

Different Ways of Interpreting the Kornilov Affair
A Review of George Katkov's *The Kornilov Affair: Kerensky*
***and the Break-up of the Russian Army*, London and New York:**
Longman, 1980.

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I. Introduction

Just after the July Crisis resulting from the Bolsheviks' attempt to seize power, the Provisional Government had to deal with another very strange and fatal event in Russian history. The delicate conflict between the Provisional Government without a real power base and the military power reached its highest tension in late August, which led to the dismissal of General Kornilov, the Supreme Commander of the Russian Armed Force by Kerensky, the Prime Minister, who had appointed the former to that post less than two months before.

Although historians of 1917 seem to agree that this event was decisive in hastening the downfall of the Provisional Government and assuring the success of the Bolsheviks, they have advanced a multitude of different interpretations in characterizing it. In general, the Kornilov affair has been interpreted in three different ways. The first one is, as Kerensky claimed, at the time and afterward, that Kornilov plotted to overthrow the Provisional Government and to assume dictatorial powers. The second interpretation holds that the whole affair resulted from an unfortunate misunderstanding between the prime minister and his commander in chief. The third view is that Kerensky trapped Kornilov by first ordering the General to send a cavalry corps to Petrograd to help suppress an anticipated Bolshevik uprising, and then, when Kornilov did as instructed, accusing him of sending the troops to topple the government. This was Kornilov's own view of the matter.¹

Katkov's view about the matter belongs to the third. In this book, which constitutes a step-by-step recapitulation of the Kornilov affair beginning with a review of conditions in the Russian army following the demise of the monarchy and concluding with a summary of both the personal and political consequences of the affair, we can notice his almost complete exoneration of General Kornilov and a thoroughgoing indictment of Kerensky.

As a well-known historian of the February Revolution of 1917, Katkov explains how the Kornilov episode was of fundamental importance in effecting the collapse of Kerensky's government by perusing the exclusive material available to him along with other sources. In doing so, he argues that the Kornilov affair was nothing more than the personal invention of Kerensky.

On what historical sources is this conclusion based? How does he treat them? How does he develop his interpretation from these materials? By asking these questions, this paper tries to review his way of interpreting the Kornilov affair.

II. Method and Evidence

One characteristic of Katkov's method of historical research is his relative disregard of the secondary sources. According to him, in most secondary sources, "the authors' historical insights have to be winnowed from the chaff of traditional historiography (p.xii)." In pursuing his former works, his method seems to be subject to detailed analysis of the accounts given in official documents and by eye-witnesses contemporary with the events described.

However, this method has unusual difficulties to be entirely applied to the study of the Kornilov affair, because the reporting of events treated in this work was seriously biased from the outset. Katkov is convinced that not only did Kerensky, in his version of the affair, suppress every element that failed to reinforce his own views, but those who would have been ready to lend support to Kornilov either had no opportunity to state their opinions, or else were afraid to do so (p.xii). To deal with this bias in the sources, based on the collected materials, he

1 Richard Pipes, *The New Republic*, Apr. 25 1988, p.39.

compiled "a synthesized version" of Kornilov's original deposition which, he believes, is the most reliable and important material concerning the event (p.xiii). This synthesized Kornilov deposition as attached in the Appendix gives much strength to this book.

Katkov seems to have a deep faith in this material. He, therefore, purposely omits reference to other documents or articles which, he thinks, are motivated by the desire either to justify their authors' conduct in retrospect or to vilify their political opponents (p.202). As a result, the readers are deprived of the opportunities to consider or evaluate different historical sources and interpretations of some parts of the event which are belittled by him. Instead of confusing the readers by introducing unimportant or biased sources, he tries to convince the readers that Kerensky's momentous denunciation of the head of the Russian armed forces was the final blow to the heroic attempts of the military administration to channel the evolution of political and social forces into a legal and stable form by drawing upon the hitherto unknown and neglected sources at his disposal (p.xiv).

In other words, his book is not a discussion of the historical viewpoints on the Kornilov affair. Rather, it is a chronological recapitulation of the events based on his materials. Readers can hardly find various debates, different opinions, interpretations, or historical perspectives on these events except the very brief comments on the Kornilov historiography in his short bibliographical note.

III. Personality-Oriented Approach

In this book, Katkov strongly stresses the role of personal relationships and covert political maneuvering in the Kornilov affair. He tries to explore the responsibilities for the affair among its rival protagonists. Based on the rigorous analysis of the related evidences, Katkov produces especially insightful characterization of the affair's main actors- Kornilov, Kerensky, and Lvov.

In this personality-oriented approach, Katkov's analysis can be reduced to an almost complete exoneration of General Kornilov,

who emerges as the unwitting victim of political forces beyond his ability to comprehend, and a sharp and vindictive attack on Kerensky.² This conclusion rests essentially on several points of interpretation.

First, Kornilov's disposition of reliable troops on the approaches to Petrograd, which began as early as 6-7 August, was directed solely against the Germans and the Bolsheviks, was accomplished with the full knowledge of the Provisional Government, and was therefore in no way part of any military plot to overthrow the existing regime. Second, the famous conversation of 24 August between Kornilov and V.N. L'vov, which effectively precipitated the crisis, was entirely innocent on the part of the Supreme Commander, who sincerely believed that L'vov was an authorized agent of the Kerensky government. Third, the report of his conversation with Kornilov that L'vov then conveyed to Kerensky was a tissue of obvious lies which the prime minister deliberately used to invent a counterrevolutionary plot in order to avoid introducing promised military reforms that would have caused a break with the Petrograd Soviet and the probable loss of his position. In sum, one of the Katkov's main arguments in this book is that the event was not a counterrevolutionary attempt plotted by General Kornilov but Kerensky's trap of the General for the purpose of keeping his power. However, there are some points in this book which should be examined against this argument.

IV. Treatment of Kerensky's Behavior

In order to validate his argument of Kerensky's concoction of Kornilov, Katkov patiently analyzes Kerensky's behaviors and motives in several critical moments. Katkov's treatment of Kerensky's behavior is an important issue in this book, because it is a necessary basis of his conclusion that the Kornilov affair was the personal invention of Kerensky. In many parts of this book, Katkov tries to describe that Kerensky is hysteric (p.62), was in terrible quandary (P.86), his dominant trait is a notorious vanity (p.86). According to Katkov, Kerensky's career is meteoric

2 John Long, *Kornilov Redivivus: New Data On The Prelude To Bolshevism*, Russian History, Vol.III, Part I, 1984, p.106.

and he lacks self-assurance which brought on a periodic fits of despondency (p.86).

By this psycho-analytic description of Kerensky, Katkov tries to not only criticize Kerensky's behavior as inappropriate to deal with the critical situation which would have been settled down peacefully otherwise but also invalidate the credibility of Kerensky's own version of the Kornilov affair which were written after the affair. Katkov's effort seems to be especially successful in describing Kerensky's character. The reconstruction of Kerensky's behavior around the second meeting of Lvov and his final decision not to sign the draft proposed by Kornilov (pp.83-90), which is based on his analysis of Kerensky's character, is very imaginative and meticulous.

However, his psycho-analytic description of Kerensky's behavior can hardly explain other important points in the Kornilov affair. Why did not Kerensky sign the draft which he had promised to do? Kerensky's personal interests or his character do not explain this question satisfactorily. In order to answer this question in a broad perspective, we need to look at the relationship between Kerensky and supportive social or political force to him.

According to Katkov, Kerensky did not sign the Kornilov draft, because Kerensky realized that to sign the draft would entail a break with 'Revolutionary Democracy' on the support of which he had hitherto relied (p.86). This argument needs to be developed more specifically. Readers need more detailed explanations about so-called Revolutionary Democracy, Kerensky's tie with the Petrograd Soviets, his relation with Bolsheviks, and the possible influence of these on Kerensky's decision.

Instead of extending his consideration into Kerensky's relation with other social or political forces, Katkov rather tries to focus on the freemasonry movement of Kerensky and other cabinet members. For example, in explaining Kerensky's behavior of not informing government of what was going on between him and Kornilov, Katkov puts much importance on the fact that only three ministers (Nekrasov, Tereshchenko, and Kerensky) were chosen to meet Kornilov and the meeting kept secret (p.57). According to Katkov, the bond uniting these three ministerial members was not their political but their masonic allegiance.

These three members believed that they had their finger on the nation's pulse and mirrored the people's aspirations, and would thus have regarded it as their bounden duty either to press their decisions on their government or even to force them through behind the government back (pp.58-59).

References to the nefarious part played in the 1917 events by the Russian freemasonry is one of Katkov's particular interpretive idiosyncrasies.³ However, the bond between the three men who formed the secret inner cabinet and weight of their combined decision seems to be not crucial enough to shade other points to be considered in discussing the Kornilov affair.

Although it is said that Kerensky became so isolated from the real Russia and that he was impervious to social analysis⁴, we need to consider Kerensky's behavior not only in the perspective of his state of mind, his character, or his masonic relation with other ministerial members but also in the perspective of his political quest for maintaining his power in a polarized political situation of Russia. How could Kerensky regain his popularity in a political disparity between liberals, conservative side drifted to the right in search of a strong government and increasingly popularized leftist Bolshevik power? Did he have a chance of winning support from liberals and conservatives who had come to view him as an incompetent demagogue? How did Kerensky respond to Bolsheviks' challenge? By asking these questions, we may take better perspective of understanding Kerensky's final decision of claiming him as a defender of the Revolution and crushing so-called right wing counterrevolution.

V. Involvement of the Kadet Party

The involvement of the Kadet Party is another important issue in the study of the Kornilov affair, because the analysis of the involved group may show an element of class dynamics in the Kornilov affair. In other words, the involvement of the Kadet Party may raise the problem of interpreting the Kornilov episode in the perspective of social class struggle.

3 John Long, *ibid.*, p.106.

4 Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1987, p.275.

This is a very controversial issue about which the major concerned figures such as Milyukov and Maklakov published different versions of the story. While elaborating his view of the affair that Kornilov was an unwitting victim of circumstance in his book, *The Russian Revolution*, Milyukov seems to deny his involvement in the affair by keeping silence about the matter.⁵ But his view of the affair and his silence about possible contacts with the Kornilov attempt are severely criticized by the translator of his book.

In his introduction to the translation of Milyukov's book, Hamburg says that the view of Kornilov as unwitting victim of circumstance is inconsistent with the evidence. According to him, Kornilov was a conscious participant in a determined effort by non-socialist politicians to strip the Petrograd Soviet of political power, and, if necessary, to establish a military dictatorship. Milyukov and other Kadets were, to their subsequent embarrassment, deeply implicated in this effort. He continues that, in fact, Milyukov's virtual silence about his own contacts with the Kornilov movement best can be explained as an attempt to conceal the fundamental errors of the Kadet Party in August 1917.⁶ In addition, the letter from Maklakov to Milyukov which is introduced in Katkov's book (pp.142-143) directly supports the fact of counterrevolutionary contacts between certain "public men" (including Milyukov) and representatives of Kornilov.

On the contrary, Rosenburg argues that few leading members of the Kadet Party, if any, took a personal role in actively planning or executing the conspiracy, and that official Kadet organizations, such as the Central Committee or the Petrograd or Moscow city groups, stood entirely aloof. According to Rosenburg, conspiracy was the work of the Republican Center, in conjunction with army groups like the Union of Officers and individual members of the General Staff. Even in terms of support for such a venture, much less their participation, Milyukov, Kokoshkin, and most of the party's *verkhovniki* were ambiguous at best, refusing to encourage a unilateral move on Kornilov's part while supporting his goals in the government.⁷

5 Paul Milyukov, *The Russian Revolution 2*, translated by G.M. Hamburg, Academic International Press, 1984.

6 Paul Milyukov, *ibid.*, p.xii.

As aforementioned, the point of this controversy is whether the Kadets, who represent the political interests of the liberal middle class of contemporary Russian society, were involved or not. If the Kadets were involved, the Kornilov affair can be interpreted as a counterrevolutionary attempt of a combined force of the military and the moderate middle class. If not, the Kornilov affair has yet to be analyzed whether it was a conspiracy at all or whether it was supported by other groups than the Kadet Party. These are the questions which should not be avoided in dealing with the problems of the Kadets' involvement.

In this respect, Katkov's treatment of these questions in this book is disappointing. In criticizing Kerensky's view that the Kadet Party supported the Kornilov conspiracy, Katkov admits that the Kadets must have expressed general sympathy with the immediate aims of Kornilov, which were to halt the disintegration in the fabric of the state and of the armed forces (p.141). However, without any clear conclusion about the possibility of the Kadet involvement, he hastily ends the chapter dealing with this issue (Chapter Eleven, Later Reconstructions, Legends, and Rumors) just by quoting the Maklakov's letter to Milyukov, which explains about what happened at the Conference of Public Men at Kishkin's house (pp.142-143).

Katkov says that there were contacts between certain group of the Kadet Party and representatives of the military by drawing upon Maklakov's letter, which he regards as authentic, in the latter part of the book (p.200). But, he does not develop his argument about the influence of these contacts on the overall development of the Kornilov affair any more. He does not explain how to include the nature of these contacts in interpreting the Kornilov affair in his perspective of the personality-oriented approach. Katkov proudly states that he has been given access to this private letter which has never been published. However, what the readers may expect from his book is not just the author's access to a wide range of related historical materials but also his evaluation about the materials and his clear opinion about the event which can be explored through these materials. The aforementioned questions are not really answered in his book.

7 W. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1974, pp.226-227.

VI. Intervention of L'vov

Another example showing Katkov's relative negligence in refuting the existence of conspiracy against the Provisional Government can be found in Chapter Six, which deals with the intervention of L'vov. L'vov published an article in the Paris Russian language newspaper *Posledniya novosti* between 30 November and 9 December 1920, in which L'vov states that before his first interview with Kerensky he had met in Moscow two somewhat *obscure characters*: Dr. Dobrinsky, the former member of the first Duma, and Aladyn, who had recently returned to Russia carrying letters of introduction from personal friends in the British army.

In L'vov's article, it was Dobrinsky and Aladyn who implanted in L'vov the notion that Kornilov meant to proclaim himself dictator. L'vov also states that he went to see Kerensky at the instigation of Dobrinsky who knew all about the coup being plotted at GHQ. In short, L'vov clearly states in the article that there was a coup attempt at GHQ and that for his role as a mediator between Kerensky and GHQ, he met two representatives from GHQ. To be sure, L'vov's argument contradicts Katkov's conviction that there was not a conspiracy against the Provisional Government.

Katkov severely criticizes the credibility of L'vov's report. According to him, L'vov's life in these years had been a checkered one. He had emigrated, and had become a *clochard de Paris*: sleeping under bridges and eating whatever he could scrounge from old acquaintances. In this desperate situation, L'vov "decided to make some money by publishing sensational revelations about the background to the Kornilov affair" (p.76).

However, Katkov is not clear in criticizing the contents of L'vov's descriptions about Dobrinsky and Aladyn. Katkov says that Dobrinsky and Aladyn are obscure characters. But, the readers may be confused about what Katkov exactly means by using the word 'obscure'. Rather, Katkov's explanation about these two figures are obscure. It may mean that their role in the event is difficult to articulate. Or it can mean that L'vov's insisting on the existence of contact between himself and the

representatives of 'certain elements' who knew well about the coup being plotted at GHQ is doubtful.

Without further mentioning these two figures, Katkov just admits the existence of the contact between L'vov and these two figures in the latter part of this chapter (p.77). Instead, he should have provided his explanation in more detail about their role and involvement in the coup attempt at GHQ. Or he should have discussed more about L'vov's descriptions of these two figures and the credibility of his descriptions. By doing so, he should have tried to justify his main argument that there was not a preliminary coup attempt at GHQ. Unfortunately, little effort is made for justification of his argument.

VII. Issue of Conspiracy

It is not easy to tell whether there was or was not a conspiracy. As Katkov points out, the expression "conspiracy against state" varies according to the historical and political circumstances in which it is used. Nevertheless, Katkov himself says in Chapter Twelve (Looking Back At The Evidence), "the facts, and pseudo-facts, reported in the foregoing chapters should help us determine the critical question of whether there was or was not a plot to overthrow the Provisional Government by force of arms (p.145)." Here, we should consider why it is important to say that there was or was not a conspiracy.

To be sure, this question is important for Katkov, because the negation of the existence of a conspiracy from the Kornilov side is the very basis of his main argument that the Kornilov affair was only a personal invention of Kerensky. From a different historical perspective, the existence of a conspiracy is important because this is a necessary premise to say that the Kornilov affair was a form of social struggle. Historians of the latter perspective try to characterize the Kornilov affair as a social class dynamic by identifying one class which was involved in the conspiracy and the other class which tried to smash this attempt. For example, Lenin, whose view of the events once predominated the Soviet historiography on the affair, defined the Kornilov affair as a counterrevolutionary movement of reactionary generals and capitalists supported overtly by the

bourgeois Kadets and de facto by Kerensky, the Allies, and the compromising Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionary parties. Lenin argued that the unity of this vast conspiracy had been shattered only by internal intrigue and the subsequent prompt action of the Bolshevik-led popular masses.⁸

The social class dynamics approach of the Kornilov affair has been continued in the new and more sophisticated account of many other Soviet and Western historians. By and large, this approach has concentrated its focus on the discussion of the nature of the involved class and the aspect of class struggle in the event as a plotted counterrevolutionary attempt.

In sum, in one perspective based on the personal relationship around the event, the Kornilov affair can be interpreted as the result of Kerensky's concoction for the purpose of keeping his power. In other perspective, the Kornilov affair is one aspect of the social struggle which appeared as a counterrevolutionary attempt that finally catalyzed the Bolsheviks' seizure of power.

We can hardly decide which of these two perspectives is correct in interpreting the Kornilov affair. Maybe, the Kornilov affair is too complicated an historical event to be interpreted by either one or the other. However, Katkov clearly shows some points in this book that should be studied beyond the analysis of the personal relationship and their characters. In this sense, his ambivalent statement that "a plan to overthrow the government certainly did exist, but the Supreme Commander had not decided to execute it (pp.152-153)" is an obscure conclusion about the question of whether there was or was not a conspiracy. In fact, this statement can be interpreted either as an admission of the existence of conspiracy or as a negation according to the various usage of the expression 'conspiracy' as he points out. Katkov may also recognize the importance of the social struggle in the event. But, as mentioned earlier, he does not sufficiently explore the related problems of a conspiracy, maybe because the existence of a conspiracy is the basic assumption for the interpretation of the events as a social struggle, which contradicts his view that the Kornilov affair was nothing more than the personal invention of Kerensky. By almost intentionally disregarding these problems, Katkov actually ignores the important issues initiated by the social class

8 Recited from John Long's article p.103.

interpretation of the affair.

VIII. Conclusion

As with many other historical events, the Kornilov affair can better be understood in its relation with the future development of Russian history. Katkov well recognizes this. He is convinced that the Kornilov episode was very important in effecting the collapse of the Provisional Government, as the whole tragic imbroglio to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power.

In this book, Katkov severely indicts Kerensky for the failure of the heroic attempts of the military administration to channel the evolution of political and social forces into a legal and stable form (p.xiv). But, his blame of Kerensky seems to be exaggerated. Moreover, his criticism of Kerensky is excessively grounded on his psycho analysis which is not enough to be used to evaluate the entire role of Kerensky and his behavior in the affair. The political and social situation of Russia at that time was so complicated and chaotic that the heroic attempt of the military administration could hardly calm the whirlwinds of political and social conflicts down into a legal and stable evolution. The situation was beyond being smoothly handled or dramatically changed by a single character, Kerensky.

This is not to say that the role of Kerensky in the Provisional Government and his influence in the Kornilov episode and other events at that time can be safely disregarded. The point is that the Kornilov affair, in the context of its effects on coming of the Bolshevism, was more than a result of extremely complicated personal relations among the people concerned. At least, the Kornilov affair needs to be analyzed further about the social, political, and historical background which resulted in or influenced these complicated personal relations. His indictment of Kerensky or his emotional advocacy of the heroic attempt of General Kornilov is excessively strong that it overwhelms the need of developing his views and explanations about the social and political backgrounds of the Kornilov affair. This is well revealed in his almost intentional disregard of the related problems of a conspiracy, which may raise the most significant shortcoming of this book.