

Conciliatory Rhetoric at the First Congress of the Soviets

In June of 1917, the Provisional Government was overwhelmed. They had policy crises at home and abroad. Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavel Milyukov and War Minister Alexander Guchkov had recently resigned, leaving Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky the central figure of the Provisional Government. At times holding all the positions of Minister of Justice, Minister of War and the Navy, Prime Minister, and Commander-in-Chief, Kerensky was both a hero and a scapegoat of the new Russian Democracy.¹ In his speech to the First Congress of the Soviets on June 4th 1917, Kerensky touches on multiple formative concepts in Russian history.² One is the “revolutionary freedom fighter” image. The image of the revolutionary freedom fighter is a term for the many individual heroes of the Russian Revolution who different segments of the peasantry, workers, and soldiers glorified. This phenomenon was a hallmark of the Russian Revolution. Another is the subtle imparting of religious terminology on political movements. He also shows key aspects of his own position within the Revolution, which would later contribute to his descent from power. Kerensky makes reference to the Russian ideal of the “revolutionary freedom fighter,” he uses telling religious language while describing political parties, and he reveals the nature of his own relationship to the revolution.

In his attempt to dissuade the Congress of Soviets from following Lenin and the

1 Figs, Orlando and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*. London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. pp. 74-76

2 For more information on the First Congress of Soviets, see Tess E. Smidt, “[First All Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets](#)” (June 3, 1917)

Bolsheviks into dictatorship, Kerensky evokes the popular image of Russian political activists who suffered for the new Democracy, and implies that these heroes are not on the side of radical Bolshevism. He appeals to the representatives to “see to it that our comrades who have been released from prison do not return there.”³ Later, he implores them not to allow a “new shedding of democratic blood,” a reference to the martyrdom of SR terrorists. These quotes hearken to the Russia ideal of the “freedom fighter,” a notion which took the masses by storm in the early stages of the Russian Revolution and also in late 18th century France. Peasants in 1917 would go on pilgrimages to prisons and places of political exile to worship revolutionaries in a quasi-religious manner. The illegal market for histories of Pugachev, Razin, Nechaev and others was large. The longer revolutionaries sat in jail, the more the peasants, workers, and soldiers honored them.⁴ Kerensky uses this image in his speech to persuade the Congress that the heroes of the Revolution are on his side—the side of freedom and democracy, not the side of the Bolsheviks.

The quasi-religious nature of the Russian popular adoration for their revolutionary heroes is also referenced when Kerensky uses the word “disciples” to describe the followers of Marx. He says “...I have the highest respect for Marx, his teaching, and his disciples.”⁵ This characterization reveals the political climate of the time to a modern reader. The political parties were made up of an uneducated peasant class. Though the peasants were often vehement about their right to have their protests about land and war

³ “Kerensky’s Response” (June 4, 1917) in Richard Sakwa, ed. *The Rise and fall of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991* (London: Routledge, 1999), doc. 2.6, pp. 40-41.

⁴ Figs and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, pp. 74-76

⁵ “Kerensky’s Response,” in Sakwa, doc. 2.6.

heard, they were not fully cognizant of how a democracy actually works. Not entirely clear on the distinction between Tsarism and democracy, the peasants were predisposed to treat their favorite leaders of the revolution like monarchs with divine connections in some cases. There is much evidence suggesting that the political parties capitalized on these simple ideas, treating their heroes like Christ, each one using the popular slogan “*istinnye bortsy za svobodu*” (true fighters for freedom) to distinguish themselves as the purest party.⁶ Even Kerensky’s own SRs used him as a demigod figurehead.

Kerensky’s speech reveals the complexity of his place within his party. Primarily, he spends a lot of time straddling the views of the left and of the right. He says, “I am not a Social Democrat. I am not a Marxist.” At once he proclaims his “highest respect for Marx” but distances himself from Lenin who “cannot call himself a socialist.”⁷ His words are a manifestation of his position. He was a leader for the Right, but a friend of the Left with support (especially in the early days) of the workers and soldiers. In his words Kerensky embodies the uplifting spirit of conciliatory fraternity that represented the views of a large segment of the Russian workers and soldiers especially. He speaks to his rapport with these groups when he reprimands Lenin’s fiery language: “such prescriptions do not excite [us], but among the masses such words will be taken seriously.”⁸ They could be easily misled by radicalism, and he is particularly concerned because he, in his leadership position, feels more personal attachment to the democracy

⁶ Figes, Orlando. “The Russian Revolution of 1917 and its Language in the Village,” in Martin Miller, ed., *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 73-103. Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, pp. 74-76.

⁷ “Kerensky’s Response,” in Sakwa, doc. 2.6.

⁸ *Ibid.* This quote also speaks to the general belief amongst the revolutionaries that the peasantry was not ready to handle their own democracy, an interesting discussion of which can be found in Martin Miller, ed., *The Russian Revolution*, p. 75.

than others.

This is the second important aspect of Kerensky's political position. His personal attachment to democracy is strong. There are several comments that reveal this attachment. First, he frequently describes the Congress as the embodiment of Russian Democracy. As the head of this Congress, it is reasonable to guess that he felt *himself* central in that embodiment. He uses possessive pronouns, saying, "It is *our* duty, the duty of the Russian democracy." He describes the Congress as the "gathering of the flower of the Russian democracy," both in appreciation for their intellectual might, but also as a reference to the Congress as the bud of a new Russia. Later, in his own history of the Russian Revolution, Kerensky would describe 1917 as the birth of "my Russia."⁹ His word choice proves that he did believe the democracy to be *himself*, as the leader of the Russian people, an iconic freedom fighter and personal steward of the Revolution. In a speech just a month earlier [give exact date – unclear here], Kerensky more explicitly states his view:

I am a representative of democracy and the Provisional Government should look upon me as the spokesman of the demands of democracy and ought to take account especially of those opinions which I will put forward as the representative of democracy by whose means the old order was overthrown.¹⁰

Kerensky's personal attachment to democratic Russia is striking. Whether he actually embodied it or not, he certainly tried to.¹¹ Further, I think this attachment to the notion of democracy may have led him to believe he had more control over it than he actually did.

⁹ Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*.

¹⁰ Kolonitskii, Boris. "Democracy During the February Revolution." *Slavic Review*, 57, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 95-106.

¹¹ Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*.

At any rate, as left and right grew farther apart, it became prohibitively hard for Kerensky to maintain any power and still move towards the conciliatory democracy he so wanted.

Kerensky's June speech thus references many cultural trends that led to his rise. It also shows some of the weaknesses that ultimately undermined him. While he may have been "the first love of the Russian Revolution," Kerensky was also the first victim of the growing divide between Left and Right which allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power.¹² With the Right fearing him to be unfaithful, and the Left conspiring to steal his power by painting him as autocratic, Kerensky's sharp rhetoric of conciliatory fraternization proved to be his ultimate downfall.

¹² Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).