

What problems did the Provisional Government face?

After the February Revolution which saw the fall of the Tsar, a Provisional Government was set up. Formed from the Duma or representative assembly, which had existed under the Tsar, the new government was a weak and unstable grouping of politicians trying desperately to gain some control over events. Led initially by Prince Lvov and after July 1917 by Kerensky, the Provisional Government faced the same problems as the Tsar and was unable to offer any effective solutions. From the start it lacked both authority and support.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

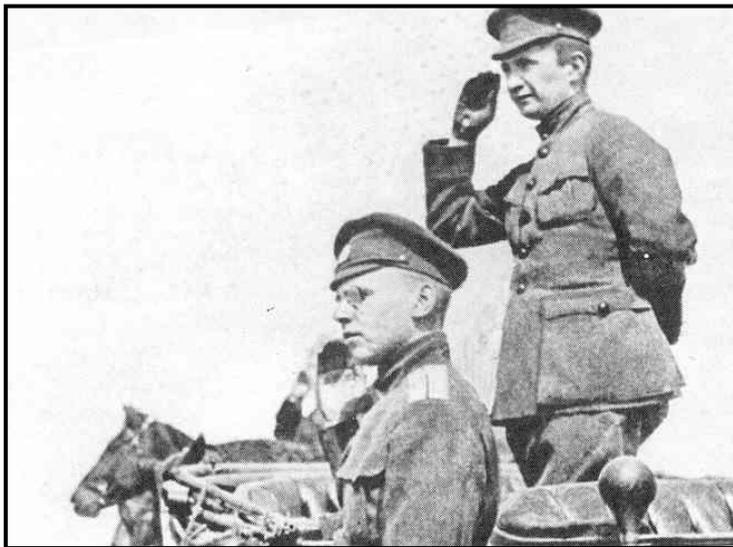
The war was the most pressing problem for the Provisional Government, who took the unpopular decision to continue the campaign against Germany, in the hope that they could turn the tide against the Germans and gain land. They also felt that by honouring the alliance with France and Britain Russia would get important financial support. Kerensky launched a major offensive against the Germans in June but the Russians made no headway and morale started to collapse. Desertions reached worrying levels with over two million soldiers returning home in 1917. This decision to continue the war severely weakened the capacity of the Provisional Government to consolidate its position and deal with the other problems it faced. It also showed just how out of touch the government was with the concerns of those suffering the hardships of war: rank and file soldiers, the industrial workers and the peasantry.

THE PETROGRAD SOVIET

What also weakened the government from the start was its lack of credibility and authority. It had not been elected and had no programme for government. The Petrograd Soviet had a better claim to legitimacy having been formed from representatives of the workers. It then expanded its base to include soldiers. The Soviet had considerable power, with its control over the postal service and railways in Petrograd, to the extent that it was difficult for the Provisional Government to do anything without its support. This point was illustrated by the Petrograd Soviet's Order No. 1, which urged the soldiers to only obey the orders of the Government if they did not contradict its own decrees. Kerensky failed to gain any real level of trust from the Soviet and had little choice but to tolerate it. This system of 'dual power' between the Government and the Petrograd Soviet added to the chaos of the situation but neither side was in a position to deal effectively with the other.

THE DECISION TO DELAY THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

One area where the Provisional Government could have gained support was through the calling of a Constituent Assembly or parliament to legitimise its powers and to introduce land reform, but Kerensky delayed the summoning of a Constituent Assembly. Although the rights of peasants to the great landed estates were recognised in principle, the Government was in no position to implement this. The grievances over land had long been a concern to peasants and many were unwilling to wait any longer. Many of those peasants who had deserted the army and returned home had done so in order to seize some land for themselves. The Government's failure to take a lead on reform lost it



valuable support from the peasantry. Disorder spread to the countryside with many landowners finding themselves on the receiving end of the peasants' anger. The Government was clearly unable to control what was happening.

LEFT: Alexander Kerensky reviewing the troops in 1917

THE 'JULY DAYS'

For many industrial workers the months following the February Revolution were a time of great excitement and those based in Petrograd and Moscow were quickly becoming not only more radical but also more organised. This development posed a danger for the Provisional Government. Sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt organised their own armed demonstration under Bolshevik slogans such as 'All power to the Soviets' and marched into Petrograd in what became known as the 'July Days'. This posed a dilemma for the Bolsheviks. Middle-ranking Bolsheviks were happy to encourage the rising but the Bolshevik leadership hesitated and refused to endorse this attempt to overthrow the government. Lenin preferred to 'wait and see'. With support from the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, the Provisional Government was able to crush the rising. '

The importance of the 'July Days' was that it led, in the short term, to the discrediting of the Bolsheviks, who were blamed by many for the bloodshed. Kerensky also used this as an opportunity to attack Lenin personally by claiming he was a German spy working to undermine the Russian war effort. Bolshevik offices were closed, as was their newspaper *Pravda*. Leading Bolsheviks were forced into hiding; Kamenev and Trotsky were arrested. The role of the Bolsheviks in the 'July Days' has caused some debate amongst historians. The standard view of Soviet writers before the 1980s was that the Bolsheviks took little part in the events but some Western historians see Bolshevik reticence at being involved as demonstrating a lack of nerve in seeing through a serious attempt to seize power. For Lenin the time was not yet right for revolution. For the Provisional Government, the crushing of the rising gave them temporary relief from the threat of the Left though this was to be followed by a serious threat from the Right.

THE KORNILOV 'COUP'

The position of the Provisional Government was severely undermined by what became known as the Kornilov *coup*. After the 'July Days' Kerensky made an attempt to assert control over events and appointed Kornilov as Commander in Chief to reassert discipline in the army. This measure was too reactionary for the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who were now part of the Government, but Kornilov (**PICTURED BELOW**) was hailed as a hero by the Right.



Even some of the Liberals now talked of the advantages of military rule. With continued strikes and unrest in Petrograd the Government edged towards the imposition of martial law. Kornilov moved to suppress unrest in Petrograd but at the last moment Kerensky ordered his arrest and had to call on the Soviet to help defend the city against what seemed like an attempted *coup* by Kornilov. The Soviet came to Kerensky's aid and Kornilov was arrested. What were the motives of Kornilov? Was this really an attempted *coup* or, as Kornilov claimed, was he merely following Kerensky's orders to bring troops to the capital to restore order?

Kerensky's ambiguous role in this affair was to seriously damage his standing with both the Right and the Left. The army was left demoralised and confused with little sense of direction. On the Left, the affair led to an upsurge in support for the Bolsheviks, who had taken a lead in organising the workers against Kornilov, whilst support for the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, both associated with the Government, declined. Kerensky and the Provisional Government were now dangerously isolated and drifting towards final collapse.

THE FAILURE OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

By October 1917 the Bolsheviks were in a position to succeed in seizing power from the Provisional Government, although by this time the Provisional Government wielded little power of its own. It is difficult not to reach a verdict of failure on the Provisional Government; it had lasted little more than eight months. Yet it should be remembered that the country had undergone enormous political change in a very short time. From being a strict autocracy Russia had gained a liberal constitution which, in theory, many in the West admired due to its emphasis on complete political and religious freedom. It even banned capital punishment in the army. The policies of the Provisional Government had also included the release of all political prisoners.

These were positive aims but, as best demonstrated by the failure to call the Constituent Assembly and deal with land reform, their implementation was poorly handled and often ineffective.

From the start, the Provisional Government had lacked both support and authority. Its attempts to pursue a moderate line were perhaps undermined by the lack of a substantial middle class in Russia, but it could have done more to gain support from the conservative elements or even from the moderate Left. Instead it tended to alienate both groups and as a result was left isolated. The decision to continue the war was perhaps a crucial factor, "sapping" the strength and diverting the energies of a government whose hold on power was tenuous in the first place.

KEY PEOPLE AND TERMS

Constituent Assembly

An assembly/parliament which was to be elected by the people. It would have led to the formation of a government which could claim it ruled with the wishes of the people. Many peasants wanted the Assembly to be set up as soon as possible in 1917 in order to guarantee their right to own land. Kerensky delayed elections for the Assembly and the Bolsheviks used this action to criticise the Provisional Government.

Prince Georg Lvov (1861-1925)

The first leader of the Provisional Government. He had little experience of government before becoming prime minister after the abdication of the Tsar in February 1917. He was also at a disadvantage because he had not been elected by the people; thus he failed to command much authority. Although he held liberal views, Lvov was not a member of any political party and lacked a power base.

Alexander Kerensky (1881-1970)

A leading member of the Provisional Government. He served as Minister of War under Prince Lvov before becoming leader of the Provisional Government in July 1917. Kerensky, as a Menshevik, was a moderate socialist who saw a need to work with the Liberals in order to bring about change. He was a superb speaker but he struggled to remain in control of events during the summer of 1917. His attempt to revitalise the Russian army against Germany failed and the confusion caused by his role in the Kornilov Affair greatly undermined his position. He was forced to flee Petrograd when the Bolsheviks seized power in October. After failing to raise resistance to the Bolshevik government, Kerensky fled abroad and lived most of the rest of his life in the USA.

General Lavr Kornilov (1870-1918)

In the summer of 1917 Kornilov became a focus for right-wing forces opposed to the Provisional Government and its failure to deal effectively with social unrest. Kerensky appointed Kornilov Commander in Chief of the Russian army to restore law and order in Petrograd but when his troops marched into the city they were stopped and Kornilov was arrested. Kornilov's motives are unclear. Did he wish to overthrow the Provisional Government and establish military rule or was he merely obeying what he thought were Kerensky's orders. Opposition to Kornilov was led by the Bolsheviks and affair greatly restored their fortunes after the 'July Days'. Although Kornilov was arrested, he had highlighted Kerensky's failure to deal with social unrest and this weakened the standing of the Provisional Government.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Provisional Government decide to continue fighting in the First World War? What were the consequences of this decision?
2. Why did the Provisional Government lack credibility and authority? How did the Petrograd Soviet compare?
3. What were the consequences for the Provisional Government of Kerensky's failure to call the Constituent Assembly? (Make sure you explain clearly in your answer what the Constituent Assembly was)
4. How did (a) the 'July Days' and (b) the Kornilov *Coup* affect the position of the Bolsheviks?
5. Was the Provisional Government a complete failure?
6. Using the information provided, produce your own factfile on Lvov, Kerensky and Kornilov.