Despite the quantity of historical literature which the February Revolution of 1917 has occasioned, scholars have written relatively little about the role of Russian political Masonry in the destruction of the monarchy, the transfer of power to the Provisional Government, and the functioning of that government. This neglect is due in part to the paucity of sources on the political Masonic organization, a highly conspiratorial organization which cut across party lines to unite such prominent political figures as the Octoberist A. I. Guchkov, the Progressists A. I. Kononov and Savva Morozov, the Kadets N. V. Nekrasov and M. I. Tereshchenko, the Trudovik A. F. Kerenskii, the Socialist Revolutionary B. V. Savinkov, the Mensheviks N. S. Chkheidze and M. I. Skobelev, and the Bolshevik I. I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, as well as influential non-party people like S. A. Kotliarevskii, E. D. Kuskova, and S. N. Prokopovich. In order for political Masonry to pursue its goal of establishing "a democracy based on broad social reforms and on a federal state order," secrecy was essential. Hence the organization kept no written records or membership lists and its members were bound by an oath of silence. This silence was maintained even after many Masons had left Russia following the Bolshevik seizure of power: those who broke their silence did so only briefly and with considerable reticence.

A second reason for the neglect of political Masonry and its involvement in the February Revolution and Provisional Government is that for many historians the subject of political Masonry conjures up images of zhidomasonstvo, that myth of a Jewish-Masonic world conspiracy so popular with the Black Hundreds and revitalized by right-wing émigré circles after the 1917 revolutions. Because of the persistence of this pernicious and abhor-

2. Ibid., p. 88.
ent myth, many historians have simply failed to take the matter of Russian political Masonry seriously, considering it to be outside the province of genuine scholarship.

The question of a political Masonic role in the February Revolution and in the Provisional Government was not raised in the historiography until more than a decade after 1917. In a series of articles entitled “Under the Aegis of Conspiracies,” published in 1930, the émigré scholar and former Popular Socialist S. P. Mel’gunov made the first attempt to penetrate the secrecy surrounding the Russian political Masonic organization and its part in the destruction of the monarchy and the transfer of power to the Provisional Government. Although his efforts to elicit information from former Masons were unsuccessful. Mel’gunov had at his disposal sufficient indirect evidence (including written and oral testimony from a number of contemporaries, unpublished police files, and his own recollections) to enable him to offer some hypotheses about the organization’s involvement in the February Revolution.

According to Mel’gunov, who at one time had been solicited for membership in political Masonry, that conspiratorial organization emerged sometime during 1915, having grown out of, but with no “organic relation” to, an earlier Russian Freemasonry in existence in the years immediately after the 1905 Revolution. Motivated by a desire to create a government more responsive to the people, and thus forestall a popular uprising in wartime, the Masons participated in oppositional activity in the State Duma and were probably behind efforts to establish the anti-government Committee of Public Safety (Komitet narodnogo spaseniiia) in the summer of 1915. Similarly, they were “the connecting link, as it were, between the separate groups of ‘conspirators’—that behind-the-scenes director’s baton” in the schemes for a palace coup conceived by Guchkov and Prince G. E. L’vov in 1916. Mel’gunov, however, stops short of suggesting that the political Masonic organization attempted to provoke revolution, and he assigns it no responsibility for the eventual destruction of the monarchy. In his view, the February Revolution was the result of a spontaneous popular uprising which took everyone, including the Masons, completely by surprise, and he rejects

4. Mel’gunov’s articles, “Pod egidoi zagovorov,” were published irregularly in the New York daily Za svobodu between August and December 1930. They were republished almost immediately with only minor revisions as Na putiakh k dvortsovomu perevorotu. Zagovory pered revoliutsii 1917 goda (Paris: Knizhnoe delo “Rodnik,” 1931). All subsequent references are to the more accessible Na putiakh.
5. Mel’gunov, Na putiakh, pp. 182, 185-86.