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The Kadets' Resignation

Prince Lvov's resignation from the prime minister position of the Provisional Government on July 7th and Alexander Kerensky's rise to the position on July 8th was a critical moment in the Russian Revolution, because the latter (Kerensky's rise), along with the resignation of the Constitutional Democrats from the Provisional Government coalition, helped determine the actions that the government would take over the next few months before being overthrown. While the motivations of the Kadets when they resigned are fairly clear, it is less obvious why the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries did not use the opportunity to establish a more socialist government. This was because Kerensky was more moderate in his views than many others in the nation. While the general population in Russia was becoming more and more radically socialist, Kerensky was still a moderate and hoped to maintain a coalition government that was not comprised solely of socialist parties. When he reformed the coalition a few weeks after the Kadets resigned from the government, he did so with the Kadets included once again.

At the time of Kerensky's rise to the prime minister position, the Provisional Government was struggling to assert its legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people. While the peasants wanted land reform and withdrawal from the war, the Kadets and the more moderate socialists intended to delay those issues until later on. This led to the parties being seen as mere continuations of the Tsarist regime which had been overthrown earlier in the year. The Bolsheviks were taking advantage of the upheaval to demand freedoms for all peoples in Russia at the time. While this included land reform that was central to communist aims, it also included

autonomy for ethnic groups that were not Russian, so that they would be free from oppression as well. These conflicts set the stage for the Kadets to resign from the government.

When members of the Kadets resigned from the government by walking out on July 2nd it was ostensibly over a single issue, Ukrainian autonomy. On this issue the Kadets were to the right of most in the government and the Bolsheviks, who were in favor of autonomy for the Ukrainian people¹. The issue was an important one, and Lenin wrote multiple times in favor of Ukrainian independence, using it to try to attack the Kadets by connecting them to the old Tsarist regime in their desire to suppress the Ukrainians². This also led the Bolsheviks and others on the left, especially those from minority groups such as the Ukrainians to portray the Kadets as counter-revolutionaries, as this was evidence that their goals were not synonymous with democracy and socialist revolution for all free people throughout the world. Because the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries did not entirely disavow the Kadets for their stance on the issue, Lenin was able to attack them on the issue as well, despite the fact that both parties were in favor of Ukrainian autonomy. This was a common theme throughout the revolution, as the Bolsheviks were able to maintain purity by being outside the ruling government, while the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries attempted to maintain legitimacy by including as many groups as possible. The Bolshevik strategy was far superior, as they were not blamed for the actions of the ineffectual Provisional Government that relied on coalition support, and it is not entirely clear why the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were not willing to seize power when it was handed to them by the actions of the other parties.

¹ -“Den’ On The Kadet Withdrawal”, No. 102, July 6, 1917, p. 1 in Robert Paul Browder and Alexander F. Kerensky *The Russian Provisional Government 1917* p. 1384

² Vladimir Lenin, “The Ukraine” (June 28 1917) <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jun/28.htm>; Vladimir Lenin “The Ukraine and the Defeat of the Ruling Parties of Russia” (June 30 1917) <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jun/30a.htm>

While Ukrainian autonomy was the single issue that sparked the Kadets to leave the government, the larger reason for their departure was a desire to push the government in a more conservative direction, a strategy which Lenin was easily able to decipher³. The Kadets attacked the socialists in the coalition for being in favor of the coalition, when in fact the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries wanted to rule without taking the Kadets' beliefs into consideration⁴. In this way the other parties attempted to gain the main benefit of a coalition, broad support from many groups, while not losing out on the ability to act with only their own interests in mind. The Kadets argued that the other parties in the government were attempting to push the revolution towards a purely socialist one, instead of one based around the consensus of all peoples. What this in effect meant in the eyes of many was that the Kadets wanted the bourgeoisie to benefit from the revolution as well, which was not good for their political standing, as bourgeoisie had almost become a term of opprobrium at the time in Russia⁵. When Kerensky reached out to the Kadets to rejoin the government in the middle of July, their list of demands was to the right of what many of the Russian people wanted. These demands included no separate peace with the Central Powers, no land reform by the Provisional Government, and a restoration of the army discipline that was present before the revolution⁶. The government was initially not willing to meet some of these demands, but when Kerensky reformed it in later July, he did so with many Kadets, while maintaining Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary support⁷. This was yet another

³ Esther Kingston-Mann, "Lenin and the Beginnings of Marxist Peasant Revolution: The Burden of Political Opportunity, July-October 1917" (Oct. 1972), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4206621>

⁴ "Rech' on the Withdrawal of the Kadet Ministers and Prince Lvov" *Rech'* No. 158, July 1917, p. 1. in Browder and Kerensky p. 1395

⁵ Boris I. Kolonitskii, "Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti-"Burzhui" Consciousness in 1917" (April 1994). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4206621>.

⁶ "Letters From the Kadets to Kerensky" *Rech'* No. 166, July 18, 1917, p. 2 in Browder and Kerensky p. 1401

⁷ Kort, Michael. *The Soviet Colossus*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 104

factor in the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries losing their appeal to a public swept up in the ideals of a socialist revolution.

Part of the reason that the Mensheviks and the Socialists Revolutionaries that had power in the government wanted to keep Kadet support was that they were led by Alexander Kerensky. Kerensky was a Socialist Revolutionary, and a while he was to the left of the Constitutional Democrats, he was still in favor of many measures of those in the right, especially the war effort. This was part of the reason that Prince Lvov resigned in favor of Kerensky, as Kerensky was seen by Lvov as the strong leader that the government needed at the time⁸. Lvov attempted to portray the Bolsheviks as the reason for the trauma surrounding Russia during the July days, and tried to cause people to believe they were acting in league with the Germans. Accordingly, a strong military man would be needed to run the government and continue the war effort⁹. Lvov was a Constitutional Democrat, and when he resigned he knew that Kerensky would be a man willing to work with Kadets, unlike those in Russia further to the left within the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, such as Yuli Martov, who would later urge that the Soviets take power and form an all socialist government¹⁰. In hindsight, would have been the correct move, but both of these parties wished to rule with consensus at the time, so they did not take power. Lenin also thought this would have been the right choice for the socialist parties within

⁸ “Prince L’vov on Kerensky as His Successor as Minister-President” in *Russkoe Slovo* No. 157, July 12, 1917 p.3 in Browder and Kerensky, p. 1389

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Kort

the government, but felt they would be too cowardly to take action, an assessment that seems fair¹¹.

The area that the primary sources tell the most about Kerensky is in his involvement with the war effort, both during his spell as Minister of War and when he became Prime Minister. In June the Kerensky Offensive was launched in Galicia, which, while initially successful, was ultimately met with defeat. Shortly before he became Prime Minister, he toured the armies of the Western Front, where the soldiers appeared happy to see him according to one source¹². There he emphasized that the soldiers were fighting for their freedom, and they addressed him as Comrade Kerensky rather than any specific title. There was certainly a desire for some soldiers to fight on behalf of the ongoing revolution, a fact emphasized by the writings of another soldier on the front¹³, but it was not true for all. At the time the Petrograd garrison with rebelling and calling for his removal as Minister of War, as a result of the Kerensky offensive, which was not a success by any means.

While the Kerensky offensive started out somewhat successfully, it quickly backfired on the Russian government. It led to the loss of many competent army groups¹⁴, and over 700,000 soldiers deserted during the summer and fall following it¹⁵. This great failure diminished Russia's prestige and directly encouraged a German and Austrian counterattack, which led to even more

¹¹ Kingston-Mann

¹² "Alexander Kerensky at the Front, July 7, 1917" in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922*, doc. 40, p. 91

¹³ Victor B. Shklovsky and Richard Sheldon "At the Front-Summer 1917" (June 1967). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/127086>

¹⁴ "Alexander Kerensky"

¹⁵ Kort

losses. Furthermore, it solidified the idea in the eyes of many that Russia needed to withdraw from the war, as Lenin wrote that the soldiers “voted with their feet” following the mass desertions. Despite this disaster, Kerensky did not suffer greatly, as he became Prime Minister following the massive demonstrations known as the July Days that resulted from the offensive. The issue of the war would hang over the heads of the Russian government throughout the Provisional Government’s lifespan, particularly since Kerensky believed that winning the war would greatly aid the revolution.

This belief also dictated how certain media outlets acted during the revolution. A notable case of this is the appeal to the population in the July 11 issue of *Izvestiia*, the official newspaper of the Petrograd Soviet. The paper appealed to both Russian pride and to revolutionary ideals in trying to get citizens to serve in the military¹⁶. This appeal, a few days after Kerensky became prime minister, showed that the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were still dedicated to winning the war, believing it would help the revolution.

This belief might have been true, but actually defeating the Central Powers proved to be impossible for the Provisional Government. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were more open to land reform than the Kadets, which was one of the key ways that they differentiated themselves from the more conservative groups, but their shared belief that winning the war would help the revolutionary cause turned out to be one of the critical flaws in their ideology. Given that Kerensky and other Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks were not willing to accept even a negotiated ceasefire with no territorial concessions on either side, it is highly unlikely they would have stomached something similar to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk that

¹⁶ -“An Appeal to All the Population”, *Izvestiia*, No. 114, July 11, 1917 p.1 in Browder and Kerensky p. 1394-5

the Bolsheviks would later agree to. This difference in thinking marks a crucial way in which Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to succeed, as they were dedicated to the revolution at all costs, in a way that other groups in Russia were not.

Both the primary and secondary sources agree on the thinking of the major political groups at the time, as well as that of prominent individuals. The secondary sources have the benefit of hindsight and are able to see in retrospect that many of the Provisional Government's actions were extremely foolish for one reason or the other, but they also show that the primary sources neglect the cause for many actions at the time. The primary sources often only focus on the top level of government's role in the issues, while ignoring what influenced the lower levels. This is due to the fact that one of the best collections of documents from the time is a collection that was edited by Kerensky, a man in a position of power throughout the time of the Provisional Government.

The idea that most of what happened during the revolution is a result of the actions within the higher echelons of government is in direct contrast to the thinking of the man who preceded Kerensky, Prince Lvov. Lvov believed that the lower levels should be responsible for most of the initiative in actions such as elections of governors, as a reflection of the democracy created within the revolution¹⁷. Lvov also believed this because he believed that the more local levels were more responsible for how given events transpired. This is in direct contrast to Kerensky, who believed that the national government was responsible for the course of the revolution. The Kadets leaving the coalition was sparked by an issue of a more local level, Ukrainian autonomy,

¹⁷ W. E. Mosse, "Interlude: The Russian Provisional Government 1917" (April 1964), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/149631>

but aside from brief mentions of it there is no great detail provided by primary sources detailing why it was such an issue. This is because they believed the split was due to longstanding issues between the Kadets and the socialist groups within the Provisional Government, rather than a local issue. This is especially true of the collection of documents contained within the volume edited by Kerensky, which should make one more wary of how he presents the details with regards to how great the Provisional Government's role was in a matter. This can be explained partially by the fact that Kerensky was in favor of more centralized government than Lvov was, and the documents chosen for the volume reflected this view. Lenin's writings on the issue tended to address those at the lower levels much more effectively, although much of this was because of his charges that the Provisional Government did not represent the common worker in any manner¹⁸. Lenin was writing in part to show that the Provisional Government was illegitimate, so anything that cast weakness on it was valid for inclusion in his texts. His goals were almost directly opposite those of Kerensky's, so it is necessary to appreciate where the bias would come from in Lenin's writings as well.

What the secondary sources, such as Kort, that write about the aftermath of the Kadets withdrawing from the government do agree with Lenin on is how the Provisional Government was weakened by their withdrawals and Kerensky's rise to Prime Minister. The Kerensky Offensive in June was a catastrophe for Russia, and the continued lack of land reform contributed to the rising revolutionary mood in the nation. The Kadets bore the brunt of the anger, and although they attempted to shift the blame to the Bolsheviks, the public was increasingly in favor of an all-socialist government¹⁹. However, the Mensheviks and Socialist

¹⁸ Kingston-Mann

¹⁹ Kort

Revolutionaries felt they needed the support of the Kadets, which was a costly miscalculation, and helped lead to their downfall within the government.

The Government was in this state of flux until the end of the Civil War in 1920, as until then no one managed to seize complete control of Russia²⁰. Though Kerensky brought strong leadership to the central position July to October 1917, his rise to the Prime Minister spot did not stop the government's eroding legitimacy. The primary sources from the volume edited by Kerensky tend to neglect this, for much of the same reason they only focus on the top level of government. As well, many of the primary sources are propaganda documents from Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary sources, who intended to emphasize how the new government was more legitimate than before. This was not true, as the coalition quickly dissolved again before a new one with the Kadets included formed in later July²¹. The subjects of the primary documents speak more to the real legitimacy of the government than what they proclaim. Within the volume compiled by Kerensky and Browder, there are texts proclaiming how the Kadets leaving is a great gain for the socialist coalition followed shortly by transcripts of messages from Kerensky asking the Kadets to rejoin the coalition. This shows how the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries really felt about their government's legitimacy without the Kadets' involvement, despite the fact that they could have probably seized power without the Kadets' being involved at all, which Lenin knew, and thought, correctly, that they would be too cowardly to accomplish²². The Provisional Government's lack of legitimacy turned out to be a problem both before and during Kerensky's reign as Prime Minister.

²⁰ Mosse

²¹ Kort

²² Kingston-Mann

Alexander Kerensky becoming Prime Minister was a notable event in the Russian Revolution for a number of reasons. Despite the growing support for a socialist government the middle of 1917 and Kerensky's status as a Socialist Revolutionary, this change did not lead to an all-socialist coalition. This was both because of Kerensky's more moderate views compared to those of Martov and Lenin, and because the larger socialist parties felt that they needed Constitutional Democrat support in order for their government to be legitimate enough to rule. Though the Kadets did not rejoin the government that formed after Prince Lvov's resignation, they were able to join it after Kerensky reformed the coalition a few weeks later. The Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary desire for their government to appear legitimate enough to rule was a crucial mistake that eventually allowed the Bolsheviks to gain power, as the latter's separation from the government allowed them to maintain ideological purity and muster popular support against a government that was largely ineffective and did not carry out measures that the larger population supported.

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