Leaders of the Russian Revolution

Nikolai Muralov (1877-1937)

Part One: Early years through the Civil War

Clara Weiss
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As part of the celebration 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. This is the first of a two-part profile of Nikolai Muralov.*

Due to the bloody and protracted Stalinist and bourgeois reaction against the revolution, these individuals remain largely unknown to the international working class. Yet they rank among the most complex and formidable figures of the 20th century and are an important part of the proud heritage of the working class. The stunning and often tragic vicissitudes of their political and personal lives mirror the complicated development of the Bolshevik Party itself, and the rapid succession of revolution, war, and reaction. This series seeks to introduce our readers to the major contributions these figures made to the struggle for socialism, and how their lives intersected with the development of the Russian Revolution.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are by this author.

It is difficult to think of a figure from the Russian Revolution for whom the description "working class hero" would be more apt than Nikolai Muralov. An agrarian expert by training, Muralov led the Bolshevik forces in the seizure of power in Moscow, was one of the towering figures first of the Civil War and then of the inner-party struggle in the 1920s.

Nikolai Ivanovich Muralov was born on December 7, 1877, in a small town in southern Russia, in Grecheskie Roty, near Taganrog. His father, Ivan Anastasievich, was a descendant of Greek settlers in what is now Ukraine and Crimea. He came from an educated and wealthy background, but broke from his social milieu to marry Nikolai's mother, a poor and illiterate Ukrainian peasant girl. While in Great Britain, he met the exiled Russian revolutionary democrat Alexander Herzen, whose legendary journal *Kolokol* (The Bell) he avidly read when back in Russia.

Despite the family's poverty, Ivan Anastasievich took great care to ensure that his eleven children would receive a good education. No less than five of them would eventually join the Bolshevik Party: Nikolai, his older sisters Sofia and Yulia, and his younger brothers, Aleksander and Radion.

At age 17, Nikolai entered a four-year school of agricultural education. He later wrote:

> I came from a poor working family and I achieved both an education and my status through my own hard labor. I then entered workers' circles in 1899 and the party in 1903. In my subsequent activities I continued to be a conscious, mature, and educated person. [1]

Muralov was part of a relatively small layer of young workers who went through all stages of the development of the Russian revolutionary movement since the 1890s. (Overall, these figures number just a few dozen people.) In the 1890s, the political work of the Russian social democratic movement was still centered on agitation, carried out in the factories by members of small circles (kruzhki). For the most part, these circles maintained very little to no contact with each other. They issued their own newspapers and leaflets and at times even advanced different demands. The founding of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1898 was the first step toward the building of a unified party, but it took place under very adverse circumstances.

The two most important and influential leaders of the Marxist movement—Georgi Plekhanov and Vladimir Lenin—were both absent: Lenin was in exile in Siberia, while Plekhanov lingered in his exile in Switzerland. The Tsarist police launched a massive crackdown on the party immediately after the Congress, arresting over five hundred of the most active Social Democrats. [2]

It was under these conditions that Nikolai Muralov became a Marxist revolutionary in what is now Ukraine, which was then one of the most important centers of the revolutionary movement. From 1899 to 1902, he lived and worked in Maikop, where he participated in a circle studying the works of Marx, Engels and Kautsky, and reading Lenin's newspaper *Iskra*, which had started to appear in 1900. In 1901, he became a member of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). He played an active role in the strikes that swept the city's factories, including his own. After the October Revolution, one of the town's largest streets was named after Muralov, but it was renamed again during the Great Purges, in 1937.

In 1902, Muralov left Maikop to continue his studies in Moscow. Here, he participated in the great student protests of this year and was promptly arrested. After his imprisonment, he settled in Serpukhov, a town near Moscow, where he helped build a cell of the RSDLP. In 1903, he moved to Podolsk.

When the Bolshevik faction, headed by Lenin, was formed in opposition to the Menshevik faction at the Second Party Congress in 1903, Muralov and his two sisters joined the Bolsheviks. Proceeding from his analysis in *What Is to Be Done*, Lenin insisted at the Congress on forming a centralized political party that, through a daily newspaper, would be capable of bringing socialist consciousness into the working class and preparing it for the actual seizure of power. Moreover, in contrast to the Mensheviks, Lenin insisted that the Russian liberal bourgeoisie could not play a revolutionary role in the democratic revolution in Russia—a prognosis that would be fully confirmed by the revolution of 1905.

All of this required a break with what Lenin termed "*kruzhkovshchina*"—the mentality and mode of working within little, more or less independent circles of intellectuals and worker-intellectuals.

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Along with his siblings, Nikolai Muralov played a very visible role in this first major revolutionary upheaval of the Russian working class. It was in this monumental struggle, and the ensuing counterrevolution, that his most outstanding qualities—courage and firmness of principle—first became legendary.

He frequently spoke at meetings organized by the Bolshevik Party that were attended by hundreds of workers. An eyewitness described one such meeting:

> Among the workers was one stranger (I knew all of the others), he spoke about an approaching all-Russian general strike and the meeting decided that we too should go out on strike, and advance economic demands. After the speech, he handed out small booklets with revolutionary songs, which I had never read and seen before. They gave us church candles, lit them, and now I could see the face of the agitator quite well. He was dark, 25 or 30 years old, with a very energetic face, his voice was almost a bass, it was powerful, courageous and determined. I later learned that this was Nikolai Ivanovich Muralov. He was the first to start singing the Varshavianka, others joined him. How much energy and strength this song had! And how serious were the faces of the singers! [3]

Nikolai and his brother Aleksander helped organize the December uprising in Moscow in 1905. Following the crushing defeat of the uprising, pogroms and counter-revolutionary tsarist squads swept the country.

As two of the best-known revolutionaries in the region, the Muralov brothers became the target of a violent assault by Black Hundreds in Podolsk. Trotsky later described a clash between Muralov and the Black Hundreds in *My Life* (in fact, both Muralov brothers figured in this clash):

> In Serpukhov, in 1906, he [Nikolai Muralov] was caught in the pogrom of the Black Hundred—carried out, as usual, under the protection of the police. Muralov is a magnificent giant, as fearless as he is kind. With a few others, he found himself in a ring of enemies who had surrounded the building of the Zemstvo administration. Muralov came out of the building with a revolver in his hand and walked evenly toward the crowd. It moved back a little. But the shock company of the Black Hundred blocked his path, and the cabmen began to howl taunts at him. “Clear the way,” ordered the giant without slackening his advance, as he raised the hand holding the revolver. Several men pounced on him. He shot one of them down and wounded another. The crowd drew back again. With the same even step, cutting his way through the crowd like an ice-breaker, Muralov walked on and on toward Moscow. His subsequent trial lasted for two years, and, in spite of the frenzy of the reaction that swept over the country, he was acquitted. [4]

After the defeat of the revolution, the two Muralov brothers returned to Podolsk where they worked on their own farm. Several of their siblings and relatives joined them here. Meanwhile, Nikolai Muralov’s lawyer, N. N. Muraveev, tried to delay the trial—with success.

Throughout these years, Nikolai Muralov remained a highly active party worker. The Muralovs’ estate in Podolsk became a central meeting point for underground Bolsheviks. Many Bolshevik leaflets and pamphlets were printed with their secret printing press, and they organized lectures with leading party members for the local population. In addition, Muralov and his brother Aleksander founded the Society for Sobriety in Podolsk, which sought to educate the local workers and peasants and fight against the widespread alcoholism.

Muralov was eventually acquitted of the charges of the murder of a member of the Black Hundreds, but only because he was drafted into the army for World War I. Seeking to maintain close ties to the soldiers, Muralov rejected a promotion and agitated among the rank-and-file soldiers for Lenin’s slogan of turning the imperialist war into a civil war. The February Revolution of 1917, which put an end to the 300-year long rule of the Romanov Dynasty, found him still serving in the army.

In the inner-party struggle of 1917, Muralov calmly and firmly sided with Lenin and Trotsky. The latter later described Muralov’s behavior in the wake of the defeated July insurrection, as the counter-revolution swept the country and cracked down on the Bolsheviks, in *My Life*:

> The situation in the ruling circles of the party was bad. Lenin was away; Kamenev’s wing was raising its head. Many—and these included Stalin—simply let events take their own course so that they might show their wisdom the day after. The Bolshevik faction in the Central Executive Committee felt orphaned in the Taurid Palace [the headquarters of the Petrograd Soviet -CW]. It sent a delegation to ask me if I would speak to them about the situation, although I was not yet a member of the party; my formal joining had been delayed until the party congress, soon to meet. I agreed readily, of course. My talk with the Bolshevik faction established moral bonds of the sort that are forged only under the enemy’s heaviest blows. I said then that after this crisis we were to expect a rapid upswing; that the masses would become twice as strongly attached to us when they had verified the truth of our declaration by facts; that it was necessary to keep a strict watch on every revolutionary, for at such moments men are weighed on scales that do not err. Even now I recall with pleasure the warmth and gratitude that the members showed me when I left them. “Lenin is away,” Muralov said, “and of the others, only Trotsky has kept his head.” ... In the July days of 1917, Muralov held his head up, as usual, and encouraged many others. In those days, we all needed a lot of self-control to stride along the corridors and halls of the Taurid Palace without bowing our heads, as we ran the gauntlet of furious glances, venomous whispers, grinding of teeth, and a demonstrative elbowing that seemed to say: “Look! Look!” There is no fury greater than that of a vain and pampered “revolutionary” philistine when he begins to perceive that the revolution which has suddenly lifted him to the top is about to threaten his temporary splendor. [5]

By this time, Muralov was recognized as one of the Bolshevik Party’s leading experts on the agrarian question. At the First Congress of Soviets in June 1917, he presented the Bolshevik resolution. Given that the Bolsheviks were still in a small minority in the Soviet at that point, it was defeated by a large margin. Yet, in essence, it contained the agrarian policies which the Bolsheviks were to defend and enact in the months to follow and on the basis of which they gathered substantial support among the peasantry. Muralov later recalled:

> Our proposals were brief and concrete—immediate confiscation of the land from the landowners, nationalization of all land, all forests and depths of the earth. Our resolution, written in hand by Lenin, could fit on a quarter of a piece of paper. [6]

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In their agrarian program, the Bolsheviks adopted many ideas from the Socialist Revolutionary Party. The central axis and most attractive part of the SR's otherwise extraordinarily vague and contradictory program was the call for a socialization of the land. It was not least of all due to this programmatic demand that the SR party became during the spring and the early summer of 1917 the most popular party in Russia, with its chairman Viktor Chernov possibly being the single most popular politician in the country. But even though the SR party formed a central pillar of the coalition governments created after the overthrow of the Tsar, eventually even controlling the agricultural ministry, the party failed completely to enact any land reforms. It offered fervent support for the war effort, which claimed the lives more soldiers and peasants with every passing day. [7]

The growing disillusionment of the peasant and soldier masses with the SRs in the late summer and fall of 1917 led to a significant surge of support for the Bolsheviks. Especially after the aborted Kornilov coup, which had been co-staged and supported by two leading SRs, prime minister Alexander Kerensky and the vice-minister of war, Boris Savinkov, the SR party leadership was increasingly discredited among poorer layers of the peasantry.

This shift in the balance of forces, especially among the petty-bourgeois masses, was critical to the Bolshevik victory, not just in Petrograd but also in Moscow, which was located in a much more rural area than the capital. Nikolai Muralov, whose political trajectory had been mostly bound up with the developments in this region, came to play the central role as the Bolshevik military and political leader in the struggle of Moscow.

The Bolsheviks had initially planned to stage a simultaneous uprising in Petrograd and Moscow. But by the time that Nogin, one of the members of the Central Committee, managed to send a telegram to Moscow on October 25 (O.S.), the seizure of power in Petrograd had already been completed.

In a secret session, the Moscow Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies swiftly decided to create a Military Revolutionary Committee. This committee included four Bolsheviks and three Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), but "de facto, the four Bolsheviks had to carry all the weight of the work on their shoulders." [8] The most immediate task facing the committee was the struggle to arm the working class of Moscow. The Moscow Soviet eventually passed a decree to arm the Red Guards, despite the opposition of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who ardently opposed the organization and arming of Red Guards.

Muralov later recalled that this issue, more than almost any other question, clarified the lines between the Bolsheviks as the true revolutionaries, on the one side, and the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, on the other.

> The Mensheviks, who called themselves a party of the working class, feared to arm this class. The SRs, who called themselves revolutionaries, feared to arm the vanguard of the revolution. On this question, leaving aside many others, the true nature of these two "revolutionary" parties, their cowardice, petty-bourgeois character, sycophancy and servility before the kings of capital, were revealed.... It was not difficult for us to expose these "revolutionaries" before the broad working masses. On this question they stumbled, they ran into a dead end and themselves revealed the contradiction between their deceptive words, promises and names ("revolutionaries"), and their deeds. [9]

Unlike in Petrograd, the struggle in Moscow was bloody and prolonged. Having just suffered a crushing and to some extent unexpected defeat in Petrograd, the forces of the counter-revolution now focused all their strength on preventing Moscow from falling to the Bolsheviks. Yet they were outnumbered, and their cause was unpopular. According to Muralov's estimates, some 15,000 active revolutionary troops (in addition to 25,000 reserve troops) were facing 10,000 counter-revolutionary forces, including troops from the military schools, high-school students and regiments of the Mensheviks and SRs.

In the weeks immediately leading up to the uprising, the balance of forces had decidedly shifted toward the Bolsheviks. The peasants in the surrounding area had swung to the left as the government, which included the peasant-based Socialist Revolutionaries, continued to fail to give them land, peace, and bread. In Muralov's words, "The villages around Moscow teemed with deserters from the front." He further noted, "The peasants needed all of the land, and now, and not just when the Constituent Assembly would grant it. The balance of forces gave us the advantage. For all Moscow military units wanted to stop the war, [and] hated their officers...." [10]

The soldiers in the hospitals were in favor of the Bolsheviks and helped them by procuring weapons during the battle of Moscow. Even some Cossacks, the most conservative and pro-Tsarist units of the Russian military, were most concerned about returning home as quickly as possible. In the battle of Moscow, they refused to follow the orders of the Tsarist officer Riabtsev, thus helping the victory of the Red Guards.

Muralov later estimated: "Overall, in Moscow we had at least 50,000 people who were absolutely loyal to us, and about as many who were close to us, were wavering or were, at the very least, not our enemies, but rather friends, as it would then turn out." [11] Nevertheless, the White insurrection in Moscow could be defeated only with the help of forces that were sent from Petrograd, Ivanovo-Voznesensk and the Baltic Fleet.

Apart from the lower concentration of the working class and militant sailors and soldiers in and around Moscow, and the desperate effort to thwart the Bolshevik uprising in Moscow by the counterrevolution, a major reason for the prolonged character of the battle lay in the indecisiveness of the Bolshevik leadership itself, whose "wavering" Muralov would later often criticize in his reflections on the uprising. The Moscow party organization did not have the cadre of the Petrograd organization, where most of the major figures of the revolution were concentrated in 1917.

The Central Committee member responsible for coordinating the Moscow uprising, Viktor Nogin, belonged to the party leadership's right-wing, which had first opposed the insurrection in Petrograd and then advocated the formation of a "coalition government" with the very parties that had just been overthrown right after the seizure of power. These positions no doubt found an expression in his less than resolute approach to the Moscow uprising and his reportedly weak nerves. The Military Revolutionary Committee also proceeded in less firm a manner than it had in Petrograd. It failed, for instance, to capture the city telephone offices when the occasion arose.

Nevertheless, by November 15 (November 2, O.S.), the Military Revolutionary Committee in Moscow could proclaim victory. The same day, Muralov was given the powers of a commander for the Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee. A few days later, on November 27 (November 14, O.S.), Lenin signed the order affirming Muralov as the commander of the Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee.

In the months that followed, no less than 19 armies from the major imperialist countries (Germany, the United States, France, Great Britain, Japan, Canada) and smaller right-wing regimes in Europe (among them Poland, Czechoslovakia) invaded the fledgling workers' state. A bitter struggle over the control of much of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia ensued.

In the Civil War, Muralov emerged as one of the most influential and popular leaders of the Red Army. His soldiers famously said about Muralov: "We don't need any generals, we have the soldier Muralov."

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The Bolshevik leadership saw the invasion of the imperialist armies and their lackeys, and the insurrections of the Whites against the workers' seizure of power, as part of an *international* civil war between the working class, headed by the Communist International, on the one side, and the bourgeoisie, on the other, which was desperately and violently defending the crumbling vestiges of the capitalist order.

This perspective also underlay the work of Muralov as army commander. One of his appeals to the Red Army soldiers read:

> Comrades! The hour for a general world insurrection of the oppressed of all countries against the age-old slave-holders has come. The Western proletariat is shattering the stronghold of the capitalist foundations. The torch of the revolution in our country has ignited a worldwide fire in different corners of Europe, which is destined to destroy all foundations of imperialist rule and to erect a bright, wonderful, and just building of a new society of brotherly workers. Forward, comrades, advanced ranks of those leading to a socialist society!
>
> The commander of the forces of the Moscow Military District
> N. Muralov
> Commander-in-chief A. Burdukov [12]

In early 1919, Muralov was sent to the Eastern Front—then the most critical stage of the Civil War. He participated in the battles against the White Armies of Kolchak over Sarapulo-Votkinskoi, Perm, Ekaterinburg, Petropavlovsk and Kungur. On February 21, 1919, Muralov became a member of the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensoviet) as a delegate of the 3rd Army. When the central stage of the Civil War shifted toward the Southern Front (in what is now Ukraine) in the summer of 1919, Muralov was sent there to help reorganize and centralize the armed forces, and work out military plans. (Click here for footage of Nikolai Muralov and other leaders of the revolution in Moscow from 1918.)

Muralov remained in military positions until August 1920. By then, the Red Army had won some ground in the war, and the Central Committee felt that the process of transitioning party members back to civilian life and duties could begin. Lenin, in particular, was concerned with getting as many leading Bolsheviks as possible back to "civilian" life and having them work for the building of the Soviet economy.

As an expert on agriculture, on July 3, 1920, the Central Committee named Muralov a member of the Collegium of the People's Commissariat for Agriculture (the equivalent of a ministry of agriculture). Reluctantly, Muralov left the front. Describing his way back to Moscow through the war-torn and hunger-gripped country, Muralov later wrote:

> On the way to Moscow, I saw an even sadder picture—the fields and the grass of the guberniyas of Briansk and Luga had been burnt [by the sun], and at every [train] station dozens of tattered kids surrounded the wagons, begging for bread. ... The picture in Moscow was no better—due to the fires in the swamps and forests all of Moscow was covered in fog. [13]

In the following seven months, which Muralov called "an entire epoch of practical work on the economic front which had been conquered with blood in the October Days," he worked relatively closely with Lenin. [14] However, as the situation at the front grew worse again and in the wake of the Kronstadt uprising, the Central Committee decided to return Muralov to his post as commander of the Moscow Military District on March 1, 1921.

Throughout the Civil War, Muralov maintained close ties to Lenin. They went hunting together, and Muralov was one of the few Bolsheviks who had a direct phone line to Lenin's office. Lenin reportedly valued him as someone who could think for himself and had a different approach to many things and who was "independent."

To be continued.

Endnotes

[1] Quoted from: N. Poleshchuk, I. I. Romanenko, " *Nikolai Muralov: Strikhi k portretu* ", in: Poleshchuk N. (ed.), *Nikolai Muralov*, Moscow: *Moskovskii rabochii* 1990, p. 10.

[2] Alan Wildman, *T he Making of Workers' Revolution: Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903*, Chicago: 1967, p. 187.

[3] Quoted from: N. Poleshchuk and Romanenko, p. 15.

For a recording of the *Varshavianka*, one of the most popular revolutionary songs in Russia, see:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-C-tjQK0TY

[4] Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, Ch. 26. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/ch26.htm

[5] Ibid.

[6] Nikolai Muralov, "*Vstrechi s Ilyichem na voennoi rabote*," in: Poleshchuk N. (ed.), *Nikolai Muralov*, Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii 1990, p. 75.

[7] The program of the SR party called for socialization of the land but insisted on the maintenance of private property relations in industry. It was thus essentially pro-capitalist, while calling for petty-bourgeois socialist measures in the countryside. The main historian of the SR party in 1917, Oliver H. Radkey, noted: "The SR's believed that historical forces would deposit the revolution somewhere between classic liberalism and the collectivist society of the future, which could not be created by fiat but must grow organically from the increasing consciousness, organization, and economic achievement of the toilers themselves....the SR land program was never more than a declaration of principles into which the necessary details were never sketched. Not even the events of 1917 induced the SRs to take this step." Oliver H. Radkey, *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism. Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries February to October 1917*, New York/London: Columbia University Press 1962, pp. 24, 27.

[8] Quoted from: N. Poleshchuk and Romanenko, p. 21.

[9] Nikolai Muralov, "Oktiabr'-Noiabr'," in: Poleshchuk N. (ed.), *Nikolai Muralov*, Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii 1990, pp. 64-65.

[10] Ibid., p. 66.

[11] Ibid., p. 68.

[12] Quoted from: N. Poleshchuk and Romanenko, pp. 24-25.

[13] Nikolai Muralov,"Kratkie strannitsy ob Ilyiche na rabote v narodnom kommisariate zemledeliia,"in: Poleshchuk N. (ed.), *Nikolai Muralov*, Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii 1990, p. 95.

[14] Ibid., pp. 102-4.

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