Russia Between Revolutions, March–November 1917

How was Russia governed between March and November 1917? How successful was the Provisional Government in dealing with Russia's problems?

The Provisional Government and the Soviet

After the Tsar's abdication, someone had to run the country. Members of the Duma formed themselves into a Provisional Government. Nobody had elected this government, and therefore it was called 'provisional', meaning it was a temporary arrangement until elections could be held for another parliament. However, the elections were postponed, because the war was still going on.

The Provisional Government did not intend to sweep away everything from the past. Nevertheless there were some important changes. Political prisoners were freed, including many Bolsheviks. Newspapers could now print what they liked. Revolutionary exiles were allowed to return home.

There was another important development. During the March Revolution the Petrograd Soviet, which had first appeared in 1905, was again formed. Unlike the Provisional Government, the Petrograd Soviet was elected by workers, soldiers and sailors. It included several revolutionaries who wanted to change things much more drastically. It issued its own orders to workers and soldiers. The Soviet also issued Order Number One, stating that it would obey the government only if the Soviet thought it was running Russia in the right way. This apparent sharing of power between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet is often known as 'dual government'.

Many of the Bolsheviks were prepared to support the Provisional Government because they believed that Russia was not yet ready for a socialist revolution. Most Marxists believed that the events of March meant the middle class was taking power from the Tsar. They expected that there would then be a long period during which the working class would become better organised, and then Russia would take part in a genuine world-wide revolution in which the proletariat or workers would set up their own state.

Kerensky

Alexander Kerensky, a socialist member of the Petrograd Soviet, was also Minister of Justice in the Provisional Government. He soon became Minister of War and then Prime Minister. Opinions about Kerensky varied, as sources A and B suggest.

A Bruce Lockhart, writing about Kerensky in Memoirs of a British Agent (1932):

He was an honest, if not a great man. Sincere, in spite of his oratorical talents [his ability to make inspiring speeches], and, for a man who for four months was worshipped as a god, comparatively modest.

B From the diary of Louis de Robien, a French diplomat in Petrograd:

Kerensky is in reality nothing but an inspired fanatic, a nutcase and a madman. He acts through intuition [guesswork] and personal ambition, without reasoning and without weighing up his actions.

Many people were very enthusiastic about the Provisional Government at first. Some Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries even became government ministers. But the enthusiasm did not last long. The government soon ran into serious difficulties. Some were of its own making, and some were caused by circumstances beyond its control.

Kerensky wanted to continue fighting the war against the Germans. He hoped that victories would strengthen his own position and that of the government. But a Russian offensive against the Germans in the summer of 1917 failed. All the problems described in earlier chapters also continued: shortages, desertions and casualties.

Under Lenin's leadership, the Bolsheviks were the only revolutionary party which refused to allow any of its members to join the Provisional Government.
Lenin’s return to Russia

Lenin had returned to Russia in April. The German government arranged a special train to take him from exile in Switzerland to Petrograd, via Sweden and Finland. The Germans knew that Lenin wanted to stop the war, and they thought that if Lenin caused trouble in Russia, it would disrupt the Russian war effort against Germany.

On his arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd, Lenin caused some surprise, even to his own followers. He read out the April Theses, which was his programme for the Bolsheviks.

E Lenin’s April Theses included the following points:
  - The Provisional Government must be overthrown.
  - The war must be ended immediately.
  - Industry must be nationalised.
  - Land should be given to the peasants.
  - All power must be given to the soviets.

Lenin’s programme was summed up in the words ‘Peace, Bread and Land’ and ‘All power to the soviets’. These were effective slogans in 1917.

Week by week food became scarcer. The daily allowance of bread fell from a pound and a half (675 grams) to a pound, then three-quarters, half, and a quarter-pound. Towards the end there was a week without any bread at all ... For milk and bread and sugar and tobacco one had to stand in queues for long hours in the chill rain. Coming home from an all-night meeting I have seen the queues beginning to form before dawn, mostly women, some with babies in their arms.
The July Days

At first things were difficult for Lenin. He had to persuade his colleagues that he was right. Then in July there were mass demonstrations in Petrograd against the war. Lenin was reluctant to join in, knowing that the Bolsheviks were not yet strong enough to seize power. However, he was persuaded to give his support to the demonstrations, known as the 'July Days'. When Kerensky's government managed to suppress the demonstrations, Lenin was forced to flee in disguise across the Finnish border in order to avoid arrest. Other Bolshevik leaders were arrested. Rumours spread that Lenin was being paid as a spy by the Germans.

The Kornilov revolt

Events now started to go Lenin's way. The new commander of the Russian army, General Kornilov, distrusted Kerensky's ability to fight the Germans. He also wanted to destroy the Petrograd Soviet, which was calling for peace. Kornilov wanted to set up a military dictatorship, and when his troops approached Petrograd, Kerensky was forced to rely upon Bolshevik armed 'Red Guards' to block the advance. The Bolsheviks persuaded many of Kornilov's men to desert.
Kornilov’s rebellion collapsed and the Bolsheviks boosted their image as ‘Defenders of the Revolution’. In contrast, Kerensky’s government was seen as increasingly weak. In the countryside peasants were seizing land for themselves. Military discipline was breaking down as more and more soldiers deserted – ‘voting with their feet’ as Lenin put it.

The Bolsheviks decide

Only Lenin of all the party leaders appeared to have clear, confident aims. He was now claiming that he wished to seize power not just for the Bolsheviks, but in the name of all those represented in the soviets. At the end of August and the beginning of September the Bolsheviks won majorities in the Moscow and Petrograd Soviets for the first time. Lenin still had to persuade the other leading Bolsheviks that the time was right to seize power. He returned secretly from Finland to attend a meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. The Committee voted 10–2 in favour of carrying out a second revolution by seizing power in the name of the workers and the soviets. The two who disagreed were Zinoviev and Kamenev. They were afraid that the Bolsheviks

would not get the support they needed, and they even leaked news of the meeting to the newspapers. However, Kerensky’s government, increasingly isolated, took few effective steps to protect itself.

Lenin was determined to go ahead. Trotsky had only joined the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1917, but he was given the task of organising the actual seizure of power. Detailed preparations were made.

1 What steps did the Provisional Government take to win support after the Tsar’s abdication?
2 What was the Petrograd Soviet, and what was ‘dual government’?
3 What impression of Kerensky is given by sources A and B? What problems do these two sources cause for an historian writing about Kerensky?
4 What was revolutionary about the April Theses?
5 Do sources C and D prove that the Provisional Government was well supported in its first few months? Explain your answer.
6 Source H is a frame from a feature film about the Russian Revolution made ten years later. The film, made in Communist Russia, made the July Days seem like a very dramatic affair. But a British historian described the events of July as ‘a very small setback for the Bolsheviks’. How could there be two such different interpretations?
7 What effect did the Kornilov revolt have on the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks?
8 Study source E and other evidence in this chapter. Did the Provisional Government succeed in solving the problems caused by the war? If not, why not?