

## Lack of Soldier Unity in Revolutionary Efforts in October and November 1917

By Olga Botvinnik

By October 1917, radical socialist forces in Russia had developed to almost their peak strength, teetering on revolution. While most revolutionary demonstrations and protests were concentrated in cities well within Russian borders, the soldiers of the World War I Eastern front joined in the rebellion. They played a key role in disrupting Provisional Government resistances, such as the Kornilov Affair against the leaders of the revolution, the Bolsheviks. Russian soldiers wholeheartedly supported the Bolshevik revolutionary movement, though specific strategies of endorsing the movement varied across the armed forces. All soldiers wanted to end the war quickly and peacefully: some resisted the interim Provisional Government by befriending German soldiers, while others wanted to egress the battleground by any means necessary and constantly defied orders.

There were two key instigators of soldier disobedience that decreased soldiers' respect in Army officers. The first, Order No. 1 (March 1917),<sup>1</sup> allowed soldiers to address their superiors without honorifics, which demolished the hierarchy present between officers and soldiers. The second was Commander-in-Chief Mikhail Kerensky's miserable military gamble (July 1917)<sup>2</sup> where he tried to mitigate soldier discontent by mounting a risky campaign against the Germans. While he was an excellent orator, able to impress many soldiers with the phrase "Forward to

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<sup>1</sup> "Order No. 1" (March 1, 1917), Johnathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History, 2009, doc. 18, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kort, The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath, 2006, p. 103.

liberty! ... Forward to death!"<sup>3</sup> his plan was woefully designed and exacted considerable casualties on the Russian (but not the German) army, which further degraded soldier-officer interactions.

While the war was initially greeted with nationalistic pride, by 1917 soldiers were exhausted.<sup>4</sup> Senseless killing and relentless barrage on Russian soil demoralized conscripted soldiers, who were forcibly removed from their home and sent to the intolerable trenches. Trench warfare, the favored technique of the time, was pointless. Gains of a few feet by one side would quickly be won back by the other. Many soldiers fraternized with the enemy to frustrate officers and promote peacekeeping efforts.<sup>5</sup> They were idealistic and naive; they believed that friendship between enemy soldiers would directly lead to peace. However, other soldiers vehemently opposed interacting with Germany as they were afraid of the German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of their views on fraternization, all soldiers wanted to end the war immediately, but soldiers at the front despised and resented any soldiers at the rear. The soldiers at the rear weren't in trenches and didn't need to worry about bullets whizzing overhead. They were "enem[ies] of the homeland,"<sup>7</sup> no better than the elites and Provisional Government that sent them there.<sup>8</sup> The Provisional Government was largely annexationist and had no plans to end the war anytime

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<sup>3</sup> As printed in Kort, *Soviet Colossus*, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> "Excerpts from Soldiers' Letters, Intercepted by Censors" (1915-1917) Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War*, doc. 5, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> "Condition of Troops at the Front" (October 2 [September 30], 1917), in James Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, eds., *Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1918; Documents and Materials*, 1934. As referenced on <http://soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917front1&SubjectID=1917armyrevolt&Year=1917>

<sup>6</sup> "Appeal to the Country from the Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies of the 12th Army" (printed in *Izvestia*, October 7 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, 1917, doc. 84, p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Chibrikin and Vasilev, "Resolution of the 2nd Company, 11th Siberian Rifle Regiment" (October 23 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 88, p. 233.

<sup>8</sup> "A Soldier Rails against Officers and Elites" (November 14, 1917) Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War*, doc. 56, p. 129.

soon, but the defeatist Bolshevik view resonated with the soldiers both at the rear and at the front. Soldiers did not want to risk their lives as mere German cannon fodder anymore. In support of Bolshevism, the rear interfered with mobilization of troops to the front. While this prevented aggregation of troops at the front, who could have more directly resisted officers, the ensuing chaos was detrimental to army function and officer morale.

By October 1917, officers desperate for obedient soldiers were driven to suicide, or more likely killed by subordinates, under the guise of suicide.<sup>9</sup> Soldiers were willing to achieve peace at any price and under any conditions — a few Army officer deaths didn't deter them. The officers saw that soldier disobedience and Bolshevik support was too great for the Provisional Government to curb. Even the officers didn't trust the government to organize the army because their last attempt at organization, the Kornilov Affair, was poorly executed and demoralized the entire officer corps. In a military intelligence report, one officer describes the conditions at the warfront to another: the stubbornly disobedient soldiers, the unending war, the lack of supplies; the list seemed to never end. Any and all attempts at disciplining the soldiers was seen as a "Kornilov move," a potential threat to the revolutionary campaign, and thus an attack on soldiers.

Not all soldiers had a clear view of revolutionary movements; some were relatively uninformed. As millions of peasants, soldiers and workers relied on only a few hundred thousand Bolsheviks for propaganda, some were bound to remain uninformed. In a letter to *Izvestia*, a pro-Revolutionary newspaper, wounded soldiers in an infirmary request a revolutionary speaker to teach them about the revolutionary causes. The soldiers constantly reiterate their ignorance,

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<sup>9</sup> "Condition," in Bunyan and Fisher, Bolshevik.

blaming the doctors and wounded officers who refused to discuss the revolution with them. The letter closed with a genuine desire to learn, “Comrades! I beg of you! Send us and come see us yourselves with your comrades. Bring us your slogans, come see us, we are waiting for you, send us your speakers. Sow the seed in our hearts, set us on a pure path we can follow unimpeded.” Even if these soldiers did not understand the specifics of the revolution, they knew it supported soldier’s views and had the potential to end the brutal war.<sup>10</sup>

Other soldiers thought the revolution was moving too slowly and demanded immediate action by the Provisional Government.<sup>11</sup> In an appeal printed in *Izvestia*, soldier deputies faulted the government for a lack of any unified domestic policy and accused the elites of “blind indifference” towards anything outside of their own concerns. A sense of extreme urgency is felt throughout the document, “economic collapse is mounting ... the revolution and the country are on the brink of danger ... Wilhelm’s regiments are advancing on us, and we must not waste a minute before defending ourselves. We declare before the entire people: this cannot go on any longer.”<sup>12</sup> The soldiers felt it necessary to inform the Provisional Government how wretchedly it was performing, especially since it was not government officials’ sons and husbands at the forefront, but the nameless male peasantry. Soldier committees demanded for peasant and land committees to receive their fair share of land, as distributed by the zemstvos and *not* the Constituent Assembly. They also wanted the war’s peaceful end,<sup>13</sup> cessation of all pogroms, transport of resources and human reinforcements (“Every extra soldier in the rear is a criminal!

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<sup>10</sup> Savin, Mikhail (Senior noncommissioned officer, Chairman of the [wounded] Soldier’s committee), “Letter to *Izvestia*” (mid-October 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 89, p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> “Appeal from the 12th Army,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 84, p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> “Appeal from the 12th Army,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 84, p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> “Revolutionary Demands of the 202nd Gori Infantry Regiment” (November 4, 1917), Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War*, doc. 49, p. 115.

Every idle, full-bellied, carousing soldier in the reserve units is a criminal!”) to the Army, and for all of this to happen immediately, for “the day and hour have come when delay is criminal.”<sup>14</sup> These soldiers were hungry, cold, and outraged that they were still fighting a war they didn’t believe in. Even more so, they were indignant that not all classes gave everything they had to the army, that the army’s welfare is an afterthought and not a central value.

After the Bolshevik revolution on October 30th, 1917, the soldiers were ecstatic, for their dreams had finally been heard.<sup>15</sup> But they didn’t appreciate the burden of freedom, as many celebrated, gave into temptation and drank too much.<sup>16</sup> Soldiers criticized each other for their deplorable actions, for they should be maintaining the new social order and not getting caught up in the excitement of the Bolshevik overthrow. This castigating correspondence between soldier groups further indicates dissent within the army, even after their ultimate goal was achieved.

Soldiers in the Russian armed forces of October 1917 agreed on a political direction, but could not choose a single path. However, the divergent methods employed by the soldiers at the rear and the front created chaos within the army and prevented a full-scale fight from the Provisional Government. While a unified soldier support of the Bolsheviks may have been more effective in directly influencing the revolution, the internal inconsistencies in soldier resistance played an important role in dispersing the Provisional Government’s scarce resources against the Russian revolutionary movement.

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<sup>14</sup> “Appeal from the 12th Army,” in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 84, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> “Appeal from the soldiers' committee of the 1st Cavalry Corps,” printed in *Izvestiia* (November 30 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 118, p. 287.

<sup>16</sup> “Appeal to soldiers from the soldiers' committee of the Volynsky Reserve Guards Regiment, Petrograd,” printed in *Izvestiia* (December 3 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices*, doc. 119, p. 288.

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