



**DURHAM**  
AT **WAR**



**John Headlam**

Travel diary written at the time of the March Revolution

**Diary account, part 2**

**27 March 1917**



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## NOTES AT PETROGRAD.

14/27 MARCH, 1917.

1. I arrived at Petrograd on the afternoon of Sunday 12/25th. The appearance of the town was wonderfully normal – shops open, tramcars running, sledges plying for hire, and the usual crowds of people. Of course there were red flags everywhere – from the winter palace to the tramcars – and red favours were generally worn. I saw guns in action in one street, but as regards material damage there was little sign. In the drive from the station to the Morskaya I saw only one burnt out house, and scarcely a broken window. In the Morskaya on the other hand for some little distance almost every shop window had a bullet through it, but they were putting in new panes of glass – a good sign. The restaurant at the Astoria has been smashed up, but the rest of the building little damaged. There seems no doubt whatever that the police had machine guns in some of the upper windows, so that the mob had reason for their attack. Count Frederick's house is completely burned out. It appears that the soldiers from the Horse Guards barracks opposite got into the cellars and all got drunk, and then the hooligans began to loot the place, and it was set on fire by accident.

All the walls are now placarded with an admirably written appeal from the Union of Workmen and Soldiers for the protection of Palaces, Monuments and all works of Art.

The Artillery Department suffered somewhat severely as their office are almost opposite the law courts which were one of the first objects of destruction when the prisons were opened. They were burning for three days, no one being allowed to take any steps to put out the fire, and in the consequent disorder the windows and the chauffage pipes of the artillery offices were broken with bullets, and all the officer's great/

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great coats and swords looted from the hall! There was no loss of life there, but three artillery generals were killed in these first days – one, General Saboudski, President of the Artillery Committee, with whom I had had many interesting discussions, was found dead on the street with a bayonet wound in the stomach, and a sword cut over the head. The bodies of the other two, Generals Doubnitski and Bordelius, have not yet been found, but there is good evidence of their having been killed. It is known that many bodies were put in the Neva through the holes in the ice.

A very pleasing feature is the way in which English officers appear to have been allowed to go anywhere unmolested, and to have been listened to with respect by all classes, from the members of the new Government in the Duma to the soldiers in the barracks! It appears to me to redound very much to the credit of the officers



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themselves. General Poole was in the Astoria Hotel on both occasions on which it was attacked, and no doubt his courage and resource saved the situation.

2. As regards the Army, soldiers are everywhere in the crowd, but quiet and well turned out, and I do not think there is any appreciable difference in their appearance generally, though I have seen two or three men wandering about with rifle and bayonet who looked as if they might be up to mischief. Most of the hotels and such like seem to keep a soldier as a sort of sentry in the hall – no doubt to deal with such gentry.

On Sunday afternoon there was a military procession to the square by the Winter Palace. The troops carried red banners, but they might have been the King's guard marching down the Mall for turn out and soldierly bearing, and the inscriptions on their banners were almost entirely unpolitical. There was one welcoming "the temporary government and the union of workmen and soldiers", but the others/

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others expressed such excellent sentiments as "Remember your brothers in the trenches" – "The war and a complete victory" - "Comrades make shells" - "work all for the war" – etc. etc.

Another day I saw a regiment marching past General Cornilov on their way to the Duma to swear allegiance to the Government. They had to march in column of companies diagonally across the big space in front of the Winter Palace, and they passed with their rifles at the 'charge', the points of the rear rank bayonets between the faces of their front rank men – so it was a severe test of their steadiness and they came through it splendidly. I have never seen this before and it is extraordinarily impressive. The way it was done shewed plainly that whatever effect the company and regimental committees who now order affairs in the Army may have on the discipline, they certainly do not allow of any relaxation in the standard of steadiness on parade.

After the regiment had passed there were very hearty cheers for the General, and a lot of soldiers in the crowd carried him on their shoulders – and very carefully – to his motor! There was no horseplay.

Since then I have attended a big review of all the military schools in the same place; I should think there were at least 10,000 on parade, naval and military, infantry and engineers, cavalry and artillery. It was a difficult job to get them all packed in, and then to get them into their places for the march past, but it passed off extraordinarily well. The greater part of those on parade were training for officers and they were certainly a very good stamp, well set-up, smart, intelligent looking young fellows.



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And it is not only in these show parades that discipline is maintained. Small parties are constantly passing – men going on fatigue duty, convoys of wagons, and so /

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so forth – and I have not been able to detect the slightest signs of a slackening of discipline.

One sees, too, the usual recruits' drill going on constantly in the square in the afternoon – squads being taught their parade march, 'forming fours' and so forth – just as usual.

And as regards the troops – the aloofness of the officers from their men was no doubt a great assistance to the mutineers. On the night of the outbreak though it was known that one regiment had gone over to the side of the people, none of the officers of the others were in barracks with their men. Those of one regiment were holding a regimental dinner in a hotel. Such a thing is almost inconceivable to us.

3. But the news from the northern front is bad. Discipline is said to have disappeared, and large numbers of the men are reported to have come back from the front. As I pointed out to the Ambassador, however, this latter must not be looked upon as quite as serious a symptom as it would be in other armies. Curiously enough one of our discussions at the beginning of my tour turned on this very point, and I was much struck by the Russian officers saying that they never thought of shooting a man for deserting – a man often went off home – they did not realise the heinousness [sic] of the offence they were committing. At the same time there is no doubt that the situation at the front is grave – a German attack might pull it together, on the other hand it might walk through, and generally speaking we may well be grateful for the lateness of the spring.

The Government are alive to the peril, and Guchkov has himself gone to the front to try to pull the men together. The country at large is no doubt whole-heartedly for the prosecution of the war, but the chance of a relaxation of effort is always a great temptation to a Russian, while some of the extremists have begun to talk only of continuing the war/

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war until they can 'arrange matters' with their comrades in Germany!

Mr. Wilton who accompanied Guchkov on his tour of the Northern front has, on the other hand, brought back a very reassuring account of affairs there; Guchkov was



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received with the greatest enthusiasm everywhere, and there were no signs of want of determination to finish the war [war?], or of the desertions of which we heard, although things were no doubt upset for a time (one officer was killed, but by an accident), and a German attack might have had disastrous results. Fortunately they confined themselves to sending over pamphlets in which they sympathised with the poor Russians on having their Emperor deposed by the English!

The new Committees are now in working order. They are composed in an army of an equal number of officers and men as representatives elected by the lower committees which have been established in all units from companies upwards. They have nothing to do with operations but confine themselves to questions connected with the rights and treatment of the soldier. Mr. Wilton attended one of their meetings. Attempts are, however, being made to cause trouble by emissaries from Petrograd. The departure of these men from Petrograd cannot be prevented, but the Command of the front are taking energetic steps and arresting them daily – many dressed as soldiers and even officers. Some have been found to be the old agents of the secret police. There have been encouraging signs than even in Petrograd the soldiers are getting tired of these unscrupulous agitators. One regiment offered General Kornilov to burn the office of the PRAVA and hang the whole of the staff.

4. As regards munitions the Ambassador and General Poole are both pessimistic. At the least computation the recent troubles have involved a loss of three weeks' output, and/

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and there is no guarantee that the men will work steadily now, while from the latest reports of the condition of the Murman Railway there is small hope of receiving what is sent from England. At the same time General Poole said he found the authorities here much more amenable, a great effort is certainly being made at Archangel, the factories have begun to work again and the Government are certainly alive to the necessities of the case. But here again there are signs of a change for the better. Report says that not only the Army but also the workmen in Moscow and other towns have spoken very plainly to the men of Petrograd regarding the danger of their conduct. Certainly in the works I have visited (some of the most important) I have been struck with the demeanour of the men. It was not only that they were at work – and in Easter week – but that there was so little sign of the upheaval that has been. As the officer in charge passed through the shops the men took off their hats, and doors were held open, and the respectfulness of their behaviour was unmistakeable. It really looks as if all might be well.



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5. The funeral of the “victims” passed off without any of the disturbance anticipated. There had been great apprehension that serious riots would occur chiefly owing to the decision to have a purely civil ceremony, and the date was put back once or twice in consequence. In the end it was apparently decided to have no ceremony at all (though there was a religious service next day), and certainly nothing could have been more reverent than the whole proceeding. Each district brought its own dead, the coffins being carried on stretchers in front of each procession. When I counted them in the afternoon there were 130 in the grave and one or two districts had not yet come in. A good many bodies had also, I believe, been buried privately owing to the indignation aroused by the idea of their being denied the blessing of the church. As the head of each procession reached the great grave/

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grave in the centre of the Champ de Mars the coffins were quietly laid in place, the guns of St. Peter and St. Paul thundered out, and then the procession moved on again passing with bared heads and lowered banners.

This went on from 8 o’clock in the morning until at least the same hour at night – and I do not know which was the most remarkable – the perfection of the organisation or the patience and the orderliness of the crowd. There was never either a gap or a check in the stream passing, although the numbers involved were enormous; the various processions had to converge on one spot from every direction, and there were no police available to assist. The timing must have been extraordinarily difficult, yet I never saw any fuss or heard a shout, and the marshals were curiously little in evidence; there was only one mounted. I walked for considerable distances along the line of the procession both morning and evening, besides spending a considerable time in the official enclosure by the grave, and the regularity and order maintained were almost uncanny. The streets were lined with soldiers and people marched eight abreast, sometimes in double column when the width of the street admitted. There were many bands with the processions, generally playing Chopin’s “Funeral March”, and in the intervals there was a great deal of the beautiful Russian singing, sometimes the women, sometimes the men – revolutionary songs and the regular funeral hymns. There was no disorder anywhere, no straggling or least sign of horseplay either in the procession or in the crowds looking on, though the whole population were in the streets.

It was certainly the most impressive thing I have seen.

6. Taking it all in all, certainly the chief impression produced on my mind is one of profound astonishment at/



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at the general appearance of order and security. Considering that it is only just a fortnight since the rebellion broke out – that the Emperor has been deposed, ordinary government entirely superseded, the police abolished, and the troops who accomplished this and still control the situation are in a state of open mutiny (in that they appoint their own officers and only refer to committees formed in each unit from the men themselves), the present situation seem to me to be nothing less than phenomenal. With a rich city lying at their mercy they have more right than Warren Hastings ever had to be “astounded at their own moderation.”

John Headlam



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