

To what extent were the failings of the provisional government responsible for the success of the Bolshevik Revolution?

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Table of Contents

Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources	3
Section B: Investigation	5
Discussion.....	7
Section C: Reflection.....	9
Bibliography	10

Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will explore the question: To what extent were the failings of the provisional government responsible for the success of the Bolshevik Revolution? The events from February 1917 right up to the October Revolution will be the focus of the investigation, allowing for a detailed analysis of the failings of the provisional government and weighing this against other factors.

The first source that will be evaluated in depth is the Hodder Education textbook *Communist Russia Under Lenin and Stalin* written by Chris Corin and Terry Fiehn, first published in 2008. The origin of this source is valuable because Terry Fiehn and Chris Corin are teachers of history and have specialized in the Russian Revolution, with both having published several textbooks on the topic, indicating that they are knowledgeable on the subject. Furthermore, as it is published in 2008 and after the end of the Cold War, it has the advantage of hindsight, with more sources and information being available than would have been for a contemporary source, without many of the ideological biases that are inherent to Cold War historians. This is displayed by the vast array of different perspectives from both contemporaneous and secondary sources contained in the book, which are of great value in understanding the events. However, the origin is limited in value since the authors are not native Russian speakers, thus reducing their ability to interpret contemporary sources and also potentially allowing for faulty translations of original sources. Textbooks might also become outdated and no longer be supported by the scholarly consensus.

The purpose of the relevant sections of the book is to educate and explain to students why and how the Russian revolution occurred, showing various factors and perspectives that support different conclusions. The rest of the book details the origin of Bolshevik rule and how this rule manifested itself under Lenin and Stalin. However, since the textbook is directed towards younger students, there is likely to have been attempts to reduce the complexity of the revolution, thus potentially leading to an over-simplification of events and thus not presenting enough available information for the different views on the cause of the revolution.

The second source that will be evaluated in depth is the book *Ten Days That Shook The World* written by journalist John Reed in 1919. The origin of the source is valuable because John Reed

was a contemporaneous journalist who was living in Russia and reporting on how the living conditions of the Russian population changed during the war. This gives him access to governmental documents and corroborates them himself. However, a limitation of the origin is that Reed is not native to Russia and will have had a hard time collecting all information that he needed, potentially neglecting important documents.

The purpose of the book was to report on how the revolution took place, and how Russian society had transformed from 1914 to 1917 in Russia. Reed reported on everything from food prices to the official decisions taken at Soviet. However, a limitation to the purpose is that Reed was a communist and a Bolshevik himself, and would therefore have reason to exaggerate the numbers in order to justify the revolution and critique the war. Therefore, the purpose might be to spread propaganda rather than accurate reports.

Section B: Investigation

On 25 October 1917, the Russian provisional government was overthrown in the Bolshevik October Revolution, marking the beginning of Bolshevik rule.¹ This occurred almost eight months after the Russian revolution, which had previously led to the end of the Russian monarchy, the establishment of the provisional government, and the promise of a general election.² In this essay, the role of the provisional government's failures in fueling the Revolution will be assessed and compared to other contributing factors. Firstly, the essay will provide a brief background of the political dynamics of Russia after the Russian Revolution. Secondly, the weaknesses and failures of the provisional government to address the issues of the war, political opposition, economic and social inequality will be addressed. Thirdly the strengths of the Bolsheviks will be investigated and how they exploited the weaknesses of the provisional government. Fourthly, other factors contributing to the success of the Bolshevik Revolution will be examined. Finally, a discussion where the failings of the provisional government will be compared and contrasted with the other factors responsible for the October Revolution. Ultimately, it will be attributed primarily to the failings of the provisional government, both because its actions helped to increase the popularity of the Bolsheviks and also due to its inability to prevent the coup d'état.

The February revolution led to a dual power system which weakened the provisional government, an entity that had been declared on the 2nd of March 1917 and had the task to govern Russia until elections to a Constituent Assembly could be held.³ However, historian Richard Pipes argues that another assembly, the Petrograd Soviet, representing the rights of soldiers and workers, was in control of "day-to-day events" and that the government "existed only on its sufferance".⁴ Both assemblies wielded political influence, creating a dual power system. This suggests that the provisional government was doomed from the beginning and that it therefore cannot be said to be responsible for the success of the Bolshevik Revolution.

¹ "Russian Revolution of 1917." *New World Encyclopedia*

² Corin & Fiehn, p.27-29

³ *Ibid*, p.29

⁴ Pipes, p.94

The provisional government decided to continue WW1 which led to criticism when the war effort failed. The summer offensive, an attempt by the provisional government to attack and gain an advantage in the war lasted only three days and resulted in an uncontrolled uprising, which later became known as the July Days, reaching its climax when 20,000 armed sailors reached Petrograd demanding that the Soviets took power.⁵ Figes argues that the summer offensive swung the soldiers to the Bolsheviks, since they were the only major party supporting an immediate end to the war.⁶ WW1 also brought severe economic problems. The fuel-demanding nature of the War gave domestic shortages, with the consequence of over 100,000 jobs being lost. The shortage of these goods was also a consequence of the war, seeing the cost of food items increase on average 556% and 51% more than wages between 1914-1917.⁷ The antagonism of the population towards the war translated to hostility towards the provisional government, which remained keen on continuing it and this aided the anti-war Soviets.

The war exacerbated pre-existing problems. The issue of redistributing land, a reform that was in popular support among peasants, was not on the provisional government's agenda but was rather postponed to after the war. This caused dissatisfaction in rural areas, with many uprisings occurring during the spring of 1917.⁸ Another key issue was that of national minorities, many of which had nationalistic tendencies and desired independence.⁹ The government did not want to make any concessions here either, thus further increasing its unpopularity among the major national minorities.

At the start of the establishment of the Soviet, it was dominated by Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SR), with only a minority being Bolsheviks. However, in the following 8 months, Bolsheviks would gain a lot of public support, seeing them go from 10,000 in February to 250,000 in October and winning Moscow's municipal election with 51% of the vote in October, compared to just 11% in July.¹⁰ One of the most important reasons for this was the return of Lenin, who differed from the leaders of the Soviet, being told upon arrival that the revolution was doing well and did not need his assistance.¹¹ However, Lenin used the opportunity to lay out what would become known as the April theses, demanding: a worldwide

⁵ Figes, p.427

⁶ Ibid, p.408

⁷ Reed, p.164

⁸ Figes, p.364

⁹ Ibid, p.374-375

¹⁰ Corin & Fiehn, p.61-62

¹¹ Ibid, p.36

socialist revolution, an immediate end to the war, an end to cooperation with the provisional government, the Soviet to take power and land to be given to the peasant.¹² Lenin provided a vision, a hierarchy, and a structured organization to the Bolsheviks, making them the most realistic alternative to the provisional government. Another factor, contributing to the success of the Bolshevik revolution was the disastrous effect of the Kornilov affair. General Kornilov was appointed supreme commander of the Russian Forces in August 1917 by the provisional government, with hopes of law and order being restored. Instead, Kornilov decided to march on Petrograd to establish military control. Troops were sent out to stop him and the attempt failed, but the damage had already been done. The reputation of the provisional government, Kerensky, and the socialist parties associated with it had become irreversibly tarnished.¹³

Discussion

The extent of the failings of the provisional government being responsible for the Bolshevik revolution has to be contrasted with its inability to make changes due to the dual power situation. The Soviet had 1300 members on the 5th of March, and only a week later it had 3000,¹⁴ showing that they wielded a lot of political influence. The number of representatives of soldiers and workers would become crucial since it gave the Soviet power to control the Railways, telegraph stations, factories, power supplies, and the soldiers in the Petrograd garrison.¹⁵ Considering that both the provisional government and the Soviet were in Petrograd, the provisional government had a very small level of independence and were unable to communicate without the knowledge of the Soviet. The Soviet power manifested itself in the declaration of Order no.1,¹⁶ a decree where soldiers were commanded to take control of the weaponry and also stated that the provisional government was to be followed only if the Soviets agreed with its decision. Dual power dramatically reduced the ability of the provisional government to effectively govern the country. On these bases, it could be argued that the collapse of the provisional government was inevitable, and the success of the Bolsheviks was inevitable and cannot be attributed to the faults of the provisional government.

¹² Corin & Fiehn, p. 37

¹³ Karpovich, p.273

¹⁴ Corin & Fiehn, p.30

¹⁵ Ibid, p.31

¹⁶ Ibid

Similarly, Russian historian Nikolaj Berdyaev argued that “Moderate people of liberal and humanist principles can never flourish in the elemental sweep of revolution and especially of a revolution brought about by war.”,¹⁷ suggesting that only an uncompromising and radical alternative could be successful, descriptors often attributed to the Bolsheviks. However, even if what Berdyaev says is true, the continuation of the war only increased revolutionary tendencies, which was illustrated by the July Days, and the lack of land reform led to an increase in uprisings across the country. The deteriorating economic situation caused by the war helped to radicalize workers, further fueling radicalism. Had the government sued for a separate peace with Germany, resources could have been redistributed, largely solving the food and fuel shortage, elections could have been held, land reform could have been implemented, and thus revolutionary sentiments could have been reduced. In a time of peace, Bolsheviks would have been less successful in exploiting the faults of the provisional government, even with the arrival of Lenin.

The other socialists’ failure to distance themselves from the provisional government led to their decrease in popularity, ultimately leading to them losing control of the Soviet in September. The Kornilov affair, a factor that cannot be directly attributed to the failures of the provisional government, also played a significant role in the Bolsheviks taking control of the Soviet and escalated the situation. Regardless, the situation in Russia at the time seems to suggest that the fall of the provisional government was inevitable, due to the obstinate determination of the provisional government to continue the war. Shortage of food supply would have only worsened in the winter, thus making an attempted Bolshevik revolution appear likely.

¹⁷ Berdyaev, p.139

Section C: Reflection

The investigation into the Russian Revolution was a long process. To acquire a basic understanding of the causation and the chronology of events, I had to read several more basic texts explaining what had happened without nuances. As I began to understand what had taken place, I started reading about the different perspectives on what caused the revolution. Finding different perspectives proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. There were many different perspectives on the revolution as a whole, but it was more difficult to narrow it down to historians that responded clearly to the question I was investigating. This was made more difficult by the fact that a lot of the most important sources were in Russian, so I had to rely heavily on textbooks and historians reporting these figures accurately. It is also difficult to escape the western lens, particularly when all my sources are written in English. Because I am so far removed from the events, it becomes difficult to know who to trust, since all information is presented through the perspective of someone else. The role of the historian is to make sense of all these different perspectives and present a coherent account of causation. Although most historians have the same facts available to them, they interpret them in dramatically different ways. A Bolshevik would primarily focus on the Bolshevik's leadership role in harnessing the natural desire for liberation coming from the masses, while some western historians would say that it was only due to the incompetence of the provisional government that the masses were outraged. Due to the plethora of evidence existing to support all kinds of different perspectives, it becomes a challenge to determine what is actually significant and what relates to what.

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