

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 146

### “Chaos in the Army”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In Russia, the Petrograd Soviet continued to take in new representatives from soviets across the nation, building it into something like a national congress of workers and soldiers. In accord with socialist principles, the Soviet passed multiple resolutions condemning the war as an act of imperialism, one contrary to the interests of the Russian people, and calling for an end to the fighting as quickly as possible. There would then usually follow a passionless line or two, added into the resolution at the request of fellow socialist and now war minister Alexander Kerensky, suggesting that Russian soldiers should keep on fighting, for now.

These mixed messages were received that way at the front, as Kerensky himself acknowledged. When he returned from his tour, he wrote that “[a]fter three years of bitter suffering, millions of war-weary soldiers were asking themselves: ‘Why should I die now when at home a new, freer life is only beginning?’”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 146. Chaos in the Army.

Lavr Kornilov was born on August 18, 1870. His parents were Cossacks, apparently, and his father an officer in the Russian Army. I say “apparently” because the sources disagree on his family’s ethnic background. He likely had some Turkic or Asian ancestry. It’s hard to say because he was orphaned at an early age and adopted by relatives of his mother.

As the son of an Army officer, young Lavr was entitled to a free education in a military school, which led him to following in his father’s footsteps. He spent his early military career in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran, and learned several of the regional languages. He served with distinction as an intelligence officer during the Russo-Japanese War and afterward became a military attaché in China for three years. He learned Chinese and took a deep interest in Chinese

history and culture. He is said to have spent much of this time doing research for a book on China, but that book was never written. History has a very different fate in store for him.

When the Great War began, Kornilov was put in command of an infantry division on the Galician front. In 1915, he was wounded during the fighting around Przemśl and taken prisoner by the Austrians. His high rank made him a noted and valuable prisoner. Austrian chief-of-staff Conrad wanted to meet with him personally. In spite of this notoriety, though, he somehow managed to escape Austrian custody in 1916 into neutral Romania and from there back to Russia, where he was celebrated as a hero.

Kornilov was very different from your typical Russian general. He wasn't Russian, for one thing, let alone an aristocrat. His origins were humble and his ethnic background downright exotic. But he was a very good soldier and admired in the ranks. Following the February Revolution, Lavr Kornilov was appointed commander of the Petrograd Garrison, likely because the new government saw him as more trustworthy than many of the aristocratic fops in the Army who knew little about soldiering but likely harbored Romanov sympathies. Kornilov was exactly the opposite. He had no love for the Romanovs and apparently nothing to gain from any counterrevolution. He was a soldier's soldier and nothing more.

But although Kornilov sympathized with the Revolution, he was old school in his ideas on how to run an army. He had no patience for the committee meetings and part-time saluting and other "democratic" military innovations the Petrograd Soviet was imposing on the Army, and you'll recall from episode 144 that in April of 1917, following the abortive Bolshevik uprising of that month, Kornilov asked to be relieved of his duties in Petrograd and returned to the front. He was given command of an Army and sent back to Galicia, where he was part of the Kerensky Offensive in July.

And here is where Kornilov's story catches up with the end of last week's episode, so let me push the pause button on Kornilov for a moment while we pick up that story. I ended last week with a pretty rosy picture. The Bolsheviks had attempted to take power during the July Days, but that attempt had failed and the Bolshevik leadership is now in hiding. Alexander Kerensky is prime minister of a new Provisional Government, one that includes a couple Constitutional Democrats and the socialist parties: the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks persist in opposing the Provisional Government and calling for "all power to the soviets," the councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants now springing up across Russia and sending representatives to Petrograd. But the Bolsheviks have been discredited by accusations of financial support from Germany and their leaders are dispersed.

But those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that this is not the end of the Russian Revolution. This is not even the beginning of the end. It is merely the end of the beginning.

Kerensky did indeed put together a new government by early August, but it took two weeks. The different political factions didn't trust one another, especially the Constitutional Democrats, or Kadets as they are often called. That's what the initials K and D sound like in Russian. The Kadets would have been considered radicals just a few years ago; now they were being left behind by the rising support for the socialist parties. The party leader, Pavel Miliukov, had as a young man first, been expelled from university, and later imprisoned by the Emperor for six months because of his radical views on democracy. But that was then; now, in 1917, The Kadets have been discredited by the actions of Miliukov when he was foreign minister and spent weeks dancing around the question of why Russia was still fighting the war and what its goals were, rather than simply disavow any Russian territorial claims after the war.

Miliukov was out of government now, but he was still leader of the Kadets. But the Kadets themselves are becoming unpopular. What was radical a few years ago is reactionary and counterrevolutionary in 1917. The Revolution appears to be leaving the Constitutional Democrats behind. Or is it that the Revolution is slipping into anarchy? When Miliukov addressed his party's congress in July, he denounced what he called "chaos in the army, chaos in foreign policy, chaos in industry, and chaos in nationalist questions." He's got a point. Kerensky is in charge now, and he has a government behind him, but what exactly does he rule? The Provisional Government is losing popularity and losing control.

Take the nationalities questions. Kerensky has recently been forced to send the Army to the city of Tsaritsyn, on the Volga River. Tsaritsyn is the city that in 1925 will be renamed Stalingrad, and in 1961, Volgograd. The troops were needed there to restore government control after the local soviet, which was controlled by Bolsheviks, declared independence and proclaimed the Tsaritsyn Republic. This development received a lot of press attention in Petrograd because, hey, "Tsaritsyn Republic"? Are you kidding me? Is every town and village in Russia now going to declare itself an independent state? What kind of government do we even have? Or maybe should I ask, do we even have a government?

Tsaritsyn was only one example. Restless ethnic minorities across the former Russian Empire are poised to declare independence, most notably the Kiev Soviet, which is styling itself the Ukrainian Rada and demanding regional autonomy if not outright independence. Poland is probably already a lost cause; the loss of Ukraine as well would cost Russia something like a third of its population and arable land.

Similarly, Finland had had its own parliament, even under Imperial rule. Now that parliament was claiming autonomy over Finland, which will lead the Provisional Government to dissolve it and take direct control in autumn, leading many Finns to ask, seriously, is this why we had a revolution? So that we could be ruled over with a heavier hand than the Emperor's? You see the problem. If the Provisional Government is too accommodating, it looks weak. If the Provisional Government gets tough, it looks tyrannical.

Several Kadet ministers quit the government over the Ukrainian situation just before the July Days began, as you may recall, because freedom and equal rights for ethnic minorities was one thing, but breaking Russia up into a hundred little republics just wasn't what they had signed on for. This is less of a problem for the socialists, mind you, who believe that in some mystical future the state is going to wither away anyway, but the Kadets are about making Russia into a liberal democracy, not about dissolving it into insignificance.

A couple of Kadet ministers remain in the Provisional Government, but the Kadets are mostly the right-wing opposition now. Kerensky himself will later describe this period as him fending off "the Bolsheviks of the Right and the Left." The "Bolsheviks of the Right" would be Miliukov and the Kadets. And as the chaos that Miliukov identified spread across Russia, he and the Kadets would indeed seek allies among the disaffected Right, the monarchists and the aristocrats and the army officers who never thought much of the Revolution in the first place.

Kerensky was aware of this gathering storm, and after the July Days were over and the Bolsheviks dealt with, he increasingly came to believe that the biggest threat to the Revolution now came from the political right. The Bolsheviks were a shambles. Their traitorous ties to the Germans had been exposed and their leadership was in hiding like frightened rabbits. How much of a threat can they be? The Kadet party newspaper agreed. As they put it, "The best way to free ourselves from Bolshevism would be to entrust its leaders with the fate of the country...The first day of their final triumph would also be the first day of their quick collapse."

[music: Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 4*]

Despite what you might expect though, the Bolsheviks retained significant support, even after the humiliation of the July days, and local election results were showing that Bolshevik support was, if anything, on the increase. How could this be?

Well, for one thing, with the other parties of the left now in government, the Bolsheviks were the only opposition party remaining. Well, you could join the Kadets and start talking about annexing Constantinople or go the full monarchist route and talk about undoing the Revolution altogether. Those were not very popular positions in Russia in July 1917. But there was plenty of political space to the left of the Provisional Government, and the Bolsheviks had it to themselves.

The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, the other socialist political parties, espoused the same socialist ideals that the Bolsheviks did, but every one of them seemed to come with a "but" attached. The Provisional Government was bourgeois and served the interests of the capitalists. *But* the soviets were a check on the government, so that's good enough and we should support it. The war serves no one's interests but the capitalists at home and our imperialist "allies" in Britain and France. *But* the soldiers should remain in the trenches and keep up the fight anyway, even though the Provisional Government hasn't yet taken any concrete steps toward opening talks with the Germans or ending the war. Land reform is urgently needed. *But*

the rural folk should continue on as before until we work that one out with the bourgeois government.

While the other socialist parties were engaged in this “on the one hand, but on the other hand” *shtick*, the Bolsheviks offered simple, concrete remedies. The Provisional Government was bourgeois. Fine. Abolish it and give all power to the soviets. The war serves only the capitalists and the imperialists. Fine. End the war. Land reform was urgently needed. Fine. Let’s get to work. While the other socialists had long-winded excuses, the Bolsheviks had a few simple slogans: “All power to the soviets.” “Down with the war.” And the simple and pithy “Peace, land, and bread.” These were not especially popular slogans in July 1917, but they had the advantage of being simple, easy to understand, and flowing logically from the socialist critique of Russian society. Against this, the other socialist parties offered the slogan: “Peace, land, and bread someday, blah, blah, blah, but be patient in the meantime, blah blah, because reasons.”

In his speech to the Kadet Congress, Pavel Miliukov cited “chaos in the army.” Okay, let’s turn our attention to the Army for a minute. The last time we talked about the actual war, the Kerensky Offensive was just getting going. To review, the first few days went fine. The Austrian Army collapsed just as expected and Russian soldiers were soon in the Austrian trenches, but then I didn’t want to tell you any more, because I didn’t want to spoil the good vibe at the end of last episode. But say goodbye to the good vibe, because it’s time to tell the rest of the story.

Remember that the Kerensky Offensive is taking place in Galicia, against the Austrians, which is logical from a strategic standpoint, since the Austrian Army is in sad shape, much more vulnerable than the Germans. But from the standpoint of the ordinary Russian citizen, the Germans are on Russian soil while the units fighting the Austrians are on Austrian soil. Shouldn’t we be trying to reclaim Russian territory rather than seize even more Austrian territory. Didn’t we just go through a whole political crisis over *not* claiming additional territory?

Or to put it even more simply, look at it from the standpoint of a Russian soldier in the trenches in Galicia. You’re ordering me to go over the top and assault Austrian positions and probably get myself killed for the sake of gaining ground our leaders in Petrograd have already insisted they don’t want. On what planet does *that* make any sense?

I mentioned the beginning of the offensive last week, and I said it went well for the first few days, and that’s true, but it’s also the best you can say for it. Many Russian soldiers had lost faith in the war and simply refused orders to attack, so it was the most loyal and staunch units that led the offensive in its first few days, and these were also the units took the brunt of the casualties and the soldiers behind them would not take their places.

Most officers attributed this to simple cowardice, or “Trench Bolshevism,” as they liked to call it. Kerensky had begun accepting recruits for new women’s battalions, thinking that the men at the front seeing women soldiers going over the top would be shamed into following them. The first of these units, the First Women’s Battalion, earned the nickname “The Battalion of Death”

for their willingness to assault enemy positions, and some nearby men soldiers were indeed shamed into following them. The Russian Army also placed a battalion of ethnic Czech prisoner-of-war volunteers onto their front line to oppose an Austrian Army unit that was largely Czech and they were able to induce some 3,000 of those Czech Austrian soldiers to surrender.

But these innovations were not enough. After a few days of successful attacks, the Kerensky Offensive petered out. When the Austrians, and especially the Germans, counterattacked, Russian units fell back, some of them dropping their weapons and fleeing at the first sight of a German uniform.

The rate of desertion has been high all year, but now soldiers are deserting in greater numbers than ever, mostly in Galicia, where the offensive was supposed to be taking place. If you desert in Galicia and flee eastward, you will find yourself in Ukraine, where the Rada, the would-be parliament of a would-be Ukrainian nation, found itself in the happy position of gathering up these deserters, disarming them, sending them on to their homes, and handing over their weapons to the Ukrainian army they were organizing. Better still, some of the fleeing soldiers were ethnic Ukrainians themselves and didn't need to be disarmed at all, but simply folded directly into the new Ukrainian Army.

In the end, the Kerensky Offensive proved a disastrous miscalculation. It had been intended to boost morale, reassure Russia's allies, and earn political support for Kerensky and the Provisional Government. In practice, it did the opposite. It crushed Russian morale, alarmed the Allies, and made the Provisional Government look weaker and less effective than ever. When the dust settled from the counterattacks, the Russian Army had given up all the gains made in last year's Brusilov offensive and had fallen back some 150 miles, out of Galicia altogether. The new front line stabilized where it did only because Austrian and German units outran their supply lines and were forced to stop and wait.

The only bright spot in this mess was the army commanded by Lavr Kornilov. It had fought more successfully than the other armies and was the only one to retreat in good order. On August 1, Alexander Kerensky, now prime minister and war minister both, dismissed Brusilov as commander-in-chief of the Russian Army and replaced him with Lavr Kornilov.

At the same time Russia was being humiliated on the battlefield, new political fissures were opening up in the new Provisional Government. The Justice Minister, Pavel Pereverzev, had done yeoman's work investigating the Bolsheviks and exposing their ties to Germany, but no good deed goes unpunished. The political right accused Pereverzev, who was a member of the Socialist Revolutionaries, of botching the investigation by going public too soon and allowing Lenin to slip through his fingers. All the publicity might have fatally compromised the investigation, they claimed, making it impossible for the government to secure convictions. Underlying these accusations was the unspoken charge that, as a fellow socialist, Pereverzev might have deliberately sabotaged the process to protect the Bolsheviks.

But Pereverzev had few supporters on the left, either. The other socialist parties now regarded the political right, not the left, as the number one threat. After all, the left *was* the government now, except for the Bolsheviks, who had been neutralized. But the fear of counterrevolutionary conspiracies among the aristocracy and the Army had never gone away, and now with the Kadets seemingly ready to join them, it became conventional wisdom in Petrograd that the next attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government would come not from the left, but from the right. Hadn't the French Revolution led to an army officer, Napoleon, seizing power and proclaiming himself Emperor? In August of 1917, it was easy to imagine that the same fate threatened revolutionary Russia.

So in the minds of many among the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, this zealous persecution of the Bolsheviks looked suspiciously like the first step in a purge of socialist parties generally, an effort to undermine the government, not shore it up. So they criticized Pereverzev for cracking down too hard on the Bolsheviks.

Now, if there's one person in the Russian government who should have been standing up for Pereverzev, it was Alexander Kerensky. After all, Leon Trotsky had publicly called for the murder of Kerensky and the Bolshevik mobs of the July Days had hunted him down and would have lynched him if they'd have caught him. Even the justice minister's critics had to concede that his going public with evidence of Bolshevik treason had dampened Bolshevik support, especially in the Army, and that in turn had helped quell the rioting.

But instead of backing Pereverzev, Kerensky sacked him. This may have been part of a larger plan of Kerensky's, to create a smaller war cabinet to deal with military and foreign policy issues in the same way Lloyd George had in Britain. To Kerensky's detractors, he was setting himself up as a dictator. To his supporters, he was streamlining the splintered and ineffectual Provisional Government. But it may just be that what was actually going on was that Kerensky was becoming paranoid. At the relatively young age of 36 and with no military or administrative experience, he was now the most powerful person in Russia, and the number one target of anyone unhappy with the status quo. Which was everyone.

That's the best explanation I can give you for Kerensky's increasingly erratic behavior—some mixture of youth, inexperience, and paranoia—beginning with his decision to dump Pereverzev. And his paranoia was focused almost entirely on the political right.

And not only on the political right, but increasingly on the new Army commander-in-chief, Lavr Kornilov. Kerensky had appointed Kornilov to the position, but not without some conflict. As I said, Kornilov was an old-school soldier with no patience for these soldiers' committees and soviets of civilian socialists dictating to Army officers what orders they can or can't give their own troops. Back in July, Kornilov and other Army officers had persuaded a reluctant Kerensky to reintroduce capital punishment in the military, albeit only on the front lines, and only for the crimes of mutiny or desertion.

When Kerensky offered him the commander-in-chief position, Kornilov told him he would only accept if Kerensky agreed to certain conditions. He and his officers had to have command discretion restored to them. No more orders from the Petrograd Soviet or anyone else. And corporal and capital punishment had to be restored, not only on the front lines, but everywhere in the Army.

Kerensky almost withdrew the offer, but instead reluctantly agreed to Kornilov's conditions. In Kornilov's view, it was this silly civilian meddling in the operation of the Army that had led to the collapse of the Kerensky Offensive, and all he wanted to do was restore professionalism to the Army, for the good of Russia. Or that's what he said. Kornilov insisted he was loyal to the Revolution, that he hated the monarchy, and his only interest was in whipping the military back into fighting shape.

For his part, one of the things Kerensky wanted from Kornilov was some trustworthy cavalry units, soldiers of unquestioned loyalty, to be sent to Petrograd to help keep order and serve as a defense against any further anti-government violence. Kerensky must have trusted Kornilov at first, even to have raised such a request, but Kerensky began to question Kornilov's loyalty almost as soon as he had appointed him and began to see Kornilov as potentially that Russian Napoleon everyone was warning against.

Kerensky began to drag his feet on the reforms he'd promised. Kornilov interpreted this as evidence that Kerensky's hands were tied by the Petrograd Soviet and began complaining privately about the Soviet, even speaking intemperately about sending those cavalry units into the Tauride Palace and forcibly dissolving the Soviet. Kornilov was smart enough not to say this sort of thing publicly, but some of his subordinate officers were less afraid to speak aloud their contempt for the Soviet. Soldiers like a clearly defined chain of command after all, and for them, the chain of command ran from them to Kerensky and the Provisional Government, and later, after the Constituent Assembly was elected and seated, it would supplant the Provisional Government as the final authority in Russia. The Petrograd Soviet? Phht. Who are they? A bunch of self-appointed extremists and rabble-rousers who represent no one but themselves.

But Kerensky soon became aware of this talk, both the public and private statements, and he became increasingly worried. The Kornilov of real life was sounding more and more like the Kornilov of Kerensky's nightmares. Was he actually plotting a coup?

With his Army reforms going nowhere, Kornilov requested permission to meet with the Provisional Government personally to discuss the need for them. He came to Petrograd and the meeting was held, but Kerensky and Boris Savinkov, the man who was actually running the war ministry under Kerensky's direction, kept interrupting him whenever he got too deep into the details on the status of the Army and plans for future operations against the Germans. When one of Kornilov's written reports to the government on the state of the Army got leaked to a socialist



newspaper, Kornilov got the picture. His superiors, Savinkov and Kerensky, couldn't even trust military secrets to their ministerial colleagues in the Provisional Government.

The next day, Kornilov ordered a cavalry corps to be withdrawn from the Romanian front and redeployed to Velikie Luki, a town in western Russia about equally distant from Petrograd and Moscow. The commander, a General Krymov, noted that this redeployment was too far from the front line to be of any use in fighting the Germans. Kornilov explained to him the troops were to be used against potential Bolshevik uprisings in either Petrograd or Moscow, the two cities that were Bolshevik strongholds.

On August 27, Kornilov gave a speech at a government rally at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. He was proper and non-political in his remarks, but he was cheered lustily by the Army and by the Constitutional Democrats and they carried out of the theatre on their shoulders afterward. Kerensky wrote later that it was at this moment, it became "clear to me that the next attempt at a coup would come from the right, not the left."

This was not the opinion of French military intelligence, who had gotten wind of Bolshevik plans for another coup attempt, possibly as early as next month, one that would come in coordination with a new German offensive. As it happens, the Germans are indeed about to begin a new offensive, but there's no evidence the Bolsheviks were planning anything in coordination with it, so who knows why the French believed this, but they did. And they warned the Russian commander-in-chief, Kornilov, and the prime minister, Kerensky.

Kornilov reacted perhaps a bit intemperately to this information, warning those he spoke with that he had the Third Cavalry Corps prepared to move into Petrograd at a moment's notice, should the Bolsheviks start any further trouble. But he went further, and threatened to use his cavalry to seize control of the naval base at Kronshtadt from the Bolshevik sailors who now controlled the place and to force the dissolution of the Petrograd Soviet.

Part of Kornilov's concern surely had to do with the fact that the German Army was on the move once again. The key Russian city of Riga, on the Baltic coast, fell to the German advance on September 3. And as far as Kornilov could tell, no one in Petrograd could be bothered to take notice. In his mind, the Provisional Government was increasingly becoming shackled by the radical leftists of the Petrograd Soviet, and he began to take measures to prepare for a day of reckoning, when it might be necessary to march into Petrograd and put down the Bolsheviks by force.

To Kerensky, when he heard about this kind of talk, it must have sounded quite a lot like that right-wing coup he was worried about. Kerensky sent his man at the war ministry, Boris Savinkov to Stavka headquarters at Mogilev to discuss the state of the Army with Kornilov, but his real mission was to sound the general out and see what he was really up to. In particular, Savinkov sounded Kornilov out on a suggestion from Kerensky, that Kerensky himself be given personal command of the Petrograd Military District, including that cavalry corps in Velikie

Luki. Kornilov agreed to this proposal, and Savinkov returned to Petrograd, reporting to Kerensky that all was well, although you have to think that Kornilov would have been pretty thick not to understand Kerensky's request for direct control over the Petrograd Military District as a sign of lack of confidence in Kornilov.

So the relationship between Kerensky and Kornilov is getting pretty strained. And hang on, because it's about to get a lot worse. But that is a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. Thanks, too, to Markus and Daniel for their donations, and thank you Charles for becoming a patron of the podcast. Patrons and donors help keep the words flowing and the bits going, so if you have some loose change burning a hole in your pocket, why not visit [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and lend a hand. You can also leave a rating and review at the iTunes store, tweet and retweet on Twitter, share on Facebook, and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, good old-fashioned word of mouth is still effective. If you know someone loves history, tell them about *The History of the Twentieth Century*. Both of you will be glad you did.

I'm going to be taking next week off for research time, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time here on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as I pick up right back up where I left off and examine the Kornilov Affair. That's in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Remember the Romanovs, the Imperial family? They had been living under house arrest at their palace outside Petrograd ever since Nikolai had returned from the front. Now Alexander Kerensky ordered that they be moved to Siberia. Granted, they were being moved to the city of Tobolsk, the capital of western Siberia and traditionally the center of Russian control of the region. They were installed in the governor's mansion and permitted an entourage of fifty servants, so this is hardly the same sort of Siberian exile the Emperor and his ministers used to impose on political dissidents in the bad old days, but still. Kerensky claimed the move was meant for the Romanovs' own protection in the event of more Bolshevik violence, but it seems more likely Kerensky was afraid the deposed Emperor might lead a monarchist counterrevolution, or at least become the figurehead of one, and sending him to Tobolsk was likely a means of stashing him safely out of the way, at least until such time as the Romanovs could finally be sent into exile.

[music: Closing Theme]