

MYTH MAKING: THE KORNILOV AFFAIR IN SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Özet

Sovyetler Birliği'nin yıkıldığı 1991 yılından beri Rus tarihçiliğinde yapıla gelen çalışmaların büyük bir kısmı 1917 ihtilalleri sırasında yaşanan olayları daha objektif bir biçimde incelemektedir. Ancak Şubat ve Ekim devrimleri arası döneme ait son olaylar, özellikle de Kornilov Meselesi, halen devrim tarihinin mitoslarından biri olarak fazla sorgulanmadan ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışmada dönemin başbakanı Kerensky ve General Kornilov arasında geçen ve Bolşevikler'in Ekim ayında iktidarı darbe yoluyla ele geçirmeleriyle sonuçlanan olayların bir tarihsel mesele olarak birbirlerine zıt siyasi görüşlerce yazılan kaynaklarda nasıl değişik mitoslar halinde sunulduğu incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kornilov Meselesi, Aleksandr Kerenski, 1917 Rus İhtilalleri, Tarih ve Mitoslar.*

Abstract

The recent paradigm shift in Russian history has led to a radical reevaluation of the often-confused and mythologized chapters of 1917. Nevertheless, the final episode of the February-October Interregnum – the Kornilov Affair – still remains largely ignored as an 'enduring myth' of the revolution and needs to be reexamined in light of the new revisionist critique. This paper will seek to demonstrate the dichotomized representation of the Kornilov Affair between the White Generals' memoirs, the Bolshevik accounts and the books published in the West by the exiled members of the Provisional Government.

Key Words: *The Kornilov Affair, Alexander Kerensky, Russian Revolutions of 1917, Myth Making in History.*

Since the 1990s, a new generation of revisionist historians – including Orlando Figes, Terry Martin, Amir Weiner, Peter Holquist, Frederick C.

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Corney, and David Hoffmann – has been seeking to dissect the recurring met narratives in both Soviet and Western scholarship vis-à-vis the events of 1917, which gave birth to ‘the Soviet Century.’ The essentialist objectivity – manifest in the works of most historians who survived the Cold War – has become the center of revisionist criticism. This recent paradigm shift in Russian history has led to a radical reevaluation of the often-confused and mythologized chapters of 1917. The final episode of the February-October Interregnum, the Kornilov Affair, however, still remains largely ignored as an ‘enduring myth’ of the revolution and needs to be reexamined in light of the new revisionist critique. This paper will seek to demonstrate the dichotomized representation of the Kornilov Affair between the White Generals’ memoirs, the Bolshevik accounts and the books published in the West by the exiled members of the Provisional Government.

Western accounts of the Russian Revolution often suggest that the Kornilov Affair gave a great impetus to the Bolsheviks’ cause. In most of these accounts, the Kornilov affair appears sometimes as a pathetic interlude, sometimes as the only viable alternative to Bolshevism, sometimes as a bargain between Kerensky and Kornilov which broke down because of meddling intermediaries or Kerensky’s failure of will, sometimes as a straightforward contest between the dichotomized social and political forces of the revolution. These accounts sought to address a series of questions: Had Kerensky managed to deal with the crisis between himself and the Generalissimo, would the Bolshevik insurrection still have been successful? If Kerensky had fulfilled his commitments instead of giving concessions to the left, would the gap between the Soviets and Provisional Government have been bridged and the Constituent Assembly been summoned as scheduled? Would Russia, then, have had the chance to experience a peaceful transition to democracy?

While such outcomes would have been possible, the Provisional Government had other more serious challenges; most importantly, the unpopular war-efforts and inflation.¹ As portrayed by Marc Ferro, Norman Stone and Peter Kenez in their detailed accounts of the Russian army, turmoil

¹ The Percentage Increase in Food Prices, December 1916 – February 1917

Potatoes	25	Bread	15
Carrots, turnips	35	Chocolate	100
Cabbage	25	Sugar Candy	75
Meat	20	Cookies, sweet rolls	100
Sausage	50	Apples	70
Ham	60	Pears, oranges	150

Source: Hasegawa 1981, 200.

was inevitable under wartime conditions. The Kornilov Affair indeed stands as a turning point in the irreversible course of the revolution – a moment when the February system stopped. The importance of the Kornilov Affair, however, lies not only in its disastrous impact on the People’s Revolution of February 1917 but also in the ways in which the affair has been mythologized by all parties after February, namely the Reds (Bolsheviks) and the Whites (Tsarist Generals) as well as the Architects of February (Kadets, Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks).

From all the literature on the subject two myths emerge which may be termed: Kornilov the Great and Kornilov the Counterrevolutionary. The former had been gradually constructed and utilized by the White Generals and become an influential banner after the February Revolution. The latter, on the other hand, had become the locus of post-July Bolshevik propaganda. Since both scenarios are still an intrinsic part of contemporary Soviet history the truth of what happened – Kornilov’s motive behind his attempted coup and Kerensky’s role in it – seems out of reach. It is impossible to demythologize the affair collectively. We can, however, see the ways in which the Bolsheviks carved their myth into collective memory, and how the Whites amplified theirs through Western Sovietologists after the Civil War. In fact, Kornilov’s persona was constructed by the White Generals well before the Civil War and sheds light on a particularly important aspect of the affair: Kerensky’s appointment of Kornilov as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army in June 1917.

The White Generals’ memoirs, especially Denikin’s, suggest that Kornilov’s sole ambition was to regenerate Russia’s armed forces by taking the necessary precautions, such as the promulgation of a number of laws by the Provisional Government. This ambition became even more obvious when “Kornilov laid certain preconditions, on which he would accept Kerensky’s offer as C-in-C, and lead the nation to victory and to the prospect of a just and honorable peace.”² Likewise, Kerensky cites Kornilov’s conditions in his memoirs: “*The General’s telegram was clear: ‘I accept this appointment upon the following terms: (I) responsibility only before my conscience and before the whole people; (II) absolute non-interference with my military orders, including appointments to the high command; (III) extension of all measures lately adopted at the front to all districts in the rear where there are army reserves...*”³ Even General Denikin, who was a close friend of Kornilov and the future leader of the White Movement, had mentioned that the first of these

² Denikin 1922, 303.

³ Kerensky 1919, 53.

demands would create “a form of sovereignty of the Supreme Command that would have been very original, from the standpoint of state law.”⁴

Although initially Kerensky was aggravated by Kornilov’s ultimatum, he considered the language of these demands an indication of Kornilov’s naïveté in political matters; “At that time I could have entirely shared Prince Trubetzkoy’s later expressed opinion of Kornilov: ‘My general opinion of Kornilov’ wrote Prince Trubetzkoy, ‘is that he is above all a soldier unable to grasp complicated political matters, and as such he offers a particularly remarkable sample of our commanding staff’.”⁵ Indeed, Kerensky thought that Kornilov lacked the necessary diplomatic qualifications for a man of his position. Likewise, General Alexeev, who fought with Kornilov at the Eastern Front, considered him politically illiterate and said that the Generalissimo had “the heart of a lion and the brain of a sheep.”⁶ Nevertheless, based on the information about Kornilov’s military capabilities, Kerensky reached the conclusion that he ultimately shared the same goals with Kornilov – restoration of law and order in the country. In Kerensky’s words,

“The decision to exercise actively the extensive rights of a military commander, the daring to act without fear of responsibility, without hiding behind another’s back – these were the qualities most needed at the time. Unfortunately, these qualities were seldom to be found among our higher army command...Therefore it is obvious why I promptly and decidedly promoted General Kornilov, in spite of the original ‘ultimative’ methods of his activity...(Besides) If we recall the whole military-political situation at the beginning of July 1917, it becomes obvious that the substance of General Kornilov’s ‘demands’ was by no means an America discovered by him, but a somewhat peculiar formula applied by him to the measures partly passed, partly planned by the Provisional Government and fully corresponding to the frame of mind of all responsible democratic and liberal circles.”⁷

The appointment of Kornilov to such a high rank, thereby placing so much military power in the hands of a known monarchist, has provoked a deep curiosity among historians. James White, a Western scholar who investigated the affair in 1970s, wrote “*Why should Kerensky come to appoint this military*

⁴ Denikin 1922, 303.

⁵ Kerensky 1919, 54.

⁶ Moynahan 1992, 230.

⁷ Kerensky 1919, 29.

*mediocrity to such a position of power when he must have known that Kornilov was politically unsuitable?”*⁸ Although Kerensky was known to be the Hamlet of Kadets, who frequently hesitated over crucial appointments, in this case he possibly thought that a change in the command of the army might be imperative. After all, Brusilov, who “*of all the old Tsarist Generals had gone farthest in his efforts to adapt himself to revolutionary phraseology,*” failed to restore the army’s combative forces.⁹ Kornilov, who was much younger than Brusilov, with his reputation for “*iron will and inexhaustible energy*” was a better alternative.¹⁰ Besides, although they had major disagreements over its implementation, both Kornilov and Kerensky had the same goal – to revitalize Russia’s combative forces. In Chamberlin’s words,

*“Had Kerensky been a revolutionary of the uncompromising type and had Kornilov been an out-and-out monarchist, anxious to replace the Romanovs on the throne, the appointment of the latter would never have taken place, or at least the irrepressible conflict between the two men would have burst out much sooner than it actually did.”*¹¹

Indeed, the desires and objectives of the Socialist Revolutionary Premier and of the Cossack General ran along parallel lines to a certain extent. Kerensky, no less than Kornilov, had the desire to see an army wherein discipline and order remained unchallenged. Nevertheless, what Kerensky failed to ask himself is perhaps a more important question: Leaving aside his lack of political communication skills, was Kornilov as capable as he thought? Even today, traditionalist scholars of Russian history, such as Richard Pipes, seem to analyze the affair based on the assumption that “*Kornilov was a patriot, ready to serve any government that advanced Russia’s national interests, especially in time of war, by maintaining whatsoever was necessary to win victory.*”¹² This supposition as to why Kerensky appointed Kornilov eight decades ago exposes an already existing myth, which was later utilized by the Whites during the civil war: Kornilov the Great.

⁸ Kerensky 1919, 29.

Contemporary historian D.N. Collins published a detailed article on the officers’ perception of Kornilov’s military mediocrity. See: Collins 1970, 528 – 532.

⁹ Chamberlin 1935, 193.

¹⁰ Savinkov 1919, 70.

¹¹ Chamberlin 1935, 194.

¹² Pipes 1990, 441.

In the voluminous accounts and memoirs published in the West after the Affair, Lavr Georgiyevich Kornilov was portrayed often as a fighting general, the son of a Cossack peasant officer, born in 1870 at a Siberian garrison town. A historian of the Russian Civil War, Richard Lockett, later defined the word 'fighting tradition' as "*an emotive phrase, [which] conjured up the picture of a leader of men who was the antithesis of the desk-bound staff officer or bureaucrat, who would never hesitate to expose himself to danger, a hero in the sense of Skobelev.*"¹³ Likewise, in Chamberlain's definition, Kornilov was a picturesque personality, and full of Eastern color; "*his slanting eyes, slight, erect figure and Mongolian physiognomy suggest that in his veins flowed the blood of some Oriental people.*"¹⁴

Arkady Borman, who interviewed the General during the Civil War, wrote that Kornilov, "*lacking family inheritance, land, and money, by a Herculean effort,*" made his way into the Omsk military school when he was 13, where he "*studied with eagerness and on release had the highest grades among the cadets.*"¹⁵ Kornilov entered the Artillery School of Petrograd and by achieving a phenomenal academic record, he was designated by his commander to a post at the Academy of Joint Staff. The prominent White general A. Bogaevsky, later wrote in his memoirs that "*this modest and timid artillery officer, thin and short, with his Mongolian personality had survived successfully in the academy and during the examinations completed all science courses at once.*"¹⁶ Lieutenant Kornilov then served in the Staff College for three years, where he received a silver medal and became captain ahead of schedule - his surname had been inscribed on a marble roll of honor.¹⁷

According to these accounts, Kornilov owed his subsequent reputation to a number of factors, all of which he had solely accomplished by his own virtue. He had become familiar with several Turkic languages and various dialects, whereby he also learned their customs. Hence, his personal bodyguards, who were mostly Tekintzy or Turcoman warriors, were devoted to him. He received his first post in Turkestan and served in the frontline, which was located on the

¹³ Lockett 1971, 64.

Mikhail Dimitreyevich Skobelev (1843–82) was a brave Russian general, and one of the military commanders responsible for the Russian conquests in Turkestan. Skobelev distinguished himself in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, and in 1881 he led the march to Gök-Tepe, which completed the conquest of Russian Turkistan.

¹⁴ Chamberlain 1935, 192.

¹⁵ Borman 1968, 215.

¹⁶ Petrovich, militera.lib.ru

¹⁷ Borman 1968, 215.

Afghani border. The Pathan Revolt of 1897 served as an instrument for the Russians to revitalize their interests in Afghanistan wherein Captain Kornilov managed to obtain crucial documents about the precise locations of the Afghani fortifications.¹⁸ His prudence and success in this critical task brought him a substantial amount of fame. From 1899 to 1904, he traveled thousands of kilometers, visited Persia, Afghanistan, China and India, constantly risking his life.¹⁹ General Lukomsky wrote in his memoirs that Kornilov also published a book in 1901 called *Kashgaria and East Turkestan or (The Land of Kashgar)*, which gained popularity in the 1900's – although the existence of such a publication was not certain prior to the 1970's.²⁰

Following his mission in Turkestan, he fought in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and later served as a military attaché in China. For four years he conducted diplomatic affairs vis-à-vis military matters, meeting English, French, and German diplomats. As had been his old habit, he traveled all across Mongolia and most parts of China. Having returned to Russia, Kornilov became commander of a Warsaw military district, but soon left for an Eastern district (Zaamursky). In 1912, he was the commander of a brigade in Siberia (Vladivostok)²¹.

He became the commander of a brigade on the Carpathian front in World War I (48th infantry division, which is a part of III Army of A. Brusilov).²² He fought in Galicia and the Carpathians. On Austro-Hungarian territories, he fought side by side with the 4th rifle brigade of General A. Denikin – part of the VIII Army. Following the first winter, despite serious casualties, the 48th division received the name “*Steel*” (*Stalnoi*) for its valorous actions. “*Strange business,*” recollected Brusilov, “*The general (Kornilov) never neglected his division... he sustained horrifying losses but never left the front... the officers and soldiers loved him for he trusted them... He was brave indeed, but he sometimes climbed forward rashly.*”²³ Likewise, General Lukomsky argued that during the withdrawal of the army from the Carpathian Mountains, while covering the retreat of his division with a handful of heroes, “*General Kornilov was severely wounded and taken prisoner by the Austrians.*”²⁴

¹⁸ Luckett 1971, 62.

¹⁹ Luckett 1971, 63.

²⁰ Collins 1974, 274-275.

²¹ Vladimirova 1924, 90 – 100.

²² Brusilov 2004, 181.

²³ Brusilov 2004, 182.

²⁴ Lukomsky 1922, 92.

His alleged escape from the Austrians marked the true beginning of the Generalissimo's myth as a national celebrity. Admiral Bubnov, the naval representative at Stavka, wrote "*General Kornilov was by nature an infinitely brave, honorable, upright and straightforward man, totally imbued with a feeling of his military duty. Thanks to his personal bravery, demonstrated in battle and thanks to his brave escape from German (sic. Austrian) captivity he enjoyed in the army an almost legendary fame, and despite his strictness and exacting demands in service, the soldiers loved him and were devoted to him.*"²⁵ The long list of publications, written mostly by the White Generals, demonstrates the fact that by June 1917 General Kornilov's cult was magnified to the extent that even Kerensky was convinced he had no other alternative but to appoint Kornilov.

An investigation of the Tsarist Generals' memoirs, however, reveals a competing narrative; one that demythologizes General Kornilov's virtues, exposing his inaptness and misdemeanor for command of large military units. They suggest that the Whites' Kornilov legend owes nothing much to reality. General M.B. Bruyevich, for instance, became the first to disavow Kornilov's peasant background in order to discredit his myth, by claiming that his father was actually a Tsarist officer, not a peasant; "*We had finished the General Staff Academy together. He was the son of a government official and not of a Cossack peasant as he wrote in his proclamations to the people and the army during the revolt. At the Academy he kept aloof, rarely mixed with his fellow-students, and seemed imbued with the quality of envy.*"²⁶

The alleged book (*Kashgariya ili Vostochnyi Turkestan*) written by Kornilov, on the other hand, appears to be one of the many extravagant claims made by Kornilov's supporters after his death in 1918. In the 1970s Western historians, such as D.N. Collins, argued that "*certainly none of the major libraries in this country [Russia] seemed to be aware of the existence of such a book.*"²⁷ Though several records about Turkestan, written by the Whites, refer to this book, and argue that a copy was held by the Lenin State Library in Moscow, no one actually saw it before.

The Tekinty Division's (the official title is *Kavkazkaia Tuzemnaia Diviziia*) devotion to Kornilov is yet another 'White' legend. The division had been formed as a non-professional, 'wild' volunteer unit in 1914 – originally

²⁵ Bubnov 1955, 349-350.

²⁶ Bruyevich 1966, 151.

²⁷ Collins 1974, 274-275.

composed of the Chechen, Cherkess and Tatar (Azeri) cavalry regiments and an Adjarian infantry battalion – to serve in the First World War as part of the 3rd Cavalry Corps. As the contemporary historian Michael Smith puts it, “*the name of the division, partly a term of chauvinist abuse and partly a badge of honor, also called to mind nearly a century of wars for the conquest of the ‘wild’, mountainous North Caucasus, fought largely between the Russians and the Chechens and Cherkess.*” Reports in the Muslim press, subsequently verified by leading historical accounts, held that the officers of the Tekinty Division, mostly Russians and Georgians, may indeed have been in league with Kornilov.²⁸ But the troops, “*ironically famous for their strict discipline, were neither aware of nor sympathetic to Kornilov’s designs, and when they were stopped 37 miles outside the city by Russian railway workers and left-wing Muslim (Volga Tatar) agitators (September 1917), they immediately joined the anti-Kornilov defensive.*”²⁹

Likewise, Brusilov later argued in his memoirs that Kornilov was not a great commander of large military units. On May 4th 1915, two days after the successful German offensive had begun; it became apparent that the Germans were not fast enough to capture the Carpathian part of the III Army and to cut the connection between the III Army and the neighboring VIII Army. “*Only one division – Kornilov’s – was caught,*” as Norman Stone puts it, “*partly because its order to retreat came too late, partly because its supply-routes were taken up with other troops’ supplies, partly because Kornilov foolishly counter attacked: he surrendered on 6th May, with all but five guns.*”³⁰

Among the few who strongly criticized Kornilov’s arbitrariness were Bouch-Bruyevich and Bogaevski. Bruyevich, for instance, who later fought in the Red Army, wrote:

“In the spring of 1915, when the Russian army was retreating from Galicia and his division was surrounded, Kornilov ignominiously deserted it and fled, though it was through his fault that the division had fallen into the trap. Four days later he surrendered himself to the enemy, and, later still, escaped by bribing a Czech surgeon’s assistant named Franz Mrnak. This escape, in his telling, had been an act of high heroism, and he even threw into his story, for good measure, the death of Mrnak, who as later on

²⁸ Martynov 1927, 16 – 20.

²⁹ Smith 2001, 211 – 240.

³⁰ Stone 1975, 137.

*came to light was safe and sound; and so, with the aid of the ultra-reactionary Novoye Vremya, he gained nationwide fame.*³¹

Hence, instead of being court-martialled, Kornilov received a hero's welcome.³² It was at this time that Kornilov attracted powerful political supporters such as Rodzianko and Guchkov.³³

In 1975 the British historian Norman Stone wrote one of the best books published on the history of the Eastern front in World War I. Stone argued in his *The Eastern Front* that "legend has a picture of countless millions of peasant soldiers being thrust into battle, armed with long-handled axes, against overpowering German artillery and machine-guns."³⁴ As Stone further suggests "the army by the beginning of the 1916 campaign was not suffering from material shortage of any significance, any more than other armies," it did however, experience remarkable difficulties in maintaining proper communication between the commanding staff.³⁵

Indeed, new evidence suggests that reality was the very reverse of the White legend. Especially General Brusilov's memoir, which was published in Russia in 2004, demonstrates that by the summer of 1916, the Russian Army, whose survival seemed at stake following the retreats of the previous year, was finally ready for an offensive. At least, in terms of war-material, there was not a major shortage. In Brusilov's words,

*"On July 15 (1916), all my armies were waiting for an offensive. The 3rd and 'Special' armies had met on the Kovel Sector and they had the time to bring up new reinforcements and heavy artillery. In general from May 22 to July 30, the armies entrusted to me had comprised 8255 officers, 370,153 soldiers, 144 machine guns and 367 mortars, and an enormous quantity of rifles, cartridges, shells and different other military equipment. By this time, the winter operation of Southwestern armies had finished. The enemy considered our position certainly unapproachable."*³⁶

Nevertheless, problems of command and control became crystal clear in this period. In his account, Brusilov emphasized Kornilov's arbitrariness that

³¹ Bouch-Bruyevich 1966, 152.

³² Bogaevski 1968, 39.

³³ Lukomsky 1922, 228.

³⁴ Stone 1975, 212.

³⁵ Stone 1975, 212.

³⁶ Brusilov 2004, 172.

hindered the development of a successful offensive and described the situation at the Front in detail; *“The decisions of the military council, however, by any measure, had not been executed. The western front was subject to the main impact yet had not been functional at all, and the Northern front received the motto familiar to us with the Japanese war [of 1905] ‘patience, patience and patience.’ My Generals, especially General L.G. Kornilov, failed to execute the means to operate the armed forces under my command. He did not control events; rather events controlled him, as the wind carries a leaf.”*³⁷

When appointing Kornilov to the highest post of his army, apparently the Premier was neither aware of the actual obstacles in the army nor these other views about Kornilov’s profile. In his words, *“When years later, I read what Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Hoffmann had to say in their memoirs about the Russian army in 1916 and compared their accounts with those of our own Russian generals, I found, to my surprise, that the German generals gave a more balanced and favorable picture of our military record at that time than did our own generals.”*³⁸ Kerensky was misinformed and his surprise is a manifestation of this. Ironically, it was through the same corrupt communication channels that had led Kerensky reach the conclusion that the army was likely to breed a counter revolutionary Napoleon.

Despite the significance of the White Generals’s myth making, scholarly debates still focus on whether Kornilov was a self-appointed counter-revolutionary and really staged a coup or whether Kerensky needed a legitimate reason to dismiss his commander and thus used *agent provocateurs* to provoke Kornilov to rise against the government. There seems to be a consensus among most historians on the results of Kornilov’s alleged mutiny. The Tekinty Division’s march on Petrograd *“seemed as an act of insubordination, but certainly not of mutiny or rebellion as Kerensky wanted it to appear.”*³⁹ Beyond the corridors of the Winter Palace all Kerensky’s decrees were ignored. *“There was a vacuum of power”* as Orlando Figes suggests, *“and it was now only a question of who would dare to fill it.”*⁴⁰

On September 15 1917, the French diplomat Louis de Robien had given the answer in his diary: *“the conflict between Kornilov and Kerensky is going to take a back seat, because a far more dangerous struggle is in the preparation between the government, supported by all those who want relative order, and*

³⁷ Brusilov 2004, 172.

³⁸ Kerensky 1965, 295.

³⁹ Asher 1970, 287

⁴⁰ Figes 1996, 455.

the Soviets, who have realized the extent of their strength as a result of this venture, and who are preaching to their tovariches to revolt against all authority."⁴¹ We now know that the Kornilov rebellion was essentially a test of strength between Kornilov and Kerensky; the victor, however, was Lenin. Indeed, the Bolshevik strategy was *"to help crush the Generalissimo and then take advantage of the ensuing chaos"*⁴²

Through utilizing Kornilovism as a counter-revolutionary banner, Lenin found the opportunity to put forward his position to even greater masses. Lenin's motto, *"Either a Kornilov dictatorship or a dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest strata of the peasantry,"* became the basis of the second myth and the Bolsheviks' route map towards power.⁴³ *"We cannot be guided by the mood of the masses. That is changeable and unaccountable,"* said Lenin in late September, *"(instead) we must be guided by an objective analysis and estimate of the Affair."*⁴⁴

Lenin's Kornilov myth changed the whole revolutionary discourse. Prior to the rapid Bolshevization in September, there had been no doubt about the meaning of the two words 'revolution' and 'counter-revolution.' *"Revolution was supposed to break out spontaneously, to have its roots deep among the people, and to bring about the establishment of democracy,"* Kerensky had written shortly before his death. Counter-revolution, on the other hand, meant *"the work of a particular group among the ruling classes, and was always followed by a period of 'reaction.'"*⁴⁵ As Kerensky suggests, after Lenin's anti-Kornilovist propaganda, *"any movement on a mass scale came to be termed a 'revolution'; no matter what aims its leaders were pursuing...there was a vast difference from the point of view of the people's interests and the future of Russia; hence between the Kornilov movement and Lenin's movement, which the Kornilov movement had revived."*⁴⁶ In General Denikin's words, *"Kornilov became a banner of counterrevolution, rather than the salvation of the motherland."*⁴⁷

The panic of counter-revolution following Kornilov's alleged mutiny was manipulated by Lenin. The growth of suspicious attitudes towards the

⁴¹ Robien 1969, 112.

⁴² Ascher 1953, 250.

⁴³ Ascher 1953, 372.

⁴⁴ Ascher 1953, 372.

⁴⁵ Kerensky 1966, 404.

⁴⁶ Kerensky 1966, 404.

⁴⁷ Denikin 1922, 303.

Provisional Government made it easy for the Bolsheviks to create and take advantage of the turmoil. Kornilov served as a weapon of mass propaganda at the time; he became the embodiment of counterrevolution. Lenin, during the hot days of the affair, told his comrades that; “*We will fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, even as Kerensky’s troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness...we shall not overthrow Kerensky right now, we shall approach the task of struggling against him in a different way, namely we shall point out to the people the weakness and vacillation of Kerensky.*”⁴⁸ It seems obvious that Lenin knew he had found a precious opportunity to initiate his assault on the remaining powers that opposed him. Kerensky was now “*completely in the hands of the maximalists and the Bolsheviks*” wrote Zinaida Gippius, “*The ball is over. They haven’t raised their heads yet. They sit. Tomorrow, of course, they will get on their feet.*”⁴⁹

The turmoil brought Lenin back into the mainstream of Russia’s revolutionary life. Having read the Petrograd press, which was available in Finland, Lenin wrote a letter to the central committee: “*Kornilov’s revolt is quite unexpected at such a moment and in such a form- it is really an unlikely sharp turn of events.*”⁵⁰ As historian Norman Saul argues, “*The Kornilov affair was a catalyst upon Lenin’s movement.*”⁵¹ The waning popularity of Kerensky and the Provisional Government in the aftermath of the Kornilov Affair ruined the last hopes for amelioration in Russia, both in the rear and at the front. George Katkov, in his book on the Kornilov Affair, argues that the disastrous impact of the Kornilov affair was most apparent in the Russian army. The counter-accusations of Kornilov and Kerensky was confusing and demoralizing the troops; “*The susceptibility of the soldiers to the Bolshevik propaganda translated into behavior of an anarchical nature, including the arbitrary lynching of officers.*”⁵²

The Bolshevik newspapers further elevated Lenin’s myth by inflicting a public fear of counter-revolution and by publishing instances of these killings. On September 2 1917, for example, the Bolshevik paper *Izvestia* wrote: “*at first three generals and a colonel, who were arrested earlier, on charges of supporting Kornilov, were dragged out of the guardhouse by the crowd, thrown*

⁴⁸ Lenin, quoted in Ascher 1953, 250.

⁴⁹ Gippius, quoted in Moynahan 1992, 247.

⁵⁰ Lenin, *op. cit.*, vol. 34, 119.

⁵¹ Saul 1973, 491 – 505.

⁵² Katkov 1980, 122.

off the bridge and killed in the water.”⁵³ The Kornilov Affair left the supreme command with a diminishing authority that led to Kerensky’s demise. As Victor Shklovsky⁵⁴ recalled:

*“The Russian army was ruptured even before the Revolution. Revolution, the Russian Revolution, with the ‘maximalism of democratism’ by the Provisional Government, freed the army from all constraints. There were no laws left in the army – not even rules. But there was a complement of trained men, capable of sacrifice, capable of holding the trenches. Even without constraints, a short war was possible – a blitzkrieg...we knew that what lay in front of us was not an army, but a hash – distinctly worse than our 16th Corps and a good deal more cowardly; but unfortunately the Germans did, however approximately, follow orders.”*⁵⁵

As the contemporary historian Marc Ferro suggests *“the February Revolution had broken out in the streets and was the handiwork of all, but the part played by the soldiers had been all-important – as it was in April and again in June, September, and October. But now not only the troops at the rear were involved; those at the front had also joined in the movement and, in the face of the Germans, had thrown into question one of the oldest traditions – army discipline.”*⁵⁶ Kerensky’s fear of breaking with the General Staff, his deep-seated hostility to the Soviets, his preference for negotiations at all costs, and his delusion that he could reconcile the irreconcilable were all factors that induced Kerensky to deal gently with the Bolsheviks in their duel. This attitude had the most drastic results. *“It alienated for good the sympathy of those who had continued to obey the rules of any institutions yet functioning.”*⁵⁷

Observing the disastrous September, Sir George Buchanan wrote, *“The Kornilov affair deprived officers of the little authority which they previously possessed, while it had restored the influence of the Soviet. The latter had passed resolutions abolishing the death penalty, declaring all existing secret*

⁵³ “Article Printed in *Izvestia* on September 2, 1917,” Browder and Kerensky 1961, Doc. 1309.

⁵⁴ Victor Shklovsky became prominent as a Futurist poet and theoretician. In 1914, he organized the *Opoyaz* Group (Society for the Study of Literary Language). When the Russian Revolution broke out in February 1917 he was serving in the tsarist army as an instructor. Source: Sheldon 1967.

⁵⁵ Shklovsky 1967, 219-230.

⁵⁶ Ferro 1971, 507.

⁵⁷ Ferro 1971, 508.

treaties invalid, and demanding the immediate conclusion of a universal democratic peace."⁵⁸ The reaction against the Kornilovites grew to an even greater extent than the anti-Bolshevik phobia during the July days. "Now it was the monarchists ... anyone with the faintest hue of the Tsarist past, who was hunted off the streets" as Moorehead suggests, "it was upon the inner political structure of the socialist movement that the Kornilov fiasco had its really significant effect."⁵⁹

A different alignment was being formed among the various socialist groups throughout September; the Mensheviks had gradually become confined to the government cadres and the skilled workers to the trade-unions, while the Socialist-Revolutionaries were becoming "rather less of a peasant party than they were before."⁶⁰ Similarly, in his personal records of the Russian Revolution, Sukhanov wrote:

*"Even before the Kornilov mutiny, before the Fall of Riga and after the Moscow Conference, the entire bourgeois press had sounded the alarm about the Bolshevik peril, in connection with 'reliable reports' about forthcoming 'demonstrations' by the Bolsheviks... The Kornilov incident, however, not only accelerated the Bolshevikization of the Soviets and the worker-peasant masses, but was also sharply reflected in the current policies of Lenin's Soviet opponents. The Mensheviks and the SRs who ruled in the Central Ex. Com. were just as far from Bolshevism as before; but they too had shifted their positions and swung Left."*⁶¹

The Bolsheviks began to control the society, who were "stirred and shaken up by the recent events," in Moorehead's words, "it was left to the Bolsheviks to exploit the rest of the population, the city workers, the soldiers, the vast illiterate hordes who had nothing much to lose and a great deal to gain from the break up of the established order."⁶² Indeed, throughout September 1917, the workers and soldiers of the Petrograd Soviet began turning to the Bolsheviks in remarkable numbers.⁶³ On September 12, for instance, when the

⁵⁸ Buchanan 1923, 189.

⁵⁹ Moorehead 1958, 246.

⁶⁰ Moorehead 1958, 247.

⁶¹ Sukhanov 1955, 525.

⁶² Moorehead 1958, 247.

⁶³ MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN MOSCOW

PARTY

June 1917

September 1917

Change

tension between the Kornilovites and the Soviets was at its height, the impact of the Kornilov Affair on the left became crystal clear at the Petrograd Soviet meeting. By 279 votes to 115 the Petrograd Soviet passed a Bolshevik resolution which demanded that Russia should be declared a republic, that the government should be made up entirely of socialists, that the land should be given to the peasant Soviets, that the workers should control industry, that the secret peace treaties should be annulled, and that peace should be concluded at once – in short the whole Bolshevik programmer.⁶⁴

Trotsky later noted in his autobiography; *“While handing over the chairmanship, Tsereteli asked me how we would be able to retain our authority. The implication was that they gave us three months at most. They were terribly mistaken. We were making solid steps towards authority.”*⁶⁵ It was the first apparent Bolshevik victory, upon which Lenin called upon his comrades to put every possible pressure on Kerensky, compelling him to give more concessions. An all-out Bolshevization was taking place in Russia, from every small district to major towns; on September 18, the Moscow Soviet voted for the Bolshevik Nogin as its chairman.⁶⁶ On September 27, Lenin wrote:

*“Without deliberately closing one’s eyes, one cannot fail to see that after the Kornilov affair Kerensky’s government is leaving everything as before, that in fact it is bringing back the Kornilov affair. The appointment of Alexeev, the peace with the Klembovskys, Gagarins, Bagrations and other Kornilov men, and leniency in the treatment of Kornilov and Kaledin all very clearly prove that Kerensky is in fact bringing back the Kornilov affair. There is no middle course. This has been shown by experience. Either all power goes to the Soviets and the army is made fully democratic, or another Kornilov affair occurs.”*⁶⁷

The Bolsheviks often claimed that the course of the October Revolution of 1917 had already been defined before the Kornilov Affair. Yet, Lenin’s anti-

SRs	58.9	14.7	-44.2
Mensheviks	12.2	4.2	-8.0
Bolsheviks	11.7	49.5	+37.8
Kadets	17.2	31.5	+14.3

Source: Pipes 1990, 466.

⁶⁴ Pipes 1990, 466.

⁶⁵ Troçki 1999, 343.

⁶⁶ Trotsky 1985, 842.

⁶⁷ Lenin 1964, 370.

Kornilovist discourse and his counter-revolutionary hunting campaign in September manifests how 'the events of October' did not become 'The October Revolution' until the Bolsheviks managed to focus on constructing one. We now know that out of the two competing narratives on Kornilov – Whites' and Lenin's – the latter triumphed in October 1917 and was carved into the Bolshevik met narrative.

Central to the reconstruction of Russia's image after 1917 – like all modernizing states – was a foundation narrative; a new and all-encompassing account of what was said, written and witnessed about 'what happened' in October 1917. Before 'the Great October,' the majority of the multiple versions of 'what has been perceived about what happened' attributed a minor role to the Bolsheviks. Instead, the weakness of the Provisional Government, communication problems at the front, the September debacle caused by the clash between two miniature Napoleons – Kerenskii and Kornilov – or the disastrous course of the First World War were among the multiple versions of 'what happened'. It was only after the Bolsheviks had gained full control over Russia together with the institutions of the old regime, that an institutionalized narrative centered in the party itself was written.

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