

Russia and Temporary Dictatorship

The Russian monarchy finally crumbled in March of 1917. Unlike many European monarchies before it, such as that of France, Russia's transition from a Tsarist authoritarian state to a republic with numerous political parties was a non-violent one. Tsar Nicholas II agreed to abdicate after his closest advisors informed him that abdication was his only choice. When his brother, Mikhail, also refused the throne, the Romanov dynasty ended its 300 year run. The next few months, until Bolshevik control in November, were a critical time in Russian history. For this short time, Russian politicians tried to build viable, representative government. In June of 1917, the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets assembled for this purpose. The odds were against the participants of this historic meeting. Russia was torn between war and internal chaos. The temporary dual government system was ineffective, and no system was in place for establishment of an effective representative government. The resulting power vacuum in Russia after the abdication of the Tsar was not conducive to the establishment of a democratic government, but rather set the stage for a dictatorship.

The political change in Russia after the abdication of Nicholas II was very abrupt. Unlike in countries such as England, where the monarch gradually transitioned from a position of authoritarian power to one of powerless symbolism, Nicholas II maintained an authoritarian regime up until his very abdication. In fact, the State Duma was only created after the October Manifesto, in which Nicholas responded to the events of the Russian Revolution of 1905 by promising the Russian people civil liberties and representation in the government. Nicholas never lived up to his promise, however. In 1906, he issued the Fundamental Laws, which greatly reduced the power of the Duma, and granted him the right to disband the Duma and call for new

elections whenever he pleased. Nicholas exercised this right three times, preventing the Duma from getting any real control.

When the time came for the formation of a government after the abdication of the Nicholas II, there was no precedent to follow. As Sukhanov recalls in March of 1917, “The Provisional Committee of the Duma, which had taken the executive power into its hands, was still not a government, not even a ‘provisional’ one; the creation of this government still lay ahead.”¹ Thus, members of this Provisional Committee, which would later evolve into the Provisional Government, had to essentially build a government from scratch. As Pavel Miliukov notes, “The immediate task of the Temporary Committee and of the government it was forming was to find out what its relations would be with representatives of the socialist parties, which, from the very beginning, claimed to represent the democratic classes of the population, the workers, the soldiers, and, later on, the peasantry.”² How exactly the Provisional Government was going to represent the people was a question that its members struggled with for the duration of the government’s existence.

The Provisional Government came to power in early 1917 at a time of great upheaval. The primary reason for this upheaval was the war. World War I was a giant drain on the lives and resources for all of the countries involved, but Russia lost more lives than any other country. This led to a decline in morale for soldiers, as well as the rest of the Russian population. Furthermore, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to gather support for their party by announcing that they would end the war immediately after coming to power. Kerensky, on the other hand,

¹ Sukhanov, N.N. (Politician), “The Conferences Between the Delegates of the Executive Committee of the Soviet and the Temporary Committee of the State Duma.” (1917) in Robert Paul Browder, and Alexander Kerensky. *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 102, pg. 118.

² Miliukov, P.N. (Politician), “The Selection of the Members of the First Provisional Government.” (1917) in Browder and Kerensky. *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 103, pg. 124.

made the mistake of ordering an offensive in July, known as the Galician offensive, which resulted in a debilitating and embarrassing defeat for the Russian army. Then, even after the failed offensive, Kerensky refused to end the war, claiming, according to Orlando Figes, that he did not want to be “responsible for Russia’s national humiliation.”³ Many years later, however, when asked whether he thought he could have stopped the Bolsheviks by signing a separate peace with Germany, Kerensky replied “of course. We should be in Moscow now.”³ When further asked why he had not stopped the war, Kerensky replied, “We were too naïve.”³

In addition to the war, Russia was undergoing a period of internal chaos. As stated in an editorial by the Socialist Revolutionary newspaper *Volia Naroda*, “Against the background of merciless foreign war and defeats of the armies of the Republic, internally the country has entered upon a period of anarchy and, virtually, a period of civil war. National class animosity has flared up everywhere... The singular devastation of Russian life is further complicated by strikes, revolts, upheavals, and outright robberies.”⁴ This “anarchy” did not fare well for the Provisional Government. People doubted the capabilities of the Provisional Government, leading to a decrease in the government’s support. The government was too weak to control the country. This view is expressed in an editorial in the newspaper *Russkiiia Vedomosti* in September of 1917: “The weakness of the Government is felt most keenly by the Government itself... because the Government is now deprived of the opportunity to insist on its decision by forceful means. Only those who wish to, obey it, and to the extent they wish. Not only does the problem of forming a strong government remain a problem, but its solution as well is advanced into the depths of some vague and remote future. And in the meantime, events do not wait. Anarchy

³ Kerensky, Alexander (Politician), Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, pg. 409.

⁴ *Volia Naroda* (newspaper), “Editorial in *Volia Naroda on the Growing Anarchy*” (September 20, 1917) in Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 1329, Vol. 3, pg. 1641.

inside Russia is growing.”⁵ As this editorial suggests, the people wanted, and needed, a strong government to control the “anarchy” and carry out its decisions.

There were several reasons for the Provisional Government’s lack of power. One important reason was the dual government system. The Provisional Government shared power with the Petrograd Soviet. This was problematic as the Petrograd Soviet limited the power of the Provisional Government. Furthermore, the Petrograd Soviet had a strong military influence as it represented the workers and the soldiers. The liberal newspaper *Den’* published an article in March of 1917 describing this problem: “As an administrative organ, the Soviet becomes a power which seems to stand above the Provisional Government... While in the first days of the revolution such a state of affairs was required by the course and the very essence of the revolutionary struggle, it now stands in sharp contradiction to the logic of the revolutionary movement.”⁶ Warnings such as these, however, highlighting the problems associated with the Petrograd Soviet having too much power, were not heeded. Eventually, the Bolsheviks were able to get control of the Petrograd Soviet (Trotsky became chairman in September), and use it to stage a coup against the Provisional Government.

The First All-Russian Congress of Soviets in June 1917 was the first major meeting of all of the different parties to discuss what government Russia would have in the future. The outcome was support of the Provisional Government and a call for “the speediest convocation of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly.”⁷ The Constituent Assembly was meant to write a constitution for Russia that would pave the way for a permanent representative government. This Constituent

⁵ *Russkiiia Vedomsti* (newspaper), “Editorial in *Russkiiia Vedomsti on the Increase in Disorder*” (September 20, 1917) in Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 1330, vol. 3, pg. 1643.

⁶ *Den’* (newspaper) in “Article in *Den’ on the Relations Between the Government and the Soviet.*” (March 22, 1917) in Browder and Kerensky. *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 1051, pg. 1217.

⁷ *Izvestiia* (newspaper), “The Resolution of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries Passed by the Congress, June 8” (June 9, 1917) in Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, doc. 1124, pg. 1306.

Assembly, however, took several more months to get organized, and by the time it did, it was too late as the Bolsheviks had come to power. The reason that the convocation was not “speedy,” and that, in general, the Provisional Government took too long to get anything done was a power vacuum in the Provisional Government.

Representatives from many different parties attended the First Congress of Soviets. The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, with 285 and 248 delegates, respectively, made up a majority of the 784 voting delegates. However, the Bolsheviks also had a considerable presence with 105 delegates, and the rest of the delegates came from other parties.⁸ Each of the parties present had a different agenda and represented a different portion of the Russian population. Furthermore, there was considerable disagreement among members of each party. These different viewpoints and goals impeded the formation of a cohesive and decisive government. Additionally, because of the dire shape of the country in the summer of 1917, each party, with the notable exception of the Bolsheviks, was afraid to take power. Irakli Tsereteli, a minister in the Provisional Government and one of the leaders of the Menshevik Party, described this phenomenon in the First Congress: “The Right says, let the Left run the Government, and the country will draw our conclusions; and the Left says, let the Right take hold, and we and the country will draw our conclusions... Each side hopes that the other will make such a failure, and the country will turn to it for leadership.”⁹ As Tsereteli explains, each party knew that the challenges of governing Russia at this time of war and internal turmoil were vast, and that, under a democratic system, if the party in power failed to swiftly reverse the country’s dire situation (and this reversal was certainly going to be arduous and painful), a different party would be

⁸ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, pg. 407.

⁹ Tsereteli, Irakli, “Tsereteli at the First Congress of Soviets” (June 4, 1917) In Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, doc 2.4, pg. 39.

elected. Thus, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries were hesitant to step up and take responsibility.

The one party that was not afraid of trying to solve Russia's enormous problems was the Bolshevik Party. In fact, during Tsereteli's speech to the First Congress, Lenin interrupted Tsereteli when Tsereteli said, "At the present moment, there is not a political party in Russia which would say: Hand the power over to us, resign, and we will take your place. Such a party does not exist in Russia."¹⁰ In response, Lenin famously yelled out, "such a party does exist."¹¹ Lenin then delivered a speech and, at the end, made his position very clear: "Our party is ready at any moment to take all power into its hands."¹² The turmoil that Russia was undergoing greatly helped Lenin come to power. As Richard Pipes points out, "The rapid disintegration of Russia from lack of firm leadership resulted in the weakening of all national institutions, including those run by the socialists, a process which gave the Bolsheviks an opportunity to outflank the Menshevik and SR leadership in the All-Russian Soviet and the major trade unions."¹³ Since Kerensky and the Provisional Government were ineffective at controlling the Russian population and carrying out necessary reforms, the people looked elsewhere. Especially given that Lenin promised to immediately end the war, the Bolsheviks gained popularity and influence. At the end of October, with minimal fighting, the Bolsheviks come to power through a military coup, and Lenin assumed control of Russia.

Members of the Provisional Government were not unaware of the Bolsheviks' intentions and the potential repercussions of the Bolsheviks coming to power. Before the coup, at the First

¹⁰ Tsereteli, "Tsereteli at the First Congress of Soviets." (June 4, 1917) In Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, doc 2.4, pg. 39.

¹¹ Lenin, "Tsereteli at the First Congress of Soviets." (June 4, 1917) In Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, doc 2.4, pg. 39.

¹² Lenin, "Lenin Addresses the First Congress of Soviets." (June 4, 1917) In Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, doc 2.5, pg. 40.

¹³ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, pg. 408.

Congress of Soviets, Kerensky responded to Lenin's speech: "You [Bolsheviks] recommend that we follow the road of the French revolution of 1792. You recommend the way of further disorganization of the country... When you, in alliance with reaction, shall destroy our power, then you will have a real dictator. It is our duty, the duty of the Russian democracy to say: Don't repeat the historic mistakes."¹⁴ In hindsight, Kerensky was, unfortunately, spot on. Lenin did, indeed, become a "real dictator." Despite preaching Utopian Marxism, Lenin established an authoritarian regime. He then destroyed Russia's chance of democracy and freedom. However, it didn't necessarily have to be this way. Had a different dictator come to power and defended democracy, perhaps a viable government would have been possible. As Korotkov, a worker from the Kharkov Province, exclaimed in a letter to Kerensky in late August 1917, "For the salvation of freedom and the revolution, we need – temporarily, of course - a dictator with unlimited authority. We need, in the name of our Homeland's salvation, to put down strikes by force and get the defense factories going; we need to introduce iron discipline into the army by force, otherwise Russia will perish on account of the ignorance of her sons!"¹⁵ This simple worker's foresight is amazing. He highlights the only cure for Russia's many problems, a temporary dictatorship that would get the country back in order while maintaining the ideals of "revolution and freedom."

The time between March and October of 1917 was the most important period in the history of Russia because for a few months between the authoritarian reign of Tsar Nicholas II and the equally authoritarian regime of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Russia had a chance to build a foundation for democracy. However, Russia was not ready for the abrupt transition from a

¹⁴ Kerensky, Alexander, "Kerensky's Response." (June 4 1917) In Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, doc 2.6, pg. 41.

¹⁵ Korotkov, G. (worker), "Letter to Kerensky from G. Korotkov, a worker in the provincial town of Slaviansk, Kharkov Province," (August 26, 1917) in Mark Steinberg, *Voices of a Revolution, 1917*, pg. 246.

monarchy directly to a representative government. The resulting power vacuum after the abdication of the Tsar, coupled with war and internal upheaval, required a strong leader to come to Russia's helm. Unfortunately, that strong leader was Lenin. Had the Germans not put him on the infamous sealed train to Russia, the country's path for the next century would have been undoubtedly very different. And yet, it is also unlikely that the Provisional Government under Kerensky would have been successful in establishing a viable representative government. The Provisional Government was too slow and ineffective at dealing with Russia's problems to maintain the support of the people. This leads to the question of how Russia could have gone about building a democracy, given that a large proportion of the population and many politicians yearned for this goal.

Russia could have had a democratic government if a strong leader had come to power and forcefully set up a representative government. Since Russia needed a strong leader in 1917 to unite the country, bring about reforms, and prevent chaos, one could envision such a leader coming to power through means of force (such as Lenin's coup), forming a temporary dictatorship, and then setting up the foundation for a democratic republic. Indeed, looking outside of Russia, at least one clear example of such a case exists. Only a few years after the Russian Revolution, in 1922, the general Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, took control of Turkey. The Sultanate was abolished, and Turkey faced a similar challenge to that of Russia in building a new government. During this reign, Mustafa Kemal established an authoritarian regime where he forcefully introduced new reforms and crushed political opposition. Though he ruled with an iron fist, he greatly modernized Turkey, and also set up a multi-party representative government which continued to function after his death. It is not unimaginable that in 1917 such a leader could have come to power in Russia. Of course, it is unclear whether such a leader

existed at the time. And, yet, had such a leader found his way to the top and been committed to democracy instead of communism, Russia would be a very different country than it is today.

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