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March 10, 2013

Trotsky Denounces a Coalition with the Provisional Government at the All-Russian Democratic Conference

The All-Russian Democratic Conference was held from September 14 to 22, 1917 with representatives from a range of nonpolitical institutions, including cooperatives and others. Directly following the Kornilov Affair and called to order by Alexander Kerensky, the Conference's objective was to define who controlled the power of the state. Leon Trotsky, regarded as the second man in the Bolshevik party after Lenin, made at least one charismatic speech to this conference in which he declared the views of his party.¹ With the Provisional Government in a shambles and Kerensky barely holding onto the threads, the time was perfect for a takeover. The speech was crafted to capitalize on the feelings of the delegation, especially the sentiment that Kerensky and the government he represented were dishonest and untrustworthy. Moreover, it was an attempt by the Bolsheviks to eliminate the perceived threat of a counter-revolution by the bourgeoisie.

Trotsky (born 1879) was the son of a Jewish farmer who left home at age nine to continue his education in Odessa. In 1897 he began revolutionary activities and helped to organize workers in Nikolaev into the South Russian Worker's Union. He was arrested due to these activities soon thereafter and was exiled to Siberia. Escaping in 1903, he joined the Social Democratic Party, following the Mensheviks when the party split. From 1903 to 1905 he traveled around Europe giving speeches, his reputation as a writer, organizer, and orator, growing. By the 1905 revolution he was well recognized as a leader of the revolution and became chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet, using his position to push forward the revolution. These actions not only caught the eye of other revolutionaries but also of the Tsarist government. The Soviet was only in place for fifty-two days when, on December 3rd, Count Witte, the tsar's prime minister, ordered troops to surround it and arrest the top leaders. Trotsky was tried ten months later and sentenced to Siberian exile for life. Nonetheless, he managed to escape and take refuge

¹ Trotsky, Leon. "Speech at the Democratic Conference," <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1917/next/app01.htm> (accessed Feb 25, 2013).

in Helsinki with Lenin and Martov. They would not return to Russia until after the February Revolution in 1917. In August Trotsky joined the Bolshevik Party and helped it seize power in October.²

The Kornilov Affair was a sign of the disintegration of the Provisional Government and benefited the Bolsheviks and their claim that counter-revolution was looming. On 27 August, in the wake of that affair, all the members of the Cabinet of the Provisional Government submitted their resignations, leaving Kerensky to decide exclusively on affairs of the government. Kerensky had two major problems to contend with. He had to avoid succumbing to the Kornilov conspiracy, which he had been involved in, and avoid acquiescing to the Soviet. Kerensky, realizing that his grip was slipping drastically, on September 1st declared Russia a republic led by a five-man Directorate which he controlled and convened a conference in Petrograd on September 14th.³ As Trotsky points out in his speech, Kerensky and his government lacked legitimacy as they were never elected to their positions. Kerensky's plan was to bring all the parties together and have them elect a Provisional Council of the Republic (Pre-Parliament) with powers to issue official decrees and run the government.⁴

Trotsky went to the conference to discredit Kerensky and the Provisional Government because he feared that it was the most likely source of counterrevolution. In his speech Trotsky observes that no one has defended the “five-headed monster,” i.e., the Directorate, as a legitimate government nor called for its permanence. He explains that the only reason Kerensky is in power is due to a power vacuum where the owning class won't seize power because it would result in a civil war, nor will the people seize power, and so an “arbiter, a dictator, a Bonaparte, a Napoleon, is born.”

The first half of Trotsky's speech is thus directed towards eating away at Kerensky's legitimacy. The second half advocates what he wants the assembly to act upon. He wants them to deny representation in the new government to the sabotaging Cadets because they are untrustworthy, referring to their

2 Rubenstein, Joshua. *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary's Life* (Yale UP, 2011), pp.10-55.

3 Katkov, George. *The Kornilov Affair* (New York: Longman, 1980), pp.121-25.

4 Service, Robert. *Trotsky: A Biography* (Macmillan, 2009), pp.180-83.

involvement in the Kornilov affair. In this second half, Trotsky delivers his most salient point: the capitalist press in other countries have given expression “to the lies and to the thoughts, feelings and wishes of the capitalist class,” and hence, a counter-revolution could be instigated with the support of other countries, especially at the time when Russia is weak. The assembly therefore cannot consider a coalition. Trotsky does not stop there. The workers, he insists, should seize power proactively to eliminate the possibility of a bourgeois democracy. Power should be transferred from the Provisional Government to the Soviet.

From this situation one can see that the Kornilov affair helped the Bolshevik Party enormously. Kerensky’s sway with the soldiers was demolished and many people saw the Kornilov affair as an attempt by Kerensky and the virtually non-existent Provisional Government to install a government more obedient to the owning class.

Trotsky got what he wanted: the Conference voted for a coalition including Cadets, then for one without Cadets implicated in the Kornilov affair, and finally rejected the resolution altogether. Kerensky then put together the Pre-Parliament, with Cadets, but it had no executive power.⁵ The Pre-Parliament continued to exist until the Bolsheviks seized power a mere four weeks later, but it was only a forum for indecision.

⁵ Katkov, p. 126.