

General Lavr Kornilov's Rise to Power

The Kornilov affair did much to alter the course of Russia's history post-Tsarism. An attempted right-wing coup was enormously effective in galvanizing political forces on the left, reviving the popularity of the Bolsheviks in particular. It was an unmitigated defeat for the Provisional Government and Prime Minister A.F. Kerensky, who was forced to enlist the help of his main political rival, the Petrograd Soviet, in stopping the army which he ostensibly controlled. By all accounts, Kornilov was an extreme man, both in his policies towards discipline in the armed forces (whether or not this was justified is another question) and in his attitudes towards the nascent quasi-democratic bodies which had taken control of the Russian state after the fall of the Tsar. At the very least it is safe to say that his views were a good deal more reactionary than those of Kerensky and the Provisional Government. The question then becomes, why did Kerensky allow Kornilov to rise to the position of supreme commander of the Russian armed forces?

For the purposes of this paper, we will examine Kerensky's own account of his decision to promote Kornilov to the position of Generalissimo, contrasting it with the views of other pivotal individuals in the process. Kerensky's story can be summarized in two main points: he selected Kornilov primarily for reasons of competence, and secondarily because he seemed slightly more moderate than the alternatives. The evidence suggests otherwise: that Kerensky picked Kornilov with full knowledge of his reactionary tendencies, which would have been readily apparent by the time he was appointed supreme commander on the 19th of July, 1917. Further, Kornilov was a popular man within certain political circles, which would have put considerable pressure on Kerensky to aid in Kornilov's rise to power. The appointment of Kornilov is therefore best seen as the desperate act of a man at the helm of a fractious government in an effort to restore order to the front while appeasing right-wing authoritarian elements whose support he needed to remain in power.

The beginning of Kornilov's rise to power came when Kerensky appointed him to the position

of commander of the Southwestern front on July 7th. It is important to note that this appointment came at a time when the army was by all accounts having great difficulties. In terms of morale, the war was deeply unpopular, and desertion was becoming more and more common. The situation had become so hopeless in some quarters that there were numerous recorded attempts on officers' lives¹. There was fierce debate as to how (and whether) to pursue the war within the dual government structures of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. And finally, the front had just been broken at Tarnopol, Ukraine on the 6th, necessitating an immediate retreat. Further complicating matters was what Kerensky described as “the bolshevik attempt to 'break up the inner front,'” better known as the July Days, occurring less than a week before Kerensky was to rise to the position of Prime Minister in the Provisional Government.² In other words, Kerensky rose to prominence at a time when the power of left-wing demonstrators and the Petrograd Soviet was readily apparent (and often falsely attributed to the Bolsheviks specifically, though they were not the instigators of the July Days revolt).

It was in this context that Kerensky promoted Kornilov to supreme commander of the Southwestern front, saying that general Gutor, Kornilov's predecessor, had “lost his head,” and that there was “no one else” for the job.³ Kerensky goes on to say that he thought Kornilov's main weakness, “a too great impetuosity in case of success,” would not be a problem during a retreat, but that his “decision, organizing talent, his initiative and independence” would be a much-needed asset⁴. This may very well have been true, but given the circumstances it is difficult not to see this promotion as giving power to a strongman in order to strengthen the army (in an effort to secure the front) and guarantee loyalty to the Provisional Government above the Petrograd Soviet. In fact, Kerensky had direct evidence of Kornilov's enmity towards the Soviet. In April his request to fire upon protestors in Petrograd was denied, after which he immediately resigned, telling the Minister of War that “he

1 Kornilov, Lavr, “Kornilov's Speech” (August 1917), in Kerensky, A.F. and Browder, R.P. The Russian Provisional Government 1917 Volume 1. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961.

2 Kerensky, A.F. Prelude to Bolshevism: The Kornilov Rising. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1919. p. 5.

3 Ibid. p. 4.

4 Ibid. p. 4.

considered it impossible to be a witness and a contributor to the disruption of the army by the Soviet” (White quoting Denikin).⁵

The next important piece of evidence to examine is General Kornilov's telegram of July 11th. In it, he proposes a number of measures, including “the immediate termination of the offensive” which had proven disastrously uncoordinated, and the introduction of the death penalty “as a temporary extraordinary measure.” Finally, he threatens that he will “resign [his] office...unconditionally” if his demands are not met.⁶ Kerensky explains away the extremity of these demands by comparing them to similar ones made by other generals at the same time. In doing so, it is clear that he hoped to justify why such an unprompted telegram was not an immediate warning sign that Kornilov was possibly insubordinate. However, the fact that the military establishment was apparently united in wanting to bring stricter discipline to the army does nothing to change the petulant tone of the telegram, nor the fact that this was the second occasion on which Kornilov had threatened to resign and made demands of the civilian leaders who were supposedly above him. What it does indicate is that the officers suspected Kerensky would be susceptible to political pressure on the issue, a suspicion proven correct on July 12th, when the Provisional Government “passed a unanimous vote, temporarily re-establishing the death-penalty at the front and setting up revolutionary martial tribunals.”⁷

It is important to note that for this document along with others attributed to Kornilov, it is sometimes unclear who was the actual author. Kerensky in particular was convinced that at least one telegram he received from Kornilov (this time on the 14th of July) was not actually drafted by him.⁸ In this case, the telegram came with a small note from Boris Savinkov, one of Kornilov's backers, affirming that he “support[ed] everything he has expressed word for word”.⁹ Savinkov was commissar

5 Denikin, A.I. The Russian turmoil; memoirs: military, social and political. Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1973 in White, James D. “The Kornilov Affair. A Study in Counter Revolution.” Soviet Studies. v. 20 no. 2 (Oct 1968): 187-205.

6 Kornilov, Lavr, “Telegram to Provisional Government upon assuming command of the Southwestern front” (July 1917) in Strakhovsky, Leonid, I. “Was There a Kornilov Rebellion? A Re-Appraisal of the Evidence.” The Slavonic and East European Review. v. 33, no. 81 (Jun 1955): 375.

7 Kerensky, Prelude. p. 10.

8 Ibid. p. 14.

9 Milyukov, P.N. Istoriya vtoroy russkoy revolyutsii. Sofia: Rossiisko-Bolgarskoe izd-vo, 1921. in Strakhovsky, Leonid, I.

of the Southwestern front at the time, and would continue to express his support for Kornilov until and throughout the entire affair. The degree to which he and other individuals shaped Kornilov's stated policies is possibly quite substantial, but in any case Kornilov had powerful backers. Just one example of this was evident during the Moscow Conference, when the newspaper *Ruskiia Vedomosti* published a glowing review of “the exceptional restraint of his speech” which showcased a “strictly non-party position.”¹⁰ Of course, in the very same article there are veiled references to the various left-wing groups at the conference who were not vocal in their support of Kornilov. Further, in the actual speech he refers to “the undisciplined mob [which] would destroy its own country in a torrent of disorders,” a clear swipe at the Soviets.¹¹ Indeed, in light of his actions at Petrograd in April the idea that he could be a non-partisan figure in the power struggle between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet was patently absurd. This bit of propaganda is therefore evidence that Kornilov's authoritarian opinions found consistent support among certain influential individuals.

We now come to the pivotal moment in Kerensky's decision, the conference with Stavka (joint chiefs of staff) of July 16th. Kerensky himself called the conference, to be attended by himself, his war minister, and generals from the various fronts. While Kornilov was told he would not be able to attend, Savinkov did. The purpose was “purely strategical,” in Kerensky's own words. Kerensky's account of the meeting is bleak: he claims that there was “a complete lack of strategical and political insight,” and that the assorted officers and generals preferred to blame “the state of mind of the private soldiers” for all of their woes.¹² In contrast we have the telegram from Kornilov (which he sent in lieu of attending the meeting) in which he also included the idea that there was a “long-standing deficiency of the commanding staff” (an idea with which Kerensky would have to agree).¹³

“Was There a Kornilov Rebellion? A Re-Appraisal of the Evidence.” *The Slavonic and East European Review*. v. 33, no. 81 (Jun 1955): 372-395.

10 “*Ruskiia Vedomosti* on Kornilov's Speech” *Ruskiia Vedomosti*, 15 August 1917. No. 186, p. 3 in Kerensky, A.F. and Broder, R.P. *The Russian Provisional Government 1917 Volume 1*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961.

11 Kornilov, “Kornilov's Speech” in Kerensky, A.F. and Browder, R.P. *The Russian Provisional Government*.

12 Kerensky, *Prelude* p. 14.

13 *Ibid.* p. 14.

Of course, Kerensky claims to have been thoroughly deceived by this promise, as he states that “all General Kornilov's appointments after he became Generalissimo were based upon an inverted principle. He immediately began to promote and reinstate men belonging to the oldest traditions.”¹⁴ But examined more closely, it seems almost obvious that this was exactly what Kornilov was implying in his telegram. Surely Kerensky remembered his history of demanding draconian reforms and absolute authority within the ranks, as had been the case during the days of Tsarism. Within this context, his complaints about an inferior group of officers were most likely referring to those who were new men, and not nearly strict enough, rather than members of the old guard with a deficiency of new ideas. In keeping with this interpretation, General Denikin, an officer who presented a stronger form of Kornilov's argument in person to Kerensky, later commented that “Kornilov's cleansing was not intended against men of solid military traditions, but against the hirelings of the Revolution...”¹⁵ Of course Denikin's version of the facts, like that of every player in the event, is carefully crafted so as to shift as much blame as possible away from himself. However, even taking this into account it is difficult to understand how Kerensky could have taken the opposite interpretation of Kornilov's telegram unless he was being willfully ignorant. In any case, this was the final warning sign Kerensky had of Kornilov's true intentions before he promoted him to Supreme Commander, and the idea that he did not willingly overlook it, just as he did many others, is highly implausible.

All of this must lead to the conclusion that Kerensky knew Kornilov was far from the ideal choice for him, ideologically speaking. If Kerensky knew that Kornilov's opinions differed significantly from his, and that he was insubordinate and therefore dangerous if he became powerful enough, the question remains as to why he instated him as the highest-ranking military officer in Russia. Here we must rely to an unfortunate degree on speculation. Part of the answer lies in the (previously referenced) text of the *Russkiiia Vedomosti* article glorifying him as a non-partisan savior. Kornilov was a favorite of the right, whether one chooses to believe that he was a figurehead or merely posing as one. His anti-

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁵ Denikin, A.I. The Russian Turmoil in White, James D. “The Kornilov Affair”

Soviet tendencies were in plain sight, from his willingness to fire on protestors in Petrograd to his opposition to the promotion of General Cheremisov (a popular figure among the political left) as his successor on the Southwestern front.¹⁶ Because of this we can surmise that Kerensky probably saw his appointment as a useful way to garner support from members of the military establishment (who would not have approved of a man like Cheremisov, ideologically much closer to Kerensky), right-wing parties within Russia, and foreign powers who would not take kindly to a rising Soviet influence. This is the conclusion drawn by James D. White in his article “The Kornilov Affair. A Study in Counter Revolution” and supported by documents which suggest that the Kadet party was directly suggesting the institution of Kornilov as Generalissimo.¹⁷ While it may not be a complete description of Kerensky's motivations and reasoning behind his decision, it is certainly an important part which he wholly omits. The decisiveness and competence Kornilov had shown in previous action must have accounted for some portion of Kerensky's reasoning, but his claim that this was the only consideration, in light of Kornilov's clear problems and the pressure he no doubt felt to appoint someone politically tenable, cannot be an accurate one.

16 Strakhovsky, Leonid, I. “Was There a Kornilov Rebellion? A Re-Appraisal of the Evidence.” The Slavonic and East European Review. v. 33, no. 81 (Jun 1955): 372-395.

17 White, James D. “The Kornilov Affair. A Study in Counter Revolution.” Soviet Studies. v. 20 no. 2 (Oct 1968): 187-205.

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