

My Brush with History: Lunch with Kerensky

by Harold Harris, Professor Emeritus of English

Seated next to me at lunch one day in 1967, Alexander Kerensky hardly struck me as a dominant figure on the world stage. After all, a half-century had gone since he had been thrown out of power by Lenin, Trotsky, and company and had narrowly escaped with his life. Now, having lunch with a small group of Kalamazoo College professors in a quiet Midwestern city, that time must have seemed almost as remote to him as it did to me and my colleagues. With one or two exceptions, we all had been born after the Russian Revolution, and with one or two exceptions we possessed only the most generalized knowledge of that epochal event and of what had happened to Kerensky.

Some years later I had occasion to think of him again, although in a very different setting. Rather than the almost bucolic Midwestern campus, it was in Leningrad (which several years later was to resume its former name of St. Petersburg) where I was reintroduced to the great man—or to his spirit, he having died within six months of our lunch together.

My wife and I were Leningrad in 1983 as part of the kind of tightly controlled, conducted tour of the city that in those days before the demise of “the evil empire” was the only way Americans could get to see any city in the Soviet Union.

We went only where Intourist wanted us to go, saw only what Intourist wanted us to see and could ask only those questions to which Intourist thought we deserved answers. Because I am a literary man, the questions I put to our stolid, almost robotic guide had to do with Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Gogol rather than with Kerensky or Lenin or Trotsky.

Indeed, looking back I cannot remember anyone so much as mentioning Kerensky (or for that matter, Trotsky) during our entire time in Leningrad. As our group was being shepherded through the enormous Malachite Room of the Winter Palace, it was as if I were suddenly overwhelmed by the past. It was in this very room, our tour guide informed us, that the actual transfer of power took place which Communists call the October Revolution. This to distinguish it from the February Revolution, in which Kerensky had been instrumental and which had replaced the Czarist autocracy with a democratic regime. I cannot say that all of this historical information passed through my mind as I listened to our guide, nor that my head was filled with any kind of political ideas. That would all come somewhat later. What I felt, rather, was the strong feeling that I was in as direct a relationship as I had ever been, or would ever be, to another human being who had been intimately involved with a world-shaking historical event.

My curiosity about Kerensky of course having been piqued by this “encounter” with him, upon my return to Kalamazoo I began to re-examine both the Russian Revolution and his role in it. Doing so meant, above all, reading Trotsky’s exceedingly long but quite exciting *History of the Russian Revolution*. What I discovered in Trotsky’s book was that for all his proclaimed belief in history being a struggle between two classes (with the working class destined to triumph) and his Marxian Socialist contempt for “the cult of personality,” he not only places great emphasis on his personal role in making the revolution but repeatedly singles out Kerensky as an individual rather than an impersonal symbol of “bourgeois democracy” or “Western style liberalism.” Moreover, without exception, his invocation of his defeated enemy—never adversary—is mean-spirited, demeaning, and

without a shred of sympathy or the simplest acknowledgement of Kerensky as a fellow human being.

At the time of that 1967 lunch I still thought of myself as some kind of socialist, although I was only a few years away from shedding a self-identity that had been mine since I was a kid in junior high during the Great Depression. But because I regarded myself as a democratic socialist I always hated Communism with a passion, recognizing that—for all its talk of “the masses,” “the working classes,” and “the People”—in actuality it held ordinary people and individuals in contempt. I knew that about Marxian Socialism when I sat down to lunch with Alexander Kerensky, and I certainly did not need any reminder of it when I found myself in the Malachite Room. All that I needed, which is exactly what my experience gave me, was the realization that behind the abstraction “the Russian Revolution”—and the notion of various agents most responsible for that cataclysmic event—were flesh-and-blood people, one of whom I had come to know if only very slightly.