

Why did Russia fail to establish a democracy in 1917?

Introduction

March 1917.....Revolution.....formation of the Provisional Government.....hopes Russia would become a genuine democracy.....only 8 months later swept from power.

Development

1. Provisional Government undermined by the Petrograd Soviet (Order No 1).
2. Failure of the Provisional Government to give the people the things they most wanted.
 - Peasants
 - Factory Workers
 - National Minorities
 - Soldiers
3. Fatal mistake – continuing the war
Worsening economic conditions.....mounting discontent in cities and countryside.
- 4 Appeal of Bolshevik Policies
(The April Theses)
5. Failure of Kornilov Revolt – growing popularity of Bolsheviks.
6. Bolshevik seizure of power (November 1917).....
Provisional Government overthrown in a bloodless coup.

Conclusion

Summarize the main points.

Directly answer the question – identify the main reason for the fall of the Provisional Government.

The Fall of the Provisional Government

Factor One-The Provisional Government was undermined by the Petrograd Soviet.

What 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 government had to share power with the Petrograd soviet, an elected committee of workers' and soldiers' representatives which tried to govern the city. Other soviets appeared in Moscow and all the provincial cities and when the Petrograd soviet ordered all soldiers to obey only the soviet, it meant that in the last resort the provisional government could not only rely on the support of an army.

From the beginning, the authority of the Provisional Government was undermined by the spread across the country of soviets or councils of workers', soldiers and peasants' deputies. A system of dual authority developed which meant that the Provisional Government lacked both the will and the means to enforce its authority.

On 14th March the Petrograd Soviet issued a decree called Order No.1, which fundamentally changed the nature of the Russian army. One of the great fears of members of the Petrograd garrison was that they would be sent to the front. But this decree revoked the authority of officers over the men. All decisions were to be in the hands of committees of soldiers and sailors, while all military units agreed to follow the orders of the Petrograd Soviet, rather than those of the Provisional Government. Thus the Provisional Government was not in control over the military in its own capital.

The Provisional Government had a powerful rival in the form of the Soviets. On March 12th the workers and soldiers of Petrograd had elected a Soviet, and by April 1917 there was a network of Soviets throughout Russia. From the start the Petrograd Soviet functioned as an alternative government. In its famous Order no.1 published on March 14th, it instructed the armed forces to establish Soviets, to refrain from saluting officers and calling them 'your excellency', and to refuse to obey any order of the Provisional Government unless it was approved by the Petrograd Soviet. Since the Soviet represented workers who ran essential services such as the railways it was possible for it to frustrate the wishes of the Provisional Government by calling them out on strike.

Factor Two – The Provisional Government failed to satisfy the aspirations of the people.

1) **The Peasants**

They wanted to own their land. But the Provisional Government called upon the peasants to refrain from any land seizures. They were told to patiently await resolution of this question by the Constituent Assembly.

The Provisional Government used armed force to suppress rural disturbances. Peasant land seizures became more violent and peasants also took control of crops and livestock. Rather than sell grain at prices they considered too low, The peasants preferred to hoard the grain and even destroy it rather than give it up to the government. The result was widespread food shortages in the cities.

2) **The Soldiers**

The wanted peace with Germany. The Provisional Government's basic position was that Russia should stay in the war until the Allies were victorious. In June Kerensky launched a massive offensive. Despite its failure, the Provisional Government refused even to consider a separate peace with Germany to end the war. Thousands of soldiers deserted and streamed back to the countryside. At the front the army hardly constituted a recognisable army.

3) **The Workers**

Workers saw the fall of the Tsar as a signal for improvements in living and working conditions. The workers demanded an 8 hour day, wage increase and security of employment. The Provisional Government failed to stop declining living standards in the cities and increasing unemployment. It failed to support any move in the direction of worker's control.

In the cities food shortages became more acute, unemployment increased, goods became difficult to obtain and inflation rose rapidly. Factory seizures, strikes and popular demonstrations increased dramatically. The Provisional Government ceased to have authority in the eyes of the working class.

4) **The National Minorities**

They hoped the new order would mean, if not national independence, at least greater freedom. The Provisional Government refused to accept calls for national independence. Only Poland (behind German lines) was given independence. All other nationalities were called upon to wait for the Constituent Assembly. The calls for independence became more strident. Pressure mounted to weaken ties with Russia.

The Fall of the Provisional Government

Factor Three- The Provisional Government made the fatal mistake of continuing the war.

It took the unpopular decision to continue the war, but the June offensive, Kerensky's idea was another disastrous failure, causing a complete collapse of army morale and discipline and sending hundreds of thousands of deserting troops streaming home.

The Provisional Government wished to continue the war. The so-called Kerensky offensive of 18th June collapsed in the first week in July. It was quite clear that the army no longer had any stomach for offensive action. Even so, the Kadet politicians of the Provisional Government remained committed to the aggressive prosecution of the 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 greatest problem was, of course, the war. In 1917 Britain and France were hard pressed and felt they could only hold out if the Russians carried on with the campaign on the eastern front that had been promised by the Tsar before he was overthrown. The Provisional Government knew that the war was unpopular with the troops, who had thought the March revolution would bring an end to their miseries. It would also lead to food shortages and higher prices in the cities. Yet they decided to go on with it. They persuaded the soviet to back this decision by promising that they would only fight a 'defensist' war and would not involve the troops in campaigns to win new lands for Russia.

Factor Four – The Appeal of Bolshevik Policies

The February Revolution caused fevered excitement amongst the workers, soldiers and peasants. The task the Bolsheviks successfully accomplished was to find the common ground between the demands of all these groups and articulate them in order to gain support. In doing so, the Bolsheviks gained support from a reasonably wide section of the working population and were able to organise this support in order to seize power.

Thanks to the new political amnesty, Lenin was able to return from exile in Switzerland (April). The Germans allowed him to travel through to Petrograd in a special 'sealed' train, in the hope he would cause further chaos in Russia. After a rapturous welcome he urged that soviets should cease to support the provisional government.

In the midst of general chaos, Lenin and the Bolsheviks put forward a realistic and attractive policy. *He demanded all power to the soviets*, and promised in return an end to the war, all land to be given to the peasants, and more food. By October the Bolsheviks were in control of both the Petrograd and Moscow soviets, though they were still in a minority over the country as a whole.

The skill of the Bolsheviks was in gearing their ideas and slogans towards these three groups – workers, soldiers and peasants – and organising support to increase their power. Support for the Bolsheviks was greatly increased by their useful use of propaganda. **Lenin's** arrival in Petrograd in April provided a major boost for Bolshevik morale. In his '**April Theses**' he described the Provisional Government as representing the bourgeois or middle-class stage of revolution which would move to a second stage of revolution where power would be transferred to the workers and peasants. He saw the Provisional Government as a spent force and advocated pushing for a workers' revolution. Lenin's promises to end the war, to give land 'to the people' and ensure adequate food supplies provided the useful rallying cry of '**peace, land and bread**'. This slogan also demonstrated the way in which the Bolsheviks were able to combine the demands of industrial workers, soldiers and peasants to maximise their appeal.

Factor Five- Growing Popularity of the Bolsheviks following the failure of the Kornilov Revolt.

Many conservatives regard Kerensky's response to the July Days and to the Bolshevik rebels as weak and half-hearted. Kornilov, the Commander-in Chief of the army seemed a better alternative. Kornilov established 33 shock battalions and added to them reliable Cossack units. His goal was to enter the capital and round up and hang the leading Bolsheviks, including Lenin. The result of a Kornilov victory would have been a military dictatorship in Russia.

Kerensky's problem was that he lacked popular support among the workers, soldiers and sailors. Consequently he declared a general amnesty, releasing Bolsheviks from prison and allowing the members of the factory Red Guards to arm themselves. Over 13,000 Red Guard troops were assembled in Petrograd. About 3,000 sailors arrived from Kronstadt to defend the capital.

The revolt, however, ended in anti-climax. Kornilov's troops fraternized with workers and railway men en route. Kornilov was arrested and the commander of his leading column of troops committed suicide.

The actions taken against Kornilov united the capital as never before. More important, however, they altered fundamentally the balance of power. The factory workers of the Red Guard retained their weapons, and the feeling in the capital was that the decisive action against the revolt had been taken by troops loyal to the Bolsheviks. The collapse of the Kornilov revolt then was less a triumph for the government than one for the Bolsheviks. Having released the Bolsheviks and permitted them to take action, Kerensky relinquished much of his authority in the city. The Bolsheviks, who were the fastest growing element in political life and now with enhanced prestige, had become the main opposition. The power of the government was beginning to crumble.

The Kornilov plot showed how powerless Kerensky's government was, and revealed that Bolsheviks were a well-armed and well-disciplined force. During September they began to win majorities in many city Soviets, including those in Petrograd and Moscow. Lenin's slogan 'All power to the Soviets!' was beginning to make sense. The moment for revolution was approaching.

The Fall of the Provisional Government

Factor Six – The Bolshevik seizure of power... ..the Provisional Government overthrown in a bloodless coup.

On 20th October, urged on by Lenin, the Petrograd soviet took the crucial decision to attempt to seize power. Leon Trotsky, chairman of the soviet, made most of the plans, which went off without a hitch. During the night of 6-7 November, Bolshevik Red Guards occupied all key points and later arrested the provisional government ministers except Kerensky who managed to escape. It was almost a bloodless coup enabling Lenin to set up a new soviet government with himself in charge. The coup had been successful because Lenin had judged to perfection the moment of maximum hostility towards the Kerensky government, and the Bolsheviks, who knew exactly what they wanted, were well disciplined and organised, whereas all other political groups were in disarray.

The key to Bolshevik success proved to be the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) which came into being between 9th and 16th October. The crucial role in these final days was played by Trotsky. This was his finest hour. This was Lenin's revolution, but on the day itself he was a secondary actor.

The Bolshevik seizure of power was remarkably bloodless as the majority of soldiers simply did nothing but look on.

On 21st and 22nd October the MRC was able to assert its authority over the Petrograd garrison and two days later Government troops were persuaded to give up control of key points-bridges and the like-and Kerensky's power just melted away. Lenin urged more decisive action and on the night of 24th-25th October Trotsky organised the occupation of the central telephone exchange, railway stations, the central post office and other key installations. The Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government was in session, was captured after resistance stopped in early hours of 26th October.

Meanwhile Kerensky had slipped away. It was all over in 36 hours, with the minimum of bloodshed and violence. However, occupying the seat of government was one thing, being able to govern was another. The Bolsheviks now had to consolidate their power. The Revolution had only just begun.