

The Opinion Pages

The February Revolution and Kerensky's Missed Opportunity

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RED CENTURY MARCH 6, 2017

Brisbane, Australia — The February Revolution is one of history's great "What if" moments. If this revolution — which actually took place in early March 1917 according to the West's Gregorian calendar (Russia adopted that calendar only later) — had succeeded in producing a constitutional democracy in place of the czarist empire as its leaders hoped, the world would be a very different place.

If the leading figure in the provisional government, Aleksandr Kerensky, had seized on an opportunity presented by a now-forgotten vote in the German Reichstag, World War I might have been over before American troops reached Europe. In this alternative history, Lenin and Stalin would be obscure footnotes, and Hitler would never have been more than a failed painter.

By February 1917, after more than two years of bloody and pointless war, six million Russian soldiers were dead, wounded or missing. Privation on the home front was increasing. When the government of Czar Nicholas II announced the rationing of bread, tens of thousands of protesters, many of them women, filled the streets of St. Petersburg. Strikes broke out across the country. The czar tried to suppress the protests by force, but his calls to the army were either met with mutinies or simply ignored.

By the beginning of March, the situation was untenable: Nicholas abdicated, bringing an end to the Romanov dynasty.

The vacuum created by the collapse of the autocracy was filled in part by a provisional government, formed from the opposition groups in the previously powerless Duma, or Parliament, and in part by workers' councils, called soviets. At the outset, the initiative lay with the provisional government, which seemed to embody the hopes of a majority of the Russian people.

The most immediate of these hopes, the replacement of autocracy by constitutional democracy, was inscribed in the very name of the party that came to power after the February Revolution. The Constitutional Democrats, or Cadets, who had emerged from a failed revolution in 1905, were moderate liberals with substantial support from intellectuals and the urban middle class. Prince Georgi Lvov, a middle-aged aristocrat, became the prime minister, but he was generally seen as a figurehead. The Cadet leader and foreign minister, Pavel Milyukov, was the dominant figure in the early days of the revolution.

The Cadets were the most moderate of the parties that jostled for power in the wake of the February Revolution. To their left were the Social Revolutionaries, who, despite their radical-sounding name, were a relatively moderate and democratic group, focused mainly on breaking up the big feudal estates and redistributing land to the peasants. Even more confusingly from a modern perspective, the real revolutionaries were known as Social Democrats, a term now used by European parties of the moderate center-left.

The Social Democrats were further divided into two also misleadingly named factions. The smaller, dominated by Vladimir Lenin, went by the name Bolsheviks (or majority socialists), while the larger group, which included most of the notable leaders other than Lenin, were the Mensheviks (minority socialists). In claiming the mantle of majority for his group when it won a minor procedural vote, Lenin foreshadowed the determination and ruthlessness that would propel him to supreme power.

Those were only the biggest groups. Anarchists, syndicalists and a specifically Jewish leftist group, the Bundists, all competed with, fought against and sometimes allied with one another.

When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, most of these groups, despite their opposition to the czarist regime, had supported what they saw as a defensive war caused by the aggression of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. In this, they were similar to a majority of European socialist and social-democratic parties, which abandoned their professed internationalism and rallied around the flags of their national governments.

Among the minority of political leaders who opposed the war, the most important was Lenin, along with the leaders of the left-wing strand of the Mensheviks, Yuli Martov and Leon Trotsky, all of whom were in exile. From faraway Zurich, Lenin could do little but write denunciations of the “social chauvinists” who supported the war.

As the war dragged on, however, support ebbed among both the political class and the Russian people. The Brusilov offensive of 1916, hailed as a great victory at the time, ended with as many as a million Russians killed or wounded, with nothing of substance in the course of the war changed. Czar Nicholas's decision to take personal command of the Russian armed forces produced even greater disasters, discrediting both Nicholas and the monarchy as a whole.

The rapid collapse of the regime was, therefore, not surprising. But having come so suddenly to power, the provisional government faced the usual problem of revolutionary regimes: how to satisfy the often contradictory expectations of the people who had put them in power.

The provisional government rapidly introduced reforms that would have seemed utterly transformative in peacetime, instituting universal suffrage and freedoms of speech, assembly, press and religion, and addressing the demands of the many national minorities who made up much of the Russian empire's population. But none of this delivered the three things the people wanted most:

peace, bread and, for the peasants, land.

Of these failures, the most important was the failure of peace. The war continued, and in April it emerged that Milyukov had sent a telegram to the British and French governments, promising continued Russian support. He lost office shortly thereafter, and the Socialist Revolutionary leader Kerensky emerged as his successor.

Despite the obvious lessons of Milyukov's fall, Kerensky, too, continued the war. After touring the front, he succeeded in rallying the weary troops for yet another offensive. Despite some initial successes, the Kerensky offensive stalled, with heavy loss of life, repeating the grim pattern of World War I.

The zenith of Kerensky's authority came with the July Days, a mass demonstration undertaken by the Bolsheviks but defeated by forces loyal to the government. With the failure of the July Days protest, Kerensky consolidated his position by becoming prime minister, replacing Lvov.

At almost exactly the same time, far away in Berlin, the socialist and social-democratic parties repented of their decision to endorse the war. Germans were almost as war-weary as Russians, with terrible casualties and widespread shortages caused by the Allies' blockade. A resolution in the Reichstag, the German Parliament, passed by a large majority, called for a peace "without annexations or indemnities" — a return to the situation that had prevailed before war broke out.

By this time, however, Germany was effectively a military dictatorship. Power lay with the High Command, run by the generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg, both of whom were later to play prominent roles in bringing Hitler to power. Unsurprisingly, Ludendorff and Hindenburg ignored the Reichstag motion.

What is surprising, to anyone who has absorbed the standard victor's view — according to which the Allies were fighting a defensive war to liberate small states — is that Britain was disingenuous about its war aims, while France declined to state them at all. The reason is that those aims were too discreditable to avow openly. In a series of secret treaties, they agreed in the event of victory to carve up

the empires of their defeated enemies.

From the Russian viewpoint, the big prize was the Turkish capital, Constantinople, now called Istanbul; this was promised to Russia in a secret agreement in 1915. The subsequent publication of this and other secret treaties by the Bolsheviks did much to discredit the Allied cause.

Kerensky could have repudiated the deals made by the czarist empire and announced his willingness to accept the Reichstag formula of peace without annexations or indemnities. Perhaps the German High Command would have ignored the offer and continued fighting (as it did when the Bolsheviks offered the same terms after the October Revolution at the end of 1917). But the circumstances were far more favorable in July than they were at the end of 1917. As the Kerensky offensive demonstrated, the Russian Army, while demoralized, was still an effective fighting force, and the front line was far closer to the territory of the Central Powers. Moreover, Kerensky commanded credibility with the Western Allies that he could have used to good effect.

Kerensky's determination to continue the war was a disaster. Within a few months, the armed forces were in open revolt. Lenin, who was transported across Germany in a sealed train with the High Command's acquiescence in the hope that he would help to knock Russia out of the war, seized the opportunity. The provisional government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. This Bolshevik Revolution consigned the February Revolution to historical oblivion.

After accepting a humiliating treaty imposed by the Germans, Russia was soon embroiled in a civil war more bloody and brutal than even World War I. By its end, the Bolshevik government, launched as a workers' democracy, was effectively a dictatorship, enabling the ascendancy of a previously obscure Bolshevik, Joseph Stalin, who would become one of the great tyrants of history. On the other side, the German High Command's rejection of peace similarly led to defeat, national humiliation and the emergence of the 20th century's other great tyrant, Adolf Hitler.

We cannot tell whether a positive response from Kerensky to the Reichstag peace initiative would have achieved anything. But it is hard to imagine an outcome worse than the one that actually took place. The years of pointless bloodshed that brought Russia two revolutions turned out to be merely a foretaste of the decades of totalitarianism and total war to come. Kerensky's failure was one of the great missed opportunities of history.

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This essay is part of a series about the legacy and history of Communism, 100 years after the Russian Revolution.

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