

## **The Kerensky Offensive: A desperate operation that backfired**

### **Executive Summary**

The Kerensky Offensive was the last Russian WWI offensive, whose name came from the Provisional Government's minister of war at the time. This operation was aimed not only at holding the Central Powers in the Eastern Front in coordination with the Allied forces in the west, but also at raising the morale of the Russian Army and people's faith in the government. Despite its initial success, the desperate offensive ended as a catastrophe: not only did it fail to achieve any of the goals, but it also gave an unrecoverable blow to the Russian military, and further undermined the Provisional Government's prestige and widened the gap between the ruling elite and general public. The event contributed to subsequent domestic unrests that eventually led to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

### **Background - Turbulent days since the February Revolution**

After the abdication of the Tsar Nicolas II in February 1917, a series of changes quickly swept Russia. The country, having been deeply entrenched in war for nearly three years, had suffered from huge human loss, severe economic distress, and large scale civil unrest. More deeply, the poverty and turmoil as the legacy by the old autocracy drove people desperately seeking new causes to attempt at revitalizing the country. The leadership was shared by the Provisional Government (originated from the State Duma in late Tsarist days) and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (or the Soviet for short). Along with them, numerous other actors on the stage of pre-Bolshevik era played active roles together in bringing about a number of profound changes to almost every aspect of Russian life.

The new leadership initiated a series of democratic reforms immediately after the February revolution. The Russian people enjoyed unprecedented freedom and rights, which were unimaginable during the oppressive era under the tsarist regime. However, despite all these new

changes forboding a bright but vague future, Russia remained poor and backward. The low industrial productivity relative to Western Europe, an insufficient railway system that was unable to support transportation across the vast territory, the low food output all haunted the leaders and the people. Even worse, the World War One, in its third dreadful year, continued to consume the precious resources so vital for Russia to build the new order. Compounded with so many disturbing factors, Russia was afflicted by constant domestic unrest along with outside pressure.

Notable among the areas swept by changes was the the military sector. The effects could be summarized as democratization followed by demoralization and then demobilization. Ever since the February Revolution, the voices demanding for immediate democratization in the army were growing stronger. On March 12, the Provisional Government officially abolished the death penalty in all Russia, including in the army. Even more radical was the Order No.1 by the Soviet, stating that the soldiers should obey the Military Commission formed by the Provisional Government only in so far as it did not contradict the policies of the Soviet [1]. Such sudden changes led to widespread confusion among field soldiers at the front, who had been used to the oppressive tsarist rules in military. The results were disobedience of soldiers toward their officers and increasing rate of desertions and finally virtual paralysis of the Russian army.

### **The question about the World War I**

All the political elements at the time recognized that the war was one of the most urgent issues for the government to deal with. There were three choices about what to do about the war. The first one was to continue fighting in WWI. Such a view was in the mainstream, held by many high-ranking governmental officials, a representative of whom was Alexandar Kerensky, then the Minister of War, later the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government. In his reflection *The Catastrophe* (1927), Kerensky, after being in exile for nearly one decade, still argued in favor of the offensive. To him, the continued Russian participation was an obligation to defend liberty and the revolution of the Russian people integral to the whole revolution endeavor[2], and "Russian honor" in international relationships[3]. He also advocated "wiping out the shame" of previous defeat in

WWI, especially during 1915 as the Russian Army was in constant retreat[4]. Apparently, despite their appearance as newly emerged defenders of freedom and democracy, the Provisional Government officials inherited the legacy of Tsarist Russia's sense of imperial glory. The second view of the war, more moderate and pragmatic, sought peace without annexations and indemnities. Dubbed as "revolutionary defensism", this view was held by the moderate socialists in the Soviet. As manifested in its first pronouncement on the war on Mar 14, the Soviet announced that "the Russian democracy ... will oppose the policy of conquest of its ruling classes . . . and it summons the peoples of Europe to common, decisive action in favor of peace".[5][5] People holding this view did not have much enthusiasm for territorial gains or the messianic Pan-Slavic heroism in liberating the Slavic population under oppression. Yet, unwilling to withdraw to reach a separate peace and hoping the war would end soon, the defensists agreed to cooperate with the government in war efforts. The last and most radical view, called "defeatism", was held by the Bolshevik Party under Vladimir Lenin's leadership. As Lenin and Stalin argued in their papers, the WWI was a "predatory imperialist war" [6], fighting for the capitalists' expansionist ambitions at the price of revolutionaries' blood[7]. The Bolsheviks further blamed the war as the topmost reason for Russian people's suffering – the financial crisis, food shortage, rising tax and cost of living, etc [8][9]. To end the suffering, the Bolsheviks urged an immediate separate peace with Central Powers[10] and an end to Russia's own bourgeois government[11]. There were even some who took pro-German standing among these defeatists. The Social Revolutionaries' representatives made open pro-German speeches and were in direct communication with the German government.[12]

On the international stage, the Allied forces kept pressing Russia for the general offensive previously promised by the tsarist regime to be held in spring 1917. The Central Powers, on the other hand, were hoping for a separate peace with Russia. A virtual armistice was realized at the front. The enemy prohibited any type of action except in response to a Russian assault "in the hope that Russia would sign a separate peace with the Central Powers".[13] In fact, Berlin's attempts to negotiate Russia's exit from the war started as early as April.[14]

## **Preparation for an offensive**

### **1. Evaluation of the feasibility of the offensive**

Despite the opposition and unrest at the front, the Provisional Government, from its very earliest days, had been preparing for a resumption of the military operation. Vasily Alekseyev, the chief of the army's staff from March to June 1917, started the evaluation of morale and fighting ability by requesting feedback from field commanders. The majority of these officers reported degenerated disciplines among soldiers and lowered fighting abilities resulting from the dissolution of old regulations and the absence of new ones.<sup>[15]</sup> They thought the troops were ready for defensive operations, but that offensive operations should be put off.<sup>[16]</sup>

Also in doubt was the leadership that the army commanders could exercise over their troops. Given the special dual leadership of the Provisional Government and the Soviet, many army officers were confused and frustrated. Alexander Guchkov, the minister of war before Kerensky, once complained to Alekseyev, saying "...one may say directly that the Provisional Government exists only so long as the Soviet permits this. Especially in the military sphere it is possible now to give out only such orders as do not definitely conflict with the orders of the Soviet".<sup>[17]</sup> With the army morale and discipline in question and the lack of clarity in leadership, Alekseyev wrote twice to the allies to put off Russia's commitment in the eastern front.<sup>[18]</sup>

By contrast, Aleksei Brusilov, Commander of the Southwestern Front, was optimistic about the general offensive. He received unanimous agreement from his commanders on several points: "the armies had the will and capability to attack; we must undertake our obligation to the Allies; 'the Army has its own opinion, and the opinion of Petrograd as to its state and morale cannot solve the question'; the opinion of the army is obligatory for Russia; its real force is here, in the theater of war, and not in the rear" <sup>[19][19]</sup>. However, that might not be the real case. As historian R. Feldman pointed out, Brusilov arrived at his conclusion largely based on misinterpretation of the soldiers' revolutionary zeal as enthusiasm to continue the war.<sup>[20]</sup> Indeed, as observed from the documents of soldiers' voices during mid-1917, their opinions on the war divided widely. A small fraction of

soldiers surely showed the patriotic enthusiasm as Brusilov concluded. They embraced the active military operation as "the path to liberty and honor" and criticized those who coiled at the offensive. [21] However, the voices opposing Russia's continuous participation in war were equally strong. In the resolution from soldiers of the 1<sup>th</sup> Infantry Reserve Regiment, the soldiers called for immediate end of the war and concentrated efforts on reviving the national economy. [22] Most of the soldiers were in confusion and tired of the war and simply held the defensist view: " we will end it soon ... but (we) don't have to attack and aren't going to." [23]

## 2. Replacement of the field commanders

Although the army officers held different attitude about the feasibility of the offensive, none of them ever questioned the necessity of Russia's continuous, active role in the WWI. Even the pessimist officers would agree that the defensive operations were to be only transient until morale and discipline were fully reestablished. [24] However, Kerensky could not wait. Determined to implement the offensive as , Kerensky replaced the cautious Alekseyev with the bold and aggressive Brusilov on May 22. [25] A series of purges were conducted in the army. General Dragomirov was replaced by General Klembovsky as commander of the Northern Front while General Przheval'sky replaced General Yudenich on the Caucasian Front and General Denikin, Chief of Staff to Alekseev, replaced Gurko as commander of the Western Front. [26] Such personnel reshuffling merely one month ahead of the offensive was reminiscent of the frequent and capricious change of commanders by Nicholas II and signified the ineptitude of Kerensky in military manipulation.

## 3. Win support from the Soviet

Kerensky spent extra efforts try to win the support the approval and support of The First All-Russia Congress of Soviets, held in Petrograd on June 3. In order to gain support to legitimize the offensive, Kerensky once informed Brusilov to put off the offensive. As Kerensky expected, the resolution was passed, ending with the statement: 'The Congress takes the stand that until the war is brought to an end ... the Russian revolutionary democracy is obliged to keep its army in condition to

take either the offensive or defensive.... The question whether to take the offensive should be decided from the purely military and strategic point of view.[27]

### **The offensive**

On June 18 1917, the offensive day, the Russian army was better prepared than at any time during the war for an offensive.[28] Three armies (the 11th Army to the north of the Southwestern front; 8th to the south; and 7th in the center) were rallied along the nearly two hundred kilometer long front, highly superior to the enemy in manpower and well equipped with arms from domestic factories as well as allies. The assault was prepared by two full days of artillery attack, although this did little harm to the enemy, who was informed well in advance about the offensive by deserters and the Petrograd news media and had enough time to evacuate their trenches.[29]

Tactically, the goal was to capture Lemberg which would disrupt communication and transportation between the German north and the Austro-Hungarian south. [30] Strategically, the Russian commanders hope to give a heavy blow to the Austro-Hungarian troops in Galicia as well[31] as to tie as much as possible German divisions so as to release the pressure on the Allies at the Western Front until the American troops arrived.[32]

#### **1. Initial success**

During the first few days of the offensive, the Russians received considerable victory. To the north, the 11<sup>th</sup> Army struck the Austro-Hungarian 2nd Army. With intelligence, the commander knew in advance that the enemy's 19th division consisted primarily of Czechs. The Russian quickly transferred a battalion of former Czech prisoners of war who had gone over to them from the Czech division. With a successful solicitation of surrender before assault, the 3000 men of the 19th Division dropped their weapons and surrendered to the Russians.[33] The surrender of the 19th division created a gap in the Austro-Hungarian defence, which allowed the Russians to push deep into enemy line. On Jan 18 alone, the 11th Army captured nearly 18,000 prisoners, 21 guns and 16 machine guns.[34]

At the center of the front was the 7<sup>th</sup> Army, which was the strongest among the three Russian Armies. However, they lost the initiative as they attacked three days later than the 11<sup>th</sup> Army, allowing their enemies to prepare themselves. Having sustained heavy losses, the 7<sup>th</sup> Army barely pushed through enemy line.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Army in the south brought the largest success in the first few days. Mounting a full attack on the Austro-Hungarian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, the Russian quickly cut through the enemy's defense, and eliminated a small force of German reserve. From June 18 to June 20 witnessed the capture of 10,000 prisoners and 80 artillery pieces. [35]

## 2. Later slow down of path

Although filled with excitement from the initial success, Brusilov had to slow down the offensive after the first week for several reasons. Aside from the reinforcement by the Central Powers, one reason was the poor organization of operational plans.[36] The Russian commanders did not make detailed follow-up plans after the initial success. Another reason was the passive attitude of the field soldiers. Contrary to the expectation that the soldiers, after initial success, would be more active in battlefield, they displayed unwillingness for further assault as they reasoned that they had done their share and were not obliged to keep up an uninterrupted advance.[37] For these reasons, Brusilov had to postpone repeatedly his plans for secondary attacks. Finally, the commanders were given "a free hand in deciding when the armies are ready" [38], which created a huge confusion that probably contributed to their later lack of coordination in operations.

## 3. Final collapse

While the Russians were immobilized in confusion, the Central Powers were able to organize their counter-attack. The Germans quickly transfer six divisions through their highly effective railway from French and Belgian fronts.[39] The Germans, with fighting ability much superior to that of the Austro-Hungarians, exerted tremendous pressure on the Russian lines. To the south, the Austro-Hungarian 7<sup>th</sup> Army were able to probe the loosely held positions of the Russians and made

a concerted attack to push the Russians back. Altogether, the Central Powers were able to break the Russian defense and advance 145km within 10 days. During the retreat, the Russians suffered heavy losses: casualties included 40,000 killed[40], and 20,000 wounded[41]. At this point, the Russian army was so devastated that they were not able to launch any counter-attack any more.

## **Consequence**

The Kerensky Offensive, a desperate gamble to reestablish governmental authority, backfired on the Provisional Government. Its failure marked the weakness of the Provisional Government in military, politics and diplomatic relationships. Suffering a heavy blow, the Russian army never recovered to its full strength and was no longer able to launch any offensives. Constantly retreating, the Russians finally lost Riga in late August, which was only 300 miles away from Petrograd, the capital at that time. Instead of bolstering army morale by a victory, the offensive deepened soldiers' grievances about the war and the government itself and led to further degeneration in army discipline. The government again reshuffled the army commanding personnels. General Brusilov was replaced by General Kornilov, who was the main actor in the Kornilov Affair in Aug 1917 that catalyzed the collapse of the Provisional Government. As for the relationship with the Allies, the offensive did nothing to raise Russia's prestige. Rather, frustrated by their weakness, the Allies no longer counted on the Russians for constructive warfare.

Most importantly, the military failure shook the basis of the government's authority. The Kerensky Offensive signified the government's inability and even insensitivity to respond to the need of the people. The government was expected, as best summarized in a March 1917 editorial in the Newspaper *Rabochaia Gazeta*, " ... with the support of the people and the army, to destroy swiftly and decisively everything that remains of the old order and that interferes with the new one, and to create, just as swiftly and decisively, everything without which the new order cannot exist..."[42]. However, instead of bringing in the new order, the government clutched tightly to the war, one of the major legacies of the old order, and kept feeding the war machine with the scarce resources so desperately needed to relieve the country's suffering. Such ignorance of people's calls



widened the gap between the government and the masses. Meanwhile, the government's weakness in maintaining order and discipline was evident. Soldiers were becoming increasingly defiant to their officers and more and more rebellious. The Bolsheviks exploited to the full advantage of these dissatisfactions to attack the government on their path of rising to power.

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