

The Russian Provisional Government and the War

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The Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 was indisputably one of the most important events of the twentieth century, and in hindsight it seems inevitable, given the unwillingness of the Provisional Government to solve any of the major problems facing the country – most crucially, the problem of war and peace. The memoirs of Bruce Lockhart, the British Consul-General to Russia at the time, reflect this wisdom-in-hindsight:

[T]he revolution was a revolution for land, bread, and peace – but, above all, for peace. There was only one way to save Russia from going Bolshevik. That was to allow her to make peace. It was because he would not make peace that Kerensky went under. It was solely because he promised to stop the war that Lenin came to the top. [...] [E]ven if Kerensky had shot Lenin and Trotsky, some other anti-war leader would have taken their place and would have won through on his anti-war programme.¹

Alexander Kerensky, who was first Minister of Justice, then Minister of War, and finally Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, in June, 1931, was asked by British media tycoon Lord Beaverbrook, “would you have mastered the Bolsheviks if you had made a separate peace?” Kerensky replied, “of course, we should be in Moscow right now.” Beaverbrook then asked the logical follow-up question: “then why didn’t you do it?” “We were too naive,” was Kerensky’s reply.²

These observations made in hindsight beg the question: why did the Provisional Government continue Russia’s participation in the First World War, even at the expense of turning the masses against it and paving the way for a second, Bolshevik-led, revolution? Was it

¹ R.H. Bruce Lockhart, *British Agent* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1933), 168-169.

simply a case of bad or mistaken policy? If not, what imperatives, forces, motivations, and priorities led the Provisional Government – and the parties that controlled it – to continue the Russian war effort?

To answer these questions, the foreign policy of the Provisional Government, which lasted from March 15, 1917 until November 7, 1917 must be examined.³ The personnel responsible for formulating and implementing foreign policy, their political affiliations, and the factors that impacted their decisions must also be examined.

With the creation of the Provisional Government, control over foreign policy passed into the hands of two members of the Constitutional Democratic Party, or Kadets: Prime Minister Georgy Evgenyevich Lvov, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavel Nikolayevich Miliukov. A third person, Alexander Guchkov, a member of the Octobrist Party, played a subordinate role as the Minister of War. As Vladimir Nabokov, a Kadet and the head of the Provisional Government's Chancellery, observed in his memoirs: "on the aims of the war and on the tasks of foreign policy [Guchkov] kept somehow in the background."⁴

On March 20 Lvov announced that the new government would "sacredly observe the alliances which bind us to other powers" and would "unswervingly carry out the agreements entered into by the Allies" with the former Tsarist government.⁵ These secret⁶ agreements provided Allied support for the Russian seizure of: the Straits of Constantinople, the western coast of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmora and its islands, the Dardanelles, Southern Thrace as

² Ibid, 177.

³ Dates for events are according to the Gregorian calendar.

⁴ Virgil Mendlin and Steven Parsons, eds., *Vladimir Nabokov and the Russian Provisional Government*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 88-89.

⁵ Clarence Jay Smith, *The Russian Struggle for Power, 1914-1917; a Study of Russian Foreign Policy During the First World War* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 469.

⁶ Secret in the sense that the treaties remained unpublished and their exact contents unknown to the Russian public until after the Bolsheviks took power.

far as the Enos-Media line, the coast of Asia Minor between the Bosphorus and the river Sakaria, a point on the Ismid, the Islands of Imbros and Tenedos, as well as the provinces of Erzurum, Trebizond, Van, and Bitlis in Asiatic Turkey, and southern Kurdistan.⁷

Lvov's announcement was not surprising, since the Kadet party, and Miliukov in particular, supported these aims from the outset of the war. In a speech to the Duma on February 9, 1915, Miliukov congratulated then-Foreign Minister Sazonov on his success in securing French and British approval for Russian seizure of the Straits of Constantinople, saying, "We are glad to know that the realization of our national task is making good progress. We can now be certain that Constantinople and the Straits will become ours at the opportune moment through diplomatic and military measures."⁸ In a pamphlet titled, "What does Russia expect from the war?" published in the same year, Miliukov declared, "the acquisition and complete possession of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles together with Constantinople, and of a sufficient part of the adjacent shores to insure the defense of the Straits, must be the aim."⁹

Miliukov argued that had to have unilateral control of the Straits of Constantinople in order to safeguard its economic well-being from the interference of other powers and to end the long-standing conflict¹⁰ over the area between the Russian and the Ottoman empires, thereby laying the foundations for a lasting peace. He did not view Russian seizure of this important waterway as imperialist since, he claimed, Russia would not use this control to dominate other nations but merely to defend itself. Furthermore, he argued that Russia's seizure could not be labeled immoral since she was not conquering truly Turkish territory; the city, after all, was an

⁷ Seymour Cocks, ed., *The Secret Treaties and Understandings: Text of the Available Documents* (London: Union of Democratic Control, 1918), 19, 26.

⁸ Paléologue, *An Ambassador's Memoirs*, para 9. <http://www.gwpda.org/memoir/FrAmbRus/pal1-08.htm>

⁹ Quoted in Samuel Kuchеров, "The problem of Constantinople and the Straits," *Russian Review*, Vol. 8, no. 3, 208.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 206. Since the beginning of the 18th century until 1914, Russia fought the Ottomans eleven times for

international trading center and not *originally* controlled by the Turkish Caliphate.¹¹

The British Ambassador to Russia at the time, George Buchanan, described Miliukov as being “obsessed with one idea – Constantinople.”¹² But he was not alone in his obsession. As the Kadet party’s expert on foreign policy, his views on the question were the party’s, as historian William Rosenberg observed in his study of the Kadets:

Miliukov was not lacking party support for his views [on the war]. Kadet literature published in March 1917 repeatedly stressed [these] war aims. So did the speeches of various party leaders at public meetings, and editorials in the press.¹³

While the Kadets found themselves in control of the foreign policy of the Provisional Government, they also found themselves under pressure from the Allies. Immediately after the formation of the new government was announced on March 15, the French and British ambassadors contacted the new Minister of Foreign Affairs to ascertain whether or not the revolution would affect the war effort. The French ambassador Maurice Paléologue met with Miliukov on March 17 and urged him to secure “a plain and unambiguous proclamation” declaring the Provisional Government’s commitment to “the ruthless prosecution of the war and the maintenance of the alliances.”¹⁴

A day later, on March 18, when Miliukov said he hoped the Provisional Government’s forthcoming proclamation on foreign policy would satisfy the French government, Paléologue

a total of thirty years for control of the area. Only twice was she allied with the Ottomans – in 1793, and 1833.

¹¹ William Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution: the Constitutional Democratic Party, 1917-1921*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 74-76.

¹² George Buchanan, *My Mission to Russia and Other Diplomatic Memories* Vol. 2, (New York: Cassell and Co., 1923), 127.

¹³ Rosenberg, 76-77.

snapped, “you mean to say you only *hope*? A hope’s no good to me: I want a certainty.”¹⁵

British ambassador George Buchanan put similar pressure on Miliukov, telling him on March 18 that his government “must have an assurance that the new government was prepared to fight the war out to a finish and to restore discipline in the army” before they could recognize it.¹⁶ When the Provisional Government issued its proclamation that it had not broken with the foreign policy of the Tsarist government on March 20, the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, immediately met with Miliukov and assailed the text of the proclamation, saying:

After my recent talks with you I was not surprised at the language adopted by the manifesto published this morning on the subject of the war; but it doesn't make me any less angry. A determination to prosecute the war at any cost and until full and final victory isn't even mentioned! The name of Germany does not occur! There isn't the slightest allusion to Prussian militarism: No reference whatever to our war aims!¹⁷

Paléologue wrote in his diary later that day:

It [the proclamation] is a long, verbose and strongly-worded document which fiercely castigates the *ancien regime* and promises the nation all the benefits of equality and liberty. The war is barely mentioned: *The Provisional Government will loyally maintain all its alliances and do everything in its power to provide the army with all its needs with a view to*

¹⁴ Maurice Paléologue, para 68. http://www.alexanderpalace.org/mpmemoirs/3_9.html

¹⁵ Ibid, para 81.

¹⁶ Buchanan, Vol. 2, 90.

¹⁷ Paléologue, para 87.

*carrying on the war to a victorious conclusion. Nothing more!*¹⁸ [Original emphasis.]

It was this continuous pressure from the Allied governments that drove Miliukov to take a stronger stand on the question of the war, but in doing so he initiated a conflict within the Provisional Government and between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet that eventually led to a political crisis and his resignation. A few days after Miliukov's tense meeting with the French ambassador, Alexander Kerensky, the Minister of Justice, declared in an interview on March 22 in the *Daily Chronicle* that Russia had no designs on the Straits of Constantinople and that he favoured its "internationalisation," meaning control by a coalition of Great Powers,¹⁹ an arrangement very different than that agreed upon by the Allies in the secret treaties of 1915. Fearing that the Allies would see Kerensky's statement as a repudiation of the war-time agreements, on March 23 the Kadet newspaper *Rech* published an interview with Miliukov in which he reaffirmed the Provisional Government's commitment to the terms of the secret treaties:

The transfer of the Straits to us [Russia] would in no way contradict the principles advanced by Woodrow Wilson when he spoke of the possibility of transferring their ownership. The possession of the Straits is the protection of "the doors to our home," and it is understandable that this protection should belong to us, while a neutralization of the Straits, especially a complete neutralization providing for a free passage into the Black Sea of men-of-war of all nations, would be even less acceptable to us than their remaining in the hands

¹⁸ Ibid, para 84.

¹⁹ Alexander Kerensky and Paul Browder, ed., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents, Selected and Edited* Vol. 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 1057.

of the Turks.²⁰

The interviews sparked a sharp debate over foreign policy within the Provisional Government on March 24, the day after Miliukov's reply to Kerensky was printed. When Kerensky challenged Miliukov's position in a cabinet meeting that day, Miliukov shot back: "I still consider that the policy I am pursuing is indeed the policy of the Provisional Government. I demand a definite answer, and depending on the answer, I will know what I should do next." Kerensky paused, and Prime Minister Lvov intervened, stating that Miliukov was indeed pursuing a policy corresponding to the views and plans of the Provisional Government.²¹ In an attempt to avoid conflicts over policy in the future, the cabinet agreed not to make individual declarations to the press.

Despite Miliukov's vindication at the cabinet meeting, the cabinet agreed to draft a compromise position which was published on March 27, under the heading, "the Provisional Government's Declaration of War Aims." In it, the Provisional Government declared "to the peoples of the world" that it would "tell the people directly and openly the whole truth" and claimed that the war on Russia's part was being waged in self-defence against German aggression. On Russia's war aims, it said:

[T]he aim of free Russia is not domination over other nations, or seizure of their national possessions, or forcible occupation of foreign territories, but the establishment of a stable peace on the basis of the self-determination of peoples. The Russian people [*sic*] does not

²⁰ Ibid, 1045.

²¹ Paul Miliukov, *Political Memoirs: 1905-1917*, trans. Carl Goldberg, ed. Arthur Mendel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 433.

intend to increase its world power at the expense of other nations.

The declaration also pledged that the Provisional Government would “fully observe at the same time all obligations assumed toward our allies” and denounced secret diplomacy.²²

The “obligations” that were to be observed remained secret at the time, and provided for the very “domination over other nations,” “seizure of their national possessions,” and “forcible occupation of foreign territories” that the declaration denounced²³ and the Allies realized that the statement contained these contradictions. Despite Miliukov’s attempts at damage control, Russian credibility with the Allies eroded due to the continual conflicts over foreign policy, and they began to plan the course of the war and its aftermath without regard to Russia’s interests.

Konstantin Nabokov, the Charge d’Affaires at the Russian embassy in Britain, cabled Miliukov on April 4 that “the [British] Government and the press discern in this statement [the March 27 Declaration] an abandonment of our rights to Constantinople and other territorial acquisitions.”²⁴ On April 11, Nabokov described the attitude of British policy-makers towards the Provisional Government’s position in another cable to Miliukov:

[V]ery definite concern over the stability of the present provisional regime. [...] As regards the texts of the Declaration of the Minister-President and of the Kerensky statement, which have appeared today in newspapers, it is pointed out that both the statement and the principles voiced by Kerensky lack conformity with the declarations regarding the observation of engagement formerly concluded with the Allies, and also with the contents of

²² Kerensky and Browder, Vol. 2, 1046.

²³ After the Bolsheviks took power, they published all of the secret diplomatic agreements found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

²⁴ Ibid, 1050.

your interview regarding Constantinople.²⁵

Two weeks after Nabokov's alarming reports came even worse news for Miliukov. Nabokov informed him on April 26 that he had discovered that the Allied governments – France, Britain, Italy, and the United States – had held an important conference at Savoy without even bothering to invite a Russian representative. Nabokov explained that Russian participation in these conferences was essential to “counterbalance influences endeavouring to exploit our absence for their own egotistic purposes.”²⁶

A few weeks after the skirmish between Miliukov and Kerensky over war aims, the American ambassador to Russia David Francis received a telegram from Secretary of State Robert Lansing on April 21 ordering him to threaten the leaders of the Provisional Government with the possibility of withholding war loans:

The Congress has passed a \$7 billion war loan, of which \$3 billion are to be assigned to Russia and the Allied governments. The political reforms of the Russian state have been met here with great enthusiasm. However, the latest reports, widely disseminated by the press, of the Government being under the influence of extreme socialist parties that aim at a separate peace for which Germany yearns so intensely, are doing much damage to the Russian interests here; if these communications do not cease, they might prevent Russian from obtaining her share of the loan [...] As far as propriety permits, please widely inform the Russian leaders of this and insist that measure should be taken in order to redress the unfortunate bad impression produced on the American people. There is no way of

²⁵ Ibid, 1050.

overestimating the feelings of enthusiastic friendship which will be brought into being over here and the open unlimited possibility for their development after the war if the new Government is able to maintain order and successfully carry on the war. A separate peace would preclude the possibility of any kind of assistance on the part of America.²⁷

The American loan put the Provisional Government in an awkward position. On the one hand, accepting the loan would undoubtedly would require a confirmation of Russia's commitment to the secret treaties, running the risk of re-creating conflict within the government over foreign policy. On the other hand, declining the loan would make financing the war very difficult, and it would also be seen by the Allied governments as a repudiation of the secret treaties. The Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties which controlled the Petrograd Soviet decided to label it a "Liberty Loan" since a loan to continue the war would not have won popular support. The Menshevik leader Tseretelli proposed that the Provisional Government send a proclamation to the Allied governments, which would at the same time be published in Russian newspapers, calling on them to renounce imperialist aims, and once that was accomplished, the issue of whether or not to accept the "Liberty Loan" would be put to a vote on the floor of the Soviet.

Miliukov agreed to send Tseretelli's proposed proclamation to the Allies, but on one condition: that he be permitted to send a note of introduction with it. He wanted to assure the Allies that Russia's commitment to the war-time agreements – and his control over foreign

²⁶ Ibid, 1052.

policy – remained unshaken. His note declared that Russia “will fully observe the obligations which it has accepted regarding our allies,” and sought a “victorious finish to the present war in total agreement with our allies.” The note claimed that the revolution had not only not weakened Russia’s ability to fight, but “[q]uite the contrary, the general aspiration of the whole people to bring the World War to a decisive victory has only been strengthened” by it. The note concluded with the hope that “the leading democracies will find a way to establish those guarantees and sanctions which are required to prevent bloody new encounters in the future.”²⁸ The text of Miliukov’s note was unanimously approved by the cabinet – including Kerensky – before it was sent to the Allied governments on May 1.

Paléologue noted in his diary that Miliukov’s note was “couched in intentionally vague and diffuse terms, [and] does what is possible to counteract the arguments of the manifesto” which it preceded.²⁹ Buchanan wrote to the British Foreign Office that the explanatory note “was couched in language, which if it did not actually contravene the letter of the proclamation, was an unquestionable contravention of its spirit.”³⁰

The publication of Miliukov’s introductory note in Russian newspapers triggered mass demonstrations of anti-war soldiers and workers in the capital on May 3. Tens of thousands of marchers, angered by the note’s reaffirmation of the secret treaties, carried banners in the streets of Petrograd that read, “Down with Miliukov” and “Down with Guchkov.”

The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet met with the cabinet of the Provisional Government on the evening of May 4 to discuss the crisis. The Socialist Revolutionary leader

²⁷ Browder and Kerensky, 1053.

²⁸ Miliukov on many occasions asserted that peace would be lasting only if Russia successfully seized control of the Straits of Constantinople ending the long history of conflict between Russia and the Ottoman empires once and for all.

²⁹ Paléologue, para 74, <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/memoir/FrAmbRus/pal3-12.htm>

³⁰ Buchanan, Vol. 2, 123.

Chernov suggested that Miliukov become Minister of Education in an attempt to defuse the crisis, but he refused. Instead, the cabinet agreed – over the objections of Miliukov – to send a *second* explanatory note to quiet the storm of protest in the streets of Petrograd.

The text of the note was written by the Menshevik and Soviet Executive Committee member Tseretelli and the Provisional Government's Minister of Transport Nekrasov, which was understandable given the furore generated by Miliukov's text. This second note, published on May 5 and sent to the Allied governments, claimed that by "guarantees and sanctions" Miliukov had meant "the limitations of armaments, international tribunals, etc." and not the seizure of the Straits of Constantinople, as the anti-Miliukov demonstrators believed.³¹

This latest round of conflict over foreign policy led Paléologue to cable his superiors in Paris about how France should adjust its diplomacy to the new situation on May 7:

It is increasingly clear that disgust with the war, abandonment of all the national dreams and a lack of interest in everything save domestic problems are becoming uppermost in the public mind. [...] Ought we to continue to put our trust in Russia and give her more time? No; because even under the most favorable circumstances she will not be in a condition to carry out all her obligations as an ally for many months to come. *Sooner or later, the more or less complete paralysis of Russia's effort will compel us to revise the decisions we had all come to on Eastern questions.* The sooner the better, as the prolongation of the war involves France in terrible sacrifices of which Russia has not borne her share for a long time past.³²

[My emphasis.]

³¹ Kerensky and Browder, Vol. 2, 1011.

Miliukov realized that the renewed conflict over foreign policy would hurt Russia's position vis-à-vis the Allies, and he attempted to minimize the damage by telling the *New York Times* in an interview on May 8 that the dispute had ended in a victory for him. He declared: "Our policy remains unchanged. We have conceded nothing."³³

Less than a week after Miliukov's self-proclaimed victory, the Minister of War Guchkov resigned on May 14, and Miliukov followed suit two days later. They recognized that it was impossible to pursue their foreign policy objectives without interference from Soviet leaders who were soon to join the Provisional Government.³⁴ Miliukov wrote that he viewed a coalition with the Soviet's leaders as a "rotten compromise which carried the struggle between the Soviet and the government right into the new cabinet,"³⁵ and he did not want to be responsible for carrying out or appearing to agree with a foreign policy he rejected.

With these resignations, Russian foreign policy was placed into new hands: Mikhail Tereshchenko, a wealthy sugar magnate from the Ukraine, a non-party man, and former Minister of Finance in the Provisional Government, was appointed to replace Miliukov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Guchkov's place at the Ministry of War was taken by Alexander Kerensky, a recent. Unlike Miliukov, Tereshchenko had no background on questions of foreign policy, no pamphlets, news interviews, or articles in which he spelled out what he believed Russia's foreign policy should be. Nor was he the member of a political party. The lack of a paper trail or known political affiliation made him an attractive candidate for the post because opponents of the war would be unable to attack him for any imperialist or annexationist aims for lack of evidence. Yet

³² Paléologue, para 4. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/memoir/FrAmbRus/pal3-13.htm>

³³ Rex Wade, *The Russian Search for Peace: February-October 1917*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 42.

³⁴ Miliukov, 453-454.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 454.

this lack of documentation about his views on the war before (or after³⁶) he assumed control over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes studying his foreign policy more difficult and we can only infer from his words and his actions what exactly his foreign policy was.

The first challenge facing the new Foreign Minister was how to deal with was the British and French responses to the Provisional Government's May 1 proclamation. He immediately went to Buchanan and Albert Thomas, who had replaced Paléologue as the French ambassador, and began negotiating with them to delete any language which smacked of war until victory or the seizure of foreign territory in an attempt to avoid inflaming Russian public opinion. The Allies grudgingly compromised with him, and after *three* revisions the British replied more than a month later on June 8 that it too "did not enter upon this war for conquest" and was not "continuing it for any such object." It claimed that the diplomatic agreements made between the Allied powers during the war conformed to the ideals of freedom and self-determination for all peoples, but indicated that it was "quite ready with [*sic*] their Allies to examine, and if need be, to revise, these agreements."³⁷ The French reply on May 26 also paid lip-service to the right of nations to self-determination but said the Allies sought "reparatory indemnities" and did not mention any willingness to revise the war-time agreements.³⁸ Tereshchenko also requested that the American ambassador revise a message from President Wilson to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent on May 9, but was informed that Wilson's message was not a reply to the May 1 proclamation and was not subject to change.³⁹

Unlike Miliukov, Tereshchenko was more sensitive to the anti-war mood in Russia, but at the same time he sought to accomplish what Miliukov failed to do: reassure the Allies that

³⁶ Unlike Trotsky, Miliukov, Kerensky, or Nabokov, Tereshchenko never published any memoirs after the events of 1917.

³⁷ Great Britain Foreign Office, "British reply respecting war aims," (London: Harris and Sons, 1917).

³⁸ Kerensky and Browder, Vol. 2, 1108.

Russia was still a reliable ally and deserved her share of the spoils. For example, Tereshchenko argued that Russia should “renounce imperialist aims,”⁴⁰ but at the same time he opposed publishing the secret treaties which would have exposed Russia’s “imperialist aims” on the grounds that “immediate publication of the treaties would amount to a break with the Allies.”⁴¹ Although he claimed that Russia had no imperialist or annexationist intentions, he never explicitly renounced the agreements that provided for Russian control of the Straits or Asia Minor either.⁴²

Tereshchenko’s coupled his stubborn resistance to publishing the secret treaties with a more flexible attitude towards the question of revising Allied war aims than his predecessor. In an attempt to ease pressure on the Provisional Government on the issue, on June 13, Tereshchenko published this proposal:

The Russian democracy remains steadfastly loyal to the cause of the Allies, and welcomes the decision of those of the Allied powers which expressed readiness to meet the desire of the Russian Provisional Government to *reconsider* the agreements concerning the ultimate aims of the war. We suggest that there be called for the purpose a conference of Representatives of the Allied Powers, to take place as soon as conditions are favorable to it.⁴³ [My emphasis.]

The proposal called for an Allied conference at which war aims would be “reconsidered,” rather than “revised,” or “re-written” and the timing of such a conference was left completely open. No reasons were given as to why such a conference could not be convened immediately; after all,

³⁹ Ibid, 1109.

⁴⁰ John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, (New York: International Publishers, 1982), 324.

⁴¹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 384.

⁴² Wade, 77.

the Allies had been able to hold a conference without a Russian representative at Savoy. The vagueness of the declaration seems to have been intentional, designed solely to deflect anti-war sentiment in Russia, especially since the declaration was never officially sent to the Allied governments. When the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, was questioned about Tereshchenko's proposed conference in the House of Commons on June 26, he said he said no communication had been received by the British government about it.⁴⁴

The next major foreign policy effort by the Provisional Government came on July 1 in the form of a major Russian offensive, ordered by Kerensky. In his order, Kerensky wrote, "I call upon the armies, strengthened by the vigour and spirit of the revolution, to take the offensive. [...] Let all nations know that when we talk of peace, it is not because we are weak! Let all know that liberty has increased our might."⁴⁵ The reference to "all nations" indicates that offensive was undertaken to show not only to the Central Powers, but the Allies as well, that Russia remained a formidable Great Power.

Yet the offensive – or rather, its results – sent opposite message of what the Provisional Government intended. The French General Staff, in preparation for an Allied conference in Paris, wrote a memorandum on July 21 which assumed considerable Russian military contributions to the war effort, but was replaced on July 24 with a new memorandum which assumed Russian inaction or defection from the Allied cause that would result in a large transfer of German troops to the Western front. The revision was caused by the news of the offensive's failure and armed demonstrations in Petrograd, which ended in the resignation of Prime Minister Lvov on July 20.

⁴³ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 87.

⁴⁵ Kerensky and Browder, Vol. 2, 942.

The British reaction to the failed offensive was similar; on July 31, the cabinet weighed the consequences of Russia's conclusion of a separate peace with Germany.⁴⁶ On August 7, before a second Allied conference in London, the British cabinet discussed whether or not to invite a Russian representative and decided against doing so since it would be difficult to include the Russians but exclude *Serb and Romanian* representatives! This, more than anything else, indicates how far Russia's status had fallen since Serbia and Romania could not be considered Great Powers in 1917 by any stretch of the imagination.

In the event, Konstantin Nabokov found out about the conference accidentally when he sought a private meeting with Balfour, who was unavailable because he was attending it. Nabokov expressed surprise at his discovery, since Russia was one of the Allies but was unaware of the meeting, and he was invited to attend a few minutes later. At the conference, he was forced to sit through a long discussion about whether to send the Provisional Government a message of protest at the continuing disorder in the country which was undermining the war effort. Eventually, a protest was drafted and sent to the Provisional Government, which provoked an angry outburst by Kerensky at Buchanan who delivered the message: "How would Lloyd George like it if a Russian were to come tell him how to manage the English people?"⁴⁷

The failure of the offensive also produced a change on Tereshchenko's part. On July 24, he cabled B.A. Bakhmetev, the Russian ambassador in Washington, D.C.:

[I]n view of the latest events at the front and the situation in the country, I deem it necessary to postpone somewhat the proposed conference and, suspending for the time being all negotiations with respect to future peace conditions, to concentrate all our attention on the

⁴⁶ Wade, 98.

continuance of the war.⁴⁸

Tereshchenko's foreign policy, in the wake of the disastrous offensive, shifted away from simultaneously appeasing anti-war sentiment in Russia and bolstering Russian credibility abroad towards only one goal: ensuring that the Allied powers did not take advantage of Russia's weakened position and threaten her interests. Throughout July and August of 1917, he sought to contain encroachments on Russian influence in the Mediterranean, successfully dissuading the French and British from giving Italy a larger stake in Asia Minor, but failing to prevent joint British and French removal and replacement of King Constantine in Greece with a more pliable government, which had expansionist ambitions with regard to the annexation of Constantinople.⁴⁹

Further evidence of Tereshchenko's hardened attitude concerning the war lies in a conflict with the Minister of War, General Verkhovsky, who took office in the wake of the abortive Kornilov coup. On November 2, in a joint session of the ministries of War and Foreign Affairs, Verkhovsky argued that the extreme radicalism and the complete breakdown of discipline in the ranks of the army made continuing the war impossible, and all attempts to do so would only further destroy the army as a cohesive military force. Thus, the only course open to the Provisional Government was to make a serious attempt at negotiating an end to the war with all the belligerent governments. When asked what should be done if the Allied powers refused to open peace negotiations, he recoiled at the thought of a separate peace, saying: "in that case, being bound by certain commitments, we would have to submit to fate, i.e. go through such trials

⁴⁷ Ibid, 98-99

⁴⁸ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 101.

as a Bolshevik uprising, ... anarchy, and all the repercussions that follow it.”⁵⁰ Tereshchenko responded to the general’s arguments by asking Kerensky to dismiss him, which he did. Thus, the Provisional Government, five days before it was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, continued to oppose a serious call for peace talks and a separate peace remained unthinkable.

From Tereshchenko’s words and actions as Foreign Minister of the Provisional Government in 1917, the overall thrust of his foreign policy becomes clear, and can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, lasting from when he assumed office in mid-May until the end of the disastrous July offensive, he sought to make *rhetorical* concessions to anti-war sentiment while pursuing a foreign policy whose *substance* was the same as his predecessor’s. His willingness to yield on rhetoric allowed him to avoid triggering political crises that led to the resignation of Miliukov, who proudly talked about “war until victory” and the seizure of the Straits. Miliukov himself underlined how much continuity there was once he left the Provisional Government and praised his successor’s political skill in doing one thing and saying the exact opposite:

Tereshchenko must be given credit, for he did not permit our Allies to use Russia’s disadvantageous position as a means of retreating from their obligations. [...] *Tereshchenko essentially was continuing Miliukov’s policy* [...] But this did not prevent him from making broad *verbal* concessions to Soviet demands in his notes to the Allies whenever these demands became particularly insistent.⁵¹ [My emphasis.]

⁵⁰ Ibid, 139.

⁵¹ Paul Miliukov, *The Russian Revolution*, Vol. 1, trans. Richard and Tatyana Stites, ed. Richard Stites, (Gulf Breeze: Academic International Press, 1978), 138-139.

Vladimir Nabokov, a fellow Kadet, offered a similar judgment of Tereshchenko's foreign policy:

In his activities as minister of foreign affairs, his goal was to follow Miliukov's policy, but in such a way as not to be hindered by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. He wanted to dupe them all and for some time succeeded in doing so. [...] [D]uring the whole existence of the Provisional Government our entire international policy was indeed nothing but talks.⁵²

During this phase, he sought to contain anti-war sentiment in Russia by making empty gestures towards an Allied conference at which the war-time agreements would be "reconsidered." His attempt to modify the aims of the Allied war effort were, in fact, a mechanism to continue the war with the same aims, which was later admitted by Kerensky himself:

[T]he strenuous fight between the Provisional Government and the Allied cabinets throughout the course of the February Revolution *had less to do with actual war aims* than with the motives of their revision. *The Provisional Government had no wish whatever to quarrel with its allies over sharing the lion's skin before the beast was killed.* We simply wanted to win the War. To do so we had to have an army that could fight. To make the army fight we had to give it new war aims, which to the rank and file would fit in with its new spirit born of the revolution. [...] [I]t was essential to speak a new, different, diplomatic *language* which would not be reminiscent of the old "imperialist" *language* of Czarism, so bitterly hated in the trenches.⁵³ [My emphasis.]

⁵² Mendlin and Parsons, 94-95.

In the second phase of the development of his foreign policy, lasting from the end of the July offensive until the Bolshevik seizure of power, Tereshchenko became less concerned with anti-war sentiment in Russia and instead sought to salvage what he could of Russia's international position. Throughout both phases, he rejected any talk of a separate peace, the publication of the secret treaties, or the renunciation of Russian designs on the Straits of Constantinople.

The underlying reason why the Provisional Government remained committed to continuing the war, despite the fact that it contributed to the disintegration of the army and radicalized much of the population which eventually led to the Bolshevik seizure of power, was because it was unwilling and unable to break with the interests of Russian big business. The Straits of Constantinople had enormous economic and strategic importance to big business in southern Russia; in 1914, 37 percent of Russian exports and a high proportion of her wheat crop exports travelled through the waterway.⁵⁴ On August 3, 1914, Tsar Nicholas II told Buchanan that twice in the preceding two years the Straits had been closed for a short period, with the result that, "the Russian grain industry had suffered very serious loss."⁵⁵ Historian Clarence Jay Smith noted the impact on – and political response of – Russian capitalists to Turkey's closure of the Straits after being attacked by the Balkan states in 1912:

The economic consequences to southern Russia were serious, since transportation westward of Ukrainian grain was *twenty-five percent more expensive* by land than by sea. It was estimated that Russian grain growers lost *30 billion rubles a month* while the Straits were closed. The Russian balance of trade in 1912 was worsened to the extent of a hundred

⁵³ Alexander Kerensky, *The Crucifixion of Liberty*, (London: Arthur Barker, LTD, 1934), 302-303.

⁵⁴ William Renzi, "Great Britain, Russia, and the Straits, 1914-1915," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 42, no. 1, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

million rubles [...] As a result, in 1912-1913, *a powerful demand arose among the Russian landlord, commercial, and banking interests for assurances that nothing like such a debacle should happen again*. Economic interests, something vastly different from sentimental, Pan-Slavist, Orthodox dreams had entered the picture.⁵⁶ [My emphasis.]

When the Ottoman Empire joined the First World War on the side of Germany, German warships closed the Straits of Constantinople to all Allied shipping in October, 1914, re-creating “the debacle” that Russian big business faced in 1912. On November 1, in a speech to the Council of the Republic, convened by Kerensky in a vain attempt to bolster the Provisional Government, Miliukov praised Tereshchenko’s foreign policy and explained the necessity of using Russian military power to secure capitalist interests:

[Tereshchenko] also wishes that the south of Russia be given the opportunity to develop its economy. This is already a very serious and daring idea (*laugh from the right*). Evidently it concerns the Straits and the Minister repeats one of my ideas. He says that the neutralization of the Straits without disarmament would mean infringement of the interests of Russia; it would be a return to a situation which would undoubtedly be much worse than the one which existed before the war. ... The Russian interests in the south will be protected only when the desire of the Minister that the south be given an opportunity to develop its economy is gratified, only when we obtain military control over the Straits. (*Voices from the left: “Oh! Oh!”*) If we knew how to say in Paris [...] that the Straits, our military control over them, are as necessary for us as Alsace-Lorraine is necessary for France, then we

⁵⁶ Smith, 64.

should accomplish our national task.⁵⁷

Not only was the Provisional Government's foreign policy shaped by the interests of Russian capital, it was also shaped by pressure from the capitalist governments of France, Britain, and the United States. This pressure was particularly effective because the Russian military did not have the power to seize Constantinople and the Straits on its own. The commander-in-chief of Russia's armed forces, Grand Duke Nicholas, the Tsar's second cousin, declared on December 18, 1914 that "seizure of the Straits by our troops alone is entirely out of the question."⁵⁸ Grand Duke Nicholas' successor, General Alexeev, came to the same conclusion given the enormous difficulties the Russian military had against its German and Austrian counterparts on the Eastern front.⁵⁹ Thus Russia's only chance to gain control of the area was through the negotiating table, with the consent of the Allies. Miliukov and Tereshchenko were concerned with retaining the confidence of the Allies not out of the principle of loyalty, but out of necessity due to Russian military weakness.

The refusal of Allied foreign policy makers to open peace negotiations forced the Provisional Government to make a stark choice between continuing the war in the hopes of gaining some of the spoils in the aftermath or concluding a separate peace. Such a peace would have meant Russia's loss of all territory occupied by the Central Powers and possibly more, given the Russian army's weakness as a military force. A peace treaty concluded between the Provisional Government and the German government would in all likelihood have resembled the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed by the Bolsheviks in 1918, in which Finland, the Baltic States,

⁵⁷ Kerensky and Browder, Vol. 2, 1149.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Michael Florinsky, "A Page of Diplomatic History: Russian Military Leaders and the Problem of Constantinople During the War," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, no. 1, 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 114-115.

and the Ukraine were surrendered to Germany. Furthermore, a separate peace by would have nullified the secret treaties, thereby entailing the loss of all territories and spheres of influence in Asia Minor, in particular the Straits of Constantinople, the control of which was crucial to big business interests in southern Russia. In short, a separate peace would have left Russia without her Great Power status and at the mercy of the victorious Allied powers who would not hesitate to punish Russia for her defection.

By ruling out a separate peace from the outset, the Provisional Government could do nothing but find itself in a dead end on the question of the war. This dilemma was starkly illustrated when Vladimir Nabokov, upon hearing a report from Guchkov about the army's morale crisis in April, argued, "if this is correct, then a separate peace with Germany is necessary." While Guchkov strongly disagreed with Nabokov's conclusion, he was unable to offer a counter-argument. Elements in the Kadet Party and the army's high command – notably Vladimir Nabokov and General Verkhovskii – realized that Russia's inability to continue the war required her to find some way to end it, but these elements remained a small minority despite the soundness of their arguments.

The only analogy approximating the situation that the Provisional Government faced in 1917 on the question of the war would be the following: in order to save himself from a man-eating bear, a man would have to voluntarily saw off all of his limbs in order to fit into a small space where the bear's claws and teeth could not reach him. Although *logically* the case for self-amputation would be strong, *carrying it out in practice* would be all but impossible because of the pain involved and the bear would consume him. The bear in this analogy, of course, is the Bolshevik seizure of power that consigned the Provisional Government to the archives of history on November 7, 1917.

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