ALEXANDER FEDOROVICH KERENSKY

Virgil D. Medlin

Department of History, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Alexander Fedorovich Kerensky[1], the "persuader-in-chief" of the Russian Revolution of 1917, is no more. As grim fate would have it, he died June 11 in New York City on the 100th anniversary year of the birth of his political enemy, Vladimir Ilich Ulianov-Lenin. "It was like Easter," Kerensky recalled in 1967, on the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. "There was joy, extraordinary joy." Revolutionary Russia was also the "freest country in the world" and deeply embroiled in a World War. It became Kerensky's fate under the trying conditions of a disastrous war and a deepening revolution to head a short-lived Provisional Government which received the *coup de grâce* from Lenin and the Bolsheviks in October of 1917. The coming to power of the Bolsheviks in Russia is certainly one of the important turning points in history, and for his part in the lost revolution, Kerensky for over a half century received little more than vilification. While the "hostage of democracy" cannot be *entirely* absolved of responsibility for the failure of the Russian experiment in democracy, most would agree that neither can he be held *solely* responsible for its failure.

Kerensky was born on April 22, 1881 in the backward provincial, Middle Volga capital of Simbirsk. (In 1924, Simbirsk was renamed Ulianovsk, for it was Lenin's birthplace. Although the senior Kerensky was Lenin's gymnasium teacher and early mentor, A. F. Kerensky apparently saw little of Lenin.) Alexander Fedorovich has described his youth in Simbirsk as "the happiest years of my life." During these formative years appeared two characteristics so much a part of the mature Kerensky: the paternal refusal to use physical force on his children (something deeply engrained in Alexander's character), and, equally important, the religious source of Kerensky's revolutionary fervor. In 1889, the Kerensky family moved to Tashkent where Alexander Fedorovich, as the son of the Turkestan school inspector, Fedor Mikhailovich Kerensky, spent a pleasant, though isolated, ten years of his life. While in Tashkent Kerensky's childhood dream of becoming an actor or musician gave way to a "decision to serve my people," as his father had done all of his life.

His matriculation, in 1899, at St. Petersburg University, where he studied history and law, was to change his life dramatically, for here he came to cultivate the spirit of the populists (*narodniki*), and to despise the Marxists. Kerensky's youthful adoration for the Tsar and monarchism gave way to an ardent opposition to "supreme power" which was embarking Russia "upon the path of great hardships and disaster." At the university Kerensky sought out and found professors, Platonov, Zelinsky, Rostovtsev, Lossky, and Petrazhitsky, who confirmed his own "instinctive feelings about the world." Under Petrazhitsky's instruction, Kerensky came to accept that law and morality coexisted in man's mind with morality "being an innate sense of duty," and law "an innate sense of what a human being can ask of others and what is expected of him in return." Upon graduation in law in 1904, Kerensky married Olga Baranovsky and, shortly thereafter, applied for admission to the bar and was admitted as a junior barrister after some "bureaucratic" difficulty of his own making. The following year brought the 1905 Revolution and Kerensky's journalistic and professional involvement, and for the young revolutionary brief imprisonment and a "vacation" in Tashkent.

During the Revolution Kerensky for the only time in his life became momentarily infatuated with political terrorism — even ready to kill the Tsar. Upon his return to Petersburg in 1906, he became involved briefly in politics, but soon turned to his profession and began his role as a brilliant roving advocate of the political "criminal." Kerensky's debut as a lawyer and a political speaker came, at 25 years of age, in a bril-

[1] Correctly, the name Kerensky is pronounced with stress on the first syllable, not on the second as it is commonly mispronounced by Russians and foreigners alike.

liant acquittal in Reval. In the 1912 Armenian Dashnaktsutyun Party trial, Kerensky was able to obtain 95 acquittals of 146 accused and light sentences for all but three of the rest. Shortly after this trial, the Duma opposition (liberals, Social Democrats, *Trudoviki*) appointed Kerensky to head a commission whose investigation into the Lena massacre proved highly beneficial to the Lena populace and embarrassing to the Tsarist regime. In 1912 he once more delved into politics and was elected a member of the Fourth State Duma from Volsk in the province of Saratov. By the second session, Kerensky became the leader of the *Trudoviki*, a party that was something more than a mere protective label for the Social Revolutionary (S.R.) Party. Kerensky was closely associated with the S. R. Party, but never became a member; he preferred to call himself nothing more than a "collaborator."

In 1912, Kerensky also began his affiliation with resurrected, irregular, Russian Freemasonry. Their "efforts were directed toward the establishment in Russia of a democracy based on broad social reforms and on a federal state order." With the beginning of the World War the unconditional defense of Russia became the basis of their work, and after the February Revolution of 1917 four Masons, Kerensky, Nekrasov, Konovalov, and Tereshchenko, became ministers of the Provisional Government and Masons N. S. Chkheidze and Kerensky, chairman and vice-chairman, respectively, of the executive of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Apparently, from the summer of 1916, Kerensky was secretary of the Masonry's national organization, *Veliki Sovet narodov Rossii*.

On the outbreak of war in August 1914, Kerensky, along with a Duma majority, declared a political truce with the Tsarist regime. Kerensky was a bitter opponent of autocracy, but he was never a defeatist (the general written opinion to the contrary). Throughout the wartime period prior to February 1917, Kerensky, both in and out of the Duma, denounced the regime. Even the isolated imperial family felt the sting of Kerensky's speech of February 15, 1917, as a letter from the tsarina to the tsar shows: "I hope that Kedrinskii (Kerensky) of the Duma will hang for this terrible speech." Kerensky, however, only mirrored the discontent of a country sliding into oblivion. On February 18, 1917 began the events that allowed Kerensky, at age 36, to experience what was his and Russia's finest but most tragic hour.

Riots, mutiny, and revolution occurred in sequence in February 1917, and Kerensky and men like him transformed the riots, mutiny, and revolutionary acts into Revolution. Kerensky "knew how to dance on the revolutionary bog." In the first days of the Revolution, Kerensky was everywhere dashing about like "the flaming torch of revolutionary justice" (Shul'gin). His election as vice-chairman of the Executive of the Petrograd Soviet and his appointment as Minister of Justice in the Provisional Government came as a surprise to no one (though he had to storm the Soviet rhetorically to obtain permission to hold the ministerial post).

Unfortunately, Kerensky's position in the Soviet became nominal as he devoted all his energies to his government post. As the only socialist in the new government, he was at first isolated, but shortly became eminently influential and led a majority of the ministers. His primary opponent in the first cabinet was the liberal, European Russian, Paul N. Miliukov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, as the revolution continued to deepen, Miliukov's views became more and more *passé* and he did not survive the crisis of April. In the new coalition government of liberals and socialists that followed, Kerensky became Minister of War and still more influential. As Minister of Justice, Kerensky carried out a judicial revolution which included: a general political amnesty, *i.e.*, a complete penal reform, abolition of the death penalty, and freedom of speech, association, assembly, religion, and press; civil and political equality with men for women; abolition of restrictions based on nationality, religion, and class; abolition of "special" courts and all "political" cases, *i.e.*, cases involving state security were subjected to trial by jury. Kerensky also organized the Extraordinary Commission of Inquiry into the acts of the old regime.

Kerensky felt that the defense of the country was the first task of the Provisional Government, and, as War Minister, he sought with his whole soul and body to

maintain this objective. The eroding force of war mixed with a deepening political, social and economic revolution, however, drove Russia to the brink of total destruction in 1917. War weariness cut deeply into the spirit of all Europeans in 1917, but the failure of the July Offensive destroyed what little war spirit was left in the Russian people. The July Days followed immediately upon the military debacle and, whatever the role of the Bolsheviki, the Russian body politic was even more divisive thereafter. In the chaos, Kerensky rose as minister president to try to order the crisis.

Kerensky had hardly taken command when the farce known as the Kornilov Affair occurred. The Russian socialists, all too mindful of the role they were playing, took too many cues from revolution history and, therefore, expecting a coup from the Right, over-reacted when it came. The Supreme Commander Lavr Kornilov, personally an honest man, became the dupe of Rightist forces and marched unsuccessfully upon Petrograd to take over the government. Regardless of how Kerensky's role in the affair is viewed, he emerged discredited by both Left and Right. "I feel it is important to the cause of freedom," Kerensky wrote later on the affair, "to ascribe the main reason for the defeat of the Russian democracy to this attack from the right instead of to the foolish myth that Russian democracy was 'soft' and blind to the Bolshevik danger." But the conclusion of Mel'gunov and others that Russian democracy was indeed blind to a possible coup from the left is almost inescapable. Kerensky himself apparently had too much confidence in his own personal power to control the forces around him.

By October 1917, anarchy was raging in heavy industry, the army was in the last stage of disintegration, the various parties were in disarray or melting into the Bolshevik organization, and the Provisional Government was but a mere shadow of its former self. Not a single national group in a new Russian Republic favored Alexander Kerensky, a tragedy in itself, since the man had no evil plans for them. All his ideas included their future as equal with that of Russian nationality. When the Bolshevik *coup d'état* came October 25, it was really only a *coup de grâce* that had been anticipated for some days before it occurred. As William Henry Chamberlin noted, the benevolent neutrality of the peasants and the army was all too significant in allowing the Bolshevik city revolution, which had progressed from factory committees, to the Soviet, and, finally, to the Government. Kerensky had telegraphed in time for troops from the front to have reached Petrograd, but General Cheremisov had countermanded his order and, when Kerensky reached the front, all that could be obtained were from 500 to 600 Cossacks under General Krasnov. After occupying Gatchina and Tsarskoe Selo, Krasnov's Cossacks met a Bolshevik force of 12,000 men at Pulkovo Heights in a tactical victory, but Kronstadt sailors held out and Kerensky's forces retired to Gatchina. Krasnov opened negotiations for a truce with the Bolsheviks, and as Kerensky's surrender figured in the terms, the Commander-in-Chief took the first opportunity to escape.

From this time until late May 1918, when he left Russia in search of foreign aid, Kerensky tried as best he could to raise, inside Russia, a viable force to oppose the Bolsheviks. Kerensky's life underground in Russia shows a man of courage and of duty dedicated to his beliefs. Only with the greatest of difficulty was he dissuaded from addressing the opening session of the Contituent Assembly in January, 1918. Kerensky took time to write while in Petrograd under the very noses of the Bolsheviks and then publish in Moscow *The Prelude to Bolshevism,* his extensively annotated transcript of his testimony before the Extraordinary Commission on the Kornilov Affair. In late spring of 1918, Kerensky was asked to go abroad and negotiate with the Allies for the "Union for the Resurrection of Russia." In late May, he left for London *via* Murmansk where he boarded a French cruiser, after passing through the Soviet lines with "arranged" papers of a Serbian captain. Kerensky's meeting with Lloyd George and Clemenceau showed some promise at first, but the denouement was not long in coming — the Allies had already written off Russia!

For the rest of his life Kerensky was certain that democracy would eventually triumph in Russia. During the half century in which Kerensky was in exile, he wrote, lectured, and spoke of the time when Russia did enjoy its brief experiment in democracy. His works include: *Izdaleka: sbornik*

statei (1922); *The Catastrophe* (1927); *The Crucifixion of Liberty* (1934); with Capt. Paul Bulygin, *Murder of the Romanovs* (1934); with Robert Paul Browder as editor, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917* (1961). His last work was his autobiographical and political testament, *Russia and History's Turning Point* (1965). After 1918, Kerensky's home was in Paris, where he edited an emigré journal, *Dni,* but with the collapse of the Third Republic in the summer of 1940, the exile of exiles, fleeing the Nazis, settled in New York where he spent the rest of his life.

Steven L. Parsons in his forthcoming book writes of Kerensky:

> He was an idealist, but he had the good sense to know when to modify these ideas. He was emotional, but this emotionalism suited the temper of the times. He considered himself the tribune of the people, and in a very real sense he was correct. He therefore made a distinct contribution to the success of the February-March Revolution and assured himself the leading role in the short-lived democratic regime that ensued. After the failure of that regime, Kerensky spent more than a half-century in mourning for "his Russia," a Russia that if it had succeeded, would have assured a basically different world today.