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Public Attitude Transformations of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka Citizens in March-September of 1917

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the changes in public attitude and political behavior of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka city dwellers during the opening months of the Great Russian Revolution, with the writers paying especially close attention to the reasons and circumstances behind these changes. This research allows to define the specifics of public conscience transformation in the spring-summer of 1917 in the territories remoted from the main revolutionary front, as well as to plan further research concerning these matters. The paper clearly shows that the most far-away provinces of Russia were gradually getting involved in the revolution during the first half of 1917. This piece of work is written on the basis of both published and unpublished historical sources. A local newspaper titled "The Kamchatka News Letter", which was the first printed newspaper in Kamchatka published from May 2, 1914 to spring of 1918, became the main source of historical information for the authors of this research.

Keywords: Great Russian Revolution, Public attitudes, Political behavior, Far East, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka.

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Introduction

Both Russian and overseas researchers of many different fields and schools have continued to study the events of the Great Russian Revolution for more than a hundred years. The spectrum of opinions, concepts and approaches to this matter is considerably wide and requires critical thinking skills to analyze. The Russian History Institute's Scientific Council on the History of Russian Revolutions in partnership with the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East formulated a number of main theses for the concept of the 1917 Revolution; consequently, this research became a big step forward for the academic community (Larin, 2003).

The broadening of the research topics and the inclusion of new subjects into practice is a unique trait of modern research work. It is the Russian everyday life and public conscience transformation during the revolutionary years that attract special attention. Although completed research papers on this kind of changes in the central regions of Russia have been already published (Alsenov, 2002; Zakharova, 2013), the provincial regions have only just begun researching this phenomenon. Until now there have been no published research papers on the public conscience transformation of the Kamchatka dwellers during the 1917 Revolution. By using modern methodological approaches and analyzing newly-found sources, the authors of this piece of work present the everyday life in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky and its citizens' political behavior transformations in the winter-autumn period of 1917.

Materials and Methods

The research of historical process is conducted from the point of view of such objective factors as social, economic and political aspects – with the psychological aspect more often than not omitted from history. Porshnev (1972) researched this problem extensively as well and concluded that it was the objective processes that made a basis for social-historical events. According to Porshnev (1972), “These objective processes are conducted by the real existing people with their subjective motives” (para. 8). In his works, he examined the problems of will, suggestion, and counter-suggestion powers in historical process. When researching revolution, i.e. a time when society is most unstable, one should take into account the fact that during a revolution the amount of information circulating among the public experiences a sudden rise.

Porshnev (1972) believes that there are several information types, namely the performative (order, advice, request, prohibition, and permission of certain actions) and constative (factual information) information. The latter can consequently be used for inciting or restraining action. Information delivered through speech can influence an individual to act in a certain way. The power of suggestion, i.e. the immediate influence borne by words, is a primary property of human speech (Ilina, 2016). When the usual way of life falls into a disarray because of a rising revolutionary storm, the changes affect not only individual people but whole social groups too, especially if such groups are located on the periphery of the country.

From February to March of 1917, both the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky city and its inhabitants were exposed to massive revolutionary agitation and, as we believe, had their public conscience transformed under the influence of the two types of “contamination”, namely the mimicking and suggestion. A local newspaper titled “The Kamchatka News Letter” (it is the first printed newspaper in Kamchatka; published from May 2, 1914 to spring of 1918) became the main source of historical information for the authors of this research. It is a unique source in the form of a collective diary, depicting day-to-day life in Petropavlovsk in great detail. As the province lacked important national events to report, the newspapers struggled to attract readers with any local sensations resulting in the information presented in local newspapers being quite representative. Moreover, the old censorship ceased to exist in 1917, and the new censorship (which was to gradually come along with the Bolsheviks rule) was not enacted yet. In other words, the news published in this newspaper at that time is trustworthy.

Another important source of information is Purin's (2005) memoir essays by the title of "From the past and the present of Kamchatka". The author have not only witnessed and taken an active part in the 1917-1922 political events in Petropavlovsk, but has also served as a chairman of the Kamchatka Public Security Committee and the Kamchatka Regional Committee. Despite his subjective reasoning, Purin (2005) provided a plenty of examples illustrating the changing political mood and public attitudes. This set of historical sources allows us to identify the main traits of public attitude transformation.

Results

Just like other subjects of the Russian empire, the grand total of 1960 inhabitants of Petropavlovsk in February of 1917 absolutely did not expect a revolution to occur. The first news of it reached Petropavlovsk on March 1; however, following the order of the General-Governor, the military censors banned all information concerning the events occurring in the Centre. Only after the establishment of the Provisional Government and receiving its official orders was the ban lifted on March 3. The general public was informed on March 4 not via the newspaper but rather in an old fashion, after a church service. Purin (2005) describes it in a following way, "In the Petropavlovsk cathedral parvis, the acting governor A.G. Chaplinskiy in the presence of Right Revered Nestor together with the clergy and the administration announced the news of the Russian coup d'état and the emperor abdicating the throne" (p. 130). According to Kamchatskiy listok (1917a), "The city dwellers were indifferent to the news of the revolution. People wanted to believe in a better future, but everyone felt uncomfortable after hearing about the Tzar's family getting arrested. People openly condemned this decision made by the Provisional Government and considered it to be absolutely unacceptable under the terms of a peaceful revolution" (p. 5).

"The Kamchatka News Letter" covered the news of the State Duma Provisional Committee establishment, as well as the affairs in Petrograd. After this the events in Petropavlovsk started to unfold extremely fast. On March 6, 1917, the City Assembly elected candidates to form the Petropavlovsk Committee of Social Security, which later, on March 12, became a regional committee. During this time, some of the Kamchatka's inhabitants interpreted these changes and their new-found freedom quite extravagantly. For instance, on March 6, they forcefully unsealed shops in the city and demanded the traders to sell alcohol. Only the unity of the new administration and garrison did not allow the city to fall into further disarray. On March 7, 1917 the inhabitants of Petropavlovsk were finally persuaded that the revolution was real by the Nicholas II and Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich abdication manifestos published in a newspaper (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917b, p.3). During the whole March and April of 1917, the old authority establishments were disbanded, while the new ones were formed in their place. The city dwellers became involved into never before seen political activities such as various election campaigns. The advertisement section of almost every issue in March of 1917, "The Kamchatka News Letter" was inviting the citizens to participate in meetings, assemblies, commissions, etc. (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917a, 1917b).

In the light of democratic changes, even the conservative clergy called to forget "all kinds of grudges and profit" and to give full support to the Provisional Government (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917d, p.1). "The Kamchatka News Letter" tried to present the unfolding events in a romantic way by inciting the public to take an active part in building a new Russia, to "take on the work that the monarchy along with the parasitizing bureaucracy could not finish properly; the work which, I strongly believe, the Provisional Government together with the free people is capable of undertaking" (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917c, pp. 2-3). In our opinion, the newspaper articles attempted to "transform" once loyal subjects living on the edge of the country into the supporters of the Revolution and citizens of new Russia.

During the first few days after receiving the news of the monarchy's fall, many cities in Russia saw Tzar's portraits being removed from schools and institutions; the destruction of monuments and the state crest

symbols, streets, passenger ships, etc. renaming followed this incident. In Petropavlovsk itself, the portraits of the late sovereign and his family were removed peacefully, but according to Purin (2005), "...it wasn't the same for the province. The local Russians united under the black flag started doing unbelievable things. In Palana, they collected all Tzar's portraits and trampled on them in public" (p. 132). Thus, the call to participate in the revolution has finally taken form. This profanation of the state symbols in the spring of 1917 implies that the people had no desire to live by the old rules anymore.

The Revolution (which proclaimed everyone being equal) introduced a new uniform form of address – a "citizen". The spread of this word can serve as a criterion to judge the degree of revolutionary ideas entering the Russian province. In March-April of 1917, the abovementioned form of address was found in the issues of "The Kamchatka News Letter": "citizens of Petropavlovsk", "citizen priest", and "fifteen citizens", etc. At the same time, "dear sir", "mister editor", "gentlemen", and other such forms of address were still actively used. The word "comrade" became used quite a lot from July 1917. The peaceful coexistence of "sirs", "citizens", and "comrades" in newspapers (and even in the span of one article), as well as the usage of these forms of address on equal terms attested to the provincial city dwellers' inexperience in big politics. Meanwhile, the meaning of these new words escaped the general public quite often.

From the pages of the only source of social-political information, "The Kamchatka News Letter", the general public of Petropavlovsk was steadily reminded of the Tzarist regime. In the archbishop's proclamation published in March of 1917, the bishop of Kamchatka and Petropavlovsk, who was revered by many, referred to Nicholas II in a favourable way. "The late governmental officials built an all but transparent wall between the Tzar and his people," Nestor the bishop said in order to explain the reasons behind the incident, "Thusly, the Tzar could not heed their true thoughts and needs" (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917d, p.5). Additionally, the newspaper editors still adhered to the rules of publishing names and titles of the members of the once ruling Romanov family.

Unlike other cities in the Russian Far East region, a number of social organizations were established faster than the political ones in Petropavlovsk. Thus, in July-August of 1917, the political activities of Petropavlovsk's citizens involved in various social institutions grew considerably. To finally define the governance structure in Kamchatka and to further develop economic activity, the very first provincial conference of the Kamchatka people's representatives was held from July 20 to August 8, 1917. It attracted a lot of attention from the general public. Forty-six delegates have arrived at the meeting (Larin, 2003). Through its subscription, "The Kamchatka News Letter" received an enclosure informing of the matters discussed and the decision made at the meeting. The delegates decided on a new composition of the provincial committee by promoting representatives from each district. Aside from political and administrative problems, participants of the conference discussed the development of public education, healthcare and other matters directly influencing many people's interests and quality of life. Simultaneously with the first provincial meeting, a teacher's conference was held with a number of citizens invited to discuss the reorganization of public schools (Larin, 2003). The lack of everyday political rallies and marches and the loyalty of the citizens to both the dissipated and the newly forming authorities allowed the Regional Committee members to get on their feet and to tackle many problems essential to the city but left unsolved by the revolution. The representatives of the new authority acted together, tried to prevent chaos and sincerely believed in reforms and change.

It was during these months that Petropavlovsk's citizens began to let go of the nostalgic feelings for the past. In a newspaper of July 27, 1917, the late regime was referred to as "the rule of the Romanov's clan" (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917c, p.2). The Drama Society House built under the last governor of Kamchatka, N. V. Monomakhov, was renamed into the People's House. The inhabitants of the Monomakhovo settlement also petitioned for their village to change its name (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917f, p.3). However, even this political activity can hardly be considered destructive. The politics went into turmoil for the first time on

August 3, 1917. In his notes, Purin (2005) called the following incident “a fight with the anarchy” (p. 134). A representative of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies Kashirinov came from Vladivostok to deliver a report on the situation in Kamchatka. Upon examining the earlier documents received from Petropavlovsk, the Vladivostok Soviet of Deputies deemed Kamchatka regional committee hostile and counter-revolutionary. Kamchatka’s new authority was blamed to be “...in the same old prerevolutionary state. There is no actual freedom still. The governor’s late officials who, while avoiding being sent to the actual lines, serve their military duty as an integral part of the police state now, closely controlling all life in Kamchatka and do not allow any reforms on the basis of their new freedom” (Purin, 2005, p.134). The delegates from Kamchatka were indignant at the Vladivostok Soviet interference and ignored their decision. Instead they ordered to arrest Kashirinov and send him away from the region (Purin, 2005, p.135). When the delegates’ assembly was adjourned on August 8, the newly elected Regional Committee saw to its duties while the delegates went back to their settlements across Kamchatka to deliver the news of change.

In the provincial town of Petropavlovsk, impulses of revolutionary enthusiasm interchanged with periods of indifference. A general person fired up easily but also easily refused routine work requiring commitment. Many citizens saw their participation in voluntary social activities as a way to realize their ambition and acquire political power. Under the pretense of “freedom”, the poachers demanded for the confiscated furs to be returned, as well as for a compensation for the time wasted in prison. Purin (2005) states, “When asked to go to court, people threatened to feed them with bullets” (p.131).

The August of 1917 issue of “The Kamchatka News Letter” can confirm the thesis that a revolution always makes living conditions extreme both for individuals and society as a whole, leading to more violence. One cannot help but notice “The Kamchatka News Letter” getting more and more pro-revolutionist. For instance, “The enemy of the revolution” phrase came into use, with its meaning expanding gradually. First and foremost, it can be attributed to two factors. First, the spread of publications on the Petrograd events of August-September in 1917 and, second, the Bolsheviks entering the political arena. With a compromised food supply and a rising cost for essential goods, the number of malcontents in Petropavlovsk grew. On this stage, the political behavior of the citizens was affected by their everyday life problems. Therefore, the representatives of the Churin Trade House were branded “the enemies of the revolution” and “bourgeois” (Larin, 2003). To add to that, the very word “bourgeois” took on an insulting, even profane meaning. From August 22, 1917, Petropavlovsk dwellers learnt from a newspaper article that the commission had been organized in the city to investigate the power misuse incidents by the old authorities. The author of the article insisted that “it is desirable that the commission should publish the names of its members as well as its work schedule so that everyone would know where to go and whom to address in case they want to report the cases of the old regime’s abuse of authority” (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917g, p.5). When addressing the governmental representatives, the author also recommended to accelerate case-processing in “the old authorities’ power abuse incident investigation commission” (Kamchatskiy listok, 1917h, p.2). He also wrote down the surnames of the police officers who were to be judged by the Revolutionary Court as soon as possible.

In sum, during the first half of 1917, the most far-away provinces of Russia were gradually getting involved in the revolution. It wasn’t possible to stop or delay this process anymore.

Conclusion

The analysis of historical sources allows to follow the post-February changes in public attitude and political behavior of the provincial city dwellers, as well as to analyze reasons and circumstances behind these changes. For the most part, the information reaching Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in February-August of 1917 was of an informative character, i.e. simply reported the revolutionary changes all over the country.

Even then its influence on the public proved to be immense. The political activities of the new Russian citizens began to become destructive. Suggestion became the primary reason for public attitude transformation. The worsening economic situation, the instability of the central authorities, and the inability to find a foothold in the rapidly changing world made the people extremely sensitive. Participating in the political processes was often an unconscious but a volitional act of the citizens, in our opinion. The traditional system of values took a rapid turn, becoming one of the main outcomes of the 1917 February Revolution, and resulted in aggression starting to grow both from the outside and the inside of society. At the same time, the provincials were not simply the victims of the revolution but also its creators. The situation was to take a turn for the worse with the Bolsheviks entering the political arena, bringing about a civil war. The attempt to research the specifics of people's everyday life during a revolution in the context of social-psychological transformation of society is a first step to understand the events of the 1917 Great Russian Revolution in the peripheries.

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