

Module 03: 1917 — Did the War Cause a Revolution?

Evidence 18: Miliukov's Speech to the Duma, November 14, 1916

A

Introduction

As the war continued into its third year, concerns about the Russian campaign and the regime's refusal to work with loyal political and social groups intensified among Russia's parliamentarians. In this famous speech, the leader of the liberal "Kadet" party, Pavel Miliukov, articulated the frustration of many with Russia's failure to prevail in the war. His challenge to the government — "What is it, stupidity or treason?" — demonstrated the growing crisis that Tsar Nicholas faced on the domestic front by the end of 1916.

Question to Consider

- What are the main concerns addressed in Miliukov's speech?

Document

November 14, 1916

Gentlemen, Members of the State Duma!

With a heavy heart, I ascend this tribune today. You remember the circumstances under which the Duma met over a year ago, August 1, 1915. The Duma was then suffering from the blows of our military failures. These were due to the scarcity of munitions; and for this scarcity the Minister of War, Sukhomlinov, was responsible. You recall how at that moment the country, under the influence of the terrible peril that had become obvious to all, demanded a union of the national forces and the formation of a Ministry composed of persons in whom the country had confidence. And you recall how even Minister Goremykin, at that time, admitted from this very platform that "the course of the war demands an immense, extraordinary spiritual and physical effort." You remember that the Government then yielded. The Ministers who were odious to the public were then removed before the convocation of the Duma. Sukhomlinov, whom the country regarded as a traitor, was removed. (Cries on the left: "He is a traitor"),

and, in response to the demand of the popular representatives, Polivanov, at the session of August 10 announced to us, amid general applause, as you may recall, that a commission of investigation had been appointed and a beginning made toward bringing the former Minister of War to justice. And, gentleman, the public agitation at that time was not without consequences, Our army obtained what it needed, and the nation entered upon the second year of the war with the same enthusiasm as in the first year.

What a difference, gentlemen, there is now, in the 27th month of the war! A difference which is especially striking to me, after several months spent abroad. We are now facing new difficulties, and these difficulties are not less complex and serious, not less profound, than those that confronted us in the spring of last year. The Government needed heroic measures to combat the general disorganization of the national economy.

We ourselves are the same as before; we, in this 27th month of the war, are the same as we were in the tenth and in the first month. As heretofore, we are striving for complete victory; as heretofore, we are prepared to make all the necessary sacrifices; and, as heretofore, we are anxious to preserve our national unity. But, I must say this candidly: there is a difference in the situation. We have lost faith in the ability of this Government to achieve victory (Cries: "That's true"), because, as far as this Government is concerned, neither the attempts at correction nor the attempts at improvement, which we have made here, have proved successful.

All the Allied Powers have summoned to the support of the Government the best men of all parties, all the confidence, and all those organizing elements present in their countries, which are better organized than our own country. What has our own Government accomplished? Our declaration has told that. When there was formed in the Fourth Duma a majority [Progressive Bloc], which the Duma lacked before, a majority ready to vote its confidence in a cabinet worthy of such confidence, then nearly all those men who might in some slight degree have expected confidence were forced, systematically, one after another, every one of them, to leave the cabinet. And, if we have formerly said that our Government had neither the knowledge nor the ability which were indispensable at the moment, we say now, gentlemen that this present Government has sunk beneath the level

on which it stood in the normal times of Russian life. (Cries on the left: "True! Right!") And now the gulf between us and that Government has grown wider and impassable. (Cries on the left: "True!") Gentlemen, a year ago, Sukhomlinov was placed under judicial investigation. Then the hateful Ministers were removed before the opening of the [Duma] session, but now the number of such ministers has been augmented by one. (Cries on the left: "True!" A voice on the right: "Protopopov?") At that time, we did not appeal to the reason and the knowledge of the Government, but, instead, to its patriotism and its conscience. Can we do so now? (Cries on the left: "Of course, not!")

In the French Yellow Book there has been published a German document in which rules are laid down for the disorganization of the enemy's country, showing how to stir up trouble and disorder. Gentlemen, if our own Government wanted deliberately to set itself a task, or if the Germans wanted to employ their own means for the same purpose – the means of influencing and of bribing – they could not do better than to act as the Russian Government has acted. (Cries on the left: "Correct!" Rodichev: "Unfortunately, that is true.") And now, gentlemen, you have the consequences. As early as the 26th of June, 1915, I uttered a warning from this platform that, "the poisonous seed of suspicion is already yielding abundant fruit," and, "from one end of the Russian land to the other, there are spreading the dark rumors of treachery and treason." I am quoting the very words which I then used. I pointed out at the time – and I am again quoting my own words – that, "these rumors reach high and spare none."

Alas, gentlemen, that warning, like all the others, was not heeded. Consequently, we find the following statements in the declaration of the twenty-eight presidents of provincial zemstvo boards who met at Moscow on the 11th of November of the present year: "Painful, terrible suspicions, sinister rumors of treachery and treason, of occult forces fighting for the benefit of Germany and striving, through the destruction of national unity and the sowing of dissention, to prepare the ground for a disgraceful peace, have reached a point where it is generally felt that an enemy hand is secretly influencing the course of our State affairs. It is but natural that from such foundation there should arise the rumor that our governing circles have admitted the uselessness of further struggle, the timeliness for ending the war, and the necessity of a separate peace."

[...]

Yes, gentlemen, there is a vast difference between that meeting of ours, under Goremykin, which took place on the first of August, 1915, and even in February, 1916, and the meeting taking place today. These meetings are just as different as is the general condition of the country. At that time we could talk about organizing the country with the help of Duma legislation. Had we then been given the opportunity to carry through the laws which we had planned and prepared for passage, including the law on the volosts, Russia would not now be so helpless in the face of the food supply problem. That was the situation then. But now, gentlemen, the problem of legislation has been shifted to the background. Today we see and understand with this Government we cannot legislate, any more than we can with this Government, lead Russia to victory. (Cries on the left: "Correct!") Formerly, we tried to prove that it was impossible to start a fight against all the vital forces of the nation, that it was impossible to carry on warfare within the country when there was war at the front, that it was necessary to utilize the popular enthusiasm for the achievement of national tasks, and that otherwise there could be only killing oppression, which would merely increase the very peril that they were trying to avert by such oppression.

Today, gentlemen, it seems that everybody feels convinced that it is useless to go to them with proofs; useless when fear of the people, fear of their own country, blinds their eyes, and when the fundamental problem has become that of hastening the end of the war, were it even without gain, merely to be freed from the necessity for seeking popular support. (Cries on the left: "Correct!") On the 23rd of February, 1916, I concluded my speech with the statement that we no longer dared to address our appeal to the "political wisdom of the Government" and that I did not expect any answer from the existing Cabinet to the questions which agitated us. At that time, my words appeared to some people too pessimistic. But now we go further, and perhaps those words will sound clearer and more hopeful. We are telling this Government, as we told it in the declaration of the Bloc: "We shall fight you; we shall fight with all legitimate means until you go!" (Cries on the left: "Right! Correct!")

It is said that a member of the Council of Ministers, – and this was correctly heard by Duma Member Chkheidze – on being told that the State Duma would on this occasion speak of treason, exclaimed excitedly: "I may,

perhaps, be a fool, but I am not a traitor." (Laughter) Gentlemen, the predecessor of that Minister was undoubtedly a clever Minister, just as the predecessor of our Minister of Foreign Affairs was an honest Minister. But they are no longer in Cabinet. And, does it matter, gentlemen, as a practical question, whether we are, in the present case, dealing with stupidity or treason? When the Duma keeps everlastingly insisting that the rear must be organized for a successful struggle, the Government persists in claiming that organizing the country means organizing a revolution, and deliberately prefers chaos and disorganization. What is it, stupidity or treason? (A voice from the left: "Treason!" Adjemov: "Stupidity!" Laughter). Furthermore, gentlemen, when the authorities, in the midst of this general discontent and irritation, deliberately set to work stirring up popular outbreaks, that is to say, when they purposely provoke unrest and outbreaks, – is that being done unconsciously or consciously? We cannot, therefore, find much fault with the people if they arrive at conclusions such as I have read here, in the words of those representatives of provincial administrative boards.

You must realize, also, why it is that we, too, have no other task left us today, than the task which I have already pointed out to you: to obtain the retirement of this Government. You ask, "How can we start a fight while the war is on?" But, gentlemen, it is only in wartime that they are a menace. They are a menace to the war, and it is precisely for this reason, in time of war and in the name of war, for the sake of that very thing which induced its to unite, that we are now fighting them. (Cries on the left: "Bravo!" Applause.)

Gentlemen, you understand that I can deal with no other theme today than this one. I cannot emulate Duma Member Chkheidze and occupy myself with our internal [Duma] controversies. This is not the time for it, and I shall make no reply to his references and attacks upon me. For me, answer has been given in that declaration which we read there. We have many, very many, different reasons for dissatisfaction with the Government. When we have time, we shall speak of them. But all those various reasons come down to this one general reason: the incapacity of the Government as at present composed. (Cries on the left: "Right!") This is our main evil, the overcoming of which will be tantamount to the winning of the whole campaign. (Cries on the left: "Right!")

And, therefore, gentlemen, for the sake of the millions of victims and the torrents of blood poured out, for the sake of the achievement of our national interests, – which Sturmer does not promise us – in the name of our responsibilities to that nation which has sent us here, we shall fight on until we achieve that genuine responsibility of government which has been defined by the three points of our common declaration: an equal understanding by all the members of the Cabinet of the immediate problems of the present; their agreement and readiness to execute the program of the majority of the State Duma; their obligation, not only in the realization of this program, but throughout their activity to look to the majority of the State Duma for support. A Cabinet which does not satisfy these three standards does not merit the confidence of the State Duma and must go. (Cries: "Bravo!" Stormy and prolonged applause on the left, in the center, and the left section of the right.)

Source:

Frank Alfred Golder, ed., *Documents of Russian History, 1914-1917*, translated by Emanuel Aronsberg (New York: The Century Co., 1927): 154-166; *Rech'*, No. 330, December 13, 1916.