

Leaders of the Russian Revolution

Leon Trotsky on Yakov Sverdlov (March 1925)

Leon Trotsky
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As part of the commemoration of the centenary of the October Revolution in 1917, the World Socialist Web Site is publishing a series of profiles of leaders of the Russian Revolution. We are publishing here a portrait written by Leon Trotsky of Yakov Sverdlov, the chief organizer of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and first president of the Soviet Republic.

The article originally appeared in 1925 and was translated into English by the American Trotskyist John G. Wright. It was published in Vol. 7, No. 11, of the Fourth International journal in 1946. What follows is an edited version of this translation prepared by the World Socialist Web Site, together with the original introduction from the Fourth International journal.

Introduction (from the Fourth International journal, 1946)

We are reprinting, on this 29th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky's brief sketch of the great Sverdlov, the incomparable Bolshevik organizer. It is well to acquaint our readers with this heroic figure, who epitomized the type of revolutionist who made possible the 1917 revolution and the subsequent victory over the counter-revolution.

Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov was born in the city of Nizhny Novgorod on June 3, 1885. His father, an engraver, was able to give his children an education beyond the reach of working-class families in Czarist Russia. As a boy of ten, young Yakov was enrolled in a gymnasium (equivalent to high school) where he studied for five years.

At the age of 15, he left school to work in a drug store. The next year, that is 1901, the first revolutionary underground committee in Nizhny Novgorod was organized. This same year, Sverdlov, at the age of 16, joined the revolutionary movement.

Despite his extreme youth, he came quickly to the forefront, serving in his period of underground activity as a leading figure in virtually all the regions of Russia. When the split occurred in the Russian movement in 1903, Sverdlov adhered to the Bolsheviks, in whose ranks he remained to the day of his death. In 1905, during his assignment in the Urals, he organized and led the Soviet of Workers' Deputies there.

Like all the underground workers of his day he spent many long years in prison and Tsarist exile. His first arrest came in 1903. In 1906, after the defeat of the 1905 revolution, he spent 18 months in jail and then served a two-year penitentiary term. A whole series of arrests, jailings, exiles, and escapes followed.

In the autumn of 1913, at the Poronin Conference of the Bolsheviks, he was co-opted in his absence (he was in exile at the time) to the Central Committee of the Party.

When the February 1917 revolution broke out, Sverdlov was in exile in the polar regions of Siberia, from where he came at once to Petrograd. At the April 1917 Conference, he was elected to the Central Committee.

At the Second Soviet Congress, he was elected Chairman of the All-Union Soviet Executive Committee. He combined his work as President

of the Soviet Republic with the onerous responsibilities of "organizer-in-chief" of the Bolshevik Party to the day of his untimely death at the age of 34.

Little is now known about this superb organizer of Bolshevism. Layer upon layer of Stalinist distortions and falsifications have encrusted his memory. Official Kremlin mythology has not merely assigned to Stalin most of the role and functions that Sverdlov fulfilled in the October Revolution and in the Civil War period but has sought to depict Sverdlov in Stalin's image. But Sverdlov as organizer was the polar opposite of Stalin. Trotsky later drew the following contrast between Sverdlov and Stalin "as types of organizers":

Up to the spring of 1919, the chief organizer of the Party had been Sverdlov. He did not have the name of General Secretary, a name which was then not yet invented, but he was that in reality. Sverdlov died at the age of 34 in March 1919, from the so-called Spanish fever. In the spread of the civil war and the epidemic, mowing people down right and left, the Party hardly realized the weight of this loss. In two funeral speeches, Lenin gave an appraisal of Sverdlov which throws a reflected but very clear light also upon his later relations with Stalin. "In the course of our revolution, in its victories," Lenin said, "it fell to Sverdlov to express more fully and more wholly than anybody else the very essence of the proletarian revolution." Sverdlov was "before all and above all an organizer. From a modest underground worker, neither theoretician nor writer, there grew up in a short time an organizer who acquired irreproachable authority, an organizer of the whole Soviet power in Russia, and an organizer of the work of the Party unique in his understanding." Lenin had no taste for the exaggerations of anniversary or funeral panegyrics. His appraisal of Sverdlov was at the same time a characterization of the task of the organizer: "Only thanks to the fact that we had such an organizer as Sverdlov were we able in war times to work as though we had *not one single conflict worth speaking of.*"

So it was in fact. In conversations with Lenin in those days we remarked more than once, and with ever renewed satisfaction, one of the chief conditions of our success: the unity and solidarity of the governing group. In spite of the dreadful pressure of events and difficulties, the novelty of the problems, and sharp practical disagreements occasionally bursting out, the work proceeded with extraordinary smoothness and friendliness, and without interruptions. With a brief word, we would recall episodes of the old revolutions. "No, it is better with us." "This alone guarantees our victory." The solidarity of the center had been prepared by the

whole history of Bolshevism and was kept up by the unquestioned authority of the leaders, and above all of Lenin. But in the inner mechanics of this unexampled unanimity, the chief technician had been Sverdlov. The secret of his art was simple: to be guided by the interests of the cause and that only. No one of the Party workers had any fear of intrigues creeping down from the Party staff. The basis of this authority of Sverdlov's was *loyalty*.

Having tested out mentally all the Party leaders, Lenin in his funeral speech drew the practical conclusion: "Such a man we can never replace, if by replacement we mean the possibility of finding one comrade combining such qualities ... The work which he did alone can now be accomplished only by a whole group of men who, following in his footsteps, will carry on his service." These words were not rhetorical, but a strictly practical proposal. And the proposal was carried out. Instead of a single Secretary, there was appointed a collegium of three persons.

From these words of Lenin, it is evident, even to those unacquainted with the history of the Party, that during the life of Sverdlov, Stalin played no leading role in the Party machinery – either at the time of the October Revolution or in the period of laying the foundations and walls of the Soviet state. Stalin was also not included in the first Secretariat which replaced Sverdlov.

Yakov Sverdlov (by Leon Trotsky, 1925)

I became acquainted with Sverdlov only in 1917 at a session of the Bolshevik fraction of the First Soviet Congress. Sverdlov was presiding. In those days there were hardly any in the party who guessed the true stature of this remarkable man. But within the next few months, he was to unfold himself fully.

In the initial period after the revolution the emigrés, that is, those who had spent many years abroad, could still be told apart from the "domestic" and "native" Bolsheviks. In many respects, the emigrés possessed serious advantages because of their European experience, the broader outlook connected with the latter, and also because they had generalized theoretically the experience of past factional struggles. Naturally, this division into emigrés and non-emigrés was purely temporary and eventually it disappeared. But in 1917 and in 1918 it was in many cases something very palpable.

However, there was no "provincialism" to be sensed in Sverdlov even in those days. Month by month he grew and became stronger so naturally, so organically, so seemingly without effort, so much in step with events and in such constant touch and collaboration with Vladimir Ilyich [Lenin] that to a superficial view it might have seemed that Sverdlov had been born an accomplished revolutionary "statesman" of the first rank. All questions of the revolution he approached not from above, that is, not from the standpoint of general theoretical considerations, but rather from below, through the direct impulses of life itself as transmitted by the Party organization. When new political questions were under discussion, it might have seemed sometimes that Sverdlov – especially if he kept silent which was not infrequently the case – was wavering or had not yet made up his mind. In reality, in the course of the discussion, he was engaged in mentally working out the problem along parallel lines, which might be sketched out as follows: Who is available? Where should he be assigned? How shall we broach the problem and bring it in harmony with our other tasks? And no sooner had the joint political decision been reached, no sooner was it necessary to turn to the organizational side of the problem and the question of personnel than it almost invariably turned out that Sverdlov was already prepared with far-reaching practical proposals,

based on his encyclopedic memory and personal acquaintance with people.

In the initial stages of their formation, all the Soviet departments and institutions turned to him for personnel; and this initial and rough allocation of party cadres demanded exceptional resourcefulness and inventiveness. It was impossible to depend on an established apparatus, on files, archives, etc. For all this was still in an extremely nebulous shape, and at any rate provided no direct means of verifying to what extent the professional revolutionist Ivanov may be qualified to head a particular Soviet department, of which only the name was as yet in existence. A special psychologic intuition was required to decide such a question: one had to locate in Ivanov's past two or three focal points and thence draw conclusions for an entirely new situation.

Meanwhile, these transplantations had to be made in the most diversified fields in a search for a People's Commissar, or for a manager of the *Izvestiia* printing plant [the central organ of the Petrograd Soviet], or for a member of the Central Committee of the Soviets, or for a commandant of the Kremlin, and so on *ad infinitum*. These organizational problems arose, naturally, without any consecutiveness whatever, that is, never from the highest post down to the lowest or vice versa, but in every which way, accidentally, chaotically. Sverdlov made inquiries, gathered or remembered biographical details, made phone calls, offered recommendations, gave out assignments, made appointments. At the present time, I am at a loss to say exactly in what capacity he performed all this work, that is, just what his formal powers were. But at all events, a considerable part of this work had to be performed on his own personal responsibility – with the support, naturally, of Vladimir Ilyich. And no one ever challenged it, because such were the exigencies of the entire situation at the time.

Sverdlov accomplished a considerable part of his organizational work as Chairman of the All-Union Soviet Executive Committee, utilizing the members of this Executive for various appointments and for particular assignments. "Talk it over with Sverdlov," Lenin would advise in many cases whenever someone turned to him with a particular problem.

"I must talk it over with Sverdlov," would say a new-baked Soviet "dignitary" to himself whenever he hit a snag with his collaborators. One of the ways to solve a major practical problem was—according to the unwritten constitution—"to talk it over with Sverdlov."

But Sverdlov himself, of course, did not at all favor this personalized method. On the contrary, his entire work prepared the conditions for a more systematic and regularized solution of all Party and Soviet problems.

In those days the need was for "pioneers" in all spheres, that is, people capable of operating on their own two feet amid the greatest chaos, in the absence of precedents, without any statutes and regulations. It was for such pioneers for all conceivable exigencies that Sverdlov was constantly on the lookout. He would recall, as I have already said, this or that biographical detail, of how so and so had conducted himself at such and such a time, and from this, he would adduce whether or not this or that candidate would be suitable. There were, of course, many mistakes. But the astonishing thing is that there were not many more. And what seems most astonishing is how Sverdlov found it possible to even broach a problem in the face of the chaos of tasks, the chaos of difficulties and with a minimum of available personnel.

It was much clearer and easier to approach each problem from the standpoint of principle and political expediency than to approach it from the organizational standpoint. This situation is to be observed among us to this very day, flowing, as it does, from the very essence of a period that is transitional to socialism. But in those days the discrepancy between a clearly envisaged goal and the lack of material and human resources made itself felt much more acutely than today. It was precisely when matters came to the point of practical solution that many of us would start shaking our heads in perplexity. And then someone would ask: "Well, and what do

you say, Yakov Mikhailovich?” And Sverdlov would offer his solution. In his opinion “the undertaking was quite feasible.” A group of carefully selected Bolsheviks would have to be sent; and they should be properly briefed, and given the proper connections, and proper attention paid, and the necessary aid given—and it could be done. To gain successes on this path one must be completely imbued with confidence that it was possible to solve any task and to overcome any difficulty. An inexhaustible reserve of active optimism did indeed supply the subsoil for Sverdlov’s work. Naturally, this does not mean to say that each problem was in this way solved 100 percent. If it was solved 10 percent, that was good. In those days this already meant salvation because it made tomorrow secure. But after all, this was precisely the gist of all the work during those initial and hardest years: it was necessary to get food supplies somehow; it was necessary to equip and train the troops somehow; it was necessary to keep the transport functioning somehow; it was necessary to cope with the typhus somehow—*no matter what the price the revolution had to be secured its tomorrow.*

The Best Type of Bolshevik

Sverdlov’s qualities became strikingly revealed in the most critical moments, for example, after the July Days in the year 1917, that is, after the White Guardists had crushed our Party in Petrograd; and again, during the July days in the year 1918, that is, after the Left Social Revolutionists staged their insurrection. [1] In both cases it was necessary to rebuild the organization, to renew connections or create them over again, checking up on those who had passed a great test. And in both cases, Sverdlov was irreplaceable with his revolutionary calm, his far-sightedness, and his resourcefulness.

On another occasion, I have told the story of how Sverdlov came from the Bolshoi Theater, from the Soviet Congress to the cabinet of Vladimir Ilyich at the very “peak” of the Left SR uprising. [2] After greeting us with a smile he said, “Well, I suppose we shall again have to move from the *Sovnarkom* (Council of People’s Commissars) to the *Revkom* (Revolutionary Military Council).”

Sverdlov remained himself, as he usually was. In such days one really learns to know people. And Yakov Mikhailovich was truly beyond compare: confident, courageous, firm, resourceful—the best type of Bolshevik. It was precisely in those critical months that Lenin came to know and to appreciate Sverdlov. Time and again it happened that Vladimir Ilyich would pick up the phone in order to propose to Sverdlov a particular emergency measure and in most cases the answer he got was “Already.” This meant that the measure had already been adopted. We often made jokes on this topic, saying, “Well, in all likelihood, Sverdlov has it—already.”

“You know,” Lenin once remarked, “in the beginning, we were against including him on the Central Committee. How we underestimated the man! There was a considerable dispute over it, but the rank and file corrected us at the Convention, and they proved to be entirely correct.”

Despite the fact that there never was, of course, even talk of intermixing the organizations, the bloc with the Left SRs did unquestionably tend to make the conduct of our Party nuclei somewhat nebulous. Suffice it to mention, for example, that when a large group of activists was detailed to the Eastern front, simultaneously with the appointment of Muraviev as commander-in-chief of that area, [3] a Left SR was elected the secretary of this group of several score, even though most of them were Bolsheviks. In the various institutions and departments, the greater was the number of new and accidental members of our own Party all the more indefinite were the relations between the Bolsheviks and the SRs. The laxness, the lack of

vigilance and of cohesion among Party members only recently implanted in the still fresh state apparatus are characterized quite strikingly by the single fact that the basic core of the uprising was constituted by the Left SR organization among the *Cheka* troops.

The salutary change occurred literally within two or three days. During the days of the insurrection engineered by one ruling party against another, when all personal relations were suddenly put in question, and when the functionaries in the departments began wavering, then the best and the most devoted Communist elements within all sorts of institutions quickly drew close to one another, breaking all ties with the Left SRs and combatting them. The Communist nuclei became fused in the factories and in the army sections. In the development of the Party and the State alike, this was a moment of exceptional importance. Party elements, distributed and in part dispersed throughout the still formless framework of the state apparatus and whose Party ties had become to a large extent diffused in departmental relations, now came instantly to the fore, closed ranks and became welded together under the blows of the Left SR insurrection. Everywhere Communist nuclei took shape which assumed in those days the actual leadership of the internal life of all the institutions. One may say that it was precisely in those days that the Party in its majority became for the first time really conscious of its role as a ruling organization, as the leader of the proletarian state, as the party of the proletarian dictatorship not only in its political but also in its organizational aspects. This process—which might be designated as the beginning of the party’s organizational self-determination within the Soviet State apparatus created by the Party itself took place under the direct leadership of Sverdlov, irrespective of whether involved was the All-Union Soviet Executive Committee or a garage of the War Commissariat. Historians of the October Revolution will be obliged to single out and minutely study this critical moment in the evolution of the reciprocal relations between the Party and the State, a moment that was to place its stamp on the entire period to come, down to this very day. Therewith the historian who takes up this question will lay bare the great role played by Sverdlov, the organizer, during this all-important turning point. All the threads of practical connections were gathered in his hands.

Even more critical were the days when the Czechoslovaks threatened Nizhny Novgorod, while Lenin was struck down, with two SR bullets in his body. On September 1, [1918] at Svyazhsk I received a coded telegram from Sverdlov: “Return immediately. Ilyich wounded. How critically not known. Complete calm prevails. Sverdlov. August 31, 1918.” I left immediately for Moscow. The Party circles in Moscow were in a stern, somber but unwavering mood.

The best expression of this unwaveringness was Sverdlov. His responsibilities and his role increased manifold in those days. The highest tension could be sensed in his nervous body. But this nervous tension meant only a greater vigilance—it had nothing in common with aimless bustling, and all the less so with jitteriness. During such moments Sverdlov made his stature felt completely.

The diagnosis of the physicians was hopeful. No visitors were allowed to see Lenin; no one was admitted. There was no reason to remain in Moscow. Shortly after my return to Svyazhsk, I received a letter from Sverdlov dated September 8:

“Dear Lev Davidovich,

I take this opportunity to write a few words. Things are going well with Vladimir Ilyich. I shall probably be able to see him in three or four days.”

The rest of the letter deals with practical questions which it is unnecessary to bring up here.

Engraved sharply in my memory is the trip to the little town of Gorki where Vladimir Ilyich convalesced from his wounds. It was on my next trip to Moscow. Despite the terribly difficult situation there was strongly to be felt at the time a change for the better. At the Eastern front, which was then the decisive one, we had recaptured Kazan and Simbirsk. The

attempt on Lenin's life served the Party as a supreme political overhauling: the Party felt more vigilant, more on guard, better prepared to beat back the enemy. Lenin was improving rapidly and making preparation to return to work soon. All this together engendered moods of strength and assurance. Since the Party had been able to cope with the situation up until now, it would surely continue to do so in the future. This was exactly our mood as we made the journey to Gorki.

En route, Sverdlov acquainted me with what had happened in Moscow during my absence. He had an excellent memory as is the case with most individuals who have a strong creative will. His account revolved, as always, around the axis of the most important things that had to be done, with the necessary organizational particulars, accompanied in passing, with brief characterizations of individuals. In brief, it was an extension of Sverdlov's customary work. And beneath it all was to be felt the undercurrent of confidence, calm and at the same time overpowering: "*Spravimsia* [we'll manage]!"

An Imperious Chairman

Sverdlov had to preside a great deal. He was chairman of many bodies and at many meetings. He was an imperious chairman. Not in the sense that he shut off discussion, or curbed the speakers, and so on. Not at all. On the contrary, he never quibbled or insisted on formalities. His imperiousness as chairman consisted in this, that he always knew exactly what practical decision was before the body; he understood who would speak, what would be said, and why; he was quite familiar with the backstage aspects of the issue – and every big and complex issue has its own backstage; he was adept at giving the floor in time to speakers who were needed; he knew how to put the proposition to a vote in time; he knew what could be carried and he was able to carry what he wanted. These traits of his as chairman were bound up indissolubly with all his qualities as a practical leader, with his ability to appraise people in the flesh, realistically, with his inexhaustible inventiveness in the field of organizational and personnel combinations.

During stormy sessions he was adept at permitting the assembly to become noisy and let off steam; and then at the proper moment, he would intervene to restore order with a firm hand and a metallic voice.

Sverdlov was of medium height, of dark complexion, very thin and gaunt; his face, lean; his features, angular. His powerful and even mighty voice might have seemed out of consonance with his physique. To an even greater degree, this might be said of his character. But such an impression could be only fleeting. And then the physical image became fused with the spiritual. Nor is this all, for this gaunt figure with its calm unconquerable and inflexible will and with its powerful but not flexible voice, would then stand forth as a finished image.

"*Nichevo* [no problem]," Vladimir Ilyich would sometimes say in a difficult situation. "Sverdlov will tell them about it in his Sverdlovian bass and the matter will be settled ..."

In these words, there was affectionate irony.

In the initial post-October period the Communists were, as is well-known, called "leatherites" by our enemies, because of the way in which we dressed. I believe that Sverdlov's example played a major role in introducing the leather "uniform" among us. At all events, he invariably walked around encased in leather from head to toe, from his leather cap to his leather boots. This costume, which somehow corresponded with the character of those days, radiated far and wide from him, as the central organizational figure.

Comrades who knew Sverdlov in the underground days remember a different Sverdlov. But in my memory, Sverdlov remains clothed in

leather as in an armor grown black under the blows of the first years of the Civil War.

We were gathered at a session of the Political Bureau when Sverdlov, who was burning up with fever at home, took a turn for the worse. E.D. Stassova, who was then the Secretary of the Central Committee, came in during the session. She had come from Sverdlov's apartment. Her face was unrecognizable.

"Yakov Mikhailovich feels poorly, very poorly," she said. A glance at her sufficed to understand that there was no hope. We cut the session short. Vladimir Ilyich went to Sverdlov's apartment, and I left for the Commissariat to prepare to depart immediately to the front. In about 15 minutes a phone call came from Lenin, who said in that special muted voice which meant great strain: "He is gone."—"He is gone?"—"He is gone." For a while, each of us held the receiver in our hands and each could feel the silence at the other end. Then we hung up. There was nothing more to say. Yakov Mikhailovich was gone. Sverdlov was no longer among us.

March 13, 1925

Endnotes (by the WSWs):

[1] The insurrection by the Left SRs: The general dissatisfaction of the Left SRs with the policies of the Bolsheviks, most notably the conclusion of the Peace Treaty of Brest Litovsk, eventually resulted in an open insurrection in Moscow on July 6, 1918. The assassination of the German ambassador Graf Mirbach, carried out on behalf of the SR Central Committee by Ya. Bliumkin and N. Andreyev, signaled the start of the insurrection.

[2] See Trotsky's "On Lenin," written in the same year.

[3] Muraviev was a lieutenant colonel in the army who sympathized with the Left SRs during the epoch of Kerensky (*Kerenshchina*). In the initial days of the October Revolution, he performed an important service to Soviet power in his capacity as a commander of the armed forces. In July 1918, he gave the treacherous order to withdraw units from the Eastern Front and march on Moscow. The armed forces did not support him, and Muraviev shot himself.



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