

# The Kornilov Affair: Fighting for a Lost Cause

By Lindsey M. Holland

On the heels of one of the least successful Russian offenses of the First World War, General Lavr Kornilov attempted a coup d'état to overthrow the unstable Provisional Russian Government in August of 1917; Russia's revolutionary year. The failed coup not only stripped General Kornilov of his power and freedom, it sparked a complete collapse of the Russian military authority with Russian soldiers dragging generals and colonels out of their homes to then murdering them in the street. One artillery soldier recalled:

Right before my very eyes a horror occurred that truly frightens me and makes my heart ache. ...three generals and one colonel were arrested... A small group of soldiers that had gathered there began to grow. ...they demanded that the arrested be handed over to them as traitors to freedom and the homeland. ... The arrested men were pulled and dragged out one after another, punched in the face and head and at random with fists, feet, and gun butts. They all begged for mercy, but there was none to be had from the comrades. ... they wanted to crush Kornilov's lackeys and weaken them. <sup>1</sup>

This ruthless approach toward high-ranking officers was a byproduct of the soldiers' discontent for General Kornilov; the same discontent that doomed General Kornilov's attempted coup.

General Kornilov's coup d'état failed because there was a complete lack of understanding between the military leadership and their soldiers, both at the front lines and domestically. This complete lack of understanding from the top officers of the political, social, ideological, and economic state of the peasant foot soldiers led the military leadership, especially General Kornilov, to make decisions with no

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<sup>1</sup> Morozov, I. (soldier) "Letter to the Socialist Revolutionary newspaper *Delo Naroda* from I. Morozov, Artillery Soldier at Vyborg Fortress." (end of August 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 80, p. 219.

chance of success. Making a play for a military dictatorship requires the support and loyalty of the military, which General Kornilov had less and less of as World War I dragged on. Four incorrect assumptions by General Kornilov brought the end of his putsch before it even began. First, the assumption that the soldiers were interested in having a revolution at all. Second, that they would not have their own conflicting political ties to parties opposing a military dictatorship. Third, the assumption they soldiers were as morally and nationalistically driven to stay in World War I as much as the military leadership and the Duma Provisional Government, and finally, the assumption that the death penalty would prevent soldiers from abandoning their posts at the front lines. These incorrect assumptions led to dissent within the ranks that turned into all out desertion, leaving General Kornilov without military muscle when he arrived in Petrograd to attempt to steal power by force from Prime Minister Kerensky.

In his talks with Vladimir Nikolaevich L'vov, a member of the Provisional Government, General Kornilov justified his play for power as a defensive move to protect the country from a Bolshevik uprising:

The Bolsheviks are planning to stage an uprising in Petrograd between August 28<sup>th</sup> and September 2<sup>nd</sup>. ... I can see no other way out than to transfer the power of the Provisional Government to ... the Supreme Commander.<sup>2</sup>

Here Kornilov asserted, he was not seeking power for himself, but to protect the nation from the Bolsheviks. Though many of the soldiers were also against the Bolsheviks taking power, as seen below in the Resolution from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Railroad

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<sup>2</sup> L'vov, V.N. (Member of the Provisional Government) "Memoirs" (August 24th, 1917), in Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.  
<<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917lvov1&SubjectID=1917kornilov&Year=1917>>.

Battalion, they still were not on the same page with Kornilov. Kornilov assumed his soldiers, politically opposed to the Bolsheviks, would support his coup to prevent the Bolshevik rise to power. The quote from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Railroad Battalion, below, shows, however, that this was not the case, that the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, while denouncing the Bolsheviks as a threat, nonetheless were opposed to any military effort to overthrow Kerensky:

We express our protest against all the comrades and political parties leading... to counterrevolution and anarchy, such as the Bolsheviks. ... If the majority are on the side of our comrade freedom fighter Kerensky, which means our side, then they have to submit to the majority without a murmur, and if not [they] should be considered enemies of freedom, the revolution, and the Homeland, lackeys of the old order and Wilhelm.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, this Battalion was endorsing Kerensky and pledging their arms to defend the Provisional Government against any attack, including one by their commanding officer Kornilov. Also, it should be immediately noted that this was a railroad battalion, as General Kornilov's forces were subsequently stopped on the railroads approaching Petrograd.

Legitimizing his coup as a defensive measure against the Bolsheviks, General Kornilov again incorrectly assumed his troops would be willing to fight the Bolsheviks at all. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Railroad Battalion's lack of support for the Bolshevik revolution, a view which might appear to have given some legitimacy to General Kornilov's decision to fight back against the potential revolution, was nonetheless a minority opinion. The Bolsheviks were successful in this period in recruiting soldiers, and many soldiers were pledging their allegiance to the Bolsheviks. In a letter to the Bolsheviks from two individual soldiers on the front lines of World War

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<sup>3</sup> Polkovsky and Chvertko. (soldiers) "Resolution on the July Days by the soldiers of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Railroad Battalion." (July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 69, p. 201.

I, we see through their writings that these soldiers were clearly taking sides in the upcoming political and military battle for power.

We consider the program of your Bolshevik part the most just. ... there is nothing here but Benefit for us peasants and workers... we need the program of your Bolshevik party like a fish needs water or a man air.<sup>4</sup>

Here the two soldiers pledged themselves to the Bolshevik cause and, later in their letter, even asked the Bolsheviks to send information to help them recruit their fellow soldiers to the Bolshevik cause.

Our provisional government has come out very much against the Bolsheviks. But we, positional soldiers, don't find any fault with them at all. ... We are little by little going over entirely to the side of the Bolsheviks.<sup>5</sup>

Again we see soldier at the front describing a climate of growing Bolshevik support. They are describing the Provisional Government and the Bolsheviks as opposing forces. They appeared to be clearly taking the side of the Bolsheviks, against the Provisional Government. From Kerensky's point of view, the peasant soldiers were powerless and too uneducated to take a political stand, but clearly from the soldier's statement above the Bolsheviks were winning the hearts and minds of the soldiers.

How were they doing this? How were the Bolsheviks winning the soldiers' hearts and minds? The Bolsheviks did it with their political stand on the war, their strongly opposition to World War I, a view Kornilov did not share with his soldiers. Kornilov's view on Russia's participation in the war was one of personal and nationalistic pride:

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<sup>4</sup> Solovyov, Nikolai, and Baronin, Ivan (soldiers), "Letter to the Bolshevik Party from Two Soldiers on the Southwestern Front." (July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 68, p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Sirebrov (soldier), "Letter to the Central Executive Committee of Soviets on Behalf of the Positional Soldiers." (August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Steinberg, Voices, doc. 75, p. 213.

...it is quite impossible for me to betray Russia into the hands of her ancient enemy, the German race, and to turn the Russian people into German slaves. I prefer to die on the battlefield of **honor** rather than see the disgrace and infamy of the Russian land.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Kornilov described Russia's participation in World War I as one of necessity to prevent the Russian people from being enslaved by Germany and losing their Russian honor and dignity in the process. This, however, is not how the Russian soldiers viewed their role in the war. A soldier in the trenches at the front line wrote his view on the war:

I most humbly ask you to inform us in the trenches how long this pointless war is going to continue... We will hold freedom in our hands as long as we're alive, but if we're gone, if they keep killing us in this **idiotic offensive**, then the common people are not going to see freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Here the soldier, Yurchenko, does not see the war as one of fighting off the German invaders. Rather, he sees it as an "idiotic offensive", one instigated by the Provisional Government. He continues fighting because he has pledged to do so and will fulfill his manly duty, but he sees no hope or potential victory, only continuing death. Clearly someone like Yurchenko, a peasant soldier, was a prime target for Bolshevik loyalty, due to his view of World War I as hopeless. This also went against Kornilov's view of the war as one of pride and nationalism, Yurchenko was not worried about his nation's pride; he worried about staying alive.

Many soldiers shared Yurchenko's view, WWI was an unnecessary war, contrary to the nationalistic view of Kornilov. Another soldier wrote about his belief

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<sup>6</sup> Kornilov, L.G. (Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces) "Response" (August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1917) in Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.  
<<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917kornilov1&SubjectID=1917kornilov&Year=1917>>.

<sup>7</sup> Yurchenko. (soldier) "Letter to the Soviet from the Soldier Yurchenko, in the trenches at the Front" (July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 67, p. 199.

the war was not only an unnecessary offensive, but a traitorous action by the Provisional Government:

...all of you are friends of the English and French rich. You would like to win certain advantages for these two states, and then something will come your way from the capitalists at the cost of the people. ... You are traitors to Russia. You have betrayed Russia to England and France.<sup>8</sup>

This soldier saw not only the Provisional Government, but also any Russian trying to continue Russia's participation in World War I, as a corrupt act. Kornilov, as a diligent supporter of Russia's participation in the war was one of those people this soldier, and many others, considered their enemy. Yet another reason Kornilov's lack of understanding of his soldiers led to a coup, doomed from the start.

Finally, we come to Kornilov's use of the death penalty on his Russian troops as a tool against desertion. Kornilov wrongly believed the use of capital punishment would encourage the troops to stay in the fight and retain their loyalty. This view was seen in the letter below from Safonov, a high-ranking military officer under Kornilov:

It has become obvious to everyone that humane treatment of politically unaware people in the rear and in the army is harmful, and decisive measure[s] are necessary, ... Let a few dozen traitors hang, so that thousands can be saved from treason, the enemy, and anarchy.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Safonov believed the threat of death would be enough to encourage loyalty among the troops. However, as we will see below, there were fates worse than death incentivizing disloyalty and desertion among Kornilov's troops.

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<sup>8</sup> (Soldier) "Letter to the Central Executive Committee of Soviets from a Soldier at the Front." (August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 76, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> Safonov. (Staff Sergeant) "Letter to the Minister-President of the Provisional Government from Staff Sergeant Safonov." (July or August 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 72, p. 206.

In the words of the soldier Gurianov, to the chairman of the Central Executive Committee:

This offensive has become loathsome to all the soldiers. ... has led to nothing but ruin. ... We, all the soldiers, refuse to attack and cause bloodshed... You don't scare us with your instructions about the **death penalty** and iron discipline. We have tasted the sweet and now we won't take the bitter.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the soldiers were not afraid of the death penalty. Whatever punishment the Russian military leadership could hand down could not be a worse fate than fighting at the front line. If the soldiers were already refusing to attack under the threat of implementation of the death penalty, what kind of soldier would be willing to follow General Kornilov into his own personal battle for power? These soldiers were not afraid of the death penalty because there was certain death in going to the front, and if they died, then there was certain death for their families at home, fighting their own battles against starvation.

"We, soldiers... are going to stay in the trenches at the front and repel the enemy, and maybe even attack, but only until the first days of baneful autumn, by which time we ask you to end the war and its bloodshed at any cost... If this is not done, then believe us when we say that we will take our weapons and head out for our own hearths to save our father[s], mothers, wives, and children from death by starvation. Remember that all your threats about the **death penalty** and discipline and the eloquent words of orators will cease to have any effect on us... it will be too late."<sup>11</sup>

This passage, more clearly than any other, conveys the complete disregard for the threat of capital punishment. Getting killed by Russian tribunals was no different than getting killed by German soldiers, to this officer, but at least if he threw down his arms, his family might survive the next winter famine. There was no political

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<sup>10</sup> Gurianov, P. "Letter to the Central Executive Committee of Soviets from the Soldiers' Committee of the 129<sup>th</sup> Bessarabian Infantry." (August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 73, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> (Soldiers) "Letter to Kerensky from soldiers at the Front." (August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg, Voices of Revolution, 1917, doc. 78, p. 218.

speech or justification for revolution Kornilov could give this soldier and his comrades that would inspire any to help Kornilov, not only to fight a war with Germany, but to fight a battle with Kerensky for power.

Looking back at all of Kornilov's shortcomings, amidst an understanding of the mood and positions of his military forces, there is great irony in General Kornilov's quote found in L'Vov's Memoir:

"I was commander of the Petrograd forces and I know the mood of those men...."<sup>12</sup> Clearly, General Kornilov did not know the mood of his men. He knew nothing of their political affiliations, their disgust for war, and the lengths to which they'd go, to end the bloody fight. The conditions on the Eastern Front had become worse than death, and the threat of capital punishment was almost laughable with death on the front a near certainty. General Kornilov thought loyalty could be had by force, but when the soldiers were starving and desperate, while being promised peace by the Bolshevik party, their loyalty was easily stolen away from Kornilov. Kornilov went to battle against the Provisional Government, with the Provisional Government being supported by the Bolsheviks, having already lost the fight. Railroad workers, including the Railroad Battalion, loyal to Kerensky blocked Kornilov's passage to Petrograd, while Kornilov's soldiers, weary of war and loyal to the Bolsheviks, abandoned him on the tracks. General Kornilov's arrogance and poor judgment of his troops' loyalties made his attempted coup a lost cause before it even began.

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<sup>12</sup> L'vov, V.N. (Member of the Provisional Government) "Memoirs" (August 24th, 1917), in Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.



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