

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 137

“The February Revolution”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“In the days of the great struggle against the foreign enemies, who for nearly three years have tried to enslave our fatherland, the Lord God has been pleased to send down on Russia a new heavy trial. Internal popular disturbances threaten to have a disastrous effect on the future conduct of this persistent war. The destiny of Russia, the honor of our heroic army, the welfare of the people and the whole future of our dear fatherland demand that the war should be brought to a victorious conclusion whatever the cost. The cruel enemy is making his last efforts, and already the hour approaches when our glorious army together with our gallant allies will crush him. In these decisive days in the life of Russia, We thought it Our duty of conscience to facilitate for Our people the closest union possible and a consolidation of all national forces for the speedy attainment of victory. In agreement with the Imperial Duma We have thought it well to renounce the Throne of the Russian Empire and to lay down the supreme power. As We do not wish to part from Our beloved son, We transmit the succession to Our brother, the Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, and give Him Our blessing to mount the Throne of the Russian Empire. We direct Our brother to conduct the affairs of state in full and inviolable union with the representatives of the people in the legislative bodies on those principles which will be established by them, and on which He will take an inviolable oath. In the name of Our dearly beloved homeland, We call on Our faithful sons of the fatherland to fulfill their sacred duty to the fatherland, to obey the Tsar in the heavy moment of national trials, and to help Him, together with the representatives of the people, to guide the Russian Empire on the road to victory, welfare, and glory. May the Lord God help Russia!”

Russian Emperor Nikolai II. Abdication statement.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 137. The February Revolution.

We continue today to examine the events of the revolution in Russia. We left off last time at the conclusion of March 12, that remarkable Tuesday that had begun with Petrograd apparently quiet after yesterday's army crackdown, and ended with the Imperial government in control of only a handful of buildings, and not one but two provisional committees, one composed of Duma members, the other, the Petrograd Council, or Soviet, composed of representatives selected by disgruntled soldiers and factory workers.

Meanwhile, the end of that day also saw trains begin rumbling toward Petrograd from the front, trains carrying trusted soldiers under the command of General Nikolai Yudovich Ivanov, and with orders to take control of the city from the mutinous Petrograd Garrison.

Early the following morning, March 13, the Emperor himself boarded his personal train and began his own journey back to Petrograd. Curiously, and significantly, someone persuaded the Emperor not to take the most direct route to the capital, ostensibly so that the Imperial train would not slow down the trains carrying Ivanov and his soldiers to the capital. Instead, the Emperor's train would be routed to Petrograd via a longer and more circuitous route.

This was a fateful decision. A strong and decisive Emperor who strove to get back to the capital as fast as possible might have arrived soon enough to have been able to assert his authority decisively and hold onto his crown, perhaps at no greater cost than some sensible political concessions that he should have made anyway. Even a weak Emperor might have managed something like this, if he'd had his spine stiffened by a steely Empress like Alexandra, which, let's face it, for Nikolai is really the best case scenario here.

But what is actually going to happen is that the Russian Emperor is going to spend the next two days, which are critical to his realm, isolated in a private train chugging slowly through the Russian countryside, with few advisors and only limited information about the situation in Petrograd. This is pretty much the worst case scenario, as he and you are about to discover.

But as the Russian Emperor rides the train back to Petrograd, let's turn our attention to the doings there. You'll recall from last time that we're seeing not one but two committees forming, either one of which might become the nucleus of a provisional revolutionary government. One was the self-styled "Provisional Committee of Duma Members for the Restoration of Order in the Capital," the other was the Petrograd Soviet.

You'll recall from our previous episodes that the Duma has been critical of the government's handling of the war for almost two years now, and when I say "the government" here, I mean the Emperor's appointed ministers. This criticism had grown increasingly strident over the past few months. Firebrands like Alexander Kerensky accused the government of corruption and betrayal. What they wanted was some kind of movement in the direction of some sort of constitutional monarchy. Perhaps something like the British system, where the government ministers are chosen by the Duma. Or, if that was too much to ask of Nikolai, maybe he would settle at least

for a system where the Emperor would choose his ministers from among the members of the Duma and grant the Duma the right to confirm or reject Imperial appointments.

But then the Revolution came. The Imperial government was effectively overthrown and mutinous soldiers and other demonstrators demanding change have taken control of Petrograd, probably as much to their own surprise as anybody else's. Now, either we wait for the Emperor and his troops to march into Petrograd and restore order, which is just another way of saying, "we lose everything we've achieved so far," or else we push on to the next step in what has suddenly become a revolution. Only, the soldiers and demonstrators in the streets had no idea what to do next. They hadn't gone into this thing with any kind of plan. So they naturally turned to the Duma. Everyone knew that the Duma had been stridently demanding a change in leadership. So okay, guys. Here's the ball. Now run with it.

Only, the Duma didn't have a plan either. The Duma was a group of politicians and lawyers, elected in not especially representative elections that were deliberately designed to give weight to the votes of landowners, bankers, merchants, professionals and other middle-class bourgeoisie. The Duma's power had come from Imperial decrees and it had been focusing its attention on pressing the Emperor to revise those decrees to give it more power. Now a revolution had broken out on the streets of Petrograd, and it was not in the nature of these Duma members to lead a revolution. I mean, that would be against the law! When revolutionary mobs began turning up at the Tauride Palace to proclaim their loyalty to the Duma and seek its leadership, Duma members were busy debating among themselves whether it was even legal for them to meet, since the Emperor had ordered the Duma dissolved. Never mind the question of whether they had the power to appoint a new government. They had even tried cabling the Emperor for permission to form a new government, which in hindsight is kind of hilarious since Emperor Nikolai's authority has by this point pretty much evaporated, although the leaders of the Duma seem to be the last people to realize this. Apart from the Emperor himself, of course.

You can feel the timidity of these Duma members in the name they chose for their committee. Since they technically lack the authority to form a new government, or even act in the name of the Duma, they styled themselves "Provisional Committee of Duma Members for the Restoration of Order in the Capital," which you'll notice is an official-sounding name that doesn't actually claim authority from anyone to do anything.

Some of this timidity also stems from the fact that the Duma consists of multiple political parties, who stand for everything from the autocratic status quo to reforming the Empire into a constitutional monarchy to closet republicans to a handful of socialist radicals. It's not clear what the Duma as a whole would want to do even if it were allowed to meet and hold a vote, which it probably can't because the Emperor forbade it, meaning many of the members would either refuse to come or be afraid to come, and with events unfolding so rapidly in the capital anyway there's hardly time to call the Duma back into session and listen as over 400 members spend days debating Russia's future.

Meanwhile, the Petrograd Soviet began to receive its new members, representatives of workers and mostly of soldiers. The number of soldiers' and workers' representatives showing up quickly swelled into the thousands, making the Petrograd Soviet entirely too big and unwieldy to assert any kind of authority over anything. The Soviet was more like a town meeting, where large numbers of people met in a hall and gave speeches ventilating about whatever grievances they had, which is fine, but hardly the kind of organization you'd need to actually make decisions quickly and get things done. So the Petrograd Soviet formed what it called its Executive Committee, or Ispolkom, to use the abbreviated Russian nickname.

In spite of its name, Ispolkom wasn't what you usually think of when you think of an "executive committee." I mean, if you usually think of an executive committee as a smaller group of people selected out of larger body, whose job is to keep things running smoothly in between the meetings of the larger body, then no, it wasn't that sort of committee at all. In fact, what the Soviet had done was create a committee composed of three representatives from each Russian political party deemed to represent the interests of workers. There were also representatives from soldiers' groups. So that's how Alexander Kerensky got on Ispolkom, for instance. He was one of the representatives of the Labor Party. The Russian Social Democratic Party and Social Revolutionary Party were also allocated seats.

As a result, the Ispolkom members were not members of or representatives of the peasants or workers of Russia, but were in fact politically radical members of the educated classes, lawyers and academics and such. *Intelligentsia*, to use the Russian word which will soon become an English word, and these *intelligentsia*, these Ispolkom members, they were just as leery of the idea of seizing power and proclaiming themselves the new Russian government as were the Provisional Committee of Duma Members. Like the Duma members, they were all too aware that the revolution was vulnerable. Army units from the front might march into Petrograd at any time, and if that happened, all bets were off. Today's provisional government might be in the dock for treason tomorrow. Or court-martialed and lined up in front of a firing squad, as had happened to the would-be revolutionaries in Dublin just last year, in the far more liberal and tolerant United Kingdom.

Also like the Duma members, the Ispolkom had to wrestle with the question of their own legitimacy. At least the Duma was a recognized state institution. The Petrograd Soviet was essentially a private organization created by its own members. It looked more like a labor union than a government. It did not purport to represent the Russian public as a whole, only the soldiers and factory workers of Petrograd. Ispolkom was basically a coalition committee of socialist political parties who also didn't claim to represent the whole nation, but only the interests of workers and peasants.

And while you're considering the Soviet's legitimacy, consider this: Imagine that Ispolkom actually tried to create a provisional government for Russia. Imagine that this Soviet-led provisional government tried to appoint a minister, say of transport. Is the new Soviet-approved

minister of transport just supposed to walk across town to the Transport Ministry and tell all the bureaucrats in the building, “Hi, the Petrograd Soviet sent me over. I’m your new boss?” The odds that the bureaucrats in the ministry would be willing to take orders from a new minister sent over by a committee they never heard of are probably very slim. And even if they did agree to accept this new minister and carry out the new minister’s instructions...um, what exactly is the minister going to tell them to do? What exactly *is* the Petrograd Soviet’s transport policy, for example?

No, the Soviet was in no position to take control of the government.

And beyond those concerns, there is socialist theory to contend with. We talked about socialism in some detail back in episode 18; in brief, socialists look back at the history of the 19th century and see the Industrial Revolution, good, liberalism and greater democracy, good, technological and economic progress, good, but they also see a widening divide between the rich and middle-class bourgeois minority on the one side, who are reaping all the advantages of this new order, and the working class majority on the other, who are seeing no gains at all from these modern marvels, and who are in fact losing ground and becoming increasingly immiserated by this so-called progress. Bad. Many socialist thinkers, most notably Karl Marx, concluded this widening gap between the prosperous minority and the suffering majority was clearly unsustainable and would eventually lead to revolution, which would lead to socialism, a system where the means of production are controlled by all for the benefit of all.

In the view of these thinkers, Marx included, a liberal and democratic system of government is a necessary precondition for the creation of socialism. The working class majority needs democracy in order to assert its will. Guarantees of individual rights, like freedom of speech and association and freedom of the press, are necessary to begin educating and organizing the masses. Labor unions and socialist political parties must be made legal and given freedom to operate. All of these things need to happen *before* we can begin talking about the transition to socialism. Even capitalism has to be there, to build the factories and create the working class that will be the font of the revolution.

That’s why most socialist thinkers predict that the first nations to go socialist will be ones like Britain or Germany, advanced capitalist nations with a substantial working class and reasonably liberal and democratic political institutions that allow that working class to organize for change. Talking about socialism in Russia is wildly premature. It’s like trying to build a skyscraper on a sand dune—the foundation just isn’t there to support it.

The logical corollary to this argument is, okay then, let’s build the foundation. That means building a liberal democracy with elected representatives and a system of guaranteed civil rights and freedoms for working people to organize and advocate for change. And what *that* boils down to is supporting the Duma members. The Provisional Committee is composed of members of parties advocating for something in the spectrum from constitutional monarchy to constitutional

republicanism, with a few socialist sympathizers like Kerensky thrown in, so that's just the sort of government you'd be looking for to build your foundation for your future socialist state.

Not all socialists saw it that way, most notably not the Bolsheviks, but most socialists did. As for the Bolsheviks, well, let's come back to them later. Oh, we will. Trust me on this.

The night of March 14, just a day after the first meeting of the Petrograd Soviet, Ispolkom and the Duma leaders came together to hammer out a *modus vivendi* in which the Soviet agreed to endorse the Provisional Committee of Duma Members and lend them its support. But Soviet support was not unconditional. The Provisional Committee was asked to agree to an eight-point program that would serve as the basis of Provisional Government policy until a permanent government was in place. The eight points included:

- Immediate amnesty for all political prisoners.
- Immediate grants of freedom of speech and assembly and the right to strike.
- Immediate repeal of all laws limiting the rights of national or religious minorities.
- Immediate preparation for a national election to a Constituent Assembly, which would become the basis for a new democratic government for Russia. This election would be held on the principles of universal suffrage, direct election, equal representation, and secret ballot.
- All police to be disbanded and replaced with citizens' militias.
- New local government councils to be elected, again on the principles of universal suffrage, direct election, equal representation, and secret ballot.
- The Petrograd Garrison would receive assurances that they would not be disarmed, or sent off to the front.
- Off-duty soldiers would be granted the same rights as civilians.

This arrangement benefited both sides. The Provisional Committee got the support of the soldiers and workers, the people who had actually made this revolution happen, which put some muscle behind its decrees. The Soviet got the expertise and the reputation of the Duma leaders. Each body gained legitimacy through the endorsement of the other. The Provisional Committee of Duma Members would now begin to call itself the Provisional Government.

The Duma committee wanted to go further and actually bring Ispolkom into the new government, but Ispolkom turned this offer down. They did not see their mission as governing Russia, but rather as keeping a watchful eye over the Provisional Government to make sure it didn't betray the revolution or the workers and soldiers who had fought for it. As historian Richard Pipes put it, Ispolkom would serve as a sort of "supreme court of the revolutionary conscience."

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, *Mlada*]

You may be wondering what has become of the titular Russian Emperor. Recall that he boarded the Imperial train on the morning of March 13 to begin a circuitous route back to Petrograd and to his family. That same day, Duma chairman Rodzianko began sending telegrams to key military commanders. He told Alekseyev, the Army Chief of Staff in Mogilev, that the capital was calm and under control and that the government was reorganizing and there was no need for Ivanov's troops to march on the city. Alekseyev telegraphed Ivanov and told him to stand down, in order that "the shameful civil strife for which our enemy longs will be avoided."

Rodzianko also cabled the other top Russian generals, telling them all that Petrograd was calm and presenting himself and his Duma committee as the only ones capable of keeping things that way, which was a little premature, since at this moment the Petrograd Soviet was just coming together and the agreement with the Provisional Committee I just described has not yet been reached, but the generals didn't know that, and most of them fell in line.

It's surprising that Russia's most senior military commanders would so quickly abandon the Emperor to whom they had all taken oaths of loyalty. To put it simply, it seems that Russia's commanders genuinely believed they were better off without Nikolai's meddling in the Army, that 1917 was shaping up to be the year the Russian Army would build on the successes of the Brusilov Offensive and would push the enemy out of Russian territory, and that the one thing that would spoil this otherwise rosy picture was civil disorder in the Army's rear. Better to accept rule by the politicians in the Duma now and get back to the business of defeating the Germans than to force the Army to fight a two-front war against the external enemy and internal revolutionaries at the same time and run the risk that the government collapses altogether and some crazy extremists like, I don't know, the Bolsheviks or someone like that would take power.

Or to put it even more simply, the generals had come around to agree with the politicians in the Duma that the existing government had become an obstacle to Russia's winning the war. The reputation of the Emperor and his dynasty had sunk so low there was hardly anyone left even in the Army willing to defend the monarchy.

And while all these subversive messages were burning up Russia's telegraph lines, the still-officially-the-Emperor Nikolai, was riding his luxury train back to Petrograd. By midnight that night, the train had gotten within 200 kilometers of the city when it suddenly stopped. The Emperor was informed that the tracks ahead were under the control of mutinous soldiers and that it would not be safe to continue on. As it happens, this wasn't true, although whether it was believed by the people reporting it to the Emperor, or whether it was a snow job to keep him away from the capital is unclear.

Either way, the decision was made to turn around, head back toward the front, and make for the city of Pskov. Pskov was the location of the headquarters of the Russian Army's North Front, so that sounds like a safe place. It took almost another day to get there; Nikolai did not arrive until

late in the evening of March 14, just about the same time Ispolkom and the Provisional Committee were finished hammering out their agreement.

At Pskov, Nikolai hoped to contact his wife the Empress in Petrograd by telegraph and get a clearer picture of what exactly was going on. But by the time he arrived, there was a whole set of fateful telegrams waiting for him from a number of Russia's top military commanders, including the Grand Duke Sergei, his own first cousin, and Alexei Brusilov, the hero of last year's offensive in Galicia, begging him to abdicate for the good of the war effort. Most devastating of all was a telegram from Chief of Staff Alexeyev at Stavka, the man Nikolai had been working with side-by-side for the past year and a half to coordinate the Russian war effort. Alexeyev's telegram told Nikolai "It is impossible to ask the army calmly to wage war while a revolution is in progress in the rear," and asked him to allow Rodzianko to appoint a new government.

And then there was the commander of the North Front, General Nikolai Ruzsky. As it happened, Ruzsky was one of Nikolai's staunchest critics in the Army. He added his arguments to those of the others, persuading Nikolai to agree to Rodzianko's government and to issue an order to Ivanov to "take no measures before my arrival."

Nikolai retired to bed for the night, although by all accounts he slept little. Ruzsky telegraphed Rodzianko, informing him that the Emperor had granted him permission to appoint a new government. Rodzianko telegraphed back, "It is obvious His Majesty and you do not realize what is going on here...The troops are completely demoralized, they not only disobey but kill their officers...hatred of Her Majesty has reached extreme limits...I must inform you that what you propose is no longer adequate, and the dynastic question has been raised point blank."

The following morning, Ruzsky met with Nikolai again. He showed the Emperor more telegrams from more commanders, including the commander of the West Front and the commander in the Caucasus, Grand Duke Nikolai, the Emperor's cousin, calling on him to abdicate. Nikolai looked out the window of his rail car for a few minutes, crossed himself, and agreed. He would abdicate in favor of his son, Alexei, with his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, to serve as regent until Alexei came of age.

But then Nikolai sent for the court physician to consult with him on a private medical question. Rasputin had told the Imperial couple that Alexei would recover from his hemophilia when he reached thirteen years old. Alexei would turn thirteen five months from now, and Nikolai wanted to know, was there any chance Rasputin knew what he was talking about? The doctor told Nikolai that medical science knew of not one case of a person with hemophilia recovering from the condition, although he assured his Emperor that there was reason to hope that his son would live for many years to come.

But once Alexei became Emperor, they wouldn't let Nikolai or Alexandra care for him anymore, would they? No, the two men agreed. It was likely that Nikolai would be sent into exile and perhaps never see his son again.

And so, Nikolai announced that he had changed his mind and would abdicate on Alexei's behalf as well as his own, and named his younger brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, the next in line for the throne, as the new Emperor. It was Nikolai's intent that when he and his family were sent off into exile, Alexei would remain with them and in their care.

In Petrograd, Rodzianko hurried over to meet with Mikhail to discuss the Grand Duke's response. Under pressure from Rodzianko, Mikhail renounced the throne on March 16, at least until the agreed-upon Constituent Assembly had a chance to meet. At that time, Mikhail declared, if the Constituent Assembly chose the path of constitutional monarchy for Russia, Mikhail would accept the title of Emperor if that were the Assembly's will, but the decision must be left to the representatives of the people.

And so, in a matter of days, the 304-year old Romanov dynasty was over. What the future holds for Russia, no one can yet say.

The first foreign government to recognize the new Provisional Government would be the United States, scarcely a week later, on March 22. Two days after that, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, Russia's major wartime allies, lent the new government their recognition.

The story of the Russian Revolution is not over. Indeed, it has hardly begun. It is arguably the most important single event of the twentieth century, and we'll be talking about its consequences for as long as this podcast go on. But it would be worthwhile to pause for a moment here and step back to contemplate what has already happened.

The speed with which the Empire fell is breathtaking. Why did it fall? Future Marxist historians will point to Russia's long history of autocratic rule, injustice, and oppression. Western historians will be far more likely to emphasize the hardships the Great War imposed on Russia. I think that in order to explain fully how quickly the whole edifice collapsed, you have to credit both explanations and more. It is clear that opposition to the Imperial order ran wide and deep.

The precise chain of events that led to the fall of the Romanovs was an unlikely one, though the pressure has been building in Russian society for decades now. There was much Nikolai could have done to relieve some of that pressure; instead, he seemed determined to do everything he could to make things worse. In that regard, I'm reminded of the Great War itself. In a similar way, the exact circumstances of the July Crisis were surprising and would have been hard to predict, but that Europe was headed for some kind of war seemed inevitable. In the case of Russia, the longer reform and modernization of Russian government were delayed, the more

likely an explosion. Nikolai could have engineered a peaceful transition to a more modern state had he any interest in doing so. He did not, and was met with revolution instead.

But the problem with the Russian revolution, as with all revolutions, is that it is easier to assemble a consensus that the old regime has to go than it is to assemble one on the question of what should replace it. And as this particular revolution plays out, that problem will become painfully clear.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and special thanks to Rieke for making a donation and to Brian for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons keep the words going and the bits flowing, so if you have a few euros or shekels or dollars or rupees or quid burning a hole in your pocket, head on over to the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on "help the podcast." You'll be glad you did.

I know I will.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we shift the spotlight back to the United States. You saw the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. You heard about the Zimmerman Telegram. And now you've seen the overthrow of the czar. What effect will these events have on American foreign policy? It's time to Make the World Safe for Democracy, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The events that we've discussed in this episode and the previous one took place during the second week of March, 1917, by the Gregorian calendar in use in most of the world. But it was the last week of February by the Julian calendar, which was at that time still in use in Russia. And that is the reason why, despite the Gregorian calendar, these events are known to history as "the February Revolution."

[music: Closing War Theme]