The "Class- Tragedy" of Izhevsk:  Working-Class Opposition to Bolshevism in 1918

The historiography of the Russian Civil War is replete with conflicting interpretations of many issues and events. On one point, however, Soviet and non-Soviet historians generally agree. Both assume that the Russian working class, some three and one-half million strong at the time of the February Revolution, gave the Bolsheviks unstinting support and were the decisive factor in the success of the revolutionary movement. Students of the Russian Revolution have tended to overlook the fact that industrial workers revolted against Bolshevik rule in a number of provincial cities. The most significant working-class revolt against Lenin's regime took place in the city of Izhevsk and quickly spread to neighboring towns in the central Urals. Thousands of workers in Izhevsk not only refused to support the Bolsheviks but fought against them tenaciously for three years, almost the entire span of the Russian Civil War.1

Izhevsk, located in Viatka guberniia, in the valley of the Kama, the main tributary of the Volga, had a population of 100,000 in 1918. Since the construction of the Izhevsk Gun Works and Steel Foundry in 1762, Izhevsk had been one of the main suppliers of rifles to the imperial army. The most salient feature of the city, however, was not the rifles but the men who were responsible for their production. They were perhaps the highest paid factory workers in the Russian Empire and constituted a veritable working-class aristocracy.2 Their privileged economic position resulted from the fact that the Chief Artillery Office, which administered the Izhevsk factories, deemed them essential to state security and therefore took measures to guarantee the existence of a stable pool of manpower.

The Izhevsk workers, or the Izhevtsy as they were known, were unique in other ways. In contrast to factory workers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, who lived in tenements and hovels reminiscent of London and Paris in the worst years of the industrial revolution, the Izhevtsy resided in their own wooden homes, many of which were surrounded by garden plots which furnished the family with vegetables and fruit.3 There were even a few

1. Next to Izhevsk, the most important anti-Bolshevik working-class revolts occurred in 1918 in Jaroslavl' and Ashkhabad. In neither case did the number of insurgents exceed the number of participants in the Izhevsk revolt. Moreover, the Jaroslavl' revolt was terminated in less than two weeks. In Ashkhabad the revolt lasted longer than the one in Izhevsk, but in contrast to the Izhevsk rebellion, which was devoid of foreign support, the Ashkhabad workers were assisted by British soldiers for the duration of their conflict with Bolshevism.


An important non-Soviet source used in the preparation of this article also speaks of the affluent Izhevsk working class: D. I. Fedichkin, "Izhevskoe vosstanie" (Unpublished manuscript in the Hoover Institute on War and Peace), pp. 2-3.

3. Fedichkin, loc. cit., p. 2; Makarov, pp. 22-23; and Sapozhnikov, loc. cit., p. 5.
working-class families that were fortunate enough to possess their own livestock.4

This relatively high standard of living probably explains the failure of the Izhevsk workers to manifest any signs of working-class militancy and solidarity in either the revolutionary years of 1905-1906 or during the period of the industrial and labor awakening in 1911-1914. The Lena Gold Field massacre, for example, appears to have gone unnoticed by the Izhevsk workers.5 At least one Bolshevik historian has argued that the relatively high standard of living of the Izhevsk workers precluded the Social Democrats, whether Mensheviks or Bolsheviks, from developing any substantial support in Izhevsk.6 A more likely reason was that a sizeable number of workers were of peasant origin and still retained close links with the countryside, where the Socialist Revolutionaries exercised a virtual political monopoly. Whatever the reason, in the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the Social Democrats ran a distant second to the SR's in the competition for working-class support in the city.7

The advent of war did not dramatically alter the attitudes of the Izhevsk labor force. The wartime strikes and other signs of labor unrest throughout the empire did not appear in Izhevsk. The weak Social Democratic organization, harassed by the police after 1914, experienced a precipitous membership decline which left the organization with less than thirty members by 1916. Only a handful considered themselves to be Bolsheviks.8

This situation began to change in late 1916 and early 1917 as the government administrators of Izhevsk, seeking to boost productivity, introduced military discipline into the factories and lengthened the workday.9 At the same time, the Izhevsky, together with the rest of the population, were caught in an inflationary squeeze which led to a decline in real wages.10 The result was discontent culminating in a mass strike in early February, 1917.11

A transformation of the Izhevsk labor force contributed to the strike action. In an attempt to expand production the government increased the number of factory workers from approximately 20,000 to more than 35,000, with 8,447 of the new workers coming from Petrograd and Moscow as well as from military units in other parts of Russia.12 It is quite likely that there existed among these new laborers a core of class-conscious proletarians capable of providing revolutionary leadership under the right circumstances. The remainder of the increased work force consisted of peasants from Viatka guberniia who

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4. Chursin, p. 3; Fedichkin, loc. cit., p. 2; Makarov, p. 21; and Sapozhnikov, loc. cit., p. 5.
6. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
8. Makarov, p. 27.
9. D. S. Korotkov, Fevral'skaia zabastovka rabochikh izhevskikh zavodov (Izhevsk, 1927), p. 7, notes that the workday was increased from nine-and-a-half to thirteen hours. Bystrova, p. 4, contends that for many workers in Viatka guberniia a fourteen- to sixteen-hour workday was the norm during the war.
10. Korotkov, p. 9. For a detailed analysis of the rise in the price of essential food items in Izhevsk between July 1, 1914, and March 1, 1917, see Bystrova, pp. 4, 72.
11. For dates in 1917 I have used the Old Style calendar. Events taking place in 1918 are dated according to the Gregorian or New Style calendar since both Soviet and non-Soviet sources employed this system in writing about the Izhevsk rebellion.