Byways in History

Prince Lvov and the 1917 Russian Revolutions

Alf Wilkinson brings to life an often overlooked figure

PRINCE GREGORY LVOV BECAME PRIME MINISTER of the Provisional Government set up after the Tsar abdicated in February 1917. His appointment was ratified by members of the Duma and the Petrograd Soviet. Yet by May his influence had been largely replaced by the rising star of the government, Kerensky, and in July he resigned after the 'July Days' revolt. Why was Lvov appointed Prime Minister in the first place and why was he so easily swept aside by the events of mid 1917?

Born in 1861, Prince Lvov was a member of one of Russia's oldest noble families, with huge estates all over the country. He was deeply religious, and even from an early age showed great concern for the peasants. He studied law at Moscow University and then followed the traditional route of Russia's upper classes into the service of the Tsar. He became a spokesman for rural landed gentry at the Tsar's court and was Minister of the Interior from 1886 to 1893. He made a real effort to boost the interests of rural areas at a time when great emphasis was being placed on industrial development. He played a prominent part in famine relief in his home area after the disastrous harvest of 1891; a role he again played during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-6.

Lvov's commitment to the people of Russia

Lvov's rise to prominence came, as you might expect, through the Zemstvo movement. First set up in 1864 as an attempt to improve local government, the Zemstvo came to play an increasing role in rural life, providing schools, hospitals and relief to the peasants. They also became closely identified with increasing demands for more representation and involvement in national government. By 1905 Prince Lvov had joined the Constitutional Democratic party (the Kadets) which became the largest political party in the First Duma with 182 seats.

As a liberal monarchist, Lvov favoured constitutional reform, but was clearly a moderate, as you would expect of a man of his background and upbringing. His deep concern for the peasants made him acutely aware of their plight, and most of his political energy was spent in trying to improve conditions for the vast majority of the population that lived in the countryside. He was essentially in favour of the monarchy, but urged Nicholas II to make concessions to increase participation in the running of the country. Following the outbreak of the First World War he was instrumental in setting up the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos to help the successful prosecution of the war. Much of his efforts were put into developing effective medical supplies and help for wounded soldiers who the army seemed unable, or unwilling, to care for. He was appalled at the level of corruption and mismanagement evident in the war effort. In 1915 he was a leader of the Progressive bloc set up by the Duma to aid the war effort and was astounded when the Tsar's response was to suspend the Duma. By January 1917 Lvov was calling for the replacement of the Tsar as the only way to effectively win the war.

Following the abdication of the Tsar, Lvov was appointed Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior. His appointment was an attempt to secure support for the new regime from rural and Liberal quarters, as well as urban ones. His idealism was seen as an asset, but he had a deep-seated fear of violence and was by nature an 'appeaser' who preferred to try to reconcile conflicting opinions. He was determined to carry out

Russian soldiers who joined the revolution with a red flag on the bayonet

Russia's international obligations and successfully prosecute the war - he saw no alternative to this other than capitulation to the Central Powers, and if Russia was to remain a great power then this was unthinkable. It was his continuing support of the war that led to his increasing unpopularity over the next few months.

Lvov: a liberal leader in post-Tsarist Russia

He tried desperately hard to set up a Constitutional and Democratic government in Russia, against all the odds. Political prisoners were released, censorship abolished, the Tsarist police system dismantled, political exiles - even Trotsky and Lenin - were allowed home. According to Robert Service wartime Russia became 'freer than any other country, even at peace'. Perhaps Lvov's idealism undermined any chance he had of success. By May he was stating 'the Government is an authority without any power whereas the Soviet is a power without any authority'. Under the chaotic conditions in Petrograd in May 1917 the government could, in effect, only do what the Soviet allowed it to do. Hence, Lvov's authority was increasingly being undermined by the increasing influence of Kerensky, who was a member of both the government and the Soviet. The government was broadened by the inclusion of some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries in an attempt to reflect the political situation and restore order. Lvov's position as a moderate reformer became increasingly untenable. Following the July Days insurrection, Lvov formally resigned from the government. He was arrested by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 but managed to escape. He ended up in Paris where, interestingly, he led a delegation of émigré Russian democratic politicians at the Versailles peace conference. He died in Paris in 1925.

It is ironic that a member of such a traditional Russian noble family should lead, however briefly, the government that replaced Tsar Nicholas II. But the part played by Prince Lvov does remind us that, by 1917, the Tsar had successfully alienated not only the peasants and the workers, but much of the traditional elite, too. It was the abandonment of Tsarism by people such as Prince Lvov that made the Russian Revolution inevitable.