

Option 2: Respect the Peasants

The peasants are the backbone of Russia. Approximately 80 percent of Russia's population are peasants, while most of the remainder are but one or two generations removed from peasantry. The peasants grow the food that keeps Russia alive. Thanks to their toil, Russia was the world's leading pre-war grain exporter. If there is a social class that deserves respect, it is the peasantry. Tragically, far from receiving anything resembling respect, the peasants instead receive horrible abuse. Russian peasants were the last in Europe to be released from serfdom. Since then, the peasants have still been heavily dependent on their former masters—the nobles.

Under the old regime, the government has attempted to “help” the peasants. May the Good Lord preserve us from such “help” again! The “reforms” of Alexander II and bloody Nicholas drove good people off the land and redoubled human misery. These “reforms” brought nothing but Stolypin's neckties and carriages. Thank God that those accursed bloodsuckers are gone for good! The exploitation of the peasants must end!

Land and liberty! It is time that the peasants received their due. All land should be granted to the peasants without compensation to the nobility. The timeless traditions of the Russian commune will be observed. Equality of all peasants will be guaranteed. Russia will only progress if the rural economy progresses first. Agriculture, the most important sector of our economy, will feed the factory workers in our cities. The Russian people must be a single family of brother-laborers. The Russian people have pulled themselves free and thrown off the heavy chains of tsarist oppression. Now Russia can be rebuilt, like a beautiful new house, by all its inhabitants.

Participation in the soviets and the Provisional Government are necessary so that the voice of the people can be clearly heard. In addition, we should work with the Socialist Revolutionary Party to advance the cause of the peasants. Countless peasant members of our brave Russian army have enriched our soil with their own blood, shed by the hated invaders. The sacrifices of our heroes must be repaid through the defeat of the Central Powers! After victory, we will seek a peace of justice with our international brothers.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

1. Since the peasants are the foundation of Russian society, any serious attempt to improve conditions in this country must begin with the peasants.

2. Land should belong to those who make it productive. Peasants have a right to the land and the gentry do not.

3. The current international borders of the Russian state should remain intact.

We are reluctant to consider limited autonomy for ethnic groups within Russia.

4. The Russian army is a peasant army, and peasants are men of the soil. Countless peasants have given their lives to defend that soil; their sacrifice must not be in vain. We must defeat the Central Powers and seek a peace of justice!

Supporting Arguments for Option 2

1. The great mass of the Russian people are either peasants, or one or two generations removed from peasantry. Since they comprise what is, by far, the largest social class, their needs should take first priority in post-tsarist Russia.

2. For centuries, Russian peasants have been treated abominably by the landowners and the state. Our leaders must seek to right countless grievous wrongs committed against the peasants. Only then will the people bear true loyalty to the new Russian society.

3. Only the Constituent Assembly has the legitimate right to decide basic political questions for all of Russia, including the minority areas.

4. Participation in the soviets and the Provisional Government represents our best hope for an eventual government of national unity, to be chosen by all the people. Land reform will come, but it can wait for the moment. Our first task is to defend our Russian homeland against invasion.

From the Historical Record

Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), "On the Russian Peasantry"

"For hundreds of years the Russian peasant has dreamt of a state with no right to influence the will of the individual and his freedom of action, a state without power over man."

Peasant Duma deputy from Saratov (to a delegate of the nobility), 1907

"We know about your property, for we were your property once. My uncle was exchanged for a greyhound."

Alexander Kerensky in a speech to the liberals in the Duma, February 15, 1917

"The historic task of the Russian people at the present time is the overthrow of this medieval regime but you wish to fight only "by legal means"... You consider your duty done once you have concluded your diagnosis of the ills of the country. I say to you that your speeches on the necessity of calm at all costs are either the naive sentiments of superficial thinkers or just an excuse to avoid the real fight, just a pretext to stay safely in your warm armchairs.... You don't want to listen to anybody but yourselves but soon you will have to listen, for if you do not hear the warning voices, you will encounter the harsh facts."

Resolutions of the Conference of the Petrograd Socialist Revolutionary Party, March 2, 1917

"1. In view of the fact that the danger of a counter-revolution is not yet passed, and that the question of the moment is to make fast the political revolutionary conquests already attained, this Conference believes that it is urgently necessary to stand behind the Provisional Government, in so far as it carries out its announced political program...

2. This Conference, however, reserves to itself the right to change its attitude toward the Provisional Government, should it decline to live up to its programs....

3. ...the Conference calls on all members of the...Party to take active part in the organization of the popular masses by participating in the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, by forming peasants' unions and other organizations having for their object the defense of the interest of the people."

Resolutions of the Peasants' Union in the Morskoi Korpus, April 8, 1917

"1. That it is necessary to go on with the war for freedom, but that the Russian people has no need of conquests; that the Russian people, after freeing the areas ruined by the belligerents, needs a peace in the interest of the laboring classes of the world....

2. ...that the Russian people, having thrown off the yoke of autocracy, desires neither a limited nor an unlimited tsarist government, but a democratic republic.

3. ...that the land should be handed over to the workers, and that each person who tills the soil with his own hands has the right to the use of it.”

Alexander Os'minin, peasant writer, 1917

“We are standing for the people to become the masters of their own lives, for our country to become a single family of brother laborers, without rich or poor—in short for the Kingdom of God to come to our land.”

Options in Brief

Option 1: Create a Liberal Democracy

The time has come to build a liberal democracy in Russia! We support the Provisional Government until a Constituent Assembly can be elected to enact needed political and social reforms. Representatives of the people must be chosen by universal suffrage; government is best guided by the ballot box, not mob violence. Educated persons can provide necessary leadership. Russia deserves to be guided by the rule of law—law that respects the freedom and dignity of every human being. Individual rights, such as the right to speak, write, and worship freely, should be safeguarded. Private property should be protected and free enterprise should be encouraged. The civil and cultural rights of minority peoples should be respected, but the integrity and unity of the Russian state has to be preserved. The sacrifices of our brave soldiers and sailors must not be in vain. We will defend the fatherland!

Option 2: Respect the Peasants

The exploitation of the peasants must end! Land and liberty! The peasants are the backbone of Russia, yet it is they who suffer the most. All land should be granted to the peasants without compensation to the nobility. The traditions of the commune will be observed; the equality of all peasants will be guaranteed, while private ownership of land will not be reintroduced. Peasants and workers share the brotherhood of toil. Agriculture is more important than urban industries, which will only grow if the rural economy progresses first. We support the civil and cultural rights of minority peoples. Participation in the soviets, the Provisional Government, and the upcoming Constituent Assembly will help to achieve these aims. We should work with the Socialist Revolutionary Party to advance the cause of the peasants. Abroad, Russians must fight to defend their country and, after the war, we will work internationally for a peace of justice.

Option 3: Work Toward a Future Socialist Society

Karl Marx's ideas mirror what is happening now in Russia. Russia is industrializing rapidly, and this process is both creating an urban lower class and exacerbating class conflict. However, Russian capitalism is still in its infancy, and it will be a long time before Russia is ready for socialism. We must trust in our wise Menshevik leaders to guide us to that eventual goal. For now, active participation in the soviet's development of a strong labor party to prepare for future Constituent Assembly elections, and cooperation with the Provisional Government will move Russia toward a better tomorrow. We support self-determination for minority groups, but this must be decided by the Constituent Assembly. Russia should defend itself against aggression. After the war, together with our brothers throughout the world, we will strive for a just peace.

Option 4: Organize Now for a Second Revolution

Marxist theory is sound, but must be adapted to Russian conditions. With the February Revolution, the time is ripe for radical change. It is true that, at present, Russia's urban lower class lacks sufficient class-consciousness to overthrow capitalism. However, an elite group of well-organized, highly-disciplined, dedicated revolutionaries can teach and lead the workers to achieve this goal. A second revolution is needed in Russia! All power to the soviets! Peace, land, and bread! All peoples of Russia should join the cause of the Bolsheviks! The Provisional Government is an empty shell; after a period of organization and subversion, we can topple it. Russia must withdraw from the war and conclude an immediate peace. Land should be confiscated from the nobles and redistributed by the peasants themselves. City workers must be fed. Long live the international socialist revolution!

Presenting Your Option

The Setting: It is late April 1917. Crowds have gathered in Znamenskaya Square in Petrograd and are making speeches and arguing about the future of Russia.

Your Assignment: Your group comprises a variety of individuals who share a common vision for Russia. Your assignment is to persuade the undecided citizens that your option should become the basis for action. On Day Four, your group will be called upon to present a persuasive three-to-five minute summary of your option to these individuals. You will be judged by the undecided citizens on how well you present your option. This worksheet will help you prepare. Your teacher will moderate discussion.

Organizing Your Group: Each member of your group will take a specific role. Below

is a brief explanation of the responsibility of each role. Before preparing your sections of the presentation, work together to address the questions below. The **group director** is responsible for organizing the presentation of your group's option to the undecided citizens. The **political expert** is responsible for explaining why your option is most appropriate in light of the current domestic and international political climates. The **economic expert** is responsible for explaining why your option makes the most sense for the country economically. The **social expert** is responsible for explaining why your group's option offers the best route in terms of social issues. The **military expert** is responsible for explaining why your group's option offers the best route in terms of security.

Consider the following questions as you prepare your presentation:

1. What will be the impact of your option on the people of Russia?

2. What will be the impact of your option on foreign relations?

3. What is your option's long-term vision for Russia?

4. What are your option's short-term strategies for Russia?

5. What potential difficulties might your option's strategy encounter?

6. On what values is your option based?