The Provisional Government and the Rise of the Soviets

It is important to understand the far-reaching effects that the February Revolution had on how Russia functioned and thought of itself. Richard Pipes (American historian) wrote in 1990 that:

The February Revolution had many striking features that distinguish it from other revolutionary upheavals. But the most striking of all was the remarkable rapidity with which the Russian state fell apart ... The instant the monarch withdrew the wires snapped and the whole structure collapsed in a heap. [Pipes, The Russian Revolution (1990)]

The impromptu nature of the February Revolution and the Tsar’s abdication left a power vacuum in Russia. There were two key institutions that rose to fill that vacuum: the Provisional Government and the Soviets. These two institutions represented different ideas about the future for Russia but were able to exist side by side as Russians began to debate and plan for the next steps in Russia.

Who was the Provisional Government?

The body that took control of the mechanisms of government was the Provisional Government, consisting of 12 representatives of the Duma. This decision was made on 1 March [14 March] 1917, the day before the Tsar resigned.

The members of the Provisional Government were mostly middle class moderates who supported a constitutional monarchy and greater freedoms within Russian society. This was a self appointed government with the clear goal of governing the country until democratic elections could be held later in the year.

Prince Lvov was chosen as the leader of the Provisional Government. Known as a moderate reformer, he had not held a position in the government before and was seen as a neutral but well respected leader for a provisional government. There was also the inclusion of a ‘token’ socialist, Alexander Kerensky. Kerensky was a lawyer but also a member of the Socialist Revolutionaries. He had a popular profile amongst the workers in Petrograd and was also elected to the Petrograd Soviet (see below). Kerensky’s initial role on the Provisional Government was as Minister of Justice.

It is important to note that the Provisional Government was not elected or chosen by a section of the people. While power had been officially transferred by the Tsar’s brother Grand Duke Michael when he had refused to become Tsar, many people in Russia considered that the Provisional Government had no official authority. This perception became problematic over time.

The Provisional Government introduced a number of immediate reforms consistent with its liberal and democratic aims for Russia.

- Return of basic freedoms of speech, press, assembly and unions. The Russian people gladly welcomed this official opening up of society. Leaflets and posters were quickly produced to help spread new ideas and stimulate debate amongst the people about Russia’s future. This included
the spread of socialist ideas which were not completely consistent with the ideals of the members of the Provisional Government.

- **Amnesty for political prisoners.** Many of the socialists who had been in exile overseas or in Siberia began to return to the key cities of Petrograd and Moscow to help spread the messages of socialism.

The Provisional Government made a quick decision to renew Russia’s commitment to its Allies in the Great War. British and French investments in Russia were crucial to the continuation of its economy and there were concerns of Allied reactions if the Russians withdrew from the war. Russia agreed to not merely defend its borders but to participate in offensives which were strategically designed to assist the overall Allied war effort.

Yet the war continued to have an impact on soldiers, workers and peasants across the country. Despite joy at the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, the Russian people quickly realised that their situation had not changed overnight. Soldiers were still deserting from the front, workers continued to strike in the cities and peasants continued to call for land ownership.

**The Petrograd Soviet**

As the Provisional Government took control of the formal mechanisms of government, an alternative authority was establishing itself. On 27 February as protests grew on the streets, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies was re-established (the body had been active in 1905).

The Petrograd Soviet was a body representing workers and soldiers. Members, who were elected by soldier units and workers in factories, gathered to debate actions that should be taken to improve conditions for workers and soldiers. The Soviet was a socialist body, mostly made up of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries with a few Bolshevik representatives. Kerensky, who was also a member of the Provisional Government, was a leading member of the Petrograd Soviet and had the role of Chairman at certain times over the coming months.

The Petrograd Soviet became a powerful body due to a number of circumstances. As the representative of the workers, the Soviet had significant influence over the postal and rail workers in Petrograd. These services were crucial to the effective operation of the city and workers’ strikes had seen these services crippled during the February Revolution. The Soviet was able to convince workers to reduce or increase strike action.

The Soviet also had its own newspaper *Izvestiya* (The News) which became a key mechanism for spreading messages. The newspaper issued calls for the immediate takeover of all landlord estates – a key goal of the Socialist Revolutionaries and its peasant supporters. This message from the Soviet added to the agrarian anarchy that had already gripped the countryside, with peasants continuing to seize land from landlords. Many soldiers, keen to secure their own piece of land, were deserting from the front lines in order to return home and take part in the land seizures.
Yet the most important mechanism used by the Soviets to achieve power was its Order No 1 which was issued on the 1 March [14 March] at the time the Provisional Government was established. The order to soldiers and sailors made it clear that troops were not to follow an order from the Provisional Government unless the order was countersigned by the Petrograd Soviet. The Soviet was able to gain troop compliance by requiring representation (a delegate) to the Soviet for each army and navy unit. This gave the soldiers and sailors a sense of direct input into the decision making of the Soviet and thus the desire to follow the Soviet’s orders. The impact of Order No 1 of the Petrograd Soviet was to constrain the power of the Provisional Government and the officer corps of the army and navy.

With its influence over workers, soldiers and sailors, and meeting the needs of the peasants, the Soviet became an extremely powerful body. It had established the power to counteract against the orders of the Provisional Government.

**Dual Authority**

Yet in the early days following the February Revolution, the Petrograd Soviet was supportive of the actions of the Provisional Government. The Soviet was dominated by the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries whose ideology supported the creation of a constitutional democracy. This was seen as a necessary bourgeois stage of the revolution – a precursor to the socialist revolution which could then take place. The Soviet was not looking to seize power at this stage, just ensure that events continued in a way that would benefit the workers, soldiers and sailors. It adopted a ‘watchdog’ role over the Provisional Government.

The relationship of cooperation established between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government is referred to as the dual authority. Areas of cooperation were in relation to:

- Agreement on the need to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly → universal, direct, equal and secret suffrage (although note the Provisional Government kept postponing elections, so soon this was not due to be held until November)
- Agreement on key ‘freedoms’ and the granting of political amnesty for former political prisoners.

There was, however, one key point of disagreement between the Soviet and the Provisional Government: the war. The Soviet was keen to pursue a ‘defensive’ war and end it without loss of Russian territory as soon as possible. This conflicted with the Provisional Government’s offensive war approach to please the Allies.

**Rise of the Soviets**

The Petrograd Soviet was quickly emulated across the country. Workers, soldiers, sailors and peasants were attracted to this democratic mechanism. During the February Revolution, the Moscow Soviet was established to operate just as it did in Petrograd. Soviets proliferated across the country.

While the Petrograd Soviet, working in close proximity to the Provisional Government in the capital, had the initial power, the existence of so many Soviets across the country changed the dynamic. In June
1917, the first Congress of Soviets was established. This body was a gathering of 820 delegates from the more than 400 Soviets across the country, which now made key decisions that were acted on by the various Soviets in their own cities and towns. By October there were over 900 soviets across Russia.

Who really had control?

The Provisional Government had introduced welcome reforms to dismantle the controls that were part of the Tsarist Government. This included the secret police and regulatory controls on dissidents. In the chaos that continued after the February Revolution, the Tsarist bureaucracy ceased to function properly and key services no longer operated.

At the same time as the cities and government were continuing to fall apart, agrarian anarchy was continuing in the country side. Peasants were seizing land, police were not acting to protect private property and landlords were refraining from their traditional responsibilities of supporting the peasant community.

The Provisional Government aimed to govern by discussion and compromise, reflecting the new liberal and democratic ideals it wanted to promote. While this approach was ideologically sound, it resulted in little action and little power to actually enforce any of its decisions. Australian historian David Christian [Power and Privilege (1989)] suggests that the Provisional Government alienated its supporters rapidly by introducing policies aimed at pleasing both the upper-class and supporters of the Soviet. Christian concludes that “The result was to alienate both groups” due to the conflicting interests of the two groups. RH Bruce Lockhart, a British agent in Russia at the time and a close friend of Kerensky’s, similarly wrote (in Memoirs of a British Agent 1932) that neither the Duma nor the intelligentsia had any control of the situation. Lockhart suggested this was because the February revolution had been “a revolution of the people” and only the group able to meet the needs of the people would gain their support.

It was the Soviet which emerged as the body able to establish some level of discipline and control over workers and soldiers and sailors. (No real attempt was made to control the peasants). Alexander Guchkov, the Minister for War of the Provisional Government, admitted in his letter of 22 March 1917, the Provisional Government had no real power and the Soviet held “the most important elements of actual power, such as troops, railroads, postal and telegraph service...”.

By May, a stronger feeling had emerged in the Petrograd Soviet itself that it must take a greater role in the Provisional Government, not just rely on Order No. 1 to veto government decisions. With the Provisional Government aware of the potential power of the Soviet, changes were made to add four more socialists to the Government. Kerensky was given the key role as Minister for War.

Following the Provisional Government’s war policy, Kerensky attempted to promote enthusiasm for the war by emphasising that the Russian Army was no longer the Tsar’s Army, but the army of the newly liberated people of Russia. He was able to rally some improved support for the war effort and a new Russian offensive was launched in June 1917 (Kerensky Offensive).
The Kerensky Offensive failed. The result was a further lowering of army morale, more rationing in the cities and more strikes. This was a turning point for the Provisional Government.