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Dual Power

By [Siobhan Peeling](#)

In February 1917 two centres of power emerged to replace the tsarist government: the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. The Provisional Government had formal authority but the Soviet controlled the actual levers of power, including the loyalty of the troops, and offered only conditional support to the government.

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Definition

The term Dual Power describes the division of authority between the [Provisional Government](#) and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies after the [collapse of the tsarist government](#) in February 1917. From February to October 1917 the Provisional Government possessed formal power in the [Russian Empire](#), while the Petrograd Soviet held the closest thing to real authority among people in the streets. The Soviet supported the Provisional Government conditionally, as long

as it adhered to certain approved principles.

Formation

The Context of the February Revolution

The system of dual power arose out of the revolutionary events of February 1917. On 23 February (8 March) 1917 crowds of women marching for equal rights were joined by female textile workers protesting shortages of bread and male workers from other factories. By 25 February (10 March) there was effectively a general strike as hundreds of thousands of workers marched into the city centre. From 26 February (11 March) soldiers garrisoned in Petrograd mutinied and defied orders to march against the demonstrators; instead they spilled out on to the streets, weapons in hand, to join them. Bloody struggles on the street prompted feverish responses by politicians of the State Duma, Russia's semi-parliamentary institution, and by radical party activists. Their activities created two parallel sources of authority centred on the Tauride Palace.

The Provisional Government

In the right wing of the Tauride Palace, the Provisional Government emerged from efforts by Duma leaders to restore authority in the capital. The Tauride Palace had been the seat of the State Duma since April 1906. The Duma was an elected legislature with limited law making powers that had been granted by [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1894-1917\)](#) in the midst of widespread protest against his autocratic rule. The Tsar and his ministers, however, frequently bypassed or dismissed the Duma in subsequent years. On 26 February (11 March) 1917 the Tsar once again ordered the dissolution of the Duma. Members of the liberal and conservative parties, who formed the majority of Duma delegates and generally represented the interests of the propertied classes, had been calling for the Tsar to appoint a government of public confidence since 1915. Now they had to decide whether to obey his order to dissolve or to defy the Tsar, declare themselves in power and attempt to channel the revolutionary forces. Cautiously, they accepted dissolution, moved into another room of the palace as a gathering of private individuals and elected a Temporary Committee with the aim of returning order to the streets. Escalating violence among the crowds, as well as the resignation of the Tsar's Council of Ministers and pressure from the newly formed Soviet pushed the Duma elites to form a cabinet. On 2 March (15 March) the announcement of a self-appointed Provisional Government made up overwhelmingly of former Duma deputies appeared in newspapers, alongside an appeal from the Soviet for people to support the new government.

The Petrograd Soviet

In the left wing of the Tauride Palace, members of the socialist intelligentsia convened the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The revolutionary disturbances had caught radical parties in Russia unaware. Many prominent leaders, including [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#), were in exile abroad, and

those remaining in Petrograd did not anticipate the success of the revolution. From 23 February (8 March), however, the idea of establishing a workers' council, or Soviet, in the mould of those that sprang up in 1905 began to take hold among factory workers and revolutionary intellectuals. On 27 February (12 March) leaders of the workers' groups of the War Industries Committees released from prison made their way to the Tauride Palace accompanied by a large crowd. Together with several socialist Duma members, they declared the formation of a Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet and appealed for workers and army companies to elect delegates to a Soviet assembly to be held that evening. The assembly appointed an Executive Committee dominated by the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties. It established a military staff and an armed workers' militia to organize the struggle against the old regime and set up commissions for matters such as food supplies and finance. All day on 28 February (13 March) delegations of soldiers, sailors and workers thronged into the hall to declare allegiance to the Soviet, and to eat, sleep and debate. Proclamations were adopted to thunderous applause in the hall, but important decisions continued to be made by the intellectuals of the Executive Committee.

Negotiations

The Soviet's Executive Committee rejected participation in the Provisional Government, instead choosing to act as an independent organ of control over the bourgeois cabinet. On 1 March (14 March) it presented the government with a list of conditions for its support. These included amnesty for political prisoners; freedom of speech, press and assembly; abolition of restrictions based on class, religion and nationality; preparations for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage to determine the future government; abolition of all police bodies and the creation of a people's militia responsible to organs of local self-government; a guarantee that military units that took part in the revolution would not be disarmed or sent to the front; and a recognition of civil rights for off-duty soldiers. The Provisional Government had little choice but to consent. No mention was made of the major issues of war and land distribution on which the Provisional Government and Soviet could not agree, or of the legal status of the Petrograd Soviet.

Dual Power in practice

The Problem of Authority

The standard characterisation of Dual Power is that while the Provisional Government had the responsibility of running the country, the Petrograd Soviet controlled the actual levers of power, such as the troops, [railways](#) and telegraph service. The undermining of the Provisional Government by the system of Dual Power is encapsulated in the passing of Order No. 1 by the Soviet on 1 March (14 March). The order decreed that soldiers' committees be elected as a counter-balance to the power of officers in the army and that soldiers would only carry out orders of the government with the approval of the Soviet. At a stroke the order damaged government influence over the army and further weakened discipline within regiments. In addition, without a compromise with the Soviet the

government was impotent in the face of the clamour for land reform from peasants and soldiers and could not rely on the masses to support the war effort to which it was committed.

In practice, of course, there was not a neat division between the two centres of power. [Aleksandr Kerenskii \(1881-1970\)](#) served initially as Vice Chairman of the Soviet and Minister of Justice in the Provisional Government, becoming Prime Minister in July. In the wake of the April Crisis surrounding the revelations of the commitment of the Provisional Government's War Minister [Pavel Miliukov \(1859-1943\)](#) to the expansionist war aims of the Tsar, moderate socialist leaders from the Soviet joined the government to shore up its authority, only to become tainted by its failures. Until the Bolsheviks gained control of the Soviet Executive in September, however, the Executive would not countenance assuming power itself, even when crowds of protestors demanded it did. This was partly due to party dogma. Mensheviks in particular adhered rigidly to Marxist theory that a bourgeois revolution and a long period of capitalism and democracy were preconditions for socialist power. Soviet leaders, moreover, feared counter-revolution and civil war should they proclaim themselves in power. Historians such as Tsuyoshi Hasegawa have also suggested that, while the Petrograd Soviet exercised more power over the masses than the former Duma leaders, it could not be certain of its authority. It could not command cohesive military forces or comprehensive administrative machinery. The power of the Soviet rested in the masses who rallied behind it, and Soviet leaders feared the violence of the masses would turn against them should they become the government.

Regional Challenges

Scholars focusing on the situation outside Petrograd have challenged the traditional characterisation of Dual Power. Sarah Badcock has argued that Soviet and Provisional Government administrations in Nizhnii Novgorod and the surrounding province of Nizhegorod and in Kazan did not display divisions of power along the lines of the capital and worked closely together until the Bolshevik seizure of power. In Smolensk, according to Michael Hickey, hybrid institutions formed under pressure from local popular organisations. In fact, Orlando Figes maintains, the period between February and October was marked by a breakdown of all central power. Both the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet had limited control over the revolution in the provinces, where all manner of ad hoc committees sprang up to replace the tsarist administration. In the regions this was not so much a period of Dual Power as one of a multitude of powers.

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