

### The Kornilov Affair: a Failed Coup D'état

The Kornilov Affair in 1917 was a coup d'état by the General of the Russian Army, Lavr Kornilov. This coup was a major turning point in the modification of Russia's government. Kornilov attempted to gain control of the Russian Provisional Government, which was headed by Alexander Kerensky. The coup began in late August when Vladimir Lvov told Kornilov about Kerensky's proposed strategies to fortify the government. The three plans were for a dictatorship under Kerensky, a military government with Kornilov as a dictator and Kornilov as a leader in an authoritarian government. The main controversy of this event was that it is uncertain whether Kerensky actually sent Lvov to Kornilov's command center. Lvov returned to Petrograd and reported to Kerensky that Kornilov preferred the plan that featured him at the head of a military dictatorship. Kerensky took this information to mean that Kornilov was attacking him personally. Believing this, Kerensky tried to gain information about Kornilov's actual plan. Due to the distance separating them and the limited technology that was available at the time, the teleprinter conversation was very unclear and left Kerensky confused as to what was actually happening, but he acquired the belief that Kornilov had the intention of seizing power.

The next day Kornilov and his troops marched on Petrograd. He directly defied the Provisional Government. Kerensky realized that this coup was becoming a reality and asked for the help of the Petrograd Soviet to prevent a take over. The Soviet appealed to the workers and soldiers, asking them to protect the revolution. They reacted by shutting down all rail traffic in and around the city of Petrograd. Unfortunately for Kornilov, he and all of his men were on trains approaching the city. The Soviet sent men to the trains with Kornilov's men and persuaded the soldiers that Kornilov's actions were

against the revolution. The persuasion of the soldiers effectively ended the coup before it was able to begin, preventing the loss of life that might have ensued if the coup had occurred.

Kornilov had been acting in what he believed to be the best interests of his country and her people. He believed that the country was dying, that the army was being killed under the pressure of the Provisional Government and the Soviet. Kornilov, like all Russians, wanted to save the motherland from her fast approaching death. He declared that he wanted nothing for himself. Of course had his endeavor been successful he would have gained immense power. "I vow to bring the people by means of victory over the enemy to the Constituent Assembly, where they themselves decide their fate and choose their new government."<sup>1</sup> Kornilov had good intentions, but events outpaced him and he did not have enough support for his coup to become an actuality. An associate general of Kornilov believed that he "had the heart of a lion but the brains of a sheep."<sup>2</sup> This opinion of his colleague shows that Kornilov was well thought of for his courage, but he was seriously lacking the intelligence that would have been needed to make this coup successful. Perhaps Kerensky did not realize this about Kornilov when he appointed him to the position of commander-in-chief.

The other casualty of the coup was Kerensky, though he was harmed in a more indirect manner. The military and right believed that he had turned against Kornilov and they hated him for it. The left blamed him because he was the one who appointed Kornilov and was rumored to have supported him at the beginning of the coup. Kerensky had chosen to save what was left of his own reputation. He had come up with a proposal for a new type of government and asked for assistance from Kornilov. However, when it came time for the chopping block, Kerensky "left Kornilov alone to bear the discredit of his former policy. The change of mind may have been just and wise, but it cannot excuse the treachery of his conduct to the man whom he punished for

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<sup>1</sup> Kornilov, Lavr, "The Kornilov 'Revolt'" (August 27, 1917), in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991*, Doc. 2.8.

<sup>2</sup> Kort, Michael, *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed.  
Armonk/London: M.E. Sharpe, 2010. p. 105.

a course undertaken on his own instructions”<sup>3</sup> This opinion of John Buchan’s, a Canadian author and politician, showed the controversy surrounding the affair. Buchan alluded to the affair originating from Kerensky. Also he believed that when the coup started to disintegrate, Kerensky switched sides and pretended to have no involvement while ordering for the arrest of a man whom was following Kerensky’s orders from a few days prior.

The decline in Kerensky’s political image from this point on corresponded to the drop in belief in the Provisional Government. “In effect there was a political vacuum.”<sup>4</sup> This is where the Bolsheviks, always waiting on the sidelines, saw an opening and took every advantage that they could. All of the Socialist groups agreed on one thing after the Kornilov Affair; “there must be no more Kornilovs.”<sup>5</sup> The Bolsheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks agreed to meet at a Democratic Conference in September to discuss a new government. The growing majority of the Bolsheviks frightened the other two parties. It was not until after the October Revolution that the Bolsheviks finally gained full power, but the Kornilov Affair was the beginning of the end of the Provisional Government.

The main outcome of this event was that it discredited the Provisional Government and Kerensky. This discrediting paved a way for the Bolsheviks and Lenin to move forward with their intended government. Lenin said, “We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, just as Kerensky’s troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten,”<sup>6</sup> Lenin wanted power for himself and his party, but he knew that his party was not ready to take over the whole government just yet. He used Kerensky “as a gun-rest”<sup>7</sup> to overcome the problem of

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<sup>3</sup> Buchan, John, *Nelson’s history of the war*, volume 20, 1917. p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Read, Christopher, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, 2005, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, John, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 1919, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Woods, Alan, Part Six: The Year of the Revolution, The Kornilov Rebellion, in *Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution*, 1999

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Kornilov. They temporarily set aside their differences with Kerensky because Kornilov was the imminent danger and the Bolsheviks believed they would be able to dispose of Kerensky at a later date when the current situation had been handled. Using that victory Lenin knew that the Bolsheviks would gain credibility and power. This would allow them to strengthen and later take care of Kerensky.

This opportunity for progress for the Bolsheviks appeared rather suddenly. In July of 1917 the Bolsheviks would have been treated like rebels if they had made an attempt to gain power. However, in late August, early September, they had the credibility to move forward. “Now the picture is entirely different... All the objective conditions exist for a successful insurrection.”<sup>8</sup> Lenin voiced his opinion that it was time for the Bolsheviks to start moving forward at a more active pace than they had been moving at previously. The events were creating a set of circumstances that either favored the Bolsheviks or were taken advantage of by the Bolsheviks. “They were now ready to shatter a regime which they knew had no foundation.”<sup>9</sup>

The most debated part of the Kornilov Affair is the role that Kerensky played in it. No one seems to be able to decide how active he actually was in the attempted revolt. It is possible that the original idea for a revolt to reform the government came directly from Kerensky. Another possibility is that Lvov obtained the information that he gave to Kornilov from another source or even created it himself. However, Kerensky tried to dodge questions regarding his involvement and claimed that he had no involvement in the affair.

In the September and October 1918 issues of the *Fortnightly Review* Wilcox called for Kerensky’s version of the Kornilov Affair in his “Kerensky and Kornilov” articles.<sup>10</sup> Wilcox worked for the Daily Telegraph in Russia and was a wartime critic.

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<sup>8</sup> Lenin, Vladimir, “Marxism and Insurrection”, (September 13, 1917), in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991*, Doc. 2.10. p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Buchan, John, *Nelson’s history of the war*, volume 20, 1917. p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Kerensky, Alexsnader Fyodorovich, *The Prelude to Bolshevism: the Kornilov Rising*, 1919, p. 249.

Kerensky's response to this request is that he had already acknowledged the gap in information and published his side of the affair in June of that year in Russia and would have an English version published soon. Kerensky believed that Wilcox was biased in his assessment of the affair and that he saw Kornilov as a hero. In the response that Kerensky wrote, he explained his side of the story. Kerensky somewhat bashed Wilcox's journalistic abilities, stating, "Mr. Wilcox, by the way, so blindly follows his favourite sources of information that occasionally he falls into quite humorous situations."<sup>11</sup> This statement discredits Wilcox's articles, alluding that his sources were less than accurate and he may have been reporting false information.

The response, written by Kerensky, to Wilcox's articles was published in 1919, two years after the Kornilov Affair. During this time Kerensky's power was slowly being diminished and eventually ended up in the United States. It is possible that in his response that he was not mixed up in the affair, Kerensky may have changed the truth of his involvement in that coup. In the two years between the incident and his written account of his involvement, Kerensky might have decided that he did not want everyone to know the complete reality of his side of the Kornilov Affair. However at this point Kornilov no longer had anything to lose. He was in the United States, not Russia, at this time and he was no longer the Prime Minister, he had no power. There was no personal expense to him to tell the truth. The choice is left to us to determine, who was actually being honest?

The Kornilov Affair ended quite differently than its creators ever believed it would. Kornilov ended up disgraced, arrested and put in prison. Kerensky lost face for his supposed involvement in the coup. Eventually the outcome of the Kornilov Affair led to Kerensky and the Provisional Government being overthrown. The Bolsheviks were thankful for the affair. It gave them an opportunity at the opportune moment for them to begin the process of taking over the Provisional Government and setting up their own government. Also the Bolsheviks were not responsible for this coup, so none of

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<sup>11</sup> Kerensky, Alexsnader Fyodorovich, *The Prelude to Bolshevism: the Kornilov Rising*, 1919, footnote p. 266

their followers or leaders were detained or killed in the affair. For some sides of the table the Kornilov Affair was a disaster, for others it foreshadowed the beginning of a new era and a new government.

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## Summary

Kornilov, the commander-in-chief of the Russian Army received government-strengthening proposals that were supposedly sent from the Prime Minister Kerensky on August 24, 1917. One of the proposals was for Kornilov to begin a military dictatorship. Kornilov, believing he was acting for the best interests of his countrymen, decided to seize power. On August 27, 1917 Kornilov ordered his troops to advance to Petrograd. Kerensky, realizing that Kornilov was marching on Petrograd, appealed to the Petrograd Soviet to stop this attempt at seizing power. Kornilov and his troops were stopped outside of the city and the Soviet managed to convince the troops that they were betraying the revolution and that they needed to stop obeying Kornilov's orders. The coup was avoided without any fighting or bloodshed.



## **The Road to Power**

The Bolsheviks took the credit for defeating the Kornilov putsch and were rescued from the doldrums in which they had languished since the July Days. In September they gained majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow city soviets. Kerensky's attempts to broaden the base of the regime by forming a third coalition government in late September failed to overcome the alienation of left and right.

### **Document 2.8 The Kornilov 'Revolt'**

On 26 August the military high command under General L. G. Kornilov called for the surrender of the Provisional Government and planned to form a government under his personal direction, a military dictatorship. Kerensky refused the demand and on 27 August called for popular resistance to come to the defence of the Provisional Government. Kornilov's forces were repulsed by the Petrograd soviet and the city's workers organised in Red Guard units. Kornilov brusquely rejected charges that he sought to overthrow the government, and in language remarkably reminiscent of that of the putschists of August 1991 (see pp. 474–82), he outlined his position.

People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. The hour of her death is near. Forced to speak openly, I, General Kornilov, declare that under the pressure of the Bolshevik majority of the Soviets, the Provisional Government acts in complete harmony with the plans of the German general staff, and simultaneously with the forthcoming landing of the enemy forces on the Riga shores, it is killing the army and undermines the very foundation of the country.

The heavy sense of the inevitable ruin of the country commands me in these ominous moments to call upon all Russian people to come to the aid of the dying motherland. All in whose breasts a Russian heart is beating, who believe in God, in Church, pray to the Lord for the greatest miracle, the saving of our native land!

I, General Kornilov, son of a Cossack peasant, declare to all and sundry that I want nothing for myself, except the preservation of a Great Russia, and I vow to bring the people by means of victory over the enemy to the Constituent Assembly, where they will themselves decide their fate and choose their new form of government. But 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.

Russian people, the life of your motherland is in your hands! August 27 1917. General Kornilov.

*Source: Browder and Kerensky (eds), The Russian Provisional Government 1917, vol. III, p. 1573.*

## Document 2.10 Lenin's 'Marxism and Insurrection'

Lenin's calls for an immediate insurrection to overthrow the Provisional Government became ever more insistent. On the question of ending the war, Lenin believed that the Germans would grant the Bolsheviks, at the very least, an armistice. In this, as we shall see, Lenin was wrong.

One of the more vicious and probably most widespread distortions of Marxism resorted to by the dominant 'socialist' parties is the opportunist lie that preparation for insurrection, and generally the treatment of insurrection as an art, is 'Blanquism' . . .

To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that *turning point* in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the *vacillations* in the ranks of the enemy and *in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution* are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish *Marxism from Blanquism*.

Once these conditions exist, however, to refuse to treat insurrection as an *art* is a betrayal of the revolution . . .

On 3–4 July it could have been argued, without violating the truth, that the correct thing to do was to take power, for our enemies would in any case have accused us of insurrection and ruthlessly treated us as rebels. However, to have decided on this account in favour of taking power at that time would have been wrong, because the objective conditions for the victory of the insurrection did not exist . . .

We could not have 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 . . .

All the objective conditions exist for a successful insurrection . . .

And another thing. 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 defence of the country, and a really just, really revolutionary war will then be waged by revolutionary democrats under the leadership of the proletariat . . .

Source: Lenin, 'Marxism and Insurrection: A Letter to the Central Committee of the RSDWP', 13–14 (26–7) September 1917, Selected Works, pp. 357, 358, 360–1.