

History

Paper 2N (AS) Additional Specimen Question
Paper

Question 02 Student 2

Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0 05/01/16

Specimen Answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2N (AS): Additional Specimen question paper

02 'The fall of the Provisional Government in October 1917 was entirely due to its own failings.'

Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

[25 marks]

Student response

When the Provisional Government fell in October 1917, it was in disarray. Its policies, whilst not necessarily malicious, had almost totally failed to retain the support of the Russian people, and had left the Provisional Government without allies at the downfall of their premiership. By delaying the Constituent Assembly elections and continuing to fight an unpopular and costly war, the Provisional Government ensured its own downfall – but in more forgiving times their decisions would not have resulted in such a premature end. First Lvov and then Kerensky were doomed to be operating a transitional government in a country fuelled by revolutionary fervour, a fervour that had not necessarily been satisfied by the deposition of the Romanov Dynasty. The Provisional Government was at least partly to blame for the October Revolution, but the Bolsheviks, the other left-wing parties and the Tsars were at least as much to blame.

There is much evidence to suggest that the Provisional Government was to blame for its own downfall. When it came to power after the February Revolution, it promised election to a Constituent Assembly by the end of the year, more land for the peasants, total freedom of speech and a policy of 'Revolutionary Defencism', defending the gains of the revolution from the Central Powers while avoiding being drawn into a costly war of aggression.

Many of the problems that the Provisional Government encountered would stem from them not holding to these promises. The Provisional Government would again and again delay the Constituent Assembly elections for practical reasons – it is, after all, a monumental challenge to organise a national election in a country that has previously had no existing infrastructure of this type. They would also delay workings of the Land Commission, as they felt it would lack legitimacy if it was in operation before an election.

Initially the Provisional Government implemented a policy of total freedom of speech. This meant releasing all political prisoners and allowing for the public operation of all newspapers. However, over time, they slightly reneged on this policy, particularly in respect to the Bolshevik party. This weakened their position with the left-SR parties as well as the public, as they were shown to be a little hypocritical and weak enough to need to imprison their enemies. The Provisional Government also abandoned their policy of "Revolutionary Defencism" towards the end of their tenure, with Alexander Kerensky leading an ill-advised offensive in July 1917 that resulted in 60,000 Russian casualties. This was vastly unpopular, proving them to be hypocrites with no more militaristic skill or tactics than the Tsarist government.

The Bolshevik party overthrew the Provisional Government in October 1917, and so were obviously key players in the Revolution. However, their strength and capabilities were not as romanticised by writers such as Sergey Eisenstein would have you believe. The Bolsheviks were quite incompetent at times, and only ended up in government through a combination of luck and the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

Throughout their existence, the Bolsheviks caused many problems for the Provisional Government. From April 1917, Lenin was a constant thorn in their side, preaching of transferring all power to the soviets and refusing to collaborate with this 'false' revolutionary government. The Bolsheviks directly attempted to wrest power from the Provisional Government in the July Days, a horribly bungled attempt at a spontaneous revolution that taught the Bolsheviks some valuable lessons that they would take on board in October. Ironically, the Bolsheviks actually ended up saving the Provisional Government from destruction during the Kornilov Affair, as the Red Guards were the only real military force in the city of Petrograd. After the attempted insurrection, Kerensky gallingly had to let the Bolsheviks keep their weapons and free any remaining Bolshevik prisoners. These acts would lead directly to the October Revolution, as the Bolsheviks had demonstrated their ability to be a stable and strong force in Petrograd and now had the weapons to impose themselves on the people.

The Mensheviks and other left-SR parties also helped to make the October Revolution happen. It was through their complacency and dampened zeal that the Bolsheviks were able to even slightly legitimize their regime.

Before the Bolsheviks could get into power, they had to somehow control the Soviets. As winning the majority of seats in elections to the Soviets seemed unlikely, they followed another tactic: waiting. Following the February Revolution, the Mensheviks gradually grew more and more complacent: they assumed that democracy had now been won with the promise of a Constituents Assembly, and so stopped turning up to the Soviets. The Bolsheviks took their chance here, as they still turned up. They now had a majority in the Soviets, and control of the Military Revolutionary Committee. When they took power in October, the Mensheviks and other left-SRs had one chance left to stop the Bolsheviks by attempting to secure some kind of democratic or coalition-led government. But instead, they walked out in protest, shutting themselves and any non-Bolshevik politician out of power.

The remnants of the Tsarist regime also played a big factor in the fall of the Provisional Government. Many historians assume that the Provisional Government fell due to its own failings - but maybe they just faced an impossible task. No electoral infrastructure existed in Russia, not to mention the lack of laws around land ownership and freedom of speech. From Tsar Nicholas II the Provisional Government had inherited an unpopular war, but one which they needed to keep fighting in to ensure economic support from the Allied powers. Yes, the Provisional Government made mistakes, but there was no real short-term solution to any of these problems. The Provisional Government gambled on a long-term fix, hoping that the general public would remain complacent enough until a Constituent Assembly with some legitimacy could be elected. They were wrong.

It is unreasonable to say that the fall of the Provisional Government in October 1917 was entirely due to its own failings. Sure enough, their incompetency and the bungling leadership of Kerensky played its part. But they faced an insurmountable task, a set of debts from a corrupt, hierarchical old regime that had no quick solutions. On top of this, they had an enemy totally set on their destruction in the Bolsheviks, and no other competent opposition to counter the Bolsheviks' extremism. In the end, the downfall of the Provisional Government was mostly down to the unmanageable Tsarist legacy that they had inherited. If there had been more chance of a real democracy, then the Provisional

Government probably would not have fallen and the Bolsheviks would have been relegated to the doldrums of history. But in the end, the challenges left behind by the Romanov Dynasty proved too great for the Provisional Government to cope with.

Commentary – Borderline Level 4/5

This is a strong response with a consistent and clear argument, relevant to the proposition in the question. It is considerable range and adequate supporting detail. It could have developed the assessment of the Provisional Government somewhat, but the range and control is impressive and it would be borderline Level 4 and 5.