

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 139

“No Fight, No Loan”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the summer of 1917, an American delegation visited Petrograd. It was led by the now 72-year old Elihu Root, former Secretary of War, Secretary of State, Senator, and recipient of the 1912 Nobel Peace Prize for his work in promoting arbitration in the settling of international disputes.

Root and his delegation had been sent by US President Woodrow Wilson to open talks with the Russian Provisional Government and to offer Russia a \$450 million line of credit. The Provisional Government needed the loan badly, but it came with one condition, as Root would bluntly explain. A later US diplomatic official would summarize the Root Commission’s message as: “No fight, no loan.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 139. No Fight, No Loan.

The February Revolution in Petrograd had taken place swiftly and with relatively little bloodshed. One hundred and sixty-nine Russians died in the fighting, and about 1,200 more were injured. Every death is a tragedy, of course, but still, these are remarkably light casualty figures when you consider that we’re talking about the overthrow of one of the most heavy-handed governments in the world, a regime that has ruled for centuries, and at its greatest extent over one-sixth of the planet’s land area.

The first foreign government to recognize the new Russian Provisional Government was that of the United States. This had a lot to do with the US ambassador in Petrograd, who was bullish on the Revolution and urged the Wilson Administration to support it at once. Recognition also came through quickly from Russia’s major allies in the war: Britain, France, and Italy.

From a propaganda point of view, the Russian Revolution was a boon to her allies. They had already been trying to frame the war as future versus past, democracy versus autocracy, freedom versus repression. But the fact that one of the principal Allied nations was Imperial Russia, a nation whose regime was as elderly and old fashioned as it was heavy handed and undemocratic undercut that framing. And so, Russia's allies hailed the Revolution as Russia's glorious transformation into a fully modern, democratic nation, because it made a good story. The Allies now represented democracy and egalitarianism. In contrast, autocratic Germany, authoritarian Austria, and the elderly and unstable Ottoman Empire could now plausibly be lumped together as obsolete throwbacks from a bygone era of aristocracy and absolutism.

In particular, as we saw last week, the Russian Revolution made it possible for Woodrow Wilson to declare that the Great War was about making the world "safe for democracy."

Internally, though, the new Provisional Government struggled with the most basic matters of governance. It had done its deal with the Petrograd Soviet, which listed the priorities of the new government, and it had appointed new ministers. A moderate aristocrat, Georgi Yevgenyevich Lvov, became the new chairman of the council of ministers, the equivalent of a prime minister, and also minister of the interior. Two other important ministries were assigned to Duma members whose names you are already familiar with: Pavel Nikolayevich Miliukov, he of the famous "stupidity or treason" speech would become the new foreign minister, and Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky would become the new minister of justice.

The new government would work on the priorities agreed to with the Soviet, which I laid out in episode 137. New laws were quickly put into place guaranteeing Russians the freedom of speech, assembly, and of the press. Laws that discriminated against Jews, Muslims, and other religious minorities were repealed. The death penalty was abolished; so were floggings. Deportation to Siberia, one of Imperial Russia's most hated and feared punishments, was abolished. So many liberal reforms passed so quickly that justice minister Kerensky was soon moved to boast that Russia was now the freest nation in the world.

The new government also dismissed all provincial governors. These officials had been appointed by the Emperor, and so you can understand that the Provisional Government might have doubts about their loyalty to the new order. In fact, some were staunch monarchists; others were willing to take oaths of loyalty to the new government. It didn't matter. Every one was dismissed. Their role was to be taken up by the *zemstvos*, basically local councils. *Zemstvos* had been created under earlier reforms, but like the Duma, they had in practice been more consultative bodies than legislative ones, and they had little expertise in actual governance.

These changes were in the spirit of the revolution, but they created an immediate practical problem. The new government had dissolved the mechanism by which the old government had exercised control over the vast Russian nation and replaced it with a patchwork of local councils

that varied widely in their competence and ability to govern, let alone their willingness to cooperate with the government in Petrograd.

The Provisional Government also carried through its commitment to dissolve police organizations. These were to be replaced by citizen militias. Again, though the desire to rid Russia of the chief implement of Imperial oppression was understandable, this action also diminished the Provisional Government's ability to enforce its will. The Provisional Government also moved swiftly and comprehensively on the agreed-upon amnesty for political prisoners. I'll have more to say about that in a few minutes.

These reforms were enacted swiftly because they were uncontroversial. Everybody wanted them. Land reform was still needed, but that was a tricky business and the Provisional Government was notably reluctant to touch it. In the absence of action from Petrograd, many peasants took measures into their own hands. As word percolated across Russia's vast territory of the Emperor's abdication, many of the rural peasants saw the Revolution as principally about land reform and set to work on their own spontaneous "people's land reform," if you like. This took the form of peasants harvesting crops and rustling livestock from other people's land. It got more serious once soldiers from rural regions began hearing about the do-it-yourself land reform underway back home and began deserting in large numbers so they could hurry back and get in on the action.

Another reform that the Provisional Government was slow to move forward on was this Constituent Assembly that was supposed to form the nucleus of Russia's new post-revolutionary government. It had been agreed that the Constituent Assembly would be chosen in a nationwide election on the principle of universal suffrage, including women, by the way. Women had played an important role in the February Revolution and the new government acknowledged that by making Russia the first country in the world to grant full rights of suffrage to every adult woman.

The thing is, just between you and me, the Provisional Government has a legitimacy problem. The Duma had been assembled from an election process that was weighted to favor landowners and the urban bourgeoisie. And even at that, the Provisional Government was only tenuously linked to the Duma. Not all the ministers were even Duma members, and the Duma itself had not ratified the Provisional Government, or even been asked to. Rodzianko, the Chairman of the Duma, was not in the new government. He was regarded as too close to the Emperor. In fact, you could argue that the Provisional Government was self appointed. And you would not be far wrong.

The Provisional Government had a lot of popular support at first, but it was just a matter of weeks before that support began to dwindle as the government began to take unpopular decisions, which made the disaffected wonder out loud just who these guys were, anyway, and how do they get to make all these decisions. There was no constitution in place, not even a final decision on whether Russia was to be a monarchy or a republic. How would authority be

allocated between the *zemstvos* and the national government? What was the mechanism for the national government to enforce its will? Questions like these remained unanswered. If at least a Constituent Assembly could be assembled after a democratic election, it could ratify the current council of ministers, or replace it, if they deemed that advisable, and that would at least begin to answer the mounting questions regarding the new government's legitimacy. And if the Provisional Government were at least seen to be organizing an election that would lead to a Constituent Assembly within the next—oh, I don't know, six months? Nine months? A year?—that could at least buy the Provisional Government some breathing room to operate in the meanwhile.

But in fact, the Provisional Government never did prioritize that Constituent Assembly election. This was likely their biggest single mistake, and it's all the more perplexing because we don't even have much in the way of sources to tell us *why* this crucial question kept getting pushed to the bottom of the government agenda. The closest we can get to an answer is the testimony of the Secretary to the Provisional Government, an aristocrat named Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, who would later say that there was no conscious decision to put off the election, it was just that there was always something else that seemed more pressing at the time.

[music: Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, III. Tuileries.]

That was a quick summary of what the Provisional Government is up to in the aftermath of the Revolution. Now let's turn our attention to the Petrograd Soviet. I said last time that the Soviet was functioning as a sort of revolutionary conscience. It supported the Provisional Government, but only so long as the Provisional Government hewed to the agreed list of revolutionary goals. But it wielded power in its own name as well, most famously, or perhaps notoriously, on March 14, even before the Emperor formally abdicated, when it issued its first decree, Soviet Order Number One.

This was a directive to the Petrograd Garrison and it addressed two problems. First, soldiers were complaining about bad treatment by their officers. Order Number One dealt with this by limiting the authority of military officers. Soldiers were excused from military discipline when off duty. They would not have to stand at attention and salute. Officers were instructed to address their troops by the formal pronoun, rather than the familiar pronoun. Second, since military officers were among the most conservative elements in society, the Soviet understandably feared that these conservative military officers were a potential font of counterrevolutionary plots to restore the Imperial system. Thus, Order Number One asserted that the Petrograd Soviet was the highest military authority in Russia and that orders of military officers and, significantly, even the Provisional Government, were to be obeyed only insofar as they were consistent with the decrees of the Soviet and approved by elected committees of soldiers from each unit.

Ostensibly, all this was to protect the soldiers' dignity and guard against counterrevolutionary forces taking control of the Petrograd Garrison and using it to undo the Revolution. The order

was addressed to the Petrograd Garrison only. Nevertheless, Order Number One was quickly distributed to soldiers at the front and taken to apply to them as well. Whether it was intended to kneecap the Provisional Government by depriving it of a means, the army, which the government might have used to assert its will on the country, is a matter of debate. But that certainly was the effect. Soviet Order Number One would take on a life of its own, and Leon Trotsky would later dub it “the only worthy document to come out of the February Revolution.”

Now, you may be wondering where the former Emperor was during all of this. After his abdication, Nikolai returned to Stavka headquarters at Mogilev, where he said his farewells and issued a statement to the Army, instructing them in the future to take their orders from the Provisional Government. It was at Mogilev that Nikolai heard the news that his brother Mikhail had refused the Imperial crown. This incensed Nikolai, who responded by rescinding his abdication in favor of Mikhail and issuing a third abdication statement, in which he went back to abdicating in favor of the twelve-year old Crown Prince Alexei. Stavka forwarded Nikolai’s latest abdication statement to the Provisional Government in Petrograd, who promptly filed the statement away in the drawer marked “to be ignored.” Nikolai did not yet understand how little his decrees now mattered.

Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that Nikolai is headed for an unhappy end, but I think it’s important to keep in mind that right now, he has no idea of what fate awaits him. When monarchs abdicate, it usually means they sail off into a comfortable retirement somewhere, where they no longer wield power, but still live an easier life than people like you or me. Historically, monarchs have abdicated for a variety of reasons, some of them personal, like failing health, or familial, such as a desire to guide their child through the opening years of their own rule. Sometimes monarchs abdicate because of defeat in war, Napoleon being an obvious example.

Russia has not been defeated in the Great War, so this abdication is not quite the same thing. The closest analogies I can think of are two nineteenth-century abdications we discussed before on this podcast, the abdications of the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand in December 1848, and of the King of Piedmont-Sardinia, Charles Albert, just a few months later in March of 1849.

Charles Albert abdicated because the war he had begun against Austria was turning out badly for his kingdom; his abdication allowed his son, Victor Emmanuel, to get more favorable peace terms than Charles Albert could have gotten. You can see some parallels there. Kaiser Ferdinand abdicated in favor of his nephew Franz Josef in the face of a revolutionary uprising, so you can see some parallels there, too. Both of these are stories of monarchs who sacrificed their personal rule to preserve their dynasty. It’s likely that’s the sort of outcome Nikolai had in mind, too. He would leave, his brother would take over, and Imperial Russia would carry on.

Only, his brother wasn’t following the script, and neither was the nation. Nikolai wrote to the Provisional Government, requesting that he be permitted to return to the palace outside Petrograd

where the rest of his family was until his children recovered from their measles. He then offered to relocate to one of the many Imperial palaces, someplace remote from the front lines, until the war was over. He further requested that after the war, he and his family be permitted to retire to their vacation palace on the Crimea.

The Government agreed, or at least let's say they were okay with him returning to his family, which he did. Soldiers were assigned to guard the palace, although it's an even bet whether they were keeping the Emperor's enemies out, or keeping the Romanovs in. Probably a little of both.

That's because while the members of the Provisional Government were mostly okay with treating the former Emperor with respect, the Petrograd Soviet was not ready to make nice. Socialists in Russia, and everywhere really, hated Nikolai. They saw him as a singularly cruel and oppressive foe of them and of the working classes. They wanted to see him put on trial for crimes against the Russian people, and his wife Alexandra for treason. For its part, the Provisional Government worried that the question of what to do with the Emperor was threatening the uneasy alliance between them and the Soviet and might tarnish the new Russia's image abroad. It seemed expedient to remove this problem by removing Nikolai, and so, one of Foreign Minister Miliukov's first assignments was to find a foreign country willing to accept the Romanovs in exile.

His first queries were to Switzerland, Denmark, France, and Britain. The French, who were having their own troubles with mutinous soldiers and restless socialists at this time—we'll talk more about that next week—wanted nothing to do with him. The British scotched the idea of sending Nikolai to Switzerland or Denmark. Both of these small, neutral countries bordered on Germany, and the government of David Lloyd George worried that it would be too easy for Nikolai to slip across the border into Germany—or be abducted and spirited away to Germany—where the Germans could use him to undermine the new Russian government and perhaps spark a civil war.

The Lloyd George government at first offered to allow Nikolai and his family to come to Britain, and Nikolai agreed. Indeed, he quickly became enthusiastic about this idea, but then the British government suddenly retracted the offer. Lloyd George would claim it was his decision, and it would only emerge much later that he was covering for the person who actually put the kibosh on this plan, that being the King himself, George V, Alexandra's first cousin and the man young Nikolai used to love and hate being mistaken for. It seems the King's advisors counseled him that the Labour Party and other British socialist groups would make trouble if Nikolai lived out his days on British soil, possibly endangering the monarchy in Britain. George decided it just wasn't worth the risk.

But the biggest question of all facing the new Provisional Government, a question that was *not* one of the easy and uncontroversial ones, but neither could be tabled as easily as land reform or the future of the Romanovs, was the war. Remember the war? Russia had seven million soldiers

under arms along front lines stretching from Latvia to Persia. They were still in the trenches, fighting, bleeding, dying...for what, exactly?

If you think back to those crazy days of the Duma, its members giving speeches about Rasputin, about the Empress, about stupidity or treason, you'll recall that the liberals in the Duma, the democrats and constitutionalists, were not attacking the Emperor's government for fighting the war; they were mad at the government for botching it.

You might be tempted to ask whether this liberal enthusiasm for the war was opportunistic. In other words, did the liberals merely get behind the criticisms of the war effort as a convenient political device that allowed them to attack the Emperor and look patriotic at the same time? Surely political convenience played a role, but this is an era when liberalism and nationalism often go hand in hand. A lot of the aristocracy have German family connections, including the Romanovs themselves, while the business and professional class, the bourgeoisie, were among the most stridently anti-German of Russians. Remember the good old days of the Concert of Europe, which wanted every nation to have a monarch, because the republican rabble would think only of the welfare of their own nation, and not of Europe generally?

Think back to the days of the July Crisis in 1914. Remember Alexander Krivoshein, the agriculture minister who was one of the most outspoken in favor of a hard line against Austria and Germany? Also a supporter of land reform and of granting more power to the Duma. He was one of the ministers who was dismissed for opposing the Emperor's decision to take personal command of the Army. Remember Sergei Sazonov, the foreign minister who was in the thick of the diplomatic machinations in the Balkans that ultimately led to the war? Dismissed by the Empress Alexandra for being insufficiently loyal.

The members of the Provisional Government were cut from this same cloth. They believed in the war, and they believed the fighting must go on. In fact, the Provisional Government was so committed to continuing the war that some in the German government suspected that the February Revolution had been engineered by the British. But the war was not popular with the soldiers, nor with the working class masses, and these were the two groups that had just toppled the Emperor. This forced the Provisional Government into an awkward balancing act. The Allies, Britain, France and Italy, and soon the United States, they very much want Russia to stay in the war. Speedy recognition of the Provisional Government by the Allies abroad helped buttress the government's legitimacy at home, and Allied financial aid promised to get Russia back on her feet, but all this foreign goodwill would evaporate in a heartbeat if the Allies got the idea that the Provisional Government wanted out of its wartime commitments.

The Imperial government had pledged to the Allies that it would not seek a separate peace with Germany. The Allies regarded that pledge as still binding on the Provisional Government, and so, from the Allied point of view, the Provisional Government's legitimacy was weighed and measured by its willingness to live up to Russia's already-existing obligations.

[music: Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, VII. Limoges.]

And then there is the matter of the Provisional Government's policy of amnesty for political prisoners. It was a broad amnesty, and perhaps it needed to be. After decades of political repression, Russia had a lot of political prisoners, whose ideologies ranged from moderate and liberal to socialist and extremist, including individuals who had committed crimes of violence in their opposition to the old regime. There's something about long-term political repression that tends to radicalize opponents of the government, so none of this is surprising.

The Petrograd Soviet had pushed for a broad amnesty, no doubt because a lot of the Soviet's leaders were themselves socialists who distrusted the members of the Provisional Government and saw their willingness to release even the most radical prisoners as the acid test of the Provisional Government's willingness to accept and work with Russian socialists, even socialists who opposed the Provisional Government on the grounds that the February Revolution hadn't gone far enough. From the point of view of the liberal moderate supporters of the Provisional Government, well, if the Provisional Government is only going to release political prisoners who support it and leave its enemies locked up, how does that make the Provisional Government any better than the Imperial Government that preceded it?

One example of how broad the amnesty would be would be the case of the Georgian Ioseb Jughashvili. He was born in 1878 in the town of Gori in what is today Georgia but was then part of the Russian Empire. His father was a shoemaker who enjoyed success at first, but his fortunes declined and he became an alcoholic. I'll leave it to you to speculate which is the chicken and which is the egg, but the ex-shoemaker and current drunkard took out his frustrations on his wife and son. Young Ioseb's mother, who was religiously devout, left her husband, taking Joseph with her, and moved in with an Orthodox priest who was a friend of the family.

Joseph had a bout with smallpox in his childhood, which left his face scarred for life. It seems that he was an intelligent child and his mother, despite her unfortunate circumstances, was determined to see the boy get an education. He was enrolled at the Gori Church School at the age of ten. The school was intended for the children of clergy, but Joseph's priest-patron told a little white lie to get him in. Joseph was a good student, though he also earned a reputation as a troublemaker. When he was twelve years old, Joseph was seriously injured after being struck by a horse-drawn carriage. He lost the use of his left arm, which failed to grow properly afterward. Later in life, he would develop the habit of keeping his left hand in his pocket or out of sight to disguise his disability, much in the same way as Kaiser Wilhelm.

At the age of 15, Joseph Jughashvili was accepted to the Orthodox seminary in Tbilisi, and he and his mother moved to that city. Again, he was a good student, but he did not get along with the seminary administration, which was ethnically Russian and hostile to the Georgian language and culture. Students were not even permitted to speak the Georgian language. Joseph, by contrast, was proud of his Georgian heritage and was by this time publishing Georgian-language

poetry in the local newspaper. Despite his religious upbringing, Joseph was also drifting toward atheism by this time, and socialism, taking up the cause of the working class. He joined a secret book club at the seminary, whose members read and discussed forbidden books, including works by Émile Zola, Honoré de Balzac, and Karl Marx.

In 1899, at the age of twenty, Joseph Jughashvili dropped out of seminary and became involved with the radical socialist underground. He began by teaching classes on socialism to his fellow radicals and was arrested for the first time soon after. This was probably meant as a warning.

But Jughashvili didn't take the hint. He became involved with illegal socialist groups in Georgia, organizing strikes and demonstrations, which were illegal. He developed something of a knack for spotting secret police informants and for escaping custody. He was hard to catch and hard to hold onto. The authorities managed to deport him to Siberia in 1902, but he escaped and returned to Georgia in time to get caught up in the Revolution of 1905. He aligned himself with Lenin and his Bolshevik faction, becoming the most prominent Bolshevik in Georgia.

During the violence of this period, he opposed attacks on Jews and Armenians, dismissing pogroms as the Emperor's tool to divide the opposition. He organized an armed gang of Bolsheviks who sometimes worked to protect minorities from persecution, but more often committed extortion and robbery to fund the socialist movement. The official Russian Social Democratic Labor Party opposed these tactics, but Lenin quietly encouraged Jughashvili to keep it up.

They had their biggest score in Tblisi in 1907, when Jughashvili and his gang attacked a stagecoach carrying cash from the post office to the state bank. Despite the fact that this cash shipment was guarded by a heavy police and military escort, Jughashvili's gang successfully attacked it and made off with over 300,000 rubles, worth millions of US dollars in our time. Forty people were killed in this attack, but none of them were Jughashvili or his men.

The robbery made headlines worldwide, but it hurt the reputation of Russian socialists in general and Bolsheviks in particular, making them look more like a bandit gang than a political movement. In 1908, Jughashvili was caught and deported to Siberia. He escaped in 1910 and made it to St. Petersburg before being arrested and sent back. In 1912, he escaped again and again headed to St. Petersburg. Lenin offered Jughashvili a seat on the Bolshevik Central Committee, because he believed that having a high-ranking Georgian in the party would appeal to them and to other ethnic minorities within the Empire.

By this time, press laws in the Russian Empire had been liberalized enough that the Bolsheviks had their own newspaper, called *Pravda*, which is Russian for "Truth." Jughashvili wrote articles for the paper. In 1913, he crossed the border into Austria, lived in Vienna for a while, and there published his most important work, an essay entitled "Marxism and the National Question," which examined the relationship between socialism and nationalism. This essay was published

under the pseudonym “Stalin.” The Russian word for “steel” is “stal,” so the name suggests steel. It also evokes “Lenin,” which you’ll recall is also a pseudonym.

Joseph Jughashvili would become known generally as “Joseph Stalin,” and that’s the name I’m going to call him from now on, since one, it is better known, and two, it’s easier to say, and I have a feeling I’m going to be talking about this guy a lot over the next, say 200 episodes or so?

Shortly after writing this essay that made his reputation as a socialist intellectual, Stalin returned to St. Petersburg, where he was caught again and deported to Siberia again, this time to a particularly harsh and remote region from which it would be difficult to escape. In early 1917, with only a few months to go on his exile, Stalin, now 38 years old, was drafted, although excused from military service because of his disability. Then came the February Revolution, and before you can say, “the workers must control the means of production,” Stalin was back in Petrograd. He was appointed editor of *Pravda* and assigned one of the Bolshevik seats on the Ispolkom, the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. And just like that, one of the most notorious revolutionary criminals in all Russia is now a player in the new regime.

Now, there are amnesties and there are amnesties, but you gotta admit, this is an *amnesty*.

We’ll be sure to check in again with Stalin in a future episode and see how all this works out, but we’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and a special thanks to Carol, for her donation, and thank you, Steve, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words going and the bits flowing, so if you’d like to help out, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn to the Western Front in 1917. Spoiler: more bloody, pointless offensives, only this time, the soldiers may finally have had enough. Plus a special Christmas bonus: the Red Baron. What’s Christmas-y about a German fighter pilot? If you don’t already know, you’ll find out next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned the name of the Russian Provisional Government’s cabinet secretary, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov. Some of you may be thinking the name sounds familiar. If the name Vladimir Nabokov sounds familiar, it’s because Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov has a son who has just turned eighteen years old at this point in our narrative. His name is Vladimir Vladimirevich Nabokov, and he will eventually emigrate to the United States, where he will become a professor of literature, an avid lepidopterist, and most significantly, a celebrated novelist. His two best known novels are, *Lolita*, the story of a middle-aged academic’s obsession with a twelve-year old girl, and *Pale Fire*, a complex tale about an American poet told by a Slavic émigré academic who studies and admires his American colleague’s work and who also just might be an exiled king deposed in a communist revolution. *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* will become two of the most acclaimed American novels of the twentieth century, even though English was Nabokov’s second language. This invites comparisons with Joseph Conrad, whom

we have already met on this podcast, although that comparison never sat well with Nabokov himself, who was *not* an admirer of Conrad's work. Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist, passed away in 1977, at the age of 78.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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