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“The Kornilov Affair: Unusual Alliances and External Enemies”

The Kornilov Revolt of August 1917 had profound impacts on the political and social organization of Russian society and contributed to the strength of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. Lavr Kornilov, then commander-in-chief of the Russian army, was frustrated by the state of the military and attempted a coup against the Provisional Government, led by Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky. Kornilov was afraid of a revolution from the left and wanted to ensure the “salvation” of Russia. He even offered Kerensky a role in his new government. To prevent such a takeover, Kerensky turned to the Bolsheviks and the soldiers for assistance against Kornilov and his followers. In the aftermath of the event, Kerensky remained a weak ruler and the Bolsheviks were able to gain strength and ultimately lead a revolution a few months later. Key themes in the rhetoric of the time include the salvation of Russia, the traitorous actions of various players, and the role of the Germans.

For some time, Kornilov had been warning the government of his fears concerning the weakness of the military.¹ He warned of the lack of troop discipline and of his desire to reintroduce the death penalty. He also spoke of the food and supply shortages the army was facing and their inability to be effective fighters against the Germans. His frustration grew, and on August 26, he sent L’vov, former head of the Provisional Government, to Kerensky with his demands:

¹ Lavr Kornilov, “Address to Moscow Conference, August 1917” in Robert Browder and Alexander Kerensky, The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents, doc. 1233, p 1474

- (1) That martial law shall be proclaimed in Petrograd.
- (2) That all military and civil authority shall be placed in the hands of the Generalissimo.
- (3) That all Ministers, not including the Premier, shall resign, and that the temporary executive power shall be transferred to the Assistant Ministers till the formation of a Cabinet by the Generalissimo.²

Kerensky verified L'vov's message with Kornilov and was instructed to join Kornilov's government as soon as possible.

Kerensky was shocked by the turn of events and sent a radio-telegram to the Russian people on August 29th as a response to Kornilov's demands.³ His message started off with a brief, more factual recounting of the details of the previous few days. He spoke of the need "for the salvation of our motherland, of liberty, and of our republican order..." Kerensky appealed to the people's strong tie to the land that was one of the cornerstones of Russian identity, as well as their desire for freedom and order. He spoke of liberty as a core goal, but "at the same time" he felt it necessary to place the country under martial law to preserve tranquility. The balance between freedom and order was difficult, he said, and the government must be flexible under the extraordinary circumstances in which Russia found herself. In this case, Kerensky leaned towards order, and thus he was required to distribute arms and free criminals in order to squash Kornilov. He also used a common tactic seen in internal strife, i.e., looking to an outside enemy for internal unification. He ended his message with a reminder to the soldiers "to carry on with calmness and self-sacrifice" in performing their "duty of defending the

² Alexander Kerensky, "Kerensky's Account of his Second Meeting with L'vov and his Conversation over the Hughes Apparatus with Kornilov," in Browder, Russian Provisional Government, doc. 1268, p. 1569.

³ Alexander Kerensky, "Radio-Telegram from Kerensky to all the Country, No. 4163," in Browder, Russian Provisional Government, doc. 1270, p. 1572.

country against the external enemy.” The concept of “duty” was difficult in this period of time as the country’s loyalties were divided among various groups including the Provisional Government and the Soviets. Yet despite their political or social groups, the Russian people seemed united in their goal to be loyal to Russia and do what they believed was best for the country. There was a lot of sacrifice for the “greater good,” but there was no agreement on how to achieve these goals of order and tranquility

Kornilov responded to Kerensky’s message with similar themes in his rhetoric despite the two men’s opposition.⁴ Kornilov started his message with a personal attack on Kerensky and accused him of lying about what had transpired earlier. The first paragraph of his message starts in a similar tone to Kerensky’s radio message, with a focus on the details and facts of the situation. He then transitioned into more typical “activist” language in order to engage the masses: “People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. The time of her death is near.” He was trying to pull on the heartstrings of the people by appealing to their personal connection to the Russian land and by personifying her. From his perspective, if the left were allowed to take over the government and if the military could not satisfactorily protect the country, then it was doomed. He also focused on another cornerstone of Russian society, Orthodoxy: “All in whose breasts a Russia heart is beating, who believe in G-d, in Church, pray to the Lord for the greatest miracle, the saving of our native land!” He tried to equate himself to the common person, to his audience, by reminding them of his origins as the son of a Cossack peasant. This connection is especially important, as there were strong class divides between his followers and much of his audience. Part of the tension in the

⁴ Lavr Kornilov, “Kornilov’s Response to Kerensky’s Radio-Telegram” in Browder, Russian Provisional Government, doc. 1271, p. 1573.

military was due to the class and social divide between the officers and the troops. Like Kerensky, he reminded the Russians of the external threat of the Germans, and therefore the importance of a strong military and Russian state to maintain their existence.

Kerensky and Kornilov were united in their devotion to Russia as their homeland and to Orthodoxy, and their fear of Germany winning the war.

The aftermath of this affair focused on shifting alliances, treacherous actions, and the necessary “salvation” of Russia and its need for a strong but tranquil existence to fight the external German foe. In an order to the military written on August 29th, Kerensky lambasted Kornilov as someone who “has now revealed his treachery in practice.”⁵ Kornilov as a member of the government was supposed to uphold its ideals and its unity. Yet his primary alliance was to the military, and he believed that he was taking necessary action in the short term to preserve Russia in the future. One of the goals of the Moscow Conference at which Kornilov spoke in June was to unify the country, but even within right-wing circles there were profound divides: “He speaks of saving the native land, yet he is consciously creating a fratricidal war.”⁶ Russian writing frequently depicted their country as “the motherland;” this theme of family is echoed in Kerensky’s use of the word “fratricidal.” Kerensky hoped to appeal to the people’s allegiance to Russia, its ideals, and their nationalistic spirit: “The hour has arrived when your loyalty to freedom and the revolution is on trial.” He also mentioned criminality, “and before it is too late let [the soldiers fighting for Kornilov] understand and become ashamed of the cause for which they have been criminally sent.” In the new Russian

⁵ Kerensky, “Order to the Forces of Petrograd” (August 29, 1917), in Browder, Russian Provisional Government, doc. 1276, p. 1580-81.

⁶ Ibid

society, the masses finally had a chance for justice and to have their voice be heard; however, this was not something to which they were accustomed to, particularly from official government channels.

It was not just other members of the government such as Kerensky accusing Kornilov of his “transgressions” against Russia. Soviet-Revolutionary supporters were also on the side of the Provisional Government. An editorial in *Volia Naroda*, a Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) newspaper, echoed much of Kerensky’s language and sentiment about the Kornilov Revolt. The editorial immediately starts with inflammatory language, “At the terrifying hour of grave trials in the life of the exhausted country, at the hour of the greatest outward danger threatening its very existence, a treacherous hand has risen armed with a fratricidal knife to strike a deadly blow.”⁷ Russia was again personified, this time as “exhausted.” Another common theme, that of “fratricide” was also echoed in this piece, as a reminder of the once unified country now divided from within. Also reiterated was the common theme of not just the threat from within but also the threats of the external enemy, Germany:

General Kornilov and all the social forces that support him at the present moment are the best accomplices of Wilhelm II and Hindenberg... Kornilov’s victory would mean an unavoidable separate peace- an unavoidable fall under the iron yoke of imperialist Germany.

The editorial goes on to attack other parties (the Kadets, Bolsheviks); their big fear is that unless the country rallies behind the Provisional Government, the nation will fall apart.

With war came sacrifice, and the editorial reminds the reader that, “History demands the

⁷ “Editorial in *Volia Naroda*” (August 29, 1917) in Browder, Russian Provisional Government, doc. 1291, p. 1595.

greatest sacrifice of the Government and the revolution, in the name of the highest ideals of humanity, to suppress the feeling of pity and to crush with an iron hand those for whom violence is the usual basis of rule.”⁸ The last part of this phrase refers to Kornilov and the other military officers for whom military law and violence was their rulebook. In this case, the SRs supported the Provisional Government in attacking Kornilov and having a strong, unified government; they had similar goals and used similar phrases and themes in their rhetoric to Kerensky’s.

The Kornilov affair had profound effects that reverberated months later and probably contributed to the timing of the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks were in a much stronger position than a few months earlier because they had more political support and arms. Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks could have, and perhaps should have, taken power during the July Days but did not. He said that it was a wise move because “We could have not retained power politically on 3-4 July because, *before the Kornilov revolt*, the army and the provinces could and would have marched against Petrograd. Now the picture is entirely different...”⁹ He also mentioned the Germans: “By immediately proposing a peace without annexations, by immediately breaking with the Allied imperialists and with all imperialists, either we shall at once obtain an armistice, or the entire revolutionary proletariat will rally to the defense of the country, and a really just, really revolutionary war will then be waged by revolutionary democrats under the leadership of the proletariat...” Lenin believed that a revolution was necessary in Russia, but until August 1917 he had not been sure when it would occur during his lifetime. The

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lenin, “Marxism and Insurrection, September 13-14, 1917” in Richard Sakwa, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, doc. 2.10, p. 46.

Kornilov Revolt provided him with the necessary weapons and the national sentiment to achieve his goals. The soldiers, peasants, and workers were exhausted from the war efforts in Germany and wanted to restore Russia to a more peaceful, orderly society. The government was revealed as being weak and ineffectual. The Bolsheviks promised to fulfill the masses' demands for peace (along with bread and land) and in a few short months seized power themselves.

Kornilov, Kerensky, and Lenin disagreed on how Russia should be ruled and how to make Russia a strong country. Yet they all had similar themes in their rhetoric, a love for and closeness to the land, the need for "salvation," and a need to protect Russia from the German threat during World War I. Unusual alliances were formed as the Provisional Government relied on the soldiers and workers as the manpower to quell Kornilov and his men. After a period of dual power, many in government spoke of a desire to unify Russia and were shocked by Kornilov's "fratricidal" actions and the huge schisms in society. Ultimately, the Bolsheviks were able to capitalize on the chaos of the period and were able to come to power much sooner than they had expected due to a change in national sentiment and Kerensky's provision of arms necessary to stage a coup against Kerensky himself.

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