

Alexander Kerensky: An Interview

by JACK SCHWARTZMAN

AS KERENSKY entered the room I experienced a great shock. Fifty years have passed—one-half of one century—since he was Prime Minister of Russia, and here he was—in New York City—thousands of miles away from his birthplace: still vociferous, still opinionated, still stately. Yet what a difference! This once youthful, dynamic, thunderous orator; this once celebrated, persuasive, theatrical lawyer; this once dashing, nervous, energetic parliamentarian; this once enthusiastic, dictatorial, commanding minister; this once “Number One” man of all the Russians—was now reduced to a halting, bitter, semi-invalided person, destined to spend his life writing memoirs, and dreaming of *What Might Have Been!* This aged man: was he truly Alexander Kerensky?

As I was interviewing him, I thought of the millions thundering his name; of the ambassadors of the world battling the crowds to see him; of the hungry “masses” of Russia associating his name with that of the Savior—and replacing the Ikon with his photograph; of the adulatory editorials comparing him to the Messiah; of the jammed populace wildly cheering his presence! And I thought also of his sudden downfall; of the jeers and ridicule which he then received from bitter and hostile mobs; of the “treason” that the Bolsheviks later associated with his name; of the contempt that Lenin and Trotzky publicly proclaimed for him; of the oblivion into which he had fallen. And I felt melancholy at the sight of a man whom ironic destiny had spared for fifty *years* beyond his less than fifty *weeks* of power—and wondered pensively what the intervening decades would have been had he—and not Lenin and his successors—remained Premier of the Soviet State.

Impatiently, abruptly, he recalled the great dreams that he had envisioned. He spoke of his then-immediate plans: to end World War I; to “nip in the bud” the incipient civil war that was about to break out in the provinces; to abolish the horrible poverty and maldistribution of wealth that had destroyed the once-invincible empire; to introduce necessary and immediate land reforms by means of the proud program of “land and liberty;” to do away with capital punishment; to spare the lives of all political prisoners; to call forth an election to the Constituent Assembly; to do away with class distinctions; to end “pogroms” and racial and religious persecutions; to establish autonomous nations within a federated republic; to introduce freedom of speech and assembly; and to help create a free exchange of goods and services among the nations.

Alas! It was not to be! From the inception, it was hopeless. The German enemy shattered his “inherited” remnant of the Russian troops; poverty and starvation continued unabated; Lenin—from the “left”—and Kornilov—from the “right”—commenced an unbeatable two-flanked attack against his government; the Allies intervened and interfered with his plans; the people deserted him; his friends betrayed him. He became a man without a country; a patriot with a *patria*.

Yet the eyes of the exile sparkled still: a dream remained. Someday, he said, Russia would again be a true republic—the hope of Kerensky and ideal of the poets would be fulfilled.

Someday, he concluded wistfully, Russia would be free—truly and completely free! Someday . . . someday . . .

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