Revolutionary Russia’s Success Through Lawlessness

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Introduction:

If war is considered to be the midwife of revolution, then crime is certainly the irresponsible father who helped create that accident of a child in the first place. During the revolutionary era in Russia, crime was about as common and prevalent as one might expect in a society that has been oppressed for a long while. Somewhat surprisingly, Russia under Tsar Nicholas Romanov II actually had one of the lowest execution rates in the world, that is, until the revolution of 1905-1907.¹ One can also draw a correlation between that event, and the crime rate of the entire empire under Nicholas II dramatically increasing by 43 percent, from 1899-1908. In a short time span of three years, the murder rate doubled (and then some), from 2,244 dead in 1904, to 4,857 in 1907, and indictment for theft increased from just over 2,000 in 1900 to 5,777 in just thirteen years.

Some questions that I’ll aim to answer are: how did the crime rates of 1917-1922 differ from the crime rates of Nicholas II’s reign? How did the militias put in place by the government as a police system lead to even more violence and destruction? And, how did the Bolsheviks use crime and the crime and punishment system to their advantage? Over the course of this paper, it will become evident that crime and revolution have a sort of two-way parasitic relationship, in that revolution needs the laws of the old establishment to be ignored, and crime during a revolution thrives off of the chaos of the revolution.

Late Imperial Russian Legal Reforms, and Law Enforcement:

Though the people of Russia had plenty of reasons to revolt against the Imperialist system, there were specific areas that were seeing great improvement in the late Imperialist era. Like the rest of the European world in the 19th century following the Napoleonic code, the Russian empire sought the reform of its crime and punishment systems. Starting somewhere in the late 1800s, the Russian juridical systems started adopting new ideas pertaining to the rights of the accused that first came to be in the Enlightenment period. For example, the idea that one can have individual states of criminality (lichnye sostoyaniya prestupnosti), and therefore can be curable, became widely accepted by the Russian juridical thinkers of the 1880s. Many Russian legal thinkers even accepted the idea of the reformation and reintroduction of an offender to society, and that punishment was not necessarily a tool for the recovery of a criminal in custody, and ‘criminal politicians’ started adopting the idea of “lichnost” or the autonomous value of a person.

The reforms also aimed to make the punishment of criminals more humane, because particular offenses had rather draconian punishments that did not exactly fit the crime. Under these reforms, the legal minds devised two classifications of offenses, “criminal,” which had punishments like exile, and execution and “corrective,” which had lighter punishments of exile, only up to four years, and regular old imprisonment. Interestingly, the rate of criminal sentences reduced from 13 percent to 8.8 percent in

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3 Ibid., 190.
just twenty years in 1894.\(^4\) However the Enlightenment ideals being passed on through the Imperialist judicial system may have been ideal, the wages of law enforcement officials seemed to be exactly the opposite. In fact, those attempts to “normalize” or make the punishment more consistent seemed to be all in vain, seeing as how when it came to political crime, punishment and treatment of revolutionaries was unpredictable, especially when compared to traditional criminals. For example Aleksandr Kornilov stated that a murderer would receive a more just and fair trial for his crimes than the trial he was receiving for writing an appeal to protest the treatment of student demonstrators in March 1901.\(^5\)

Russian officials were encouraged to practice what was known as “feeding” in the medieval times, i.e. they were expected to solicit bribes so they were able to make a living despite their mediocre at best salaries. For example, Moscow’s chief of police from 1905-08 became notorious for the extortion of offenders.\(^6\) Perhaps not all police officers were comfortable taking bribes, because of the increasing number of vacancies in police positions went from 447 in the city of St. Petersburg in 1912, and 937 vacancies two years later.\(^7\) To help put this in perspective, in 1913 St. Petersburg had 113 criminal investigators. That’s as a major European city, at that same exact time, the city of Paris had 1,200.\(^8\)


\(^7\) Hasegawa, *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution*, 111.

\(^8\) Ibid., 114.
As one can imagine, rising tensions and the overall lack of officials meant to keep the peace was not helpful for a nation on the brink of revolution. With revolution, political crime comes naturally, seeing as how the easiest, and most effective way to distance oneself from a ruler you’re not particularly fond of, is by breaking rules put in place by that ruler. For example from 1904 to 1913, the number of political crimes carried out from citizens went from nothing, all the way up to over 35,000.\(^9\)

**The Militia and Mob Vigilantism:**

After Nicholas II abdicated the throne in 1917, the biggest job that the new Provisional Government had on their hands, arguably was creating a new and effective police force, seeing as how the Imperial police force was not very effective, and somewhat feeble compared to other European police forces. The Provisional Government’s answer to this was to appoint militias to be the governing force for keeping the peace. The militia police force came to be as the underdog, which can be expected, seeing as how they were appointed in the middle of a revolution as if the Provisional Government said “alright, you guys figure it out.” For example, the city of Smolensk reported nearly two and a half times more crimes in 1917 versus the previous year of 1916.\(^10\)

As crime continued to rise during the months of 1917, the public perception of the militias declined accordingly. Along with their reputation for having the inability to perform the tasks of their own jobs, the militia largely became known for being public

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drunks, often drinking on the job. Not only that, but militiamen often failed to report for duty. When it came time for inspection of militia posts, the commissars often found the posts to be deserted. When the militiamen were at their posts, their response time to a commissar’s whistle was often lacking in haste, and sometimes the whistle was met with no response from the men in the post.\textsuperscript{11} As the state of the militia gradually self destructed, the number of “mob justice” events increased, with their sights often aimed directly at the failing militiamen. In fact, in August of 1917, almost every single mob justice event was aimed towards members of the militia.\textsuperscript{12}

Following the July Days, the Provisional Government’s response was a very “seemed to be a good idea at the time,” moment in having the soldiers of the Russian military assist the failing city and worker’s militias. In reality, the soldiers were absolutely not a better choice for peace keeping, as their behavior often mirrored the militias.\textsuperscript{13} The most blatant failure of the merger between the military and militias was the fact that soldiers often joined up in arms with the mobs of vigilantes, disarming off-duty soldiers during mob justice episodes.\textsuperscript{14}

With the militias out of their way, the mobs of vigilantes were now able to act as judge, jury, and executioner, and the fact that they ideologically fit in with the Bolshevik ideal of the people rising up from the bottom, they didn’t have to worry too much about anyone stopping them. One event in particular on June 9th 1917, a group of three pickpockets were caught red handed on a tram car. The mob decided to parade them

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 161-166.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 172.
on down to the commissariat, but somewhere along the way elected to beat the three men to death on a whim.\textsuperscript{15} As the days and months went on with the mobs acting as the bastardized keepers of the peace their actions only became more and more violent, with events or “trials” consisting of literally tearing offenders limb from limb, and throwing bodies in the icy rivers of Russia.\textsuperscript{16}

**Organized Crime:**

Despite all the chaos due to the revolution, the attitude towards any form of criminal activity in the revolutionary era was extremely negative. However, many career criminals braved the storm of possibly becoming the victims of mob justice. Organized crime worldwide is a concept that has pretty much always existed in various forms, and it certainly did not disappear during the russian revolution. Italian-American Mafia boss John Gotti supposedly once said “We Italians will kill you. But the Russians are crazy… they’ll kill your whole family.”\textsuperscript{17} During the reign of Nicholas II, specifically during the revolution of 1905-1907, the Imperial navy had to deal with “the Black Sea Pirates,” who notably raided the ship *Tsarevich Alexander* in 1907.\textsuperscript{18} Interestingly, Julius Martov accused Iosif Dzhugashvili (yes, that Iosif) of being a key member of the Black Sea Pirates, which led to a libel case in 1918, but I will elaborate on that case later.\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps the most benign form of professional crime was gangs of “hooligans,” consisting of teen boys aged thirteen through eighteen, whose primary focus was on

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 167-192
\textsuperscript{17} Robert L. Friedman “The Organizatsiya” *New Yorker Magazine*, 27, 44 (Nov. 4, 1994): 50-60, here at 54.
\textsuperscript{18} Galeotti, *The Vory: Russia’s Super Mafia*, 35.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 35.
pickpocketing and other forms of theft. Going up the ladder of organized shitty behavior, we have traditional organized crime. If we take a look back to Tsar Nicholas II’s reign, one could possibly argue that one of Nicholas II’s biggest blunders was placing a prohibition on alcoholic beverages during wartime. One could easily make the connection to the United States prohibition during the twenties, and how organized crime exploded. Similarly Russian gangsters took up the opportunity to make a little cash for getting the thirsty people their bottles of vodka. During that same prohibition while the militias were the police force, gang members infiltrated the militias, and used their inside information to smuggle alcohol into the city of Petrograd through underground markets.²⁰

**The Opportunistic Bolshevik Party:**

Criminal organizations aside, the biggest benefactor of criminal activity during the Russian Revolution was arguably the Bolshevik Party. One could very well argue that the Bolshevik Party operated similarly to an organized crime family. Propaganda used to control the masses after the Bolshevik takeover certainly aimed to paint Lenin as a hero of the party, disregarding his political party’s shady past similarly to the way Al Capone was seen by a portion of the American public in the twenties. Being a revolutionary party would naturally imply that they had some kind of disregard for rules put in place by the Imperial government. And similarly to any organized crime family, the Bolsheviks were very comfortable with those who opposed them “disappearing,” as evident by the Red Terror in 1918 or the murder of the entire Romanov family.

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The Bolsheviks often used illicit behavior to their advantage, for example, Stalin was a part of a couple bank heists that were used to help fund the party in its early days. Criminality was also somewhat celebrated within the party, Stalin, for example, originally had the pseudonym “Koba,” which was the name of a mythical outlaw/hero from his home country of Georgia. And Lenin himself was exiled to Siberia for some time as well, before spending seventeen years away from his Russian homeland.

Jumping forward to the heart of 1917 when the episodes of mob vigilantism were running rampant, anarchy had totally taken over the peacekeeping system in Russia. Lenin perhaps partially because he didn’t want to become the victim of senseless mob violence, but also because he was an opportunist who realized that the mobs patrolling the streets conveniently fit in with his ideology was all for the acts of violence. He celebrated the “spontaneous movements” as political expression, and rallied the armed insurrection which eventually led to the Bolshevik takeover.

Lenin essentially saw the literal state of anomie in the streets of cities like Petrograd and rode the wave of despair to the very top of the Russian political system. All he had to do was use his blessing of the violent acts as a verbal gasoline on the revolutionary fire that was already white hot. Though Lenin and the rest of the Bolshevik Party preached about the liberation of the working class, they were very much political conquistadors who sought total control of the new government following the fall of Tsar Nicholas II. Politically if an official’s ideas didn’t align with the Bolsheviks’ in even the slightest way, they were seen as a loose end that needed to be cut off.

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Because pretty much every establishment within the government was either in shambles, or in an easily manipulated infantile stage, it was very easy for the Bolsheviks to abuse their power within the new government, and personally attack their political opponents.

Because revolutions essentially cause a nation to hit the reset button on all of their government systems, the Russians had to create a new judicial system from scratch, similarly to their situation with law enforcement. Following the uproar of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks put revolutionary tribunals in place to judge anyone they deemed to be counter to the revolution, or guilty of any political crimes. And luckily for the Bolshevik Party, the tribunals were much more successful when it came to performing properly, unlike the aforementioned militias.

One trial carried out by the tribunal was the Purishkevich Affair. The Purishkevich affair started when an Ensign by the name of Zelinskii was caught by stealing blank government forms from the Petrograd military region by Bolshevik Party members. The Ensign claimed that he was stealing the forms on the behalf of Vladimir Mitrofanovich Purishkevich, who was not only an accomplice in the murder of Grigori Rasputin, but a monarchist, which would make him an enemy of the state in the eyes of the revolutionaries. Purishkevich was in fact a counter-revolutionary, and was plotting to carry out a revolt against the revolutionaries, and because of this, several properties connected to Purishkevich were searched, and several guns, blank documents similar to the ones Zelinskii tried to steal, and cyanide was found. However the actual “smoking

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“gun” was a letter to Cossack general Aleksei Maximovich Kaledin, discussing plans for armed support when Kaledin was supposed to arrive in the city of Petrograd, which in-turn led to numerous arrests. All in all, the most significant aspect of the Purishkevich affair was that it demonstrated an efficiency within the legal system that Russia was lacking very early on under the new government, and it painted the Bolsheviks in a positive light, because they were the ones who put the tribunals in place. However, the Purishkevich Affair did foreshadow the totalitarian nature of the U.S.S.R. that would follow in the coming years, because an active audience during the trial was totally removed, and evidence was tampered with as well.

Possibly one of the most significant trials of the revolutionary tribunals would be the trial of Julius Martov. Martov was the leader of the Bolshevik’s biggest political opponents, the Menshevik Party, and in 1908, on March 31, 1918, Martov accused Joseph Stalin of organizing robberies along with his aforementioned supposed ties to the Black Sea Pirates. Regardless of whether or not Joseph Stalin did in fact commit these supposed crimes, he could not risk damaging his public image. On April 5, 1918 Joseph Stalin accused Julius Martov of libel. Julius Martov most likely understood that the Soviet tribunals were the brain-child of the Bolsheviks, and knew he would never stand a chance in their court. As a result Martov motioned to have the case heard in a normal district people’s court. Martov’s reasoning for this was that the case was a standard libel case, but Stalin argued that the claims were politically charged, and

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24 Ibid., 1775.
25 Ibid., 1778.
26 Ibid., 1779-1782
therefore it was a political case. It did not matter that Stalin did in fact organize robberies, the fact that Martov was personally attacking a member of the Bolshevik party was seen as an attempt to undermine the brand new government. The tribunal unsurprisingly sided with Stalin and the Bolshevik party, and reiterated the points that were made in Joseph Stalin’s argument. The tribunal’s ruling was that Martov was guilty for his “criminal use of the press,” and undermining the government by insulting its authority over the Russian people.  

**Conclusion:**

In the general sense, Revolutionary Russia was a very volatile and chaotic setting in the world. Having Tsar Nicholas II as not only an oppressive leader, but one that overall lacked the proper decision making skills to be a strong leader, only fueled the revolutionary tensions. That’s not to say his government did not make strives to better their crime and punishment system, it’s just that those attempts were made much too late. As one would have expected, there was a lot of trial and error within the young Soviet government, the most notable error would be the militias, which were created in good faith, obviously, but performed very poorly in a time when crime was on the rise. The fact that those very same militias were infested with members of organized crime units, who used the intel they gained to their advantage, proved the militias to be even more disastrous. Desperate times call for desperate measures, as is evident by the episodes of mob vigilantism, which were a catalytic events, especially for the rise of the Bolshevik party under Vladimir Lenin. The fact is, Lenin had a keen eye, and

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27 Ibid., 1780.
understood how to manipulate the emotion of the Russian people to his advantage. Similarly, he and his party also knew how to use the reborn judicial systems to their advantage, as evident by the revolutionary tribunals. Had Lenin and the Bolsheviks not understood how to use both criminal acts and the system of crime and punishment to their advantage like a Mafia family, Russian history may have turned out very different.
Works Cited:


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