

The months of June and July of 1917 were marked by instability and turmoil. The February Revolution's effects were still being felt throughout Russia, and various factions rushed to fill the political vacuum created by Tsar Nicholas II's removal. The Provisional Government, established by the Duma immediately following the February Revolution, managed to function as Russia's governing body despite constant challenges to its authority from all sides of the political spectrum. As the Provisional Government retained control, the local and regional Soviets, comprised mostly of workers, peasants, and soldiers, continued to grow in popularity as a means for Russia's historically underrepresented majority to have their views heard. The relationship between the two groups was the main political issue of the June-July time period, and the outcome would determine the direction of the Russian government well beyond 1917.

In 1917, Russia was still locked in World War I, a bloody and unpopular war that was particularly cruel to the Russian soldiers. The Russian soldiers fighting the Germans on the Eastern Front were short on funds, arms, morale, and almost everything else an army would need to fight armies as powerful as the Central Powers were. The soldiers were not the only Russians who opposed Russia's continued participation in the war. Russian citizens were mostly against the war as well, as it put additional stress on Russia's already-strained infrastructure. Many observers also viewed the war as a continuation of the Tsarist regime's policies, something they had hoped would end with the February Revolution.

The Provisional Government, however, saw the matter differently. The Provisional Government sought to continue the war. This was particularly evidenced by a telegram sent by Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov to the Allied Powers reaffirming Russia's commitment to fight

the war until a decisive victory. This, in turn, stood in contrast to the Provisional Government's earlier stance that Russia's involvement in the war constituted defense, not aggression.¹ The duplicity of the Provisional Government was one of its biggest flaws, and one that was especially damaging to their approval among Russian citizens.

Another problem facing the Provisional Government was the wide range of political stances of its members. This made it difficult to act decisively on any given issue, since there was often a large constituency that opposed the majority decision. The main parties involved in the Provisional Government ranged from the right-leaning Octobrists and Kadets to the left-leaning Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks provided an overlap with the Soviets, something that would come into play when the Soviets voted on how they were to view the Provisional Government.

The Soviets also had a number of factions among them. The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, as mentioned previously, represented more moderate members. These two sects were generally supportive of the Provisional Government, and later even put members into important ministers' positions within the government. The Bolsheviks represented the other main division of the Soviets. The Bolsheviks rejected support for the Provisional Government, and were adamantly anti-war. The Bolsheviks were led by Vladimir Lenin, whose revolutionary fervor and staunch anti-Provisional Government position had forced him into exile on more than one occasion. These factions within the Soviets faced the same inability to

¹ Miliukov, Pavel (Foreign Minister), "Russian War Aims Note to Allied Powers" (April 20, 1917) in Robert P. Browder, The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents, Vol. 1, doc. 962, p. 1096

act cohesively as the Provisional Government did, and as a result there was an ongoing struggle between the factions to gain control and steer the Soviets in their preferred direction

The Provisional Government was initially formed immediately following the February Revolution by decree of the Duma. Until April 1917, there was no overlap between the Provisional Government and the Soviets. In the aftermath of the Miliukov Note scandal, thousands of workers and soldiers took to the streets demanding Miliukov's resignation. As a result of this uprising, Miliukov resigned, and the Provisional Government approached the Petrograd Soviet with the idea of a coalition government comprised of members of both bodies. The proposal was eventually accepted, and in May 1917 the coalition government was formed, with six minister positions filled by members of the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties.²

This dual power arrangement vastly increased the influence of the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. It also created a difficult situation for the Soviet ministers, who were faced with the task of trying to appease both their left-wing Soviet members and the more right-leaning ministers who were holdovers from the old Provisional Government. As a result, the coalition government was faced with the same issues of indecisiveness that plagued the old Provisional Government, where competing ideologies prevented any action from ever occurring.³

The debate amongst the Soviet factions regarding the Provisional Government reached its apex at the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets on June 3 in Petrograd. 1,090 delegates

² <http://www.uoregon.edu/~kimball/sac.1917.1920.htm>

³ <http://www.uoregon.edu/~kimball/sac.1917.1920.htm>

attended the congress intending to establish the Soviets' position on a number of issues, including Russian involvement in World War I and the relationship with the Provisional Government, among other things. Debate wore on for three weeks, as every delegate was entitled to present their opinions. Eventually, the delegates voted nearly unanimously to seek an end to the war, and also voted strongly to "support the Provisional Government energetically in all its efforts to strengthen and broaden the conquests of the revolution,"⁴ with the condition that "the socialist ministers in the Provisional government... [were] to be obliged to decisions made by the Soviets."⁵ The final count of the vote was 543 to 126. This decision was reached largely due to the prevalence of Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks among the delegates, who together comprised over two-thirds of the total delegation. The Bolsheviks' calls for an immediate disbanding of the Provisional Government were overruled by the majority, and their message went mostly ignored in the Congress.⁶

The reaction by Soviet members to the Congress' decision to support the Provisional Government was mixed. Many workers and soldiers supported the decision of the Congress. As one manufacturing worker noted, they sided "against the Bolsheviks and their leader Lenin, who do not trust the Provisional Government and want to take power into their own hands."⁷ They argued that the majority had spoken and that the Bolsheviks had no right to contest the

⁴ "Resolution of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionists" (June 21, 1917), in Frank A. Golder, Documents of Russian History 1914-1917, p. 368-70

⁵ <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/events/a/arcs.htm>

⁶ Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, p. 76

⁷ Bogdanov, Vladimir D., et al, (Chairman of Vysokovskaia Manufacturing Co Workers' Meeting), "Protocol of a General Meeting, 14 June 1917," (June 14, 1917), in Steinberg, doc. 17, p. 101-2

decision. They also argued that Russia, being involved in a major war, had more important issues to worry about at the time, and that to create more internal strife would be “to play consciously into the hands of our enemies and to the downfall of our freedom.”⁸

However, not all Soviet members were satisfied by the decision to cooperate with the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks and Bolshevik-allied Soviet constituents were not satisfied with the resolutions passed by the Congress of Soviets, and spoke out in favor of dissolving the Provisional Government. They argued that “the jackals from the State Duma and State Council [were] reaching out with their filthy paws to strangle freedom.”⁹ They reasoned that the still largely-bourgeois Provisional Government could not act in their best interests, and insisted “that the All-Russian Soviet of Soldiers’, Workers’, and Peasants’ Deputies seize all power.”¹⁰ The decision to support the Provisional Government was very divisive within the Soviets, and the divergence of opinion, which up to this point had been largely peaceful, was about to boil over.

It was about this time that the Russian Army was prepared to launch the Galician Offensive, an ambitious push toward Lviv in the Ukraine. After initial successes against Austro-Hungarian forces, the more resilient German troops fought back furiously and forced the Russians to retreat over 200 kilometers. This embarrassing defeat only served to amplify the calls to end Russian involvement in the war and lengthen the divide between the workers and soldiers and the Provisional Government.

⁸ Bogdanov, “Protocol”

⁹ Sakharov, (Assembly Chairman of 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment), “Resolution of the Soldiers of the 1st Infantry Reserve Regiment,” (June 16, 1917), in Steinberg, doc. 36, p.124-5

¹⁰ Sakharov, “Resolution,” in Steinberg, doc. 36, p.124-5

In addition to the military failure, the coalition government's hold on power was tenuous at best. On July 2, the Kadets abandoned the Provisional Government, severely undermining the stability of the governing coalition with the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and throwing the government into turmoil. On July 3, soldiers and workers took to the streets in massive anti-government demonstrations, and the "July Days" had begun.

The Bolsheviks backed the soldiers and workers as they took to the streets in protest. Hundreds of thousands of protestors, chanting the Bolshevik slogan "All Power to the Soviets" turned out to demonstrations over the next two days. Initially, the intent of the Bolsheviks was to keep the demonstrations peaceful and orderly. However some members of the party (particularly those from the Bolshevik Military Organization) insisted that the demonstrations should be allowed to turn militant. The demonstrations remained peaceful until military authorities dispatched troops to quell the uprising, leaving hundreds dead or severely injured. With the support of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, the protestors were disarmed, disbanded, and arrested. The Provisional Government issued an order to arrest Vladimir Lenin, who subsequently fled to Finland to escape his fate. Many top Bolshevik leaders were arrested, and as a result, Bolshevik influence over the revolutionary movement declined.

Kerensky's Galician Offensive cost the Provisional Government what little public support it had. The Russian populace by and large rejected the Provisional Government since in spite of military desertions and humiliating defeat at the hands of the Central Powers, the government remained "convinced that the retreat of our armies will be only temporary, and that it will not prevent them, reorganized and regenerated, from resuming at the appointed hour their

onward march in the name of the defense of the fatherland and of liberty, and that they will victoriously finish the great work for which they have been compelled to take up arms.”¹¹

The Provisional Government was still committed to the war effort, and seemed to be holding ever-growing amounts of power. The Soviets were now a weak vestige of the dual power arrangement. Given these conditions, the July Days can be seen as a “point of no return” for the upcoming revolution. An attempt at a peaceful uprising was brutally put down, leaving the revolutionaries no choice but to seize power by force.

The June-July period of 1917 saw an unstable government devolve into absolute chaos. The Soviets and the Provisional Government diverged in policy, World War I was taking an ever-increasing toll on the Russian populace, and the government turned against its own citizens in a bloody display. In a country only four months removed from revolution, it was becoming progressively more apparent that February’s rebellion would not be Russia’s last.

¹¹ Tereshchenko, Mikhail (Foreign Minister), “Message to the Allies Following the July Days,” (July 19, 1917) in Daly, Jonathan W. and Trofimov, Leonid, Russia in War and Revolution 1914-1922: A Documentary History, doc. 41, p. 93-4

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