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for four years, as from May 5, 1911. It was not forgotten that he had already escaped from there once; the Tomsk district police officer was sternly enjoined to keep him under the strictest possible surveillance.

In Tsarist times Narym was like a huge open prison, surrounded by boundless virgin taiga, by impassable bogs which swarmed with virulent mosquitoes in summer. In winter it was bitterly cold and the snow lay deep everywhere; in spring and autumn the area was cut off by a sea of mud. Nature had made it an ideal place for the autocracy to confine its political prisoners without need for walls or bars and to make their lives a misery.

Before long the local officials sent Sverdlov even further from civilization — to settlement called Maksimkin Yar. He was the only exile there but, though he frankly admitted to me that at times life weighed heavy, he never let depression or despair get the better of him. Between the lines of every letter I saw his determination not to give in.

The situation was bleak indeed: he was cut off from the world, from his comrades and family in that remote place, where mail came only once in two or three months; he often went hungry and lacked warm clothes and other basic necessities; his guards were constantly at his heels and the drunken priest harried him incessantly. But he would not break.

On October 13, 1913 he told me how he was living:

“Imagine a narrow room, three paces across and seven long, like a prison cell. One little window on one



side, two on the other. A plank bed on the wall nearest the street, like a prison bunk, a trunk, a little table...

“There is a small, dim, kerosene lamp, which I now find more adequate than I had thought I would. It is a low room, lined from top to bottom with my newspapers. All in all it is bearable, even quite comfortable, given that no one here has a better place, except the priest...

“You are always concerned about my food. It is not too good — there is simply nothing to buy: no meat, no fish even until the river freezes, no milk, no white bread, no eggs or butter... It’s like this — for four days we have been living on tea and boiled potatoes with beer. I smoke rough-cut, there is no other tobacco to be found. I could get coarse flour but money is short — I have three rubles and 20 kopeks to last me until November 20 — I had to have a warm shirt made because the one I had was not adequate and I have no winter coat.

“But it is not too bad. I will survive and emerge in one piece. It seems that the outdoor life has done me good; I have begun to feel a little better over the summer.”

I have an earlier letter from September 1911, consisting of densely crowded lines of miniscule script on a scrap of thin grey cigarette paper. It no doubt evaded the Tsarist censorship by travelling inside someone’s clothing. It reads:

“The weather has changed. We have had several falls of powdery snow and the river is beginning to freeze. The long, cold Siberian winter is coming and I am so unprepared that I hardly dare think about it. I have no warm clothes or underwear, I am short of books, there is no paper... But I should not complain. After all, I will not be going anywhere this winter. Where would I go? The taiga will be deep in snow. I’d go in up to my neck and never get out. It will be unpleasant without books, if none come on the next boat in four or five days time,

which is highly likely. I feel I can take almost anything but how it will be when the post, which is reliable although infrequent, stops coming I dare not think...

“Bad news from all around. I do not know where my comrades are or what they are doing. I write not knowing if or when the letter will get there.

“And yet I am not disconsolate. I assure you again that I have not lost my good spirits nor even my zest for life. A contradiction, if you like, but it is so. I try not to think too much about my situation. I base myself on facts, as ever, and if it is a fact that I have to spend the winter here, then so be it. And it is not too bad: I will survive and retain my good spirits and my vigour. I will not dissipate my energies in a battle with myself — I have a better use for them.”

If the police counted on wearing Sverdlov down through sheer boredom in the wilds of Siberia they were mistaken. He kept busy, involving himself in local life and quickly making friends with his neighbours. In October 1911 he wrote:

“It will soon be time to go out with the nets again and check the ‘garrets’ (a special kind of fish trap)... The yard has to be cleared of snow, the horses cared for... It leaves little time for study. I am also coaching my landlady and another girl to become teachers, which takes up two hours every evening.”

“And besides all this,” he wrote two months later, “I have patients to visit sometimes. I am their doctor since my comrades sent me some medical supplies — for my own use, it is true, but I hand them out.”

He became more involved, helping people from all over the area to compose official petitions, giving them advice and writing letters for the illiterate. “I have doctored almost everyone here, or done them some other favour,” he wrote, “...and take nothing for it, which still bewilders them all...”

A group of young people gathered around him. He

got them to stage Chekhov's play *The Bear*, communicating his enthusiasm to his hesitant troupe — hesitant with good reason, as none of them had even seen a theatre, much less been in a play — until everyone was so inspired that he had more volunteers than he needed.

The interests of this group, first confined to the play, began to extend and Sverdlov formed a circle to study various topics of general interest.

All this intense activity deeply disturbed the guards and the priest, and together they decided what to do. One evening, when the young people were gathered in Sverdlov's room, both guards (who rejoiced in the names Pristavka and Mungalov) suddenly appeared. In a fit of official fervour they tipped up all the exile's poor belongings, ransacked his bed, desk and trunk — and emerged victorious. They had discovered the group drawing mysterious signs and diagrams on pieces of paper, which they confiscated as clear evidence of Sverdlov's seditious dealings — though quite what it all meant they did not think to find out.

They sent the papers off and waited in pleasurable anticipation of congratulations for their diligence. However, what they finally received was not congratulations but a ticking off from their superior, who called them blockheads and clowns. Those seditious symbols were geometrical diagrams and the most terrible of all was a Pythagorean triangle.

So Sverdlov's popularity and influence continued to grow, while the alarm of the guards grew in like measure.

But his health was suffering. On September 25 he wrote to me that he had "no intention of falling seriously ill; it would be worse than dangerous because there's no medical treatment available here." Three months later he reported that he was sleeping badly, that "my brains are in such a state that I could not do a simple little problem that I had set my students. I had to call off the les-

son. Yesterday I felt so bad: I wanted to cry, I could not sleep, I really had to pull myself together. Well, now I have told you how awful it all is and I feel better for it... I know I will be fine in a day or two... Darling, don't be upset. I will not break down, I will not come out of this a physical or emotional cripple. I will still be a whole person when they release me."

After a day or two his condition did not improve, however. "I did not sleep and felt very bad towards evening... Oh, it's all so dreadful! And I have no one here — even if I were to go under completely nobody would know for months..."

But he was wrong — his comrades, the Bolshevik exiles in Narym and Kolpashevo, in Parabel and Togur, knew. They had received a note from him through a trusted friend: "Stop the preparations for escape. I fear the journey would be too much." If Yakov Sverdlov, the eternally cheerful, strong, confident Comrade Andrei, was feeling like that, then the situation was grave indeed...

## **BACK TO NARYM**

The Bolsheviks throughout the area realized that it was a matter of life and death and decided on a united course of action. The rule in Narym was that each exile had the right to an audience with Ovsyanikov, the local police officer, once a week and now they gave him not a moment's peace. Personal needs were forgotten — an unending stream of exiles went to him with one request: bring back Sverdlov.

Ovsyanikov applied to the Governor of Tomsk Province and in February Sverdlov was sent back to Narym, where his health rapidly improved and he set himself to work again. On February 23 he wrote:

"I have been here for about two weeks. I intended to lock myself away with lots of books but I couldn't do it.

There are so few educated people here and my social conscience is too strong — I yielded to my comrades' persuasion and pestering to give lectures on political economy. And now I have taken it on myself to arrange open discussions on fascinating topics such as current events, the election campaign and so on. I will read the opening papers."

Immediately on his return he began to improve the colony's contact with the outside world, so as to keep the exiles abreast of developments inside and outside the Party. They eagerly seized on all Party news, passionately debated Lenin's articles as they arrived in Narym and were engrossed in the proceedings of the Sixth All-Russia RSDLP Conference, which took place in Prague in January 1912.

The Conference discussed a wide range of issues and elected a wholly Bolshevik Central Committee, chaired by Lenin, which was to give the Party firm and militant leadership. As its ranks were often depleted by arrest, it was allowed extensive rights to co-opt new members, which is how Sverdlov joined the Central Committee. Towards the end of 1912 he was also appointed to the Russian Bureau of the Party, which had been established by the Conference to supervise operations in Russia under the direct guidance of the Central Committee.

By closely questioning each new Bolshevik arrival, Sverdlov kept himself constantly informed on the situation at the grassroots. He advised every Bolshevik escapee where to go, for he knew which groups were most seriously undermanned.

Sverdlov had intended to escape since his first days in exile — this I know because at the end of 1911 I was thinking of going with the baby to join him, but when I wrote to him about it, I received this reply:

"Of course I want to be with you soon... It's my dream but dreaming and doing cannot always go together... There is a feeling of animation in the air. I am

ready for action, and if my dream comes true it will *not* be because you come to me... Please don't make arrangements to come this way just yet." (Punctuation is in the original — *Author's note.*)

It was obvious that he was not meaning to stay in Narym much longer and it was clear to me why. He was absolutely right about the change in the atmosphere: Stolypin's reactionary reign<sup>1</sup> was coming to an end, the Russian working class was again rising against Tsarism and the Party had been galvanized by the Prague Conference. How could Sverdlov sit counting the years in the backwoods of Narym at a time like that?

In early April 1912 a terrible tragedy in Siberia's Lena gold fields rocked the country. The army, on instructions from the gendarmes, fired on a thousand unarmed workers who were going to negotiate with the mining administration. Over 500 people were killed or wounded. News of this foul act quickly spread throughout the country, triggering off mass strikes, meetings and demonstrations. It reached Narym at about the same time as Moscow and Petersburg, during the preparations for the May Day demonstrations.

The exiles had decided to hold their demonstration in Narym itself, as it was the largest settlement in the area. Though not the first demonstration there, it was to be the best organized. Sverdlov, with Valerian Kuibyshev, had done a lot of the spadework, but he realized that to take part would be too risky. He asked to be sent to Kolpashevo, so as not to give the authorities the slightest grounds for returning him to Maksimkin Yar and left a few days before May Day.

Carrying their red banners, the exiles marched to the edge of town, where Kuibyshev gave a rousing speech to

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<sup>1</sup> P.A. Stolypin (1863-1911) was a reactionary Russian statesman who held the position of Premier and Minister of the Interior from 1906 to 1911, during the reign of Tsar Nicholas II. — *Tr.*

a large crowd of exiles and locals. The air of excitement was such that the guards did not dare to interfere, but the arrests began a few days later. Sverdlov was also arrested. He protested that he had not even been there and was told that he could have masterminded it from a distance.

He was held in Tomsk prison for several months, not returning to Kolpashevo until August 1912. At about that time Stalin arrived in Narym and they met for the first time. It was a short-lived acquaintance, however, as Stalin escaped at the end of the month. Sverdlov had every intention of following him.

## ON THE RIVER

The escape plans had long been laid; the final details were quickly arranged. Sverdlov was to leave Kolpashevo in a small boat, go up the Ob River to a nearby landing stage and there meet the *Tyumen*, a steamer from Tomsk, which would be taking on wood. Some of the engineers, trustworthy men, had already agreed to hide him until the steamer reached Tobolsk along the Ob and Irtysh rivers. Kapiton Kaplatadze, an excellent oarsman, was to accompany him to help handle the small boat.

The brief farewells, a firm handshake and an embrace, were made on the banks of the stormy river late one evening at the end of August. The small group of onlookers watched until at last the unsteady craft disappeared from view in a cloud of spray and the shadows of approaching night. Winter was already on its way; the howling northern winds carried flurries of snow and thin films of ice were appearing on the river. The foam-flecked waves dashed in rapid succession against the boat and the raging wind cut the runaways to the bone. It would have been hard to find a worse time to make an escape like that, but the *Tyumen* would make no more

trips before the following spring. There had been no choice.

After three or four days the steamer arrived in Kolpashevo. The exiles hurried to contact their engineer ally, only to receive the staggering reply that the fugitives had not appeared, though the steamer had spent a day at the landing stage. Everyone in the know had kept their eyes peeled and had even mounted a search but the area was clearly deserted.

The comrades feared the worst: Sverdlov and Kaplatadze had not reached the landing stage and the Ob in a storm was no joking matter. But after two more days news came from the village of Parabel: they were alive but under arrest. They had not, indeed, managed to reach the landing stage. Soon after they had set off the storm had borne down on them with all its fury. As they desperately tried to row upstream, the current and wind carried them back. By morning they were spent and knew that they would never reach their destination. It never occurred to them to give up and return to Kolpashevo.

They decided to turn the boat around, in the direction of Narym and Parabel, and try to hold back against the current, so that the *Tyumen* could overtake them. They could see no alternative, though this meant that they would have to hold out against the storm for two or three days in their frail little craft with almost no food and with no hope of rest. They would have to row constantly. They could not bring themselves to land the boat, not because they were afraid of being caught or of meeting any of the wild animals that roamed the deserted overgrown banks, but because they did not want to miss the steamer; though when it appeared they would still have to find some way of swimming to it and boarding unnoticed, and finding their engineer friends, who were expecting them at the landing stage, not in the middle of a turbulent river.



Maybe these difficulties would have proved insurmountable; they never found out. They had by then been over 24 hours in a flimsy boat that was now racing downstream despite their failing efforts. If they laid down the oars to straighten up for a few minutes the icy wind would freeze their soaked clothing to their skin, and their arms and legs would stiffen with cramp. They simply could not allow their exhausted bodies to stop rowing. Then one of them made a false move which he was unable to correct and the boat capsized, tipping them into the freezing water.

Sverdlov was an excellent swimmer; he could probably have reached the bank in spite of his terrible fatigue and waterlogged clothing. But Kaplatadze could not swim. Clutching the boat, Sverdlov feebly tried to save his helpless comrade. Death was closing in.

They had covered about 80 miles in their desperate battle with the elements, and capsized not far from Parabel, where their friends were on constant look-out for the *Tyumen*.

Vanya Chugurin remembers that he was talking with some peasants when they noticed a boat, some two miles away, coming towards them from the far bank. When one of the sharp-eyed peasants said that it had disappeared, they thought that it must have landed on a small island in midstream. Then they heard a resonant cry for help.

They had no life-saving equipment but went out in one of the half-finished but usable boats that were beached nearby, got as close as they could, and threw the drowning men an oar tied to a rope. Even then it was touch and go, for Sverdlov and Kaplatadze were stiff with cold. After a long fight with the current they were all driven to shore. The poor creatures lay motionless while the peasants built a fire; they were revived and taken indoors, at which point the police appeared.

Early next day, August 31, 1912, Sverdlov was re-

turned to Narym and imprisoned again. The police could relax at last — there was not much to be feared from a man of weak constitution who was now half dead from his dreadful experience on the river and a long soaking in icy water.

A delegation of exiles petitioned the Narym police officer to allow their sick and exhausted comrade to rest for a few days in their care; knowing what Sverdlov had been through, the official agreed. Yet no sooner had the prison gates closed behind him than Sverdlov disappeared and a day later was back in Parabel, preparing to escape to Tomsk. Vanya Chugurin had contacts among the crew of the steamer *Sukhotin*.

Sverdlov was re-outfitted by a group effort and slipped into a first-class cabin late one evening, just as the steamer was leaving. When it reached Kolpashevo the next day, all the village came out as usual, for this was an event which brightened their monotonous days. Some of the crowd seemed more than normally agitated — the Bolsheviks had already heard the news and were willing the *Sukhotin* to leave quickly.

Everything seemed to be going normally until a large group of guards appeared and made their way through the crowds. They boarded the steamer and headed straight for the first-class cabins. They knew what they were about; it was clearly an informer's doing.

They searched two cabins thoroughly but to no purpose, and went on to the third, which looked empty until one of them glanced under a bunk and let out a joyful bellow. Sverdlov emerged and asked with an unruffled air: "Is this Kolpashevo? Thank you so much for waking me, gentlemen. Just fancy — I almost missed my stop!" And he strolled past the stunned guards, leaving those seasoned veterans with their mouths open as he went ashore and melted into the crowd of exiles on the wharf.

But he was tracked down the same day and sent back to Tomsk prison. This, his fourth escape from Narym,

had been a failure.

Yet he kept on trying, depending on the aid of dozens of comrades, on that wonderful, indomitable Bolshevik brotherhood. In fact, the whole history of Bolshevik exile in Narym was a dramatic and intense struggle between two opposing camps. A huge number of powerful, well-armed Tsarist officials, who held all the vast area, its prisons and colonies in their cruel grip and who had the land itself — the trackless taiga, impassable bogs, bitter cold, miry roads — on their side, was ranged against a small persecuted group deprived of their rights and even of the basic necessities of life. But these were special people — Bolsheviks, inspired by great ideas, united by comradeship, made strong by their collective spirit, marching behind Lenin to their hard-won victory — people for whom nothing was impossible.

It seems almost incredible that the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the unequal contest of exile. Yet dozens of them, overcoming all obstacles and disregarding past failures, managed to escape, among them Sverdlov — but more of that later.

I did not hear the details of the misadventures I have just described until later that autumn, when I arrived in Narym with our son, Andrei.

## TOGETHER AGAIN

I had been separated from Sverdlov for eighteen months, most of which time I had spent in Ekaterinburg under police surveillance. I stayed longer than I intended to, for the baby was born there, but in the autumn of 1911 I took the child and ran away.

While in Moscow, without papers or permission, I stayed with a friend, Sanya Anisimova. The idea of going to Sverdlov came to me there but, as a boat put in at Maksimkin Yar only twice a year, I knew that it was impossible, especially as the baby was less than a year old

then.

Sverdlov wrote to me a lot from Narym, mostly on personal subjects. When I sent the first photographs of baby Andrei, he replied:

“The photos along with what you tell me make me so proud, so happy. I have been showing this work of art to all and sundry... I sometimes wonder what I will mean to him, being with him so rarely. Will I be there when he takes his first steps? Will I be there when he becomes aware of the world around him and begins to ask questions? I have been doing a lot of thinking...”

He had written earlier from Maksimkin Yar:

“Thousands of miles, but sometimes it feels like no distance at all... I used to mull over our relationship, but I hardly ever do that now. So little together, so long apart — a day of joy, months of misery. Does it really make sense to stay together? To answer that question I had to answer another: Does it make sense to ask a question like that? The obvious answer is that life is not measured by the passage of time but by the intensity with which we live. And there is no doubt that we have both developed as a result of being together... I think we can both be sure that we would and should do the same if we had our time over again.”

It is true that we were not often together: while he was in prison or exile in one place, I was being held in another. When we were released, we sometimes managed to stay together for a few months, but more often it was a question of weeks or days.

While in Petersburg I received the letter from Narym telling me that we would meet soon, though not in Siberia. I waited through the spring and summer of 1912 but Sverdlov did not come and I heard no more from him. I did not know what to think but was sure that it was pointless to wait any longer. I collected some money from comrades and set off.

Having reached Tomsk with no problem, I sailed

down the Ob to Kolpashevo, where I judged Sverdlov to be from his last letter. I was warmly greeted by the Bolsheviks there but they had bad news for me; a day or two before Sverdlov had been sent to Tomsk prison. I was dreadfully upset; in leaving Tomsk I had been increasing my distance from my husband, not decreasing it! There was nothing for it but to return. I was so impatient that I paid no heed to their pleas to wait until the situation was clarified somewhat; I had to get to Tomsk in a hurry, especially as the river would not be navigable much longer.

The exiles, seeing that their pleas were in vain, gave me what they could in the way of clothes and other essentials and put me on the steamer. I would have had a bad time in Tomsk, alone in an unfamiliar town, with a baby and almost destitute, if it had not been for the Naumovs, whom I had known as a girl in Ekaterinburg.

As soon as I could, I went to make enquiries and try to arrange a meeting with Sverdlov. A gendarme colonel agreed to speak to me, and when I told him I was Sverdlov's wife and had come with our baby to be near my husband, he began to behave with uncommon courtesy. Accepting that I was Sverdlov's wife without any documentary proof, he arranged a meeting, and what a meeting — not in the office in front of everybody, with a grille between us, but in Sverdlov's cell, alone together.

I was ready to run straight to the prison but it was late. I do not know how I got through the night; I only remember that my head was full of nonsense and I could not sleep.

In the morning I set out with the drowsy baby in my arms. The prison gate creaked open but the office was deserted because I had come so early. As the minutes passed Andrei began to whimper with hunger. At last someone came, I went through the final formalities and found myself in a dark corridor. The keys rattled in the lock; the door swung open...

Sverdlov was taking his “morning constitutional,” striding rapidly from corner to corner of his cell — six paces each way — unaware that I was even in Tomsk. At the sound of the key he turned his head, expecting to see the warder’s tiresomely familiar features. Instead he saw me and little Andrei, and froze in his tracks. The door closed behind me. We were alone.

I can say little about that meeting because I remember so little — only that it seemed to last a few seconds, not the hour that it really was. I no longer know which of us did more talking, who asked the most questions, who replied. Andrei did not let us forget that he was there too; in the gloom of that Tomsk solitary confinement cell Sverdlov first laid eyes on his eighteen-month-old son.

The key sounded again in the lock all too soon. I took Andrei to the Naumovs’ and fed him quickly, then went straight to the gendarme office. I spoke to the same colonel, who was again considerate and kind. He said that he would try to have Sverdlov sent from prison back to exile if I would go with him, taking the baby.

That explained everything! The “kind and considerate” gendarmes had read Sverdlov’s letters, knew that he was boundlessly devoted to us, longed to be with us, and calculated that we would be more effective in holding him there than any guard — which only shows how little they understood the Bolshevik mentality. Naturally I agreed and the following day the Governor of Tomsk Province received this dispatch:

“I beg leave to request the transfer of Sverdlov to Parabel, in view of the imminent discontinuance of river traffic. Sverdlov’s wife has arrived with an eighteen-month-old child. She volunteers to remain in exile with him.”

Parabel was about three miles from the river but they considered that too close; maybe he was a family man, but there was no point in putting temptation in his

way. They also felt that it would be easier to watch him in a smaller place than Parabel, where there were dozens of exiles. They sent us to a godforsaken hamlet of four or five houses called Kostyrevaya.

We rented a room in a peasant's house and, although there were problems and money was very short, we did not do badly. Sverdlov took over the housework, always doing the cooking and usually the washing, and I had to fight to be allowed even to help. It was not just that he had looked after himself in prison and exile for years; it was a question of principle. For a genuine Bolshevik the equality of women and their emancipation from housework was a matter for action, not words.

Sverdlov spent a lot of time with our son. It was as if he wanted to make up to him for the years they had been apart and also to store up fond memories for the future.

He rarely left Kostyrevaya, even to go to Parabel; he seemed to be quietly contented with his lot, having dismissed once and for all the idea of escape. At first his guards looked in on us two or three times a day but they always found him at home playing with the baby or doing the housework, and began to relax. Appearances were deceptive, of course; Sverdlov had started to plan his escape almost as soon as we arrived. He loved us but never for a moment forgot that his place was in the front-line of the revolution that was daily gaining ground among the Russian proletariat. He could not let us tie him down when the Party needed him, in that climactic year of 1912.

By an extreme effort of will he managed to maintain the calm appearance of a man satisfied with life but he concealed nothing from me.

I had not seen him for almost two years. It struck me, as he strode around our room telling me — and the peacefully sleeping baby — all his plans, how much he had matured in that time. I attributed it to his experi-

ences in exile: his diligent study of theoretical texts, the organizing that he had done under extremely difficult circumstances, his contact with Party groups in Russia and careful assessment of their needs, and his constant association with a group of politically mature working people who were courageously bearing the burden of their exile in Narym. His mental scope, as a result, was wider, his understanding of the political situation sounder, his comprehension of the Party's problems deeper. And this made it harder to sit in idleness.

We agreed that if he got away safely, he would let me know. I would go to Tomsk with Andrei and wait to hear from him again.

His fifth escape was a success. I soon heard that he was beyond Tomsk. Our comrades again gave my son and myself some basic necessities and we left for Kolpashevo, where we spent two days with the Dilevsky sisters. A letter reached us in Tomsk and we went to join Sverdlov in Petersburg.

## **ON THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE**

When Sverdlov arrived in Petersburg towards the end of December 1912 he had almost no contacts and did not know how to communicate with the Central Committee or with Lenin, who was still living abroad. The only certain thing was that any false move or careless contact could send him straight back to prison or exile.

On December 23 he wrote to Narym. The best he could say was that he was alive, achieving nothing, sleeping in a different place every night and seeing only those people that he absolutely had to, who were few indeed.

The position began to improve slowly with the help of Mikhail Olminsky, who put him in touch with a number of Leninist Bolsheviks. He was soon in contact with



the Bolshevik deputies in the Duma and finally reached Lenin and the Central Committee. He himself was now a member of the CC, having been co-opted in his absence.

He went to stay with Fyodor Samoilov, a Bolshevik worker and Duma representative, and took up the two tasks that the Central Committee had assigned him, supervising *Pravda*, which had begun publication in December 1912, and providing whatever help the Bolshevik faction in the Fourth State Duma needed. *Pravda*, and the Duma were vital to the Party's legal activities and to the extension of its influence as it strove to unite and organize the people.

Grigori Petrovsky, one of the older revolutionaries, told me: "Sverdlov quickly became involved in all aspects of the Party's work. He helped us in the Duma faction, ran *Pravda*, worked in the Central Committee's Russian Bureau and headed the Petersburg Party Committee."

But he followed Lenin's orders to concentrate on *Pravda*, doing all he could to check the lack of editorial discipline and organization that Lenin had pointed out, and to prevent the unforgivable delays that sometimes occurred in carrying out Central Committee directives or in printing Lenin's articles.

Although he was careful, it was not long before the secret police knew that he was back in Petersburg. Indeed, they were aware of almost every move he made, for at that time they had the services of a man called Malinovsky, a case-hardened informer who worked simultaneously for the Petersburg police department and the Moscow secret police and had so cleverly ingratiated himself that he had been appointed to the Central Committee at the Prague Conference and was also a member of the Bolshevik Duma faction. He was in everyone's confidence, and he passed on all his diligently amassed information to the secret police.

They shadowed Sverdlov more and more openly and persistently, biding their time, fully confident that Malinovsky would not let him slip away.

In early February the caretaker approached Fyodor Samoilov to say that he knew there was an “unregistered person” living in his room; he had seen secret police in the yard, assumed they were watching Sverdlov and was worried that when the arrest finally came both he and Samoilov would have some explaining to do. Samoilov seemed to dismiss the matter but let Sverdlov know immediately and called together the Duma deputies, with Malinovsky, of course, among them. It was agreed that Sverdlov should quickly move to a safer place.

When darkness fell, the deputies, with Sverdlov hidden in their midst, went into the yard and helped him to climb the fence that backed on to the River Neva. Malinovsky was waiting there with a cab and they made their “getaway” together to Malinovsky’s flat.

A wonderful getaway — in trying to save Sverdlov they had unwittingly handed him over to a Tsarist informer, though of course the police did not mean to compromise their valuable agent by seizing Sverdlov in his flat. Beletsky, the intelligent and crafty head of the police department and Malinovsky’s immediate superior, had ordered him to take Sverdlov to some place where he could be arrested. But Sverdlov himself had not intended to stay with Malinovsky, although he trusted him completely; on February 9, 1913 he moved in with Grigori Petrovsky and his wife Domna.

I had come to Petersburg with Andrei only the day before. As I had been corresponding with Sara, Sverdlov’s younger sister, I went directly to her, leaving my things at the station. Since Sara had links with Central Committee’s Bureau and the Petersburg committee and often helped Sverdlov, she knew where he might be. Moving around so much, he had been unable to let me know where he could be found.

The next morning Sara took me to the Petrovskys but Sverdlov had not yet arrived. They made me welcome, though, and I met there an old comrade from the Perm committee, Bina Lobova, who was on the *Pravda* editorial staff and acting as secretary for the Bolshevik Duma faction.

The Petrovskys unhesitatingly invited me to stay in their large flat, and after a really hard journey from Tomsk with Andrei I was only too glad to accept. Domna and Bina insisted that my things remain in the left luggage office overnight; they said they would go with me the next day and help me carry them. They did go, indeed, but not with me...

It was late in the evening when Sverdlov came. Although he was as cheerful as ever and bubbling over with plans, he was taking his situation seriously and frankly admitted that having the police on his heels was unpleasant. He assumed that the police had been looking for him at Samoilov's, which meant that they had somehow managed to track him down but he could not see how. He knew, however, that he would now have no peace from them.

He felt he must move as soon as possible. Samoilov and Petrovsky were both Bolshevik Duma deputies; the police would probably draw the obvious conclusions. I agreed with him, but Petrovsky only laughed: "Have you forgotten, old chap, that I'm a deputy and we have official immunity, even in this country. Relax — no one's going to touch you in my flat."

Sverdlov was incredulous that Petrovsky could think of his "immunity" seriously; to him it was obvious that the police could take it with a pinch of salt. A friendly wrangle began but Petrovsky failed to shake Sverdlov's conviction that he should get away from "all these deputies" without delay.

We talked so much that it was late before we ate and almost midnight before Sverdlov and I went to our

room, where little Andrei had long been snuffling peacefully in his sleep. Then we stayed up until dawn, talking about my journey, our comrades in Narym and Sverdlov's work in Petersburg. Just as we were settling down to sleep, there was a piercing, insistent ring at the door. Sverdlov listened a while, then said calmly: "Now we'll see who was right. So much for official immunity! Looks like they've come for me. Goodbye, darling, be strong. Look after yourself and Andrei. You're on your own again, love, and I think it will be for a long time..."

The police were already bursting into the room. There was a gendarme officer, several police officers and a number of underlings, including some civilians. The baby woke up and began to sob. Petrovsky complained loudly and demanded respect for his official immunity, and much good it did — they even forcibly prevented him from telephoning the police department. They took Sverdlov to the Crosses, a notorious Petersburg prison, and sent me and the baby to the preliminary detention cells, where I had been two years previously.

A passionate protest against our arrest appeared in *Pravda* the next day.

It was several months later that Sverdlov was exiled, by order of a special tribunal, for five years. I was sentenced to two years' banishment under strict police surveillance. The essential difference between exile and banishment was that I was not transported with other convicts but had to make my own way. So at the end of April 1913 I was on the streets of Petersburg, destitute, homeless and with a gravely ill child on my hands.

Andrei had suffered in prison. I tried so hard to save him the best food and get him a little milk or fruit but the prison fare finally gave him dysentery. By the time we were released he was seriously ill and I simply did not know what to do. I thought of going to Sara's, but she herself was in hard straits, living in a tiny room and struggling along on bread and water. I decided to go to

the Petrovskys. Though I had only been with them for a few hours, I counted on their advice and help, as Bolsheviks and friends of Sverdlov.

Petrovsky's wife opened the door, and gathered me into her arms, sobbing. They understood the problem immediately, and unquestioningly took me in. My being in Petersburg was a problem but Petrovsky willingly went to petition the police for permission to extend my stay at least until the baby was better. Although he was ultimately refused, I had two weeks' respite, during which those kind people surrounded Andrei and myself with tenderness.

Sara was told and came straightaway, followed by Mikhail Olminsky and Vladimir and Vera Bonch-Bruevich. Vera and Sara were doctors; for the first few days of our stay they took turns in sitting at Andrei's bedside with me and thanks to their skill he did not die.

I said my goodbyes to the Petrovskys at the beginning of May 1913 and went home to Ekaterinburg, where I was to spend the first part of my exile. I was separated from Sverdlov yet again and was destined to be for a long time...

## Chapter Five

# IN TURUKHANSK TERRITORY

### DAY IN, DAY OUT

They kept Sverdlov in the Crosses for about three months before exiling him, in May 1913, to Turukhansk territory, in Northern Siberia. This time they had chosen well — it was practically impossible to escape from there.

It was a wild, harsh land, especially at its northernmost limits; for thousands of miles around there was nothing but endless, trackless taiga, dismal tundra and marshlands. Through the nine-month-long arctic winter the night closed in, blizzards raged and the temperature dropped to minus 60° C. In the brief summers the sun never set but still the ground remained frozen three feet below the surface.

At the confluence of two rivers, the Nizhnyaya Tunguska and the Yenisei, several hundred miles from Krasnoyarsk, close to the Arctic Circle, was the village of Monastyrskoye (now called Turukhansk), which in those days was the territorial administrative centre.

It had a post office with telegraph equipment, a branch of the state bank, two little grocery stores, a school and even a hospital; it also possessed a police department, dozens of guards, a justice of the peace and, of course, a jail. But for all that Monastyrskoye was a tiny backwater, with a few hundred inhabitants, 40 or 50 houses and shacks and, not surprisingly, no theatre or library. All winter it was immersed in six-foot snowdrifts and only the howling blizzard disturbed the deathly silence of the deserted streets. In the gloom of the arctic night, lonely squeak of footsteps, hastening to escape the bitter cold, were a rare sound indeed.

The only contact with the outside world — Ye-

niseisk, Krasnoyarsk, Russia itself — was the Yenisei River, which carried steamers and boats in summer and sleds pulled by reindeer, dogs or horses in winter. But it was a long and exhausting journey. For days at a time one encountered no visible sign of life, since the settlements along the river banks were tens or even hundreds of miles apart. It took weeks of rowing upstream against the current, weeks of sledding behind a dog team to reach Krasnoyarsk and the nearest railway station.

At the point where the southern border of the territory and the district of Yeniseisk met there were military posts on both sides of the river, placed there to keep a continuous and close watch on all movement along the river and detain anyone who did not have a special pass.

The isolation was almost incredible. Mail, which took over a month to reach Monastyrskoye and much longer to get to the smaller settlements, was a rare event.

This is how the Turukhansk exiles were separated from the world — so completely that it is no wonder that few managed to escape from there during the last years of the Russian Empire.

In May 1913 Sverdlov was transported to Krasnoyarsk by rail and held there for about a month while some way was found of sending him on to Turukhansk territory. The political prisoners there were a mixed company: Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, anarchists, Socialist Revolutionaries, Bundists,<sup>1</sup> and Polish and Lithuanian social-democrats. Many of them had been in detention for years, exchanging a prison cell for a convict convoy, a convoy for another prison, forced labour for exile, and had completely lost touch with Party affairs. They knew nothing about the Prague Conference or the decisive break that had occurred between the Bolsheviks and the

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<sup>1</sup> The Bund was a Jewish social-democrat organisation formed in October 1897. It was a petty-bourgeois, opportunist, nationalist party, a channel of bourgeois influence on the working class. — *Ed.*

double-dealing liquidationists and Trotskyites.

Sverdlov did not allow them to remain in the dark for long. He explained the current political situation to them in detail, helping them to understand its complexities and told them about the cancerous influence of liquidationism and Trotskyism.

In early June Sverdlov and a number of others were transported to Yeniseisk on the steamer *Turukhan*. From there he was rowed down the Yenisei in a small boat, under heavy guard, reaching Monastyrskoye at the end of July. Even then they sent him some 20 miles further north, to the village of Selivanikha. Finally, in March 1914, he was moved to an unbelievably remote settlement called Kureika, which had a population of 30 or 40, several police guards and two exiles — Sverdlov and Stalin.

Acclimatization to life in the Arctic Circle was hard for Sverdlov, whose health had been undermined by years of prison, convict transports and exile. He fell victim to headaches and a terrible lassitude. Later, when he had recovered from what had proved to be a grave illness, he wrote to me: “It was really awful — all mental activity seemed to stop, a kind of suspended animation of the brain — and it made me suffer like the very devil.”

The isolation was also hard to bear. Had Sverdlov been a less sociable person, less determined to be interested in people, in the life around him, he would certainly not have found Kureika so repugnant.

When war broke out in August 1914 Sverdlov became even more keen to renew his contacts with his comrades, to find out and understand what was happening, to discuss it with like-minded people. Early in the war he heard rumours that the exiles in Monastyrskoye had made an arrangement that would allow them to receive telegrams and determined to get closer to that source of information.

Thanks to the determined efforts of the exiles in Mo-



nastyrskoye, Selivanikha and Miroyedikha, who were concerned for his health, he was brought back to Selivanikha in September 1914.

His health slowly improved there, although life was no bed of roses. Food was so incredibly expensive that the exiles' miserly allowance was barely sufficient to stave off hunger, and it was an uncommon achievement if one of them, by dint of backbreaking labour through the summer, earned 40 or 50 rubles. They almost never saw bread, cereals or vegetables, and had no meat except game, no eggs and no flour. Butter, potatoes and milk were rare, and sugar, salt, matches and tobacco almost unobtainable.

The few with friends or relations who could send them money were, of course, better off. Occasional sums of money and newspapers, magazines and books also reached certain exiles from comrades in Russia. It was usually pointless to send Sverdlov anything, however; money never arrived, books were held up and newspapers confiscated.

But no obstacles, no police control, could prevent him from starting up an extensive correspondence from Turukhansk with his comrades both in Russia and in Siberian exile. He had made several friends among the locals, and used their addresses when writing on Party business; he knew that all letters sent to him personally would be carefully scrutinized and censored. In his letters he discussed major political issues, gave his opinion on Party affairs and passed on information about the exiles.

## **WAR**

The First World War broke out on July 19 (August 1 New Style), 1914. The commencement of hostilities agitated the whole colony. Questions about the war, its effects on society and its unavoidable consequences

were on everybody's lips.

No political party, indeed no thinking person, could avoid taking up a definite stand on the war. The majority of the leaders of the international social-democrat movement, the Russian Mensheviks and the SRs, who until so recently had been calling themselves socialists, became outright traitors to socialism, betraying the workers' cause, supporting the nationalist bourgeoisie and making an undignified show of their chauvinist sentiments. One party and one alone — the Bolsheviks headed by Lenin — made a courageous and determined protest against the war, which they recognized as purely predatory, and called on the proletariat of the combatant nations to turn their weapons against their own bourgeoisie.

Newspapers took weeks to get to Turukhansk; the Bolsheviks there did not know how Lenin and the Party viewed the war. They had to work out their own position from the few scraps of information they received in telegrams.

At that time Sverdlov was still in the Arctic Circle. He wrote to me from Kureika on August 12 (Old Style), 1914, nearly a month after the outbreak of war:

“My major concern just now is what is happening far away. Practically no information, just occasional telegrams and newspapers. Impossible to grasp so many world shaking events all at once. And no really reliable news at all... I know absurdly little and face six or eight weeks' more silence... The murder of Jaurès was a terrible blow. Some comrades here are foretelling the doom of the labour movement, the triumph of reaction, a reverse to our cause that will last for years. I cannot see it. More likely the movement will take a great step forward. The horrors of war and its consequences, the dreadful burden that will fall on the most backward elements, will give a great stimulus to the backward countries too... The war will almost certainly bring cruel repression, re-

actionary excesses — but that will get them nowhere, it will be nothing but death throes. Yes, this in undoubtedly the beginning of the end... Discontent, bitter discontent, will inevitably grow, and all the drum-beating will not silence it.”

With no idea of how the Central Committee and Lenin stood on the war, with access to only the most meagre information, Sverdlov could not thoroughly analyse the situation or confidently predict all the effects it would have on the international labour movement. Yet his internationalism never faltered. In a later letter he sharply criticized the German social-democrats for supporting war credits; he found it hard to wish success to any of the nations involved in the war and strongly attacked the chauvinism of the Russian Mensheviks. When Lenin’s first articles analysing the war appeared in Turukhansk, in *Sotsial-democrat* (The Social-Democrat), Sverdlov immediately and unconditionally adopted Lenin’s views.

Many people remember Sverdlov above all as a great organizer, an essentially practical person, one of the builders of the Party and the Soviet government, a fine propagandist and agitator.

Immediately before and after the October Revolution he was wholly immersed in political and organizational activity; though he wrote numerous official documents, he left few literary works. His life was too short — Sverdlov died at 33, a bare 18 months after the Revolution. In 1917 he was 32, and had spent almost 12 years of his life in detention: five and a half years in prison and six in exile in the most remote and wretched corners of Siberia. He was arrested 14 times. Those are the statistics of his life.

His life in Turukhansk was at last more or less settled, if that is an appropriate word. Once he was convinced that he was stranded there, that escape was practically impossible, he turned his energies to political the-

ory and to literature and produced several articles, essays and letters.

His theoretical standpoint was refined through further study of Marx, Engels and Lenin, critical analysis of the works of Kautsky, Hilferding and Pannekoek, systematic perusal of political periodicals, magazines and newspapers, and passionate debates with his comrades.

Every letter from Turukhansk touched on some theoretical issue. He was particularly interested in the international labour movement, the building of the Party, certain historical questions, economics and the potential development of Siberia and Turukhansk territory itself.

While in exile there he wrote "The Schism in the German Social-Democratic Party," "The Downfall of Capitalism" and "Siberia and the War." Sverdlov passionately criticized opportunism as detrimental to the Bolshevik cause. "The Schism" was written in 1916 for *Priliv* (The Flood-Tide), a miscellany published in Moscow by a group of Bolsheviks attached to the Central Committee's Russian Bureau, including Mikhail Olminsky, Viktor Nogin and Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov. The list of its contributors also included Lenin.

News reached Turukhansk of the Zimmerwald Internationalist Conference, where Lenin formed the group known as the Zimmerwald Left, from which the genuinely communist Third International was later to grow. Sverdlov immediately advised his comrades to begin a serious study of the international revolutionary movement and gave a series of lectures on the history of the Second International and the potential of the Third. He later compiled his *Essays on the History of the International Labour Movement* on the basis of those lectures. He intended to proceed from this to a more comprehensive work, beginning with the formation of the First International, but the February Revolution interrupted his research and he never had time to return to it.

At that time he also began a painstaking study of

Turukhansk territory, collecting information about this rich and unknown land that Tsarism treated as a huge prison, with help of exiles in other settlements in the area and of the local peasants and fishermen, whose language he was learning. He was most upset that the potential of all Russia's immense borderlands held such a low priority in the official mind.

He also wrote two articles about the life of exiles: "Ten Years of Tsarist Exile (1906-1916)" and "Mutiny in Turukhansk."

Sverdlov's essays, articles, and particularly his letters cast some light on his ideas on literature and culture, on philosophical and social issues, but he never had time to develop them or publish them in a complete series of works. He was drawn away to answer the urgent call of the revolution.

## TO TURUKHANSK

In addition to the burdens of his life in Turukhansk territory Sverdlov was worried about his family.

I left Petersburg in May 1913, and went to stay on the outskirts of Ekaterinburg, where our daughter, Vera, was born on July 30. Shortly after my confinement I received permission to move to Saratov, where Sverdlov's elder sister, Sofya, lived, but within a month I had to leave for my appointed place of exile — the small town of Turinsk in Tobolsk Province. I settled in Fabrichnaya, a nearby village, with the two children.

Our life was awful, especially at first. I went to work in the office of a wood depository for a paltry wage on which I somehow had to feed and clothe the children and keep myself alive. And Sverdlov suffered along with us. On 23 October 1913 he wrote to Domna Petrovskaya: "My wife is having a terrible time... And the worst thing of all is knowing that I can do nothing to help. But we cannot change the way we are and can

hardly hope to escape suffering in the kind of life we have chosen.”

His desperate efforts to help us were, unbelievably enough, successful; his liberal friends managed to get me occasional copying work, which brought in a little more money. My comrades often sent newspapers, magazines, books and even clothes. While I was still in Ekaterinburg I had received money from the Central Committee with a kind letter from Nadezhda Krupskaya; more came when I was in Turinsk. It turned out that Sverdlov had contacted the Central Committee through friends, told them about my plight and asked them to send me any sums that might be intended for him. Krupskaya had responded by entering “Money” against my address in the Central Committee records.

The longer we were apart, the more Sverdlov yearned for us. On October 27, 1914 he wrote: “I have the photographs of the little ones in front of me... I want so much to see them and you, darling... You are all continually in my thoughts... It is wonderful to feel so close to those who are so dear to me... Barbarous brute force has parted us — but we will live in hope that the days of barbarity are numbered.”

Need I say that I was suffering too? Until the end of my term of exile, in the spring of 1915, there was no point even in thinking about joining Sverdlov, but as that time came closer we both began to consider it seriously. In February 1915 he wrote: “The joy of living as a family again is such a weighty argument in favour of your coming that it completely tips the balance. In fact, all the arguments are in favour, except the question of what we are going to live on.”

At that time Sverdlov was in Selivanikha but had determined to ask for a transfer to Monastyrskoye, where we both might find work more easily. Comrades in Krasnoyarsk promised to find me a job through the local administration. That settled the money issue, though of

course I would have gone in any case.

Our preparations were brief. The first stage of the journey, made no easier by having two children to look after, ended in a warm welcome from the exiles in Krasnoyarsk. They put us on a steamer for Monastyrskoye, telling me that Sverdlov had already been transferred there.

What an extraordinary childhood our little ones had! Andrei was just four and had already seen his father in prison in Tomsk, lived with his mother in a Petersburg prison, had six months of family exile in Narym, two years in Tobolsk with me, and was now going to a third place of exile. Our two-year-old Vera was going to her second.

My anxiety grew as we neared Monastyrskoye. Over two years had passed since that unhappy February evening when I had last seen my husband, last heard his voice. Andrei had forgotten his father and Vera had never known him.

The days passed... Then at last we caught sight of a white bell tower and a five-domed church high on a distant bank. There were little houses on both sides of the church, stretching into the distance and scattered along the river bank. It was Monastyrskoye.

Our life there was much better than we had expected. Soon after I arrived I was appointed head of the local meteorological station: I was its only member of staff. Though the pay was bad, a small house went with the job and we moved in there together. I had to record changes in the temperature and air pressure, and measure the depth of the river, the strength and direction of the wind and the falls of snow or rain. It was a simple business, and with Sverdlov's help it took up little time.

We also gave lessons, and altogether made between 75 and 80 rubles a month. We just managed on that, helped by the occasional fee Sverdlov received for his articles — a little extra not accounted for in our “eco-

conomic plan," which enabled us to buy a milch cow to supplement the children's diet.

Sverdlov took almost total responsibility for running the household as he had in Narym. He got up at six or seven and went out immediately to take measurements around the house and by the river. When he came back he chopped the firewood, fed and cleaned out the cow, lit the stove, heated some water and made breakfast. He washed and dressed the children, who got up around eight; much as I protested, he would not let me near them.

We had breakfast at about 8.30, and I went out to give lessons, while Sverdlov's pupils, local children, came to him. He finished at about midday and began lunch, which was always excellent. Boris Ivanov, one of the exiles, used to maintain that Sverdlov's command of the culinary art put all the Turukhansk housewives to shame.

Sverdlov's working day ended at five or six, and about an hour later the visitors would begin to arrive. There were 15 or 20 exiles in Monastyrskoye at that time, and comrades often came from other settlements, usually staying with us. We also took in Bolsheviks transferred from exile in more distant areas, who had not yet found a place of their own.

It was a three-roomed house.<sup>1</sup> I and the children took the largest room, and Sverdlov studied and slept in the other, which also doubled as a dining room. The third was practically useless, as it was an extension and heated only by a small iron stove; it was always cold there and at night when the stove went out the temperature fell below zero. We only used it when we had a lot of guests and, even though we kept the stove going all night, whoever slept there really felt the cold.

The chairs and large table in Sverdlov's room were

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<sup>1</sup> Now the Sverdlov House-Museum. — *Ed.*



made for us by Ivan Petukhov, one of the exiles who was a carpenter by trade.

Our evenings were dynamic, full of animated conversation, arguments and discussions of current events. Sometimes Sverdlov would arrange a debate or he, or one of the others, would give a lecture. The whole house fell silent as the audience listened to every eloquent word, with rapt attention. Sverdlov usually put forward some proposition, with numerous examples and far-reaching conclusions. He structured his talks so that anybody, even those with no background knowledge at all, could understand the most complex theoretical points.

Meanwhile, minor day-to-day concerns did not shield us from the terrible events taking place so far away. At the end of 1916 we were astounded by the unprecedented mobilization of some of the exiles, including Bolsheviks. We realized that the autocracy was in a serious predicament if it was being forced to call up its own declared enemies.

The entire village came out to see off the conscripts, who were glad of this. They knew that as political exiles they would have an unpleasant time in the army but were looking forward to the end of their enforced idleness among the snowdrifts of Turukhansk and the chance to take up their revolutionary work again.

Twenty sledges were waiting for our comrades and their few belongings. The entire police force was there, including the police officer, but no one had any time for him. The air was filled with courageous speeches; no thoughts or feelings went unvoiced.

Sverdlov hated having to stay behind, although it was clear from the course of events that he would not be in Monastyrskoye much longer. He bade each of the conscripts goodbye until their next meeting — in Petersburg.

The crowd began to sing the *Warszawianka*, a revolutionary song, as they followed the moving sledges, and

on the steep banks of the Yenisei we parted with our comrades. We waved goodbye and stood watching for a long time...

And then, in early March 1917, the joyful news came to Monastyrskoye — the autocracy<sup>1</sup> had fallen. The police officer, Kibirov, did the most intelligent thing he could think of, which was to keep the news from the exiles. They heard it through personal telegrams, which the post office clerks handed over without asking Kibirov's permission.

Sverdlov was one of the first to know. Boris Ivanov, already in high esteem among the soldiers of the 14th Siberian Infantry Regiment in Krasnoyarsk, had sent Sverdlov a congratulatory telegram and some money collected by the soldiers.

Orders came from Yeniseisk. Alexander Maslennikov, a local Bolshevik, had been appointed Commissar of the territory. He was to relieve Kibirov of his functions and resources, and send Sverdlov to Krasnoyarsk.

There was no time for delay; it was hundreds of miles to Krasnoyarsk and the only possible route was the Yenisei, where the ice might begin to break up at any moment. The only hope was to travel day and night, without rest; otherwise he would be stranded and it would be two or three months before the river was free of ice and navigable. Sverdlov was not prepared to wait.

The years of prison and exile were over. Through all those dreadful years, through all his adversity and hardship, Sverdlov had stood unbowed, a true Leninist Bolshevik. He had kept up his spirits, conserved his spiritual strength and had been ready for the Party's call to step into the front line and fight for a happier future for mankind.

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<sup>1</sup> Autocracy was the pre-revolutionary system of government in Russia. Supreme power, formally unlimited, was concentrated in the hands of the Tsar, whose word was law. — *Ed.*

## Chapter Six

### FEBRUARY TO OCTOBER

#### FEBRUARY AND AFTER

Although the collapse of the autocracy had been sudden, it had not really come as a surprise, even to the exiles in the wilds of Turukhansk. For years we Bolsheviks had been working for the revolution, had accepted prison and exile, forced labour and solitary confinement for the sake of the coming victory. Hundreds of Bolsheviks, the flower of the Party, had laid down their lives for the cause. Though we could not predict when the revolution would come, we lived in expectation, feeling it drawing closer.

We knew that revolution was inevitable, but what exactly had happened in Russia and which classes, which parties were in power we in our Turukhansk exile did not know.

Immediately after Sverdlov's departure we formed a committee, headed by Maslennikov and including Bograd, myself and some others whose names I have forgotten, to take over Monastyrskoye. We began our management of Turukhansk by removing Kibirov, disbanding the guards, impounding police records and distributing the monastery lands gratis to the peasants.

Meanwhile Sverdlov's sledge was racing along the ice-bound expanses of the Yenisei. He stopped only to change horses, look at the latest newspapers and catch up on recent events; he slept in the sledge. The journey became hazardous towards the end, as cracks began to appear in the ice, but once he had reached Yeniseisk safely, the road to Krasnoyarsk, to Russia, was open.

The closer he got to Krasnoyarsk, the more details of the unique and complex situation became available. He saw with increasing clarity that what was happening

was historically unprecedented and could not be reduced to any preconceived set of ideas.

But Lenin showed, in his "Letters from Afar,"<sup>1</sup> one of which was published in *Pravda*, that he had already completely grasped recent developments, complex and unique as they were. He maintained that the continuing war was still imperialist and gave an exhaustive description of the Provisional Government.

In the famous *April Theses*, one of his first speeches on his return to Petrograd<sup>2</sup> on the night of April 3, Lenin asserted that the bourgeois-democratic revolution had run its course and that the next major step would be the transition to the socialist revolution. A republican government of Soviets would then be formed, under which power would pass to the proletariat and the poorest peasants. The *April Theses* provided the Party with a unified set of tactics, a program of action for the coming battle for socialism.

But neither Sverdlov nor the Bolsheviks who met him in Krasnoyarsk knew any of this, although those who strictly adhered to the *Pravda* line, at first a minority in Krasnoyarsk, held the most clear-sighted, the most Leninist, views. Sverdlov joined this group.

When he spoke to the "*Pravda* group" shortly after his arrival, he made it clear from the outset that anything he said could represent only his personal attitude, although he knew that they would look to him, as a member of the Central Committee, for their orders. He did not know the intentions of the CC and did not feel justified in speaking in its name.

No politically conscious worker, he continued,

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<sup>1</sup> The "Letters from Afar" are a collection of five letters written by Lenin in Switzerland after he had received news of the bourgeois-democratic revolution of February 1917 in Russia. — *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> On August 18, 1914 (New Style) St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd. — *Tr.*



**Yakov Sverdlov**



**Klavdiya Novgorodtseva (Sverdlova), 1905**



**Nizhni Novgorod, Sverdlov's childhood home**



**Sverdlov, 1900**

**Sverdlov: from the files  
of the Tsarist secret  
police, 1903**





**Yekaterinburg: headquarters of the RSDLP Committee**

**Yekaterinburg: building which housed the clandestine Party school (1905); now the Sverdlov museum**





**Sverdlov, 1904**



**Sverdlov among  
fellow prisoners in  
the Perm prison, 1906**





**From the files of the Petersburg gendarmes, 1910**

**Bolshevik exiles in Narym, 1912. Left to right: Sverdlov, Kuibyshev, Kosarev, Filanovsky, Zhilin**

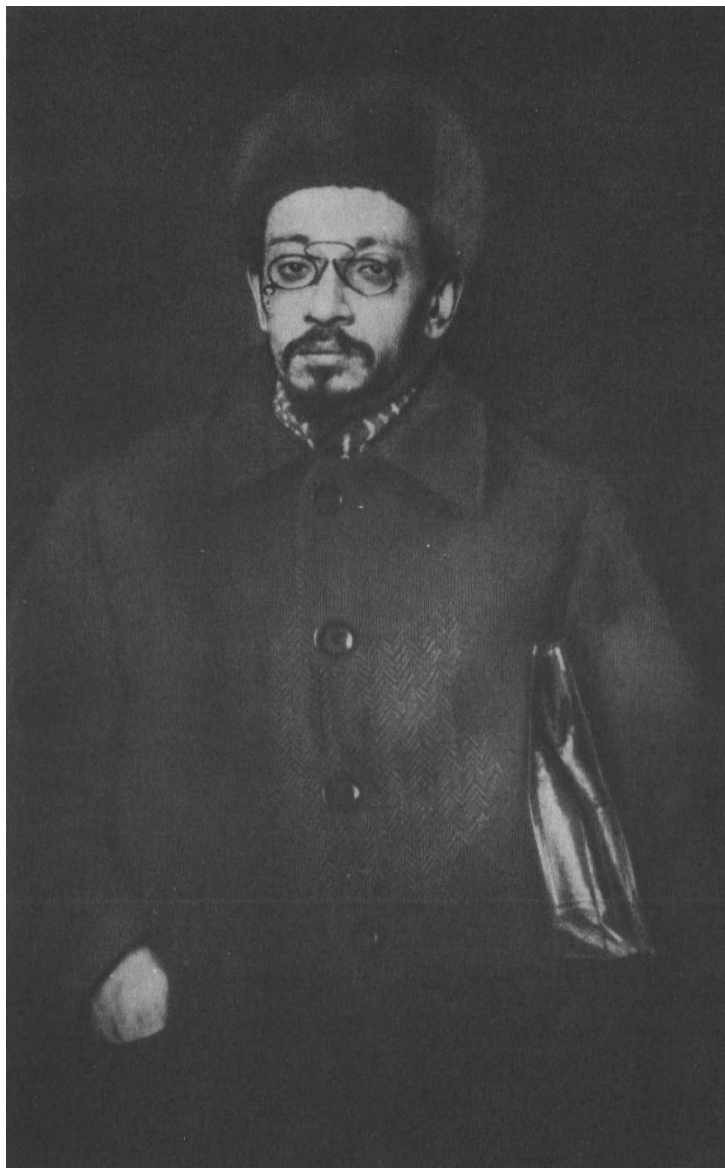




**Bolshevik exiles in Turukhansk, 1915. Seated, left to right: Klavdiya Sverdlova with Andrei, Petrovsky, Sverdlov. Standing, left to right: Spandryan, Samoilov, Stalin, Sergusheva, Yakovlev, Badayev, Linde, Shagov**



**Sverdlov  
(standing, second  
from the right)  
and Goloshchekin  
(sitting, far left)  
with other returned  
exiles, March 1917**



**Sverdlov — Chairman of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, 1918**



**Lenin and Sverdlov at the unveiling of a temporary monument to Marx, Moscow, November 7, 1918**



**Lenin and Sverdlov at the unveiling of a memorial to those who died for the Revolution, November 7, 1918**

**Sverdlov, 1918**



**Laying the foundation stone of a workers' palace in Moscow, November 1918**





**Sverdlov speaking to soldiers leaving for the front, Red Square, Moscow, 1918**





**Lenin and Sverdlov on the Presidium of the Congress of Agricultural Communes and Poverty Committees, Moscow, December 1918**



**Sverdlov travelling by train to the front, autumn, 1918**

**Sverdlov, Avanesov and Demyan Bedny, 1918**





**Sverdlov in his Kremlin office**

**Sverdlov and his wife with their  
daughter Vera, winter, 1918-1919**





**Sklyansky, Sverdlov and Podvoisky**

should give any support to the bourgeois-imperialist Provisional Government, since no amount of pressure or persuasion would ever alter its nature. Though power might have changed hands, the war in Europe was still imperialist, and all the talk of “defending the revolution” was nothing more than an attempt to deceive the people.

He advised them to concentrate on agitation, kindling the Bolshevik spirit among the workers and soldiers and rallying them round the Party. He saw the Krasnoyarsk railway depot with its five thousand workers and the numerous military units billeted on the town as vital areas in which the conciliators and unifiers must be defeated.

Sverdlov then left Krasnoyarsk for Petrograd, where representatives of the local Soviets of the larger towns were meeting for the first time, on the initiative of the Petrograd Soviet Executive Committee. The Central Committee Bureau had arranged for an All-Russia Conference of Party Workers to take place simultaneously. Sverdlov attended both, not to speak but to listen carefully to those of his comrades who had been in Petrograd long enough to be more fully in touch than he was.

Both conferences lasted from March 29 to April 3. Sverdlov went to the Urals next, not, of course, knowing that at that very time Lenin was crossing the border and within a day would be at the Finland Railway Station in Petrograd, surrounded by thousands of workers who had gone to greet their leader on his return from so many years of exile.

The Ural proletariat gave a delighted welcome to “their” Andrei. He went out to the factories straightaway and, no longer hampered by having to keep under-cover, spoke at a different place every day.

Following the line that had been mapped out in Petrograd, he hastened to muster the Bolshevik forces and prepare the ground for the revival of the regional organ-

ization and the convocation of a local conference. He became the centre of a group of proven and militant Bolsheviks, many of whom had been through the hard school of prison and exile.

The Free Ural Regional Party Conference met on April 14 and 15 under Sverdlov's supervision. It had the extra title "free" because it was the first of its kind to be held openly in the area.

As soon as the delegates began to arrive, Sverdlov went to visit them in their lodgings, talking to them and showing tremendous interest in their experiences during the years of reaction, in prison and exile, and in their present work. His belief that the Ural workers were on the right path, behind Lenin and the Central Committee, grew stronger every day.

The Conference adopted an essentially Bolshevik platform. Sverdlov spoke on the International, the agrarian question and the Party structure, and took part in debates on other issues. Like many leading Party members in those days, he was not able to determine current Party tactics as thoroughly as he would have liked. His views were neither totally clear nor completely accurate, and it was hard for him to formulate the concept of Soviets as a governmental form through which the dictatorship of the proletariat would operate. However, with regard to the Provisional Government, the war, unification with the Mensheviks (which was being seriously discussed in the Urals and elsewhere), and other matters, his approach was close to Lenin's own.

The Conference elected a five-man regional Party committee and authorized the local Party groups to elect nine delegates to the Seventh All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP(B). Sverdlov was unanimously chosen as a committee member and a conference delegate.

The day after the Ural Conference closed, Sverdlov and the other delegates set out. He did not then know that he would never see his beloved Urals again.

They arrived in Petrograd a few days before the April Conference began, which allowed Sverdlov to take part in the preliminaries. Two days before the official opening his most ardent, most cherished desire was finally realized — he met Lenin. They were not to part company again until Sverdlov's death; the intimacy that was born in April 1917 was to influence Sverdlov's future decisively.

Sverdlov was acquainted with most of the delegates, the finest members of the Party; he had either worked with them in the underground or met them in prison or exile.

This Conference had a tremendous influence on the history of the Party, on the coming proletarian revolution. It wholeheartedly adopted Lenin's plan for the development of the revolution as given in *The April Theses*. The transition from the bourgeois-democratic to the socialist revolution, and the pressing need to concentrate power in the hands of the Soviets were to define the Party's tactics henceforth. The platforms of Kamenev, Rykov, Pyatakov and other of Lenin's opponents were defeated.

Indeed, Lenin was the major influence at the Conference; he spoke four times, took part in almost every debate and tabled most of the motions that were carried.

The Conference was also useful in that it strengthened the Party's structure and reorganized the Central Committee. Operating in clandestine conditions which put normal elections out of the question, the CC had often been forced to make up its numbers by co-option since the Prague Party Conference of 1912. By the time of the April Conference the CC and its Bureau had over 30 members, most of whom had not been elected. The new CC elected at the Conference had nine members, including Stalin, Milyutin, Nogin and Sverdlov, and was chaired by Lenin.

The CC was then able to work in a more systematic

way; both its organizational role, which was to grow as the revolution advanced, and its contact with the local groups were enhanced.

At the close of the April Conference the CC appointed Sverdlov head of its Secretariat, putting him in overall control of the CC's organizational functions.

## THE SECRETARIAT

In those days the most fundamental and pressing issues were discussed by the Central Committee at its weekly meetings, which, in the few months following the February Revolution, were held in Kshesinskaya's palace or in the *Pravda* office by the Moika Canal. Later it met in the homes of particularly trustworthy Party members or accepted the hospitality of local Party groups. It had no premises of its own, except for the rooms occupied by the Secretariat.

The Party had only just emerged from the underground and begun to function on a legal basis. The CC members did not, indeed could not, have specific duties; for the most part their decisions were reached jointly, under Lenin's guidance, while the dozens, or rather hundreds, of organizational problems that arose every day devolved upon each individual member, but primarily upon Sverdlov, as head of the Secretariat.

Just before and immediately after the October Revolution the position of Secretary of the Central Committee, as we understand it today, as the supervisor of all Party functions, did not exist. The Secretariat member who was primarily concerned with organizing the Party's work, with current practical problems, with drawing up the minutes of Central Committee meetings, became known as the Secretary. This position was held by Sverdlov from the April Conference until his death.

In 1917 and 1918 the five- or six-man Secretariat was the only specialized body within the Central Committee;



there were no other departments or sections. It worked from nine or ten in the morning until ten at night or even later. Sverdlov was there every day from the morning until four or five o'clock. His evenings were spent at meetings. His duties included receiving Party members from the provinces and other visitors, scanning the incoming mail, editing or writing the more crucial documents, supervising the work of individual Secretariat members and enlisting help from the Petrograd committee and other local groups when necessary. He took a determining interest in every facet of the Secretariat's work, whatever its importance.

At four o'clock the large samovar was brought in and everyone would contribute food that they had brought from home. During the lively conversation around the tea-table Sverdlov would comment on noteworthy political events and pass on Lenin's most recent instructions. He wanted to ensure that each of his colleagues had a clear picture of his current responsibilities, so as to discharge them as effectively as possible.

His colleagues noted the speed with which Sverdlov made decisions, never postponing any issue that came within the Secretariat's competence. The other secretaries based their replies to letters from provincial groups on the brief notes that Sverdlov had made in the margins while reading them.

The volume of correspondence addressed to the Central Committee in those turbulent times was immense: reports from regional and provincial groups on their fulfilment of CC directives and on their current activities; statements from urban and military Party groups; the resolutions of meetings and conferences; requests for directions, advice or reading matter; and letters from workers, soldiers and peasants. Every one of these hundreds of documents that poured into the Secretariat offices reflected the ferment of life within the Party, and on almost every one we find Sverdlov's com-

ments and instructions. Of the hundreds of letters sent out to groups and individuals, he wrote dozens himself. It seems almost incredible that Sverdlov and his small group could cope with a workload of such size and scope.

The revolution had released large numbers of Party members from prison, exile or forced labour, or had allowed them to return from long periods of emigration. Most of them were experienced men, schooled in underground activity. They arrived in Petrograd in force every day and went straight to the Secretariat, where Sverdlov saw almost all of them. They immediately received their assignments to posts all over the country.

The Petrograd factories were a constant source of new Party personnel. For example, when the Ekaterinoslav group requested additional help, Sverdlov replied: "We are so shorthanded here that we could not possibly begin to satisfy all the demands made on us. But some Petrograd factories will soon be transferred to your area. You will find your reinforcements there."

The Central Committee had given Sverdlov other weighty responsibilities besides the Secretariat, so numerous that it is possible to mention only a few.

Shortly after the February Revolution the Petrograd workers had on their own initiative established factory committees, which played a large role in unifying and organizing the working people. These bodies were of primary importance to Lenin; he directed Sverdlov to help them strengthen their structure and win them over to the Bolshevik side.

Whereas the trade unions and factory committees helped consolidate the working class, the Bolshevik Military Organization played a similar role in consolidating the soldiers and rallying them to the Bolshevik cause. It also sent thousands of agitators from the armed forces to the Russian villages, carrying the Bolshevik message to the peasants and urging them to rise against the land-

lords and capitalists.

Lenin constantly directed the Organization: its leaders often consulted him; he spoke at the All-Russia Conference of Front and Rear Military Organizations of the RSDLP(B), which met in Petrograd in the latter half of June.

After events in July forced Lenin to go into hiding, he continued to direct the Organization through Sverdlov. As Nikolai Podvoisky, the Organization leader pointed out: "Lenin took a lively interest in our work. He kept abreast of it and of all Party activities thanks to messages from Sverdlov. When he returned to Petrograd in early October 1917 to supervise preparations for the armed uprising, Lenin called our leaders together to find out how far they had got in priming the masses for the rising."

Two months previously the Central Committee had directed Sverdlov and Dzerzhinsky to oversee the Military Organization.

## **THE JULY DAYS**

Though three months had passed since the overthrow of the autocracy, nothing had changed: the factories still belonged to the capitalists and the land to the landlords; the devastating war continued and escalated. The conviction that the Provisional Government was a bourgeois, counter-revolutionary body grew among the people, primarily among the workers and soldiers of Petrograd. They were seized by a rebellious mood and on June 18 they took to the street. Over 500,000 marched in that demonstration, carrying banners bearing the Bolshevik slogans "Down with the Minister-Capitalists" and "All Power to the Soviets." A few groups of intelligentsia, pathetic in a massive jostling flood of demonstrators who were fired by one desire and one emotion, tried in vain to raise their Socialist-Revo-

lutionary and Menshevik placards.

On that same day an all-out offensive against the German forces had been ordered by the Provisional Government.<sup>1</sup> The motivation was clear: if the move succeeded, which no one thought it would, this would strengthen the Government's position; if it failed, the Bolsheviks could be blamed. In either case the Bolshevik cause would suffer.

The offensive was a terrible failure, costing tens of thousands of lives and infuriating the workers. The atmosphere in Petrograd grew more strained by the minute.

The CC and the Petrograd Committee did their best to hold back the soldiers and workers for they knew that the vast bulk of the people did not have the political maturity to undertake any decisive action or even to support a Petrograd rising, while the growing counter-revolutionary forces were looking for an excuse to fall on the revolutionary proletariat. Such was the situation as Sverdlov described it to me when I arrived in Petrograd in early July. At that time he was living in a flat recently vacated by an engineer whom he had known in the Urals.

Then serious disturbances began on the Vyborg side. The 1st Machine-Gun Regiment had decided to move and sent representatives to the neighbouring factories and military units, asking for support. They could be out on the streets in no time. The Petrograd Party Conference cut short its debates and the delegates went out

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<sup>1</sup> The Provisional Government, which held power in Russia after the bourgeois-democratic revolution of February 1917, functioned from March 15 to November 7, 1917. It was a tool of the imperialist bourgeoisie and the landlords. The Constitutional Democrats, the ruling party after the February Revolution, were by far the most influential group within the Provisional Government, determining its composition and political stance. — *Ed.*

among the people.

The Central Committee, the Petrograd Committee and the Military Organization did everything within their power to prevent the rising; Sverdlov, Podvoisky, Nevsky and Slutsky made dozens of speeches in those few hours, trying to restore calm and restraint, but to no avail. The wall was breached and the insurgent forces were as ungovernable as the elements themselves, so, during the night of July 3, the CC, the Petrograd Committee, the Conference delegates and the Military Organization leadership decided to direct the rising. Since it could not be averted, they wanted to ensure that it was peaceful and organized.

Meanwhile the Cossack regiments, artillery batteries and armoured divisions that had been withdrawn from the front were on their way back to Petrograd and by July 4 the cadets<sup>1</sup> and the dregs of the officer corps were up on the roofs, firing on unarmed demonstrators. In the main streets dozens fell victim to their treachery.

But the Kronstadt sailors and the soldiers and workers of Petrograd held back in the face of this provocation, defending themselves staunchly but refusing to attack and leaving government buildings and officials unscathed. By a tremendous effort the Bolsheviks managed to keep the people from doing anything that would lead to their own and the Party's downfall. Late in the evening of the same day the Central Committee decided to put an end to the demonstration, feeling that it had expressed the people's revolutionary will clearly enough.

Sverdlov did not come home at all on July 4; I opened the door on hearing the agreed signal very early the next morning. He had hardly got inside before he was telling me that there had been a cadet attack on the *Pravda* office. They had narrowly missed capturing

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<sup>1</sup> The cadets were students of the military college which trained future members of the officer corps. — *Ed.*

Lenin, who had left only a short time before. “We can’t put anything past those scum now. They could be here before we know it,” Sverdlov said, looking meaningfully towards the other side of the street. “I have to warn Lenin right now, get him away from here and then think what to do. I’ve just come to get my waterproof. He’ll need it.”

He ran off, carrying the coat, to Lenin’s flat across the street. His haste proved to be well-timed.

He took Lenin to a comrade’s flat in the Petrograd district until a more permanent refuge could be found, as he told me when he dropped in for a moment that evening to return the coat.

Very shortly afterwards a lorry roared into the street, stopped near Lenin’s house and peppered the pavement with soldiers and cadets. Ignoring all the assurances that Lenin was not there, they searched the cupboards, beds, baskets, trunks... The counter-revolutionary forces were beside themselves with rage: on July 7 the Provisional Government issued a warrant for Lenin’s arrest but, no matter how hard they tried to find him and settle accounts, they were powerless against the Party’s determination to keep its leader safe.

I hardly ever saw Sverdlov now; he was at home for only an hour or two at a time — obviously, to stay in a flat which was registered in his name would be inviting arrest. One day at dawn he took a few of his things and left, not even waking the children to say goodbye. At the end of July, I and the children moved to furnished rooms on Vassilyevsky Island.

Sverdlov visited us on occasions, always briefly and unexpectedly. He moved in more or less permanently at the end of August, when the ardour of the government security services had abated a little, and even then we almost never saw each other at home. In the middle of July, the Central Committee had put me in charge of their publishing house *Priboi* (The Surf), evidently be-

lieving that I had learnt something from my years in bookshops and depositories. This work brought me into close contact with the Central Committee Secretariat and from August we shared the same premises.

## THE RISING DRAWS NEAR

In his secret hiding place in Razliv, near Sestroretsk, Lenin had thoroughly analysed recent events and was calling on the Party to ready itself for an armed rising. Liaison between Lenin and the Party was maintained by Sverdlov; he considered it his most vital task. We generally had no secrets from each other but this link was so clandestine that I only knew it existed; Sverdlov told me no more.

Although the counter-revolution had complicated our work, the bourgeoisie was unable to crush the Party or drive it underground. Our leader was still in control of Party affairs through the Central Committee and, only two and a half weeks after the closure of *Pravda*, the Military Organization, with the cooperation of the CC, produced a temporary replacement, *Rabochy i soldat* (The Worker and the Soldier). Three weeks after that, in mid-August, *Pravda*, our major Party organ, reappeared as *Proletary*, Sverdlov had done a lot to help bring that about.

The Sixth Party Congress opened on July 26. Sverdlov had spoken about it to the Second Petrograd Party Conference early in the month and the Central Committee had formed a special bureau to make preliminary arrangements, a task which the events of July had made considerably more difficult — as the Congress would have to be a partially clandestine operation. But the bureau did all it could to meet the schedule. Sverdlov took on numerous responsibilities, including choosing the meeting hall, preparing the agenda and arranging board and lodging for the delegates.

Lenin should have been the principal speaker, but, as it was too risky for him to participate personally, the Central Committee instructed Stalin to deliver the CC political report and to speak on the political situation in his stead. Sverdlov gave the CC report on current Party activities. These were the central issues considered at the Congress.

Though Lenin was absent, every delegate continually sensed his presence; the hall rose, applauding wildly, when the decision to elect him Honorary Chairman was announced. Sverdlov, Olminsky, Lomov, Yurenev and Stalin were unanimously elected to the Presidium.

This Congress showed the extent to which the Party had taken a militant line, following Lenin's course towards an armed uprising. It was clear that this was the only way that power could pass to the proletariat and the impoverished peasantry.

The Congress was well under way when the bourgeois press began to raise an incredible uproar. On July 28 a Provisional Government decree was issued outlawing all congresses and conferences. A raid seemed inevitable.

Sverdlov suggested that an extraordinary closed session be held to elect a new Central Committee as a matter of urgency. No minutes were taken and the election results were not publicized. Sverdlov noted them down in code and did not announce them until the Central Committee Plenary Session on August 4.

If the bourgeoisie had counted on quelling the revolution during the "July days," they had miscalculated badly. Tension was mounting daily, the country was in growing disarray, bread was in short supply, the June offensive had been a terrible fiasco — and all this served to open the eyes of the people, to strengthen the position of the Bolsheviks.

At the end of August, Kornilov, a general in the



Tsarist army, attempted a counter-revolutionary coup. Although acting on the instance of Russian and foreign capitalists, he only succeeded in harming the bourgeois cause.

As his troops advanced on Petrograd they were met by detachments of workers, battalions and regiments of revolutionary soldiers, and groups of sailors. Hundreds of Bolsheviks agitators — workers and soldiers — infiltrated his ranks, showing the counter-revolutionary intrigue in its true colours. The advancing forces faltered, hesitated and halted, and the Bolsheviks gained immensely from Kornilov's failure.

On August 31 the Petrograd Soviet adopted the Bolshevik motion "On Power." The Soviet's Presidium, which was predominantly made up of Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, was forced to step down; this ultimately ensured a Bolshevik majority on the Presidium, and they later took over the Soviets in Moscow and elsewhere.

Not long after this Sverdlov and the other Central Committee members in the Petrograd Soviet transferred to the former Smolny Institute, along with the rest of the Bolshevik faction. Sverdlov began to spend most of his time there, visiting the Secretariat offices more rarely. At that time we on the staff of *Priboi* were sharing 19 Furshtadtskaya street with the Secretariat, having moved there not long before the Kornilov mutiny.

Meanwhile the tension continued to mount. Now that the Soviets were in Bolshevik hands, the question of taking power came to the fore. The rising was imminent.

Lenin left Razliv for Finland at the beginning of August; at the end of the month he moved to Helsingfors and the middle of September found him in Vyborg, coming ever closer to the centre of events.

In the first half of September some of his letters were delivered to the Central Committee by his sister, Maria.

A meeting was held on September 15 to discuss his insistence that we ready ourselves in earnest for the rising.

Sverdlov had an unshakable belief that the rising would succeed, that Lenin's arguments were correct beyond question; this belief was founded on his knowledge of the situation, on his close ties with the Party nucleus and with large numbers of workers, on his unlimited faith in the revolutionary zeal and the strength of the Russian proletariat. He had gone out among the Petrograd workers, soldiers and sailors, had attended their meetings and talked to them; he knew their mood. And thanks to his daily contact with Party members from local groups, with representatives of the Bolshevik factions in Soviets throughout the country, with the ordinary people he knew the mood of the provinces too.

From the end of September communications between Lenin and Sverdlov became very lively indeed. Hardly a day went by without news from Vyborg — letters, articles for publication, assessments of recent events, something that he had said or done — and I heard it all from Sverdlov.

And then he came home from Smolny late one evening in early October and announced that Lenin was back in Petrograd. "Everything's all right now," he said.

Lenin was back. He immediately made his presence felt, especially in the Central Committee; Sverdlov saw a great deal of him. On October 10 he participated for the first time in a meeting of the Central Committee that had been elected at the Sixth Congress. Sverdlov opened the session and also chaired it. He gave a short address, outlining the state of affairs on the Romanian front, in the north, and around Minsk, and emphasized that counter-revolution was gathering force. Lenin then spoke on the current situation — the most vital item on the agenda — and again insisted that a rising was not only essential but inevitable. His arguments were compelling.

Six days later the Central Committee met again. This was a secret session, at which the strictest possible security was observed, for it also involved representatives of the Petrograd Soviet Executive Commission, the Military Organization, the Bolshevik faction in the Petrograd Soviet, the trade unions and the factory committees. Sverdlov was Chairman.

Several of those present had not met Lenin since his return to Petrograd, and many had not expected to see him at this meeting. He began the proceedings with a speech about the CC decision taken on October 10 to organize an armed rising, and hammered home how necessary and inevitable this rising was.

A disorderly and passionate discussion followed, in which Lenin spoke three times, firmly supported by all the genuine Bolsheviks present. His opponents on the issue of the uprising were routed and the motion was carried by an overwhelming majority.

The Central Committee at its meeting on October 10 had agreed to lead up to the rising under cover of defending Petrograd against counter-revolutionaries. This made it possible to create a perfectly legal body, subordinate to the Petrograd Soviet, which could use its authority to make above-board military preparations.

At the end of the session, when all but the Central Committee had left, a Military-Revolutionary Centre, comprising Sverdlov, Stalin, Bubnov, Uritsky and Dzerzhinsky, was elected to lead the rising, and head the Military-Revolutionary Committee.

I heard about all this from Sverdlov on the same day. As he was talking he pulled some papers from his pocket. I can see them now: sheets of squared paper that could have been taken from a school exercise book. They were covered top to bottom in Lenin's hand. The upper corner of one sheet was torn.

"Take these," Sverdlov said. "They're Lenin's letters. Put them somewhere really safe. Not a word to an-

ybody for the time being. They're vitally important; we must preserve them at all costs."

I did as I was told and years later, when Sverdlov was no longer with us, they were handed to the Central Committee.

Preparations for the rising proceeded apace. Smolny seethed with activity, issuing instructions and orders of all kinds, and receiving an endless stream of workers, soldiers and sailors that poured into the wide corridors and spacious rooms of the huge building where young ladies of gentle birth had once studied.

The Provisional Government was in a fever of preparation too, rallying its forces to strike the first blow, to enfeeble the revolution by destroying its leadership, the Party. Troops were recalled from the front and patrolled the streets in strength.

But the days of the bourgeoisie's ascendancy were numbered. The working-class districts of Petrograd were bristling with bayonets; every factory had become a revolutionary stronghold. The workers formed into military detachments under Bolshevik supervision; the Petrograd garrison was in the hands of revolutionaries who were under arms; the peerless men of Kronstadt and Helsingfors were ready for action; aboard the battleships of the Baltic fleet the sailors, prompted by the Party, were stoking the engines. Throughout the land the people were rising, steeling themselves for the conflict that would decide all.

## Chapter Seven

# THE REPUBLIC OF SOVIETS

### THE BIRTH OF A NEW ORDER

On the day that the cruiser *Aurora* fired its cannon, the Great Socialist Revolution came into being. Assault forces of Red Guards and revolutionary soldiers and sailors stormed the Winter Palace on the night of October 25, 1917.

At that very moment, as the artillery barrage roared a tumultuous meeting of the Second All-Russia Congress of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was in session at Smolny.

I was there. There was an unbelievable hubbub at first, as the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks tried their hardest to wreck the Congress. They followed each other onto the platform to accuse the Bolsheviks of indulging in military intrigues behind the back of the Soviet. By a large majority the Congress rejected all the provocative verbiage of these accomplices of the bourgeoisie, whereupon they made a big point of walking out. I can still see those little men leaving, pursued by whistles and ironic comments from the floor.

After they left, the meeting could be called to order. Lunacharsky read out Lenin's appeal to the workers, soldiers and peasants to deafening applause: "Backed by the will of the vast majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants, backed by the victorious uprising of the workers and the garrison which has taken place in Petrograd, the Congress takes power into its own hands... The Congress decrees: all power in the localities shall pass to the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies..."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 247.

And then a storm of applause, the ovation of a lifetime, greeted the announcement that the Winter Palace had fallen and the Provisional Government was in custody.

Lenin, Sverdlov and a number of Central Committee members were not present at that first session. Lenin appeared the next time the Congress sat, on October 26, and presented two historic decrees — on land<sup>1</sup> and on peace<sup>2</sup> — to the Congress, which approved them almost unanimously. The Second Congress created the world's first government of workers and peasants, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), with Lenin at its head.

And leading the Soviets, the new organs of government, throughout Russia — in Petrograd and Moscow, in the Ukraine and Byelorussia, around the Volga and in the Urals and North Caucasus — there were Bolsheviki, proven men, Lenin's faithful followers and comrades-in-arms.

The Bolsheviki worked in the interests of all working people and depended on a proletariat that had been steeled in the hard school of revolution. They were supported by almost all the soldiers and working peasantry of Russia; they were backed both by the potent creative potential of millions of ordinary people, who found themselves for the first time in history faced with the

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<sup>1</sup> The Decree on Land was the first Soviet document on this issue. It answered to the peasants' demand that land should no longer be private property. It would henceforth be state property and belong to all the people. — *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> The Decree on Peace was one of the first official Soviet documents. It laid the foundation of Soviet foreign policy, dedicated to peace and friendship among nations. It suggested to all combatant nations that it was time to begin negotiations to end the war and reach a just and democratic peace. This decree was in the basic interests of workers the world over. — *Ed.*

task of running this massive country, and by the Soviets, the organs through which the people could genuinely exercise their power. The Bolsheviki were invincible. Before them lay a mighty task, such as had never been tackled in the history of mankind. For the first time ever the world was witnessing the creation of a free society, with no masters or slaves, no oppressors or oppressed. For the first time ever a socialist order was in the making; exploitation would become a thing of the past. But the first priority was to hold on to power, to defend the gains of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

Hardly had the *Aurora* fired her shots, hardly was the ink dry on the first Soviet decrees, when the Russian bourgeoisie, with the support of its accomplices in France, England and America, fell on the people with vicious fury. The working people and the Bolsheviki became the target of military forays, counter-revolutionary plots and mutinies, of economic dislocation leading to famine, of sabotage and disorganization in the political and economic spheres, of frenzied attacks and non-cooperation on the part of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviki.

Only the day after the revolution began, on October 26, Kerensky<sup>1</sup> escaped from Petrograd, made contact with Krasnov, a violently pro-monarchist general, and advanced on the capital. On October 27 Gatchina fell to Krasnov and there was a fierce battle at Pulkovo, on the approaches to Petrograd, while on the same day military cadets in Petrograd rebelled, supported by the Committee for the Defence of the Motherland and the Revolution, a counter-revolutionary body which had been formed late on the previous evening by the Petrograd Town Duma, which was dominated by Constitutional Democrats.

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<sup>1</sup> A.F. Kerensky (1881-1970), a Socialist-Revolutionary, had been head of the Provisional Government since July 1917.  
— *Tr.*

General Kaledin incited a rebellion in the Don region; General Dutov followed his example in Orenburg. The bourgeois Ukrainian *Rada* seized power in Kiev. The Russian counter-revolutionary forces, hand in glove with their imperialist supporters abroad, spread civil war throughout the land. Meanwhile the Germans were advancing deep into Russian territory.

In Petrograd itself the counter-revolutionaries were scarcely bothering to hide what they were doing. The Provisional Government and the old Central Executive Committee, made up of SRs and Mensheviks, were refusing to cede their position by recognizing the existence of the Soviet government.

Malicious sabotage was paralysing government all over Russia. Food deliveries to Petrograd ceased almost completely and our revolutionary capital found the bony hand of famine at its throat: in November 1917 the Petrograd bread ration per person was 300 grams every two days. The factories closed down for lack of finance, raw materials and fuel. In Petrograd hirelings of the bourgeoisie broke into the wine stores and led the people in drunken pogroms. Profiteers, brigands, looters and hooligans came crawling out of the woodwork.

The employees of the State Bank, the Ministries, the Government Departments and the Post Office refused to recognize the authority of the Soviet government. The Bank refused outright to deal with the new organs of government — the Council of People's Commissars (the Sovnarkom), the new All-Russia Central Executive Committee and the recently reconstituted people's commissariats. But it gave the Provisional Government and the old Executive Committee everything they asked, generously subsidising the counter-revolution. The Foreign Ministry would not translate or dispatch Soviet peace proposals to the combatant governments. Post Office clerks disobeyed Soviet directives, rejected telegrams and letters from the CEC and the Sovnarkom and



delayed the delivery of Bolshevik newspapers, while continuing to handle the correspondence of government bodies which the revolution had removed from power.

The Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries on the Central Executive Committee that had been elected at the First Congress of Soviets arrogated to itself all CEC finances and documents, declaring that it recognized neither the new CEC nor the Congress at which it had been elected.

This sort of thing was what the Bolsheviks and the working people of Russia were up against when the Republic of Soviets was in its infancy. And no sooner was the victory of the revolution assured than alarmists, deserters and disorganizers arose within our own ranks — Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Nogin and Milyutin, to name a few — but in dealing with them Lenin and the Central Committee had the constant support of Sverdlov, one of the foremost champions of the Leninist line, one of the foremost creators of the new Soviet state.

In a short time the deserters were driven from the Central Committee and left the Sovnarkom. But they remained on the CEC, and, in company with its Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik members, continued to obstruct its work.

The role of the CEC was enormous: it was the supreme state body, directing the local Soviets; it alone could establish and organize government power countrywide. Unless the CEC and the Sovnarkom were in complete accord, the Party line could not be carried out; the CEC itself could function only if it firmly followed the Party line, if its Bolshevik faction was united in opposition to the SRs and the Mensheviks. And this could not be while there was an alarmist clique within the Bolshevik faction trying to assert itself and use the CEC as a weapon against Lenin and the Central Committee. It was time to restore order: the CEC must be given a leader who could be relied on to the last. The choice was

made, and on November 8 (21), 1917 the Central Committee put forward a resolution that Sverdlov should be recommended for the Chairmanship of the CEC. He was elected to the post on the same day.

## A NEW RESPONSIBILITY

Sverdlov took up this distinguished position after long formative years in the grim school of revolution, shoulder to shoulder with the proletariat in its fight for liberation. Under his control the CEC gave vital support to the Bolshevik line.

He simultaneously headed the Central Committee Secretariat. Though not able to devote as much time to it as before, he kept a close watch on its functions: he looked over the most significant items in the incoming mail and indicated what action to take, wrote the most important letters and was regularly on hand to see callers.

The months immediately following the October Revolution were a time of reconstruction; a new world was created despite opposition from the bourgeoisie and its accomplices among the government employees. To find new patterns of government, to establish new relations between Party and government and a new rapport between the various commissariats and the government establishments, and between the centre and the localities, to reorganize Soviet and Party bodies — these were the urgent issues of the day.

None of these problems could have been correctly solved without a correct distribution of the Party's human resources. Thousands were needed to establish Soviet power and strengthen the Party structure out in the country, to staff the commissariat boards, the central government machine, and the government departments, to chair the provincial executive committees and act as secretaries for the district Party committees.

As I worked in the Secretariat offices, I was able to observe what others confirmed, that Sverdlov had to select and distribute Party workers, a difficult task in itself, with no personnel department, no work records and no detailed personal files to help him.

Occasionally he would receive brief notes from Lenin, pointing out, for example, a comrade who had made a particularly good impression and who was keen to work among the people, and asking Sverdlov to give him a suitable assignment. All such cases were quickly dealt with.

Sverdlov was continually writing messages to various official bodies, recommending people for posts of responsibility. He knew about hundreds of Bolsheviks — their revolutionary activity, their past experiences, their preferences — and used his knowledge to serve the revolution. He knew the state of affairs and the working conditions that existed not only in every branch of Party and government activity but also in the provinces, sometimes down to district level. He weighed every factor and was extraordinarily objective in his judgements.

It sometimes happened that a chosen comrade was afraid that the assignment would be too much, that he had not had time to prepare. Sverdlov was always able to hearten such people, to communicate to them his ardent faith in the creative potential and revolutionary spirit of the people, so that they left with an unshakable determination to justify the trust placed in them.

Sergei Uralov described his first meeting with Sverdlov like this:

“I confess I was nervous — after all, I had never met the head of the Central Committee Secretariat before. But my timidity melted away at his first words. He gave a friendly smile and said in an unaffected tone: ‘So you’re from Saratov — tell me, what’s the atmosphere down there, how’s the organization faring?’

“I told him what he wanted to know. He heard me

out and said that he had assigned me to the Central Council of Petrograd Factory Committees, which was located in Smolny, and then and there wrote a note to Nikolai Skrypnik, one of the Council leaders.

“He was so down-to-earth, so cordial and warm; I could sense his boundless affection for the working class, for the Party. This inspired in me the greatest respect — indeed, it charmed me. And those feelings have not faded.”

As new demands arose, Sverdlov found the right people, captured their interest, fired them with his business-like optimism. He maintained close and active links with the leaders of the district Party committees and the Party groups in the larger factories, studied reports on their members, invited them to visit him, got to know them, and decided where they would be best placed.

Mistakes were sometimes made: some proved incapable of the job they had been given. Sverdlov would recall anyone who was in difficulties and conclude his interview with these words: “As you can see, it’s in the interests of the Party to give you something that you’re more suited for.” The new task would be instantly forthcoming, for Sverdlov would already have an appropriate assignment for his colleague so that he would not have to sit idle even for a day.

There were also renegades who betrayed the trust that the Party and the people had vested in them, misusing their offices or descending to petty intrigue. Sverdlov did not hesitate to demote them and to refer to the Central Committee those cases which were serious enough to warrant top-level attention. The CC would then take the appropriate measures.

The days were flying by with dizzying speed. Sverdlov and I saw each other in passing, as it were; it was certainly not every evening that we could snatch an hour

or two together before bed, to talk, pass on the latest news, exchange opinions and discuss things that were disturbing us. Elections for the Constituent Assembly were now well under way in Petrograd and elsewhere in the country, coinciding with the end of the Peasants' Congress and following an election campaign which had started before the revolution.

Now that Soviet power had been established none of us could take this Assembly seriously, but we could not simply dismiss it. Sverdlov made this point to me numerous times; he was extensively involved, helping Moisei Uritsky, Commissar in charge of the elections, Yelena Stasova and other members of the Secretariat to draft instructions for the conduct of the elections which were sent to Party organizations throughout the country. He drew up a number of the documents himself.

When the elections took place, at the end of November and the beginning of December, the Bolsheviks captured an overwhelming majority in Petrograd and Moscow, on the northern and western fronts nearest the capital, in the Baltic fleet and in the industrial centres of the country. The lists of candidates had been submitted before the revolution and did not reflect the existing class balance; there was a great deal of election-rigging; the All-Russia Election Commission, under the influence of the bourgeoisie, descended to forgery several times; but the elections proved yet again that the Bolsheviks had the support of most of the Russian working class and of the soldiers on the vital fronts.

Before the revolution the Provisional Government and the Mensheviks and SRs in the CEC had done all they could to delay the elections, but now all the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties were frantically demanding that the Constituent Assembly be convened without delay. They wanted to use it against the Soviet government and the CEC elected by the Second Congress of Soviets.

The Council of People's Commissars named January 5 (18), 1918 as the opening date of the Assembly; two days later the CEC announced that the Third All-Russia Congress of Soviets would meet from January 8 (21). The significance of these decisions can hardly be overemphasized; the success or failure of the Constituent Assembly would now depend on the Congress, the supreme legislative organ and mouthpiece of millions of ordinary people.

The Party and the Soviets worked tremendously hard before the Congress met. Sverdlov composed a circular which the CEC distributed to all the Soviets and the Party committees in the army and at the front, insisting that the common people be told the importance of the Congress: "It rests on the Soviets to counter the slogan 'All Power to the Constituent Assembly' with the slogan 'Power to the Soviets, for the Consolidation of the Soviet Republic.'"

On January 3 (16) the CEC voted its support for Lenin's Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People, a document of immense historical significance, which affirmed numerous decisions taken by the Second Congress of Soviets, the CEC and the Sovnarkom. It stated that "Russia is hereby proclaimed a Republic of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. All power, centrally and locally, is vested in these Soviets."<sup>1</sup>

Through Lenin this Party document showed clearly how government and society in the Russian Republic were structured; the CEC had given its support to Bolshevik proposals which reflected the will of the people. It remained now to put those proposals into practice.

When approving the Declaration, the CEC also agreed to Lenin's suggestion to draw up a decree which would deal severely with any attempt to usurp power.

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p. 423.

As the time for the Assembly came near, the air of agitation spread. We knew that the counter-revolution was frantically mobilizing its forces. The Mensheviks and Right Socialist-Revolutionaries were doing all in their power to incite the Petrograd workers to demonstrate against the Soviets, and a conspiracy had recently been unearthed in Petrograd itself. Members of the Union for the Defence of the Constituent Assembly had been preparing an armed rebellion in the hope of seizing power as the Assembly began.

The conspiracy was crushed in time, but the other enemies of the revolution were still active and none of us knew what the Constitutional Democrats and the Right SRs might get up to during the Assembly sessions.

By January 5 over 400 delegates had gathered in Petrograd; about 250 of them were Right SRs, Constitutional Democrats and members of other bourgeois parties.

The opening was to be at four p.m. in the Tauride Palace. Trusted sailors from the *Aurora* and the battleship *Republic* were posted inside and out to prevent any counter-revolutionary sorties. We had Lenin closely protected too, despite his protests, and for good reason: a short time before, on January 1 (14), there had been a treacherous attempt on his life as he was being driven from a meeting at the Mikhailovsky Manège, where he had been speaking. He escaped only thanks to his driver, who, hearing the gunshots, promptly accelerated out of danger, so that no one was hurt. But from then on we could hardly leave Lenin unprotected.

He was taken from Smolny to the Tauride Palace in a closed car, not to the main entrance but to a gate in the inner courtyard which would only open on an agreed signal. The Bolshevik faction then conducted him along deserted corridors to the assembly hall. His bodyguard never left his side.

An hour or two before the Assembly was to begin,

the Bolsheviks met under Lenin's leadership to discuss a plan of campaign and in particular to decide on how to open the first session. It was agreed that Sverdlov would inaugurate it in the name of the CEC.

The enemies of the revolution were making painstaking preparations too. The Constitutional Democrats, Right SRs and Mensheviks had their instructions; for once they had decided to act in concert, to shout down the Bolsheviks with one voice, to reject all the Bolshevik proposals. The Right SRs had indicated when yells and catcalls would be in order and when applause was required; they had devised a system of pre-arranged signals. All their energies were concentrated on pranks of this kind, in the hope of overwhelming the Bolsheviks.

By four p.m. the huge hall was packed. Looking down on the deputies from the galleries were men from the Petrograd factories, the revolutionary regiments and ships' companies — they were there as guests, though the country really belonged to them.

The deputies had hardly taken their seats — and the Bolsheviks had not even arrived — when the bulky figure of Shvetsov, an ageing Right SR chosen by his colleagues as Chairman, mounted the platform and picked up the bell to call for order. This was a Right SR ploy to prevent a representative of Soviet authority from opening the Assembly.

Sverdlov had been briefly detained. When he appeared on the platform beside Shvetsov, who was standing there in confusion, the atmosphere became electric. Sverdlov confidently waved Shvetsov aside and firmly took the bell from him, doing it in such a calm dignified way that the deputies were struck dumb. Sverdlov's deep and powerful voice filled the silence.

"I have been empowered by the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies to open this meeting of the Constituent Assembly. The Executive Committee..."



“Humbug!” came a shrill voice from the floor.

The Right SRs, who had by then pulled themselves together, started to hoot and whistle, trying to put Sverdlov out of countenance, but he stood impassive as stone. He raised his voice slightly, effortlessly overcoming the dreadful racket, and continued with icy calm: “...the Central Executive Committee hopes that the Constituent Assembly will ratify all the decrees and resolutions of the Council of People’s Commissars.”

It was obvious from his demeanour, from his restrained gestures that he was not to be intimidated. The Right SRs quietened down and a storm of applause rocked the hall and galleries when, at the close of his speech, he announced that he would read the Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People.

He read slowly and clearly, the words falling into the dead silence, but had hardly finished when the *Internationale* rose from the galleries, the Bolshevik deputies took it up, the hall came to its feet and the great proletarian hymn made the rafters ring. No one dared to sit down until it was over.

Then Sverdlov quickly proceeded to the election of a chairman, giving the SRs the right to speak first. Their leader mounted the platform and began to insult the Bolsheviks, upon which piercing whistles broke out, but this time from the Bolshevik benches and the galleries. Sverdlov impassively called for silence.

Not surprisingly, the SR and Menshevik majority gave Lenin’s Declaration a hostile reception; in fact, they refused to discuss it. The Bolsheviks requested a recess so that the factions could discuss this turn of events.

Lenin asked the Bolshevik faction to support a statement which he had just written, to the effect that the Central Executive Committee, in response to the wishes of the vast majority of the people, had recommended that the Constituent Assembly accede to those wishes

by acknowledging the gains of the Great October Revolution, and recognizing the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. But the Constituent Assembly had rejected this recommendation. This was a challenge to all the working people of Russia.

"Not wishing," the statement continued, "that the criminal acts of those hostile to the people should remain unexposed for a moment longer, we are leaving this Assembly in order to leave the final decision on the counter-revolutionary elements of the Assembly to the Soviet government."

Having read the statement the Bolsheviks left the hall, followed by the Left SRs and the workers, soldiers and sailors from the galleries.

The next day, January 6 (19), 1918, the Council of People's Commissars, on Lenin's advice, agreed to dissolve the Assembly, and the Central Executive Committee passed the relevant decree on the same day.

Barely a week later the capacious hall and galleries were again crowded, and the Tauride Palace came to life once more. Workers, soldiers, sailors, representatives of factories, regiments and the navy were gathering from all over Petrograd to attend the Third All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which was to discuss, among other questions, the fate of the defunct Constituent Assembly.

At exactly 8 a.m. on January 10 (23) Sverdlov tried to open the Congress, but his words were drowned in cheers and applause. Then the solemn strains of the *Internationale* filled the air, followed by another ovation.

When all was quiet again, Sverdlov began: "Before us lie some decisions of vital importance. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly has been linked to the convocation of this Congress — the supreme state body that faithfully represents the interests of workers and peasants."

After the inaugural speech, messages of support

were read by representatives of the workers, soldiers and sailors. One of those who spoke was Anatoli Zheleznyakov, head of the Tauride Palace guard and spokesman of Petrograd's revolutionary detachments; not long before he had helped to close the Constituent Assembly.

Ovations rang out one after the other all evening long. I was there, with hundreds of my comrades, to hear John Reed, the American journalist and author, say that he would return to America to tell the truth about the Russian Revolution. After him came envoys from the workers of Norway, Sweden, America and England.

Never before had words of friendship and brotherhood between the workers of all countries come from the highest rostrum of a free country's legislature for all the world to hear. The Congress was a powerful demonstration of international proletarian solidarity. Karl Liebknecht, founder of the German Communist Party, was elected Honorary Chairman along with Lenin, and the whole Congress approved Sverdlov's draft of a greeting to foreign proletarian organizations.

The Sovnarkom report was given by Lenin and the CEC account by Sverdlov, on January 11 (24). Lenin's report was the most important item considered by the Congress; it contained a thorough analysis of all that the Soviet government had done in the two and a half months of its existence, and outlined the circumstances under which it was functioning, the difficulties it had met and the basic problems which lay before Russia's proletariat and working peasantry. In conclusion Lenin said that he was confident that the socialist transformation had begun, that the working people of Russia had made great steps forward and that nothing and no one would be able to sidetrack them. Though heavy trials lay before us, though socialism was not yet within our grasp, it was clear that we were living in a socialist Republic of Soviets, and that was the greatest imagina-

ble achievement.

Sverdlov gave a detailed account of the CEC's activity and concluded with a call to ratify Lenin's Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People, rejected by the Constituent Assembly.

As his solemn voice pronounced the first words, declaring Russia to be a Republic of Soviets, the strained silence broke, the hall rose and enthusiastic applause prevented him from continuing for some time.

The delegates listened carefully to the text and approved it by a large majority, thereby giving their full support to the Sovnarkom and CEC policies and to the Declaration, which defined the basic organs of Soviet state power.

Stalin was next, with a report on the national question which affirmed that the Land of Soviets was a union of free nations, a federation of Soviet republics.

The Congress further strengthened the bond between the working class and the peasantry. Although the CECs of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies had merged, the local Soviets had yet to do so. In order to speed this process the CEC had called the Third Congress of Peasant Soviets to meet three days after the opening of the Third Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets.

The composition of the Peasant Congress showed plainly that Bolshevik influence in the countryside had grown considerably in the six weeks or so since the Extraordinary Peasant Congress at the end of November 1917, when the Bolsheviks had held only 37 seats in over 300: about half the delegates to the Third Peasant Congress were Bolsheviks or sympathetic to the Bolshevik line.

The Congress opened on January 13 (26) at Smolny. At the first session Sverdlov spoke on behalf of the CEC. A motion to merge with the Workers' and Soldiers' Congress was passed, and at nine in the evening

of the same day the first joint session was held in the Tauride Palace, inaugurated by Sverdlov. All future meetings followed the same pattern — unity was an established fact.

The Mensheviks, Right SRs and anarchists tried hard to subvert the Congress. Although few in number, they were noisy and disruptive, speaking at length on every issue, blocking Bolshevik proposals with objections, amendments and reservations. Some of the Left SRs were unsure on several points too, but the Congress majority was firmly behind the Bolsheviks. The petty bourgeois parties were played out; their attempts to subvert the Congress met categorical opposition from Sverdlov in the chair and from the vast majority of the delegates, whose solidarity was unshakable.

At the closing session Sverdlov put forward two recommendations which emphasized the significance of this Congress. He asked that the proviso “pending the agreement of the Constituent Assembly” be removed from all the major laws and decrees published by the Soviet government to date. The motion was carried. Loud applause also greeted his second suggestion, that the word “provisional” be removed from the name formerly applied to the highest level of revolutionary power, the “Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government”; henceforth it should be known as the “Workers’ and Peasants’ Government of the Russian Soviet Republic.”

The Congress elected a new All-Russia Central Executive Committee with 306 members, of whom 160 were Bolsheviks and 125 were Left SRs; the Right SRs, Mensheviks, and their like won only a tiny number of seats.

## **THE “LEFT COMMUNISTS” AND THE MOVES TOWARDS PEACE**

Hard on the heels of the October Revolution came

determined Bolshevik moves towards peace, as the construction of a socialist state unthinkable while the agonizing war continued, with its millions of casualties and catastrophic effect on the economy.

Only an immediate ceasefire with Germany would provide the respite we needed, though it was to cost us tremendous sacrifices and deep humiliation.

The Decree on Peace had been the first Soviet document to be promulgated, the first decree to be passed by the Second Congress of Soviets; in it Soviet Russia called on all the combatant nations not to delay in opening negotiations for a just and democratic peace.

Russia's former allies — England, France and America — turned down this suggestion out of hand; they did all within their power to prevent a Russia's withdrawal from the war. For them the Russian troops were mere cannon fodder; it even reached the point when the allied missions in Russia were offering Krylenko, the Soviet Commander-in-Chief, 100 rubles for each soldier who stayed at the frontline.

Since the imperialists had refused to take part in peace negotiations, the Soviet government made a unilateral approach to Germany and Austria in early December 1917 and arranged an armistice.

By wisely using the bitter internecine conflict between the two imperialist camps — Germany and Austria on the one hand and Britain, France and the USA on the other — the Soviet government had got its brief respite, though knowing full well that it would only be temporary until Russia had withdrawn completely from the war and signed peace terms with Germany. Yet the path to peace was beset with difficulties. The Bolsheviks' courageous attempts to pull Russia out of the war met nothing but resistance from the bourgeoisie at home and abroad.

The Russian capitalists, with the Mensheviks and SRs close behind, launched an intensive smear cam-

paign which accused the Bolsheviks of capitulating to Germany. Of course they had no intention of standing up to the German invaders themselves; they only wanted to prolong the war in order to hamper the secure establishment of Soviet power — let the Germans annex half the country and pillage the rest, if only it would destroy the Bolsheviks. German imperialism was a hundred times closer to the Russian bourgeoisie and its political parties than were their own countrymen, the workers and peasants who had burst their chains and taken power into their own hands.

And then, in that dark hour, when monolithic unity was so vital, some Bolsheviks faltered and withdrew their support of the Party's peace platform. All these wavering, unstable, confused elements united in the trend that came to be known as "Left-Wing Communism." Under their leaders, who included Bukharin, Pyatakov, Obolensky (Osinsky), Lomov, Yakovleva, Radek and Mantsev, they backed up their arguments against negotiation with the imperialist powers, and in support of a "revolutionary war" come what may, with all the high-flown eloquence they could muster.

Trotsky and his supporters also violently opposed Lenin's line. They had concocted a brilliant formula — "No peace, no war"!

So the negotiations with Germany dragged on fruitlessly, while the "Left Communists" stepped up their efforts to foment discord within the Party. And as Trotsky, Bukharin and their followers bogged down the Central Committee in endless discussions, preventing it from acceding to Lenin's demands to conclude an immediate peace, the German High Command broke off the talks and annulled the armistice, sending troops deep into Russia.

On hearing this news on February 18, the Central Committee went into a session that was to last, with only brief pauses, almost the whole day. Lenin spoke first,

then Sverdlov and several other Committee members; all insisted on re-opening the peace negotiations with Germany. It was agreed, despite Bukharin's opposition and Trotsky's manoeuvres, to approach the German government and suggest a prompt conclusion of peace. On the same day the Party began to mobilize all available forces to repel the German invaders.

A Decree from the Sovnarkom, written by Lenin, was published on February 21: "Our socialist fatherland is in danger! We have informed the Germans that we are ready to sign a peace treaty with them, but they are holding back their reply and continuing to advance. We must devote all our strength and all our means to revolutionary defence. Defend every position to the last drop of blood!"

On the same day the Committee for the Revolutionary Defence of Petrograd was created to supervise all military operations against the Germans. Sverdlov was a member of the Committee and its Bureau, and he wrote the regulations which determined the scope of its activities.

The Party and the Soviet government sent the cream of the working class to the front as a new army, an army of the revolution. The general mobilization was launched on February 23, which went down in history as the day on which the Red Army was born. But the Army was made up of workers and peasants who at that time were unable to stave off the well-drilled, heavily armed German forces.

The German government's reply to the Soviet peace initiative was finally received on February 22. The German conditions were considerably harsher than those Trotsky had earlier turned down. But there was no alternative; peace was imperative.

The Central Committee met again on the following day. Sverdlov read out the peace proposals, then Lenin spoke, declaring that the policy of revolutionary rhetoric



had had its day: if it continued, he would leave the government and the Central Committee. To conduct a revolutionary war one needed an army, and, as there was no army, the terms must be accepted.

Bukharin and Trotsky were up in arms immediately and not even all of Lenin's supporters were ready to sign such a harsh and humiliating treaty. Lenin rose to his feet again and again: "Some have reproached me for coming out with an ultimatum. I put it as a last resort... These terms must be signed. If you don't sign them, you will sign the Soviet power's death warrant within three weeks... I put the ultimatum not in order to withdraw it."<sup>1</sup>

Lenin used such categorical language because the revolution itself was at stake; in that critical moment every hour's delay threatened the very existence of the Soviet state.

Sverdlov saw the logic and was firmly behind Lenin, as was most of the Central Committee. The motion to sign was carried, but it was also agreed to take the strongest possible defence measures.

The matter then went to the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, the only organ empowered to take the final decision on a governmental level.

Before this decisive session, there were preliminary faction meetings. The Bolsheviks and the Left SRs sometimes met together, sometimes separately.

Words cannot describe the storms of passion that erupted at those meetings that followed without a pause, one after the other, throughout the night, or the cruel tensions which were borne by the foremost members of our Party during those few hours.

The small hall where the Bolsheviks gathered was crammed full, since the Bolsheviks on the Petrograd Soviet and the Petrograd Party nucleus had been invited to

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 36, p. 479.

join the Bolshevik members of the CEC on this occasion. Pushing my way to the front, with other comrades from Smolny, I found myself sharing a chair with someone.

At times utter silence fell in the packed hall — and then there would be a brief outburst of shouts, for and against, of objections, of applause. The initial speeches were laconic in the extreme, insisting on the need for peace, for a breathing space.

The Left SRs held forth, protesting that the peace was nothing but a shameful betrayal of the world revolution. Sverdlov, from the chair, would remind them not to stray from the point, for time was of the essence. In the morning, in a few hours' time, the German ultimatum would lapse; the Bolsheviks had to agree on their recommendation to the CEC.

The more speeches were heard the more obvious it became that the majority supported Lenin's policy. But it did have its opponents, and among the Left SRs only a handful were willing to accept the peace terms. Everyone was well aware of the importance of unity, but no one could tell which way the balance would swing at the coming CEC meeting.

Lenin had been absent at the beginning; when he appeared, Sverdlov, interrupting the speaker, invited our leader to the platform, but he made a negative sign, seeing that the crowd was too densely packed, and stayed in the crush by the wall. When the speech was over a narrow corridor formed and Lenin pushed his way forward to the platform, where he sat next to Sverdlov. They spoke in whispers during the following addresses. Then Sverdlov stood up and, on behalf of Lenin and himself, succinctly reminded his audience that most of the Central Committee were for peace.

It was over. The Bolshevik faction agreed by a positive majority to recommend that the CEC accept the German peace terms.

But however stormy the Bolshevik faction meeting was, it could not compare with the joint meeting of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs which was held in the main hall of the Tauride Palace. Some of the “Left Communists,” Ryazanov above all, created their share of disorder; they repudiated Party discipline and continued to speak against the peace. The Left SRs were beside themselves; several shouted that whatever the factions decided they would not support the peace.

Lenin then took the floor. Oratory gave way to irresistible logic that swept aside all hostile arguments:

“It is true that the peace is shameful, nay, indecent. But it’s not our fault that we cannot get alternative terms. Therefore we will have to accept this shameful, indecent peace because there is no alternative, because we can’t fight — we haven’t got the forces to send against the Germans and we can’t produce them from thin air. To continue the war would be to destroy the Soviet state, the revolution. A peace of any description represents the respite we need to restore the economy, solve the food problem and create a strong and efficient army. Then and only then will we be able to show those imperialists what we can do — we will regain with interest all that we are losing now through no fault of our own...”

It was past two in the morning; the CEC meeting could not be delayed any longer, the arguments could not continue. And further argument was pointless; those that Lenin could not convince would be convinced by no one.

The CEC meeting began at three a.m. on February 24. Lenin, as Chairman of the Sovnarkom, gave the opening report. Sverdlov presided.

Lenin’s compelling arguments were wasted on the Mensheviks and Left and Right SRs, who deliriously repeated their demands for war, war at any price. The “Left Communists” were sunk in morose silence.

The vote showed that the majority supported the

peace. The Mensheviks and SRs then insisted that the members of the CEC declare their votes individually.

Well, and why not? As Sverdlov read out their names, each went to the rostrum, turned to face the crowded hall and announced whether he was for or against the peace.

With 116 votes for, 85 against and 26 abstentions, the CEC carried the Bolshevik motion to sign the peace treaty.

On February 26 the Central Committee sent out a communiqué to all Party members, giving its reasons for accepting the German terms. With courage and frankness, it told the whole bitter truth, admitting to the discord within its own ranks, explaining in detail the crying need for peace, analysing the current situation in depth and defining the Party's future responsibilities. The communiqué was composed jointly by Lenin and Sverdlov.

Within a few days, on 3 March 1918, the peace treaty was signed.

The "Left Communist" leaders, meanwhile, had not given up. Taking advantage of their majority in the Moscow Regional Party Bureau, they tried to turn the Moscow organization into a weapon against the Central Committee, whose position they refused to recognize.

On the night of March 4, the Moscow City RSDLP(B) Conference met. Sverdlov spoke, commanding the full attention of the Conference, with its strong contingent of factory worker representatives. It was agreed to keep to the Central Committee's political line and strongly censure the schismatic "Left Communist" caucus. A suggestion from Obolensky, one of their ring-leaders, to reject the treaty and condemn the CC was defeated by 111 votes to 5. The Conference rallied the Moscow Bolsheviks to the CC and disowned the "Left Communists."

As soon as the Conference was over, Sverdlov re-

turned to Petrograd, where the Seventh Party Congress, which he had been instrumental in organizing, was to begin on the following day.

Sverdlov opened the Congress on behalf of the CC, late in the evening of 6 March in the Tauride Palace. The active Party nucleus of Petrograd was there in force and I attended all the sessions, sitting with numerous other guests.

This, the first Congress to take place after the revolution, was faced with an exceptionally complex state of affairs: it had to review the conflict with the “Left Communists,” bolster Party unity, take final account of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, strengthen the Party structure and map out the socialist reorganization of the economy.

Lenin delivered the CC’s political report, in which the issue of war and peace was discussed, and followed it with a review of the Party program. Sverdlov gave the CC’s organizational report.

Lenin’s address was fundamental to the Congress proceedings. It consisted of a complete analysis of the current situation in the country and in the Party, discussed the causes of the difficulties facing the revolution and indicated means of overcoming them. Reviewing the inner-Party conflict on the need for a breathing space in the war, he again convincingly proved that peace had been essential and pointed out the danger inherent in the reckless demands made by Bukharin, Trotsky and their followers.

On Lenin’s suggestion the Congress changed the Party’s name to the “Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)”; a commission, headed by Lenin, was created to draw up a new Party program. A new Central Committee was also elected, which included Lenin, Sverdlov, Stalin, Stasova, Dzerzhinsky, Vladimirsky and Sergeev (better known as Artyom).

Now that the government’s peace moves had the

support of the Party Congress, it remained to ratify the treaty. This was a task for the Fourth (Extraordinary) All-Russia Congress of Soviets, which convened in Moscow, not Petrograd. Our country had a new capital.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **MOSCOW**

#### **IN THE NEW CAPITAL**

The Soviet government transferred to Moscow immediately after the Seventh Party Congress, and it was there that the Fourth Congress of Soviets was held from March 14 to 16, 1918. The agenda included the ratification of the treaty, the transfer of the capital to Moscow and the election of a new CEC.

The Bolshevik faction met on the day before the Congress opened to hear Lenin's report on the Brest-Litovsk treaty. A motion to approve ratification was easily carried, despite "Left Communist" opposition to Lenin's line. They had not abandoned their anti-Party activities, although they had lost the remnants of their support during their defeat at the Seventh Party Congress. It was becoming increasingly obvious that those who refused to submit to discipline were no more than a band of schismatics out to damage the Party.

Sverdlov opened the Congress. Lenin spoke on the vital issue of ratification, and his motion in favour was carried by a large majority, which clearly showed that the Congress disapproved of the Menshevik, SR and "Left Communist" attempts to block it.

Lenin's resolution on the transfer of the capital was also passed, and the Congress elected a new CEC with 200 members: 140 were Bolsheviks, 48 Left SRs and the rest Mensheviks, Right SRs and anarchists. Among the Bolsheviks elected to the CEC Presidium were Sverdlov, Varlam Avanesov, Mikhail Pokrovsky and Mikhail Vladimirovsky.

The job of helping to re-establish the Party staff in Moscow and settle the Secretariat into its new premises fell to me; at the end of March the Central Committee

appointed me aide to the Secretary of the Central Committee.

Sverdlov had not abandoned his direct involvement with the Secretariat, but he went to the Secretariat offices once or twice a week at most, usually in the evenings, so that I had to go to the CEC offices to see him. He was always available there to discuss either state or Party business.

On the most important issues I would sometimes apply straight to Lenin, receiving the instructions I needed immediately over the phone. But more often it was Sverdlov who consulted Lenin on the matters requiring his attention.

Once settled in Moscow, Sverdlov and all the others worked unbelievably hard, without a thought for themselves or their health. Sverdlov would often bring work home and keep at it until three or four in the morning. He still studied at night too, for 30 minutes or an hour if he was very busy, or longer if he could.

The more tasks he was given to do, the more responsibilities he took on, the greater grew his dedication to his work. He found total fulfilment in the intense activity, the complex issues which faced him, although at times he found the work terribly tiring. But he remained a sensitive and attentive comrade and friend, a joy to work with and unfailingly approachable, no matter how overloaded he was.

Everything he did came out well, largely due to his ability to organize himself and others and to work almost round the clock, with very little sleep. He planned his working day to the last detail. Strictly adhering to the principle he had adopted while working in the underground, he never laid any document aside until the next day, never postponed any decision. He directed all his energies to finishing every task before proceeding to something else, which he did without so much as a moment's pause.



Lidia Fotieva, secretary to the Sovnarkom, told me: "After Lenin was wounded, I often had to give Sverdlov the papers addressed to Lenin or the Sovnarkom. I was struck by his extraordinary ability to grasp any question immediately, however complicated or involved, and get the gist of any document. It needed only a word or two before he went straight to the heart of the matter and made a rapid and confident decision. He never left any problem unresolved and never held on to any paper without good cause. This remarkable ability so distinguished him from his colleagues that I have not forgotten it to this day."

Sverdlov had a high regard for other peoples' opinions: he had regular consultations with the CC, the people's commissars, leading members of the Party and the Soviets, rank-and-file Party activists and non-Party workers and peasants. He never forced his opinions on anyone, but tried to prove himself right. A typical case is the exchange he had with the leadership of the Nizhni Novgorod Provincial Party Committee and its Executive Committee, which had, in Sverdlov's view, wrongly dismissed a Party official from a responsible post. Receiving the reply that if he insisted they could reverse their decision, Sverdlov sent them a telegram which read: "Not my place to insist on reversal of Committee's decision, can only advise."

His instructions were always extremely precise, clear and comprehensive, and he made a point of seeing how they were carried out. He could be relentlessly demanding when the need arose, but he never demanded more than one could give. He did not cavil or harass and, although he did not take errors lightly, he pointed them out as one comrade to another, in a way that was neither insulting nor humiliating.

Every day he discussed with Lenin the more serious matters that came within his competence as Chairman of the CEC and head of the Secretariat. All issues of a

political nature he took to the Central Committee, believing that the correct decisions could only be reached through group discussion.

He would not allow rudeness, conceit or tactlessness from anyone, no matter how highly they were placed, and his tact, his unfailing respect for the opinions of others and his determination when carrying out Central Committee decisions created an efficient but relaxed atmosphere around him, whatever the job in hand.

In those early days of Soviet power, the need to overcome the desperate resistance put up by the White Guards, the Mensheviks and the SRs and to end the intense conflict within the Party demanded constant vigilance from every Bolshevik. Sverdlov, though ruthless towards the enemies of the revolution, was deeply disturbed by those who were suspicious rather than vigilant especially if they were our people, part of the great united family of Bolsheviks.

## **FAMILY, FRIENDS AND COMRADES**

In the second half of March, two weeks after the transfer to Moscow, Sverdlov left for Nizhni Novgorod to deliver a report on the Seventh Party Congress to a meeting of the Party nucleus and to speak on the development of the Party and the Soviets at a joint meeting of the Provincial Party Committee and the Presidia of the Provincial and Town Executive Committees. When he returned to Moscow he brought the children, who had been living all this time with their grandfather, back with him. Our family was united again at last.

Sverdlov and I had been together for 12 years before the revolution. Except for the two years of exile in Turukhansk, they had been years of rootlessness, of unremitting persecution, when our few days of underground freedom were followed by years apart in prison and exile. It was a life of arrest, prison, convoy, exile,

time and again. Only after the revolution could we begin to live within the law, without fear of the authorities.

But, though our family was united, Sverdlov's heavy workload allowed him to come home for only a few hours every day. When he could snatch an occasional Sunday to stay at home and rest, he spent as much of that time as he could with the children. He was not too busy to watch them grow, to watch their characters and intellects developing.

The mornings belonged to them. If Sverdlov was not too tired, he would get up a little earlier than he had to and take them into our bedroom, where there was a deep-pile carpet — and they got up to all sorts of things on that carpet! Sverdlov would go down on his hands and knees and the children would ride him round the room, or he would wrestle with Andrei while the flat rang with war-like shouts and loud laughter.

Sverdlov was wonderful with the children, the soul of tact. He never raised his voice, he spoke to them as equals, but his authority was absolute. They were quick and willing to do anything he asked and listened carefully when he had to scold them. His conversations with them were always completely serious, with no baby talk or childish expressions, but, because he could hit on the right words and tone of voice, they understood each other perfectly, although Andrei was only seven and Vera five.

I recall a particularly amusing incident from the days of our exile in Turukhansk. Andrei sometimes teased his sister and frightened her, sometimes making her cry. We both tried to impress on him that this was no way to behave, but he would remember for a few days and then begin again.

One day he started to assure her, with a completely straight face, that there was a horrible old man with a sack just outside who was coming to take her away; Vera was on the brink of tears. Sverdlov, hearing this conver-

sation from next door, quickly went into the room and fell on his hands and knees. His hair on end and his beard bristling, he descended on Andrei with such a fearsome snarl that the lad began to howl in earnest. Sverdlov stood up, straightened his hair and said in a normal tone:

“What is it, old fellow, are you scared? Don’t you like it? Well, Vera doesn’t like it when you frighten her. So I’ll make you a deal — if you don’t frighten her, I won’t frighten you.”

As a matter of principle he firmly checked any signs of shiftlessness and developed their self-reliance and respect for work. He insisted they make their own beds, keep their room clean and tidy, and their toys and other things in order. He could be indescribably withering if Andrei, for example, asked someone to sew a button back on for him. Yet he never asked too much of them so as not to discourage their urge to be independent.

He explained to them the nature of the bourgeoisie, the faults of the Tsar, the reasons for the proletarian revolution, and the Bolshevik character, and they understood, because he spoke in a simple and intelligible way. When Andrei was seven, one of his friends jokingly called him an anarchist. Andrei began to cry and replied through his sobs: “Liar! Liar! I’m a Bolshevik like Papa!”

And I recall another conversation between Sverdlov and Andrei on that dreadful day in January 1919 when we heard that Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had been brutally murdered. The children knew Liebknecht’s name, for we often talked about him at home. Sverdlov and I were going out to a meeting to pay our last respects when Andrei suddenly went up to his father, pressed his cheek against his hand in a strangely timid way and, looking up at him, asked: “Papa, Liebknecht was a revolutionary, a Bolshevik, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, a true revolutionary.”

“And the bourgeoisie killed him, didn’t they?”

“The bourgeoisie, of course.”

“But Papa, you’re a revolutionary too. So could the bourgeoisie kill you?”

Sverdlov looked intently at Andrei, tousled his hair tenderly and said, in a serious and calm tone: “Yes, son, of course they could, but don’t let that scare you. When I die I’ll leave you the best inheritance there is — a spotless reputation and the name of a revolutionary.”

After the revolution and the move to Moscow Sverdlov was able to see his father, brothers and sisters again. His father came to visit us from Nizhni Novgorod once in a while. His sisters, and his brother Veniamin, who worked in the People’s Commissariat of Railways, lived in Moscow. When we were all together it was one big happy family.

One of our regular guests was Sverdlov’s half-brother, German, a bright and witty 13-year-old, the child of his father’s second marriage, who had been born after Sverdlov left home, and whom he hardly knew. But now that circumstances permitted he often came to stay. He had an inborn, inexhaustible sense of humour, and his descriptions of the most commonplace events would leave everyone weak with laughter. And he simply brought the house down when he read the familiar old Russian folk tales aloud, with his own asides. If Sverdlov was in the house at the time he would laugh as infectiously and as heartily as any of the children. Only the narrator retained his dignity.

Not long after the children came, we moved to a spacious four-roomed flat in that part of the Great Kremlin Palace that had been called the children’s quarters, and Sverdlov asked for the two adjacent rooms to be made into guest rooms. Many of his old friends who came to Moscow on business went straight to see him and we put them up. Indeed, it would be easier to say who did not come to stay at one stage or other. Filipp Goloshchekin,

Secretary of the Ural Regional Party Committee in 1918, came often, as did Markel Sergushev, Secretary of the Nizhni Novgorod Provincial Committee, Boris Kraevsky, a Front Commander, Markusha Minkin, Chairman of the Penza Provincial Executive Committee, Vanya Chugurin, Artyom (Sergeev), Tolmachyov... People's commissars and political workers from the Civil War front lines, Bolshevik underground workers from the areas under German occupation and the regions in the grip of the White Guards, and members of the Party and Soviets from Central Russia, the Urals and around the Volga. Several of them were Sverdlov's former comrades-in-arms from Sormovo and the Urals, from Narymsk, Kolpashevo, Turukhansk and Petrograd, but some of them were recent acquaintances. He took a lively interest in everyone he met; he wanted to get inside them, know what they were thinking and feeling, their strong and weak points. He found that in the official setting of his office people were often inhibited, and he did not like that at all. He would induce his visitor to wait and bring him home as soon as he was free; they would have their talk, and the visitor would, of course, stay the night. Our guest rooms were never empty.

Our life in Moscow went at the same headlong, zestful pace as in Petrograd. The victory of the revolution, the palpable successes in reconstructing society, in creating a new life, filled our hearts to overflowing with joy. We were witnessing the realization of all our plans, all that we Bolsheviks had lived and struggled for. The foundations of a new communist society had been laid, and whatever difficulties lay ahead of us, it was wonderful to know that the revolution would prevail, that we were progressing, that with our very first steps we were heading unflinchingly towards communism.

But life was not easy: the people had inherited too heavy a burden from the old regime. Everything was in

short supply; we had to scrimp all the time. Yet the Bolsheviks always put themselves and their own comfort last; the workers of Russia had entrusted us with power precisely because they saw in us the fullest expression of their interests, their innermost hopes. Although we were the vanguard of the working class, we were, more importantly, part of it, living and working alongside the workers and peasants — not using the power that the people had granted us to our own selfish ends. Indeed, the thousands of Bolsheviks in all areas of society who had dedicated their lives to their fight for the people, were hardly likely to give in to those among us who developed a self-indulgent taste for luxury. We were extremely scrupulous about every aspect of our private lives. Take Alexander Tsyurupa, People's Commissar for Food Supplies, for example — with the resources of the entire country at his disposal, he was often weak from lack of food, and he would have died but for Lenin, who intervened and practically forced him to rest and improve his diet.

One night early in the summer of 1918 Sverdlov came home looking troubled.

“You know,” he said, “Nikolai Podvoisky came to see me today. Only just arrived, they're sending him off to deal with the Czechoslovak mutiny.<sup>1</sup> You know what

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<sup>1</sup> This was a counter-revolutionary mutiny in Soviet Russia by Czechoslovak troops in May to November 1918. The Czechoslovak divisions had been formed from Czech and Slovak prisoners during the First World War. Immediately before the October Revolution the divisions were united into one corps of between forty and fifty thousand men. In 1918 their numbers were swelled by White Guards.

The Soviet government permitted the Czechs and Slovaks in the corps to leave for Western Europe via Vladivostok. They agreed to hand over their weapons to the local Soviet authorities, but did not keep their word.

Bribed by the French, English and Americans and with active help from the Socialists-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks,

an uncommonly cheerful, optimistic, energetic sort he is — a really fine fellow — well, something was wrong. He was nervy and worried but never said a word. Avanesov and I got together, decided to find out discreetly what had got into him. We went hard at it, and it finally turned out that his wife and three girls are in Czech hands. She was taking some Petrograd children to Ufa, the Czechs attacked and captured her. No one knows where the girls are.”

I knew Podvoisky well, and has several times met his wife, Nina, an unfailingly reserved, calm, remarkably self-effacing Bolshevik. She had been secretary of the Petrograd Committee in 1917. I knew how fond Podvoisky was of his family, how devoted he was to his children, and when I heard the dreadful news I cast around in my mind, wondering how I could help.

But Sverdlov had already thought it over and had commissioned one of our comrades who was going to Ufa to do everything he could to get Nina out of the clutches of the White Czechs.

She was in Ufa prison and her daughters, the eldest of whom was only ten, had been taken in by a friend. Empowered by Sverdlov, our comrade either exchanged Nina for one of their officers who had been caught by our side or arranged her escape, and helped her to get out of Ufa with the children.

She crossed the front line near the town of Balashov. Podvoisky was already there, and they met in the street quite by accident. It is not hard to imagine how he felt: he had thought they were dead. He never knew the part Sverdlov had played in the rescue.

I also remember an incident in autumn 1918 which concerned Felix Dzerzhinsky. One evening Sverdlov suggested that we go and visit him.

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the corps commanders fomented an anti-Soviet mutiny among their troops. They planned to seize the Central Volga Region and Siberia. — *Ed.*



“I’m worried — he’s been looking absolutely rotten recently, never goes home, works day by the length. He’s not well and won’t see a doctor. Let’s go and find out how he is.”

We went to the Cheka<sup>1</sup> offices in the Lubyanka; the guard saw Sverdlov’s pass and let us in immediately. As we went along the endless corridors many of the office workers greeted Sverdlov and several stopped to talk to him. He was a frequent visitor, who took a real interest in their work, and, of course, had known many of them before, for the Party had assigned its best people to the Cheka.

Dzerzhinsky was working in his office. On his desk there was a glass, half-filled with some cloudy grey liquid, and a small piece of black bread. Part of the chilly office was screened off.

When Dzerzhinsky saw us, he got up with a delighted smile; he and Sverdlov were intimate friends. We sat down and, happening to glance behind the screen, I saw a bed covered with a simple military blanket. An overcoat was tossed carelessly over it and the pillow was rumpled. It was clear that Dzerzhinsky was not sleeping as he should; he probably only lay down for a while fully dressed.

When we left, after about an hour, Sverdlov was thoughtful and remote. We walked in silence until finally he said: “He’s in a bad way, burning himself up. He’s not sleeping properly, his food’s revolting. He needs help — he needs his family. I’ll have to do something, see Lenin about it...”

Like hundreds of other Bolsheviks, Dzerzhinsky had spent the years before the revolution doing the rounds of prison and exile. His wife Sofya had also spent a lot

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<sup>1</sup> The Cheka (the All-Russia Extraordinary Commission; its shortened name was formed from its Russian initials — *Tr.*) was a special Soviet government organ which fought counter-revolution and sabotage from 1917 to 1919. — *Ed.*

of time behind bars; their son Yasik had been born in prison. When the revolution came, Sofya and the boy were in Switzerland and Dzerzhinsky had not seen them since.

“We’ll simply have to get his family out of there. He’s got no one else and he’s miserable. With the family back, home will be home again and he’ll go there at least occasionally and relax. Otherwise he’s finished.”

Sverdlov did not rest until Dzerzhinsky went abroad. Before long Sofya and the boy were back in Moscow.

Sverdlov often visited the Moscow Soviet and the district Soviets to see himself how visitors were treated, how quickly and vigorously the officials acted on the requests and complaints of the working people.

One evening at nine he invited me to go with him to the Moscow City Soviet, which would still be in session despite the late hour. Sverdlov began with the callers in the reception room. He sat next to an old worker and struck up a conversation, asking what had brought him there, and then, in his unaffected and friendly way, he spoke to the others. He did not introduce himself, and not everybody knew him by sight; portraits were a rare thing in those days.

Afterwards we went round the offices. Sverdlov asked the employees about their work and how they viewed their duties, and gave advice and some comradely criticism. He did not confine his interest to reading reports — he went into detail.

He grieved bitterly when he heard of a comrade’s death. Volodarsky’s untimely end at the hands of a Right SR assassin in Petrograd was a terrible blow to him. It happened on June 20, 1918: Volodarsky, the Petrograd workers’ favourite orator, was on his way from one meeting to another when he was fired at six times. A magnificent life was cut short; a passionate tribune of the revolution was snatched from us. He was only 28.

Sverdlov left as soon as he heard the news, to attend

the funeral in Petrograd. Just before we parted he said: "I feel so dreadfully upset... A dedicated revolutionary gone forever. It's a heavy loss — but what a fine way to go: he died at his post!"

## THE FIRST SOVIET CONSTITUTION

Once power was theirs, the working people of Russia went on to build a socialist society under Bolshevik leadership. The top priority was to evolve a new state structure, the first of its kind. Though the working millions were already participating in the conduct of all the country's affairs through the Soviets, their own creation, we had to regulate the procedures of those bodies, to give them the organized and functional structure that was lacking in the early days.

The firm establishment of the Soviets and the development of the socialist state structure concerned the Central Committee and Lenin increasingly, especially after the move to Moscow. Sverdlov, for his part, never tired of emphasizing the need for the closest possible contact between the organs of power and the workers, who should be extensively involved in running the state.

The first specialist courses for agitators and CEC instructors were arranged on Sverdlov's initiative, and were later renamed the Ya.M. Sverdlov Communist University, which gained a well-earned reputation as a training ground for the professional core of the Party and the Soviets. He drew up the first curriculum himself; I have a handwritten copy:

Labour and capital and the history of the class struggle: Lenin;

The agrarian question: Yaroslavsky;

Food supplies: Tsyurupa and Svidersky;

The organization of Soviet power: Vladimirsky;

Parliamentarianism and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie: Pokrovsky;

The construction of the Soviets: Petrovsky;

The national question: Stalin;

The Soviets and education: Lunacharsky.

Sverdlov gave lectures on the state and took an interest in the academic progress and living conditions of the students. He would often say to me after talking with them: "My goodness, what people they are! With people like that we can move mountains."

The Party put a great deal of effort into framing a new legislative system that would bring order and the rule of law to the country and ensure that the interests of the workers were met. This work proceeded under the guidance of Lenin, who was an outstanding jurist, while Sverdlov, head of the highest Soviet legislative body, the CEC, was constantly at hand to help him in this complex task.

Sverdlov was actively involved in all aspects of the work from March 30, 1918, when the Central Committee instructed him to form a Constitutional Commission.

The first Soviet Constitution, the fundamental law of the Soviet state that had emerged from the October Revolution, was adopted less than a year after the revolution. Based on Lenin's Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People, it was the embodiment and summary of all that the people had learned in creating and establishing the Soviet state.

Dozens of prominent Soviet and Party members, and leading specialists in law, worked under Lenin's leadership to draw up the Constitution. Having passed through its formative stages in the CEC and the Central Committee, it was presented to the All-Russia Congress of Soviets.

The Constitutional Commission's work was completed by June 1918 and the draft document was passed on to a commission of the Central Committee headed by Lenin, which made several amendments. On July 10,

1918 the Fifth Congress of Soviets ratified the Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic.

## **THE ROUT OF THE LEFT SOCIALIST-REVOLUTIONARIES**

The Fifth Congress of Soviets was not only memorable for ratifying the Constitution; it also saw the final defeat of the Left SRs.

Since the Fourth Congress of Soviets had endorsed the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Left SRs had walked out of the Council of People's Commissars, relations had gone from bad to worse. Sverdlov repeatedly said that it had become impossible to work with them in the CEC too. I saw for myself at the CEC meetings how obstructive they could be, how they tried to disrupt the proceedings with their unruly behaviour. They were in increasingly open collusion with the Mensheviks and Right SRs, who had been expelled from the Soviets on June 14, 1918 by order of the CEC. They made this decision inevitable when they began to organize counter-revolutionary intrigues and insurrections.

The animosity of the Left SRs grew as the class struggle developed in the countryside, for the overwhelming majority of them supported the kulaks, the rich exploiting peasants, the most ferocious enemy of the working class and Soviet power. The kulaks led counter-revolutionary revolts, hindered grain deliveries, stockpiled food and indulged in profiteering while the workers of Petrograd, Moscow and the large industrial centres went hungry. In the summer of 1918 the bread ration was again reduced, this time to an eighth of a pound every other day.

At Lenin's call the Party and the working class rose to defend Soviet power in the countryside, to defend their right to bread. The most progressive workers in the industrial towns formed food supply teams to operate in

the villages and poverty committees were established in the countryside.

Everything the Soviet government did, the decrees it passed on the food supply and the establishment of the poverty committees had a hostile reception from the Left SRs. They also agitated against the Brest-Litovsk peace, hoping to provoke an armed clash with Germany and drag Soviet Russia into a disastrous war.

At the end of June 1918 the Left SR Central Committee agreed to organize an armed rebellion to seize power by overthrowing the Soviet government. They were supported by the Moscow-based diplomatic missions of Britain, France and the USA.

The rebellion was timed to coincide with the Fifth Congress of Soviets. They planned to arrest the Congress Presidium, occupy the Kremlin, the administrative offices, the Post Office, telegraph and railway stations, to oust the government headed by Lenin and declare that power had passed to them, the Left SRs.

Their first steps were to muster armed support in Moscow and to put the military divisions that had already fallen into their hands on a combat footing, using the influential positions that they still held in various sections of the administration and even in the Cheka. The Left SR Central Committee proceeded as secretly as it could, meaning to catch the Bolsheviks unawares and give them no chance to resist.

The idea was to make a combined attack. They would infiltrate the guard of the Bolshoi Theatre, where the Congress was to be held, with their own trained men, who would arrest the Presidium with the help of the more brazen Left SR delegates. At the same time Blyumkin, a totally unprincipled Left SR terrorist, would assassinate Count Mirbach, the German Ambassador in Moscow, thus goading Germany into annulling the Brest-Litovsk peace and declaring war.

Such was the plan, in general outline, and this is

what happened.

The arrangements for the Congress were Sverdlov's responsibility. The Left SRs were so insistent on having their men in the Bolshoi Theatre guard that they aroused his suspicions. He did not let them see that he was struck by the fuss they were making, however, and agreed, but also ordered separate security measures. So, though part of the theatre guard consisted of Left SRs, each of them was kept under surveillance by two or three riflemen from the Latvian Infantry and men from other reliable divisions hand-picked from the Kremlin guard. The Left SRs could not lift a finger without attracting notice. Trustworthy people were also placed on watch in the nearby streets.

Of course, neither Sverdlov nor any of the Bolsheviks were sure that the Left SRs were planning something criminal, but, as the Congress date approached, the Bolsheviks became increasingly wary in their dealings with them and watched their suspicious behaviour more closely.

The Fifth All-Russia Congress of Workers', Peasants', Soldiers' and Cossacks' Deputies opened on July 4, 1918. There were 1,164 delegates, among whom were 773 Bolsheviks and 353 Left SRs.

Those early Congress sessions were the most difficult that Sverdlov had ever faced. They were scenes of unprecedented conflict which took an unprecedentedly ominous turn.

The Left SRs were uncooperative from the outset, shouting and whistling piercingly. Even before the day's agenda was approved the Left SR Alexandrov stood to deliver a "message of welcome" from the working people of the Ukraine, which turned out to be a provocative attack on the Brest-Litovsk peace and a demand to renew hostilities against Germany. The Left SRs gave shouts of support and he sat down to a contrived ovation. Sverdlov rose from the chair.

“I firmly believe that the political issue raised in that speech will be best reflected in the declared will of the Congress and not in disorderly behaviour of this kind... I have no doubt that our first speaker won his applause not for his words but entirely because he was speaking for the militant workers and peasants of the Ukraine.”

Sverdlov then invited a Bolshevik representative to make an unscheduled statement, which informed the Congress that shady elements were encouraging the soldiers to rebel and mount an offensive against Germany. The Soviet government had responded to this provocation by ordering that these agitators be taken before special tribunals. The Left SRs howled their disapproval, but the Bolsheviks were not easily shaken. They put forward the following resolution:

“Decisions on matters of war and peace are the exclusive province of the All-Russia Congress of Soviets and the central organs of Soviet power which it has established, namely the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People’s Commissars. No sector of society has the right to decide such matters except in agreement with the Soviet government... The good of the Soviet Republic is the supreme law. Whoever challenges that law should be wiped from the face of the earth.”

The Left SRs were in a fury. Prompted by Karelin, one of their leaders, they jumped up, declared that they would take no part in the voting and made an ostentatious exit.

“I note,” said Sverdlov crisply, “that the Left Socialist-Revolutionary faction has left the hall. This meeting of the All-Russia Congress of Soviets will proceed.”

The Bolshevik resolution was unanimously passed and with that the first session closed.

The next day Lenin and Sverdlov gave the Sovnarkom and CEC reports. The Left SRs were as unruly as before, keeping up a constant barrage of noise. The atmosphere became more charged by the hour. Those



SRs who were still able to see things in their true light and had not been initiated into the plot were wondering what lay in store.

The denouement came on July 6, with the Left SR putsch.

At three p.m. Blyumkin, armed with false papers on which his Left SR accomplices in the Cheka had forged Dzerzhinsky's signature, got into the German Embassy and gained an audience with Ambassador Mirbach. When the bomb had done its work and his victim lay fatally wounded, Blyumkin escaped through the window, leapt into a waiting car and fled to the headquarters of the Cheka unit, which was under the command of Popov, a Left SR.

Then the rebels attacked. Firing indiscriminately, they set out to occupy the telegraph office and telephone exchange, but only managed to capture the telegraph, which they used to send messages claiming responsibility for the assassination of the representative of German imperialism, Count Mirbach, on the orders of their Central Committee, and announcing that they had seized power.

One of the earliest telegrams read: "For the attention of telephone and telegraph operators: All communications signed by Lenin and Sverdlov are not to be forwarded, constituting a danger to the Soviet state in general and to the ruling Left Socialist-Revolutionary party in particular."

As soon as Dzerzhinsky heard about the attempt on Mirbach's life he went to the German Embassy, where he learned that the culprit had escaped to join Popov. He telephoned Lenin and Sverdlov, then took three Cheka officials and went to find Popov, intending to clarify the situation and arrest Blyumkin. But they were overpowered, disarmed and arrested by the rebels. The Chairman of the Moscow Soviet, Pyotr Smidovich, was the next to be captured. Then the SRs occupied the

Cheka building with the help of their men there, who that day comprised a large part of the guard, and arrested the high-ranking Bolshevik officials.

It was all going to plan; success seemed certain.

The attack had begun as Sverdlov was preparing to open the next session of the Congress at the Bolshoi Theatre; Lenin had not yet arrived. There was no time to waste: Sverdlov called together all the reliable comrades he could find and quickly worked out a plan, giving terse, clear instructions. Meanwhile the unsuspecting delegates were coming in and taking their seats with some commotion. Everything was ready; it was time to begin. But instead a Bolshevik representative moved that the factions consult together first; the Left SRs were to gather in one of the spacious foyers, while the Bolsheviks went to the CEC Propagandists' School. All the doors except the exit through the orchestra pit were locked. Passes were checked by Glafira Okulova, secretary of the CEC, who allowed out only those who could show the credentials of a Bolshevik delegate. They were urged to hurry.

It all went off quickly, without unnecessary fuss. The Left SR guards were removed before they knew what was happening. The entire theatre was in Bolshevik hands and surrounded by an impenetrable cordon.

The Left SR faction gathered, but, before they had time to act, the foyer doors burst open and an armed Red Army detachment appeared. The SRs were told that they were being held in connection with a Left SR rebellion in the city, and that they should keep calm and not attempt to resist.

So the rebellion lost its leadership. The very men who had planned to seize power and arrest the Soviet government were themselves under arrest.

By then Lenin knew about it all through Sverdlov, who had gone to the Kremlin to tell him. Having taken the most urgent steps to put down the rebellion, they

went together to the German Embassy to perform the painful duty of offering the condolences of the Soviet government.

Lenin directed operations against the rebels. He ordered that divisions of Red Guards be drawn up all over Moscow, that sizable covering detachments be stationed at all the railway stations and the main roads out of the city, and that troops surround the rebel strongholds. "All forces to be mobilized, the general alarm to be raised to have these criminals caught without delay," he urged.

Sverdlov sent one urgent telephone message asking that a plenary session of the Moscow Soviet be called immediately, and another to arrange for a 24-hour watch to be established in all parts of Moscow.

The Bolsheviks did not waste a moment. On the night of July 6, a ring of troops under the command of Nikolai Podvoisky was thrown around the area where Popov's men were entrenched.

The Moscow proletariat rose to defend the Soviet government, taking up arms throughout the city. The Bolshevik Congress delegates and the Moscow Party nucleus were sent to speak to the district Soviets, the Party committees, the military divisions and the factory workers, and were put in charge of railway stations and military barracks. On Lenin's orders all cars without a pass signed by himself or Sverdlov were halted.

On the morning of July 7, the troops moved in on the rebels, meeting no resistance. After a few shots were fired the bandits took to their heels, far from sober after a night spent drinking to cheer themselves up. They tried to break through to the Kursk railway station, but found it well-guarded and turned onto the Vladimir road, where most of them were captured. Several scattered but were caught and a mere handful, including Popov, made it to the White Guard encampments.

Some of those who had been tricked into joining the

insurrection listened closely to Dzerzhinsky as he heat- edly denounced the real culprits. They released him early on July 7.

Although the rebellion had been carefully planned by well-armed men who had the element of surprise on their side, the Left SR foray, which could have taken a heavy toll of casualties, ended as a total fiasco. Now the people could see the SRs for what they really were. Tel- egrams came from all parts of the country; at countless meetings it had been agreed to demand the severest pen- alties for these traitors to the revolution.

On July 8 the Central Committee discussed the Left SR delegates, who were still being held in the Bolshoi Theatre. The decision, recorded in Sverdlov's hand on official Sovnarkom paper, was to question them all dur- ing the night of July 8, and to free those who had taken no part in the rebellion. All the evidence was given to an investigatory commission.

The Left SR party rapidly disintegrated. Those who had connections with the middle and poor peasantry split off into independent groups which before long joined the Bolsheviks; the rest openly went over to the counter-revolution. The Left SR party ceased to exist.

The Congress of Soviets resumed its business on July 9. The government made its report on recent events and the Congress approved all the measures taken to crush the rebellion. The Left SRs were expelled from the Soviets by a unanimous vote.

On July 10 the Congress ratified the Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, an- nouncing to the world that the Republic of Soviets was firmly rooted and unassailable and was moving confi- dently towards socialism.

Lenin, Sverdlov, Lunacharsky, Petrovsky, Krylenko and other CC members and commissars gave reports about the Congress to mass meetings on July 12, which was a Friday.

In fact, Friday was the usual day for special Party activities in Moscow in 1918 and 1919. Leading members of the Party and Government spoke to the workers in clubs and the larger factories and meeting halls. *Pravda* gave that week's theme on Tuesday or Wednesday, and announced the venues and the speakers, but never specified who was to speak where: that was usually decided by the Moscow Party Committee and the CEC Propaganda Section. The CC Secretariat also had a role in assigning speakers, and I often used to phone Lenin to let him know where he would be speaking on the coming Friday. He never said that he was too busy, and he never missed a meeting or arrived late.

I sometimes accompanied him and remember his animated conversation with the workers before and after the meeting, his fervent contributions to the business in hand.

Two Fridays in the middle of September are particularly memorable. Lenin had been wounded; he was still not completely well and had not yet returned to work. The Central Committee and the government were drawing their strength from constant contact with the working class and the people as a whole, and on September 13 and 20 the meetings were devoted to reports from the people's commissars. In various parts of the city Sverdlov, Lunacharsky, Tsyurupa, Chicherin, Petrovsky, Sereda, Krylenko and Podbelsky rendered their accounts to the workers.

### **AUGUST 30, 1918**

It began like any other day. The CC Secretariat was full of callers; there was lots to do. The telephone rang at about midday. I picked it up; it was Sverdlov.

"News from Petrograd. Uritsky's been killed. Dzerzhinsky's on his way there..."

Nothing had changed, but Uritsky was gone. That

ardent revolutionary, to whom the revolution, the Soviet state, owed so much, was gone. First Volodarsky, then Uritsky...

It was a Friday, the day for Party meetings all over Moscow. Lenin was to speak in the Basmany district and at the Michelson factory in Zamoskvorechie. Sverdlov was expected in the Lefortovo district, at the Vvedensky People's House. The topic was: "Two kinds of power: the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."

Towards evening I phoned Sverdlov to ask if the meetings had been cancelled. He was surprised — were we going to hide, let that bourgeois filth frighten us? Of course not! The meetings had not been cancelled — Uritsky would have his due.

I had to go to the country that evening, to see the children who were staying in Kuntsevo. At the end of the day, when I had done my most pressing work, I left, taking some food with me. Sverdlov had promised to join us later that night.

I had hardly arrived when he phoned. His voice was almost unrecognizable; it had lost its habitually calm tone and was full of anxiety.

"Lenin's wounded... It's serious..."

That was all. He gave no more details, told me not to expect him, to bring the children back to Moscow the following day — and hung up.

After a sleepless night we set out for Moscow when it was barely light. The Kremlin had an odd watchful look. It was all the same as the day before, the same as ever, and yet different. There were the usual guards on the gates, but they were abnormally stern, their faces troubled and their hands unusually tense on their rifles. They were astonishingly punctilious in checking our passes.

As always there were a few people up at that early hour, but they all seemed to be in a hurry. A morose,

anxious silence hung over the Kremlin.

Our flat was deserted; Sverdlov's bed had not been slept in. He had spent the night close to Lenin, either in Lenin's flat or in his office, "perched uncomfortably on a chair," as Nadezhda Krupskaya later said.

I went to Sverdlov's office during the day on urgent Secretariat business and found him there. He briefly gave me the details of this monstrous crime. Lenin's condition was serious, but not beyond hope. He did not stop repeating "serious but not beyond hope" until the crisis was past and Lenin began to improve.

Neither then nor at any time afterwards did I see the slightest hint of irresolution or nervousness in Sverdlov. He seemed even more steadfast and composed than usual. Krupskaya, who had returned unsuspecting from a meeting to find that Lenin had been brought home wounded, wrote:

"Our flat was full of people I didn't know and there were unfamiliar coats on the rack. It was strange to see the door wide open. Sverdlov was standing by the coat rack with a serious and determined look on his face... 'What's going to happen now?' I muttered. He replied, 'I've agreed it all with Lenin.'"

Sverdlov accepted as a matter of course the great burden of responsibility that fell to him; immediately after the attack it was particularly heavy, because many CC members were out of Moscow at the time. Along with his full-time work for the CC and CEC he now had to make fundamental Sovnarkom decisions and chair a number of its meetings. According to Lidia Fotieva he spent two or three hours every day in the Sovnarkom offices, working at Lenin's desk.

He usually slept in his office and rarely came home. When he did it was only for a few hours and he was so exhausted that I was afraid for him. But he would have a short sleep and in the morning be cheerful and full of energy again. He mentioned several times how glad he

was that he had always been involved with the Sovnarkom. His job was easier because he was up to date on everything — though he added: “But it’s hard, impossibly hard without Lenin.”

At a CEC meeting on September 2 he said:

“Every one of you did your revolutionary training, worked and matured under Comrade Lenin’s guidance. And you know that no one could ever take his place.”

The news of the attack was telephoned to Sverdlov when he came back from his meeting. He rushed to Lenin’s flat to find Vera Bonch-Bruevich, the first doctor on the spot, and Lenin’s sister Maria doing all they could. Two professors, Rozanov and Mints, came later, followed by Krupskaya. Sverdlov contacted Avanesov, Petrovsky and Kursky; they went together to the Cheka offices, to see Kaplan, the would-be assassin. Sverdlov enquired into the course of the investigations, and assigned Petrovsky and Kursky to begin questioning her.

On the same evening he sent out an appeal from the CEC to the working people of Russia:

“Some hours ago there was a villainous attempt on the life of Comrade Lenin... The working class will react to such crimes against its leaders by a closer consolidation of its forces, and will respond with merciless mass terror against all enemies of the revolution.

“Comrades! Remember that the safety of your leaders is in your hands. By closing your ranks yet further you will deal bourgeois supremacy a decisive and mortal blow.

“Be calm! Be organized! Stand firm at your post! Close ranks!

“Yakov Sverdlov,  
Chairman,  
All-Russia Central Executive Committee.”

Thousands of telegrams, resolutions and statements sped to the Kremlin from every part of the country, from abroad, from the fronts, the factories and the country-



side. At meetings in Moscow, Petrograd, Tula, Nizhni Novgorod, Ivanovo, in hundreds of towns and thousands of villages throughout our boundless land, the workers and peasants poured out their scorn and hatred for the enemies of the working class. The communists closed ranks.

Before long Lenin's strong constitution overcame his grave injury. He returned to work towards the middle of September, but too soon: he fell ill again and his doctors insisted that he go to the country for an extended convalescence.

Sverdlov commissioned Pavel Malkov to search the outskirts of Moscow for a place that could quickly be got ready for Lenin. Malkov looked carefully at several of the many detached houses that had recently been vacated in the area. Following Sverdlov's instructions to pick a house in good condition with an extensive garden, or preferably a park, but not so large or sumptuous that Lenin would turn it down, Malkov finally chose an estate in Gorki. Sverdlov approved it and asked for it to be put in order as quickly as possible, warning Malkov not to make Lenin's whereabouts known to everyone.

The work only took a few days. After Sverdlov had checked that nothing more was needed, Lenin and Krupskaya moved in.

Sverdlov kept Lenin in touch by writing notes on issues of importance and sending him the most vital documents, and in fact spent as much time at Gorki as he had in Lenin's Moscow flat. He sometimes took the children with him, Vera more often than Andrei; Lenin was fond of her. In early October we heard of the revolutionary events in Germany. Though his doctors disapproved, Lenin wanted to return to Moscow, if only for a few days. On October 1, 1918 he wrote to Sverdlov:

"Events are accelerating at such a rate in Germany that we could be left behind. *Tomorrow* you must arrange

a joint meeting of:

the CEC

the Moscow Soviet

the district Soviets

the trade unions and so on and so forth...

“Set it for 2 p.m. on Wednesday... give me a quarter of an hour for the introductory remarks. I’ll leave immediately after that. Send a car for me tomorrow morning (but phone me and just say ‘Agreed’).

“Greetings,  
Lenin.”

The meeting was held as Lenin had asked, though one day later but he was not there because, as Krupskaya explained, “they would not agree to his going to Moscow however much he insisted — they were taking great care of his health. The meeting was set for October 3, a Thursday. The previous day Lenin had written a letter which was read out at the meeting, and a decision was taken on the lines that he had indicated...

“He knew that no car would come for him, but all the same he waited by the side of the road...”

This was one of the rare cases when Sverdlov went against what Lenin wanted. For him Lenin’s wish was law and his authority absolute; from the beginning of his revolutionary career until the day he died, Sverdlov followed Lenin and learned from him. They met in April 1917, and as their relationship grew, Sverdlov’s admiration for Lenin came to be coupled with love for him as a friend and comrade. At the Sixth Congress of Soviets, summing up the past year, Sverdlov said:

“You all understand that for every one of us without exception the name of our leader, Comrade Lenin, is an essential part of the revolution and our involvement in it.”

And Lenin kept a close eye on Sverdlov, appreciated him more and more, and counted on his political insight and experience.

I think I actually understood Lenin's attitude to Sverdlov in 1917. I was in Smolny one day in late October of that year, and came upon Lenin walking down a corridor with Krupskaya and talking in a low tone. He looked tired, preoccupied and gloomy. It was the first time he had seen me since 1906, at the Fourth Party Congress, and of course did not recognize me; we had not even spoken then and many years had passed. But I had met Krupskaya several times.

I moved to one side and nodded to them from a distance, but Krupskaya came up to say hello. Lenin stood and waited; it was obvious that he was pressed for time and not pleased by this unexpected delay.

"Don't you know who this is?" Krupskaya asked him.

He stared at me, screwing up his eyes slightly, as I went closer.

"You know, it's Klavdiya Novgorodtseva, the head of *Priboi*, Sverdlov's wife."

Lenin changed instantly. The lines on his high forehead smoothed out, a kindly smile lit up his face and his eyes began to sparkle with wonderful warmth and good humour. We shook hands cordially and exchanged a few words before they had to go.

Later I often saw Lenin and Sverdlov together, sometimes sat in on their discussions and often heard news of Lenin from Sverdlov. I became increasingly convinced that they were like-minded people. It took literally only a word or two for them to understand each other. Sverdlov instantly grasped and accepted without question Lenin's every idea and every instruction, not only because he had unbounded faith in his wisdom and perception but also because they had identical views.

Lenin would often invite Sverdlov to join him when he talked to Party members or received visitors, and would sometimes ask Sverdlov to see them in his stead. Lenin once received a letter from Vladimirov, who at

that time shared responsibility for food deliveries. He wanted to go south to organize supplies for the army. Lenin replied: "Why did you not discuss this with Sverdlov, as we agreed?" Another time a note came to Lenin during a Sovnarkom meeting, pressing for a decree to send Sovnarkom officials to the front. Lenin wrote back: "What decree? I thought we'd announce it and have done. Sverdlov is picking them out."

Many a time Lenin telephoned to give Sverdlov an instruction, only to hear the calm reply, "It's on," meaning that what Lenin had in mind had already been acted on.

There was a meeting in the Hall of Columns at the Trade Union House in the autumn of 1918. Sverdlov and I often went to meetings together but this time he had phoned to say that he would be delayed and I should go alone. I arrived before the meeting began to find Lenin in the foyer surrounded by people, insisting earnestly that the text of the Soviet Constitution be engraved on the Obelisk of Freedom which had recently been erected across from the Moscow Soviet building. Just then Sverdlov came in and Lenin asked for his opinion.

"Oh that!" he replied. "We can go after the meeting and see how it looks. It was done yesterday. It's all on hand."

Lenin burst out laughing: "Well, of course! Sverdlov's always got everything on hand."

## **THE DAILY ROUND**

The days went by. There was never a dull moment; we were kept permanently busy, with duties great and small.

In the autumn of 1918 representatives of the younger generation began to gather in Moscow and on October 29 the First All-Russia Congress of Young Workers' and Peasants' Unions opened. This historic Congress

laid the foundations of the Russian Young Communist League, the famous Komsomol.

The Congress sent a delegation to Lenin, who received them with warmth and affection, discussed the aims of the Komsomol with them in detail and then sent them to Sverdlov with a note asking him to give them lunch in the Sovnarkom canteen. Sverdlov was deeply impressed by them. "What remarkable people those Komsomol organizers were," he said later. "They understood their duties, they had energy and enthusiasm, breadth of vision, and foresight."

One of the delegation members, Alexander Bezymensky, later gave a full account of those meetings:

"After we had talked over our conversation with Lenin," he wrote, "we went to Comrade Sverdlov. We had a long discussion about the Komsomol structure, its Central Committee and provincial and district committees. Sverdlov, an organizational expert, gave us a lot of advice and detailed instructions and helped us plan the development of Komsomol activity in various spheres. He shared our dreams, criticized some of our ideas.

"As our talk came to an end, our spokesman brought out Lenin's note. Sverdlov gave a broad smile, called someone in and asked him to bring some meal tickets. He put the note in a drawer and gave us the tickets...

"Sverdlov noticed as he was saying goodbye that we were holding back, not wanting to leave.

"Come on, comrades, you've not finished — out with it!" he said.

"One of us stepped forward: 'Comrade Sverdlov, we have a great favour to ask... Give us Lenin's note, please. That note will tell generations of Soviet youth more about Lenin than hundreds of articles.'"

On November 6, 1918 the Sixth (Extraordinary) All-Russia Congress of Soviets opened in Moscow. It was special because it met exactly a year after the October

Revolution, to review the Soviet state's first year. In his inaugural address Sverdlov said:

“It is exactly a year since the Congress of Soviets which transferred power to the workers and peasants opened, as guns roared in the streets... While today we can confidently announce that throughout the length and breadth of Russia, Soviet power stands steadfast and invincible.”

The Sixth Congress was also remarkable in that it was almost entirely Bolshevik, whereas at least a third of the delegates at all previous congresses, ever since the Second, had been Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and suchlike. There were some 1,300 delegates at the Sixth Congress: about 1,250 were Bolsheviks and the rest belonged to other parties or no party at all.

There was a heightened atmosphere, a rare feeling of harmony. The motion to elect Lenin as Honorary Chairman was met with an ovation, but when Lenin took the stand to report on the international situation, the applause was enough to bring the house down. It was hard to believe that the Bolshoi Theatre could stand it!

But that was not all; at the height of the proceedings, news of the German Revolution came. When Sverdlov announced that Kaiser Wilhelm had been dethroned, that power had passed to the workers, sailors and soldiers in Hamburg, that mass meetings and demonstrations were taking place all over Germany, the thunderous ovations began afresh and the rafters of the theatre rang with prolonged, deep-throated cheers. From far and near, workers, soldiers and peasants sent letters and telegrams with messages of support for the Sixth Congress and solidarity with the German Revolution, and sincere greetings to Lenin and Karl Liebknecht.

The German Revolution ended the occupation of Soviet territory. On November 13, 1918 the CEC annulled the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as the German army raced westward, and the peoples of the Ukraine, Byelo-

russia and the Baltic began to cast off the German yoke. The CEC passed resolutions recognizing the independent Soviet republics of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Peteris Stučka was beside himself with joy. A Bolshevik of the old school, a leading Latvian Communist, prominent in our Party and government, Stučka was devoted to his long-suffering land, to the hard-working, courageous, wonderful people of Latvia, and ached to return to Riga, his country's capital. Though German troops still had the upper hand there, the Latvian Bolsheviks, firm in their belief that liberation was coming, had decided to convene the First All-Latvia Congress of Soviets in Riga in January 1919.

Stučka, beaming with delight, invited Sverdlov, on behalf of the Latvian government and working people, to open the Congress. Sverdlov listened carefully, hesitated for a moment, and then said with a smile:

“I am delighted to accept, but on one condition — I will go only if the workers of Latvia liberate their capital, and the Congress is held in a free city.”

Riga was liberated on January 3, 1919 and the All-Latvia Congress began on schedule. Sverdlov left for Riga in an enthusiastic mood; no one could know then how short-lived Soviet power in Latvia would be or how long it would be after that before the Latvian people could be welcomed back into the Soviet family. No one could know, either, that Sverdlov would not live to see that reunion, that this was to be one of his last trips. In the joyful bustle at the station when we saw Sverdlov off nothing could have been further from our minds.

Sverdlov was met in Riga by Stučka, President of the Soviet government of Latvia, and others, and on January 13 he spoke to the Congress as he had promised.

He talked about the tremendous contribution that the workers of Latvia had made to the freedom and independence of Soviet Russia. He reminded them of the CEC decision to recognize Latvia's independence; he

was firmly convinced that this, rather than weakening the ties of friendship between the peoples of the two countries, would strengthen them.

On the same evening he attended a meeting of the government. F.V. Linde, who was then the Latvian People's Commissar of Justice, remembered how Sverdlov "went into the tiniest details of our work, and was especially interested in the structure of our highest republican government body, which was different from that in the RSFSR. He jotted down an outline in pencil and had me explain in detail the functions of all the people's commissariats and their inter-relationships, and how decisions were taken in the government... At that time the government met in the Knights' House, where the Livonian nobility used to gather, and which is now used by the Presidium of the Latvian Supreme Soviet. The walls of the assembly hall were bright with enamelled coats of arms. Sverdlov was curious, and asked Stučka about the baronial families who had borne the crests. Neither Stučka nor anyone else present knew a thing about heraldry, so he jokingly promised Sverdlov that he would catch the barons and send them to Moscow with their crests to clarify the situation."

Sverdlov returned to Moscow, but did not stay long; at the end of January he went to Minsk to attend a meeting of the Central Bureau of the Byelorussian Communist Party.

On February 2, 1919 Alexander Myasnikov opened the First Byelorussian Congress of Soviets in Minsk. Sverdlov, as Chairman of the CEC, was first to speak; he stepped to the rostrum amid prolonged applause.

"The Russian proletariat," he declared, "will never forget that you bore the first onslaughts of the German imperialists, preventing them from penetrating further into our country."

Sverdlov went from Minsk to Vilno, then returned to Moscow. At the end of February, he left for Kharkov,



where the Third Congress of the Ukrainian Communist Party and the Third All-Ukraine Congress of Soviets were meeting. The Party Congress began on March 1; Sverdlov welcomed the delegates on behalf of the Russian Communist Party Central Committee. He told them that a few months previously he had played a similar role at the Second Ukrainian Party Congress, which had been held in Moscow because the Ukrainian Communist Party was still an underground organization. Now the Ukraine's ruling party, it was holding a free and legal congress in the republican capital.

The Russian Communist Party, he said, would remain united no matter how many independent national republics sprang up within the former Russian Empire. "There is no doubt in our minds," he went on, "that our Party, the Russian Communist Party, will be forever indivisible."

He spoke four times in all, urging the Ukrainian Bolsheviks to unity and solidarity, for they were going through a difficult time with a bitter inner-Party feud, which often owed less to principle than to irrelevant personal conflicts. It was fanned by Pyatakov, one of the former "Left Communist" leaders who led the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee.

Sverdlov's speech on the UCP Central Committee report was detailed, and highly critical of those who were trying to jeopardize the unity of the Ukrainian Bolsheviks.

"I simply cannot understand," he told them, "how those who have spoken to this Congress are capable of hurling such grave and unconsidered accusations at each other... We should view each other above all as comrades who have long been in the service of the same Party.

"We have here two groups, locked in fierce combat... Neither has the right to forget that they are members of one Party, and that the Central Committee that will be

elected by a majority decision today should unite all the Party workers in the Ukraine, should accept the general directives of the Russian Communist Party Central Committee and put them into practice here... Only with a strong Party organization can you cope with the massive dislocation that we see on all sides.”

The Third All-Ukraine Congress of Soviets opened as the Party Congress closed. Sverdlov did not return to Moscow until it was over. He was never to leave Moscow again...

## IN CONCLUSION

Sverdlov’s life was cut short unexpectedly, when he was busier than ever before, and far from the prime of his life. He was not even 34.

His untimely death was a terrible blow to the working class, to the Communist Party, to his relatives, to his hundreds of comrades, his thousands of fellow campaigners.

It was a hard loss, too, for the Bolsheviks who had known Sverdlov in the underground, who had begun with him the magnificent task of constructing socialism in the early years of Soviet power. It was a hard loss for Lenin.

Sverdlov’s death meant more to Lenin than parting with a valued and active member of the Party and government. In Sverdlov he lost, above all, a staunch confederate and helper, a kindred spirit, a friend... At a special CEC memorial meeting on March 18, 1919, he said:

“We shall never be able to replace this man who had cultivated such an exceptional organizing talent, if by replacement we mean finding one man, one comrade, with all these qualities.”<sup>1</sup>

Every word that Lenin said about Sverdlov, every

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p. 93.

one of the many speeches in which he mentioned his name, was charged with love and profound sorrow.

“To find a person who could take the place of Comrade Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov in full,” Lenin told the CEC when they were seeking a new Chairman, “is an exceedingly difficult task, for it is next to impossible for any one man to be at once a leading Party worker, moreover one who knows the history of the Party, and an excellent judge of people capable of choosing leading functionaries for the Soviets. It would be impossible to expect any one comrade to assume all the functions that Comrade Sverdlov took care of alone...”<sup>1</sup>

On March 16, 1920, the first anniversary of Sverdlov’s death, Lenin spoke at a memorial meeting in the Bolshoi Theatre. On March 29, 1920, at the Ninth Party Congress, he said:

“Our Party has now been through its first year without Y.M. Sverdlov, and our loss was bound to tell on the whole organization of the Central Committee. No one has been able to combine organizational and political work in one person so successfully as Comrade Sverdlov...”<sup>2</sup>

Sverdlov is dead but his memory remains forever in the hearts of Bolsheviks, of working people the world over.

Until about November 1919 the Central Committee Organization Bureau used to meet in our flat, in Sverdlov’s study. I often took the minutes of those meetings and remember how during their discussions the members would wonder aloud what Sverdlov would have thought about the issue in hand, and try to decide it as he would have done.

Sverdlov is dead. Comrade Andrei has left his post. But hundreds have risen to take his place in the ranks.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 30, p. 443.

In Lenin's words:

“The memory of Comrade Yakov Sverdlov will serve not only as a permanent symbol of the revolutionary's devotion to his cause and as the model of how to combine a practical sober mind, practical skill, close contact with the masses and ability to guide them; it is also a pledge that ever-growing numbers of proletarians, guided by these examples, will march forward to the complete victory of the world communist revolution.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, p. 94.





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