

## Spring 1917: Russia Debates its Future

The Provisional Government considered itself to be a temporary entity charged with holding Russia together until future elections could be held for a Constituent Assembly, which would create the country's new permanent government. What that government would be was far from certain.

Despite the appearance of dual authority, actual power rested with the Soviet, which was an elected body supported by workers and, most importantly, rank-and-file soldiers. By contrast, the Provisional Government had no support from armed men and existed as the result of decisions made by a small number of political leaders who lacked any popular mandate.

***“The Provisional Government has no real power of any kind and its orders are carried out only to the extent that is permitted by the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. The latter controls the most essential levers of power, insofar as the troops, the railways, and the postal and telegraph services are in its hands. One can assert bluntly that the Provisional Government exists only as long as it is allowed to do so by the Soviet.”***

—The Minister of War Alexander Guchkov,  
March 9, 1917

The dual authority of the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet reflected the divisions between the upper and lower classes. Workers and soldiers identified with the Soviet and distrusted the educated and land-owning members of the Provisional Government.

### ***Who was Alexander Kerensky?***

One person linked the Soviet with the Provisional Government: Alexander Kerensky. A charismatic personality, the thirty-six-year-old Kerensky was both a skilled orator and a

respected attorney. Although he did not hold the highest job in either entity, he was considered one of the top two or three leaders in both the Soviet and the Provisional Government, and was the only individual who held such a distinction. In his many speeches, he often referred to himself as the “hostage of democracy” who would protect lower-class interests from any hint of infringement by the Provisional Government.

### ***What happened after Lenin’s return from abroad?***

Prior to 1917, all the major socialist leaders were exiled or imprisoned. None of these exiles had played a role in the February Revolution. The Petrograd Soviet was led by middle-level Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries, who had been engaged in political agitation among workers during the war. After the tsar’s abdication, the Provi-



Workers toppled the statue of Tsar Alexander III in protest of the Romanov Dynasty.

Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library.

sional Government permitted the top socialist leaders to return to Petrograd where they began to assume leading roles in shaping their homeland's future. It became the custom to welcome returning leaders with a reception at the railroad station. Near midnight on April 3, 1917, such a reception was held for Lenin, the Bolshevik leader who had accepted German help to travel via a special train from Switzerland. Except for six months in 1905-6, Lenin had lived outside of Russia for seventeen years. He was greeted in the tsar's former waiting room at the Finland Station by a delegation from the Petrograd Soviet.

Following the reception, Lenin was driven to Bolshevik headquarters at the Kshesinskaya Palace. Speaking from the balcony to a waiting crowd, Lenin assailed the war, denouncing "capitalist pirates...defending the fatherland means defending one set of capitalists against another." With Russia still engaged in fighting World War I, Lenin's words angered soldiers in the crowd who found his words defeatist and pro-German.

### ***What did Lenin call for in his "April Theses"?***

The next day, Lenin spoke at a meeting of the Social Democrats. His address scathingly criticized the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet leadership. He called for Russia's immediate withdrawal from the war; a new revolution empowering the workers and the peasants; an end to support of the Provisional Government; abolition of the police, army, and bureaucracy; and the placing of all political authority in the hands of the soviets. Lenin's speech, which became his "April Theses," amazed and enraged many in his Social Democrat audience, who responded to his remarks with boos, catcalls, and whistles.

Each night, irate crowds gathered outside the Kshesinskaya palace, railing at the "German agent" inside. The conservative press attacked Lenin. Soldiers in Moscow protested what they claimed were his pro-German leanings.

***“How convenient it is to be friends with the enemies of Russia. The Bolsheviks are given a safe and free-of-charge passage through Germany. In Russia royal waiting rooms are opened for them at railway stations and they live in a luxurious palace—also free of charge.”***

—Newspaper *Novoe Vremia*, April 7

Many believed that Lenin was out of touch with the political sentiments of the day. Lenin's arrival exemplified the political upheaval that followed the February days.

***“For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting up of impromptu debate, everywhere...”***

—John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*

### ***How did ordinary Russians get involved?***

Competing voices clamored to be heard as Russians considered the political options for their future. Millions of Russian people poured into the streets and clamored for "democracy"—something they had never experienced. They were tired of the oppression of the tsar and the secret police, tired of the hunger and shortages after three years of war. At rallies and meetings they sang an anthem from the French Revolution: the *Marseillaise*, but with their own words.

***“We renounce the old world,  
We shake its dust from our feet,  
We don't need a Golden Idol,  
And we despise the Tsarist Devil  
Arise, arise, working people!  
Arise against the enemies, hungry  
brother!  
Sound the cry of the people's  
vengeance!  
Forward! ”***

—Russian adaptation of the *Marseillaise*

The people wanted change, but what was it that they wanted exactly?

The leaders of the new Provisional Government had their own ideas of what the people wanted and what the cries for democracy meant. So many new laws were passed, that Russians had a hard time keeping track of all their new freedoms. Lenin called Russia “the freest country in the world.”

The new political freedoms let loose a torrent of political speech. Kept silent for centuries during the rule of the tsars, Russians everywhere debated what their future should hold.

***“The servants and house porters demand advice as to which party they should vote for in the ward elections. Every wall in the town is placarded with notices of meetings, lectures, congresses, electoral appeals and announcements.... Two men argue at a street corner***

***and are at once surrounded by an excited crowd. Even at concerts now the music is diluted with political speeches by well-known orators.... Book hawkers line the pavement and cry sensational pamphlets about Rasputin and Nicholas, and who is Lenin, and how much land will the peasants get.”***

—Harold Williams, a British journalist in Russia

But for the socialists and others outside of the Provisional Government, democracy not only meant choosing a government, but changing society and social conditions as well. For them, the moment presented a chance to gain autonomy and a chance to exact revenge on those who had repressed and misused them.

In the spring of 1917, Russia’s future was uncertain. A tremendous contest for the future of Russia was about to commence. In the coming days you are going to recreate the debate that took place at the time.