




## Prologue

History does nothing, possesses no enormous wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, the real, living man, who does everything, possesses, fights. It is not “History,” as if she were a person apart, who uses men as means to work out her purposes, but history itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes.


—KARL MARX



AT 91 RUE DE CAROUGE in the city of Geneva, in a tiny apartment stacked with dusty magazines and books, with packing cases for chairs, two men spoke of revolution. It was the end of July, the year was 1905, and the focus of their conversation was Russia.

The two had only just met. The first, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, lived in the apartment with his wife. He went by the pen name Lenin. When he spoke of his rivals, the Mensheviks, his dark eyes hardened, he jabbed his fingers through the buttonholes of his vest, and then he drew back as if he was gathering venom before a strike. Although the Russian secret police, Okhrana, tracked his movements, considering him an enemy of the state, Lenin was largely an unknown figure outside socialist circles. One day he would lord over Russia, but his deeds as of July 1905 were limited, and he acted more as a journalist than a revolutionary leader.

Okhrana agents in Geneva were also watching his guest that afternoon, but his deeds and name were known throughout the world. Hero to some, treasonous villain to others, Afanasy Nikolayevich Matyushenko was the leader of the mutiny on the battleship *Potemkin*, a rebellion that had occurred only a month earlier and had made Tsar Nich-



olas II question his very hold on power. Lenin, who was as stunned at its outbreak as anyone else, had already written that the eleven-day Black Sea mutiny, led by Matyushenko, marked the first important step of the Russian Revolution. “The Rubicon has been crossed,” he declared in the socialist journal *Proletary*.

To many, stories of Matyushenko summoned up a picture of a titan, but the twenty-six-year-old sailor sitting across from Lenin looked far from such. Short in frame, he had a lean, muscular face, pronounced Slavic cheekbones, and a slight upturn on the right side of his mouth, giving him the expression of someone in on a secret. His eyes, which many of his closest comrades knew could darken into a horrible rage, were largely hidden underneath thick red eyebrows. But it was not his appearance, nor his background as a peasant from a small Ukrainian village, that made him a giant; it was his presence. Men instinctively looked to him for direction. He was intelligent, a gifted speaker, and recklessly brave. Perhaps most important of all, people recognized, as one of his comrades said, that “he lived not for himself, but for others.”

After the mutiny’s end, Matyushenko had escaped the Black Sea shores for Bucharest, where he stayed with Professor Zik Arbore-Ralli, a Russian émigré who was once close to revolutionaries Mikhail Bakunin and Sergei Nechayev. Okhrana agents in Romania kept Matyushenko under the strictest surveillance, but they were forbidden to seize him on foreign soil. Worried these Russian agents might act precipitately, Arbore-Ralli and several *Potemkin* sailors pooled their money to send him to Switzerland to join the community of Russian revolutionary leaders in exile there.

Traveling with a fake Bulgarian passport, Matyushenko arrived by train in Geneva in early July. He sought financial support for his former crewmates and guidance on where he should next take his struggle against the tsar. The Russian secret police soon picked up his trail in Geneva after he met with several individuals on their watch list. Again, they could do nothing but watch. While in Switzerland, he became close with Father Georgy Gapon, the champion of St. Petersburg workers who had marched on the Winter Palace at the first of the year, but Matyushenko could barely stand any of the other revolutionary figures he met. Each party head attempted to recruit him. In the most direct terms, Matyushenko refused them all. “It’s not for me,” he told

one party's terrorist wing. "I'm a man of the crowd. Do what you like, I just can't do it."

These intellectual leaders of the revolution professed their love and respect for Matyushenko, but he knew they thought him nothing more than an ignorant sailor who could be taught to dance for their cause. One party chided him for not reading enough Karl Marx. Another proposed he concentrate more on August Bebel. Thinking for oneself was apparently out of the question in Geneva, Matyushenko reflected. He despised their bickering over theory. While they elbowed one another over whose party deserved credit for the *Potemkin* mutiny, sailors who had risked their lives alongside Matyushenko were days away from the firing squad. The starving people of Russia seemed only an afterthought to these revolutionaries. They certainly had not earned the right to even comment on the mutiny—good or bad. The sailors had acted while these men merely talked and scribbled polemics.

In Lenin, Matyushenko found the most combative and vitriolic of infighters, the one who had splintered the Russian Social Democrats and issued polemic after polemic from his apartment concerning the true path to revolution. That afternoon, Matyushenko told him of the *Potemkin*. He had lost several close comrades in the mutiny, and the feelings of despair and triumph were still raw in the telling.

This story, theirs, begins in St. Petersburg in the cold heart of winter, 1905.