

Leaders of the Russian Revolution: Ivar Tennisovich Smilga (1894-1937)

Part one

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As part of the commemoration of the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution, the World Socialist Web Site is publishing a series of profiles of leaders of the Russian Revolution. Due to the bloody and protracted Stalinist and bourgeois reaction against the revolution, these figures 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 historical 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 in the 20th century. This series seeks to introduce our readers to the major contributions these figures made to the struggle for socialism and reveal the manner in which their lives intersected with the development of the Russian Revolution.

The first article in this series examines the life and political career of Ivar Tennisovich Smilga. This is the first of two parts.

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

Today almost forgotten, Ivar Tennisovich Smilga ranks among the most outstanding leaders of the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia. At the age of just 24, he became one of Lenin's closest confidants in the preparation for the seizure of power in 1917. He played a central role in the leadership of the Red Army during the Civil War that followed the revolution, and then in the economic work of the early Soviet Union.

Ivar Tennisovich Smilga was born in 1892 to a peasant family that owned a small piece of land in Aloya, a town in Latvia. He was part of a generation that was politicized at a very early age by the Russo-Japanese War, the first Russian Revolution of 1905 and the bloody counterrevolution that followed.

In an autobiographical text from 1919, Smilga recounted that his “revolutionary consciousness was awakened” in 1901—he was then barely nine years old—when the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Piotr Karpovich assassinated the Minister of Enlightenment, Nikolai Bogolepov. Despite the liberal and enlightened atmosphere in his home, Smilga had held, in his own words, “religious-monarchist views.” He continued, “I remember that after the assassination of Bogolepov there was something like a celebration at our house, and I was the only one not to take part in it.” [1]

The historian Alan Wildman would later describe 1901 as a year of a “general ‘swing of politics’ of Russian society” to the left. [2] The following year saw mass strikes of workers in the southern Russian city of Rostov. At the same time, a protest movement by students gained momentum. The young Smilga slowly but surely came under the influence of the socialist movement. By 1904 he was, in his own words, “a convinced atheist and supporter of the revolution.”

The tensions in Russian society, briefly bottled up but then aggravated

by the war launched against Japan in 1904, finally exploded in the revolution of 1905.

In that year, the working class emerged as the central driving force of the revolutionary struggles that raged throughout the tsarist empire, including what is now the Baltics, which had significant social democratic movements. (See: “The Legacy of 1905 and the Strategy of the Russian Revolution”)

Latvia, like Lithuania, Ukraine and Congress Poland (then still part of Russia), was a multinational and multilingual part of the Russian Empire, where acute social exploitation overlapped with ruthless oppression against the national minorities. In these parts of the empire, the national minorities often formed the local majority population.

In Latvia, there were sizeable minorities of Latvians, Jews and Poles. However, they were prohibited from using their languages—Latvian, Polish and Yiddish—in public and in educational institutions. They were ruled by the Russian administration and a narrow layer of the Baltic German nobility, heirs of fabulous wealth and a tradition of the darkest political reaction.

In 1905, thousands of workers in Latvia, especially in Riga, participated in major strikes. After the crackdown on striking workers in the spring of 1905, mass uprisings of peasants started in the countryside. They seized many estates from the Baltic German nobility. In November 1905, martial law was declared in Latvia and punitive expeditions of the tsarist government roamed the countryside and the cities.

Leon Trotsky later described the counterrevolution in this region:

In the Baltic lands, where the insurrection flared up a fortnight earlier than in Moscow, the punitive expeditions were divided up into small detachments which carried out the bloodthirsty instructions of the [German] Baltic barons, that dirty caste from which the Russian bureaucracy drew its most brutish representatives. Latvian workers and peasants were shot, hanged, flogged to death with rods and stocks, made to run the gauntlet, executed to the strains of the tsarist anthem. According to highly incomplete information, 749 persons were executed, more than 100 farms were burned down, and many people were flogged to death in the Baltic lands within the space of two months. [3]

Among the victims of the counterrevolution was Ivar Smilga's father, who was first tortured and then executed before the eyes of his family. These events had an enormous impact on the young Smilga. He later recalled:

My father moved to the left just as contemporary society moved to the left, and he played an extremely visible role in the revolutionary events. During the elimination of the peasant self-administrations [volostnykh upravlenii] he was elected chairman of the revolutionary distribution committee in our volost' [administrative unit in the tsarist empire]. In 1906 he was shot by a punitive expedition of the tsarist government. In January 1907, while a student in middle school, I joined the social democratic workers' party. In my student years (1909 and 1910), my Marxist world view was conclusively formed. [4]

Smilga entered the socialist movement at a time of extreme reaction, when the masses of workers, under the impact of the defeat of the revolution, turned their backs on the struggle for socialism, if only temporarily.

Under these conditions, the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party (RSDRP) went through a very difficult period. Trotsky would later write that Lenin, who was in exile at this time, had barely a handful of Bolsheviks in Russia whom he could trust. The opportunist Menshevik wing of the party, which was oriented toward an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie, found itself strengthened by the tide of reaction.

However difficult these years, they would prove crucial in the political education of Smilga and other leading figures of the revolution, such as Ter-Vaganian, Leonid Serebriakov and Aleksandr Voronsky. They were hardened and educated as revolutionary leaders in Lenin's relentless struggle against Menshevik opportunism and his defense of the philosophical foundations and political principles of Marxism. These struggles were conducted and their lessons were assimilated under conditions in which the Bolsheviks were subject to continuous persecution by the state and suffered numerous arrests.

Smilga (sitting on the left), among a group of exiled revolutionaries, 1913

Smilga was no exception. Between 1907 and 1917 he was arrested no less than four times. He later looked back on these years: "The almost five years of exile proved to be a real university. In exile, alongside the study of the history and tactics of our party, I mainly focused on philosophy and political economy." [5]

Between his two periods of exile, Smilga was briefly a member of the Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks, before he was again arrested and sent into exile in May 1915. Like many of the leading Bolsheviks, he returned to Petrograd only after the overthrow of the tsar in the February 1917 Revolution. At the April Conference of the Bolshevik Party, Smilga, only 24, was elected to the Central Committee (CC) along with Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Miliutin, Nogin, Sverdlov and Fedorov. In a Central Committee that at this point was dominated by the right wing under Kamenev and Zinoviev, Smilga became one of Lenin's most important allies in the party leadership.

The CC initially sent him to Kronstadt, where he played a central role in organizing and educating the militant sailors. He was then sent further north, to Finland. In August, Smilga was elected chairman of the Regional Committee of the Army, Navy and Workers of Finland. The committee had 65 members, and the Bolsheviks had—in what was highly unusual for this period—a comfortable majority of 37 delegates. The Left Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), which in many instances voted with the Bolsheviks, constituted another 26, whereas the Menshevik-Internationalists had only two delegates.

Members of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party elected at the Seventh Party Conference in April 1917. Smilga is the first man on the left in the middle row.

Due to the highly favorable balance of forces in the committee, Lenin regarded it as a central tool in his plans for the seizure of power. As the

inner-party struggle heated up within the Bolshevik Party, Lenin turned to Smilga to make concrete preparations for an armed insurrection.

In the weeks immediately preceding the uprising, Lenin faced objections from two sides: the right-wing opposition, headed by Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, rejected the seizure of power in general as premature. They strongly adapted to the Menshevik conception of a two-stage development of the revolution, according to which the revolutionary party would have to struggle not for the seizure of power by the working class, but for a left bourgeois government based on an alliance between the workers and the peasants.

At the same time, Leon Trotsky advocated a seizure of power on the eve of the Congress of Soviets on November 8 (October 26, Old Style). This position eventually won the majority. The Military Revolutionary Committee was formed and its plan acted upon. However, Lenin feared for weeks that the Bolshevik party leadership would lose important time and miss the right moment for the seizure of power. In a lengthy letter dated October 10 (September 27, Old Style), Lenin wrote to Smilga:

The general political situation causes me great anxiety. The Petrograd Soviet and the Bolsheviks have declared war on the government. But the government has an army, and is preparing *systematically*. (Kerensky at General Headquarters is obviously entering into an understanding—a *business-like* understanding with the Kornilovites to use troops to put down the Bolsheviks.) ... And what are we doing? We are only passing resolutions. We are losing time. We set "dates" (October 20, the Congress of Soviets—is it not ridiculous to put it off so long? Is it not ridiculous to rely on that?) The Bolsheviks are not conducting regular work to prepare their *own* military forces for the overthrow of Kerensky. ... It is my opinion that inside the Party we must agitate for an earnest attitude towards the armed uprising. ... Now about your role. It seems to me we can have *completely* at our disposal only the troops in Finland and the Baltic fleet and only they can play a serious military role. I think you must make the most of your high position, shift all the petty routine work to assistants and secretaries and not waste time on "resolutions"; give all your attention to the military preparation of the troops in Finland plus the fleet for the impending overthrow of Kerensky. Create a *secret* committee of absolutely *trustworthy* military men, discuss matters *thoroughly* with them, collect (and *personally* verify) the most precise data on the composition and the location of troops near and in Petrograd, the transfer of the troops from Finland to Petrograd, the movement of the fleet, etc. If we fail to do this, we may turn out to be consummate idiots, the owners of beautiful resolutions and of Soviets, but *no power!* ... [6]

Lenin wrote these lines while in hiding in Helsingfors, Finland, where he had fled after the failed July uprising in order to avoid arrest and possible execution. In August and September, he and Smilga met numerous times in Helsingfors to discuss the preparation for the seizure of power. Smilga also helped Lenin maintain his tenuous connection to the party leadership.

In 1919, Smilga explained:

... our plan was that, in case that the revolutionary workers and soldiers of Petrograd would not be able to immediately conquer the entire city, they would have to immediately [seize] the islands and the Vyborg side [an industrial district in Petrograd and stronghold of the Bolsheviks, CW] ... in this case I should decide the struggle with the help of the forces from Finland. [7]

As it turned out, however, the workers and soldiers of Petrograd were able to seize power much more quickly and smoothly than expected—no least thanks to the correct assessment of the balance of forces and the plan advocated by Trotsky. Some 1,800 sailors from Finland, under the command of Smilga, moved to Petrograd for the armed insurrection, but when they arrived the only strategic building left to conquer was the Winter Palace. This last fortress of the old regime in Petrograd fell on November 8 (October 26, Old Style).

Smilga continued to support Lenin at many critical turns in the civil war, including the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which the Bolshevik government felt compelled to sign on March 3, 1918. At the same time, Smilga acted as the emissary of the Russian Soviet Federal Republic (RSFSR) to Finland. A few words should be said about this crucial but little-known episode in the Civil War.

Finland had formed part of the Russian Empire since the early 19th century. In the early 20th century, it became a preferred hiding place for Russian revolutionaries persecuted in the empire. In 1917, it was one of the most significant strongholds of Bolshevik influence. One major reason for this was the principled defense by the Bolsheviks of the right to national self-determination.

On January 26, 1918, the People's Republic of Finland was formed. The Bolsheviks held a majority in the democratic assembly of the republic. But, tragically, the socialist leadership of the People's Republic maintained strong illusions in a parliamentary road to socialism, which doomed it to defeat. Otto Wille Kuusinen, the principal figure in the Finnish revolution, later acknowledged:

The weakness of the bourgeoisie led us into being captivated by the spell of democracy, and we decided to advance towards socialism through parliamentary action and the democratization of the representative system. [8]

But the bourgeoisie had no intention of granting a parliamentary and peaceful transition to socialism. It immediately launched a counterrevolutionary offensive, relying primarily on German troops. Despite the significant growth of the Red Guards and the Baltic fleet, where Smilga, Dybenko and Antonov-Ovseenko had worked, the working class and the fledgling armed forces of the Bolsheviks were unprepared to fight against the Whites and the invading German and Swedish troops.

Within weeks, thousands and thousands of revolutionary workers were slaughtered. Victor Serge estimated that, in total, over 100,000 Finnish workers—i.e., a quarter of the country's proletariat—were massacred. Some 70,000 Red prisoners were placed in concentration camps. About 50,000 of them were supposed to be shipped to Germany as slave laborers, a plan prevented only by the outbreak of revolution in Germany itself. The Bolsheviks had to give up hopes for the incorporation of Finland into a union of Soviet socialist republics, and the revolution in Finland was thrown back for decades.

This experience proved critical for the further conduct of the civil war by the Red Army. As Victor Serge later pointed out:

The *total extermination* of all the advanced and conscious elements of the proletariat is, in short, the rational objective of the White terror. In this sense, a *vanquished revolution—regardless of its tendency—will always cost the proletariat far more than a victorious revolution, no matter what sacrifices and rigor the latter may demand.* One more observation. The butcheries in Finland took place

in April 1918. Up to this moment the Russian Revolution had displayed great leniency towards its enemies. It had not used terror. We have noted a few bloody episodes in the civil war in the south, but these were exceptional. The victorious bourgeoisie of a small nation that ranks among the most enlightened societies in Europe was the first to remind the Russian proletariat that *woe to the vanquished!* is the first law of social war. [9]

In May 1919, Smilga was co-opted into the leadership of the Red Army, the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensoviet), at the behest of its chairman, Leon Trotsky. He would remain in this position throughout the civil war, until March 1923. [10]

In this capacity, he played a central role in defeating armies led by White generals Denikin and Wrangel and fighting against the counterrevolutionary armies that invaded Soviet Russia from Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Smilga was not only one of the most important military commanders of the Red Army, but also an important military writer and strategist. In December 1919, he chaired the First Congress of Political Workers (politrabotnikov) in the Red Army in Moscow. His pamphlet *Building the Red Army* (Stroitel'stvo krasnoi armii) was issued in no less than three editions between 1919 and 1920. Time and again, Smilga emphasized that the building of the Red Army had to be seen as part of the development of the Russian Revolution. It was, as he put it, the “first major organizational effort” of the Soviet state. Smilga put special emphasis on the paramount significance of educating the Red Army soldiers and, above all, their commanders on a political but also cultural level.

Hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants learned reading and writing, and the ABCs of politics, in and through the Red Army in the first years of the Civil War. The goal was, in Smilga's words, to not have a single “illiterate soldier in the Red Army.” Given that the vast majority of the Red Army soldiers were recruited from the peasantry, by far the largest class in Russian society, which was in its overwhelming majority illiterate in 1917, this was a daunting undertaking.

Yet it was a priority concern for the Soviet government. Under the most difficult conditions of economic devastation and financial strangulation, and in the midst of a war against almost all of the major imperialist and capitalist powers of Europe, as well as Japan and the United States, the Soviet government funded an impressive network of schools, libraries and other cultural facilities to educate the soldiers. As Smilga wrote, “To conduct cultural-educational and political work among the soldiers of the Republic we never did and never will shun any means (zhalet' sredstv).” [11]

In 1920, according to Smilga, some 1,520,674 newspapers were distributed in the army on a daily basis. They not only covered political and military questions, they also included supplements on literature, theater and music. This was in addition to about 30 newspapers issued by army units on a regional and local level. Overall, in the first 11 months of 1920, the government distributed 18,888,325 pieces of different kinds of literature in the army.

By October 1920, there were over 2,000 libraries in the army. The number of schools rose from 4,400 in July 1920 to 5,952 in November 1920, with the number of students growing from 108,000 to 120,000 in the same time period. [12]

Writing in late 1920, when much of the bloody fighting on the eastern, western and southern fronts had come to an end (although the war would continue in some areas until 1922), Smilga noted:

Now that the war has ended, we have to remember that, if the task of the war was victory, then the task of the peaceful period must be a

transformation of the Red Army into a Communist Red Army. Our enemies shall only try then to throw their crafty designs against the revolution in Russia. The conditions for conducting political and cultural work in the army are now much better than they were during the war. Not a single minute must be passed in vain.” [13]

To be continued

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Notes:

[1] Autobiographical text by Ivar Smilga in: *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii. Entsilopedicheski slovar'*. (Figures of the USSR and the revolutionary movement in Russia. An encyclopedic dictionary), Moscow: 1989, p. 63.

[2] Allan Wildman, *The Making of Workers' Revolution. Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903*, Chicago: 1967, p. 150.

[3] Leon Trotsky, 1905, chapter 21.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch21.htm>

[4] *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii*, p. 63.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

[6] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Letter to I. T. Smilga (September 27, O.S., October 10), emphasis in the original.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10.htm>

[7] Quoted in: Abramovich, *Vospominaniia i vzgliady*.
<http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/ABRAMOWICH/abramowich2.txt>

[8] Quoted in: Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, Chicago-New York-San Francisco: 1972, p. 186.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 191, emphasis in the original.

[10] A.P. Nenarokov, “Ivar Tenisovich Smilga,” in: *Revvoensovet*, Moscow: 1991, p. 350.

[11] I. Smilga: “Stroitel'stvo krasnoi armii,” in: *Voennye ocherki*, Moscow: 1923, p. 21.

[12] Numbers from *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

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