THE REVOLUTION IN BELARUS, 1917 - 1919

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Abstract

The thesis analyzes the main stages of the 1917 – 1919 revolution in Belarus: the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, the collapse of the Provisional Government in October of that year, the establishment of the independent Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918, its suppression by the Bolsheviks a year later, and the proclamation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

It shows how the revolution, which began as a social conflict, developed into a struggle over the national issue. Attention is paid to the manner in which political power was exercised and to the different ways the national, social, and political aspirations of the Belarusian people were exploited by competing claimants.

The author reconsiders some common notions about the revolution in Belarus: the alleged existence of dual power in Belarus, the Belarusian reaction to the July Days in Petrograd and to the Kornilov Revolt, and the attitudes of Belarusians toward the Bolsheviks.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Note on transliteration and dates	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: World War I and Belarus	4
1.1 Belarusians at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century	4
1.2 The Impact of World War I on the Political and Economic Situation in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917	5
1.3 The Workers' Movement in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917.....	9
1.4 The Peasant Movement in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917.....	11
1.5 World War I and the Refugee Issue on Belarusian Territories	12
CHAPTER TWO: Belarusian National Movement on German-occupied Territories, 1915 to 1917	16
2.1 The Outbreak of World War I and the Belarusian National Movement.....	16
2.2 Belarusian National Movement on German-occupied Territories: First Steps.....	17
2.3 The German Military Command and the Belarusian issue. The Vilna Confederation	19
2.4 Concept of a Belarusian-Lithuanian State	22
CHAPTER THREE: The February Revolution in Belarus	26
3.1 Western Front on the Eve of the February Revolution.....	26
3.2 The First Days of the February Revolution	32
3.3 The Attitudes of the Main Social Groups to the February Revolution	36
3.4 Soldiers' Committees on the Western Front in March 1917	39
3.5 The First Congress of the Military and Rear Units of the Western Front.....	42
3.6 The Development of a Mechanism of Self-Regulation among the Troops of the Western Front. Soldiers' Committees of the Western Front, April – May 1917..	47
3.7 The Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, March – July 1917	50
3.8 Summer Offensive of 1917 and the Revolutization of the Front.....	54
3.9 The July Days and the Western Front.....	58

3.10 The Political Activity on Belarusian Territories at the End of July – August 1917	61
3.11 The Bolsheviks in Belarus in August 1917	62
3.12 The Kornilov Affair in Belarus.....	64
CHAPTER FOUR: The Belarusian National Movement after February 1917	70
4.1 The Congress of Representatives of the Belarusian Parties and Organizations ...	70
4.2 The Belarusian National Committee.....	76
4.3 Belarusian National Movement on the Eve of the October Revolution	78
CHAPTER FIVE: The October Revolution in Belarus.....	82
5.1 Seizure Power by the Bolsheviks.....	82
5.2 The High Command and the October Revolution in Belarus: from Neutrality to Collaboration.....	91
5.3 The All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917 and the Struggle for Political Power	99
CHAPTER SIX: Establishing Belarusian Statehood, March 1918 – January 1919.....	111
6.1 The First Constituent Charter	112
6.2 The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Second Constituent Charter.....	113
6.3 The Third Constituent Charter.....	115
6.4 The Belarusian Democratic Republic, April – July 1918.....	117
6.5 German Policy toward Belarus, May – August 1918.....	121
6.6 The Belarusian Democratic Republic in the Geopolitics in the Fall of 1918	121
CHAPTER SEVEN: Belarusian Statehood under the Soviets	127
7.1 National Communists and the Idea of Belarusian Autonomy	127
7.2 The Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the Geopolitics in the Fall of 1918	133
CONCLUSION	141
APPENDIX: The Major Political Organizations in Belarus in 1917 - 1919.....	150
BIBLIOGRAPHY	152

Note on transliteration and dates

For transliteration Russian names of authors and titles of books and articles I use a modified Library of Congress system. Proper Belarusian names (persons, cities) are generally transliterated in their Belarusian form in the Belarusian Latin alphabet.

The noun Belarus and the adjective Belarusian are used throughout the book, unless they were spelled differently in the original.

All dates are in the Russian calendar of that specific time. Until February 1/14, 1918, the Russian (Julian) calendar was thirteen days behind the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Thus, all dates until February 1, 1918, are given according to the Julian calendar (so-called Old Style), after February 1/14, 1918 all dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar.

INTRODUCTION

R. Clem recently noted that: "The Belarusian people, who since medieval times have inhabited the region that bears their name today, were one of the largest ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union, yet also one of the least known".¹ This is particularly true about the various stages of the 1917 – 1919 revolution in Belarus: the overthrow of the tsar in February 1917, the collapse of the Provisional Government in October of that year, the establishment of the independent Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR) in 1918, and its suppression by the Bolsheviks a year later.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze this sequence of events, paying particular attention to the manner in which political power was exercised and to the different ways the national, social, and political aspirations of the Belarusian people were exploited by competing claimants. In many respects, the Belarusian Revolution passed through the same stages as the concurrent Ukrainian Revolution. Nevertheless, the Belarusian Revolution has been little studied by historians, be they émigré, Soviet or Western.

The majority of the works, which are available on this period of Belarusian history, suffer from the same defect, namely one-sidedness. Soviet historians define the 1917 – 1919 revolution in Belarus as a social conflict that resulted in the victory of the proletariat and peasantry over the bourgeoisie. In contrast, Belarusian Diaspora as well as the nationally oriented intelligentsia looks at the revolutionary events from the angle of national interests. According to them, the events of the 1917 – 1919 revolution are

¹ R. Clem, "Belarus and the Belarusians" in G. Smith, ed., The Nationalities Question in the Post-soviet States (London, 1996), p. 210.

defined as a conflict between Belarusians and Bolsheviks, in which the latter ultimately suppressed the Belarusian Democratic Republic, a short-lived independent state with a democratic orientation.

The approach of this thesis to the events of 1917 – 1919 in Belarus is based on the assumption that, despite some differences, the revolution in Belarus was to a large extent a duplication of the revolution in Petrograd. It, however, also has the characteristics of a national as well as of a social conflict. In addition to giving Belarusians a chance to fulfil the same social, economic, and political aspirations as the revolution provided the Russian population, it also gave Belarusian national leaders an opening to organize and mobilize the population along the lines of national identity. It provided Belarusian nationalists with an opportunity to assert their claims to political and cultural authority. Thus, while the initial stage of the revolution had all the features of a social conflict, the later revolutionary process during the September 1917 – January 1919 period took on a national character.

Economic deprivations caused by World War I on Belarusian territory promoted the politicization and radicalization of the local population. At the very beginning of the revolution the anti-war mood and slogans, expressed by the Bolsheviks, were popular among Belarusians. Nevertheless, as soon as Belarusians recognized, under the revolutionary slogans about the right of nations to self-determination, the Bolsheviks' negative attitude toward the issue of independence, mass support for them shrank significantly. The Bolsheviks' use of the military as the main force in their political struggle instead of following democratic procedures turned Belarusians against them.

The readiness of the national leaders to recognize the social interests of Belarusians along with their national aspirations provided the national movement with broad support. In contrast, the Bolsheviks, influenced by the Great-Russian chauvinism and concepts of proletarian internationalism, were able to rely only on the military forces of the Western front to seize power and to keep Belarus under Russian political influence. The discrepancy between the goals of the nationalists, which were based on a broad popular support, and the Bolsheviks, supported only by the non-Belarusian military forces, made conflict inevitable and influenced the various stages of the Belarusian Revolution discussed in this paper.

The aim of this research is to show how this conflict developed and why it took certain forms. Taking into account the complexity of the process and the many factors which had an impact on the path of the revolution in Belarus, I have chosen to concentrate on two main factors: 1) the military factor, linked to the First World War on Belarusian territory, and 2) the rapidly expanding national movement. The interaction of these two factors and their influence on the revolutionary processes determined the uniqueness of the revolution in Belarus.

CHAPTER ONE: World War I and Belarus

1.1 Belarusians at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the significance of Belarusians, who were a majority on the North Western territories of the Russian Empire, was low. The main reason of this insignificance was political. Russian officials continued to suppress Belarusianess by political and economic means even though the small nobility of Belarus (the shlakhta), who used to be the main initiator of the numerous anti-Russian uprisings in the Belarusian region during the nineteenth century, was eliminated from the political scene in the 1870s of the nineteenth century. Moreover, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Belarusians were subjected to an increased repression. The endeavors of the Russian administration were directed toward the extermination of the potential reservoirs of the national liberalism, which came to life after the 1905 revolution, and the restriction of their influence on the Belarusian population.¹ The Russification increased in all areas: in education, religion, bureaucracy and even in the army. The small national elite saw its mission as being the heightening of the consciousness of the Belarusian peasantry, which was considered as the core of the Belarusian nation.

Belarusian peasantry had one major characteristic that differentiated it from Russian and Ukrainian. It was strikingly poor due to the land-hunger. Stolypin's reforms, establishing a free land market in order to create a middle class in the agrarian sector, contributed significantly to the further pauperization of the Belarusians. The peasantry, searching for new sources of income, moved to Russian industrial cities and immigrated

to America in large numbers. The formation of a middle class in the country was also restrained by Polish nobility who remained the main owners of the land in Belarus and by the Jewish bourgeoisie who controlled the commerce and half of Belarusian industry.

The Belarusian proletariat in its development was in an embryo stage. Even though the economic depression, which Russia experienced at the beginning of the century, had subsided by 1910 – 1912, the level of industrial production and the concentration of industry in Belarus still remained much lower as compared to Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, the urban proletarian class was virtually synonymous with Jewish workers, whose interests were represented by the Jewish Social-Democratic Bund. The goals pursued by this party and some other Russian and Polish parties democratically oriented did not necessarily coincide with the goals of Belarusian nationalists. In some cases, they were antagonistic to the Belarusian revival. Thus, by the end of 1914, Belarusians were not ready for revolution, neither social nor national. Despite social problems and national oppression, the national elite who made considerable progress in its development during the first decade of the new century could count neither on the Belarusian peasantry nor on the workers, whose political consciousness remained low.

1.2 The Impact of World War I on the Political and Economic Situation in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917

Strict martial law was introduced on Belarusian territory as of the first day of war. All underground revolutionary organizations were barred, public meetings were banned,

¹ The first Belarusian political party, the Socialist Gramada (Union), was formed and issued its own organ *Nasha Niva*. A few small printing shops were opened in St. Petersburg and Moscow, printing educational literature and fictions in Belarusian, which remained officially forbidden.

and the sale of newspapers and books could not be made without permission of the military authorities. Strikes were also forbidden. According to the new regulations, all cases linked to armed resistance involving local authorities and police were assigned to military courts. Special attention was paid to the security of the railroads. By order of the commander of the NorthWestern front, General I. Zhilinskii, "any unrest on the railroads must be stopped immediately and severely".²

In the end of 1914 Belarusians were faced with the presence of large military contingents on Belarusian territory. Belarus absorbed a Russian army of 1.5 million men. For instance, the population of the city of Minsk had grown from 100,000 up to 250,000 people during the first year of the war as a result of the influx of soldiers. Similar situations occurred in other Belarusian towns and townships. Because of the lack of an adequate infrastructure, the rapid growth of city populations due to the military presence contributed to increasing social instability. Involvement of the Russian Empire in the war caused considerable changes in the economy of Belarusian territories.³

The large-scale war influenced the agricultural sector. More than one-half of all the able-bodied men in Belarusian villages were mobilized into the Russian army. As the front moved onto Belarusian territories, hundreds of thousands of peasants were forcibly mobilized to dig trenches and safeguard the railroads. The deficit of agricultural workers had a negative impact on rural enterprises, which were the main providers of food. It culminated in sharp decreases in cultivated areas. In 1917, the cultivated area was 72.3 percent smaller than in 1913. The harvest of rye and wheat was reduced by one-third

² Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii (Minsk, 1953), vol. II, p. 915.

³ M. Kastsiuk, U. Isaienka, H. Shtyhau, Narysy pa historyi Belarusi (Minsk, 1994), vol. II, p. 446.

compared to the pre-war period.⁴ During the 1914 – 1917 period, livestock decreased by 11.4 percent.⁵ Sharp reductions in crop and livestock production, aggravated by the disorganization of the transportation system of Russia, resulted in food shortages.⁶

The use of the main means of transportation for military needs destroyed the links between Belarusian industry and market outlets as well as sources of raw materials. It resulted in significant reduction of industrial production. As the front approached, about one-third of Belarusian industrial enterprises were evacuated or demolished. Indeed, the number of large enterprises on unoccupied Belarusian territory was reduced from 829 to 297 in 1913 – 1917, contributing to a decrease of 30 percent in the Belarusian work force.⁷ This structural reorganization of the Belarusian economy caused a sharp reduction in local industrial production for civilians. In 1917 it was only fifteen to sixteen percent of the pre-war level.⁸

On the other hand, the military together with the All-Russian Union and the Union of Cities, made considerable attempts to adopt the existing technical workshops and the factories transferred to Belarus from Poland and Riga to fit military needs. The new enterprises did not bring down levels of unemployment in Belarusian cities as the majority of workers employed in these enterprises were mobilized from Russian industrial centers or were transferred with the factories. However, the latter group of

⁴ E. M. Savitskii, Revolutsionnoje dvizenie v Belorussii (avgust 1914 - fevral' 1917 gg. (Minsk, 1981), pp. 47 - 48.

⁵ For instance, in the Mogilev province the number of peasant farms that did not have cows increased eightfold. See Kastsiuk, vol. II, p. 446.

⁶ Ekonomika Belorussii v epokhu imperialisma (Minsk, 1963), pp. 77, 92 - 96.

⁷ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 799 - 806.

⁸ Historyia Belaruskai SSR (Minsk, 1973), vol. II, 605 - 606.

workers contributed to the increase in the working population of Belarusian cities. Indeed, in the beginning of 1917, the number of workers reached 30,000 in Minsk (in 1914 there were only about 5,000 workers), about 25,000 — in Gomel, 18,000 — in Vitebsk (in 1914 there were about 4,000 workers), about 7,000 — in Mogilev.⁹

The social composition of Belarusian cities, which accumulated numerous workers who were not Belarusian by origin, became similar to the social composition of eastern Ukrainian cities. It is known that in eastern Ukraine, the majority of city residents were Russians. However, in the case of Belarus, short stays and severe wartime restrictions restrained the opportunities for Russian workers who were politically educated and better organized. Because of martial law, they were not allowed to establish any political organizations or seek political power in Belarus.

The significant increase in the urban population caused many problems linked to shortages of food, fuels, and housing. Indeed, by the end of 1914, large Belarusian cities experienced deficits in their main food supply. In 1915, the delivery of bread in Minsk and Mogilev provinces was reduced to 40 per cent of the pre-war deliveries. In 1916, Vitebsk province received only five to ten per cent of the pre-war norms, which had already been reduced twice since March 1914. As a result, in January 1917 prices on groceries and manufactured goods increased from seven to ten times,¹⁰ while average nominal wages of the majority of workers decreased by ten per cent in occupied

⁹ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 809 - 810.

¹⁰ For more statistic about inflation of food prices in the period from July 1914 to July 1916 see S.O. Zagorskii, State Control of Industry in Russia during the War (New Haven, 1928). For percentage increase in food prices in the period from December 1916 to February 1917, see T. Hasegawa, The February Revolution: Petrograd 1917 (Seattle, 1981), p. 200.

provinces and by seven per cent in three unoccupied Belarusian provinces.¹¹ This was considerably lower than in Russia proper.¹² Only an insignificant number of highly qualified workers and engineers who worked on the enterprises carrying out military orders earned higher salaries. The salaries of the majority of people were not sufficient to provide the minimal consumer needs given the high price of groceries, fuel, and housing.

1.3 The Workers' Movement in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917

Despite economic deterioration, the workers' movement in Belarus from 1915 to February 1917 was rather inactive. Defense of economic rights by radical means was hazardous for employees living in combat zones. This significantly affected the workers' movement. As a result, in 1915, only twelve strikes with 300 participants were held in Belarus, while in Russia more than one thousand strikes took place, with a total number of participants of about 500,000. In 1916 the strike movement embraced about 1,800 people in Belarus while in Russia there were about one million participants.¹³

Even though the Belarusian workers' movement developed as part of the all-Russian movement and shared some common characteristics, there were even more dissimilarities between them. When, during the October 1916 – February 1917 period, Russia experienced its highest rates of workers' unrest which resulted in the collapse of

¹¹ Istoria rabocheho klassa Belorusskoi SSR (Minsk, 1984), vol. I, pp. 351 - 352.

¹² For instance, in Russia the average nominal wage was about 322 rbl., while in Belarus only 168,8 rbl. See Savitskii, pp. 64 - 65.

¹³ See Kastsiuk, vol. I, pp. 448 - 449 for the number of strike participants in Belarus and in Russia. For a more extended discussion of revolutionary movement in Belarus at that time, see Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 850 - 864.

the old political system, only one strike occurred in Belarus.¹⁴ The demands of Russian workers at that time might be more or less defined by two characteristics, i.e. (1) economic and workplace issues, and (2) political and social issues. These definitions hardly might be applied to Belarusian workers because of small numbers of strikes.

Scarcity of strikes, poor organization, and mainly economic claims were the main features of the workers' movement in Belarus during the pre-revolutionary period. Higher wages, which had always hovered near the poverty line, were the most important part of the demands of Belarusian workers. As already mentioned, wages in Belarus were much lower than in central Russia. Moreover, while in Russia the industrial workers successfully pressed for immediate wage increases through their newly created unions, in Belarus this process almost did not arise due to the slow development of the organizations ready to fight for workers rights. Even if, in some cases, the workers were able to achieve minimal wage increases, these early wage gains soon were negated by inflation.

Belarusian workers, unlike their Russian comrades, made few demands for safety improvements, meal breaks, sick leave, or a reformed firing procedure. In spite of the fact that the war was very unpopular in Belarus, Belarusian workers did not make demands for its swift end, because they were afraid of severe persecution. Among the Belarusian proletariat, the railroad workers were most active and consistent in asserting their economic demands. Indeed, in the summer of 1915 strikes occurred in the depot of the Lubavo-Romenski railroad in Gomel, in 1916 — in Molodechno and Vitebsk. There was only one case in which the workers advanced political issues along with economic

¹⁴Kastsiuk, vol. I, p. 451.

demands. In April 1915 a group of workers at the railroad station in Gomel rose in protest against persecuting and firing of people for political reasons.¹⁵

Along with a poor organization, strict martial conditions prevented Belarusian workers from holding strikes. For instance, the economic strike of the employees of the wood plant in Minsk district was severely crushed by the Cossacks. Three people were killed, forty-five wounded. The organizers were sent to the front-line.¹⁶ Harsh persecution of the activists contributed in a major way to the fact that on the eve of the revolution the strike movement in Belarus remained politically unorganized. None of the political parties were actively involved in the workers' movement at that time. As a result, the workers' movement had little influence on the social life of the Belarusian population. Nevertheless, reports by the gendarmes indicated that during the period from 1915 to 1917 anti-government sentiments were widespread among the workers. They also pointed out that the negative attitudes of workers of certain industries, particularly the railroad workers, toward existing political institutions had grown considerably.¹⁷

1.4 The Peasant Movement in Belarus, 1915 to February 1917

In the beginning of the war, the peasant movement in Belarus took the form of sacking of the landlords' enterprises. Forty-three enterprises in twenty out of thirty five districts were burned during the six days of July mobilization.¹⁸ Severe punishment of the main participants weakened the peasant movement and even to some extent contributed

¹⁵ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, p. 858.

¹⁶ Istoriia rabochego klassa BSSR, vol. I, p. 362.

¹⁷ Savitskii, p. 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

to its recession.¹⁹ For instance, in 1915 ninety-nine peasant strikes occurred in Belarus, while in 1916 there were sixty strikes, and during the period from January to February 1917 only seven were reported. In contrast, in Russia economic deterioration contributed to a sharp increase in peasant unrest.²⁰

Illegal exploitation of the landlords' land and cutting of their woods were among the most widespread forms of peasant protest. One of the characteristics, which differentiated Belarusian peasant movement from the Russian, was the scarcity of violent actions against the rich peasants on behalf of the poor peasants. In 1914 – 1915 only six cases were registered, while in 1916 – 1917 such actions did not occur at all.²¹ One can assume that the class conflict in the countryside, which was considered by Soviet historians as a main prerequisite of the socialist revolution, was not a factor in the Belarusian countryside.

1.5 World War I and the Refugee Issue on Belarusian Territories

The First World War brought misery and deprivations to the majority of Russian population. Being a battleground, Belarus was submitted to the additional hardship of economic deterioration. The refugee problem was one of them. The defeat of the Russian armies in Poland in the spring of 1915 and the rapid advance of German troops toward the territories of ethnic Russia caused an uncontrolled flood of refugees. The local administration was absolutely unprepared to provide the refugees with minimal living conditions. As the command of the 4th army noted on October, 30, 1915: "... instead of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

²¹ Kastsiuk, vol. I, p. 451.

providing refugees with the essentials, civil authorities are only concerned how to get rid of them by moving them around".²² The absence of a well-developed plan of evacuation caused the refugees to settle near the front line, while waiting for the opportunity to return to their homes. As a result, the maneuverability of the Russian army was diminished and its military units could not be used effectively to stop the German offensive.

Moreover, having been in close contact with the refugees from the beginning of the retreat, in the fall of 1915 the Russian army was faced with an epidemic of cholera. To reduce the danger, the Commander-in-Chief of the Western front issued an order demanding the compulsory displacement of the refugees from central Belarus. According to this order, the refugees were forced to move toward the Dnepr River.²³ The efforts to resolve this problem by the local military command were supplemented by the actions of the central authorities, who finally realized the risks and issued an order allowing the use of railway transportation to move refugees more quickly.

The majority of the 1,130,042 Belarusian refugees were settled in the fifteen provinces of Central Russia and the Volga region.²⁴ Due to bureaucratic difficulties and a poorly organized registration, many Belarusian refugees experienced substantial difficulties, while trying to obtain financial compensation for surrendered livestock. The amounts were so small that they did not cover essential needs. People had no jobs and

²² A. M. Babkov, "Bezency v Belorussii v gody pervoi mirovoi voyny (1915-1916)", Histarychnaia navuka i histarychnaia adukatsyia (novyia kanzeptsyi i padychody): Usebelarускаia kanferentsyia historykau (Minsk, 1994), vol. I, p. 133.

²³ I. Koukel, I. Kren, L. Biareshchyk, Historyia Belarusi: z 1795 godu da viasny 1917 (Minsk, 2001), p. 315.

²⁴ Babkov, Histarychnaia navuka i histarychnaia adukatsyia, vol. 1, p.137.

there were no other sources of income. Numerous Russian and Belarusian organizations were engaged in the organization of aid to the refugees. The Belarusian War Relief Committee, which had seven branches with its main office in Minsk, was among the better known ones.²⁵

Refugees as a social category had a decided impact on economic and political issues in Belarus. Firstly, the disorganization and the absence of any control by the central and local administrations over the refugees during the first months of the offensive caused a significant exhaustion of the food resources. The townships and villages located along the roads used by migrants were harried and crops were destroyed. This was equally the case of small peasant farms and larger estates.

Secondly, the inflow of refugees heavily contributed to the deterioration of the demographic situation in Belarusian cities and put additional tension on the local labor market. The refugees were ready to go any length in order to settle in cities, where they could get aid from the relief organizations. As a result, severe competition over workplaces became one of the main characteristics of Belarusian cities during the period from 1915 to 1917. Indeed, in February 1914, only 5,000 people worked at the enterprises in Minsk, and 4,500 worked in Vitebsk, while in 1915 about 123,000 refugees settled in Minsk province and about 53,000 were gathered in Vitebsk.²⁶ Many refugees, being highly qualified, were willing to work in any job for a minimal wage. Thus, severe competition on the local labor market in Belarus contributed to a situation where the organization of labor movements became difficult, which may be considered as the main

²⁵ Savitskii, pp. 35 - 36.

²⁶ Ekonomika Belorussii, p. 92.

cause of low political activity of the Belarusian workers, in contrast to Russians. Thus, despite of the high rate of inflation and the low wages, much lower than in Russia, the Belarusian proletariat was not active in the labor movement which had grown at that time in Russia and Ukraine.

Thirdly, the organization of aid to refugees through the numerous agencies established either in Belarus or in Russia contributed to the consolidation of the national forces. Refugees, being far away from their homeland, were obliged to stay united in order to keep their identity, their language and their culture. As the revolutionary mood intensified, the cultural and educational centers established mostly outside Belarus, along with the refugee committees, became more politicized and party groups emerged out of these organizations and assumed political leadership, making a significant impact on the political process in Belarus.

CHAPTER TWO: Belarusian National Movement on German-occupied Territories, 1915 to 1917

2.1 The Outbreak of World War I and the Belarusian National Movement

As a result of the German offensive, in the summer of 1915 Belarus was partitioned into two parts by the front line. The Germans occupied the most economically advanced provinces of Vilna, Grodno and the western part of Minsk province. The rest of Belarusian territories (the provinces of Vitebsk, Mogilev, and the eastern part of Minsk and Smolensk provinces) remained under Russian control. The regimes on the territories seized on the both sides of the front line were in many respects similar. The report of the Russian Inquiry Commission issued in 1917 indicates that the German Military Command seized cattle, fodder, and food supplies in large quantities.¹ Belarusians who lived on these territories were treated as slave labor. Nevertheless, a similar list of accusations could be made regarding the Russian side of the front.² However, the attitudes of the German Occupational Army and of the Russian High Command toward the Belarusian issue were diametrically opposed. The differences that seemed insignificant from 1914 to 1916 became substantive in 1917 – 1918. Being de facto a multinational state, Russia, de jure demonstrated a negative approach to the ethnic issue at all levels. Moreover, in a propaganda campaign started with the outbreak of World War I, the notion of a united and indivisible Russia became the core of the political doctrine of official Russia. As a result, it is not surprising that national life on Belarusian territories under Russian troops was neither active nor diversified. All national

¹ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 794 - 796.

organizations, both educational and cultural, were closed; the publication of Belarusian newspapers and books was banned. Only a few Belarusian leaders stayed in Minsk, gathered around the Belarusian War Relief Committee.

In contrast, the German attitude toward the national minorities of the Russian Empire was benevolent. Official and non-official support of the national movements on the occupied territories suited German policy, whose goal was to decrease Russian influence in the region. Western Belarusian territories and Vilna were part of this plan.

With the outbreak of World War I, thousands of Belarusians fled or were deported to the East. All public life was paralyzed, including within the administrative centers of Minsk and Vilna. The latter was strongly associated with national cultural life. Some leaders of the national revival were mobilized in Russian army, while others moved to the East. Only a few leaders of the Belarusian national movement stayed on Belarusian territories occupied by the Germans or on those under Russian rule.

2.2 Belarusian National Movement on German-occupied Territories: First Steps

German policy regarding the national issue strongly contributed to the national renaissance, which took place in the western part of Belarus in the fall of 1915. Belarusian politicians in Vilna, for their part, took advantage of this opportunity. For the first time in more than one hundred years, the Belarusians had a real chance to realize their national aspirations.

² Ibid., p. 829.

It must be mentioned that, as a whole, the development of the Belarusian national movement during the period from 1915 to 1917 was not significantly different from that of the national movements of the other minorities living in the German occupational zone: the Poles, the Lithuanians, the Jews. It actively interacted with them, supporting and consolidating the traditions which had been developed in the pre-war years. The only difference was that the Belarusian national movement covered only the western part of Belarusian territory while Belarusians living in the eastern part were deprived of such an opportunity, and as a result, national activities were very limited there.

The political composition of the Belarusian national movement on the occupied territories was mixed. The main tone in the political debate was set by the representatives of the Belarusian Socialist Gramada (BSG), the oldest and most influential political organization. It was supported by the Belarusian Social Democratic Workers' Group (BSDWG), a comparatively new organization whose members were actively engaged in the organization of the trade unions and cooperatives.³ The BSDWG became an initiator and main organizer of the Belarusian People's Committee (BPC) which was considered the coordinator of all Belarusian political parties and organizations in the German occupational zone. The Belarusian People's Committee under A. Lutskevich's leadership⁴ was composed of the representatives of the Belarusian Social Democratic Workers' Group, the members of Vilna War Relief Committee, as well as of the editors of a Catholic weekly magazine etc. The aim of the BPC was to coordinate the activities of

³ For a more details about the Belarusian Social Gramada and the Belarusian Social Democratic Workers' Group see the Appendix, p. 150. See also A. Lutskevich, Za 25 gadou: Uspaminy ab pracy pershykh belaruskikh palitychnykh organizatsyii: Belarускаia Revalutsyinaia Gramada, Belarускаia Satsyialistychnaia Gramada (Minsk, 1991).

⁴ A. Lutskevich, "Zluchanyia Shtaty ad Baltyki da Chornaga mora", Svaboda, no.2 (1990). See also A. Sidarevich, "Belaruski shliakh", Litaratura i Mastatstva, November 23, 1990.

Belarusian political parties and develop ties with regional parties, including Polish, Lithuanian and Jewish ones whose leaders expressed similar political ideas. It also aspired to initiate a broad discussion on national issues among the regional politicians in order to make arrangements for the organization of national life within the new state, which would be distinct from Russia. The regional political elite was ready to discuss this issue, their only concern being whether the future state would be based on the principle of federalism or be a monolithic independent state where national minorities would be guaranteed certain rights to fulfill their national aspirations.

2.3 The German Military Command and the Belarusian issue. The Vilna Confederation

In general, German policy toward the Belarusian movement during the period from 1915 to 1917, while it did not particularly favor the Belarusian national movement, it did not object to it where it did not interfere with the German war effort. However, this policy was far from being coherent during these years. From the second half of 1915 to the beginning of 1916, the Germans supported the Belarusian national movement at both the local and the international levels. Later, in the second half of 1916 and in 1917, as the Lithuanian national movement developed, they became more indifferent to the Belarusian issue.

In the fall of 1915, the idea of a Belarusian nation as distinct from both the Polish and the Russian nations suited the policies of the occupying army. The Germans understood that the foundation of a Belarusian state with its capital in Vilna would certainly counteract the pro-Russian political forces on the western boundaries of the

Russian Empire and neutralize Russian impact on the entire region. Thus, the Germans considered this state either as an outpost of the German influence on the Eastern front or as a military and political buffer. In the first months, the German Military Command, while developing the guidelines of German policy on Belarusian territories, made considerable efforts to obtain a maximum support from the residents of the Vilna region, the majority of whom were Belarusians. Furthermore, negotiations toward the establishment of a Belarusian administration had begun in Vilna. As to the Belarusian politicians, while cooperating with the Germans regarding the national issue, they understood that this task was too complicated to be handled in isolation and contacted the regional Polish, Lithuanian and Jewish political parties.

Within the framework of this policy and with the permission of the Germans, the Belarusian People's Committee took the initiative to establish the Confederation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The negotiations with the Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish politicians took place at the end of 1915 and on December 19, 1915 they achieved an agreement culminating in the "Universal" declaration. It announced that the representatives of the Belarusians, Lithuanians, Poles and Jews were co-operating toward the establishing of a confederation of Lithuanians and Belarusians, which would function as a united state. This state would guarantee human rights to all residents of the region, while the national minorities would have the additional opportunity to express their national aspirations.⁵ The leaflet "Citizens" issued in February 1916 developed further the notion of confederation. Alongside the above-mentioned principles, some new ones were included, providing the details for the new state. In particular, a Sejm (Parliament) in

⁵ Full text of the leaflet "Universal" in F. Turuk, Belorusskoie dvizhenie: Ocherk istorii natsional'nogo i revoliutsionnogo dvizhenia belorusov (Moscow, 1921), p. 88.

Vilna, which would be elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret ballot would be the new legislative body. The Sejm was supposed to determine the form of statehood and develop a constitution. It also was mentioned that the confederation would embrace within its boundaries all the territories now occupied by German troops: the provinces of Kovna and Vilna, the Belarusian and Lithuanian districts of Grodno, Suvalki provinces, and the Lithuanian part of Courland.⁶ The cooperation of the Belarusian politicians in Vilna with the Lithuanians toward establishing a confederation was politically motivated and was considered as a main condition for the national survival of both Lithuanians and Belarusians. As A. Lutskevich noted later: "The small group of the nationally conscious Belarusians living under occupation was not able to take care of the interests of all Belarusians and of the entire Belarus".⁷ Thus, he assumed that the borders of the new confederation could be expanded and eastern Belarusian territories could be included in this state. At the same time, Belarusian leaders, foreseeing the complexities of this political process, appealed to the international community, trying to get support on issue of the new state. Belarusian politicians participated in the "Peoples of Russia" conference in Stockholm in April 1916 and in the Lausanne conference in June 1916.⁸

⁶ Full text of the leaflet "Citizens" in A. Navina, "Palitychnyia lozungi belaruskaga rukhy", Nasha Niva (Vilna, 1920), p. 8.

⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸ Full text of V. Lastouski's speech "Memarandum prадstaunikou Belarusi na 111 kanferentsyi narodau" in Homan, August 15, 1916. See also "Referat Belaruskai delegatsyi na Lioznenskai kanferentsyi narodau Rassii", Svaboda, no. 2 (1990), pp. 5 - 7.

2.4 Concept of a Belarusian-Lithuanian State

As the political process went further, however, the former political partners became more uncertain about the idea of confederation. Indeed, the Vilna project was countered by the Lithuanian Supreme Committee in Kovna, which wanted a Grand Duchy composed of the Lithuanians and Latvians alone.⁹ Belarus had the right to join the new union only as its third member. One could assume that by insisting on their own project, the Kovna radicals tried to prevent the Belarusian political elite, who would be in majority in the confederation, from dominating the political scene of the region. Therefore, the Kovna leaders cancelled all previously achieved agreements. This action provoked a split between the former political partners and finally, Belarusian politicians rejected the Kovna proposal and left the confederation.

The decision to establish a Lithuanian-Latvian state was approved by the German Military Command. Kovna politicians aspired, however, not so much to establish a Lithuanian-Latvian State, as to get German support in declaring an independent Lithuanian state. According to their plans, western Belarusian territories, occupied by the Germans would be included in the new state. In the meantime, the idea of a confederation began to be questioned also by right-wing Polish politicians, who claimed to be masters of the entire region. Having become the advisers of the German administration, the Poles made considerable attempts to re-Polonize Belarus. Being unable to resist simultaneously the Poles and the radical Lithuanians, the Belarusian leaders appealed to the German Military Command for support. The telegrams sent by Belarusian politicians to the Germans in Berlin can be used as evidence for this assumption. Indeed, in a telegram sent

⁹ A. Navina, p. 8 - 9.

to the Reichstag on September 1, 1916, Belarusian politicians expressed their gratitude to Germany and their hope that they might eventually be permitted to complete their statehood.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Germans preferred not to interfere in the debates between former political partners. It was evident that Germany had not made up its mind about how to seal the fate of the conquered countries. Faced with the uncertainty of the German position toward Belarus and not seeing the opportunity for establishing a confederation owing to the split in the political coalition, in the summer of 1917 Belarusian politicians initiated bilateral consultations with left wing of Lithuanian elite. They proposed a new concept of a Belarusian-Lithuanian state, which soon became very popular among the Lithuanian politicians in Vilna. The idea was actively promoted by a Belarusian political group called "Alliance for the independence and indivisibility of Belarus" under V. Lastouski's leadership, with the support of the Belarusian People's Committee.¹¹ According to its authors, the new state would be subdivided into independent Belarusian and Lithuanian states according to the language of its inhabitants. In the future, this state would embrace all Belarusian and Lithuanian territories, which were at that time still under Russian rule.

Having experienced Kovna politicians' and the Poles' previous actions, the Belarusians handled the issue very carefully. Neither the Alliance nor the Belarusian People Committee opposed the principle of federalism. Moreover, they appealed to the neighboring countries to join the Belarusian-Lithuanian State. But it was proposed that the Sejm (Constituent Assembly) would clarify the details regarding the implementation

¹⁰ N. P. Vakar, Belorussia: The Making of a Nation. A case study (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956), p. 95.

of the idea of federation. The leaders expressed their expectation that the power in the new state would be exercised by the entire population. They agreed that all national minorities would be guaranteed human rights and all local languages would be recognized.¹²

Even though the concept of Belarusian statehood was strongly supported by both sides, this concept could be carried out neither in 1916 nor in 1917 due to the complex political situation. By 1917, however, Lithuanian radicals began promoting the idea of their own statehood. They also managed to establish close relations with the German Military Command. As a result, the Lithuanian Tariba (National Council) supported by Germany rejected not only the proposal of the Belarusian People's Committee, but also the recommendations of the Polish and the Jewish national centers. At the beginning of December 1917, the Lithuanian Tariba, being favored by the Germans, proclaimed an independent Lithuanian state. The Belarusian territories occupied by the Germans were included in this state.

In conclusion, even though the Belarusian national movement was divided by the front line, it was considered as a movement inspired by one (Belarusian) nation. Despite the failed attempts to establish a Belarusian state, its ideas and experience were highly appreciated and later implemented in Belarus. Having reached eastern Belarusian

¹¹ V. Lastouski, "Suviaz' nezalezhnastsi i nepadzel'nastsi", Litaratura i Mastatstva, October 30, (1990), p. 13.

¹² "Pastanova Belaruskaga narodnaga kamitetu u Vilna ad 19 zhniunia," Nasha niva (Vilna, 1920), p. 9.

territories, these ideas affected the revolution in Belarus during the period from 1917 to 1919, and laid the foundation for Belarusian statehood.

CHAPTER THREE: The February Revolution in Belarus

3.1 Western Front on the Eve of the February Revolution

Military activities on the Western front caused a large contingent of Russian troops to be present on Belarusian territory. They had an impact on the events in Belarus during the period from 1917 to 1919. Discussions of this issue is usually confined to the point that the Russian soldiers on the Western front supported both the February and October Revolutions. Details of this support did not get close attention of scholars owing to a lack of information and the inaccessibility of sources. Meanwhile, the involvement of the military in the revolutionary events in Belarus, might be greater and much more complicated. In this section the following questions will be explored: 1) What were the conditions of the military on the Western front and rear garrisons on the eve of the February Revolution? 2) How did they react to the major events of 1917, such as the February Revolution, the July Days, the Kornilov Revolt and the October Revolution? 3) What political processes occurred in the army units on the Western front during that time and what impact did they have on the political situation in Belarus?

The Western front on Belarusian territory included: 1) the military detachments located within the combat zone, 2) the garrisons which were comparatively far from the front line (in Vitebsk, Gomel and the others), 3) the various detachments, working for the headquarters of the Minsk Military District, for the headquarters of the Western front in Minsk, and for the Supreme Headquarters (Stavka) in Mogilev.

Among the numerous characteristics, which determined the conditions of the Russian military on the Western front by February 1917, two factors were most important: the material supply of the military and its social composition. By the winter of

1916 – 1917, the Russian military was severely affected by the disruption of supply lines. Complaints about a shortage of necessary equipment and food became regular. According to the Ministry of War, by the winter of 1917 the majority of the soldiers were not provided with warm clothes. It is estimated that 42 percent had no fur coats, 58 percent — warm boots, 87 percent — mittens. In January 1917 complaints about the lack of uniforms and food were received from more than thirty-nine regiments and three battalions of the Western front.¹

At the beginning of 1917 the social composition of the Russian military on the Western front reflected the social structure of the Russian army.² The officer corps was composed of three groups: 1) officers, representing the High Command of the Western front, the Stavka, and the command of the largest Belarusian garrisons; 2) the field officers whose military careers flourished due to the war; 3) the nonprofessional officers mobilized into Russian army from the middle and lower strata of the society and who received their commissions after graduating from short-term military schools. The first two groups of officers personified the core of the Russian army, while the presence of the latter group was predetermined by the war. As a result of major military actions on the Western front, the Russian army lacked experienced officers in 1915 – 1916. Due to significant losses of commanders, the Russian government was obliged to allow people from the lower social strata, including peasants, to enter military schools. After receiving intensive training and obtaining the lowest officer rank, the new recruits were sent directly to the front.

¹ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. II, p. 621.

² M. Frenkin, Russkaia armia i revoliutsiia (1917-1918) (Munich, 1978), p. 22.

Political preferences of the officers on the Western front varied. Only the top of the High Command adhered to the monarchic ideas and supported the existing political order. Their political positions were understandable, given the fact that their careers in the military flourished under the old political system. Many field officers, having experienced the inefficiency of professional management in the army during the war years, realized the necessity not only for substantial changes in the army, but also for the political transformation of the entire country. The political preferences of this group were widespread: from the liberal Constitutional Democrats to the Bolsheviks. Even though the officers of the third group made considerable attempts to master the customs and habits of the professional officer corps, they still kept close ties to their familiar social environment. Their political sympathies to a large extent were on the side of the parties, representing the left wing of Russian politics.

By the beginning of 1917, the majority of the enlisted men were recruits mobilized from the central provinces of Russia. By 1917, patriotism, typical of Russian society at the beginning of the war, had disappeared almost completely. Moreover, it is known that from the very beginning of the war it played an insignificant role among the peasants. Drafted to military service, peasants were withdrawn from their fields for an unknown period. This sharply reduced family income and, thus, played an important role in the growing dissatisfaction among the peasants. Compensation, which was paid to soldiers' families, was so insignificant, that it did not cover even basic needs.³ By 1917, soldiers' families had lost their last hopes for governmental aid.

³ According to the head of the noblemen of the Mosyr district, the peasants, whose members of family served the military, believed that they were allowed to use the landlords woods and fields in order to be compensated. See Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, p. 873.

The defeats experienced by the Russian army, the difficult conditions of the military service as well as a psychological unreadiness for war of the majority of the soldiers stimulated a revival of traditional peasant philosophy. Main characteristics of the peasant consciousness, such as obedience to the law and respect for private property, were shaken by the severe reality. By the beginning of 1917, these ideas were considered by the soldier-peasants as unnecessary. As a result, the soldiers coming back to the countryside on leave usually were the initiators of the peasant revolts and pogroms, thus demonstrating their discontent with the existing conditions.⁴ In spite of the fact that those actions were severely punished by the Russian officials, they affected public opinion in a very negative way. Eventually, the encroachment on private property by the soldiers coming home on leave began to be perceived by the population either as normal or close to it.⁵ Anarchic by nature, the revolts led by the soldiers, played a negative role, making public opinion ready to accept the stereotype of violent behavior. This phenomenon became even more dangerous as the slogans about the uselessness of the war and its hopelessness began to circulate among the entire population.

Considering the political orientation of the soldiers, one could assume that the February Revolution found them outside of any political party or organization. At the same time, there was no doubt that they would support any anti-war movement or party with anti-war slogans.

Despite economic deterioration and the incredibly difficult conditions of military service, the soldiers of the Western front were more modest in their demands than the

⁴ J. Keep, "The Countryside in Revolt" in R. G. Suny and Arthur E. Adams, ed., The Russian Revolution and Bolshevik Victory (3rd ed.) (Lexington, 1990), p. 252.

⁵ Ibid., p. 257.

soldiers of the Northern front and the sailors of the Baltic Sea. They also preferred to put economic issues first. It needs to be mentioned that the form of soldiers' disobedience varied, depending on the distance to the front line. Refusal to fight, fraternization with the enemy, and desertion were the most popular forms of protest among the front units. Clashes with the police and uprisings occurred more often in the garrisons. Indeed, in the fall of 1916, the 9th corps refused to fight. As a result, the Command was forced to cancel the planned offensive.⁶ On January 18, 1917, the soldiers of the 223rd Odoevskii infantry regiment refused to leave for the front-line. The rebellion was suppressed by force, eight people were killed and nineteen soldiers were sent to hard labor.⁷ The largest revolt with about five thousand participants took place at the distribution center in Gomel in October 1916.⁸

Even though revolts were the most radical and dangerous form of protest, they embraced only insignificant numbers of people. In contrast, desertions, being less radical and noticeable, had embraced thousands of soldiers, seriously disturbing military activities on the Western front. During the period from February 1916 to November 1916, 11,000 soldiers deserted from the three armies.⁹ By February 1917, disobediences linked to desertion were so widespread among the soldiers that they threatened to develop into anarchy.¹⁰

⁶ V bor'be za Oktiabr' v Belorussii i na Zapadnom fronte (Minsk, 1957), p. 143.

⁷ Partia bolshevikov v gody pervoi mirovoi voyny. Sverzenie monarkhii v Rossii (Moscow, 1963), p. 178.

⁸ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 879 - 880.

⁹ Istoria SSSR, (Moscow, 1968), vol. VI, p. 625.

¹⁰ Partia bolshevikov, p. 178.

The facts indicate that the soldiers of the Western front were so discontented with the existing situation that they would support any political party which would defend their rights and call for the ending of the war. Nevertheless, we lack evidence that, by February 1917, political parties, including the left wing parties, had influenced the soldiers. There are no indications that the Bolsheviks had as great an impact on the soldiers of the Western front as they did on the Northern front or on sailors in the Baltic Fleet. On the eve of the February Revolution, they were poorly organized and disunited. Moreover, the Bolsheviks in Belarus disagreed about their future plans and the priorities regarding certain social groups. I. Liubimov, one of the leaders of the Bolsheviks in Belarus, wrote: "Just before we had received news about the February Revolution in Petrograd, our Social-Democratic group in Luninets discussed whether we should use our political forces among the soldiers of the Western front or among the workers in central Russia".¹¹ This seems to answer the question of why the soldiers' uprisings occurred only from time to time on the Western front, why they were poorly organized and why they lacked political motivation.

Even though on the eve of the February Revolution the Western front had not experienced numerous soldiers disturbances, there is evidence that these soldiers were deeply dissatisfied and disappointed. The officers of the Russian secret services in their reports prepared for the Stavka noticed that soldiers' discontent was consistently growing, and some of the soldiers were ready to take part in mass soldier protests.

¹¹ I. Liubimov. "Fevral' na Zapadnom fronte i Minskii Sovdep", Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, no. 17 (1923), p. 251.

3.2 The First Days of the February Revolution

The news of the autocracy's overthrow in Petrograd reached Belarus March 3, 1917. It provoked unprecedented enthusiasm from the populace, which was exhausted by the war and the economic devastation. The military command was the first official body to react to this change in the political situation. It did all it could to prevent soldiers from participating with workers in joint demonstrations and to avoid public disorder such as occurred in Petrograd.¹² The military command also took significant steps to guide the developing political situation in a specific direction. They held numerous meetings in support of the Provisional Government in all the garrisons and even in the front-line military units. The largest mass meeting and military parade took place in Minsk. Due to the joint efforts of the military command and local Belarus authorities, on the Western front in particular, the main slogans of the February Revolution "Down with the Tsar!" and "Down with the War!" were converted to the more positive "Long live the Provisional Government!" and "Long live the victory!"¹³ The last slogan, rather than a manifestation of chauvinistic frenzy, was more likely an attempt to oppose the anarchy of the Russian capital cities while favoring the organization and discipline of the military units on the Western front. The original statements were reduced to a support of the Provisional Government in the hope that it would be able to draw up and implement the political and economic reforms necessary in Russia.

The peaceful nature of the February Revolution in Belarus was most likely

¹² Indeed, on March 3, the Chief of staff of the Stavka in Mogilev General M. Alekseev sent the telegram to the head of the Provisional Committee of the State Duma M. Rodzianko, informing that 50 soldiers, who came to Polotsk from Petrograd, intended to disarm the gendarmes. He demanded that Rodzianko take measures in order to keep the agitators out of the army. "Verkhovnoie komandovaniie v pervyie dni revoliutsii", *Krasnyi arkhiv*, no. 5 (1924), p. 223.

¹³ Kastsiuk, vol. I, p. 455.

determined by instructions received from Petrograd at the very beginning of the events. Despite the fact that no documentation had been found yet regarding these instructions, there is no doubt they existed. The essence of the documents sent to the Western front is easily understood by noting the instructions sent to the Commander of the Moscow Military District General Mrosovskii by Rodzianko on March 1, 1917. Its emphasis was on the need to oppose the use of force in any form.¹⁴

The authorities of Minsk province also reacted rather quickly to changes in the political situation. Late in the evening of March 3, 1917, seventy representatives of the Provincial Zemstvo and district zemstvos, the Municipal Duma, the Zemskii Union, the Cities Union, and the clergy of various religious bodies held an emergency meeting. Also in attendance were representatives of the Western front's army headquarters and of the Minsk military garrison.¹⁵ The discussion centered around the instructions of the Provisional Government, which explained the situation in Petrograd and ordered local governing bodies to reorganize. As a result of this meeting, V. Samoilenko, the chairman of the board of the Provincial Zemstvo, was elected the commandant of the city. Regulations for the formation of a Provisional committee were also approved, which, along with the city commandant, would be responsible for maintaining order. M. Mikhailov (M. Frunze), a Bolshevik and former employee of the Zemskii Union, was appointed the city's chief of police.

The suddenness of the revolution and the resulting disorganization within the

¹⁴ E. N. Burdzhakov, *Vtoraia Russkaia Revoliutsiia* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 28 - 29. For one more evidence that the high authorities tried to avoid using armed forces in order to suppress the revolution see the telegram by Alekseev to Mrosovskii on February 28, 1917 in "Fevral'skaia revoliutsia 1917", *Krashyi arkhiv*, no. 21 (1927), p. 39.

¹⁵ Kastsyuk, vol. I, p. 457.

government led to a general state of confusion, which the radicals immediately took advantage of. Bolshevik propagandists, supported by pro-revolutionary Latvian soldiers, began to follow the Petrograd script for revolution. Expecting little help from the small, disorganized Minsk proletariat, they freed the prisoners held in the Minsk prison, the majority of whom were soldiers who had been detained either for propaganda activities or for offences of a purely criminal character.¹⁶ Having received telegrams warning against the use of force, both the police and the military refrained from interfering so as not to provoke an armed conflict. At the direction of Frunze, the first Minsk regiment, consisting of soldiers from the Latvian regiment and the newly released prisoners, began serving as the city militia.

While all of this was going on, workers, also following the Petrograd example, held meetings at which they proposed delegates to the soviets. On March 4, at a meeting of representatives from the large enterprises of the city, the Minsk Soviet of Workers' Deputies was formed. It consisted primarily of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and members of the Jewish Bund.¹⁷ The few Bolsheviks attending the meeting, proposed the formation of a Provisional Executive Committee to consist exclusively of Bolsheviks. Their justification for this was that they had already proven themselves as defenders of the revolution, having released the prisoners and organized the disarmament of the imperial police and gendarmes. Considering the achievements of the Bolsheviks, the meeting's participants accepted the proposal. The Bolsheviks immediately took the political initiative, organizing the printing of the newspaper *Izvestiia Minskogo Soveta*

¹⁶ Minskii golos, March 5, 1917.

¹⁷ Minskii golos, March 6, 1917.

Rabochikh Deputatov and appealing to soldiers and workers to elect Bolshevik representatives to the Soviet.¹⁸ The Mensheviks, the Bund members and the Socialist Revolutionaries were displeased by such activity. Afraid of the Bolsheviks' extreme radicalism, they insisted on restructuring the Minsk Soviet. Thus, on March 5, 1917 the Executive Committee was changed to include the Mensheviks and the Bund members.¹⁹ Additionally, the Minsk Soviet decided to place itself under the direction of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.²⁰ On March 8, the Minsk Soviet finalized its organization calling itself the United Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies. Following the Petrograd Soviet's Order no. 1, the Minsk Soviet began organizing soldiers' committees and overseeing their political leadership.²¹ On March 8, the Mensheviks strengthened their position through new elections to the Executive Committee.²² From the outset, the Minsk Soviet, just as the one in Petrograd, had supported and recognized the Provisional Municipal Committee as the city's official governing body, sending to it twenty of its own delegates.²³

Similar patterns were used to form soviets in other Belarusian cities. On March 3,

¹⁸ Izvestia Minskogo Soveta rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov, March 5, 1917.

¹⁹ The Executive Committee was enlarged from nine to twenty members. See Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, p. 915.

²⁰ In the telegram sent to the Petrograd Soviet, the Minsk Soviet not only expressed its support for the Petrograd Soviet but also condemned the anti-defensive demonstrations that took place in Petrograd and Moscow in early March 1917. Full text of the telegram sent by B. Posern, the chairman of the Minsk Soviet, see Burdzhakov, p. 254.

²¹ Minskii golos, March 8, 1917.

²² Menshevik B. Pozern became a chairman of the Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet while Bolshevik I. Liubimov served as a vice-chairman. See Kastsiuk, p. 454. The Mensheviks played the main role in the Soviet. See V bor'be za Oktiabr' v Belorussii i na Zapadnom fronte, p. 7.

²³ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, p. 894 - 895.

1917 various socialist parties in Vitebsk made decision to create a Soviet.²⁴ The Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies was formed on March 5. Elections for workers' delegates were held on site at the enterprises. At the first session of the Vitebsk Soviet of Workers that took place on March 8, 1917, the delegates elected an Executive Committee and set as its paramount goals: 1) to create a militia to resist the counter-revolution and protect the population against massacres and 2) to maintain and control the distribution of food stocks, paying special attention to the supplying of bread to workers' families.²⁵ Finding a way to unite these two Vitebsk soviets was not easy. In fact, the struggle for the leadership of a combined Soviet lasted two months. The merger finally took place at the beginning of May, 1917.²⁶

In Gomel, representatives of workers and soldiers at first held separate citywide meetings in which the corresponding soviets were elected. The step to merge the soviets was taken at a joint session on March 6. The Gomel Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies represented 25,000 people, the vast majority being the soldiers of the Gomel garrison.²⁷

3.3 The Attitudes of the Main Social Groups to the February Revolution

Though there had been some indications of an increase in social conflicts, the February Revolution came as quite a surprise in Belarus and it took some time for the population to realize its extent considering the special interests of specific social groups.

²⁴ Vitebskii vestnik, March 8, 1917.

²⁵ Vitebskii vestnik, March 8, 1917; also Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, p. 889.

²⁶ Istoria rabocheho klassa Belorusskoi SSR, vol. 1, p. 371 - 372.

²⁷ Savitskii, p. 148. See Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. II, p. 634.

The first documented reactions to the revolution in Petrograd are found in army correspondence. General M. Alekseev, in his report to the Provisional Government in March 14, 1917, writes that the soldiers' vision for the revolution differed from that of the officers.²⁸ The soldiers associated the change in political power with the end of the war and prompt demobilization. The officers' reaction was rather ambiguous.²⁹ As previously mentioned, during the war the structure of the officer corps on the Western front had changed considerably so that it was no longer socially homogeneous. The majority of army officers came from the middle class. To them this was still their status and this was where their interests lay. They also associated the revolution with an end to the war, their expectations in many ways being similar to those of the soldiers.

Most of the top command generally considered the news of the tsar's overthrow positively.³⁰ The Provisional Government suited them because it replaced the tsar's political power, which was already completely discredited in army circles. However, the majority of the military command was against the continuation of the revolution. According General Alekseev, they saw a fatal flaw in a prolonged revolution, considering that it would lead to the disintegration of the country as a whole, and of the army in particular.³¹ In the first months of the revolution, the higher-ranking officers considered that their main task was to preserve the Russian army's military efficiency, which they

²⁸ Krasnyi arkhiv, vol. 5 (1924), p. 234. See also "Pis'ma ofitserov s fronta v 1917 godu", Krasnyi arkhiv, vols. 50 - 51 (1932), p. 198.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 198 - 199.

³⁰ It is known from the report by the Chief of the staff of the 10th army that only two officers refused to swear to the Provisional Government. See Burdzhakov, p. 97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 96 - 98.

intended to achieve by keeping it out of politics.³²

Civilians in Belarus met the news of the autocracy's overthrow with enthusiasm. The population, exhausted by the war, associated such change with the end of the war. Belarusian peasants welcomed the revolution, hoping that military requisitions would cease and peasant soldiers would return to rebuild their war-torn homes. In addition, landless peasants hoped the new government would be more responsible in resolving the agrarian issue. Belarus's small working class, consisting primarily of Belarusians and Poles, hoped for more substantial social protection. Refugees viewed the revolution positively, seeing in it a chance to return home and resume a normal life.

For the first time in many years, the intelligentsia had a real opportunity to be educated in and develop their ethnic culture, language and literature. Ethnic political parties, which were known both in German-occupied territories and those controlled by Russia, had the opportunity to implement their party programs as related to rights and political freedoms as well as to political autonomy.

Inhabitants of Belarusian small towns, mostly Jewish small-scale tradespeople and craftsmen, associated the revolution with an end to the war and an increase of the buying power of the populace. They also expected a decrease in ethnic and religious oppression. Those in possession of large capital — in Belarus, they were the Polish and Russian landowners and the Jewish bourgeoisie — met the new changes with some suspicion. On the one hand, the formation of a bourgeois government in Petrograd gave them hope that they might have new opportunities to participate in the life of the state. On the other hand, the prospect of a quick end to the war did not suit them, because it

³² The order issued by the Commander of the Western front General Everton March 4, 1917, demanded not to discuss the political issues. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

would inevitably lead to a decrease in profits gained through military trade. But their greatest anxiety concerned the way the revolution would be carried out, because they had witnessed what a formidable and uncontrollable force the peoples' revolt of 1905 had been. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that the determining factor for these capitalists was their own economic situation, not ethnic interests.

The reaction of the state organs and of the Minsk Municipal Duma in particular, was in many respects determined by the reaction of the army headquarters on the Western front and the headquarters of the Minsk garrison. The point is that many deputies in the Municipal Duma, while defending the interests of large factory owners, were well-connected to the top command through the system of military orders. They associated the new political power with the creation of new political institutions which would allow them to participate more substantially in the administration of Belarusian territories and expand their economic opportunities.

3.4 Soldiers' Committees on the Western Front in March 1917

As has already noted, the military command on the Western front reacted rather quickly to changes in the country's leadership, doing their utmost to avert the massive soldier unrest such as took place in Petrograd. The entire command emphatically blocked all external information channels, forbid the distribution of newspapers and limited the access of propagandists. However, politics did enter the army in the form of Order no. 1. The author of the order, I. Goldenberg (Meshkovskii), was right when he later wrote: "The Order created the basis for democratization of the Russian army and, thus saved the

revolution from attempts by right-wing forces to attack its achievements".³³ It opened up, however, wide possibilities for left wing forces, by enabling the Bolsheviks to exploit the soviets and committees in seizing power in the country and in the army in October 1917.

The first symptoms of political trouble caused by Order no. 1 appeared on the Western front as early as the beginning of March, though they were not specifically dangerous. Political movements within the army remained poorly organized, forms of protest did not differ much, alternating between disobedience of orders and the arrest of commanders. Disobedience of orders was mostly due to the unwillingness to return to the front. In cases where officers intentionally disregarded the will of their soldiers, soldiers sometimes committed more serious infractions. For instance, soldiers of the 709th and 710th regiments of the 178 infantry division refused to go to the front. In response to the demand that they obey the order, they instead joined the peasants of the neighboring villages and began a revolt which was not suppressed until seven days later.³⁴ Soldiers' protests were quite often accompanied by the arrest of objectionable officers. Several such incidents occurred during the first half of March in the 10th and 3rd armies, whose soldiers were especially pro-revolutionary.³⁵

Realizing that indiscriminate application of Order no. 1 undermined the basis of army discipline and could lead to complete disorder, on March 7, 1917, the War Ministry of A. Guchkov issued an order allowing soldiers to create political organizations or the so-called committees. In the headquarters of the commander-in-chief in Mogilev this

³³ I. Goldenberg, a member of the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, emphasized this notion during his interview with French journalist and historian Claud Anet. Quoted in Frenkin, p. 142.

³⁴ *Historyia Belaruskai SSR*, vol. II, p. 634.

³⁵ Frenkin, p. 76.

order was modified. The amendments essentially limited the activity of the committees and gave higher bodies the right to control them. According to this new version, signed by General Alekseev on March 11, 1917, soldiers' committees could only deal with economic, domestic and cultural issues.³⁶ Moreover, the structure of the committees as well as their decisions had to be approved by commanders. Therefore, it is no wonder that initially the majority of officer-soldiers' committees along the Western front exhibited unconditional trust in the high command and in the Provisional Government. Only at the end of March 1917, did the Minsk Soviet make an attempt to limit the high command's control over the committees.³⁷ It repeated the decision of the Petrograd Soviet on regulating the activity of soldiers' committees.

The time gap between the decisions of Petrograd and Minsk Soviets testifies to two points: first, the organization of political movements on the Western front occurred at a slower pace than on the Northern front or in the Petrograd garrison;³⁸ second, the influence of the Minsk Soviet on the army in March, 1917 was conditional. Lack of propagandists was one of the main reasons for the slow process of committee organization. Active local party workers obviously did not have enough resources to work even in large garrisons, much less in front units, to whom access was considerably more complicated. The influence of Belarusian workers on soldiers in rear military garrisons, unlike what happened in Petrograd or Moscow, was also minimal because of the Belarusian working class's small size. The mobilized Russian and Polish workers,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

³⁷ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. III, pp. 907 - 908.

³⁸ Indeed, during the March - April period only eleven committees operated on the Western front. See Pobeda Sovetskoi vlasti v Belorussii (Minsk, 1967), p. 85.

who were working in military enterprises in Minsk, preferred not to show any special activity, fearing that they might be sent to field units. Therefore, it was not coincidental that the process of creating committees on the Western front did not intensify until the end of March and the first half of April, when both the front and the rear services were flooded by propagandists from Petrograd and Moscow.

Despite shortcomings of the organizational period, the activity of the soldiers' committees brought positive results immediately. In many cases committees could defend officers from physical violence and return them to their units. They considerably reduced the level of political confrontation in the army, promoting positive tendencies in relations between soldiers and officers, sometimes, however, at the cost of the officers' privileges. Nevertheless, the main result of the activity of the committees, throughout March and April of 1917, was to keep the soldiers from protesting and to avoid dual power in the army on the Western front.³⁹ Cooperation between the military leadership and the soldier committees at different levels was a means to prevent anarchy and maintain the military efficiency of the troops. The First Congress of the front and rear units testifies to how complex and contradictory this process was.

3.5 The First Congress of the Military and Rear Units of the Western Front

The First Congress of the military and rear units of the Western front was held in Minsk, April 7 through April 17, 1917. The Congress was considered in political circles to be of great importance, as seen by the fact that leaders of the Provisional Government,

³⁹ The situation at the Western front was under control, however, it was deteriorated by the crisis in army management. Guchkov, the War Minister, describing the situation in the Russian army at that time, used the terms *mono power*, *poly power*, *no power*, but not *dual power*. See P. N. Miliukov. Istoriia Russkoi revoliutsii, vol. 1, p. 83.

the Petrograd Soviet, and representatives of the French and British military missions participated in its work. It was the first time since the beginning of the revolution that a Congress was held at the front.⁴⁰ The resolutions of the Congress were of national importance as they defined political trends not only in the army but for the society as a whole.

The first Congress demonstrated its support to the Provisional Government and expressed the necessity for the Petrograd Soviet to exercise control over it. As far as the war issue was concerned, the Congress whole-heartedly supported the March 28, 1917, declaration of the Provisional Government regarding the continuation of war as a means to protect the revolution.⁴¹ Among the adopted resolutions, special attention was paid to the documents regarding soldiers' organizations (committees) in the army which were designed to unite the soldiers and the officers not only at the local level, but also at the front. According to this resolution, the basic organization at the lowest level was the company committee; at the level of the army — Army Soviets of Soldiers' Deputies. The Front committee, which included all of the Western Front's three armies, was politically subordinated to the All-Russia Central Executive Committee of the Soviets in Petrograd, instead of to the Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Military authorities also approved significant concessions regarding the Soviets of the rear garrisons. In political issues, the soldiers' committees of the rear garrisons were subordinated to the local Soviets instead of to the military command.

⁴⁰ The Congress of the Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies of the Northern front was held in Pskov, April 22 through April 25, 1917.

⁴¹ The resolution for the continuation of the war was supported by the majority of the delegates: 610 people voted for the resolution, eight - against, 46 delegates were abstained. See N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revoliutsii* (Berlin - Petrograd - Moscow, 1923), book III, pp. 84, 88.

Even though the command attempted to reduce the role of soldiers' committees to economic and cultural problems, the delegates, nevertheless, insisted on expanding the authority of the Soviets to the political issues. The Congress supported proposals to grant soldiers all the rights and freedoms obtained by Russian citizens during the revolution: freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, etc. It also cancelled special courts for soldiers and the restrictions of their rights when they were out of military service or on leave. In addition, soldiers' committees for the first time had the opportunity to control their commanders by producing their written evaluations. When a higher committee approved a negative evaluation, it served as a case for dismissal of the commander. The command foresaw complications which would result from the implementation of this resolution and promoted another resolution forbidding the election of commanders. Nevertheless, the Front Executive Committee kept the right to control the activity of the front command.

Thus, the well-planned system of committee subordination and detailed description of their activities allowed the hope that the anarchy, which had begun to spread in the army, would be stopped and the confrontation between committees and command would disappear in due course. The Congress showed that, having understood the importance of a compromise, the opposing sides (the Soviets and the Provisional Government), however, did not realize the seriousness of the situation. Although B. Pozner, chairman of the Congress, declared that the front and the rear units were united and that the revolutionary army was made stronger, this was an empty statement.⁴² On the contrary, the Congress demonstrated that in the dispute for the control of the army

⁴² This statement was made during the interview for the press after the Congress. See S. P. Milgunov, Martovskii dni 1917 goda (Paris, 1961), p. 348.

between the Petrograd Soviet and the liberal bourgeoisie, the latter was defeated. The army supported the Soviets, but their position was rather precarious among the other institutions that pretended to play a political role. It depended greatly on the ability of the Soviets to fulfill their promises not only to the army, but even more so to the workers and the peasants. Official power was forced to cooperate with the Soviets, but its attitude toward them was suspicious.

The unclear position of the Soviets in the army resulted from the fact that political opponents placed upon them different and often opposite expectations. The soldiers saw in the Soviets guarantors of their rights and freedoms. They believed that they were capable of asking the Provisional Government the most burning questions and of achieving solutions. As for the Provisional Government and the military command, they were forced to accept the Soviets in the army. They considered them as useful intermediaries in establishing normal relations between soldiers and officers.

Although the Congress was primarily concerned with military issues, peasant and land issues also were of great interest to the delegates, because a correct position in these matters could directly influence the fighting capability of the Russian army, which was composed mainly of peasants. The resolution to immediately expropriate church and monastic lands approved by the participants was important but not essential given the fact that the final decision regarding the transfer to peasants of all lands belonging to landlords was postponed until the Constituent Assembly. Nevertheless, in order to accelerate the preparation of the necessary documents, the delegates discussed in detail the future land-use system. Those proposals were based on the program of the Socialist Revolutionaries, which provided for the socialization of land, equal rights to use it and

the prohibition to sell it. The unwillingness of the Provisional Government and the SRs-Menshevik-controlled Soviets to resolve the land issue during the Congress had far-reaching political consequences. The ordinary peasant-soldiers got an opportunity to realize that their hopes and demands regarding the land distribution issue were ignored by the higher institutions. They also found out that the leadership of the country supported by the SRs-Menshevik-controlled Soviets, did not understand the problems facing Russia. Replacing the political slogans " War to the End " with " Peace without Annexations and Indemnities " did not change the attitude to the most urgent problems either of the military or of the government.

The position of the Bolsheviks at the Congress was insignificant. Local Bolsheviks (A. Miasnikov, N. Alibegov, and I. Solntsev) as well as the Bolsheviks from Moscow and Petrograd (N. Budaev and V. Nogin) were not allowed to speak. As A. Shliapnikov wrote: "We were too frightening for the politically unsophisticated soldiers".⁴³ Perhaps V. Knorin, a Bolshevik representative of the Minsk Soviet, was right when he pointed out that the delegates from front-line units could not distinguish the Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks.⁴⁴ However, the weak position of the Bolsheviks at the Congress benefited them later while the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, who supported programs and slogans unpopular among the soldiers, became vulnerable.

⁴³ A. Shliapnikov, Semnadsatyi god (Moscow - Leningrad, 1923), book I, pp. 173, 194.

⁴⁴ V. Knorin, Oktiabr' na fronte. Vospominaniia (Minsk, 1967), p. 113.

3.6 The Development of a Mechanism of Self-Regulation among the Troops of the Western Front. Soldiers' Committees of the Western Front, April – May 1917

The democratization of the troops of the Western front, which started in the first weeks of the revolution, resulted in the fact that Order no.1 — originally an instruction regulating the activities of soldiers committees — turned into a political instrument regulating the intra-army relations. In April – May 1917, relations between soldiers and officers became so difficult, that it was discussed practically at all the meetings which took place in the Headquarters.⁴⁵ The problem of intra-army relations had always existed in the Russian army. The February Revolution simply exacerbated it, spreading doubts among the soldiers regarding the legality of the methods used in the army and affecting the soldiers' perception of events. Every discrepancy was immediately used by radicals in the soldiers' committees. The unilateral interpretation of the order resulted in April 1917 in a new problem for the Command of the Western front: the dismissal and the arrest of the officers by order of the committees. This touched mainly those commanders who were most concerned by the fighting capability of the army and, therefore, demanded military discipline. Moreover, the newly appointed commanders were often not allowed to assume their official duties. For instance, the commander of the 17th rifle division of the 2nd army Colonel Kostiaiev and all the command of the 268th Poshekhonskii Regiment of the 3rd army were accused in reactionary and bureaucratic behavior and were dismissed.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Frenkin, p. 49

⁴⁶ Belorussiia v period podgotovki sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii (Fevral' - Oktiabr' 1917) (Minsk, 1957), vol. 1, p. 253.

This growing phenomenon often was complicated by the fact that the leaders of the left-leaning committees, in order to avoid personal responsibility, tried to spread this negative practice to neighboring units, thus creating mutual responsibility. These leaders incited soldiers against those committees which tried to prevent disorder in the army by obeying the resolutions of the Congress. This confrontation between the left-leaning and the right-leaning committees resulted in the loss of popularity for the latter among the soldiers. If the commanders tried to discipline soldiers and to force them to obey the decisions of committees, which they had themselves elected, this action was met with indignation. Even though the action of the left-leaning committees did not meet the minimal requirements of the soldiers' committees, there were no means to counteract them.

Splitting of the committees into left and right elements resulted in crisis of credibility toward the committees of higher level. This was obvious when higher-level committees defended commanders by refusing to approve a decision of dismissal prepared by a subordinate committee. For instance, when a 3rd army committee attempted to prevent the dismissal and arrest of the officers of the 268th Poshekhonskii infantry regiment, the soldiers reacted violently. Although appeals to the Central Electoral Committee of the Petrograd Soviet and personally to Kerenskii confirmed the groundlessness of the lower committee's decision, the soldiers refused to obey the higher-level committees.⁴⁷ This episode showed that the understanding of the democratization in the army was ambiguous. While the lower-level committees were mostly soldier-oriented, corps and army committees reflected the attitudes of the revolutionary

⁴⁷ Frenkin, p. 78.

democracy of those "at the top".

The committees' reaction was firstly defined by the political preferences of their members. While SR-Menshevik majorities dominated in the lower-level committees, army and front-line committees were influenced by more conservative forces. However, the latter not always were in agreement despite their ideological affinity. Indeed, on June 13, 1917, the committee of the 3rd army, in agreement with the representatives of the 10th army, demanded dissolution of the committee of the Western front, accusing it of "extremely harmful" activity.⁴⁸ As the Front committee was directly subordinate to the Petrograd Soviet, a demand was sent to the Petrograd Soviet to take resolute measures against "the radical elements" who had found refuge in the committee. As a result, the committee of the Western front was disbanded. All the above examples show that soldiers were starting to mistrust the committees and often ignored them. On April 19, 1917, Kerenskii admitted that a minority of soldiers supported the Soviet.⁴⁹ Though this acknowledgement was premature as far as the Western front was concerned, it reflected a tendency in the army. The military on the Western front started to distance themselves from the Soviets. It was an objective process. The SR-Menshevik majority in the Soviets discredited itself by ignoring urgent social problems. The Soviets continued to refuse to take into consideration the social structure of the Russian army, because they did not realize the importance of the problem. The situation was ripe for the emergence of a new political force claiming to be the defender of the interests of the soldiers, workers and peasants.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kerenskii made this statement, talking with British diplomat D. Bukenen. Quoted in Ibid., p. 97.

It is not surprising that since the end of April, Bolshevik propaganda among the troops of the Western front became more noticeable. This process developed mostly in rear garrisons, where the opportunities for information exchange were more available. Soldiers' delegations of rear military units often went for consultations to the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets. They also met with the soldiers of other fronts. For instance, in May 1917, the delegation of the 3rd army of the Western front visited Kronstadt, where the Soviets held power.⁵⁰ It is not surprising, that the decomposition of the army in the rear units was irreversible, threatening to destabilize the front units as well. The threat of unrest at the front became very real at end of April – beginning of May, when front-line units began to be strongly influenced by Bolshevik propagandists from Moscow and Petrograd. Their purpose was to discredit the higher command. It gradually became obvious that though the Soviets initiated self-management in the army, they were not able to control it. The political processes which took place in military units in the April – May period, often pushed the soldiers toward radicals outside the army, but still in institutions close to the soldiers, i.e., the local Soviets.

3.7 The Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, March – July 1917

The composition of the Minsk Soviet initially was very similar to the Petrograd one. However, contrary to Petrograd, the Minsk Soviet included a small but very skilled and influential Bolshevik group. By disarming the gendarmes and releasing the prisoners from the Minsk jail in the first day of the February Revolution, the local Bolsheviks were

⁵⁰ I. Flerovskii, "Kronshatskaia respublika", *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no.11 (58) (1926), p. 42.

able to obtain an important position in the Soviet, and the Executive Committee of the Soviet, elected in March, 1917 was composed only of the Bolsheviks.⁵¹

The Bolsheviks in the Minsk Soviet did not differ from the Bolsheviks in other Belarusian cities as far as organizational skills were concerned. They did not have their own party organization and formed a joint organization with the Mensheviks. While working in this joint organization, the Bolsheviks had considerable success due to their intellectual superiority over the Mensheviks. Indeed, the Bolsheviks often made the decisions by manipulating Menshevik B. Pozern, the chief of the Soviet.

However, having no supporters outside the Minsk Soviet, the Bolsheviks often faced difficulties in dealing with the Mensheviks who were in the majority. The Bolsheviks were elected to the Soviet thanks to the support by the soldiers of the Latvian regiment and the militia. They were unable to find new allies in the first weeks of the revolution and their influence among the soldiers remained insignificant, even though prominent activists such as Knorin, Liubimov, Frunze and Miasnikov worked among the soldiers. Peasants were under the Socialist Revolutionaries influence, while the Mensheviks and the Bund dominated the workers' organizations. In mid-April 1917, the Bolsheviks in the Minsk Soviet began to improve their position because the leaders of the Mensheviks and the Bund were unable to develop the solution for the two main issues — the war issue and the issue of land distribution.

In contrast, the Bolsheviks in Belarus were able to reorganize their work by changing their strategic goals and tactics. Bolsheviks from Petrograd and Moscow

⁵¹ The situation in the Minsk Soviet was changed on March 8, 1917, when the Executive Committee was enlarged from nine to twenty people and the Mensheviks became the majority in it. See Kostsiuk, vol. 1, p. 454.

provided them with significant methodological support. Unlike their colleagues in Moscow, Belarusian Bolsheviks had no theoretical hesitations, having supported Lenin's April Theses from the very beginning. Moreover, in April 1917 the Bolsheviks in Minsk took advantage of an inertia of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries and began preparations for the re-election of the Soviets. They also put considerable attempts in order to re-organize their own activities. The results of this reorganization became noticeable in the second half of April, when the Minsk Bolsheviks openly opposed the Petrograd Soviet.

In April 1917, the Provisional Government confirmed that it would continue the war. This declaration, known as the 'Milukov note', caused mass demonstrations. On April 21, 1917, the Petrograd Soviet, afraid that the demonstrations would spread, appealed to other Soviets. It asked them to refrain from demonstrating and to wait for further instructions.⁵² The majority of the local Soviets, including the army and front-line Soviets of the Western front, followed these instructions. However, the Minsk and Gomel Soviets, where the position of the Bolsheviks was strong, expressed their disbelief and refused to obey the Petrograd Soviet's decision. The Gomel Soviet questioned the policy of the Provisional Government on the war issue. It emphasized that the Soviets were the only power capable of saving the country. Furthermore, the Gomel Soviet appealed to the Petrograd Soviet, demanding immediate action.⁵³

Taking advantage of the decreasing popularity of the Mensheviks and the SRs, the Bolshevik group in the Minsk Soviet made several attempts to re-elect the Executive

⁵² Revolutsionnoie dvizheniie v voiennykh okrugakh (Mart 1917 - Mart 1918) (Moscow, 1988), p. 111.

⁵³ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 24 - 25.

Committee. The re-election, which took place at the end of May, was opposed by the SRs, who occupied an important position in the Minsk Soviet.

The first round of the election was scandalous. A conflict occurred between the Bolsheviks and the SRs over the candidates for the Executive Committee, resulting in the walkout of the SRs. The second round brought an important victory to the Bolsheviks. The new Executive Committee was composed of thirteen members of the SRs and twenty-three Social Democrats; the majority of the latter were members of the Bolshevik party. The Bolsheviks were able not only to form their own fraction in the Minsk Soviet; they also managed to put two of their representatives on the board of the Executive Committee. Liubimov became one of the vice-chairmen while Knorin was elected secretary of the Soviet.⁵⁴ In spite of the fact that the Bolsheviks were still a minority in the Soviet, they had a great influence on the other delegates. The resolutions proposed by the Bolshevik fraction were passed more and more often. For instance, on June 20, 1917, the majority of the Executive Committee, including the chair, supported the Bolshevik resolution, condemning the forthcoming June offensive.⁵⁵ Thus, beginning in May 1917, the impact of the Bolsheviks on the decision-making process of the Minsk Soviet became more obvious.

The new elections, which were held in the Soviets of Belarusian cities, brought significant victories to the Bolsheviks. For instance, by the end of May, the Bolshevik section of the Gomel Soviet was composed of thirty members. In June Bolshevik groups

⁵⁴ V bor'be za Oktiabr' v Belorussii i na Zapadnom fronte. Vospominaniia aktivnykh uchastnikov Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii (Minsk, 1957), c. 25.

⁵⁵ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 34.

were organized in the Vitebsk and Orsha Soviets.⁵⁶ A similar situation occurred in the Soviets of the townships where the military units were stationed.

Despite the strong position of the Bolsheviks in the Minsk Soviet, they had no great impact on the soldiers of the Minsk garrison. Many soldiers remained loyal to the Provisional Government. The committee of the Western front was controlled by the Petrograd Soviet and the army committees formally subordinated to the Minsk Soviet, also preferred to follow the instructions of the Petrograd Soviet.

The Command of the Western front, aware of the Bolshevization of the Minsk Soviet, made considerable attempts to neutralize its influence on the military by establishing a Soviet to oppose it. In order to discuss this issue, the Command organized a congress of the delegates representing the Soviets of the Minsk Military District. It was decided to establish a District Soviet which would work in close contact with the Command of the Minsk Military District and coordinate all activities with it. The military Command did not try to hide that one of the main purposes of the new Soviet was to provide ideological support for the summer offensive.

3.8 Summer Offensive of 1917 and the Revolutization of the Front.

From the very beginning of the February Revolution, the Provisional Government tried to fulfill its agreements with the allies. It emphasized that Russian foreign policy regarding the war would remain unchanged. According to the original plan, the Russian military had to begin an offensive in the spring of 1917, however, by that time it became clear that Russia was not ready for the offensive. The reorganization of the Russian army

⁵⁶ Documenty i materialy po istorii Belorussii, vol. 3, p. 866.

started in January 1917 was not completed; the spirit of the military remained low.⁵⁷

By the summer of 1917, the High Command and the Provisional Government were faced with a dead-end situation, which became typical not only for the Western front but for the entire Russian army. The soldiers were demoralized, held mass meetings, and were ready to collapse. There were only two solutions: either to stop the war or to renew the military through a victorious offensive. The majority of the generals and officers of the Western front considered the summer offensive to be a mistake, taking into account the situation in the front-line units and in the garrisons. Indeed, General D. Parskii, the Commander of the Grenadier corps of the 2nd army, reported to the Higher Command that the offensive is not realistic and that the most one can expect from the soldiers is that they would defend themselves, they are not ready for a successful advance.⁵⁸ Despite all the objections, the Provisional Government decided to start the offensive on the Southwestern and Western fronts.

The lack of a reserve was the main problem the Command of the Western front faced on the eve of the offensive. None of the front-line military units was complete. The reinforcements ordered by the military Command were supplied only in part. They did not even compensate for the natural losses in the army. For instance, in June 1917, the Command of the Western front estimated its needs in personnel to be three hundred combat units. However, only three combat units arrived to reinforce the 2nd and 3rd armies. Moreover, the newly arrived units were so pro-Bolshevik, that the Command

⁵⁷ Revolutsionnoie dvizheniie posle sverzheniia samoderzhavii. Dokumenty i materialy (Moscow, 1957), p. 423.

⁵⁸ See Frenkin, p. 345.

urgently cancelled its orders, trying to stop the spread of the Bolshevik propaganda among troops loyal to the government.⁵⁹

While there was a shortage of troops in the front units, the growth of the rear units was excessive. The thousands of the soldiers gathered in the distribution centers and the reserve units were dangerous given the conditions on the Western front. They were mainly located near the railway stations, and the propagandists sent by the Petrograd and Moscow Bolshevik organizations had a comparatively easy access to them. Moreover, reserve units, which were located in the cities and townships, became the main source of Bolshevik propaganda amongst the local population.

Taking into account the complex situation in the military, the High Command and the Provisional Government made considerable efforts to promote the forthcoming offensive. The key elements of the promotion campaign were commissars appointed to the military units by the War Ministry, and Kerenskii's trip to the front. However, the effect of these actions was questionable because a lack of social motivation. The soldiers thought in simple categories. They ignored Kerenskii's speeches about freedom and democracy, considering them as meaningless. Their concerns were peace and land distribution. The incident of the assault of the delegation from the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet by the soldiers of the 10th army bore witness to that.⁶⁰

Therefore, on the eve of the forthcoming offensive the psychological condition of the military on the Western front remained unstable. Protest actions among the soldiers occurred on a large scale. Dismissal and arrest of commanders, disobedience and

⁵⁹ Frenkin, p. 308.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 352.

ignoring the decisions of their own committees became typical of soldiers' behavior. Indeed, the Commander-in-Chief of the Western front reported to the Headquarters, that the units of the 3rd Siberian corps disobeyed battle-orders. General Tsikhovich also reported to the commander of the 10th army, that the 169th infantry division ceased to exist as a combat unit.⁶¹ Trying to improve the situation, the Command decided to remove the "disabled" units (about 30,000 soldiers) from the front.⁶² Almost all the efforts of the Command to prepare units for a successful offensive, however, encountered a desperate reluctance of the soldiers to fight. As a result, the worst expectations regarding the offensive were confirmed. The offensive, which began on June 23, 1917, by the 10th army, had to be interrupted due to mass desertions. 48 battalions of the 10th army refused to fight. In the first days of the offensive more than three thousand men deserted. The "death battalion", located near Volochysk, detained nearly 12,000 deserters.⁶³ In order to prevent desertions, especially from the 2nd army, the Minsk District Committee appealed to the garrison committees and to the soldier sections of the Soviets.

The psychological unpreparedness of the soldiers and officers combined with the deficiency of the command contributed to the failure of the offensive on the Western front. The majority of the soldiers who remained in the trenches did so because: 1) they were afraid that if they deserted, they would be deprived of the right to get land during

⁶¹ *Idid.*, p. 359.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁶³ Belyi arkhiv. Sbornik materialov po istorii i literature voiny, revoliutsii, bol'shevizma i belogo dvizhenia (Paris, 1926), p. 47 - 50.

land distribution, or 2) they were not aware of any political force capable of resolving the war issue.

The offensive clearly showed the crisis of power, which had spread in the Russian army in recent months. The Soviets, whose main role was to regulate the relations between the officers and the soldiers, showed signs of total helplessness and their influence decreased to a critical level. They were no longer capable of protecting the officers from the furious crowd. On the eve of the offensive, some soldiers openly told their officers, that in the case of failure they would be executed. The officers began to flee units where the Soviets had no impact on the soldiers and were not able to guarantee their survival.⁶⁴

3.9 The July Days and the Western Front

The news about the July 3rd events in Petrograd provoked no reaction on the part of the Belarusian population and the military. The failure of the military offensive was so stunning, that it overshadowed all the other events. The military units were in the process of relocation and reorganization following the unsuccessful offensive and they could not react effectively to these events. The Bolshevik fraction of the Minsk Soviet was not strong enough to organize mass protest actions of the workers. Moreover, in July 1917, the Bolsheviks were accused of collaborating with the Germans. These accusations were spread by the right-wing mass media and the Belarusian population seemed to believe them given the failed military offensive. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of the Soviets in Belarus condemned the demonstrations organized by the Bolsheviks in

⁶⁴ Frenkin, p. 392.

Petrograd, and expressed loyalty to the Provisional Government. Similar resolutions were adopted by municipal Soviets and by the Soviets of numerous military garrisons, including the ones in Gomel, Vitebsk, Orsha, Polotsk and Bobruisk.⁶⁵

The tightening of Russian internal policy, which was approved by the meeting in the Stavka on July 16, 1917, was considered by the military of the Western front as a lesson of the failed offensive.⁶⁶ Consequently, all actions undertaken by the civil and military authorities such as closing of the revolutionary newspapers, which encouraged disobedience at the front, and the persecution of radical parties, especially the Bolsheviks, were accepted in a positive way.⁶⁷ The new regulations, which provided for a more severe punishment for persons opposing the Provisional Government and engaging in revolutionary propaganda, were also considered as necessary for self-preservation. In addition to the new instructions proposed by the Provisional Government, P. Baluev, the commander on the Western front, issued regulations especially for the territories near the front line. By these regulations all residents of the front areas (the Vilna, Ashmiany, Svetsiany and Disna districts of Vilna province as well as all the districts of Minsk province) were put under direct control of the military authorities. The legality of these actions was questioned neither by the front military units nor by the Belarusian population or even the opposition parties. Only a few Soviets of remote garrisons, influenced by the Bolsheviks, demonstrated their discontent. This dissatisfaction was

⁶⁵ Velikaia sotsialistsicheskaja Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia v Belorussii, vol. 1, p. 467.

⁶⁶ The goal of the High Command was to develop measures in order to re-build the fighting capability of the Russian military. It was attended by A. Kerenskii and other politicians. See Frenkin, p. 385.

⁶⁷ Two anti-Bolshevik actions took place on Belarusian territory as a result of the July Days: (1) the Polesskii Committee of the RSDRP (b) was forbidden to use a room in the building of the local Soviet, (2) restrictions were put on the printing and distributing of the Bolshevik newspaper *Zvezda*. Ocherki Kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii (Minsk, 1975), vol. 1, p. 319.

usually expressed in the form of resolutions, condemning the severity of the regime.⁶⁸ Garrisons located near the front line did not support these resolutions. Their Command, the officers, and the most conscious soldiers when confronted with anarchy for the first time were shocked by its consequences. To them, any actions related to the restoration of social stability and military discipline were justified. Thus, Lenin was absolutely right, when he pointed out that "... before the Kornilov Revolt, the military and the provinces would not support the Bolsheviks".⁶⁹

Being faced with negative attitudes toward their activities from official bodies and not receiving much support from the workers and soldiers, the Bolsheviks were forced to change their tactics. After the July Days they chose to remain in the shadow of the joint organizations. Moreover, they tried their best not to demonstrate independently of the SRs and the Mensheviks in the Soviets. Indeed, on July 13, 1917, in Minsk, the Bolsheviks together with the representatives of the bourgeois parties and Belarusian nationalist groups established the "Committee of the Revolutionary Organizations".⁷⁰ The goal of the Committee was to maintain public order while obeying the orders and instructions of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. During the elections to the municipal Council (Duma) in the second half of July, the Minsk Committee of the RSDRP (b) cooperated with the Mensheviks. They appealed to the workers, urging them to vote for the list of "the joint Social Democracy". In Gomel the Bolsheviks also cooperated with other Socialist parties.

⁶⁸ See the resolution of the Rezhitskii Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Minsk Military District in Revolutsionnoe dvizhenie v voennykh okrugakh (mart 1917 - mart 1918) (Moscow, 1988), p. 221.

⁶⁹ V. I. Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 5th ed. (Moscow, 1958 - 1965), vol. 34, p. 244.

⁷⁰ Velikaia Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsia v Belorussii, vol. 1, pp. 467 - 468, 515.

3.10 The Political Activity on Belarusian Territories at the End of July – August 1917

The conciliatory policy of the SRs and the Mensheviks was such that they were incapable of keeping workers and peasants from protesting against continued economic deterioration. In late July, the workers of three Minsk printing plants, the factory "Energgos", and the bakeries went on strike. Giving priority to their economic demands, the workers also developed a list of political issues, supporting those who were laid off at a cigarette factory in Minsk and a glass-making plant in Bobruisk.⁷¹

In the summer of 1917 there was also a sharp increase in the number of protest actions among peasants which were initiated by the soldiers of the nearby garrisons such as Gomel, Rogachev, Borisov and Minsk.⁷² The participants insisted that the landowners' land must be given to the peasants without payment. The history of the soldiers' involvement in these actions deserves special attention.

In the spring of 1917, the Command, following demands by the soldiers' committees, issued an order allowing soldiers who were 40 years old to go home on vacations to work in the fields.⁷³ This practice was widespread among the soldiers on the Western front since the spring of 1917. In units where the command tried to prohibit this practice by sending the soldiers to the front line, the latter disobeyed and initiated peasant protests.

⁷¹ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. III, p. 43.

⁷² Savitskii, p. 149.

⁷³ Frenkin, p. 329.

The discontent of the peasants over the war and the land distribution issue resulted in a series of seizures of the landowners' lands and their collected harvests. These were widespread in Eastern Belarus, including the Drisna, Senno, Lepel, Orsha, Gomel and Bobruisk districts.⁷⁴ Violent incidents also occurred in Vitebsk and Minsk provinces, where discontented peasants supported by soldiers arrested the members of volost' committees who tried to keep the peasants from illegal actions. Thus, if in early summer of 1917, the peasant protests were exceptional, by the mid-summer the number of the protests increased drastically. For instance, there were 25 peasant protests in Mogilev province and 37 — in Minsk province.⁷⁵ Even though these protests were severely suppressed by military units, they became a stereotype of rebellious behavior. Receiving no support from the SR leadership, which was supposed to defend peasant interests, or from the other moderate political forces, the peasantry, and in particular its poorest layers, looked for more radical allies.

3.11 The Bolsheviks in Belarus in August 1917

The reprisals against the Bolsheviks that took place in July 1917 did not ruin the Bolshevik party. The Bolsheviks managed to escape repression either by going in underground or remaining in the shadow of joint organizations. It was not only a matter of survival but also a time to reconsider their tactics and to develop new strategies suited to the new circumstances. They were able to protect their small organizations and to increase their propaganda potential.

⁷⁴ *Historyia Belaruskai SSR*, vol. 3, p. 42 - 43.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

The VI Congress of RSDRP (b), which took place in August 1917, gave a new impulse to the reorganization of the activities of the Bolsheviks in Belarus. Although in the official documents of the Congress only M. Rogozinskii was mentioned as a representative of the Western front-line units, four other delegates also represented party organizations in the local garrisons: A. Berastsen' and B. Braslav came from the Vitebsk garrison, A. Miasnikov — from the Minsk garrison, and A. Tsirlin — from Gomel. While speaking on behalf of the Belarusian delegation, Miasnikov pointed out the strengthening positions of the Bolsheviks in Minsk and emphasized their numerical growth after the July events.⁷⁶

The resolutions of the Congress were widely popularized in Belarus. The newspaper *Zvezda*, which renewed its printing on July 27, published the materials of the Congress. All the delegates of the Congress held party meetings in their units. Miasnikov was the main organizer of the party meeting in Minsk, I. Rogozinskii made speeches in the small town of Zamiriie, where the 2-nd army was located, etc.⁷⁷

The Congress initiated the processes, which to large extent determined the future political situation in Belarusian territories. Firstly, the Bolsheviks who used to work in joint organizations left them and sought to establish their own. In the next two months, independent political organizations were formed in main Belarusian cities. Secondly, a new impulse was given to workers and soldiers leaving the SRs and the Bund to join the Bolsheviks. For instance, during the August – September period, about thirteen thousand soldiers of the Turkestan regiment, which was stationed near Minsk, abandoned SR

⁷⁶ Shestoi siezd RSDRP (Bolshevikov). Protokoly (Moscow, 1958).

⁷⁷ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 43.

organizations.⁷⁸ I. Lubovets, a former member of the Soldiers' Committee in one of the regiments of the 10th army, wrote later: "The influence of the SRs and Mensheviks on the soldiers decreased day by day. Ordinary Socialist Revolutionaries turned to the Bolsheviks in groups".⁷⁹ Industrial workers who used to be active members of the Bund organization in Bobruisk re-elected the leadership of their trade union, choosing five Bolsheviks to be their representatives.⁸⁰ Thus, being relatively quiet during the first months following the February Revolution, by September the Bolshevik forces had reorganized their activities and become more noticeable.

3.12 The Kornilov Affair in Belarus

As the summer progressed, the situation in the army caused alarm. The army as a whole ceased to maintain its functional purpose. Only assault battalions, formed on the eve of the June advance, as well as some artillery and Cossack units, remained reliable. After the unsuccessful offensive, measures were immediately taken to restore discipline. During a meeting at army headquarters on July 16, it was decided to disband rebellious units,⁸¹ however, the overall effectiveness of this measure was minimal.⁸² Soldiers of disbanded units, when redistributed among the more stable divisions, tended to degrade the discipline of their new units, significantly worsening the situation. A typical incident occurred in the 299th Dubnenskii Regiment of the 2nd Army. Conditions in this

⁷⁸ Pobeda Sovetskoi vlasti v Belorussii, p. 188.

⁷⁹ I. Lubovets, V bor'be za Oktiabr' v Belorussii i na Zapadnom fronte, p. 278.

⁸⁰ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 67.

⁸¹ Frenkin, p. 385.

⁸² Pobeda Sovetskoi vlasti v Belorussii, p. 169.

regiment, once considered most reliable, sharply declined after soldiers from disbanded units were included in it. This led to the refusal of the 12th Company to obey their senior commander when he returned from furlough, preferring instead to remain under the command of a second lieutenant who held radical views. The order to disband the company met fierce resistance from soldiers, resulting in the death of the regimental commander.⁸³

The unreasonable enforcement of the disbandment order negatively affected soldier morale in neighboring divisions. For example, units of the 694th Regiment and the 29th Infantry Division of the 3rd army, sent to suppress the 693rd Infantry Regiment, instead joined the rebellious unit. This revolt was eventually suppressed by Cossacks with the help of artillery units.⁸⁴ Thus, such incidents made it doubtful that mass disbandment would prove effective in stabilizing the situation. Measures applied in the summer of 1917 also indicated that the military was becoming more inclined to resolve internal problems by force. The first victims of this policy had been the soldier committees, which, in the eyes of officers, went too far in carrying out democratization. These committees, which had for a long time served as a means of preventing disorder in the army and as intermediaries between officers and soldiers, no longer satisfied the command. They became an obstacle to strict military discipline. At a meeting on July 16, the commanders of the Western front spurred by criticism of the committees, tried to regulate them without their consent by limiting their activity to economic, domestic and educational issues. A number of commanders went even further. For instance, in the 10th

⁸³ Frenkin, pp. 413 - 414.

⁸⁴ Revolutsionnoie dvizhenie v Rossii v iule 1917. Iul'skii krizis (Moscow, 1971), pp. 426, 431 - 432.

army there were cases in which committee members were prosecuted. The commissars and chairmen of army and regimental committees, which had some influence with the military units, tried to persuade higher authority that such approaches were unacceptable.⁸⁵ They argued that such an attitude toward the committees completely disregarded the concept of soldier self-government, and could further increase tension among the troops.

Refusing the intermediary role of committees, officers insisted on remaining in direct command of the soldiers, who now leaned sharply toward the political left.⁸⁶ Evidently, the command of the Western front was unable to foresee the negative consequences of its actions. At the same time, the primarily Socialist-Revolutionary/Menshevik soldiers' committees were unable to politically restructure themselves quickly enough to accommodate the changing views of the soldiers. These soldier committees, which had originally been organized to protect soldier interests, ceased to satisfy the soldiers. As a result, these committees had become vulnerable on the eve of the approaching political unrest.

The State Meeting in Moscow on August 12, 1917, was one of the major actions designed to restore order in the country and discipline in the army.⁸⁷ Despite the fact that the formal documents tightening control over the army had thus far been rejected by the troops, commanders still felt confident because they were expecting definite changes in internal policy. The appointment of L. Kornilov as a Commander-in-Chief seemed the

⁸⁵ I. K. Telezhkin, Podgotovka i provedenie Oktiabr'skoi Sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii na Zapadnom fronte (Minsk, 1968), p. 64.

⁸⁶ For details about Denikin's attitudes, the Commander of the Western front at that time, toward the committees see Frenkin, pp. 385 - 389.

⁸⁷ P. N. Miliukov, Istoria vtoroi russkoi revoliutsii (Moscow, 2001), pp. 290 - 319.

first step in this direction, raising hopes that the army could yet avoid collapse. Thus, Kerenskii's telegram on August 27, 1917, accusing General Kornilov of plotting rebellion was a complete shock to the Western front command, site of the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters.⁸⁸

Had the plot really existed, it seems that Belarus should have figured strongly in Kornilov's plan. Located a relatively short distance from both Petrograd and Moscow, Belarus occupied a strategic position. The railway passing through its territory connected the Headquarters with both the Southwest and Northern fronts, and all of them with Moscow, Petrograd and the industrial centers of Ukraine. This was the front headquarters, the headquarters for the three armies. The officer divisions deployed here had already proven themselves during the summer advance.

In fact, Minsk became the central headquarters for the struggle against Kornilov's alleged revolt on the Western front. The Temporary Revolutionary Committee of the Western Front (organized along the lines of one in Petrograd) united members of the Executive Committee of the Western Front, the Minsk Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies as well as representatives of the Soviet of Peasants' Deputies and Municipal Self-government.⁸⁹ The majority of members on this committee were Socialist Revolutionaries, though there were numerous Bolsheviks representing the Minsk Soviet. The committee saw its primary goal as isolating Kornilov's headquarters as much as possible from the centers of revolution. Thus, the plan was to prevent Kornilov from moving his troops from the Western and Southwestern fronts to Petrograd and Moscow.

⁸⁸ Revolutsionnoie dvizheniie v Rossii. Razgrom Kornilovskogo miatezha (Moscow, 1959), p. 442.

⁸⁹ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 47.

As it was supposed that Kornilov's revolt would rely heavily on armed forces, the troops on the Western front, in particular those garrisoned in Minsk, were considered very important.

However, no direct evidence exists supporting the assumption that the officers of the Minsk garrison — the most important on the Western front — actively took part in any subversive plans or in the revolt itself. This non-participation of these officers is surprising, because an analysis of the situation shows that their sympathies were on the side of Kornilov. In fact, Kornilov was the first Commander-in-Chief to undertake effective steps to defend the officers from the soldiers' arbitrariness. Officers also associated his name with the termination of anarchy and restoration of order in the army. Despite this, the officers of the Western front implicitly obeyed Kerenskii's order, even though it was clear that suppressing the general's revolt using the armed forces would have very negative consequences, especially for the officers. Thus, it must be assumed that either the majority of officers did not know anything about the plot, or that the plot did not include the major military divisions of the Western front, or else that it never existed in the first place. As one might expect, the soldiers reacted negatively when Kornilov's supposed plot was exposed. At the same time, there were no soldiers' protests related to the suppression of the revolt or even to the condemnation of the plot. As a whole, the mood of the Minsk garrison, as well as of other large garrisons, did not cause alarm.

Nevertheless, news of the revolt provoked an unusually sharp increase in the activity of organizations representing workers. In an assembly on August 30, representatives of the Minsk trade unions and factory committees sent an appeal to the

city's residents to form militias. The first militias, which were formed at the railway station where the Socialist Revolutionaries were strong, consisted of some 240 people.⁹⁰ But this raises a question: Was it really necessary to form militias given that on this very day (August 31, 1917) the Executive Committee Bureau of the Minsk Soviet reported that the situation in the city was stable and that the garrison supported both the Soviet and the Revolutionary Committee?

There are reasons to believe that certain political groups were deliberately manipulating the situation in Minsk to their advantage. Since the situation in the city was controlled by the military, representatives of the Revolutionary Committee dispatched delegates to Gomel, Zhlobin, Bobruisk, Vitebsk and Orsha to halt all military trains headed from the Southwestern front to Petrograd and Moscow.⁹¹ In turn, Moscow and Petrograd dispatched tens of propagandists to the Belarusian railway stations in order to win over troops loyal to Kornilov. Belarus maintained in constant telephone and telegraphic communication with Petrograd and Moscow, and also with Kiev and Belgorod, in order to inform them of possible movements of anyone involved in the revolt. Thus, the Kornilov Revolt not only contributed to the uniting of the left forces but it also provided them with the opportunity to develop new tactics which will be used in the October Revolution.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 47 - 48.

⁹¹ Revolutsionnoje dvizheniie v Rossii. Razgrom Kornilovskogo miatezha, p. 444; see also Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 48 - 50.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Belarusian National Movement after February 1917

4.1 The Congress of Representatives of the Belarusian Parties and Organizations

A resolution of nationality question was one of the goals of the February Revolution. The ease of the Romanov dynasty's fall gave rise to hope for a quick and, in the main, painless settlement of the relationship between the central authorities and national minorities. The majority of national regions, Belarus included, demanded more power over local issues as well as a cultural revival. Only Poland and Finland expected to obtain independent statehood.

The specificity of Belarus lay in the fact that the country was divided by the front-line, which in turn divided the national movement. However, it continued its development, but under different conditions. The policy pursued by Russian administration toward the Belarusian movement was radically different than that of the Germans. While Germany, due to its strategic plans, supported the national movements in territories they occupied, the imperial policy of Russia, on the contrary, was directed toward the suppression of any sign of national life. This explains why the February Revolution, which had brought unprecedented political freedoms to the peoples of Russia, was so enthusiastically welcomed in Belarus.

The February Revolution promoted the legalization of many Belarusian sociopolitical organizations.¹ The Belarusian Socialist Gramada (BSG), which resumed

¹ Indeed, more than 20 political parties, including Jewish and Belarusian, as well as branches of the All-Russian parties, were active on Belarusian territory from March to October 1917. See U. F. Ladyseu, P. I. Brygadzín, *Na peralome epoh: Stanaulenne belaruskai dziazhaunastsi (1917 - 1920 gg.)* (Minsk, 1999), p. 5.

its activity in March 1917, had been the most significant among the Belarusian parties. The lower and middle-class urban residents, a considerable part of the peasantry, craftsmen and intelligentsia formed the social basis for the party. According to its general political aspiration, the party was very close to the Mensheviks and the SRs, but it differed from them in its national program.²

There were several other specific features, which differentiated the party from other national organizations. Firstly, it became popular not only within Belarus but also within the Belarusian communities beyond Belarusian territory.³ Secondly, many influential leaders of the BSG residing in Russian cities had close connections with the Russian revolutionary movement.⁴ This peculiarity is very important since many of the political and strategic aspects of the national movement were determined by the BSG. In the first weeks of the February Revolution, the BSG together with the Minsk War Relief Committee made considerable attempts to unite national forces.

The first Congress of the Belarusian parties and organizations was held in Minsk on March 23-25 (April 5-7), 1917. One hundred fifty representatives from a wide range of political parties, including leaders of the Minsk and Petrograd Soviets refugees and members of War Relief Committees, attended the Congress. The authorities were

² For more information about the BSG see Appendix, p. 150. See M. V. Bich, S. S. Rudovich, "Belaruskaia Satsyialistychnaia Gramada", *Entsyklapedyia historyi Belarusi* (Minsk, 1993), vol. I, pp. 410 – 413.

³ Branches of the BSG were acting in Moscow, Petrograd, Saratov, Kazan, etc. as well as in the army and navy). See Bich, *Entsyklapedyia historyi Belarusi*, vol. I, p. 412.

⁴ Z. Zhilunovich was a deputy in the Petrograd Soviet, A. Burbis was in the Moscow Soviet.

represented by a Social-Revolutionary I. Metlin, assistant to the Regional Commissar of Minsk.⁵

Some historians tend to question the legitimacy of the Congress, emphasizing that its participants were delegated without open discussion of their ideas by the grass-roots organizations. For instance, Vakar's opinion that the decisions of the Congress were not binding and the bodies it established should not be treated seriously was based on this premise.⁶ It can be argued, however, that it would be more logical to consider the Congress in terms of the historical realities of the day. It is unquestionable that the Congress became a significant event for the Belarusian national movement. It was extremely important for the leaders of the Congress to gather national forces of different political orientations and to find a common ground for the discussion of the political future of Belarus. The broad representation of radical political opponents at the Congress speaks in favor of such a conclusion. Political interests of the delegates were so varied that even the Congress' organizers had difficulty reaching a mutual understanding.⁷

The essence of the speeches of the majority of the delegates came down to two main points: a positive appraisal of the February Revolution, which brought significant political freedoms to the people of Belarus, and support of the Provisional Government in its struggle against internal and external enemies. The representatives of most parties were unanimous in their appraisal of the national movement. For instance, Zhilunovich,

⁵ For full text of the minutes of the First Congress of the Belarusian parties and organizations, see "Pratokol z'iezdru belaruskikh natsyional'nykh organizatsyi u Mensku 25-27 sakavika 1917 goda", *Spadchyna*, no. 4 (1990), pp. 29 - 33.

⁶ Vakar, p. 96.

⁷ Indeed, K. Kastravitski, a delegate to the Congress from the Belarusian Socialist Gramada, resigned as chairman and left the Congress to protest against the election of Skirmunt, a landowner, as a member of the Presidium of the Congress. See Ladyseu, p. 10.

member of the Petrograd Soviet, mentioned that the freedoms gained embodied, first and foremost, the freedom of each nation to develop. Zhilunovitch was supported by deputies from other parties.⁸

On the contrary, I. Metlin, representative of the official authorities, emphasized the importance of combining all efforts in support of the Provisional Government and pointed out that discussion of the national issue was premature and even harmful. He insisted that only the All-Russia Constituent Assembly had the jurisdiction to resolve national issues.⁹

The Congress approved the creation of twelve commissions and their programs. The most important proposals were made by the organizational commission under P. Aleksiiuk's chairmanship. It outlined future government structures and developed guidelines for relations with Russia. The Belarusian Rada (Council) was proclaimed the supreme legislature of Belarus, while the executive function was put in the hands of the Belarusian National Committee (BNC).

The deputies realized that the settlement of the national issue depended not so much on the wishes of the national bodies as on the attitude of the future All-Russia Constituent Assembly. The future relationship of Belarus and Russia, as viewed by the majority of delegates, was based on the assumption that Russia would be a federative democratic republic. Moreover, the Congress expressed its determination to struggle for the creation of a Federative Russian Republic in which Belarus would acquire the status of an autonomous republic.¹⁰

⁸ *Spadchyna*, no. 4 (1990), p.30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

Unexpectedly, the problem of territorial borders of the future autonomous state became one of the most important issues faced by the Congress. The Congress pointed out that Belarus had been divided between the belligerent countries and its borders had not been legislatively approved and, consequently, it suggested the creation of a commission to determine the extent of Belarusian territories. Outstanding scholars of Belarusian origin, such as Professor M. Liubauski (the Rector of Moscow University), M. Dounar-Zapol'ski (from Kiev University) and J. Karski (Academician of the Imperial Academy of Sciences) agreed to take part in the work of this Commission.¹¹

Amongst the proposals from other commissions, the following two deserve special attention: 1) national priorities in the sphere of education and 2) the statement made by the chairman of the Financial Committee, E. Budz'ko. After analyzing possible sources of financial support for the national movement, E. Budz'ko declared that the Belarusians living outside Belarus were ready to support the national movement financially.¹²

It was decided that the BNC would be in charge of the implementation of the proposals made by the commissions and approved by the Congress. The Belarusian National Committee comprised eighteen members who represented the main political parties and social classes in Belarus.¹³ The assertion made by some historians that the BNC included only members of the Minsk War Relief Committee is not entirely

¹¹ Ibid., p.32.

¹² Ibid., p.32.

¹³ The Belarusian Socialist Gramada was represented by A. Burbis and V. Ignatouski, the Christian Democrats - by E. Budz'ko and F. Gadleuski, and the Conservatives - by R. Skirmunt. Z. Zhilunovich was the representative of the Petrograd Soviet. See *Spadchyna*, no. 4 (1990), p. 33.

correct.¹⁴ It would be also wrong to assume that the election of right-wing representatives under landowner Skirmunt's leadership and his appointment as the head of the BNC was a political mistake.¹⁵ These accusations are not justified in the light of the political situation in March 1917 and the tasks the Committee was faced with. They are based to a large extent on the knowledge of subsequent events. Since one of the primary goals of the BNC was to develop new forms of relationship between the Provisional Government and Belarusian territories, Skirmunt, a former member of the Duma, was a good candidate for the position. When electing Skirmunt to chair the Committee, the deputies believed, that he would use his numerous connections among the Russian political elite in order to achieve concessions on the national issue from the Provisional Government.

The significance of the Congress for Belarusian history stems from the fact that the basic national forces of Belarus managed to unite and consolidate in spite of the complex situation in March, 1917. The Congress demonstrated that the social base of the Belarusian national liberation movement, which was previously associated mainly with the intelligentsia, had expanded considerably. The Congress convincingly demonstrated that in the first weeks following the February Revolution, the Belarusian political elite favored an autonomous status for Belarus within the Russian Federation. It felt that all problems related to the legal delimitation of the rights of an independent and federative state had to be settled legislatively and by mutual agreement. At the same time, the attitude of the official representative of the Provisional Government in Belarus, Metlin,

¹⁴ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 15.

¹⁵ See Kastsiuk, vol. I, p. 439; also Korshuk, p. 26.

demonstrated that certain political forces in Russia were not ready to admit a changed reality in the national issue.

4.2 The Belarusian National Committee

The growing activity of Belarusian national organizations coincided in time with the publication of the Declaration of Rights of the peoples of Russia (April 10, 1917) by the Provisional Government. According to it, the nationalities inhabiting Russia had extensive national rights, including the right to secede and create independent states. Nevertheless, all attempts by the Belarusian delegation to meet with the leaders of the Provisional Government to coordinate their first steps in this direction failed. Submitting a report was the only thing that the delegation, led by Skirmunt, was able to achieve. The report emphasized the urgent necessity of declaring Russia a federation, with Belarus as an autonomous state within its limits. It also proposed the democratization of local government. Demands of a national and cultural character were reduced to teaching Belarusian and the History of Belarus in local schools. It asked the Provisional Government to compensate Belarus for the damages caused by the military operations on its territory.

Although Belarusian politicians were most interested in a discussion of the above-mentioned issues, their counterparts were not cooperating. Negotiations ended without having started and the proposals of the Belarusian politicians were openly ignored. The only thing that they managed to obtain from the Provisional Government was its consent to maintain permanent contacts with the Belarusian National Committee.¹⁶ Thus, the

¹⁶ Kastsiuk, vol. I, p. 439, Ladyseu, p. 12.

BNC delegation returned to Belarus without having met with the leaders of the Provisional Government.

In Belarus, the situation was rather ambiguous. On the one hand, the BNC resisted the ideology of "Western Russism", which was actively promoted by the representatives of local and Russian political parties. On the other hand, the BNC was deeply concerned by its limited support among the Belarusian population. The low popularity of the BNC was caused by the fact that such vital social problems as land and peace were not among the priorities of the BNC. For Belarusian peasants, who were landless and ruined by the war, and for workers, who were not able to provide a living for their families, the problems of Belarusian statehood and of Belarusian cultural and national revival were not a priority. Therefore, despite a number of good proposals regarding national renaissance submitted by the Committee at its session in May 1917, its rating remained rather low. Moreover, at the beginning of the summer of 1917, when it became clear that the BNC had refused to discuss the land issue and following the Provisional Government's decision to transfer this problem to the All-Russia Constituent Assembly, the mistrust of the Committee increased.

Persistent attempts by the representatives of the Committee's left wing to connect its political, national and cultural work with a program for social and economic transformation resulted, in the summer of 1917, in the dismissal of Skirmunt. The Committee itself was transformed into the Central Rada (Council) of the Belarusian organizations.¹⁷

¹⁷ Turuk, Belorusskoie dvizeniie, p. 91 - 92.

4.3 Belarusian National Movement on the Eve of the October Revolution

Almost at the same time the Central Rada amended its goals, emphasizing the social aspects of its program. The leadership of the Rada also confirmed once again its adherence to the idea of national and territorial autonomy.¹⁸ One of the shortcomings of the BNC as well as of the Central Rada was the absence of a well developed plan of action. One of the principal causes of this was the fact that, in the summer 1917, the Belarusian national movement was still at an organizational stage. Only at the beginning of August, 1917 was the Central Rada acknowledged as the center of all Belarusian forces.

The restructuring of the organization of the national movement resulted in the consolidation of national forces and in the creation of a united national front. The activities of the front were designed to support the idea of national and cultural autonomy vis-a-vis the Provisional Government. While political pressure was often applied to the Provisional Government, in this case the co-operation of other minorities was crucial. Guided by this strategy, representatives of the Belarusian political movement participated in the State Meeting in Moscow (August, 12-14, 1917), the All-Russian Democratic Conference in Petrograd (September, 14-22, 1917), and the so-called "Congress of the Peoples of Russia" in Kiev (September, 8-15, 1917).

At the All-Russian Democratic Conference, the Belarusian delegation represented by the leaders of its largest political parties, demanded the immediate creation of an independent council for National Affairs. Belarusian delegates also voted for the

¹⁸ The Belarusian leaders were not unanimous about the idea of an autonomy. For instance, Skirmunt, the leader of the Liberals, while supporting a regional autonomy, was for a limited political autonomy. According to him, "political autonomy" did not provide for the obligatory existence of an army, of

declaration issued by the national council of the National Socialist Party,¹⁹ demanding that the Provisional Government create a Federated Republic where the rights of national minorities were recognized in the form of cultural and national autonomy.²⁰ However, the final declaration adopted at the Democratic Conference confirmed once again the reluctance of the Provisional Government to settle the national issue. At the "Congress of the Peoples of Russia" in Kiev, Belarusian deputies issued a special resolution "On the Belarusians". It was an address to the Provisional Government demanding the immediate adoption of a decree on the autonomy of Belarus, which provided for the inclusion of ethnic territories which were occupied by the Germans.²¹

The uncertain policy of the Provisional Government toward nationalities promoted a redistribution of forces among Belarusian nationalists which, in turn, resulted in a restructuring of the national movement. Liberal democratic forces, which played a leading role during the first months following the February Revolution, gave way to Belarusian social democrats in the summer 1917. The second feature of the national movement was the radicalization of national organizations beyond Belarusian ethnic territories.

The inability of the Provisional Government to settle the national issue, along with the increased discontent of the people who were driven out of their territories by the war resulted in rapid politicization of the national movement outside Belarus. Between

customs on the borders and for a Belarusian currency. Tsvikevich, representative of the Belarusian SR's, recognized the necessity of local economic autonomy. See also Turuk, *Belorusskoie dvizeniie*, p. 91 - 92.

¹⁹ The Council of the National Socialist Party (so-called Russian International) was composed of eighteen parties. See Ladyseu, p.19.

²⁰ I. I. Voronko, *Belorusskii vopros k momentu Versal'skoi mirnoi konferentsii: Istoriko-politicheskii ocherk* (Kovno, 1919), p. 7.

September and November 1917, the First and Second Congresses of Belarusian Refugees took place in Moscow. Despite their different approach to the national issue, the majority of delegates supported the idea of autonomy for Belarus within a Russian Federation. The necessity of granting the right to self-administration and legislative functions in local affairs to the people of Belarus was emphasized.²²

As far as the actions of the national forces on the territory of Belarus were concerned, they had two goals: to further consolidate the national movement and to form Belarusian armed forces. National leaders, who had detected an increase of anarchical trends within the revolutionary movement in Russia, tried to assess how they would affect Belarus and to take the necessary measures to protect their new political freedoms.

On October, 15-25, 1917, the second session of the Central Rada of Belarusian organizations was held. The decision to protect the national interests of all Belarusians, irrespective of their social status was made, which became the basis of a new stage in the Belarusian national movement.²³ Realizing the inevitability of a social explosion if the Provisional Government did not change its policy, Belarusian leaders attempted to create a national military force, capable of resisting growing anarchy. The Congress of the Belarusian soldiers of the Western front (October, 18-24) in Minsk passed the resolution "On the creation of Belarusian national military forces". According to this resolution, the armed forces would be created to protect Belarusian territories and the territories of the Russian Democratic Federative Republic.²⁴

²¹ "Ziezd narodau", Vol'naia Belarus', September 29, October 4, 1917.

²² Ladyseu, pp. 19 - 20, Korshuk, pp. 29 - 30.

²³ Za dziazhaunuiu nezalezhnasts': Dokumenty i materyialy (London, 1960), p. 17.

²⁴ Korshuk, p. 29.

Persistent attempts of the Belarusian military to implement the resolution were opposed by Dukhonin, the acting Commander-in-Chief. He justified his refusal by saying that this decision was beyond his competency as Commander.²⁵ But, in fact, his refusal had different motives. The address of the Belarusian military to N. N. Dukhonin coincided with the October Revolution in Petrograd. The importance of this event eclipsed all other. Moreover, Dukhonin questioned the necessity to create national divisions. The Ukrainian regiment, which was formed by Ukrainian nationalists and was sent to suppress the Revolution in Petrograd, provided a negative example. In Vitebsk the regiment joined the Bolsheviks.²⁶ Thus, the attempt to create national armed forces made by the Belarusian leaders before the October Revolution failed.

²⁵ Ladyseu, p. 21.

²⁶ Kastrychnitskaia revalutsyia na Belarusi (Minsk, 1934), p. 63.

CHAPTER FIVE: The October Revolution in Belarus

5.1 Seizure Power by the Bolsheviks

The news about the revolution in Petrograd reached Minsk at midnight on October 25, 1917. The Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet immediately issued its Order no.1, informing residents that power was taken by the Minsk Soviet.¹ The armed forces of the Minsk Soviet, taking advantage of general perplexity, took over the post office, the telegraph, the train station, and the radio-station. Most political parties and organizations, including the Bund, the Right SRs, and the Mensheviks, disapproved of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. They were supported by the Front Committee. At an enlarged session of the Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet, the representatives of these organizations went on the offensive and demanded that the Bolsheviks transfer power in Belarus to the bodies of the democratic self-government, in particular to "the Committee to Save the Revolution". This Committee was composed of members of the municipal Duma, the Central Bureau of the Trade Unions, the former Provisional Government, and the Belarusian Central Council. The Committee was supported by twenty thousand soldiers. It did not recognize the authority of the Military Revolutionary Committee that emerged in Petrograd, and refused to submit to it.²

The Bolsheviks in the Minsk Soviet openly ignored the demands of their political opponents, and established a local Military Revolutionary Committee, which became the principal political organization in Belarus at that time. In turn, "the Committee to Save

¹ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. III, p. 68.

² The forces of the Minsk Soviet were composed of the regiment formed in the first day of the February Revolution from former prisoners, the 37th and 289th reserve regiments. See Ibid., vol. III, p. 68.

the Revolution" continued to insist on a transfer of power from the Minsk Soviet, threatening to appeal to military units to crush the Military Revolutionary Committee, the Minsk Soviet, and the Bolshevik party organization. The Bolsheviks, uncertain of their ability to hold on to power and not having sufficient forces on their side, agreed to negotiate. Finally, they were forced to accept the proposals with one condition: not to send military units to Petrograd and to Moscow to repress the revolution. Moreover, they agreed to cooperate with the Committee and obey orders issued by it. In order to demonstrate their intentions, some Bolshevik representatives were sent to the Committee. After the agreements were reached, power in the city was transferred to the Committee to Save the Revolution.

Nevertheless, the Military Revolutionary Committee, which did not abandon the idea of returning to power, organized meetings to rally the support of the soldiers of the second army. These units, supervised by the Bolsheviks, entered the city at midnight on November 2, took over the Minsk Soviet and arrested the members of "the Committee to Save the Revolution" and I. Zhdanov, the former commissar of the Western front.³ "The Committee to Save the Revolution" and the Military Command were incapable of resisting these armed forces. They certainly underestimated the organizing abilities of the Bolsheviks and their influence with the soldiers.

Having achieved a military coup, the Bolshevik fraction in "the Committee to Save the Revolution" left the Committee. In order to disguise the violent character of its armed coup and to gain some support from the people, the overwhelming majority of whom were hostile to the Bolsheviks, the Military Revolutionary Committee appealed to

³ Velikaia Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsia v Belorussii. Dokumenty i materialy (Minsk, 1957), vol. II, pp. 56, 62 - 63.

numerous public organizations to send their representatives. Understanding the illegality of the new political structure, the leading political forces refused to cooperate with the Bolsheviks.⁴

Even though the scenarios of the October coup in Belarus varied depending on the interrelation of political forces involved in the political processes on both sides, the main role in the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was played by a comparatively insignificant number of soldiers who were attracted by violent actions and supervised by the Bolsheviks. The process of the seizure of power in Vitebsk is typical, and reveals in detail the mechanisms of the Bolshevik coup. The Vitebsk Military Committee, which was capable of seizing power in the city, was founded on October 27, during the session of the Vitebsk Provisional Committee of the RSDRP.⁵

Contrary to the Minsk pattern, the Bolsheviks in the Vitebsk Soviet were too few in number to carry out the decision to form a Military Revolutionary Committee and thereby take control of the city and reliable military units.⁶ Nevertheless, following the Minsk Committee, they took advantage of the confusion. Supported by the Latvian detachment, the Vitebsk Revolutionary Committee dispersed the local Soviet took under its control the post-office, the telegraph, and the train station and imposed censorship. A date for new elections of the Vitebsk Soviet, which was in the hands of the Mensheviks and the SRs, was also announced. The seizure of power in Vitebsk by one group of

⁴ Za dziazhaunuiu nezalezhnats' Belarusi: Dakumenty i materyialy, p. 17.

⁵ Kastrychnitskaia revaliutsia na Belarusi, pp. 58 - 59.

⁶ Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. III, p. 73.

soldiers needs additional comment.⁷ As a matter of fact, Bolshevik propagandists from Petrograd and Moscow were able to convince the hundreds of soldiers which were sent to the aid of the Provisional Government and concentrated at the train station in Vitebsk not to obey this order and to stop their movement toward Petrograd. Moreover, the local Bolsheviks, being faced with a shortage of followers, called on the soldiers to leave the train station and to take to the streets of the city to defend Soviet power. However, there was no need to do so.

From the very beginning of the revolution Orsha was under control of the Stavka, due to the fact that Orsha rail station was considered as a major transfer point on the road from Southern and Western fronts to Petrograd and Moscow. The position of the Bolsheviks was very weak in the Orsha Soviet and thus, it was not unusual for the Executive Committee of the Orsha Soviet to condemn the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd. Followed by the municipal Duma, it declared its support for the Provisional Government and formed "the Committee of Public Safety". In turn, the Bolsheviks called on reliable military support and established an Executive Bureau, which began to function as the Military Revolutionary Committee. It had nothing in common with the Orsha Soviet. The Bolshevik fraction withdrew from the Soviet, and together with the new Executive Bureau, declared itself the new Soviet of the Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. A few days later, the Executive Bureau was renamed the Revolutionary Military Committee. Thus, the Bolshevik coup in Orsha was completed.⁸

⁷ Soviet historians, in their attempts to reduce the importance of the transit forces in Vitebsk, usually mention only fifty soldiers-railroaders. See *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 73.

⁸ *Kastrychnitskaia revaliutsia na Belarusi*, p. 62.

The seizure of power in Gomel was different from other Belarusian cities due to the Red Guards who were the main players in the October coup there. A group of approximately 5,000 Red Guards was composed of mobilized Russian workers, who were employed on the military workshops of Gomel.⁹ On the first day of the October Revolution, the workers called by the Bolsheviks to defend the Soviet, disarmed the soldiers guarding the local armory and took the weapons. Even though they did not use them, the presence of armed forces supporting the Bolsheviks had a psychological effect on their opponents. Nevertheless, at the session of the Gomel Soviet, which was controlled by the Mensheviks and the SRs, the violent seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd was condemned and Bolshevik attempts to form local Military Revolutionary Committee were rejected. Faced with unexpected resistance, the Bolsheviks tried to manipulate public opinion. After having concluded the agreement with the Left SRs, who had followers among the peasants' deputies, they called a joint session of the city Soviet and the district Soviet of the peasants' deputies. Appealing to the peasants on behalf of this coalition and emphasizing slogans popular among the peasants about land distribution, the Bolsheviks succeeded in electing a Military Revolutionary Committee.¹⁰ They were even able to reelect the Gomel Soviet.

The complexity of the situation in Mogilev was enhanced by the presence of the Supreme Headquarters (Stavka). At the first meeting after the revolution in Petrograd, representatives of public and political organizations established "a Public Committee to Save the Revolution." This action by the democratic forces was supported by the

⁹ *Ocherki istorii kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii*, vol. 1, p. 299.

¹⁰ The Military Revolutionary Committee in Gomel was composed of nine people, four of them were the Bolsheviks. See for details *Khronika vazhneishykh sobytii istorii KPB* (Minsk, 1962), pp. 304, 431.

Executive Committee the Mogilev Soviet, which passed a resolution condemning the violent seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd and calling for the establishment of a "Democratic Ministry", by which it meant the calling of an All-Russian Constituent Assembly.¹¹

The Military Revolutionary Committee in Petrograd understandably paid a close attention to the situation in Mogilev which was considered as a center of counter-revolution. It decided the best course of action was to dispatch a revolutionary group whose main goal was to liquidate the Stavka and take power in Mogilev.¹² Despite of the presence in Mogilev of reliable military support for the Provisional Government, the revolutionary group from Petrograd that entered the city at midnight on November 19, 1917 met no serious resistance. The Stavka was liquidated and General Dukhonin, the Commander-in-Chief, was lynched by his troops. His position was given to the General M. Bonch-Bruevich, the brother of Lenin's trusted friend V. Bonch-Bruevich. Thus, one of the main factors, which heavily contributed to the Bolsheviks' success in Mogilev, was the fact that the majority of the remaining high-ranking officers of the Stavka took the Bolshevik side. The details of this process will be discussed later.

The Executive Committee of the Mogilev Soviet, the majority of whom were the Mensheviks and the SRs, took into account the decision made by the officers and afraid of a bloodshed between the hostile military units, recognized the authority of the Military Revolutionary Committee.

¹¹ I. Liubimov, Revoliutsiia 1917 goda. Khronika sobytii (Moscow, 1930), pp. 83 - 84.

¹² Ibid., p. 85.

Thus, despite some differences in the scenarios of the October Revolution in various Belarusian cities, the mechanism of the seizure of power remained to a large extent identical and included the manipulation of the local Soviets and the formation of local Military Revolutionary Committees to which power was transferred by the Soviets.

This analysis of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in the large Belarusian cities would be incomplete without analyzing the processes that took place in the military on the Western front. It needs to be mentioned that despite the strengthening of the positions of the Bolsheviks in the soldiers' committees after Kornilov coup, the Mensheviks and the SRs still had significant influence among the soldiers on the Western front. The struggle between them and the Bolsheviks over the soldiers penetrated all the structures on the Western front.

The tactics employed by the Bolsheviks in this struggle were determined by conditions, which were varied and complex. Far from having absolute support among the soldiers' committees at the local level, they were forced to maneuver, using the revolutionary slogans and making temporary agreements with the Mensheviks and SRs during the re-elections of the committees. At the same time, the Bolshevik leaders, understanding the illegitimacy of the methods they had used during the coup, tried to compromise "the Committees to Save the Revolution" which had largely been elected by democratic procedures. Taking advantage of the low political consciousness of the soldiers, they created a myth about the bourgeois character of these political institutions while emphasizing the proletarian nature of the Military Revolutionary Committees.

These tactics proved to be successful on the local level. However, the Bolsheviks ran into difficulties when they tried to employ the same tactics on army and front

committees, which were under the influence of the Mensheviks and the SRs. For instance, at the three army congresses that took place in the first weeks of November, only one, the Congress of the 2nd army, approved a resolution condemning the activities of the Minsk "Committee to Save the Revolution".¹³ The two other army committees, who had criticized the seizure of power in Petrograd, passed resolutions supporting the democratic institutions. Being aware of the weakness of their positions at the army level, the Bolsheviks insisted on the re-election of these committees and made considerable efforts to ensure the presence of their own supporters in them. The Bolsheviks were much more successful in the 2nd and the 10th armies than in the 3rd army. Despite holding a re-election, the soldiers' committees in the 3rd army still remained under the Mensheviks and SRs influence. Thus, it is small wonder that the majority of the delegates of the Second Congress of the 3rd army, which was held from November 2 to November 6, passed a resolution, demanding the establishment of a united socialist government, which would be composed of the representatives of the two main camps of social democracy.¹⁴

The Bolsheviks did not want to acknowledge their defeat at this congress, and insisted on calling an extraordinary congress. At the congress, which took place one month later, the Bolsheviks obtained 75 out of 99 seats.¹⁵ The striking contrast in the ballots can be explained not by an increased influence of the Bolsheviks but rather by the fact that the High Command finally defined its position toward the Bolsheviks. By making the decision to co-operate with the Bolsheviks, the Command pushed the army

¹³ As it was mentioned above, the soldiers of this army participated in disarming of "the Committee to Save the Revolution" in Minsk.

¹⁴ Kastrychnitskaia revaliutsia na Belarusi, p. 76.

¹⁵ Ocherki istorii kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii, vol. 1, pp. 308 - 385.

toward the Bolsheviks. It contributed to the Bolshevik victory, both in the 3rd army and on the Western front. However, those facts indicate that the support of the October Revolution by the military of the Western front was not as unequivocal as it was subsequently presented in Soviet historiography.

After the Bolsheviks achieved victory in the largest garrisons and at the front, their other actions to consolidate this victory were largely irrelevant.

The tight control by the Bolsheviks over the re-election of the committees and the promotion of the interests of the soldiers' committees while ignoring other committees, such as the Workers' and Peasants' Committees, caused the soldiers' deputies to occupy the main positions in the legislative and executive bodies of the major Soviets. The mechanism of securing a predominant position for the soldiers in the Soviets can be seen in the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Region and Front. In spite of the fact that the Regional Committee was formed by representatives of the three major Soviets (the Soviet of Peasants' Deputies of Minsk and Vilna provinces, the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, and the Front Committee), the deputies of the soldiers' committees took the majority of the seats in it.¹⁶

The composition of this body corresponded neither to the social structure of the Belarusian society, where the peasants were in an absolute majority, nor to the national structure of the population living on Belarusian territory. Representatives of the Regional

¹⁶ The Front Committee was composed of 100 members (80 of 100 were Bolsheviks), the Executive Committee of the Soviet of the Peasants' was composed of 35 people (there are no numbers about Bolshevik representation in it). We do not have the numbers about the composition of the Executive Committee of the Soviet of the Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies, but it is known that at the Regional Congress of the Soviets of the Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies that took place on November 19, 1917 460 out of 561 delegates were the Bolsheviks or their followers. See *Historyia Belaruskai SSR*, vol. III, p. 77.

Committee were either professional Bolsheviks, sent by the Central Committee to work as agitators among the soldiers — Frunze, Rogozinskii, Liubimov were among them — or were Bolshevik activists who were nominated exclusively by the soldiers of the Latvian detachments such as Lander and Knorin. In both cases, the percentage of Belarusians was very low. Knowledge of these facts is very useful. On the one hand, it explains why the leaders of the Regional Committee persistently resisted demands put by Belarusians to fulfill their national aspirations. On the other hand, it helps in understanding why the Belarusian leaders were so eager to correct this historical unfairness.

5.2 The High Command and the October Revolution in Belarus: from Neutrality to Collaboration

The rapid and peaceful victory of the October Revolution in Belarus is traditionally linked to the active support of the soldiers of the Western front. Discussions on the officer corps are usually limited either to references to their disorganization or to the unsuccessful anti-Bolshevik coup by the Russian High Command in Mogilev. These perceptions share one significant omission: they do not take into account the comparatively small but important group which made up the Russian High Command immediately after the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd. The influence of this group on the revolutionary events in Belarus is not even mentioned in works dedicated to the October Revolution. The present section aims to correct this omission.

In the first days after the October Revolution the majority of the command on the Western front were neutral toward the revolutionary events in Petrograd.¹⁷ The generals' neutrality was clearly fictitious: in practice it meant that the commander of the Western front had ordered his subordinates not to support any effort to unseat the Soviet government, thus sharply increasing the chances of the Bolsheviks for victory. The second stage in the relations between the command of the Western front and the Bolsheviks could be defined as one of cooperation. It in turn contributed to the peaceful nature of the October Revolution in Belarus.

The composition of the military on the Western front, along with the presence there of its influential commander, General Kornilov, the former Commander-in-Chief, gave great hope to the anti-Bolshevik forces. The latter expected that the Bolsheviks in Mogilev would be faced with a well-organized armed resistance which might change the course of events.¹⁸

Moreover, General Dukhonin, the current Supreme Commander-in-Chief, was in direct communication line with the commanders of all fronts, the majority of whom opposed the Bolshevik regime from the very beginning and were ready to support Dukhonin with reliable units in order to repress the Bolshevik coup.¹⁹ Therefore, it came

¹⁷ The order issued by General Cheremisov, the commander of the Northern front on October 27, 1917, is evidence of this neutrality: "The political struggle which is taking place in Petrograd should not touch the army, whose main task remains the same as before - to hold solidly the positions now occupied, maintaining order and discipline". See "Oktiabr' na fronte", *Krasnyi arkhiv*, no. 24 (1927), p.176.

¹⁸ Even after his failed coup Kornilov continued to be a powerful and influential general because of his association with politicians and senior officers of the Russian army. In October 1917, he and his followers, including General A. Denikin, the future leader of the Volunteers Army, were formally imprisoned in the small town Byhov near Mogilev.

¹⁹ M. Przhevalskii and N. Volodchenko, the commanders of the Caucasian and Southwestern fronts, Shcherbachev, the commander of the Romanian front indicated their support of General Dukhonin. See Matitiahu Mayzel, "An Army in Transition: The Russian High Command, October 1917 - May 1918," *Slavic and Soviet Series* (Tel-Aviv), no.5 (September 1976), p. 19.

as no surprise that in the first days of the revolution, Mogilev became a meeting point for the main anti-Bolshevik forces, including the representatives of the Committee to Save the Revolution, the All-Army Committee, and members of non-Bolshevik parties. What prevented these forces from organizing an anti-Bolshevik mutiny?

The Command of the Western front was aware of the events in Petrograd earlier than the commands on any of the other fronts, including the Stavka. In the early morning of October 25, General V. Cheremisov, the Commander of the Northern front prematurely informed General P. Baluev, the Commander of the Western front, that the Provisional Government had fallen and that the Bolsheviks were in power, even before the Winter Palace had surrendered to the forces of the Military Revolutionary Committee.²⁰ After receiving more accurate news from the headquarters of the Petrograd Military District on October 26, General P. Baluev informed the troops of the events in Petrograd and demanded that order be maintained. This was neither a call to the troops to help Krasnov's force, backing Kerenskii, nor an endorsement of the government. Despite Baluev's outward neutrality toward the events, the content of his order left no doubt that he was searching for allies and hoping to gain the support of the soldiers' committee.²¹ The committees, on October 26, had not yet decided whether to support the Provisional Government or the new political authority. Thus, in this uncertain situation, Baluev did not want to oppose his soldiers. By employing these tactics, he hoped to gain time and to keep authority in the hands of the headquarters on the Western Front.

²⁰ See "Stavka 25 - 26 Oktiabria 1917 goda" in I.V.Gessen, ed., Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii, (Berlin, 1926), vol. VII, pp. 301 - 320.

²¹ I. Liubimov. Revoliutsiia 1917 goda. Khronika sobytii, p. 122.

The soldiers of the Western front continued to stay calm in contrast to their Petrograd comrades who actively participated in the seizure of power alongside Red Guard detachments. One could assume that this calm had almost no connection to General P. Baluev's order. The main cause of the soldiers' passivity lay more deeply and had a more complex nature than just obeying an issued order. Despite the negative consequences of the Kornilov Revolt, by the end of October 1917 the situation in the Belarusian garrisons and in front-line units was still under the control of the command. Thus, Baluev's order was not considered out of the ordinary either by the soldiers or by the officers. A second reason for this neutrality was the absence in large Belarusian cities of well-organized revolutionary workers capable of provoking and leading the demonstrations, which would involve soldiers alongside industrial workers.

The lack of decisive action by the High Command provided the Bolsheviks with a chance to rearrange their forces according to the quickly changing situation. Being convinced that the command of the Western front was incapable of undertaking any firm measures to stop the revolution, they turned their attention from the garrisons to the railway stations. As they gained more power, their main goal became clearer: to stop the transfer of reliable troops in the direction of Petrograd and Moscow. Thanks to their efforts, the railroad stations, which were on the main South-North transport channels, were blocked. Programmed by the Bolsheviks, revolutionary soldiers stayed at the stations where they had endless meetings, refusing to obey any orders issued by the command or allow further movement toward Petrograd and Moscow. All the attempts by the Command of the Western front and the Stavka to clear the stations were to no avail. The confrontation between the mutinied detachments and reliable Cossacks troops, who

tried to open the stations, threatened to develop into an armed conflict.²² Continuing to rely on negotiations, the command made a decision not to risk using force in order to put down the rebels. This helped the Bolsheviks to take control over the main railroads in Belarus.

The slowness of the command of the Western front, Baluev in particular, in accommodating to the new regime had several explanations. Made aware of the dismissal of the commander on the Northern front by Krylenko, Baluev still hoped that he would be able to keep his position. In order to assure the Bolsheviks of his loyalty, on November 5, 1917 he issued a declaration on the political neutrality of the Front's command.²³ This action was, perhaps, too late to purchase Krylenko's confidence. As a matter of fact, by the beginning of November, for the majority of the senior officers the choice was very limited. They were forced to pay full price for their hesitation: either by leaving the military ranks for the counter-revolutionary camp in the south of Russia or by collaborating with the Bolsheviks. Moreover, as General Parskii wrote to General Bonch-Bruevich, "I have no interest, of course, in the socialism preached by your Bolsheviks, but I am ready to work loyally with them, or with the devil himself, for that matter, to save Russia from German domination ... "²⁴

Paul Miliukov, having analyzed the motivations of the senior officers during the first weeks of the revolution, came to the conclusion that the initial cause of this action went back to the Kornilov Revolt, when Kerenskii accused the officer corps of being counter-revolutionaries. As a result, in October Kerenskii could not count on the support

²² Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. III, p. 74.

²³ Mayzel, c. 17.

²⁴ M. Bonch-Bruyevich, From Tsarist General to Red Army Commander (Moscow, 1960), p. 253.

either of the officers who were expelled from the military through so-called democratization, or from those who were promoted as a result of the revolt. "They supported Kerenskii as long as the wind was blowing in his direction. Now they were the first to turn on him in order to serve new masters ".²⁵

Miliukov's picture of the situation in the Russian army fit the headquarters of the High Command of the Western front very well. Both groups were equally represented. The officers of the Western front, when they answered the question why did they make a choice in favor of the Bolsheviks, usually insisted that they wanted to serve the Russian army no matter what ideology was adhered to by its masters. There is no doubt that there were other motivations as well, however. The truth is that during the first weeks of the revolution the majority of the front's command, including the leading generals and General V. Egorev, formerly Chief-of-Staff of the Western front, were psychologically unprepared to oppose the Bolshevik regime.²⁶ Their preferences were on the Bolshevik side. Having made this choice, many commanders tried to improve their relations with the soldiers and the Bolshevik organizations in their commands before Krylenko reached their headquarters.

Baluev certainly belonged to this group of officers. His arrest and dismissal from his position, initiated by the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Minsk Soviet, was an entirely political action.²⁷ There was no necessity for his dismissal, taking into account that he was not a threat at that time. His removal on the eve of Krylenko's arrival was

²⁵ Paul Miliukov, The Russian revolution. The agony of the Provisional Government, vol. III, p. 214.

²⁶ P. Selivanov, "Sozdaniie Zapadnogo uchastka otriadov zavesy", Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal, no. 1 (1972), pp. 28 - 35.

²⁷ Velikaia Oktiabr'skaia sotsialisticheskaia revoliutsia v Belorussii, vol. II, p. 160.

caused for different reasons. As a matter of fact, Frunze was eager to become the commander of the Western front and was not sure about Krylenko's decision regarding this issue. By accusing Baluev of being a counter-revolutionary and arresting him, Frunze was acting in his own self-interest.

The majority of the officers of the Stavka were also ready to cooperate with the Bolsheviks, even though its composition was somewhat different from that of the Front's command. The two opposite ends of the political spectrum managed to coexist in the Stavka. Nevertheless, these groups interrelated without causing irreparable rifts such as the one that resulted from the Kornilov Affair. On the one side, there were reactionary officers such as General M. Diterikhs and most of his officers, as well as Kornilov and his followers, and V. Vyrubov, the Chief of the All-Army Committee. When they heard about Krylenko's arrival, they left Belarus and moved to the south of Russia.²⁸ The second group continued to work, maintaining routine activities in the Stavka. In this group, the most striking example was Bonch-Bruevich who was known for his leftist tendencies. He came to the Stavka only in September and he was given the rather unimportant post of commander of the town's garrison. In spite of this, he was a powerful force because of his seniority in the army, his social and political connections, and his influence on the rank-and-file soldiers under his command. Understanding his mission in the Stavka, Bonch-Bruevich made considerable efforts to assure the generals that the new government needed the army and a professional command. There is no doubt that Bonch-Bruevich's position contributed to the fact that many officers stayed in Mogilev and continued their military routine until Krylenko's arrival. Moreover, "Not only did they

²⁸ Mayzel, p. 19.

expect no harm from the Bolshevik command, but they were even optimistic about their future and did not consider the Bolshevik government a great threat".²⁹ General Dukhonin, who managed stay somewhere in the middle, played his own political game. On the eve of Krylenko's arrival, he made considerable attempts to achieve the support of Bonch-Bruevich by offering him the position of the Chief-of-Staff of the Stavka with himself as Commander-in-Chief. However, Bonch-Bruevich declined Dukhonin's offer.³⁰

Thus, by accepting the Bolsheviks' proposals, the senior officers of the Front command and High Command and the Supreme Headquarters helped pave the way for the peaceful revolution in Belarus. The absence of anarchic actions in the garrisons and order on the front-line are additional evidence for this assumption. The Bolsheviks and the soldiers committees had no influence on the soldiers who were eager to be demobilized. The actions of the high-ranking officers were not out of the ordinary. They were rather a result of complex and contradictory processes of the internal breakdown of the military structure — a structure which had undergone the unsuccessful military campaigns of the First World War, the Kornilov Revolt, and two revolutions. It needs to be mentioned that the Bolshevik leaders appreciated the decisions made by the officers and employed most of them. Despite some difficulties, they eventually adjusted well and many of them occupied senior positions in the Red Army during the Civil War. The Stavka, under Bonch-Bruevich's command, functioned up to February 1918 and was later transferred to Petrograd where its military specialists continued to work for the Red Army.

²⁹ Bonch-Bruevich, p. 203.

³⁰ Mayzel, p. 19.

In conclusion, the popular assumption that the revolution in Belarus was peaceful and successful due to the support of the soldiers needs to be supplemented by the assertion that Bolshevik victory was to a large extent the result of co-operation with the Bolsheviks by high-ranking officers. The main cause of the underestimation of this fact by Soviet historians is undoubtedly that it did not fit the official line which emphasized the class character of the October Revolution.

5.3 The All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917 and the Struggle for Political Power

The October Revolution allowed Belarus to address three issues in a practical way: the land issue, the war issue, and the national issue. And while the first two issues were of some interest to the Bolsheviks, the national issue was discussed only on a theoretical level. The Bolsheviks in the Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet, after seizing power, had no interest in the Belarusian national movement. The opposite was in fact true.

The negative attitudes of the Bolsheviks toward the national movement caused a reaction by the leaders of the Belarusian national movement. They initiated discussions on the form of government desired in Belarus and on the kind of relations that should exist between Russia and Belarus. And while the second issue was mostly discussed on a theoretical level, the first one had more to do with the practical aspects of local administration. Belarusian leaders insisted on the necessity to organize local administration according to basic democratic principles:

- election of the governing bodies and transparency in the electoral process;

- proportional representation of the main political trends of the country;
- a government that would take into account the interests of the main social groups.

They were most critical of the Minsk Soviet and the provincial Soviets, accusing them of ignoring the above-mentioned principles. The representatives of the Minsk Soviet did not deem it necessary to discuss these issues with the national leaders. They were not prepared to share power despite not having the necessary authority amongst the population and the leading political forces of the country.

Thus, in the first weeks after October Revolution, Belarus experienced *dual* power in its political life. On one side were the Bolsheviks who seized power using unlawful methods and who were supported mainly by the military. Their power was used exclusively to the advantage of one party, most members of which did not belong to the local population. They were opposed by the united forces of the political opposition, which had a wide social foundation and demanded a lawful democratically elected government. In the fall of 1917, Belarusian organizations were sufficiently strong and respected to refuse any agreement with the Bolsheviks and to reject their proposal to co-operate. At the same time, the Bolsheviks were too weak to declare openly that the national forces were against the revolution. But in spite of the moral superiority of the national leaders and the lack of authority of the local Soviets led by the Bolsheviks, real power was in the hands of the latter. Both groups were aware that the existing order was temporary and both knew that the issue of local government would be the main cause of the forthcoming conflict.

By that time the issue of the local authority had been discussed not only by the political elite but also by ordinary Belarusians inside and outside Belarus. For instance, Belarusian soldiers on the Northern front at their conference of November 22, 1917 demanded the right of full self-determination for Belarus, including the right to secede from Russia.³¹ A similar resolution was adopted by the delegates at the Second All-Belarusian Congress of Refugees in Moscow.³² It proposed to create a Provisional Belarusian Council, which would be the main executive body until an All-Belarusian Assembly would take place. They proposed that the Belarusian Provisional Government be composed of representatives of the Zemstvo, the city dumas, and the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. Such an organization of local authority met with the approval of the majority of the political forces, with the exception of the leaders of the Minsk Soviet. The structure of local power and its programs were explained in the manifesto "To all Belarusians", prepared by the Belarusian Central Council, the Belarusian Military Council, and the Belarusian Executive Committee of the Western front. It emphasized that Belarus would be a democratic republic, which would be included together with Great Russia and the neighboring countries in the Russian Federation. The power in Belarus would belong to the Council, which would be elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret ballot. This governmental body would have the right to issue local laws and to ensure that local laws would not interfere with federal laws. At the same time, the authors insisted that nationwide issues as well as foreign

³¹ Korshuk, p. 29.

³² Korshuk, pp. 29 - 30, Ladyseu, p. 19 - 20.

policy and trade agreements with foreign countries would fall within the competency of the legislative body of the Russian federation.³³

The program presented in this manifesto was politically neutral. It was neither revolutionary nor reactionary toward Russia or toward Lenin's government. It simply expressed the main principles of the organization of a local authority. The Soviets, led by the Bolsheviks, were excluded from the composition of this new power. The day of the publication of the manifesto may be considered as the beginning of an open conflict between Belarusian national leaders and the Bolsheviks. The All-Belarusian Congress became the culmination of this conflict. The history of the organization of the Congress and its course demonstrate how sharp the struggle for power in Belarus would be.

After hearing that the national leaders intended to hold the Congress, local Bolshevik authority made considerable attempts not to allow it to happen. Miasnikov, the commander of the Western front and a member of the Minsk Soviet, went to Petrograd to convince the People's Commissariat of Nationalities, led by Stalin, that the Congress had to be forbidden.³⁴ However, issuing such an order was a complex task even for Stalin because the news about the Congress was widely spread among the Belarusians in Belarus and abroad. Thus, not being capable of interrupting its preparation, the local Bolsheviks, guided by Stalin, developed a plan, which included the political scenario for strengthening the Bolshevik local administration by including in it representatives of the Belarusian diaspora in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks' main goal was to split the national movement and to force Belarus to stay under Russian influence.

³³ Za dziazhaunuiu nezalezhnats' Belarusi, p. 17.

³⁴ Korshuk, p. 25;

The Belarusian Regional Committee, which was composed of delegates of the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies, was chosen as the main political force to achieve this goal.³⁵ The Belarusian Regional Committee was made up of second-rank leaders of the Belarusian Left SRs handpicked by the People's Commissariat. The leaders of the SRs such as P. Bodunova, R. Mamon'ka, V. Ignatouski, as well as leading figures of the Belarusian Social Gramada such as A. Burbis, Cherviakov, Zhilunovich, who had actively participated in the October Revolution on the Bolshevik side and were working in Petrograd at that time, were excluded from the list of the candidates to the Belarusian Regional Committee. The main reason was that all of them had very strong positions regarding the national issue and suspect in the eyes of the Commissariat, on how they viewed the future of Belarus.

In addition, the SRs in Belarus mainly represented the Belarusian peasantry, while half of the delegates to the Regional Committee belonged to the military. It can be assumed that the presence of the soldiers among the delegates was not accidental given the existence of the large military contingent on Belarusian territory.

The composition of the Regional Committee could be also seen as a provocation intended to split the Belarusian military, which, by this time, had tried to unite around the Belarusian Central Council and the Belarusian Executive Committee of the Western front. A thorough analysis of the actions of the Regional Committee allows one to assume that the main goal of this well-developed plan was to split the national movement which was seen as dangerous by the Bolsheviks. The Committee intended to control the diverse parts of the movement by using the Left SRs, the allies of the Bolsheviks. In case

³⁵ I. M. Ignatenko, *Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i samoopredeleniie Belorussii* (Minsk, 1993), p. 45.

of the failure of this plan, not only the Left SRs but also the entire SRs party, which was a leading political force in Belarus, would be compromised. According to the authors of this provocation, the SRs would stop their co-operation with Belarusian organizations, thus making the Belarusian movement much weaker. The argument that the Belarusian Regional Committee was an alternative to the military commissars of the Minsk Soviet has nothing to do with reality.³⁶ Rather the opposite was true. The Belarusian Regional Committee insisted on co-operating with the Executive Committee of the Minsk Soviet. Thus, the Belarusian Regional Committee was an ideal candidate for the People's Commissariat of Nationalities. Its goal — which was to split the Belarusian national movement — would be achieved in any case.

In order to justify its right to political leadership, the Regional Committee prepared a leaflet called "The Declaration".³⁷ The content of this document provides very important details which help to explain the struggle for power in Belarus between the Bolsheviks and the national forces. The document reminds one of an ideological declaration, written from the point of view of Russian interests. More than eighty per cent of the text is a description of the problems that Russia faced due to war and revolution. The authors were primarily concerned that Russia was falling apart and that Poland could annex Belarus. The unity and integrity of Russia were the main concern of its authors.

The part of the document devoted to Belarus can be divided in two parts. The first describes the hardships affecting Belarus as a result of the war. The second part expresses the idea, which was later implemented at Brest-Litovsk and might be considered as

³⁶ Ladyseu, p. 26.

³⁷ Full text in Turuk, *Belorusskoie dvizheniie*, pp. 101 - 104.

political blackmail. It states that having provided Ukraine, Lithuania and the other states with the opportunity to achieve independence, but having failed in the war, Russia was incapable of defending the borders of Belarus and might be forced to give it up to its enemies. By providing this explanation, the authors acknowledge that the fate of Belarus had been resolved prior to the March 1918 negotiations with Germany.

The question is why did the leaders of respected organizations such as the Belarusian Socialist Gramada, the Belarusian Central Council, and the Belarusian Military Council, who had witnessed the provocative character of the obscure Regional Committee, agree to co-operate with it. One assumption is that Belarusian political organizations agreed with the rules of the game put forward by the main political players such as the People's Commissariat of Nationalities, because they thought that by making temporary concessions to the Regional Committee, they would be able to remove from power legally the military commissars of the Western front. The ten mandates that the members of the Regional Committee were able to obtain from Belarusian organizations were irrelevant. However, they could destabilize the Congress, given that many delegates at the Congress represented radical forces.

Eleven hundred sixty seven delegates at the Congress had casting votes, while 705 had advisory votes. Among the delegates who had casting votes were the representatives of the main political forces of Belarus, including national parties and representatives of the local administrative bodies on the district, volost', and province levels. Members of regional political parties, including the Jewish, Polish, and Lithuanian communities, obtained advisory votes. 43 Bolsheviks and their followers, as well as the main representatives of the Soviets' administration, were among the delegates.

N. Resovskii, the commissar of the Western oblast' and front, welcomed the delegates.³⁸ Thus, the statements made later by Soviet historians that this was a Congress of bourgeois nationalists simply are not correct.³⁹ Issues of local authority, self-determination, and Belarus-Russia relations were among the main items on the agenda of the Congress. The delegates sent an address to Stalin, the Commissar of Nationalities, to clarify the position of the People's Commissariat regarding Belarus at the peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk. Stalin answered by telegram:

The Belarusian issue was not discussed by any of the delegations in Brest. The Soviet position can be summed up as follows:

- there will be no coercible retention of any people by another;
- the people has the right to a full self-determination expressed by means of a referendum;
- the military will retire;
- a Provisional Government composed of democratically elected representatives of the nation will be established;
- refugees will be returned to their homeland in order to participate in the referendum.

Regarding Belarus, I can say the same that I would say about any other national minority of Russia i.e.: full self-determination up to secession. The Council of People's Commissars will defend the interests of the workers of Belarus by all means.⁴⁰

Stalin's words clearly indicate that the People's Commissariat already had a clear position regarding the Belarusian issue. Firstly, by pointing out that the Belarusian issue was not discussed during the peace negotiations, Stalin confirmed that Belarusian territories were considered by Lenin's government as an indivisible part of Russia. Secondly, Stalin stated that if Belarus would make attempts to leave Russia, the latter had the right to regulate the process of secession through a referendum. Thirdly, it was

³⁸ "Belaruski kangres" (materyialy i dokumenty)", Belaruski shliakh, April 22, 1918.

³⁹ Velikaia Oktiabr'skaia sotsialisticheskaia revoliutsiia v Belorussii, vol. II, p. 599.

⁴⁰ "Usebelaruski ziczd 1917 goda: Svedchannie suchasnika", Belaruski chasopis, no. 3 (1993), p. 66.

declared that Russia, through the Council of the People's Commissars, would defend the interests of the working people of Belarus by all available means, i.e. that the Russian government gave itself the right to interfere in the internal affairs of Belarus. Thus, in his answer to the delegates, Stalin gave a clear indication of the legal status of the Congress and of its decisions regarding the future of Belarus.

The Congress adopted a resolution comprising fifteen elements. The main item emphasizes that whereas the Congress has the right to implement the concept of self-determination and to establish a republican and democratic order on Belarusian territories, it resolved to create an All-Belarusian Council of Peasants', Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which would become the country's governing body and would establish relations with the central authority (meaning Lenin's government). It also resolved that the All-Belarusian Council would immediately convoke an All-Belarusian Constitutional Assembly, which would determine the future of Belarus.

The rest of the declaration was devoted to the organization of the Belarus military, to the land issue, and to the re-establishing state control over manufacturing and trade on Belarusian territories. The declaration was conciliatory by character. It took into account the interests of the Belarusian Regional Committee as well as the interests of Belarusian leaders. Belarusian autonomy was not mentioned. The main concern was the form of government on Belarusian territories and of relations with the Central Powers and the Russian federation. Nevertheless, when this first point was unanimously approved, soldiers, carrying out the orders of the Minsk Soviet, entered the building. The Congress

was disbanded, twenty-seven people, including the presidium and the chair of the Congress, were arrested.⁴¹

Two recently found papers indicate that the leaders of the Council of People's Commissars in Petrograd were aware of the events in Minsk. The first document is an explanation by V. Pikel, a member of the Revolutionary Military Committee, intended for L. Karakhan, a vice-president of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Lenin's government, as to why the Congress was disbanded. Pikel wrote: "The Congress was disbanded after it decided to transfer all power to the All-Belarusian Council, which did not represent the opinion of all Belarusians". Accordingly to him,

The Congress was a meeting of Belarusian agrarians, gathered in order to dim the consciousness of the people of Belarus by their nationalistic chauvinism. It was disbanded when it came to loggerheads with Soviet authority. The clash was expressed in leaflets, in which our authority was rejected, after attempts were made to take over government.⁴²

The second document was written by Lander, a chair of the People's Commissariat of the Western oblast' and front. On December 21, 1917, Lander, commenting on the Congress, wrote to Stalin:

The Congress was convened contrary to the agreements which were made with you, comrade Stalin. While supporting in principle Soviet authority, as it exists in Russia, and while promoting contacts with the Central Government of the Council of People's Commissars, the Congress rejected the authority established by the Soviets and demanded that it be transferred to a body elected by the Congress. In turn, the Revolutionary Military Committee proclaimed the Congress disbanded and asked its presidium to leave the territory of the Western front and Belarus. It began to close the Kadet organizations, which had found refuge under the banner of the Belarusian national movement.⁴³

⁴¹ Ladyseu, p. 32.

⁴² Full text in Ladyseu, p. 103 - 104.

⁴³ Full text in Turuk, *Revolutsionnoie dvizeniie*, p. 109.

Lander's document provides a clear understanding of the main reason for disbanding the Congress. It was disbanded because the delegates refused to obey the requirements put forward by the commissars of the Revolutionary Military Committee. It is obvious that the delegates did not oppose Soviet authority established after the October Revolution. These papers show that there was no lawful reason for disbanding the Congress. However, possessing real power and supported by the military, the leaders of the Minsk Soviet did not want to transfer it to anybody else.

An armed disbanding of the Congress had far-reaching consequences. Firstly, the Minsk Soviet lost its credibility among the people of Belarus. Soviet authority in the person of its local leaders was totally compromised vis-a-vis the national forces of Belarus. The use of the military units in disbanding the Congress demonstrated once more that the Bolsheviks were true to their tactics and would not abandon them. Secondly, the failure of the provocation, which was prepared by the Council of People's Commissars with the agreement of local Bolsheviks, showed that any means would be used in order to keep Belarus under Russian influence. Thirdly, those events contributed to the consolidation of the national forces around the national idea. The value of the national idea became evident for the main political forces of Belarus, including the Left SRs and Belarusian Bolsheviks. Fourthly, it was a turning point for the leaders of the national movement. They abandoned the idea of a federation with Russia and adopted the idea of full independence for Belarus.

On December 18, 1917, the members of the Council of the First All-Belarusian Congress under Grib's leadership gathered in underground conditions and issued a resolution, underlining that the Congress was disbanded by force. The Council of the

Congress became the Executive body of the Congress and was to be responsible for the implementation of all resolutions of the Congress. Thus, the resolutions issued by the Congress became a base for the future actions of the national forces.

CHAPTER SIX: Establishing Belarusian Statehood, March 1918 –

January 1919

Three factors contributed to the development of the idea of Belarusian statehood during the period from January 1918 to January 1919:

- the division of Belarus, whose territorial and cultural unity was already acknowledged in the public consciousness;
- the unwillingness of the Bolshevik authorities to promote the reunification of Belarusian territories;
- leading national organizations, representing existing political trends, united to form a national front whose purpose was to defend the interests of Belarus by establishing Belarusian statehood.

The process of development of Belarusian statehood took place in very complex circumstances because each political force pursued its own interests. Having started at the First All-Belarusian Congress, it culminated with the declaration of the Belarusian Democratic Republic (BDR) on March 25, 1918, and later, on January 1, 1919, — in the formation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).

The issue of Belarusian statehood came to the fore largely because of external factors. Peace negotiations with Germany started on the initiative of the Bolsheviks in December 1917, raised the fear among Belarusians that their interests would be ignored by the main participants of the process. The failure of the negotiations culminated in the advance of the German armies and, as a result, new Belarusian territories were occupied. On February 19, 1918 Russian armies, followed by the commissars of the Northwestern

Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b), left Minsk. The Western oblast' still existed; however, its territory was reduced to Smolensk province and the eastern districts of Mogilev and Vitebsk provinces.

6.1 The First Constituent Charter

The day after the Bolsheviks were expelled from Minsk, the leadership of the national movement left the underground and began their activity. On February 21, 1918, the Executive Committee of the Council of the All-Belarusian Congress issued the First Constituent Charter. The Charter called upon Belarusians to vindicate their inalienable right to full self-determination, and the national minorities — to autonomy.¹ It did not, however, proclaim Belarus an independent state. Belarusian politicians were still strongly committed to the resolution of the All-Belarusian Congress, according to which, Belarus was supposed to be included into the Russian Federation as an autonomous entity.

The Executive Committee of the Congress became the highest legislative authority in Belarus, while the National Secretariat (Secretariat) appointed by it and composed of the representatives of the main political forces functioned as the highest executive authority. They both were charged with organizing an All-Belarusian Constituent Assembly, which would only have the right to determine a political order for Belarus.

From the very beginning, the Secretariat worked under tremendous pressure to provide safety for the residents of Minsk left by the Bolsheviks. It was able to establish good relations with General J. Dovbar-Musnitskii, whose legionaries controlled

¹ For full text in Russian see Turuk, *Belorusskoie dvizeniie*, p. 111; Kipel, pp. 131 - 132 (in English).

southeastern part of city, and thus secure a safe environment for Minsk's population.² Once the Germans entered the city, the activities of the Secretariat became even more complex. The German occupational authorities, pursuing their own interests, were not eager to share power with any other political forces. They also distrusted the Belarusian politicians from the Secretariat and the Executive Committee, which having been proclaimed as the highest authorities in Belarus, did not clarify their positions regarding the October Revolution in Russia. The Germans assumed that these bodies, by not differentiating between the social aspirations of Belarusians and Russians, pursued the same goal as the Bolsheviks. Moreover, in the First Charter the Belarusian politicians confirmed their readiness to protect the achievements of the revolution.

Another reason why the Germans refrained from active contact with Belarusian administration in Minsk was the existence of the Belarusian Rada (Council) in Vilna, which was known for its anti-Russian position and, thus suited the German policy better than the Minsk bodies. Thus, the Germans often gave preferences to the Vilna Rada, when making decisions affecting all Belarusians.³

6.2 The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Second Constituent Charter

The independence movement amplified considerably among Belarusian nationalists after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was signed on March 3, 1918. Belarusian

² Ladyseu, p. 34.

³ The Vilna Rada existed from January 1918 to June 1919. For details see Korshuk, p. 35 and A. Sidarevich, "Vilenskaia Belarускаia Rada", *Entsyklapedyia historyi*, vol. 2, p. 281.

territory had been partitioned between Germany, Lithuania and Ukraine.⁴ Only fourteen districts of Vitebsk and Mogilev provinces remained unoccupied. Belarus was also deprived of the right to make any claims for compensation for facilities destroyed during the war. Therefore, the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty indirectly contributed to the final consolidation of national forces around the idea of Belarusian independence.

The Second Constituent Charter issued six days after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, proclaimed the Belarusian Democratic Republic within the borders of the numerical majority of the Belarusian people. It contained eight articles regarding human rights and freedoms of the citizens of the new state. The Charter expressed a commitment to the social achievements issued by the first decrees of the Soviets: eight-hour working day, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, the right to strike, the right for national and ethnic minorities, living in Belarus, to be autonomous. While earlier the land distribution issue had been postponed until the All-Belarusian Constitutional Assembly, the seventh article of the Charter abrogated private property. The land was transferred to those who worked on it.⁵ Thus, Belarus was seen as a democratic state; the Executive Committee (the highest legislative authority) became known as the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.

The First and Second Charters were the first normative acts defining the core principles of national-state building. These principles were shared by the leaders of the main political forces of Belarus, including the Mensheviks, the SRs and the municipal

⁴ The Germans obtained the largest part of Belarus including Minsk; the Belarusian districts of Vilna and Grodno provinces as well as Bel'sk and Belastok districts were annexed by the Lithuanian state. The territory to the south of the Polesskaia railway was transferred to the Ukrainian Democratic Republic.

⁵ For full text in Russian see Turuk, *Belorusskoie dvizeniie*, pp. 112 - 113; Kipel, pp. 132 - 133 (in English).

governments who had initially been skeptical about Belarusian statehood. The attributes of a democratic state such as a Constituent Assembly, a parliamentary system, adherence to human rights and freedoms, attributes which were abandoned or ignored by the Bolsheviks, became the theoretical base for a rapprochement between Belarusian political parties and Russian democratic parties.

6.3 The Third Constituent Charter

Despite its progressive content, the Second Charter did not satisfy the right wing of the Belarusian Socialist Gramada, which became very influential in the Rada (Minsk Rada). Their grievance was provoked by the fact that no attention was paid to the issue of the sovereignty of the BDR, its territory and its relations with the neighboring countries. The ideal of these leaders was a sovereign, independent Belarus.

Pursuing this goal, they turned to the Vilna Rada to get more support. Both the Minsk and Vilna radicals made considerable efforts to develop reasonable tactics, which would bring them the missing votes on the issue of Belarusian independence. It was decided to co-opt the Vilna politicians to the Minsk Rada. Taking these steps, the Minsk leaders also hoped that the good relations which had developed between the Germans and the Vilna Rada would automatically provide German support for an independent Belarusian Democratic Republic.

On March 18, 1918, the six most influential members of the Vilna Rada — A. and I. Lutskevichs, V. Lastouski, D. Siamashka, I. Stankevich and A. Turkevich — were co-opted to the Minsk Rada and made a valuable addition to its right wing.⁶

⁶ Entsiklapedyia historyi Belarusi, vol. II, p. 281.

Having coordinated their positions, the leaders of the Vilna Rada and the right wing of the Minsk Rada made the following statement:

- the division of Belarus by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty is unacceptable to the people of Belarus;
- Belarusians have the right to protest against the partition of Belarus;
- if the Soviet government is unable to withdraw its signature from the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, then this article of the Treaty must to be cancelled at Belarusian request;
- in this case it becomes necessary to declare the independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.⁷

Despite the fact that the procedure was thoroughly prepared, the issuing of the most important articles of the Charter was quite complex, given the fact that many members of the Minsk Rada still saw Belarus as part of the democratic Russian Federation. In order to provide a proposed Third Charter with the necessary legitimacy, the right wing had insisted on the enlargement of the Minsk Rada's membership from 27 to 71 people, resulting in a significant strengthening of the position of the national radicals.⁸ On March 25, 1918, the session of the Rada delivered the Third Constituent Charter.

It moved that a Belarusian state be formed, comprising the territories of Mogilev and Minsk provinces, as well as Belarusian districts of Grodno, Vilna, Vitebsk, Smolensk and Chernigov provinces. The Charter declared the independence of Belarus and its

⁷ J. Varonka, Belaruski rukh ad 1917 da 1920: Karotki agliad (Kovna, 1920), p. 15.

⁸ Korshuk, p. 36.

complete secession from Russia.⁹ Supported by the absolute majority of the voters¹⁰, it also confirmed all the rights and freedoms which were proclaimed in the previously issued documents. The new Belarusian state got the formal attributes of sovereign power: a national flag and a state seal. Belarusian consulates opened in large Russian and Ukrainian cities (in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Rostov, Stavropol) and in Vilna.

The Soviet opponents of the Belarusian Democratic Republic used to question its legitimacy and political significance by insisting that the independence of the Belarusian state was proclaimed under the Germans.¹¹ Examining the Belarusian case, they preferred not to mention that all the new states which emerged on the territory of the Russian Empire at that time used foreign support to achieve nationhood. N. Vakar, an American historian, emphasizes that, "Since the Central Powers were in control of the area in question, there is no more reason for Belorussia to be blamed for her collaboration with them than there was in the case of Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, or the Ukraine at that time".¹²

6.4 The Belarusian Democratic Republic, April – July 1918

The Belarusian politicians made considerable efforts in order to get international recognition. Plenipotentiary missions were sent to European capitals such as Copenhagen, Bern, Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw as well as to the Ukrainian government

⁹ For full text in Russian see Turuk, Belorusskoie dvizeniie, pp. 116 - 117; Kipel, pp. 133 - 134 (in English).

¹⁰ For details see Ladyseu, pp. 37 - 38.

¹¹ N. S. Stashkevich, Prigovor revoliutsii: Krusheniie antisovetskogo dvizeniia v Belorussii (1917 - 1920) (Minsk, 1985), p. 247; Historyia belaruskai SSR, vol. 3, p. 117 - 118.

¹² Vakar, p. 106.

and the Lithuanian Tariba. Being mainly concerned about establishing good relations with the Germans, which remained unsettled, the leaders of the BDR on the advice of Skirmunt, representing the landowners and the clergy, sent a telegram to Kaiser Wilhelm II, requesting German support for "...the strengthening of the state independence and the reunification of the Belarusian territory".¹³

The telegram, which was seen by the left wing of the Rada as a manifesto of pro-German policy, precipitated an internal crisis. A group of urban liberals, the members of the Bund and the United Jewish Socialists left the Rada in protest. The leaders of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries — T. Grib, P. Bodunova — who were in the Rada since its inception, also recalled their members.¹⁴ As a result, by May 1918, the conservative elements were able to obtain key positions in the Secretariat and the Rada.¹⁵ They began to play an important role in the decision-making process, radically changing the political course of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.

In the middle of May 1918, other members of the Secretariat, representing the democratic forces, left in protest. They formed the so-called "Temporary Committee of Five" under I. Varonka's leadership and declared themselves the new government.¹⁶ Thus, two Secretariats, claiming to be the highest executive authority, were in existence in the BDR. Nevertheless, in two weeks, the conservatives managed to remove the Temporary

¹³ The telegram was sent on April 25, 1918. For details see Ladysev, p. 109. Full text of the telegram see in Turuk, *Belaruskoie dvizeniie*, p. 109.

¹⁴ S. Rudovich, "Belaruskaia Satsyialistychnaia Gramada", *Entsyklapedyia historyi*, vol. I, p. 412; Korshuk, p. 49.

¹⁵ For details see A. Tsvikevich, *Kratkii ocherk vznikhoveniia Belaruskai Narodnai Respubliki* (Kiev, 1918; Re-print Minsk, 1990), p. 37. See also Turuk, *Belaruskoie dvizeniie*, p. 49.

¹⁶ It was composed of the Socialist-Federalists I. Varonka, I. Bialevich, K. Ezavitau, V. Zakharka, A. Krycheuski. See A. Sidarevich, "Rada Piatsiokh", *Entsyklapedyia historyi*, vol. VI, p. 48; I. Varonka, *Belaruskii rukh ad 1917 da 1920 godu: karotki agliad*, (2nd ed., Kovna, 1920; Re-print Minsk, 1991), p. 28.

Committee of Five from the political scene by creating the new (Third) Secretariat. In turn, all left forces united to protest over this policy. The new political crisis was too complex to be handled by the conservative leaders alone. As a result, in late May 1918, Skirmunt, the president of the Rada at that time, confirmed in public his inability to form a new government. In the new (Forth) Secretariat, a coalition of representatives of the two blocs, the conservatives continued to dominate, having occupied the main positions.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the strengthening of the right wing contributed to the improvement of the relations between the Rada and the German Military Command. At the meeting on May 27, 1918, the Minsk politicians received a message from General E. Falkengian, the Commander of the 10th German army, that Germany would provide the Rada with support and help.¹⁸ In June 1918, the Rada, in an attempt to enhance the confidence of the Germans, released a document, according to which all Lenin's decrees, as well as the ones produced by the commissars of the Northwestern Committee and the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets, were declared invalid. All governmental bodies were to obey the laws and regulations issued by the Provisional Government.¹⁹ In turn, the Rada and the Secretariat were granted by the Germans the right to control issues which did not interfere with military operations: commerce, industry, social service, education, and culture.²⁰

¹⁷ See A. Sidarevich, "Belaruskaia Narodnaia Respublica", *Entsyklapedyia historyii*, vol. I, p. 385; Varonka, *Belaruski rukh*, p. 32; Ladyseu, p. 39.

¹⁸ By the order aollowed the meeting, the Germans allowed the Rada to have its advisers in the district offices. See Sidarevich, *Entsyklapedyia historyii*, vol. I, p. 385; Ladyseu, p. 40.

¹⁹ Varonka, *Belaruski rukh*, p. 36.

²⁰ Korshuk, p. 60.

As the conservatives strengthened their positions in the Rada, the main social achievements proclaimed in the first two Charters began to be questioned. Moreover, any proposals relating to land distribution and social reforms were automatically rejected without any consideration.²¹ As a result, the Rada began to lose its popularity.

In July 1918, the struggle for political leadership between the left wing and the conservative forces within Belarusian national movement got new impetus. The debates over the organizational issues at the second session of the Rada on July 9, 1918, turned into a conflict and the leaders of the left bloc and the Socialists Revolutionaries walked out.²² The meeting, having no quorum, was cancelled and the delegates left for their summer vacations. Despite the absence of a mandate, Skirmunt, the head of the incomplete cabinet, initiated a revision of the articles of the Second Charter related to land reform. This decision was supported by delegates representing the landowners and the property owners,²³ although it was sharply criticized by the left wing and the former members of the cabinet. As a result, on July 20, 1918, Skirmunt's cabinet was forced to resign.²⁴ The formation of a new coalition was a complex task, given the political situation in the region by the fall of 1918.

²¹ As quoted in Ladyseu, p. 40.

²² Ibid., p. 42.

²³ Dziannitsa, August 4, 1918.

²⁴ Varonka, Belaruski rukh, p. 38; A.Smalianchuk, "Raman Skirmunt: shliakh da Belarusi", Spadchyna, no. 6 (1994), pp. 31 - 34.

6.5 German Policy toward Belarus, May – August 1918

During the spring-summer period of 1918, the policy of the German Military Command in Belarus was determined by two opposite tendencies. On the one hand, at the official level Germany implemented a policy of non-recognition of the Belarusian state; on the other hand, at the local level, it provided the Belarusian leaders with unofficial support.

It is not surprising that at this time the attitudes of the Germans toward Belarus were much better than in the period from 1915 to 1917; their political motivations were also clearer. By supporting new independent states on the territories of the former Russian Empire, the Germans made considerable efforts to weaken the Russian influence in the region, thus providing guarantees for their own safety. Indeed, by 1918 the independent states of Lithuania and Ukraine were established under German protection. There is no doubt that a similar pattern was considered for Belarusians as well.

At the same time, faced with the aspirations of Russia to maintain control over Belarusian territory and preferring not to have any conflict over it with Lenin's government, Germany pursued the policy of non-recognition of Belarus at the official level. It continued, however, to cooperate with the Belarusian leaders at the local level.

6.6 The Belarusian Democratic Republic in the Geopolitics in the Fall of 1918

The summer failures of the Germans on the Western front culminated in signing an Appendix to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, on August 27, 1918. Germany was obliged to withdraw its troops from Belarusian territories between the Dnepr and Berezina rivers. Regarding the territories to the west of the Berezina River, Russia and Germany agreed to

prepare an additional protocol. Signing of it depended on the fulfillment of the fiscal commitments made by Russia.

Aware of the attempts by the Belarusian nationalists to seize power, Soviet Russia required the adding of a Fourth article to the Appendix. It specified that Germany would not interfere in relations between Russia and its territories, i.e., that Germany would neither initiate nor encourage the formation of new independent states on these territories.²⁵ Attempts by the Belarusian Rada to argue the illegality of the agreement at the international level failed.

Nevertheless, new political changes in the region contributed to a large extent to the reorganization of political forces within the Rada. The right wing, which lost much of its support because of its unpopular social policy and the cooperation with the Germans, passed the initiative to the left forces represented by the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Socialist Federalists. The leaders of the left bloc, having foreseen the new political changes, put great efforts into raising the prestige of the Rada in the hopes of increasing their chances for success in the forthcoming negotiations both with Germany and with Russia. Pursuing this goal, in October 1918, the leaders of the Rada enlarged its membership to 101 people.²⁶

The failure of the diplomatic missions sent by the Rada to major international organizations and the uncertain political situation in the region forced the Rada's new leaders to take a new approach to its external policy. The Belarusian politicians looked for contacts with Lenin's government.

²⁵ "Russko-germanskii dobavochnyi dogovor k Mirnomu Dogovory mezhdu Rossiei i Germaniei, Avstro-Vengrii, Bolgarii i Turtsiei, 27 avgusta 1918 goda", *Spadchyna*, no. 3 (1993), p. 77.

²⁶ Ladyseu, p. 42 - 43.

The first attempts to make contacts with the Soviet Russia had been undertaken by the Rada in May 1918, in Kiev, when the Belarusian delegation, including A. Tsvikevich and Professor M. Dounar-Zapolski, handed over a note of protest regarding the Brest-Litovsk Treaty to Kh. Rakovskii, a representative of the Soviet Russia in Ukraine.²⁷ Despite the negative content of the note, this action was considered by the Belarusian politicians as a good occasion to establish contacts. As Dounar-Zapolski admitted later: "...in informal conversations, the delegation went further, trying to make closer contacts with the Soviet government".²⁸ While negotiating with Rakovskii, the Belarusian politicians first of all tried to obtain confirmation that the Soviet Russia would not interfere in Belarusian internal affairs.

By the fall of 1918 this aspect of the external policy became extremely important for the Belarusian government, given the fact that the Rada, having no armed forces, was not capable of defending its achievements and thus to secure Belarusian statehood. Even though the Rada had the political structure both in Belarus and outside, required a national state and ready to fight for this idea,²⁹ the Rada could not lead a mass resistance against the encroaching Reds due to a lack of popular support. Therefore, taking into account the complexity of the situation, the left wing tried to renew contacts with the Soviet Russia at all levels.

Soviet Russia was also interested in the Belarusian issue. The Bolsheviks did not

²⁷ The full text of the note see in Turuk, *Belaruskoie dvizeniie*, pp. 118-119. For more recent publication see Ladyseu, pp. 109 - 110;

²⁸ M. B. Dounar-Zapolski, *Historyia Belarusi* (Minsk, 1994), p. 488.

²⁹ For the resolutions of the Congress of the Belarusian refugees (July, 15-29, 1918, Moscow) and the First Congress of the Belarusian Soviet organizations and parties (August, 23-24, 1918, Petrograd) about Belarusian statehood see *Chyrvony shliakh*, no. 5 - 6 (1918), p. 8.

want to push the Belarusians into the embrace of Poland which was eager to provide Belarus with political support and military help. This would have given Poland a marvelous opportunity to enlarge its influence in the region. Thus, Moscow did not reject the Belarusian proposals, although it understood that any agreement was conditional upon the inclusion of Belarusian leaders appointed by Lutskevich, the president of the Rada at this time, in the future government of Belarus. In turn, Lenin's government insisted on three conditions, including the adoption of the Soviet constitution.³⁰ The Belarusian leadership realized that this concession was the only way to protect national independence and to secure political power.

It is known that Lutskevich was not alone among the politicians claiming for power. After August 27, 1918, when the additional Appendix to the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was signed, leading political forces of the region — the right wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, the Bund, as well as the political groups representing the Zemstvo — foreseeing the defeat of the Central Powers, intensified their activities in order to obtain the political power which was presently in German hands. Indeed, on October 11, 1918, political leaders of the Zemstvo, together with representatives of the railway employees, some professional organizations, and the cooperatives formed the Executive Committee, which demanded that the Command of the 10th German army transfer civil power.³¹

The leaders of the Left SRs, without informing the leadership of the Rada, also

³⁰ The proposal to adopt the Soviet constitution was made to the Belarusian politicians on September 23, 1918 when the Belarusian delegation under A. Lutskevich's leadership handed over to the Soviet representative the note of protest regarding the Appendix to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. See A. Sidarevich, Anton Lutskevich (Minsk, 1992), p. 43.

³¹ Ladyseu, p. 42.

tried to make an agreement with the Germans. However, having received a negative answer, they attempted to organize an armed resistance against both the Germans and the Russians. The Left SRs relied on the Teachers' Union, the trade unions of the railroad workers and the postal employees. This gave rise to the idea of "a third force" in the Belarusian movement, which soon became popular among the Left.³²

The Rada was the only political organization which in fact had a real chance to stay in power under one condition, however: the non-interference of Moscow. The Belarusian side took measures to achieve this goal. Indeed, in order to obtain credibility from Moscow, the Secretariat had changed its composition by replacing three out of five members by Social Democrats.³³ The Rada also refused to cooperate with the agents of General Denikin, who intended to open an office in Minsk in order to seek volunteers for his army. In this way, the Rada attempted to maintain a positive political image in the eyes of the Soviet Russia.³⁴ The Rada was not unanimous, however, about the tactics to be employed regarding the Bolshevik government. For instance, on November 28, 1918, the Secretariat issued the Fifth Constituent Charter, which was anti-Bolshevik in content.³⁵

Lutskevich was in Moscow, negotiating conditions with the Russian government, when a revolution occurred in Germany in November 1918. The geopolitical situation changed dramatically. The position of Moscow became stronger than before and, as a

³² N. S. Stashkevich, Prigovor revoliutsii: krusheniie antisovetskogo dvizheniia v Belorussii (1917-1925), p. 190.

³³ Ladyseu, p. 45.

³⁴ Bor'ba za sovetiskuui vlast' v Belorussii: Dokumenty i materialy (Minsk, 1968), vol. 1, p. 360.

³⁵ This Charter appealed to the Belarusian population not to obey the new authority, meaning the Bolsheviks. See Ladyseu, p. 45.

result, its tactics underwent crucial change. There was no need to continue negotiations with the Rada. Lutskevich returned to Belarus and the majority of the Rada under his leadership fled from Minsk. On December 10, 1918, the Red Army occupied the city.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Belarusian Statehood under the Soviets

7.1 National Communists and the Idea of Belarusian Autonomy

A characteristic of the Belarusian Revolution was its peculiar combination of social and national problems, a result of the complex political situation caused by World War I. While the enactment of social programs was the center of public attention in post-October Russia, in Belarus such programs were still considered mere political abstractions, and for a good reason. Firstly, the policy of the German administration was to support the major capitalists and landowners and not to criticize them officially. Secondly, there were no influential political entities capable of asserting socially significant programs. The Belarusian Democratic Republic achieved certain progress in building the nation, however, it was not able to solve its social problems because its most influential leaders represented the status quo and were, thus not interested in changing forms of ownership.

Though the Bolsheviks were ready to set themselves up as the primary social reformers, they were distrusted not only by the Belarusian political opposition but also by the majority of the people. The doubts of the political elite were based on their previous experiences with the Bolsheviks. In 1917 Belarusian leaders had seen that very often the declarations of the Bolsheviks did not match their actions. The results of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk served as just such a lesson. In this way, the Bolsheviks demonstrated that protecting Belarusian territorial interests clashed with the policy of the Soviet state. The people in general were negative toward the Bolsheviks, because of their aversion to the War Communism widely practiced by the Bolsheviks in the eastern regions of Belarus. Besides, during their stay in power the Bolsheviks had shown contempt for Belarusians'

national feelings. Thus, both the political elite and the majority of Belarusians saw the Bolsheviks merely as a temporary political force, incapable of solving their social and national problems.

By the fall of 1918, a third force had appeared on the Belarusian political scene, portraying itself as the defender of the country's territorial interests and the guarantor of much-needed social and national reforms — the Belarusian National Commissariat (*Belnatskom*).¹ The history of the Belarusian National Commissariat formation is of great interest, because it became the mechanism by which the central Bolshevik leadership tried to influence the nationalist movements in Belarus.

As noted earlier, after the start of the First World War, the Belarusian national movement lost its unity and split into left and right wings. After the arrival of German troops, the left wing's leaders were forced to seek refuge in Russia. Making their way to Russia's largest cities, they supported the revolution, considering it as a key to solving major social and national problems. These leaders contributed substantially to the expansion of the social basis of national movement outside Belarus. They went first to the Belarusian workers who had also been forced to leave, to the Belarusian soldiers garrisoned in the larger cities, and to the many Belarusian refugees. Garnering this support allowed these leaders to be more persistent in promoting the formation of a national state based on principles of social equality while federated with Russia. Together with the leaders of the Belarusian Section of the Russian Communist Party of the

¹ See Appendix, p.150. See "Deiatel'nost' Belorusskogo natsional'nogo komissariata za period febral'-oktiabr' 1918 goda", *Chyrvony shliakh*, no. 9-10 (1918); S. Rudovich, "Belaruski natsyianal'ny kamisaryiat", *Entsyklapedyia historyi*, vol.1, p. 448-449; J. Zaprudnik, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus* (Lanham, 1998), p. 55.

Bolsheviks — the RCP (b),² they were the most consistent advocates of these principles during the First All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917. After the Congress was dispersed, these left wing delegates, who were also politically active members of the Social Democratic organizations in Petrograd and Moscow, sharply criticized Bolshevik activities in Belarus.

The leadership of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party was more concerned by the attempts of the right wing of the national movement to create a Belarusian state patterned after the Belarusian Democratic Republic. They therefore decided to use the national communists and the Left SRs, who were also working in the Belnatskom and in the Belarusian Section, to split the national movement and thus enhance their own influence. The Central Committee aggressively promoted among Belarusian left wing's leaders the idea of formation of a Belarusian Soviet Republic as an alternative to the Belarusian Democratic Republic. The latter accepted Lenin's proposal, hoping that they would be able to displace the power of the military commissars in Belarus.

Due to the influence of the national communists and the SRs, the idea of a Belarusian Soviet Republic began to circulate more and more widely among Belarusians living in Russia. Though descriptions of the future state's structure varied widely, Belarusian congresses and conferences increasingly adopted resolutions supporting the notion of Belarusian statehood.³

The position of the main political organizations in the non-occupied regions of

² See Apendix, p. 150.

³ See the resolutions of the conferences of Belarusian workers of the Putilov works and the Belarusian sailors of Baltic Fleet in Chyrvony shliach, no. 3 - 4 (1918), pp. 25 - 26.

Belarus — the Northwestern Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b)⁴ and the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western oblast' and Front (Oblispolkomzap)⁵ conflicted with Lenin's manifesto on the right of nations to be self-government.

The military commissars, representing these organizations, supported the idea of an interstate union and by so doing blocked the slightest attempt by Belarusians to form their own state. They denied Belarusians even the right to be autonomous. At the same time, advocates of Russia's national interests were carrying out a powerful propaganda campaign, claiming the Belarusian proletariat would fail by separating themselves from the Federated Soviet Socialist Republic and from the workers and peasants of other parts of Russia. They ignored the fact that the proletariat in industrially backward Belarus constituted a relatively small percentage of the population.

The most furious attacks by the military commissars were leveled against the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic. They accused the Rada of being a group of impostors, who were "trying to create a national bourgeois state under the guardianship of Germany and enslave Belarusian workers for German, Polish, and Belarusian landowners".⁶ Actually, the military commissars were trying to protect their own chances to gain power, promised to them by Moscow, and therefore fought all Belarusian nationals irrespective of party membership. The lack of a negative response to their actions by the Moscow authority proves that they had carte blanche in implementing their policy, whose ultimate goal was the suppression of the national liberation movement.

⁴ See Appendix, p. 150. See also Historyia Belaruskai SSR, vol. III, p. 65.

⁵ See Appendix, p. 150. Ibid; vol. III, pp. 78 - 79.

⁶ Quoted in Ladyseu, p. 50. See also Documenty i materialy po istorii Belarusi, vol. IV, p. 390.

The actions of the military commissars as well as the behavior of the top party leadership, i.e., the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b), find a logical explanation when viewed in their specific historical context. Conditions in 1918 required the preservation of the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire. Declarations of independence by Finland and Poland were successful because conditions during civil war prevented the Bolsheviks from suppressing those national liberation movements. But in the fall of 1918, the so-called theory of "Provincialism" started to be applied in all other regions. Invoking this theory, the Russian Communist Party (b) proposed to abandon the concept of nationality-based divisions of the former Imperial Russia.

Once the theory was delivered, the leaders of the Northwestern Committee supported it, because they saw in this idea an efficient way of suppressing the national movement. A proposal to rename the united Belarusian territories the Western Oblast' (Region) was immediately prepared and sent to the Council of People's Commissars (CPC) for consideration, although this decision caused a sharp protest from the Belarusian section, from the Belarusian National Commissariat, and from ordinary Belarusians living outside Belarus.⁷

The Belarusian National Commissariat adopted a position which differed from that of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, as well as from that of the of the Northwestern Committee. Supporting the Belarusians' aspirations to greater political independence in their ties with Russia, the national communists together with the left SRs proposed the concept of Belarusian self-government. They suggested that the Northwestern Committee grant all non-occupied regions of Belarus autonomy whatever

⁷ Ladyseu, p. 50.

their status in the Russian Federation and rename the Western Oblast' *the Belarusian Oblast'* or *the Belarusian-Lithuanian Commune*. Belarusian left wing's forces used as their legal basis Article 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which discussed regional unions that entered the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic (RFSSR) on a federal basis. Promoting this idea, they relaid on its revolutionary connections in Petrograd as well as the common sense of the central Bolshevik leadership, to whom they could promise a republic connected to Russia, and, therefore, controllable albeit autonomous.

When Belarusian National Commissariat proposed this idea it also hoped to prove to the CPC the necessity of dissolving the Western Oblast's bodies, i.e., the Northwestern Committee and the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets, which had been "formed from military organizations on the western front under casual circumstances without due consideration of the will of the Belarusian people."⁸

The Belarusian National Commissariat's views on Belarusian statehood were supported by the Belarusian Section. Nevertheless, the proposals of Belarusian left wing's forces were ignored by the Central Committee, which instead preferred the recommendations of the leaders of the Northwestern Committee to form the Western Oblast'. On October 31, 1918 the CPC of the Russian Federation issued a decree establishing the Western Oblast'.⁹ Thus, the idea of formation of a Belarusian Soviet Republic, which was actively promoted by the Central Committee in the September – October period, was abandoned.

⁸ Korshuk, p. 57.

⁹ Po vole naroda: iz istorii obrazovania BSSR i sozdania KPB: Dokumenty i materialy, p. 74.

7.2 The Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the Geopolitics in the Fall of 1918

The defeat of Germany and her allies, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the annulment of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty radically changed the geopolitical map of Europe. The issue of the future state structure of ethnic regions formerly occupied by the Germans became very important. The decree of the CPC, concerning the annulment of the Brest Litovsk Treaty, emphasized that the "working people of Russia, Liflandia, Estonia, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Finland, Crimea, Caucasus ... should now determine their own destiny".¹⁰ Belarus was not mentioned in this list, leading one to assume that it was included in the reclaiming Russia's native territories.

Lenin held the same opinion regarding Belarus. Indeed, in November 1918 he emphasized that it was necessary to support the provisional governments in Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Lithuania, but only if they were Soviet governments.¹¹ Thus, Poland and Finland received independence; Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, received provisional Soviet governments; and Belarus was not even mentioned. This indicates that the organization of an ethnic Belarusian state was simply a non-issue for the Lenin's government.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

¹¹ Lenin, vol. 37, p. 234. In this telegram sent to the commander-in-chief Vatsetis on November 29, 1918, Lenin emphasized that "the advance of our troops into the west and Ukraine allows us to form regional provisional Soviet governments, which will certainly strengthen the local soviets. These circumstances do have a positive aspect in that they prevent the chauvinists in Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia from characterizing the movement of our troops as an occupation and thus create a beneficial atmosphere permitting their further advance."

The Belarusian National Commissariat and the leaders of the Belarusian Section decided to act promptly. On November 19, 1918, the day the Soviet troops entered Belarusian territory, the newspaper *Dziannitsa* published an article by Zhilunovich, the head of the Belarusian National Commissariat, entitled "And what shall we do with Belarus?"¹² Zhilunovich, on behalf of the Belarusian National Commissariat and the Belarusian Section of the Russian Communist Party (b), accused the Soviet leadership of intentionally avoiding the Belarusian issue. He emphasized that there was not a single draft project for the state structure of Belarus. The author ended his article by demanding autonomy for Belarus.

Receiving no reply, on December 21, 1918, the leaders of the left wing of the Belarusian national movement gathered for a conference in Moscow.¹³ At this conference they agreed to create the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government of Belarus as a national party center. They also made the decision to call a All-Belarusian Congress of Belarusian Communists. These decisions were the first practical steps toward Belarusian statehood, and thus an open challenge from nationalist communists to both the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party and to local military commissars of the Northwestern Committee.

The Central Committee of the RCP(b) watched the situation closely. After acquainting themselves with the resolutions of the conference, they decided to give more thought to the Belarusian issue. Stalin held a meeting with representatives of the Belarusian National Commissariat on December 25, 1918. At this meeting a decision was

¹² Belarus kamunist Z.Zhilunovich,"Jak zha z Belaruss'iu", *Dziannitsa*, November 19, 1918.

¹³ Korshuk, p. 60.

taken to declare a Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Stalin also suggested that a list of candidates be prepared for the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government.¹⁴

Each of these factors existed in the revolutionary movements in Russia and in Ukraine. However, a peculiar combination of these factors made the revolution in Belarus different from both Ukraine and Russia.

A special session took place immediately following the Moscow conference and the meeting with Stalin. It was attended by members of the Belarusian National Commissariat, representatives of the Central Bureau of the Belarusian Section and the Moscow Office of the Belarusian Section. During this special session, the delegates voted for a Belarusian government consisting of seventeen persons and approved by Stalin. By secret ballot Zhilunovich was elected chairman of this government.¹⁵

On December 27, 1918, a meeting took place between Stalin, Miasnikov and Kolmanovich, the latter two representing the Northwestern Committee and the Regional Executive Committee. During that meeting the territory of Belarus was defined; the composition of its government as well as the rights and duties of the Belarusian Office of the Russian Communist Party were determined.¹⁶ A more detailed transcript of this conversation still remains inaccessible to historians, but there is no doubt that the local communists received extensive powers from Stalin.

The program of the Sixth Northwestern Conference of the Russian Communist Party (b), which began on December 30, 1918, in Smolensk, did not address the issue at all. This item was included on the agenda for the last day under the title "Current Affairs"

¹⁴ Korshuk, p. 61.

¹⁵ Ladyseu, p.56; also *ibid.* Korshuk, p. 60.

¹⁶ Korshuk, p. 62.

only at the insistence of the Central Committee. Moreover, at that day the Conference was converted into the First Congress of the Communist Party of Belarus and, on January 1, 1919, proclaimed the creation of the Belarus Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR)

The establishment of the BSSR had almost no influence on the election of the new state's Party Committee. Of the fifteen members of the Committee, thirteen were former members of the Northwest Committee of the RCP(b); from the Belarusian Section only Zhilunovich and I. Lagun were included.¹⁷

After their victory at the party conference, the military commissars from the Northwestern Committee began to revise the composition of the Belarusian government to make it identical to that of the Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus. They knew that, according to the agreement made between Stalin and Zhilunovich, ten out of the seventeen seats in the BSSR government belonged to representatives of national organizations,¹⁸ however, they openly ignored this fact. Their unwillingness to share authority with Zhilunovich was understandable, although the level of party discipline existing at that time practically excluded such independent action. Therefore, most likely additional instructions had been received allowing local communists to act with impunity.

Knowing of Moscow's support for the military commissars, Zhilunovich continued to insist on the proposals which were agreed to Stalin. Moreover, seeing the attitude of the local Bolsheviks toward the new state, Zhilunovich agreed with his colleagues to exclude Miasnikov, Kolmanovich and Pikel from the government.¹⁹ The situation began to look serious, as all earlier agreements threatened to be undone. At this

¹⁷ Korshuk, p. 63; Dalidovich, p. 57.

¹⁸ Dalidovich, p. 58.

¹⁹ Ladyseu, p. 58.

point Stalin interfered. He forced Zhilunovich to retract his demand and to accept the conditions of the military commissars. The substance of Zhilunovich's conversation with Stalin still remains undisclosed, but these results indicate that Stalin was serious. Significant concessions were subsequently made to the supporters of the former Northwestern Committee and the Regional Executive Committee. They received nine out of the seventeen seats in the government while the Belarusian National Commissariat and the Belarusian Section received only seven rather than the promised ten.²⁰

This story rises the question what really forced the Bolsheviks to change their initial intentions and to allow the formation of the Belarusian Republic?

It is known that, after the failed attempt to split the national movement in December, 1917, the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) preferred to ignore the growing role of Belarusian organizations both within Belarus and abroad. The activation of a national movement in occupied territories was thought to have been supported by the German administration. The Central Committee continued to ignore the demands of the Belarusian Section and the Belarusian National Commissariat, openly supporting the commissars of the Northwestern Committee and the Regional Executive Committee.

There are indications that the major reason for a change in the Central Committee's attitude toward the Belarusian issue was the Polish factor. The Bolsheviks' hope that, after the German troop withdrawal, the Polish bourgeoisie would be unable to remain in power did not materialize. Instead, the Polish government mobilized its forces to begin seeking its borders of 1772. This caused the Central Committee and the Soviet

²⁰ Korshuk, p. 67.

government to become extremely concerned over the security of their western borders. The creation of a "sanitary cordon", consisting of Ukraine and the Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian Republics, demanded the inclusion of Belarus as well. In the event of armed conflict with Poland, Soviet Russia was prepared to sacrifice parts of Belarus once again.²¹ Thus, faced with the prospect of losing all of the Belarusian geopolitical territory, the Central Committee made the decision to create the BSSR; and this explains their haste in doing so. But, to provide themselves with a political cover, the Central Committee insisted that their reasons for creating this republic were essentially dictated by the character of the historical moment. Moscow's true purposes were not to satisfy the wishes of the people of Belarus, despite later attempts by Soviet historians to present it that way. The impudence which accompanied the arbitrary division of the territory of Belarus testifies to that. For example, Vilna province, though it had a Belarusian majority, was given to Lithuania.

Nevertheless, the formation of the BSSR seriously weakened the position of the military commissars in Belarus. Moscow was afraid that, after succeeding in creating the BSSR, Zhilunovich's government might go further and achieve genuine independence through a union with the leaders of the leading national organizations, including the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic. This was a real possibility given the fact that some members of the Belarusian Democratic Republic's left wing, having remained in Minsk after the German troops withdrew, cooperated with Zhilunovich's government. The president of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, A. Lutskevich, also did not reject the possibility of such cooperation and spoke of his intent to transfer the mandates of the

²¹ The worst forecasts of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) came true. At the cost of western Belarus, Russia managed to pay off Poland at the signing of the Riga Treaty in 1921.

Belarusian Democratic Republic to the newly created government.²²

The formation of a strong Belarusian state did not suit the Soviet government, and two weeks after the creation of the BSSR, Lenin ordered the Central Committee of the RCP(b) to reconsider the Belarusian issue. On January 16, 1919, the unprecedented decision was made to liquidate the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Minsk and Grodno provinces were added to the Lithuanian SSR, while Smolensk, Vitebsk, and Mogilev provinces were absorbed by Russia. The record of Lenin's conversation with the representatives of the Belarusian Section of the Russian Communist Party testifies to the cynicism of the central authority toward the Belarusian people. By Lenin, "the Republic is a buffer and its existence is necessary only because of its borders with other countries. Smolensk, Vitebsk and Mogilev provinces do not border other countries, therefore they may be excluded."²³ In making the decision to liquidate the BSSR, the leaders of the Soviet state did not even consider it necessary to consult the Belarusian government.

Such an approach to solving their complex national territorial problem was offensive to the new Belarusian government, which had begun its work just two weeks before. The majority of the members of the government, led by Zhilunovich, did not agree with the Central Committee's decree. They considered the artificial and violent division of the war-torn state as out of the question and unthinkable. Zhilunovich's numerous appeals to the Central Committee, requesting a cancellation of the decision, were ignored. As a protest against such a radical solution to the national issue, three

²² B. N. Micknuk, N. M. Klimovich, A. N. Ges', "Apostal natsional'nogo vozrozhdenia", *Neman*, no. 1 (1995), p. 143.

²³ Quoted in I. M. Ignatenko, p. 184.

ministers left the government of the republic — F. Shantyr, U. Falsky, and J. Dyla.²⁴

The decision of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) was unexpected even for its direct subordinates, former military commissars, who also expressed disagreement. To secure support for this decision, A. Ioffe was sent on an urgent mission to Belarus. The records of the session of the Central Committee state that, in the presence of A. Ioffe, all six speakers rejected the decree of the Central Committee of the RCP(b). Nevertheless, the Central Committee reserved the right to disagree with the opinion of the Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus and decided to divide up Belarus anyway. Thus, the republic ceased to exist as an official state. In the newly founded Lithuanian-Belarusian republic, the representatives of the Belarusian National Commissariat and the Belarusian Section received just two out of fifty seats.²⁵

²⁴ Ladyseu, p. 60.

²⁵ Kastrychnik na Belarusi, p. 287; Korshuk, p. 70.

CONCLUSION

The February Revolution was imported to Belarus from Petrograd. Belarus was not ready for the revolution in spite of the economic deterioration caused by the World War I. Social unrest of the Belarusian population was considerably lower than in Russia. The main reasons for this passivity were the strict martial law introduced on the territory on the first day of the war and the absence of a well-organized and politically educated working class. Radical political parties were also mostly unnoticeable in Belarus due to the fact that they were banned at the beginning of the war.

Even though the revolution in Belarus was to a large degree unexpected, it was greeted with great enthusiasm because the slogan of the February Revolution brought hope that the war, which was the main concern of the Belarusians, would come to an end. The revolution brought to Belarus from Petrograd, adhered to the Petrograd format, repeating the main moments of the February Revolution. However, from the very beginning, it developed its own peculiarity that resulted from two factors:

- the division of the region by the front lines and the associated military influence on events;
- a rapidly growing national movement.

The impact of these factors on the revolutionary events in Belarus manifested itself differently during the period from February 1917 to December 1918. The military factor had a great impact on the events in Belarus at the initial stage of the revolutionary movement. However, beginning in the second half of October, events in Belarus were determined by the interaction of the two factors: the military and the national. During 1918 the impact of the latter became more perceptible compared to 1917, while the

military factor associated at that time either with Germany or with Russia was less noticeable, however, not less essential. The peculiar interaction of these factors in the fall of 1918 resulted in the victory of the national forces and the establishing of the BSSR.

The transformation of the national factor into the main characteristic of the Belarusian Revolution originated not only in the Belarusian reality but also in an external issue. A persistent unwillingness first of the Provisional Government and then of Lenin's government to resolve urgent national problems resulted in the fact that moderate demands for resolution of cultural and educational needs became more radical and more political in nature, i.e., demands for autonomy, for self-determination, and ultimately for independence. The Belarusian national movement in the spring of 1917 was so young and inexperienced that the fulfillment of its moderate demands might have reduced political confrontation and Belarusian leaders might have been satisfied with an autonomous status. However, the pertinacity of the Provisional and Bolshevik Governments in national issues as well as the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk forced the Belarusians to take more radical steps and demand for full independence.

As mentioned above, the military factor determined to a large extent the political processes in Belarus. Its impact was most noticeable, however, before the February Revolution and in the first half of 1917.

The war was a serious test for Russia. For Belarus, it was a catastrophe. It divided Belarus and decreased its economic capacity. The structural changes in the Belarusian economy due to the war resulted in the replacement of traditional industries with war industries and the arrival of a new work force mainly mobilized from Russian towns. In spite of the dangers and the high living costs near the front line, the Provisional

Government and the local authorities made no attempt to compensate the Belarusian population. The opposite was true. The wages in Belarus were 40 per cent lower while the inflation was much higher than in Central Russia. However, the demands of the workers for an improvement of their living standards were much less aggressive than in Russia or even in Ukraine. On the eve of the revolution, there were few strikes which were poorly organized and emphasized mainly the economic demands. The lack of social unrest can be explained by a high competition for jobs and the fear of the workers of being laid off or sent to the front. Workers were eager to work for minimal wages.

The main feature of the February Revolution in Belarus was its peaceful and even celebratory character. The Command made considerable efforts to avoid the situation in Petrograd, where soldiers joined workers in huge demonstrations. As a result of such an approach, the negative slogans of the Petrograd Revolution, such as "Down with the Tsar!" and "Down with the War!", were changed in Belarus to slogans with a positive meaning, such as "Long live the Provisional Government!" and "Long live the victory!" The Command also played an active role in establishing the new Soviets. However, realizing that the change to a more democratic *modus vivendi* would decrease discipline in military units, the Command made a concerted attempt to control the process inside the Soviets. As a result, the Command of the Western front was able to minimize the impact of so-called *dual power*, which was prevalent in Russia.

The Soviets, supported by the Command, helped significantly to reduce the social confrontation inside the military on the Western front and to maintain their fighting power. However, the shortsighted policy of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet caused a decrease in the popularity of the Soviets among the soldiers on

the Western front in the summer of 1917. A sharp decline in discipline and increasing tension between officers and soldiers culminated in the fact that many forces refused to advance in June 1917. Desertions and disobedience became so widespread in the ranks that the Western front lost its fighting ability. The influence of the left wing parties, including the Bolsheviks, among the soldiers was minimal. The reluctance of the soldiers to continue the war combined with the inability of the government to develop thoughtful and appropriate internal policy and to accommodate it to the needs of the major social groups, were the main causes of the crisis.

The Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies in Belarus followed to a large extent the Petrograd pattern, where the Mensheviks and the SRs played the main role. The difference in the case of Belarus consisted in the ability of the Bolsheviks led by Frunze to obtain an important position in the Executive Committee, which defined the policy of the Minsk Soviet. This success was achieved mainly because of Frunze's personality, rather than by Bolshevik activity among the local workers. Frunze, taking advantage of the confusion of the local authorities, was able with a small group of Latvian soldiers to release prisoners, mostly criminals, from the jails. He used these men to form a militia, which later was instrumental in suppressing the opposition. The principle, which guided the formation of the militia in Minsk, was completely different from the one used in Petrograd, where the Red Guard was formed from workers and was mainly used for maintaining order. Owing to this initiative, the Bolsheviks, who had very few supporters in the Soviet, were temporarily able to get extremely important positions in the Executive Committee. In spite of the fact that a few days later the Mensheviks were able to use this circumstance to their benefit, the short-lived Bolshevik success allowed

subsequent Soviet historians to create a myth about a supposedly broad support of the Bolsheviks by the local population.

One of the main characteristics of the Belarusian Revolution is the fact that the Belarusian response to the July events in Petrograd was very different from the response in Petrograd and Moscow. The army of the Western front, after failing in Kerenskii's Offensive, was busy learning its lessons and did not react to the events which took place in Petrograd. The Soviets guided by the Mensheviks, rejected the Bolshevik actions. The latter, having no support among the workers or the army, preferred to hide in the shadow of joint organizations, and voted with the Mensheviks in the resolution directed against the Bolshevik party.

The response to the Kornilov Revolt by the military of the Western front and the local population in Belarus also was different from the one in Petrograd. Attempts by the Command to tighten discipline in military units were understood as a necessity rather than as a blow to political freedoms. Documents indicate that the military on the Western front did not participate in the Kornilov's attempted coup, which was considered by them as a political rather than a military action. Belarusian garrisons in their majority did not react to these events. Thus, it is not surprising that the left forces paid no attention to the garrisons, preferring instead to concentrate their attention on the rail-stations in order to stop any movement of military units toward Petrograd.

In spite of these differences, the outcome of the failed coup was very similar in Petrograd and Minsk. The officers on the Western front suffered a moral defeat from which the majority did not recover. Their lack of authority among the soldiers had a negative impact on discipline, which became virtually non-existent. Soldiers began to

leave the Menshevik-led Soviets and demanded new elections. As a result, the Bolsheviks were able not only to recover from the embarrassment of the July Days, but also to become a real political force the popularity of which grew very quickly. The Bolsheviks were able to remove the SRs, who played the main role in organizing resistance to the Kornilov coup, and to use collective victory for own benefits. Moreover, they were quick enough to learn the advantages of the new tactic at the railroad stations and use it during the October Revolution in Belarus.

The October Revolution in Belarus developed its own differences. Firstly, unlike the February Revolution, it was not accidental. Secondly, the pattern of transferring power was also diverse from the Petrograd scenario. After seizing power, the Bolsheviks in Belarus were forced to pass it on to the Committee to Save the Revolution, insisting only on one condition: that the military forces not be sent from the Minsk Military District to Petrograd. The Bolsheviks were also able to convince the soldiers at the train stations (where they were waiting to move to Petrograd) not to obey the orders of their commanders. They used these soldiers to seize power in nearby Belarusian cities. However, the Bolshevik victory in the army was not as triumphant or as unambiguous as the Soviet historians would have us believe. The officers of the High Command and the Minsk Military District, rather than Bolshevik influence on the military, played the main role in the seizing of power by the ordinary soldiers. Having agreed to cooperate with the Bolsheviks, the officers provided conditions for a painless and relatively peaceful revolution in Belarus. The mechanism of the passage of power defined the peculiarity of the new political bodies, which were formed without adherence to democratic principles.

The new political structure was based on a one-party system and priority was given to soldiers committees, whose representatives were mainly non-Belarusians.

The October Revolution had a tremendous impact on the national movement. Belarusian national forces, having been experienced with violent seizing of power on October 25, 1917 by the military commissars of the Northwestern Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) and the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western oblast' and front, were able to unite and develop well-thought legitimate tactics toward the latter. The leaders of the main political forces of Belarus did not question the legitimacy of the Council of People's Commissars of the Lenin's government. Nevertheless, the attempts to remove the military commissars from power by using the legal procedure of elections at the All-Belarusian Congress in December 1917, were forcibly suppressed by the armed soldiers who acted on the order of the Military Revolutionary Committee with the approval from the Council of People's Commissars. The CPC, having interrupted the democratic process of power change, openly supported the armed action of local commissars who tried to secure power for themselves.

The Bolshevik action contributed to a change in the attitudes of the national forces toward the idea of independence. Although the Bolsheviks dispersed the Congress, the delegates were able to elect the Executive Committee. Radical changes in the geopolitical situation resulted in the Bolsheviks leaving Minsk to the Germans. It allowed the Executive Committee to begin its endeavors to create a base for Belarusian statehood. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, where Belarusian interests were completely ignored,

contributed to the issuing of the Second and the Third Charters, which defined the base of Belarusian independence. The building of the new state was influenced by two factors:

- the external impact of Russia and Germany, which limited the implementation of Belarusian internal and external policy;
- the absence of unity among the main political forces regarding the social issues made the political process in Belarus much more complicated.

The revolution in Germany and the geopolitical changes caused by it contributed to Moscow's negative attitude toward Belarus. Not being interested in establishing a new independent state, the Soviet government began its endeavors to annex Belarusian territories. However, Belarusian organizations outside Belarus, which had been cooperating with the Bolsheviks up to October 1918, opposed this idea, demanding an independent status for Belarus. While they opposed the idea of Soviet power, they insisted on replacing the local government, pointing out that it did not defend the interests of the people of Belarus. Using their influence with the Bolshevik leaders in Moscow and in Petrograd, they were able to make them accept the concept of a Belarusian state.

Thus, Belarusian statehood was determined by two main factors:

- the geopolitical interests of Moscow which considered Belarus as a buffer between the re-born Polish state and Russia,
- the widespread national movement and the existence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic.

Lenin's government, still under the influence of chauvinist Russia and concept of proletarian internationalism, did not want take into account the national aspirations of the Belarusians. As a result, three weeks later Moscow changed its mind. The Belarusian

state was united with Lithuania, where Belarusian representatives were able to obtain only two out of fifty seats.

In conclusion, the statements that the Belarusian state was established as a result of the October Revolution and due to the good will of Lenin's government are most questionable. The Belarusian state was a result of the long and consistent struggle for independence by the national forces of Belarus.

APPENDIX: The Major Political Organizations in Belarus in 1917 - 1919

The Belarusian National Commissariat (Belaruski natsyianalny komisaryiat, Belnatscom) existed from January 31, 1918 to March 1919. According to the official version, it was created by the Council of People's Commissars in order to intensify activities of Belarusian workers, living outside Belarus. It had branches in Moscow, Smolensk, Saratov etc. It carried out political and cultural activities mainly among Belarusian workers and refugees. In the fall of 1918 the Belnatscom opposed to the Northwestern Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) and to the Regional Committee of the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Region and Front. It played an important role in establishing the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The Belarusian Section (Belarusian Section of the Russian Communist Party of the Bolsheviks) existed from April 1918 to February 1919 to unite Belarusian Bolsheviks outside Belarus. The offices of the Section were opened at the Putilov works, at the Baltic Feet, in Moscow, Saratov, Tambov, etc. In the fall of 1918 the Belarusian Section (together with the Belarusian National Commissariat) actively opposed the Northwestern Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) and the Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front. They played instrumental role in establishing of the BSSR.

The Belarusian Socialist Gramada (BSG) existed from 1902 to 1918. The party promulgated a moderate socialist program and advocated the abolition of tsardom, confiscation of landowners' property, and national autonomy for Belarus within a federated democratic Russia. Played a key role in the proclamation of the independence of the Belarusian Democratic Republic on March 25, 1918.

The Belarusian Social Democratic Workers' Group (BSDWG) existed from 1915 to 1918 on German-occupied territories. It was as a result of dividing the Belarusian

Social Gramada. Its members adhered to the Marxist view while the members of the Belarusian Social Gramada expressed populist ideas.

The Northwestern Committee (The Northwestern Committee of the Russian Communist Party (b) of the Western Oblast' and Front). The branch of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), elected on September 18, 1917, by the Bolsheviks of the Belarusian territories (unoccupied by the Germans). Composed of Bolshevik leaders of the Minsk Soviet and Front.

The Regional Executive Committee (The Regional Executive Committee of the Soviets of the Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Western Oblast' and Front (Oblispolkomzap). The executive body of the Soviets, elected on October 26, 1918, by the deputies of the Eastern Belarusian territories (unoccupied by the Germans). It was composed of deputies of three Soviets and representatives of the trade unions. The Regional Executive Committee together with the Northwestern Committee accumulated all political power in the Eastern Belarusian provinces and at the Western front.

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