Kerensky: Past Defeat And Future Hope

by Dave Harrison

Alexander Kerensky at 86 displays a clarity of mind and an optimism towards life that is surprising. He came to Kalamazoo College Thursday as a living monument of the past but left as a foreteller of the future - "there will never be a third world war" - and a keen dissector of both the world he once knew and the world today. Above all, Alexander Kerensky is a man who has made history and has been forced by circumstances to defend his actions of 50 years previous. And he performed that task quite forcefully and effectively Thursday night.

Kerensky masked none of his bitterness against the Leninist regime that unquestionably altered his life and the lives of the people of the country he loves so dearly. He called the movement that put his government into power and overthrew the czar in February of 1917 a "revolution" because it was a "spontaneous movement of free people," but classified the Bolshevik takeover in October of that same year as a "conspiracy, a coup d'etat," but definitely not a "revolution."

Obviously feeling that Nikolai Lenin misled the Russian people, Kerensky stated that Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat was not "free," and was never intended to be; that if Lenin had told the Russian people what he really believed (that he hated the idea of Russian democracy, according to Kerensky), then Lenin's movement would never have succeeded because the Russian people are such great lovers of freedom.

Kerensky marked the beginning of the Russian democratic movement, under the control of the intelligentsia, as 1902, although he said that the question of large and profound social reforms had been an issue in Russian history since the 18th century. To Kerensky, a lawyer, a new democratic Russia was very important. He visited many Russian towns, defending the politically persecuted and organizing consultations with people of different classes and parties. He said, "I knew Russia better than the people who stayed in town and read books," an obvious thrust at the Marxist elements.

To the former Russian premier, World War I was a confrontation of two irreconcilable positions. It was fought for permanent peace and democracy, but in the end it accomplished the formation of totalitarian dictatorship. Kerensky criticized the Treaty of Versailles as the factor which kept World War I from being the war to end all wars, labeling it as even more merciless than the Russo-Germany peace of Brest-Litovsk.

Kerensky entertains no notions that any revolutionary movement will overthrow the present Communist regime but said only that the Russian people "will not forever be enslaved by Communism." There is ideological change in the U.S.S.R. today; the people are more audacious, and they are beginning to understand the doctrines connected with the teachings of Marxism. He believes that when the system of teaching the doctrines is broken, the system of government will be broken also. "The Communist government will not be changed by fights in the streets but by changing relations between men in power and men out of power."

No comparative analysis was made by Kerensky between the effectiveness of his government and that which has developed in Russia since 1917 except in his statement that Lenin was a "destructor" and not a "constructor" of governments. He finds reason for the continued existence of the totalitarian regime in Russia in the fact that the western armies during World War II defeated other totalitarian regimes (Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy) but acted as Russia's ally.

Alexander Kerensky at 86 stood up well under the ordeal Kalamazoo College put him through. We were indeed, as Dr. Moritz put it, "happy to be this close to one of the great figures in history." One must marvel at the dynamic, political capable personality he must have been in his own time.

Dramatic to the end, and quite taken by the reception given him by Stetson Chapel full of enthusiastic students, Kerensky ended his speech with a plea which has been the credo which he has set before the world all of his life: "Go forth and be defenders of freedom, social justice, and peace."