

# General Kornilov's attempt to seize power in 1917



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Why had General Kornilov's attempt to seize power in 1917 not been successful?

" *The Prelude to Bolshevism: The Kornilov Rebellion* "[1] is the title of one of the books written by Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky. From the title alone it shows Kornilov's view which are shared by many others that the Kornilov affair has accelerated the Bolshevik seizure of power[2]. The Kornilov affair officially started on 27<sup>th</sup> August / 09<sup>th</sup> September 1917, when the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Lavr Georgiyevich Kornilov, brought a troops to Petrograd although he had been dismissed by Alexander Kerensky, the head of the Provisional Government at the time[3]. The Kornilov Affair is regarded by many historians as one of the turning points in the rise of Bolshevik Party - after a short slump after July Days - and consequently towards the event in October 1917. After the Kornilov affair, the Bolshevik Party aligned with various members of society and gaining their supports in assisting to toppling the already crippled Provisional Government.

Despite its importance, the affair (which also referred as a coup d'état or a revolt) is historically unclear - different interpretations but with no concrete evidences. The accounts contradicted with each other and this led to historical debates which were dominantly discussed the different arguments brought up by Abraham Ascher and Lenoid Strakhovsky. Ascher is highly critical on Kornilov, stating that he 'conspired' to take the power as part of his ambitious plan; whereas Strakhovsky challenged this by arguing that Kerensky had staged this whole affair and betrayed Kornilov's goodwill to prevent Bolshevism from taking root.[4] Both have used Kornilov's dismissal

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by Kerensky as a justification for their action – the former argues that by refusing to accept the dismissal it was a proof to Kerensky's suspicion[5]. The latter, on the other hand, sympathises Kornilov's assumption that Kerensky had been influenced by the Soviet and it was his duty to protect Russia.[6] Aside from these two, a somewhat completely different from the previous two, where they are not the main actor: it stemmed out from a misunderstanding with the former Procurator of the Holy Synod, V. N. L'vov's involvement[7], Kornilov claimed that Kerensky – through L'vov – offered choices of who should be in power[8], whereas L'vov claimed that Kornilov ordered him to tell Kerensky his demand for military dictatorship[9]. L'vov's real involvement is still debated. The more balanced interpretation by Harvey Asher, suggests that Kornilov was convinced that the government supported his march after several people had visited him including L'vov. Moreover, Asher suggests that they conspired together to restore people's trust towards the government, although Kerensky later pulled out.[10]

These debates show partly the existing tension and division between the two actors which led to the failure of the coup. These tensions were an open opportunity for the Bolshevik Party could exploit especially when Kerensky appealed to the Petrograd Soviet to defend the capital. This led to the physical reason for this failure: the quick mass mobilisation by the Bolshevik Party. It could be regarded as a mistake made by Kerensky as the rearmament of the Bolshevik Military Organisation would lead to his and the Provisional Government downfall later in October. His fear of being overthrown by Kornilov – a person who he had been having 'quarrel' with[11] and a right-wing[12] – and his will to elevate Provisional

Government's reputation[13] might have clouded his judgement. The lack of trust and doubt amongst each other Kerensky's failure to read the mood of the situation he was in and overestimating his and general disorganisation were also the reasons for the coup's failure. Despite being favoured as the victor[14], Kornilov lost and subsequently met his death when he participated in the Civil War against the Bolsheviks.

The Kornilov Affair was triggered when L'vov came to Kerensky and demanded for the transfer of power to Kornilov. The whole narration is long, which partly has been mentioned previously, however, it shows the general mechanism in the government and their personalities. Miscommunication, distribution of power, lack of confidence and distrust with each other and different groups supporting different people for their own ambitions are all highlighted.

First, the miscommunication. Just after hearing from L'vov that he was suited to be a military dictator, Kerensky quickly announced Kornilov for a military coup against the government for fear that he might be removed from the power[15]. Kornilov claimed to be acting on Kerensky's instruction; Kerensky painted Kornilov as a counter-revolutionary who wanted to be a dictator. Although, there is some evidence stating that Kerensky regretted his dismissals and hesitate to brand Kornilov as a traitor. In fact, there was an attempt to try to negotiate with Kornilov, albeit he was under pressure. However, unknown to them, Nekrasov had dispatched the message and it was too late for them when they realised about this.[16] These 'misunderstandings' and lack of cohesion certainly shows existing fractures in the Provisional Government which led to the downfall of both sides.

Nekrasov's action, albeit there was an attempt to delay the declaration, removed any chance for reconciliation. Lack of further communication, whether it was for confirmation or negotiation, were noticeable. For example, instead of asking Kornilov after Alekseev sent him the note, Krymov went directly to Kerensky and stopped the troop from advancing. There was also the telecommunication between Kerensky and Kornilov over Hughes Apparatus where the conversation appears to be vague and no direct confrontation.[17] Some historians believed that Kerensky was trying to remove Kornilov quietly.[18] Instead of working together and worked their differences, they were more focus on removing each other. This might have been due to their prior clash in regards to capital and corporal punishment in the army to name a few[19].

In regards to L'vov, it seems unlikely that Kerensky explicitly instructed Kornilov to march troops into Petrograd and given him the choices: where one of them was that Kornilov would be a dictator[20]. Although it seems to be benefited Kerensky, he was probably no more trusting of Kornilov than others. Bringing in Kornilov's army into Petrograd would risk of military counter-revolution. It is still unclear how L'vov's and Kornilov's claims differed from each other.

As mentioned earlier, nearing the peak of the affair in the end of August, people were positive that Kornilov's troop would win: his generals, landowners[21], large officers' union, the Cossacks and the increase in Stock Exchange.[22] Considering that majority of the High Command sympathised with Kornilov[23] and his previous meetings with different people giving supports, it is not surprising when Kornilov was confident that his march

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would be a successful coup. However, not all of these groups were supportive of his plan. Earlier on, there was already opposition against Kornilov. Moscow Military District, Colonel Verkhovsky, expressed his support towards the government and distanced himself from Kornilov. There was also wariness amongst people in Stavka where they saw little chance in his march into Petrograd.[24] Only some of the professional soldiers believed in this advance, but many were not dedicated in trying to assist Kornilov. Moreover, with the denunciation calling Kornilov as a traitor made by Kerensky had further convince them to distance themselves from the affair - avoiding from being purged together with Kornilov if the affair had gone to different turn. [25]

Kornilov's deliberate military plan collapsed. Between the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, the Third Cavalry Corps which was supposed to 'crush the soviets'[26] did not arrive. Kerensky ordered General Alekseev to send a note to General Krymov that there was no Bolshevik uprising as predicted by Kornilov and consequently, he halted their advance into the capital. The generals of the troops - General Krymov and Denikin - were also cornered by their own troops and reluctantly had to surrender with the former shot himself[27]. Similarly, the troops also deserted after hearing that there was no uprising. The generals and Kornilov kept the soldiers in the dark in what they were actually fighting for - only be told that they were there to fight against the Bolsheviks[28]- which led to further decline in supports. The foundation of the coup was still not concrete and arguably the timing was a miss. Kornilov had failed to see the mood and the political situation at the time. The troops saw Kornilov as someone who reintroduced capital punishment - death

penalty - and attempted to counter the revolution. Thus, after hearing that there were no Bolshevik uprisings and Kerensky's declaration of Kornilov as a traitor, mutinies soon broke out with some divisions pledged themselves to the 'cause of revolution' - the Bolsheviks. They helped other workers and prevented the remaining troops from marching and arrested anyone who was in favour of Kornilov.[29] These miscalculations and disorganised troops are highly dissimilar from the mass mobilisation by the Bolsheviks and the workers.

Although, mass mobilisation against Kornilov by the Bolsheviks had been debated whether it was spontaneous or a completely organised deployment, this mobilisation had completely stumped Kornilov's effort. Kerensky appealed to Petrograd Soviet to stop Kornilov and defend the city (at the same time shows a weakness of the Provisional Government) led to the rearmament of Military Organisation which were both consisted of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Mass meetings were also conducted to discuss their plan against Kornilov in addition to a demand for the release of July Days Bolshevik prisoners. The demand was conceded and prisoners including Trotsky was free. These would be important later a couple month after. A committee was set up to 'defend the city', Committee for the People's Struggle against Counter Revolution[30]. This includes erecting fortifications around the city and barbed wires[31]. The Soviet was also involved in coordinating the distribution of weaponry and conducted searches and arrested anyone who was suspected to be counter-revolutionaries.

Committees at province level were also created. This was to set up networks of communication between provinces[32]. Red Guards were created - of

mainly of left SR sympathisers and Bolsheviks - and armed with many were trained by the [33] Military Organisations from a possible assault. These two organisations were overseen by Inter-District Conference of Petrograd Local Soviets. As shown, in comparison to the lacklustre that of Kornilov's military troops, the Soviets gradually created a working strings of groups.

Moreover, agitators managed to infiltrate Kornilov's troops and persuaded them to desert the advance, coupled with Kerensky's declaration. They also cooperated with the telegraph and railway workers [34] which further disorganised Kornilov's effort. On the communication side, any suspicious telegraphs were supposed to be redirected whereas on the transportation side, they were instructed to make chaos. They destroyed railway tracks and sabotage communications. As results, the troops were moving on the wrong roads, arrived at wrong places, only some of the units got dispatched and many of the soldiers were separated from their commanders, and loss of communications with their units - in short, confusion and disorder. [35] With these confusion, the movement had collapsed. The Red Guards managed to disable the coup without firing a single bullet and bloodshed; except for few murder of counter-revolutionaries [36]. Thus, shedding positive light onto the Bolshevik Party as the 'saviours and the protectors of the revolution'. Consequently, this resulted in a large increase of support.

Kornilov and other thirty army officers which were believed to conspire together, were incarcerated in the Bykhov Fortress. After the October event, Kornilov managed to escape and establish the Volunteer Army which later fought against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War; where he was killed.

Although Kerensky did not contribute and directly involved, Kerensky still

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insisted of being a protector of Revolution.[37]Kornilov did not gain anything from this whole affair, more people supported the Left, he was removed and the Right was ' shaken'.[38]The main problem with his advance was the miscommunication between everyone involved that was later could be exploited by their common enemy.

The victor of this whole but short affair was the Bolsheviks. The party revived and strengthened amidst the political chaos and distrust. On the other hand, Kerensky lost the military support. Although there are officer corps refused to join Kornilov's mutiny, they abhorred Kerensky's attitude towards their generals and growing distrust towards officer corps amongst the common soldiers. Thus increasing division between these two groups.[39]The revolt had radicalised the masses. The Soviet Press began with their propaganda and due to their policy of being a fighter against Kornilov but no association with the Provisional Government, they became popular. Therefore, coupled with the increasing support and gaining control over the Petrograd Soviet, the Provisional Government was further weakened and in October/November 1917, the Bolshevik Party seized the power off from the Provisional Government as the champion for the Soviets.

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