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The Petrograd Soviet's Failed Manifesto of 15 May 1917

After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the soldiers and workingmen expected the war to end, but it did not. The continuation of the war caused morale to reach an extreme low point especially among soldiers who had to keep fighting on the battlefield. The Provisional Government claimed power but could not run the country effectively because it lacked the support of the soldiers and still had not elected a Constituent Assembly. The Provisional Government needed the Soviets to lead the soldiers, and the Soviets needed the Provisional Government to handle other governmental operations. This led to a time of [dual power](#) in Russia, which made the country extremely difficult to rule.

On May 15 the Soviet (or Council) of Workers and Soldiers in Petrograd issued a [manifesto](#) addressed to the soldiers on the front lines. At this time the country was in chaos. In March the Soviet had issued [Order Number 1](#) to restore discipline to the army, but the order also gave soldiers more rights. [Officers had to address soldiers of all ranks formally](#), and each unit was also called to elect representatives to the Soviet. By May of 1917 the army was preparing for the June Offensive and needed all of its soldiers on the front line to be motivated and ready to fight for their country, especially since [morale was declining](#).

The May 15 Manifesto contains no discussion about the future of Russia, only stating “we will lead you to peace after having obtained from our Government a renunciation of the policy of conquest.”¹ This implies the Soviet saw themselves as the voice of the soldier to the Government. It also shows that the Soviet felt they had enough power to make sure the government did not continue its policy of aggression in the war.

During this time in Russian history historians usually point to three main stances on the war: annexationism (a notion of extending Russia's borders for the glory of the nation), defensism (defending the borders without taking any extra territory), and defeatism (ending the war by any means possible, a new view that [Lenin](#) had begun to expound when he returned to Russia [in early April](#)). The Manifesto, however, contradicts its own stance on the war several times. It starts off by proclaiming "Do not forget that the loss of free Russia would be a catastrophe.... Defend, therefore, revolutionary Russia with all your power."¹ This is followed by the comment about forcing the Provisional Government to renounce conquest, as noted above, which would seem to suggest a clear example of defensism. Yet only a few paragraphs later the Soviet implores the soldiers to "not renounce the offensive," noting that taking an offensive may be the only way to repel the enemy, an apparently annexationist stance. While this contradiction may seem confusing, the authors of the Manifesto may have used this mixed approach because, as they noted, the people considered it "urgent to end the war as rapidly as possible." Instead of angering the soldiers by making outright annexationist claims, the Soviet may have included sentiments of defensism to soften their encouragement of soldiers taking the offensive.

The expertise of the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies lay in topics relating to war and the military. The simple tone of the Manifesto shows their skill in communicating with the soldiers. The main objective seems to have been to inspire the soldiers on the front line. To motivate the soldiers, the Soviet romanticized the war by reminding the soldiers not to forget "that you are defending the liberty of the Russian revolution and your brother workmen and peasants."¹ There are no eloquent metaphors or long drawn out stories. After all, their intended audience was not the high-ranking officers of the Russian military but the soldiers on

the battlefield. The Manifesto uses every sentence to explain, whether directly or indirectly, why the soldiers should keep on fighting for the revolutionary movement.

Later the Manifesto warns about “fraternizing which is taking place at present at the front can easily become a trap.”¹ In the weeks prior to the manifesto, reports of socializing between Russian soldiers and their opposition were prevalent. Many people within the newly unstable Provisional Government worried that if the soldiers at the front kept socializing with their enemies, they would no longer be willing to kill for Russia. The tone of this passage was one of reprimand and disappointment. The Soviet tells the soldiers that the future of the country is in their hands, and then explains how the soldiers are putting the country at risk by socializing with enemy forces, especially since the “soldiers” they are fraternizing might be officers of the enemy General Staff in disguise!

This Manifesto seems not to have had the intended impact among the soldiers. Morale did not improve; the Russian desertion rate in the army increased almost two fold from 34,000 a month in 1914 to double that in 1918.² Fraternalization continued to be a huge problem for the Russian military throughout the entire war. Just a month after the Manifesto, the soldiers and industrial workers engaged in demonstrations against the Provisional Government in Petrograd during [the July Days](#). Military authorities were forced to send troops against the demonstration leaving over 700 people killed or wounded.³

These events led the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies to issue another [Manifesto](#) on 23 July 1917 to recognize the “unlimited authority” and “unlimited power” of the Provisional Government.⁴ This later Manifesto takes a much harsher tone. After the July Days many feared that Russia might be in line for another revolution, which would only lead to more chaos. In this Manifesto the earlier words of encouragement are replaced with threats:

“All those who disobey the commands of the Provisional Government in battle will be regarded as traitors. Toward traitors and cowards no mercy will be shown.”⁴ Scared by the recent events, this Manifesto throws its whole support behind the Provisional Government.

Through analyzing these two manifestos, we gain insight into the chaos occurring in Russia. By understanding the events that occurred during the summer of 1917 we can piece together some of intentions of the Soviet during these chaotic months.

1 “Manifesto of Russian Council of Workmen and Soldiers” (15 May 1917), in *Source Records of the Great War*, Vol. V, ed., Charles F.Horne ([New York?]: National Alumni 1923); http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/russian_councilofworkmen1.htm , accessed March 26, 2013.

2 Henry Cowper et al., *War, Peace, and Social Change: Europe, 1900-1955* (Open University Press 1990), pp. 100-23.

³Rabinowitch, Alexander (2004). *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Haymarket Books and Pluto Press. SBN 0745322689.

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4 “Manifesto of Russian Council of Workmen and Soldiers” (23 July 1917), in *Source Records of the Great War*, Vol. V, ed., Charles F.Horne ([New York?]: National Alumni 1923); http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/russian_councilofworkmen2.htm , accessed March 28, 2013.