

Maggie Kane
February 25, 2013

Lenin in Exile Evaluates the Kornilov Affair (August 30, 1917)

Between August 24 and 31, 1917 Lavr Kornilov, the right-wing commander-in-chief of the Russian military, planned and staged a coup to seize control of the government. On August 30 of that same year, Lenin wrote *To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.* in response to the Kornilov revolt. At the time of writing the Bolsheviks had yet to receive a majority in the Petrograd Soviet, though they achieve a majority just days after the attempted takeover. Lenin's reaction to Kornilov's attempted coup d'état shows his authority in the party, his exclusionary "us versus them" mentality, and his insistence on remaining involved in the events taking place in Petrograd. These insights into Lenin's opinions and worldviews represent well the stance he would take when the opportunity for the Bolsheviks to take power arrived.

Lenin was surprised both by the timing and format of the revolt, probably because the military was weak at the time of the attempted takeover.¹ Exhausted from World War I and hampered by insufficient clothing, food, and other supplies, many soldiers deserted their posts and the ones who stayed were indubitably wearied.² Even Kornilov expressed his frustration that the soldiers were undisciplined and "becoming nothing more than rabble".³ Lenin interpreted the desertions as the soldiers "voting with their feet", and was well aware of the decaying state of the

1 Lenin, "To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.," (Helsingfor, 1917)
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/aug/30.htm>

2 Richard Clayton, "Revolution with Cannon Fodder" (Cambridge, 2010)
<http://web.mit.edu/russia1917/papers/0316-RevolutionCannonFodder.pdf>

3 Morgan Philips Price, *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* (G. Allen & Unwin, 1921), p 73; quoted in <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSkornilov.htm>

Russian army. When faced with the threat of a takeover by this military, Lenin realized that the Bolsheviks needed to take a stand against Kornilov without aligning themselves with Kerensky.

In his letter to the Central Committee of the party, Lenin outlines the ways in which the Bolsheviks can maintain their ideals and stave off an attack. In his address Lenin uses an authoritative tone and clearly expects his recommendations to be taken seriously. He does not use the conditional tense when explaining the best course of action, but barks orders replete with “must’s”. And, although Lenin was surprised by the specific details of the coup, the Bolsheviks had been warning against a right wing counter-revolutionary attack for a long time.⁴ With the realization of this fear, Lenin feels especially qualified and does not hesitate to weigh in with other predictions. His use of language shows that although Lenin was not an elected official in the party, he was the de facto leader. Lenin also uses this authoritative rhetoric to unite his supporters.

In constructing his arguments, Lenin creates a powerful “us versus them” dynamic with respect to both Kornilov and Kerensky. Lenin uses very hostile language, painting all those who disagree with the Bolsheviks as “absolutely wrong and unprincipled” and speaks of Kerensky’s “weakness and vacillation” as characteristics that must be brought to the public’s attention.⁵ In contrast, Lenin insists that the Bolsheviks never compromise, going as far as to say that the Bolsheviks who succumb to the idea of compromise will “fall” and be “carried away”. In this way, Lenin takes the moral high ground by implying that the values the Bolshevik’s stand for are so pure that they could never be sullied by compromise. In these ways Lenin strives to

4 Lewis Siegelbaum, 1917: Kornilov Affair, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1917kornilov&Year=1917>

5 Lenin, “To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.,”

emphasize the separation between his fellow revolutionaries and their enemies, Kerensky and Kornilov.

While distancing himself from his opponents using rhetoric, Lenin also seeks to connect directly with other Bolsheviks. Because he is in exile in Finland, Lenin seems to recognize that he is working at a disadvantage and so attempts to make up for this. While discussing what is to be done, he repeats himself several times, perhaps to ensure what he is saying can be understood, something he considers to be important, as he is describing a rather nuanced distinction. Repetition also allows Lenin to provide many arguments. It is important to Lenin that the Bolsheviks not assume that they have any meaningful connection with Kerensky despite siding with him on this single issue. He insists that having the proletariat in control is their ultimate goal as a party. He also uses the pronoun “we” to describe the resistance to Kornilov, thus involving himself in what is happening despite his physical distance from those still in Petrograd (modern day St. Petersburg). Despite the inadequate technology of communication, Lenin stays involved in the movement and responses of the Bolshevik party during this critical time.

This document and the insight that it gives into Lenin’s mind are an especially interesting study given the implications of Kornilov affair. As journalist Harold Williams noted in *The Daily Chronicle*, a British paper, the Provisional Government and Kerensky along with it were irreversibly weakened by Kornilov’s attempted coup.⁶ Also, shortly after the Kornilov affair, the Bolsheviks gained the majority in the Petrograd Soviet. At this time Lenin briefly considered compromise with other similarly minded groups. However, he regressed back to his stance, so clearly expressed in this letter, that compromise is impossible shortly thereafter.⁷ In Lenin’s

6 Harold Williams, *The Daily Chronicle*, 29 September, 1917
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSkornilov.htm>

7 Alexander Rabinowich, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (New York 1978), pp. 170

letter *To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P*, one can see Lenin recognize Kerensky's (and by extension, the Provisional Government's) weakness, reveal his distaste for compromise, and maintain his connection with his fellow revolutionaries. All of these would be important in shaping the Bolsheviks seizure of power in October 1917.