

# Was the provisional government doomed from the beginning? a russian revolution as...

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



History Dissertation Was the Provisional Government Doomed from the Beginning? word count: 3999 Josh Blake Candidate No. 031276977

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Was the Provisional Government doomed from the beginning? After the February revolution on 1917 which saw the abdication of the Tsar, Russia was in turmoil.

It had gone (in a matter of days) from being one of the most repressed countries in the world to being totally free with nobody in any real position of power or authority, and this was a massive change for the population of Russia. As a result of this confusion two bodies were set up to temporarily control Russia until a constituent Assembly could be elected. These two bodies were the Provisional government, (made up of leading Liberal parties, and Kadets), and the Petrograd Soviets (made up of workers, soldiers, socialist revolutionaries, and had both Menshevik and Bolshevik members. However this reign did not last long as in October of the same year the Bolsheviks seized the Tauride Palace overthrowing the Provisional government (PG) in the name of the Petrograd Soviet. There are many reasons to why the PG did not manage to consolidate its power; primarily there were a lot of internal problems that gave them a big disadvantage. However there were also external pressures from the peasants, workers and the war that the PG could simply not cope with. As historians have studied the question in depth different schools of thought have been established.

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The Structuralist School believes that the PG was doomed from the beginning, because of the problems they faced such as Dual Power, the War and Order No1; however Darby who is a popular Structuralist historian believes that there was a " window of opportunity. "[1] However they failed to use this to their advantage and it cost them dear in October 1917. On the other hand the Intentionalist school believe that the PG was not in fact doomed from the beginning and collapsed due to outside pressure from the peasants, workers and impact of revolutionary leaders such as Lenin.

Lenin's revolutionary slogans such as " peace, land and bread"[2] shifted the support hugely from the PG to the Bolsheviks and other factors such as the July Days meant Lenin could undermine the PG completely. And gain support for the Bolsheviks. Chapter1: Nature of the Provisional Government and Structuralist opinions On the 2nd March 1917 the PG was declared and on the 4th minister's were appointed. The Petrograd Soviet was also declared as a leading body in Russia and this initial system of Dual Power presented an immediate problem for both groups.

Having two Bodies trying to run the same country immediately causes difficulties as there would be disagreements between them. This is exaggerated between the PG and Petrograd Soviet because their views and ideologies are so distinctly different. The PG wanted to contain the revolution, whereas the Soviets wanted to deepen it. John Bradley agrees with this, stating: " The Soviet and the PG although coexisting, would never act in harmony, both preferring to follow separate roads in the pursuit of different goals. "[3] This initial rivalry deepened with the introduction of

Order No. 1 which was granted to the Soviets. Order No. 1 essentially gave the Soviets control of the armed forces in Russia. It states that: armed forces are subordinate to the Petrograd Soviet in all their political actions; and one delegate from each company was to be elected to the Petrograd Soviet. Also all weapons were to remain under the control of company and battalion committees, and in no circumstances to be handed over to officers. This meant that, “ the armed forces were disabled from enforcing the PG’s will.

[4] Mosley supports this and states that: “ The PG has no real power, troops, railroads; post and telegraph are all in the hands of the Soviet. “[5] The PG’s liberal nature also played a large role in their lack of effective policies and knowledge. When they were appointed the PG immediately: abolished the secret police; abolished censorship; introduced civil liberties; abolished the death penalty; granted civil rights to soldiers; abolished discrimination based on class or religion; and gave amnesty to political prisoners.

All these things (contrary to the PG’s beliefs) were seen to be giving too much freedom to the population, too soon and this had a knock on effect throughout their reign. For example, when the state was threatened during April, July and October they were unwilling to use force. Orlando Figes sees this as a major reason for their downfall: “ Intoxicated by their own self image as the heirs of 1789, they were deluded into believing that they could resolve the problems by 1917 by importing western constitutional practices and policies, for which there were no precedents, nor the necessary cultural base in Russia. [6] The PG had destroyed the original bureaucracy under the Tsar and did not replace it with anything; this resulted in the population not really

knowing what they were supporting. Other aspects that cost the PG dearly were internal problems such as the members within the body. After the abdication of the Tsar on the 2nd March 1917 the population expected the Duma to take control of Russia. The Duma was a secondary government set up by the Tsar in reply to the October Manifesto after the 1905 revolution to keep the population of Russia happy.

However as the Tsar Nicholas was still sovereign and there was a chance that he could come back into power the Duma felt they could not establish a leading role over Russia because if the Tsar were to return they could be accused of treason. They were simply trying to save their backs in case this was to happen. As a result of this they set a Provisional committee separately which was to act as a temporary body in control of Russia until a Constituent Assembly could be elected later in the year.

In contrast to the Soviets the PG was chosen by the Duma whereas the Soviet was elected by the people emphasising the PG's lack of connection with the workers and peasants in Russia. It seems today that historians feel the Duma should have accepted their opportunity to control Russia but they had a dread of responsibility and did not want any blame if anything was to go wrong, Richard Pipes wrote: " It has been argued that the failure of the Duma to proclaim at once, in an unequivocal manner, the assumption of power had disastrous effects. [7] This suggests that the PG was a second option for the Duma and was not a well established institution and this immediately suggests that the PG was doomed from the beginning. Bernard Paves emphasises the poor quality of the PG in his book: " The PG was what

the country had to offer in experience of government outside the administrative machine; but they amounted only to a few fairly competent critics, without authority, educated in a Duma which had hardly been listened to. “[8] Initially the Duma had announced that the PG was to handle restoration of order. The PG felt a political revolution was needed, not a social revolution.

However a social reform or revolution was a necessity in Russia as there was mass unrest in both the countryside and cities. This dissatisfaction needed to be sorted out as soon as possible and although the PG tried they did not recognise what was needed to transform Russia. As Lenin wrote, Russia was in the second phase of the revolution and it was now the turn of the proletariat to continue it. The PG however was trying too hard to contain both the working class and peasants without ever giving them any of their demands making them restless. This was another key reason why they were not able to consolidate their power.

Although the PG was predominantly a liberal body there was one exception. Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky was a member of both the PG and the Petrograd Soviet and was the only representative in the body with moderately socialist ideologies. This resulted in disagreements within the party and his key role as prime minister after Lvov came as a disadvantage as he adopted a new self arrogance and cost the PG dearly. There was a huge contrast between Lvov and Kerensky. Lvov was seen largely as a “figure head”[9] and was an effective leader however he was forced to resign over the issue of regional nationalities.

Kerensky on the other hand was not such an effective leader and sought his own goals although appearing popular through the early years of the 1900's. As the PG was a liberal body they felt a republic was where Russia should be heading. However this contrasted with Kerensky's ideology's and was another reason for them being unable to consolidate their power. Milyukov was also a key member in the party. As Mosley wrote, " he was an outstanding personality in the party. "[10] Milyukov was appointed minister of foreign affairs, and he played a huge role in formulating the policies which the PG adopted.

However in connection with the War Milyukov made a grave mistake that ended in his resignation. This lack of knowledge was typical of the members of the PG. Chapter 2: Structuralists response The Structuralist response believes that the PG was doomed from the beginning due to their poor response to the demands of both the peasants and the workers, and the pressure put on them by the war. There were serious problems in Russia however there were also very high expectations of the PG, putting pressure on them, and making it hard for them to effectively consolidate power.

These key issues included: the war, land distribution, national minorities, economy, and social reform, and in March of 1917 it was important the PG made a good first impression. The key question involving the war was whether or not Russia should sue for immediate peace. This however would have implications as it would be very embarrassing and humiliating along with the severe loss of territory that would incur. If they were not to call for immediate peace they faced another problem. Should they continue fighting

alongside with their allies and try to gain territory or fight a defensive war and simply try not to lose any more territory?

The PG made a good choice in only fighting a defensive war. This however backfired when the Milyukov affair became apparent, and this cost the PG dearly. Although this problem could be seen to be a result of outside pressure and not an initial reason for their downfall, their initial reaction was simply the starting point from which the problems involving the war escalated out of control. The question involving the distribution of land was whether they should take land from the nobility and landowners and hand it over to the peasants or should they wait for the Constituent Assembly to organise it in a more controlled way.

They immediately opted to stand back from these demands, and stated that they would wait for the Constituent Assembly to be elected so that they could deal with it more appropriately. The PG adopted the same approach when answering the vital question of the demands of the working class in Russia. The Working class wanted much better conditions for both working and living; they also wanted eight hour working days and elected members on factory committees.

Beryl Williams wrote: “ Labour legislation was brought in by the PG: the right to strike, and to elect factory committees, an eight hour day, freedom and land reform... however these were postponed until the promised Constituent Assembly. “[11] This made the workers and peasants restless and as the year progresses they simply put more pressure on the PG. The dilemma



involving national minorities was that neighbouring countries to Russia such as Finland, Ukraine, and Poland wanted independence. They decided to grant these countries independence as they thought they did not really have any control over them anyway.

However this sparked disagreements within the party and turned out to be more important than the PG had originally thought. It resulted in the Kadets leaving the PG and this came as a huge loss of support and meant Kerensky took over Lvov position as prime minister. The economic situation in Russia was not good and supply of food and fuel needed to be increased. These key issues in March 1917 were very important to the PG's downfall. They gave them an opportunity to excel however due to bad decisions and poor policies the PG was not able to consolidate power.

The Structuralists School sees these problems as a chance for the PG to show Russia they were capable of leadership and the historian Darby refers to these times as a " window of opportunity. "[12] However the PG's inability to cope with such stresses among other strains put them immediately on a downward spiral. Chapter 3: Intentionalist response Although there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the PG was doomed from the beginning there is also evidence which supports the contrary. Many of the issues that the PG failed to deal with in March escalated and caused big problems within the body.

There were also key mistakes made that put support in the hands of the Bolsheviks and gave them a prime opportunity to seize power in October. As

Beryl Williams wrote, “ the PG created a climate in which its political opponents could return and flourish. “[13] The initial policy that the PG had set up in response to the war was one of the only vaguely effective policies they had adopted; this however did not last long. On the 20th April of that year a message from Milyukov (The Minister of Defence) that had been sent to the PG was leaked to the public and sparked various protests throughout Russia.

The note told the PG that the army was to go on the offensive; however this was deeply unpopular with both the Soviet and the Russian people. Figees sees this as, “ waving a red rag in front of the soviet bull,”[14] In response the Soviet called upon the people of warring countries to force their governments to negotiate peace and in doing so condemned Milyukov’s pledge. It is clear that the PG underestimated how much the Russian people, and soldiers wanted peace. As Mosley wrote, “ not fully aware then of the widespread unwillingness of the Russian people to continue the war. [15] The Milyukov note is a key example of the outside pressure that helped in the collapse of the PG and it emphasises how even a policy that seemed effective in March had backfired due to poor decisions made by key members in the body. This incident put the PG in a bad light and it was only to get worse. Another initial policy that affected the PG badly was the problem involving small neighbouring countries to the USSR and their desire for independence. Initially the PG had overlooked these demands, however as the demands grew the PG was forced to make a decision.

They made a quick decision as they felt that this issue would not affect anybody within the party or population. They gave these countries independence, however in doing so sparked unrest within the party. Many of the Kadets' including Milyukov were very unhappy that these countries (Ukraine especially) had been granted independence, and as a result they left the PG. With the loss of Milyukov, Kerensky was appointed minister of war and Paves sees this as: " gravity shifting very predominantly to the left. [16] This resulted in the PG losing their impact on the population; it also cost them a lot of members and support and signalled another step towards their destruction. As the weeks went by the PG was failing to answer the peasant's demands for the distribution of land. This meant that the PG was losing support as the peasants' opinion of them became increasingly bad. Kowalski argues this: " The problem was that the peasant restraint was not rewarded. The PG with the support of the soviet procrastinated on the land question. [17] Iganev, a leader of a popular socialist party said: " We are always being told, ' later, later, not now, not until the Constituent Assembly'... however the land question must be resolved now! "[18] This is a clear example of the pressure put on the PG. This view is supported by many historians such as Richard Pipes and over the years an Intentionalist School has been developed. They believe that it was the outside pressure put upon the PG that cost them, arguing that it was revolutionary leaders such as Lenin that led to the popularity of the PG diminishing whilst the popularity of other revolutionary groups grew.

Another example of the outside pressure put upon the PG is the political transformation of the Petrograd Soviet. They had transformed from (in March) being an institution supporting parliamentary democracy into instruments for revolutionary socialism, and there are consequences of this. According to Mosley there are two main reasons for this transformation: Primarily the Soviet's were annoyed because the PG postponed for future determination by the Constituent Assembly the solution of such pressing problems.

The second reason is largely a consequence of the first as there were growing opinions of the workers and peasant against the PG because they had failed to meet any of their demands, and conditions in Russia had not improved. This meant that the soviets felt they had to branch themselves away from the failing PG to keep their reputation intact. The Bolsheviks also used this to their advantage as when they saw this poor reputation of the PG and their lack of support the Bolsheviks took a radical move to wipe the PG out completely.

The Bolsheviks saw this opportunity: " At the Russian conference of the Bolshevik workers party on March 29, there was only one speaker who opposed the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and establishment of a proletariat dictatorship. And he was rules out of order. "[19] This emphasises how from very early on in the PG's reign people were looking to overthrow it and using Lenin's intelligence they found a perfect opportunity. Using Propaganda they adopted a new party slogan of: " all power to the soviets. In doing so the Bolsheviks felt that they could rise to power through the

Petrograd Soviet and then disband it when they got to a dominant position within the party. As a result of this the PG were left with very little support. As opposition to the PG grew there was one key incident that sparked the Bolshevik engine and this was the return of Lenin on the 3rd April 1917. Previously to this Lenin had been in exile and had not been able to ignite Bolshevik movement. When he returned the Bolshevik workers parties were already willing to overthrow the PG but simply did not have the means to do so, and that is what Lenin brought to the table.

Lenin's initial opinion was that he welcomed the revolution but saw it as only being in its first stage, the April thesis was Lenin's radical program to introduce the second phase. The April thesis was announced almost immediately after Lenin's return on the 16th April and it promised the population of Russia exactly what they wanted, which put the PG in a very bad light. The thesis included: No support to the PG; an immediate end to the war; arming the workers to defend the revolution; the introduction of a worldwide socialist revolution; and most importantly it promised, " Land, peace and bread. [20] That was all the things that the PG had been to scared to do, as they waited for a Constituent Assembly. The July days followed the PG's summer offensive and were another key reason for the PG's downfall. On 3rd July there were military uprisings against the army's poor attempt at an offensive against the Germans on the western front. There were 400, 000 casualties and this failure played into the hands of the Bolsheviks and made the PG look very bad for initiating the offensive. On the 4th July 20, 000 sailors embarked on the city from Kronstadt naval base.

As the PG was to blame all the protestors wanted the soviet to take power. However when the soviet refused to do so they crowds were not sure what to do, and were restricted by the 176 regiment who were used to protect the government. This emphasises the opinions towards the PG and is another example of a poor decision made by them which pushed them closer to being overthrown. However the July days also had a knock on effect on the Bolsheviks, because it was not successful in overthrowing the PG people wanted someone to blame and that person was Lenin.

However some historians such as Figes argue that Lenin did not actually have any role in organising the uprising. [21] The Kornilov affair was another example of outside pressure which resulted in a large loss of support for the PG and gave the Bolsheviks a more convincing role in the country as they gained support and spread the word of another revolution. By the end of August Kerensky felt that the only course open to him was to restore law and order in the cities and to boost moral and discipline within the army.

In doing so he hoped he could put pressure back on the Bolsheviks and potentially deal with any threat that they were to present. Kerensky appointed General Kornilov as new supreme commander of the Russian forces to try and boost moral. However General Kornilov had other ideas that emphasise his poor political mind and it rubbed off very badly on the PG and Kerensky. Kornilov felt that in his new position he could rally soldiers and he saw this as an opportunity to crush the radical socialists and restore military order through counter revolution.

However Kerensky realised this and had to call for help from both the Petrograd Soviet and Bolsheviks which reinforced the public's suspicions that they could not effectively govern Russia. Conclusion: There is a lot of evidence that supports both arguments: that the PG was doomed from the beginning and that it was outside pressure that resulted in their collapse in October 1917. There are also various historians who support these arguments. Evidence suggesting that the PG was doomed from the beginning is supported by famous historians such as Orlando Figes and Beryll Williams who agree with the Structuralist School.

Important factors such as the immediate demands from peasants and workers were too strong for the PG to handle appropriately and they made a grave mistake in ignoring them. “ The problem was that the peasant's restraint was not rewarded. The PG procrastinated over the land question. “[22] This was also the case when they tried to deal with the national minorities demands and this to had severe consequences resulting in a great loss of support and members. On the contrary however there is lots of evidence that supports the counter argument, stating that the PG collapsed under outside pressure put on them throughout their rule.

Issues such as the War and Bolshevik movement made the situation even harder and it became too much pressure for the PG to cope with. Also the increasing demands from peasants and workers after the PGs initial ignorance became much stronger and became a real problem for them which they failed to cope with. After looking in detail at both responses it is clear that the PG inherited problems however it was their inability to deal

with these problems that immediately put them under a lot of pressure and made it much more difficult for them to consolidate power.

This initial hesitance tied the PGs hands behind their back and because the internal problems had not been dealt with by April they had no chance against the external threat from the Bolsheviks who were bent on their destruction. It can also be argued that the PG although being seen as the rulers of Russia did not actually do anything to meet any of the peasants or workers demands and did nothing to increase the standards of Russia at all. As Bernard Paves wrote: “ The PG, although acknowledged as such for eight months cannot be said to actually have ruled Russia. [23] Bibliography ???

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