

HISTORY - REVOLUTIONS

To what extent can the Provisional Government be blamed for their own collapse?

Although the Provisional Government's self-proclaimed rule and the "bourgeois" nature of their ministers were significant contributors to their own downfall, it was not just the body's own weaknesses that brought on its failure. The strength of Soviet power in comparison to that of the Provisional Government, as well as the rising impact of the Bolsheviks due to a series of triggers, are factors that are unable to be ignored when observing this collapse.

The Provisional Government's rise to power by their own means and inability to empathise with the majority of Russia was a major factor in their own demise. After the dismissal of the Fourth Duma (27 February 1917), the members of the Duma formed their own Provisional Committee, which they later renamed the Provisional Government (2 March 1917). It was they themselves that granted themselves the role of governing Russia until the formation of a Constituent Assembly, with this decision in no way involving any form of election by the people. When Miliukov declared the ministers of the new form of government, a heckler in the crowd was quick to ask "who appointed" the Provisional Government, to which Miliukov responded "we were appointed by the revolution itself". This further demonstrates how the Provisional Government assumed authority without consultation from any other body, especially not through popular mandate, which is a move inevitable to be unpopular with the vast majority of Russians who craved representation and reforms that mirrored their own needs. Moreover, A.J.P Taylor describes that "this government had no popular mandate and little popular support", which again solidifies the idea that the public failed to appreciate the Provisional Government, largely on the basis that they were not elected by the people and therefore were not working in compliance with what the popular crowd wanted. The fact that the Provisional Government consisted of what Lenin described as "parliamentary bourgeois" ministers contributed to the body's inability to empathise with the majority of Russia, leading to them delivering reforms that failed to coincide with the people's needs. Although they managed to implement some reforms, including an eight-hour working day and the abolishment of the Okhrana, the Provisional Government failed to address the grievances of the people, which mostly revolved around the want for peace and land. Peasantry made up eighty per cent of the Russian population, and yet the Provisional Government in no way dealt to deliver their deepest desire, that being accessible land. A vast number of Russians also wished to be relieved from war, following many peasants and other Russians being conscripted due to the outbreak of World War One (August 1914). This desired peace was never achieved by the Provisional Government, and as Lynch explains, "in keeping Russia in the war, it destroyed its chances of survival". By assuming their own power and being unsuccessful in acting on the grievances of the majority, the Provisional Government played a large part in their own failure.

The authority of the Soviet also made it virtually impossible for the Provisional Government to thrive and continue. After the Petrograd Soviet's release of Soviet Order Number 1 (1 March 1917), in which it agreed to follow the Provisional Government "only in such cases as they do not conflict with the orders and resolutions of the Soviet", it is made clear how the Provisional Government lacked real authority when compared to the Soviets. The phrase "All power to the Soviets", which was first declared by Lenin (3 April 1917), pushed the idea that the Soviets should have sole authority over Russia. Furthermore, Lenin's April Theses (April 1917) consisted of the idea that there should be "no support for the Provisional Government", which ultimately led to the Bolsheviks who were previously indifferent regarding the Provisional Government becoming united against the body and be in favour of purely a singular power rather than a Dual Authority. Malone contends that "Lenin perceived the Soviets...as a strong powerbase from which the BP could assume political power", again

furthering the idea that the popularity of the soviets in comparison to the Provisional Government played a major role in its collapse.

Furthermore, there were a series of triggers that contributed to the rise of the Bolsheviks and hence the demise of the Provisional Government. The June Offensive (18 June 1917) that occurred after the Provisional Government decided to declare a defensive war on Germany and Austria (May 1917) in attempt to evoke patriotism only resulted in a detrimental defeat that furthered the loss of support for the governmental body. 170 000 soldiers deserted their posts on announcement of this offensive, with this act clearly displaying how the Provisional Government still failed to be making an effort to enforce peace upon Russia like the nation so strongly desired. In response to this failed war effort, Trotsky demanded that power immediately be transferred to the Soviet (2 July 1917). Thousands protested for the Provisional Government to hand over their power (4 July 1917), and they were joined by 20 000 sailors from Kronstadt naval base and another 20 000 workers from the Putilov steel works. Although, as Fitzpatrick states, this event saw the Bolsheviks “caught off balance” and eventually had 800 members arrested by the Provisional Government arrested, including 11 key figures (6 July 1917), their demise was very short lived. Following a misunderstanding between Kornilov and Kerensky that saw the latter eventually dismissing Kornilov (27 August 1917), Kerensky opted to turn to the Bolsheviks for assistance. Kornilov declared that “the Provisional Government” were “under pressure from the Bolshevik majority” and were acting “in full accord with the plans of the German General Staff”, and ordered troops into Petrograd in response to this threat. Kerensky retaliated by turning to the Bolsheviks for assistance, and not only freed them from imprisonment, but also armed them. The Bolshevik force proved to be effective, with Kornilov’s troops being unable to even reaches Petrograd. This move evidently ‘revived’ the Bolsheviks. Not only did their popularity begin to surge, with the majority of the Soviets being Bolsheviks by (September 1917), but they were also now armed, leading to them having greater power that further equipped them to crush the Provisional Government. A series of short-term events during (1917) aided the Provisional Government’s own doings in the collapse of the aforementioned political body.

The Provisional Government, as Steve Smith asserts, “failed to meet” the “concrete needs and expectations” of the workers and other ordinary citizens of Russia, with this lack of understanding of the majority of the nation they were ruling strongly contributing to the downfall of the government. However, there were also other growing bodies and events that also played a part in the collapse of the Provisional Government, namely the popularity of the Soviet and a sequence of triggers that saw power falling from the Provisional Government into the hands of the Bolsheviks.