

The Russian Red Guards in 1917: A Profile*

Rex A. Wade

(Professor of History, University of Hawaii, U.S.A.)

Workers' armed bands formed at the factory played an extremely important role in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Possessing a variety of names—workers' militia, workers' *druzhina* (fighting detachment)—they are usually called by the term that came to be most common in the latter part of the year: Red Guards. The Red Guards have received very little attention in studies on the revolution published outside the Soviet Union. These have, until the 1970s, focused on the Bolshevik party, the Provisional Government, and the major political figures of the revolution such as Alexander Kerensky, Paul Miliukov, General Lavr Kornilov. Even inside the Soviet Union the Red Guard's role in historical accounts has fluctuated with the political tides. There were a number of studies, often semi-memoirs, published in the 1920s as part of the enthusiasm for studying and recording the events of the Revolution. Then, during the Stalin era, the Red Guards like many others disappeared from Soviet history books, which now focused on the Communist party leadership. After Stalin, as part of moving away from what came to be called "the cult of the individual," Soviet historians began again to look at the lower-level strata of political activity in the Revolution: factory committees, local party organizations and leaders, local soviets, the Red Guard. Valuable document collections were published and historical studies of these organizations—including the Guard—began to appear. Thus new sources on these groups became available to foreign scholars, who are for the most part denied significant access to Soviet archives on such subjects. At the same time, in the 1960s,

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Western (European and American) scholarship was developing a new interest in social and popular history: the history of farmers, workers, popular culture, local political movements, ethnic groups, etc., and moving away from history as the story of the central government and the elites of society. Thus, the orientation of Western historians coincided with availability of new sources to make it possible to examine a group such as the Red Guard.

In my study of the Red Guard I have been trying to accomplish several things.⁽¹⁾ First, of course, I have traced the origin and the political role of the Red Guard, how they developed, what role they played in the revolution. Second, I have examined the interplay of the spontaneous, popular, local armed bands with the political elites, especially the Bolsheviks. One of the long-standing issues of Russian history is the relation of leaders and masses, what Marxist revolutionaries of the late 19th and early 20th century defined as spontaneity vs. consciousness. This is, of course, at the heart of any political system and key in any revolutionary situation. The third question I have addressed is who gets involved at the local level in a revolution, specifically, who joins volunteer armed bands, the Red Guard. It is this latter feature, who joined, that I would like to examine today. I believe that understanding who gets involved is important to understanding any revolutionary or other crisis situation, and thus it has implications broader than just the Russian Revolution and will be of interest to a broader range of scholars.

Let me first sketch briefly the organization of the Red Guard and their role in the revolution. In February, 1917, political order broke down in Petrograd and then all of Russia with astonishing speed and to a remark-

(1) This will appear as a book, tentatively entitled *Red Guards and Workers' Militias: Spontaneity and Leadership in the Russian Revolution*, to be published by Stanford University Press, 1982. Material on the first two months of the revolution is in Rex A. Wade, "Spontaneity in the Formation of the Workers' Militia and Red Guards, 1917," *Reconsiderations on the Russian Revolution*, ed. Ralph Carter Elwood (Columbus, Ohio, 1967), pp.20-39. The introductory material below is based on those works.

able degree. Numerous armed bands were formed, voluntarily and on local initiative, both to preserve public safety (from looting, etc.) and to "protect the revolution" from an expected counter-attack by the monarch—which never occurred. These armed bands quickly disappeared except among the industrial workers. These workers' armed bands were intensely local. Usually they were factory based, volunteer, and their leaders were elected by the members or by some other worker organization, such as the factory committee (itself elected by the workers of the factory).

As the new Russian Provisional Government proved unable to cope with the many problems of Russia, as the political and economic situation deteriorated, and as social tensions grew in the summer of 1917, these armed workers' bands took on new importance. Simply put, the Provisional Government found itself without a reliable instrument of coercive force; the newly formed police were not adequate and the soldiers were rebellious and unreliable. The Red Guard became a major force in local relations, such as forcing concessions from factory management. The broader political significance of the Red Guards was limited, however, by their lack of central organization: they remained throughout 1917 local, usually factory, oriented. Indeed, forming broader, city-wide organizations and bringing them under central leadership was one of the ongoing issues of 1917. In Petrograd such efforts were not successful and, as a result, there was a tendency by political leaders to underestimate their importance. In smaller cities their potential role, and organization, often developed more rapidly.

The main political focus of the many Red Guards, despite lack of central leadership, was the notion of "Soviet power," i.e., a socialist government based on workers, soldiers, and peasants, as against the Provisional Government, which looked toward a coalition of all significant political and social elements. It was the Red Guard's commitment to "Soviet power" and the social and economic policies they expected from it that led the various Red Guard units into the October Revolution, in which they played a key role. Indeed, they played a role far out of proportion to their numbers, much

greater than has been usually recognized. The records of the October Revolution, especially Bolshevik, stress the activities of the soldiers. This reflects that Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders did not know how reliable their supporters might be and were acutely aware of the unreliability of the garrison soldiers. The latter represented the *only* force the Provisional Government could call upon. Therefore the Bolsheviks in October lavished great attention on the garrison. The workers and the Red Guard, on the other hand, were certain to support a seizure of power in the name of "Soviet power," and hence needed less attention. At the same time, however, they were locally oriented and there was little the central Bolshevik leaders could do beyond call for their support. Their actual activities depended upon the vigor of local leaders. These proved more effective and more determined than anyone expected, in Petrograd and in the provinces. As a result they played an exceptionally important, if poorly recorded, role in the actual seizure of power in October, 1917.

So, who comprised the workers' Red Guard? First, we might look at age. Were they, as some Soviet writings suggest, experienced proletarians, veterans of earlier political and even armed confrontations? Or were they, common sense suggests might be the case, drawn disproportionately from younger workers, those with less family obligations to restrain those most impatient and most willing to resort to violent action in almost any society? The evidence suggests the latter. Most memoir and early historical accounts which mention age emphasize their youth. Typical is E. Pinezhskii, an early writer on the Red Guard, who refers to the Red Guard as being made up mostly of younger workers.⁽²⁾ I. M. Liapin, a Red Guard commander, says that most were 17-24 years of age and speaks of "youths who have not yet mastered theory but are full of feeling."⁽³⁾

(2) E. Pinezhskii, *Krasnaia gvardiia* (Moscow, 1929), p. 26.

(3) I. M. Liapin, "Iz vospominanii byvshego nachal'nika Krasnoi gvardii 1-go Gorodskogo raiona Petrograda," *Istoriia proletariata SSSR* (1932, No. 11), pp. 95-98. See also A. I. Afanas'ev, "Klub molodezhi," *Narvskaia zastava* (Leningrad, 1960), p. 125; G. F. Petrov and P. A. Lur'e, "Rabochaia molo-

Somewhat more precise data on age is given in the statistics gathered by V.I. Startsev for Petrograd. Working with the material collected by the Commission for the Affairs of Former Redguardsmen and Red Partisans in 1930~35, he obtained a statistical base of 3,557 redguardsmen for whom age is known and who were in Petrograd at the beginning of October, 1917. The results show that 53.82% were age 25 or under, and, indeed,

Age of Petrograd Redguardsmen in 1917

under 18	18~20	21~22	23~25	26~30	31~40	41~50	over 50
8.22%	20.81%	10.47%	14.32%	20.53%	20.93%	4.22%	0.50%

29% were 20 or under. Comparing them to the general work force, he finds that 17-19 year olds made up 13.5% of the male work force but 18.8% of the Red Guard.⁽⁴⁾ Overall, younger age groups provided a larger percentage of themselves to the Red Guard than did the older age groups. Studies for other areas convey the impression that in the provinces as in Petrograd the Red Guard tended to be disproportionately composed of younger workers.⁽⁵⁾

For broader comparative purposes, one might compare this to the conclusions reached by Leopold Haimson in his well-known study of urban unrest in 1912~1914—that “green youths” were especially prominent in revolutionary street turmoil.⁽⁶⁾ One important qualifier, however, is that they may not have been so green. We should not forget that people joined the work force fairly young in that generation: the average age for young

dezh' Vasil'evskogo ostrova g. Petrograda v 1917-1918 gg.," *V ognе revoliutsionnykh boev* (Moscow, 1967), p.285; David Collins, "The Origins, Structure and Role of the Russian Red Guard," Ph. D. dissertation, Leeds, England, 1975, p. 209.

(4) V. I. Startsev, *Ocherki po istorii petrogradskoi Krasnoi gvardii i rabochei militsii. Mart 1917—April' 1918* (M-L, 1965), pp.267-68.

(5) V. P. Verkhos', *Krasnaia gvardiia v Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (M., 1975), pp.84-87; G. A. Tsyarkin and R. G. Tsyapkina, *Krasnaia gvardiia - udarnaia sila proletariata v Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (M., 1977), pp.118-19.

(6) Leopold Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917," *The Slavic Review*. Vol. 23, No. 4, 1964, p. 634.

people joining the Petrograd work force was 15, and so by 19 the young worker might already have a strong identification with the factory and a string of grievances acquired first hand. Thus the considerable enrollment of young workers does not necessarily mean that they did not have factory experience and a strong class identity. The average age for redguardsmen was about 25, and by age 25 the worker had as much as 10 years in the factory.

What about family arrangements of these young workers? Were they drawn heavily from workers who were unmarried or married but without children? Logic would suggest that such individuals would be most likely to accept the risks inherent in bearing arms. While we lack statistics bearing directly on the redguardsmen, there are indications that this was the case. Z.V. Stepanov, in his study of Petrograd workers in 1917, notes that 45% of the male metalworkers aged 21-30 did not have families,⁽⁷⁾ and presumably few below age 20 did. Thus, probably over half of those under 30 lacked family obligations. Yet this age group makes up three-quarters of the redguardsmen. A picture begins to emerge of a Red Guard made up disproportionately of younger workers without family obligations.

Closely related, we might ask about place of birth and length of time in the city and industrial environ; were redguardsmen drawn more heavily from long-term residents or youth born in the city, or from recent migrants—of whatever age—from the countryside? The prewar industrial growth and the changes in the work force during the war brought in large numbers of new workers; perhaps about half the Petrograd work force had arrived since the beginning of the war. Following Haimson, we would expect that the influx of the new labor recruits from the village into the work force, adding old peasant grievances to newly acquired urban dissatisfactions, would be a major force in the Red Guard. Alas, our data breaks down. Simply, we cannot tell from it whether those who joined the Red

(7) Z. V. Stepanov, *Rebochie Petrograda v period podgotovki i provedeniia oktiabr'skogo vooruzhennogo vosstaniia* (M., 1965), p. 38.

Guard had been in the industrial process longer or shorter than the average. Nor does the memoir literature help much, although it does imply that the organizers and leaders tended to be both older and of longer industrial experience. The closest it comes to helping us is by omission: one might expect mention if the armed groups were composed disproportionately of recent immigrants from the country. Indeed, the impressionistic literature, if anything, suggests individuals with a strong identity with the factory.

Here we might ask what may seem a surprising question: to what extent were these workers' armed bands made up of workers? In Petrograd the question seems almost senseless: Startsev's sampling shows 95.9% identified themselves as workers, 2.6% as soldiers, and 1.5% as employees and students. The memoir and newspaper accounts tend to support this impression. The role of the soldiers, incidentally, was mainly as instructors. Elsewhere, however, the workers' percentage drops. A study of Moscow and the Central Industrial Region shows a Red Guard composed 81.1% of workers, 5.1% of peasants, 7.8% of "employees," 2.4% of soldiers and 3.5% of others. In contrast, the Volga region shows only 57.8% workers, 15.4% peasants, and 15.9% employees, plus students, soldiers and others.⁽⁸⁾ It is not surprising that these areas would have a larger peasant component, but one wonders to what extent some of these "peasants" were not in fact wartime migrants to the factories. Certainly the larger Volga cities, such as Saratov, do not have an identifiable peasant component in the Red Guard. Some of the smaller towns may well have had a considerable peasant component in their Red Guard, but purely peasant Red Guard units were very rare in 1917. The higher percentage of "employees" is quite notable, and perhaps reflects that class lines were less sharply drawn in the smaller cities.

Nationality is a very difficult consideration to evaluate. Soviet sources tend to blur over or sanitize treatment of nationality issues under the name of proletarian unity and contemporary records do not list nationality.

(8) Startsev, p. 255; Tsyarkin and Tsyarkina, p. 118.

Nonetheless, some generalization can be made from sifting the sources. The first point is that, as militias and Red Guard were factory based, any given detachment tended to reflect the ethnic composition of the factory rather than the community. In many non-Great Russian areas Russian workers made up a disproportionate part of the industrial population and hence were a force helping the Bolsheviks to gain control in these regions—Khar'kov in the Ukraine, for example. One thing we do know is that in some instances nationality groups did play a significant role. In cities where evacuated factories were located, as in Saratov, Khar'kov, and elsewhere, Latvians played a very active role in the Red Guard. The Latvians tended to form their own detachment at the factory with which they had been evacuated, and then through that to operate alongside other factory units. At Podolsk the Red Guard leaders seem to have basically Latvian names, reflecting the role of a factory evacuated from Latvia. Moreover, the Latvian evacuated factories seem to be among the most pro-Bolshevik, most radical, and to play a leading role in forming Red Guards. It is difficult to separate to what extent the experience of evacuation contributed to this and to what extent it grew out of a longer industrial and "proletarian" experience. In the Donbas there was a considerable mix of nationalities, including prisoners of war, in the mines and in the Red Guard. In the Paramonovskii settlement the Red Guard included 27 Chinese and 3 Austrians, and in the Almazno settlement and others nearby there were to be found Chinese, Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and others. Overall, ethnic Russians seem to predominate in the Red Guard, as they did among the working class in general, but the Red Guard was affected by local ethnic composition, whether native or evacuated, of the factories.⁽⁹⁾

(9) O. N. Chaadaeva, "Vooruzhenie proletariata v 1917 g.," *Istoriia proletariata SSSR*, 1932, No. 11, pp. 46-47; A. Khokhlov, *Krasnaia gvardiia Belorussii v bor'be za vlast' Sovetov* (Minsk, 1965), p. 48; P. I. Garchev, *Chervona gvardiia Ukraini u zhovtnevii revoliutsii* (Khar'kov, 1969), p. 174; S. K. Mel'nik and V. R. Raevskii, "Uchast' latviskikh proletariv u borot'bi za vstanovlennia Radians'koi vladi na ukraini," *Ukrainskyi istorichnyi zhurnal*, 1977, No. 12, pp. 80-91; others.

What about political traits? Though the evidence is imperfect and often contradictory, it suggests that most redguardsmen were either non-party or Bolshevik. The problem comes in determining what is meant by "Bolshevik": party members, supporters of policies advocated by the Bolsheviks, or merely members of units in which individual Bolsheviks were the commanders. The problem is compounded when Soviet writers try to utilize archives to compile statistical figures, for they are based on material gathered years later when conditions would give a distinct boost to Bolshevik identification. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Bolsheviks were the most prominent, especially as the year wore on, which is not surprising considering that they were the main party advocating armed workers' bands. G.A. Tsypkin, using the records collected by the Commission for the Affairs of Former Redguardsmen and Red Partisans, identified 2,000 Moscow redguardsmen who had joined before October 25, 1917. Of these, 55.2% gave a Bolshevik affiliation and 44.2% were non-party. For Ivanovo-Vosnesensk he claims 45% Bolsheviks, and 62.5% Bolsheviks for the Central Industrial Region.⁽¹⁰⁾ V.I. Startsev, using the same records, finds that in Petrograd 40.4% of the rank and file and 55.8% of the leaders were Bolshevik, as against only 2.5~3% members of other parties.⁽¹¹⁾ These figures must be taken with a considerable skepticism, for the statistical data coming out of the studies based on the Commission records does not fit well with the other literature. The latter shows a much larger participation by members of other parties, who are almost absent in the statistics of Tsypkin and Startsev.

Even where Bolsheviks predominated (and they did not always), members of other parties played a role both as members and organizers in the Red Guard. Many factory or local soviet resolutions setting up a Red Guard specified that the organizing committee include members of all socialist parties, or in language tended to assume members of all parties as

(10) G. A. Tsypkin, *Krasnaia gvardiia v bor'be za vlast' sovetov* (Moscow, 1967), pp. 108-09.

(11) Startsev, pp. 263-64.

participants. In Sormovo, for example, which had a tradition of fighting units in 1905, both the Mensheviks and SRs played an active role in the workers' militia from the beginning. One participant states that the SRs and Mensheviks "went about draped with bombs and revolvers," and notes that the commander was an SR. As late as December the Red Guard there is described as having 300 Bolsheviks, 200 SRs and 40 Maximalists.⁽¹²⁾ There are many examples of Mensheviks, SRs, Anarchists and other leftist parties playing an active role, including as commanders, which would suggest that although they may not have been as active as the Bolsheviks overall, they did participate much more extensively than statistical data shows. Some modern Soviet authors acknowledge this participation: in his discussion of the issue, P.I. Garchev not only admits that in many Ukrainian cities on the eve of October members of other parties were significant in the Red Guard, but that in Sevastopol, as late as January, 1918, the Red Guards, between 250~400 armed men, were almost all Mensheviks or SRs.⁽¹³⁾

Overall, then, the political affiliations varied, but with the Bolsheviks the largest party represented and more likely to be closely tied as a party to the Red Guard organizations. This reflects in part the trend of events in 1917, with growing Bolshevik popularity as the year wore on. It also reflects that the Bolsheviks supported wholeheartedly the formation of these groups, whereas the Menshevik and SR parties were more lukewarm, and in many instances, especially the central leadership in Petrograd, openly hostile to them. Still, one should not overstress party affiliations. In Petrograd and elsewhere it is quite clear that the redguardsmen came out in support of Soviet, not Bolshevik, power, and that individual workers followed their own instincts as regards to joining these armed bands, regardless of party labels.

An intriguing sidelight on the role of party members is shed by one

(12) Chaadaeva, p. 43.

(13) Garchev, pp. 170-72.

part of G.A. Tsyarkin's figures. Of the Moscow Bolsheviks in the Red Guard, one-third had joined the party before 1917. In Ivanovo-Vosnesensk, about half of the Bolsheviks in the Red Guard had joined the party before the February Revolution.⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus, not only did the Bolsheviks tend to join more than other party members, but among them the longer term party members joined in greater proportion than the ones who joined the party only in 1917. This would seem to be a logical continuation of the kind of political commitment that led them into illegal political activity before 1917. Indeed, we might suggest that there was perhaps a certain psychological type, an activist who tended to become involved in worker and revolutionary activity and that this manifested itself in joining various revolutionary organizations. Even among these there seems to have been a type either sufficiently committed to run the risks or sufficiently attracted to risky activity that, in addition to joining illegal political parties, with the dangers involved, the same people disproportionately joined the most physically dangerous of the many worker organizations available in 1917, the armed bands. Certainly, the same maximalist mentality, impatience, urge to action, would characterize both redguardsmen and Bolsheviks: the given mental set was conducive to membership in both.

This leads to consideration of a very interesting type that keeps turning up, what one might call the "local activist." We have numerous indications of the extent to which a single activist was involved in several organizations and thus able to spread not only his personal influence but to coordinate activities and bring the point of view or interests of one organization to bear upon another. A small political cadre could play a major role in this way, and the Bolsheviks especially did try to utilize their members to influence the Red Guard. A couple of examples will illustrate the point. A.R. Vasil'ev was a member of the Red Guard of the Wireless Telegraph Factory, of the Council of the Petrograd People's Militia in May, of the district soviet in the Petrogradskii district (where he worked), while also

(14) Tsyarkin and Tsyarkina, p. 117.

being active in the Okhta district (where he lived) as a member of the Bolshevik district committee and of the district woodworkers' strike committee.⁽¹⁵⁾ V.P. Vinogradov, who had been drafted into the army in 1915 for political activity, returned in March of 1917 to the Metallurgical Factory where he became secretary of the Bolshevik party organization, a member of the Vyborg district party committee, a deputy to the Petrograd Soviet, an organizer of the factory Red Guard, and in October was sent by the Bolshevik party as an agitator to the city of Kaluga.⁽¹⁶⁾ Often the factory committee chairman or a special member of the committee was put in charge of or appointed commander of the factory armed detachment. Many local leaders, of course, were simply detachment commanders or local staff members, without other positions, but it seems clear that many of them held other positions in the factory committee, district party committee, soviets, trade unions, other workers' organizations, and party membership. This provided a kind of "horizontal linkage," in contrast to the "vertical linkage" that has been the main focus in historical studies, for example, John Keep's recent study of mass mobilization in the revolution.⁽¹⁷⁾

In summation, what kind of person do we have from this all too brief sketch? We have a redguardsman who is about 25, unmarried or without children, a worker who seems to have been in the factory for a considerable length of time and to have developed a strong identity with it, probably Russian but whose nationality reflected primarily the composition of his factory. He was more likely to be Bolshevik than a member of any other party, but very likely non-party. If he held any kind of command or leadership role, he quite likely was active in other worker organizations as well. He probably was more impatient, more willing to resort to organized violent force to defend or advance the interests of his class as he

(15) A. Vasil'ev, "Moe uchastie v Krasnoi gvardii i Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii, *Katorga i ssylka*, 1932, No. 11-12, pp.105-06.

(16) V. P. Vinogradov, "Dorozhe otchego doma," *Petrograda v dni Velikogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad, 1967), pp.90, 95-96.

(17) John L. H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution, A Study in Mass Mobilization* (London, 1976).

perceived them, an impression reinforced by the strong interest in training, acquisition of better arms, and creation of medical aid units that developed as 1917 wore on.

From the above, we obtain something of a political and social profile. What we do not get, however, is a very good picture of what motivated these workers to join armed units. Did they have other special characteristics not shared by their co-workers? We have touched on the edge of this in a descriptive way—age, party membership, etc., but the psychological factor is poorly understood. This may be impossible to reconstruct. Psychology is notoriously imprecise under the best of circumstances; applied historically it is even more so. To calculate motives of those around us who we know well is difficult: how much more difficult to explain the motivation of those we know only from a few historical records! Perhaps we can only describe, and give general group motivations: economic hardship, desire to preserve the small gains the workers had made thus far in the revolution, the impact of continuing industrial unrest (major strikes or factory lockouts tended to produce increased enrollments in the Red Guard and a step-up of organizational and training activities). However, it is important to try to probe the psychological element, perhaps through group biography. This seems an important line of future research on the Russian Revolution. How successfully it can be done remains an open question, however.