

Dan Ainge
Prof. E. Wood
17.57
March 29, 2011

The Fallout of the Miliukov Note and the April Crisis

To read through primary documents from the months after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II is to read through the hopes of a Russian people primed for the coming democracy. In their March 14th *Soviet Appeal to the Peoples of All the World*, the Petrograd Soviet states, “The peoples of Russia will express their will in a Constituent Assembly, which will be called very soon on the basis of universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage. And it may already be predicted with confidence that a democratic republic will triumph in Russia.”¹ Yet the experiment of democracy in Russia would last only eight months before falling beneath the tide of Bolshevism, and for all practical purposes it would disappear much sooner.

The reasons behind the failure of democracy in Russia can be neatly assessed by a series of events known as the April Crisis, which was sparked on April 20th by the so-called Miliukov Note. The note itself, a rather benign explanation attached to an official diplomatic decree from the Provisional Government to the Entente Powers, is at first glance a surprising catalyst. The note is short and it says very little that was not previously and publicly stated. Furthermore, its intentions were immediately clarified in an additional note that was approved by the Petrograd Soviet. None of these facts could stop the groundswell of discontent that spread among the people of Russia upon its leak

¹ *Soviet Appeal to the Peoples of All the World*. Izvestiia, No. 15, p.1. March 15, 1917. Browder, Robert Paul, and Alexander F. Kerensky, eds. *The Russian Provisional Government 1917: Documents*. Doc 942, p.1077. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961.

to the press, for the note struck a chord in the fears of the young republic and drove a rift between the acting government and the populace.

To understand why the note carried so much weight, it is necessary to first understand the nature of power in the post-revolutionary government. Shortly after the abdication of the Tsar on March 2, 1917, the Provisional Government was formed under the Prime Minister Prince Georgy Lvov. The day before, the Petrograd Soviet, which had existed as a limited governing body in the days of the Tsar, issued Order Number One, which declared that the armies of Russia were to disregard any orders given to them by their commanding officers that were not in accordance with degrees issued by the Soviet. The effect of this order, beyond disintegrating the chain of command in the army, was the immediate establishment of dual power in the government. The Soviet saw itself as a political body charged with monitoring and lobbying the Provisional Government only. Yet by issuing Order Number One it effectively took control of the military and undermined the authority of the acting government, and it accomplished this before the Provisional Government was even assembled. The move also established veto power for the Soviet. These new powers led to a dangerous mismatch between the authority the Soviet perceived itself to hold and the authority it actually held. As a lobbying body, it was free to speak frankly about the desires of the country without consideration of the broader implications of those wishes, yet by popular demand much of the Soviet's half-conceived lobbies would become law. The next few months would provide numerous examples of the Soviet's tendency to act on the whims of the public before governing.

On March 14, 1917, the Petrograd Soviet again tried its hand at policy making by issuing the *Soviet Appeal to the Peoples of All the World*. The note calls for the

proletariat around the world, and specifically in Germany, to “throw off the yoke of your semi-autocratic rule” and “refuse to serve as an instrument of conquest and violence in the hands of kings, landowners, and bankers.”² The Soviet makes clear their desire to end the fighting of World War I, yet warns “The Russian revolution will not retreat before the bayonets of conquerors, and will not permit itself to be crushed by foreign military rule.”³ The next step of the Soviet was to urge the Provisional Government to issue an official statement in accordance with the views expressed in the *Appeal* and go one step further by renouncing any desires for annexations or indemnities. The Soviet believed that their appeal, coupled with a strong statement from Russia renouncing annexations, would inspire the proletariat classes in Germany and Austria to revolt and unseat their leaders, thereby ending the war. The view was of course naïve; yet the socialists in the Soviet were caught up in the revolutionary fervor, and with no real experience in governing, they were simply acting on faith.

Under the pressure of the Soviet, the Provisional Government was forced on March 27th to issue *The Declaration of War Aims*, a domestic statement intended to reaffirm to the Russian people the goals, as seen by the Provisional Government, of Russia’s continued involvement in the World War. “The Russian people does not intend to increase its world power at the expense of other nations [...] it has no desire to enslave or degrade anyone,” the declaration states. However, the document goes on to say that Russia will “fully [observe] at the same time all obligations assumed toward [its]

² *Ibid.* Browder and Kerensky, Doc 942, p.1077.

³ *Ibid.* Browder and Kerensky, Doc 942, p.1077.

Allies.”⁴ In these words one of the differences between the Provisional Government and the Soviet becomes apparent: the government felt that it must responsibly balance the needs and desires of the Russian people with the international obligations of the country – it could not operate on the hope of a worldwide revolution. The cabinet members understood that an immediate end to the war, while German forces still occupied Eastern Russian territories and while the Allies still relied on the Russian support of the Eastern front, was impossible.

The unavoidable mistake of the Provisional Government was their belief that the people of Russia, as war-weary as they were, would understand the importance of maintaining promises made to the allies and repelling the invading German armies. The newspaper *Novoe Vremia* published on March 28 stated, “The protection of our national fortunes and property and the deliverance of the country from invasion by the enemy – this is the first, direct, and unequivocal task of our troops and our people. The Provisional Government is not alone in thinking thus. All the strata of Russian society are animated by the same feeling.”⁵ Other sources suggested that the Provisional Government should have gone further to pressure the Allies to seek peace, but did not object to the basic tenants of the declaration. *Rabochaia Gazeta*, a Menshevik workers’ newspaper, stated March 29th that, “By rejecting a separate peace, by striving for peace on an international scale, we must see to it that the first step of the Provisional Government is followed by a second one; that leaning upon the Russian democracy, the Provisional Government should exert pressure on the governments of the Allied power; that it should

⁴ L’vov, G.E. *The Provisional Government’s Declaration of March 27 on War Aims*. Rech’, No. 73, p.2. March 28, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 909, p.1045.

⁵ *Novoe Vremia*, No. 14737, p.5. March 28, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 910, p.1046.

obtain from them a collective repudiation of the aggressive program which they developed in answer to Wilson's note."⁶ The opinions of the media, however, would not be enough to convince the public of the credibility of the Provisional Government. Meanwhile the Soviet, whose entire purpose was to act on the wishes of the public, was gaining undue legitimacy at the expense of the acting government.

After the *Declaration of War Aims* was released, the Petrograd Soviet began to pressure the reluctant Provisional Government to issue the document as a communiqué to the allied powers. As the foreign minister, this task fell to Pavel Miliukov. Miliukov did not wish to issue the declaration, however, saying, "I would agree to do it, only provided I were certain that the contents of the Declaration would not cause misunderstanding, particularly with regard to our alleged willingness to renounce the Straits."⁷ Here Miliukov is referring to the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, two straits connecting the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea that Russia viewed as important to their military security. At the outset of the war, the Allies agreed that the Russians would gain annexation rights to the Straits, a concession that Miliukov did not want to lose. Certainly he did not want to give the impression that Russia was ready to relinquish those rights unnecessarily, nor did he want to imply that Russia would seek a separate peace by forgoing its annexationist ambitions. To that end, Miliukov telegraphed the Russian emissaries to the Allies powers on April 18th and requested that they transmit to the powers the *Declaration of War Aims* along with a contextual note he had written. The note explained that the document was written for the Russian people, and dispelled the "absurd rumors that Russia is

⁶ *Declaration a "Victory of Democracy."* Rabochaia Gazeta, No. 19, p.1. March 29, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 913, p.1049.

⁷ Miliukov, P. Letter to Izvol'skii. April 17/30, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 963, p.1097.

supposedly ready to conclude a separate peace with the central monarchies.” Miliukov insisted that Russia would “fully observe the obligations taken with respect to [the] Allies,” and that “the whole people” wished to “bring the World War to a decisive victory.”⁸

Two days later, on April 20, the note was leaked to the general uproar of the public. In Petrograd, demonstrators took to the streets to voice their displeasure with the tone of the note, which was perceived as negating the *Declaration* to which it was attached. These demonstrations were staged against the wishes of the Soviet, which implored the public for calm. On April 21, citizens loyal to the Provisional Government held counter demonstrations, and fighting broke out between the two groups of protestors. Violence escalated to the point that the Soviet moved to ban all public protests in the city for two days and issued a statement begging the public to “Be calm, Keep Order, and Observe Discipline.”⁹

To clarify the intentions of Miliukov’s note, the Provisional Government was forced to issue yet another statement to the people on April 22. They emphasized that the original note was “unanimously” approved by the Provisional Government, that the “decisive victory” referred to in the note was meant strictly in the context of the government’s abandonment of annexationist goals, and that the “guarantees and sanctions”¹⁰ of the note referred to “limitations of armaments, international tribunals,

⁸ Rech’, No. 91, p.4. April 20, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 964, p.1098.

⁹ Executive Committee of the SWSD. *Appeal of the Soviet Executive Committee to the Citizens and Soldiers*. Izvestiia, No. 47, p.1. April 22, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 1069, p.1241.

¹⁰ Rech’, No. 91, p.4. April 20, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 964, p.1098.

etc.”¹¹ The Petrograd Soviet formally accepted this explanation, suggesting that it “puts an end to the possibility of interpreting the note of April 18 in a spirit foreign to the demands and interests of the revolutionary democracy.”¹²

Still, despite the clarification and the Soviet approval, the incidence of the note did much to solidify the distrust of the Provisional Government that had been growing in the minds of the people. The opinions of the days before, that the Provisional Government, and Miliukov in particular, “did everything in [their] power to weaken the significance of the act of March 27 and to remove all life from this document” remained unchanged.¹³ The government was increasingly seen as an artifact of the Tsarist regime, and as out of touch with the desires of the people. And now added to that belief was the suspicion that unless watched closely, the government would begin acting secretly to extend the war at the expense of the people. In essence, the Provisional Government’s attempts at transparency resulted in the belief that they were attempting to hide their actions from the scrutiny of the public.

On April 26, the Provisional Government issued the *Declaration of the Provisional Government Reviewing Its Accomplishments and Calling for the Support and Cooperation of All the Vital Forces in the Nation*, stating that it had been formed from the “unanimous” consent of the people and naming its accomplishments to date.¹⁴ Despite this, in a clear vote of no confidence, the proletariat began to demand that the Soviet take more power. In response, the Provisional Government decided to extend an invitation to the Soviet to form a coalition government. The invitation was accepted and

¹¹ VVP, No. 37, p.1. April 22, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 966, p.1100.

¹² Izvestiia, No. 47, p.3. April 22, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 967, p.1100.

¹³ Den’, No. 39, p.1. April 21, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 1062, p.1237.

¹⁴ VPP, No. 40, p.1. April 26, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 1075, p.1249.

the new government began on May 2. Before the decision was finalized, and after much internal debate on the matter, both Miliukov and Guchkov, the Minister of War, resigned from their posts. Miliukov was forced out as the Provisional Government attempted to distance itself from the Note. Guchkov resigned in protest of the coalition, which he believed to be a “grievous sin [...] is being carried on against the fatherland.”¹⁵

Guchkov understood that the formation of a coalition would only further erode the credibility of the Provisional Government. Not only that, but by moving to appease the masses, the Government was forced to realign its priorities. No longer was it focused on the logistics of running the country, rather it was concerned with its public perception. This move did much to strip the government of the few powers it managed to hold over the Soviet. Now, the government could maintain legitimacy only as long as the people were happy, which in post-revolutionary Russia was essentially never. Guchkov was also rightly afraid that the added bulk of the Soviet would make the country harder to govern, and he feared that the public image of the Soviet stepping in to aid the faltering leaders would do much to increase the loss of faith in the government. Without a strong central authority, Guchkov worried that Russia would be vulnerable to seizure by powers acting outside and inside the country. Needless to say, the Bolsheviks were also watching the unfolding events with great interest.

¹⁵ Russkiiia Vedomosti, No. 97, p.5. May 2, 1917. Browder and Kerensky, Doc 1089, p.1267.