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THE OFFICER CORPS, PROFESSIONALISM, AND DEMOCRACY IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*

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ABSTRACT. *Russia's 'democratic' revolution of February 1917 saw all types of professions and social groups mobilize into unions and congresses to articulate their demands. Lower and middle classes dominated, but it is notable how former elite groups were quick to form bodies to defend their interests and to promote their visions of Russia's future. Historians have invariably dismissed these groups as marginal to the revolutionary process and inherently 'counter-revolutionary'. This article challenges these assumptions, using the Union of Officers, formed across the military in May 1917 to defend officers' professional interests, as a case study. The union spread quickly, published a newspaper, and agitated among politicians for greater discipline in the military. Its activities fuelled popular fears of counter-revolution, but only a few of the union's leaders actively worked against the government. General Kornilov's failed revolt in August demonstrated that most officers had doubts. Nevertheless, the union played a crucial role in mobilizing moderate and conservative forces against further reform. This exacerbated social conflict and political polarization, fatally undermining the Provisional Government and democracy in 1917.*

I

There were numerous visions of democracy in Russia during 1917 ranging from the rule of law, civil rights, and parliament envisaged by educated liberals, to the popular belief of lower classes that democracy meant political power for ordinary Russians. Indeed, the 'democratic revolution' of February was often more about the unions, committees, and congresses that emerged to represent all types of professions and social groups than the recognizable political parties that claimed to speak in their name. The new Provisional Government had to consider many of these groups' demands in attempting to achieve its aims of civil liberties, law, and order, and elections to a Constituent Assembly. Similarly, as nationwide elections were delayed, the few national 'democratic' bodies in 1917 – the

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Moscow State Conference, the Democratic Conference, and the Pre-Parliament – were formed after detailed bargaining with all groups.[1]

It is particularly notable that the formation of unions and other organizations was not restricted to the lower and middle classes. Former elite groups – nobles, landowners, officers, industrialists, and others – were also quick to mobilize. They were keen to represent their own interests in the new political climate and to promote their own vision of Russia's future. They were encouraged by the government's awareness that it needed the support of *all* political and social forces, whilst the government's objectives were broadly acceptable. The lack of real 'democracy' ensured that they were represented in 'democratic' bodies, but what did they hope to achieve given their small support base, the anti-bourgeois mood, and mass support for socialist parties and social reform? The revolution was increasingly characterized by political polarization and social conflict, whilst popular fears of counter-revolution escalated. Were these bodies 'counter-revolutionary' and how far did their organizations contribute to the conflict that came to dominate 1917 and signalled the failure of the Provisional Government?

This article examines these issues through a study of the Union of Officers, analysing its objectives, activities, and impact. Officers were an important group during this period. The absence of support among senior officers for Tsar Nicholas II in February 1917 had facilitated his sudden abdication and they continued to play a vital role in the war effort. The potential military power that officers could muster also contributed to fears of counter-revolution. The union was formally created in May to defend the professional interests of officers. It promoted its programme across the military through newspapers, pamphlets, and agitation. The union enthusiastically supported General L. G. Kornilov (commander-in-chief from mid-July) and his strong policies for the military. Its leaders participated in his revolt against the Provisional Government in August, but it failed, and members were harassed and arrested. Its everyday activities have not been discussed beyond this brief outline; there have been no detailed studies and broader accounts invariably emphasize the union's 'counter-revolutionary' activities and minority status. Wildman doubted whether the union 'either influenced or represented the sentiments of the vast majority of officers'. Instead, he believed that it mobilized 'a network of staff officers of a certain type that fed into the Kornilov movement'.[2] Soviet historians were more

[1] See D. Orlovsky, 'Corporatism or democracy: the Russian Provisional Government of 1917', in A. Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the human garden: twentieth century population management in a comparative framework* (Stanford, CA, 2003), pp. 67–90; D. Orlovskii, 'K voprosu o formakh demokratii nakanune oktiabria 1917 goda', in L. Zakharova et al., eds., *P. A. Zaionchkovskii, 1904–1983 gg.: stat'i, publikatsii i vospominaniia o nem* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 407–29.

[2] A. Wildman, 'Officers of the General Staff and the Kornilov movement', in E. Frankel et al., eds., *Revolution in Russia: reassessments of 1917* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 94. Also G. Katkov, *Russia, 1917, the Kornilov revolt* (London, 1980); J. Munck, *The Kornilov revolt* (Aarhus, 1987).

damning, dismissing it as inherently 'counter-revolutionary' along with other bodies representing conservative and elite groups.[3]

The extent to which officers can be described as an elite group is questionable as they were sufficiently heterogeneous to make generalizations difficult. There were around 145,000 officers serving in the military on the eve of the revolution. This was a threefold increase from the beginning of the war in 1914. Only about 51 per cent were from the nobility (the traditional source of officers), falling to 40 per cent in the infantry. Equally, only 5·5 per cent of the graduates of new officer schools established to replace the heavy casualties suffered by officers were nobles. The majority of generals (87 per cent) and colonels (63 per cent) did remain nobles, but it is clear that most officers lacked social status or material well-being.[4] This diversity was displayed in the range of political beliefs and allegiances shown by officers during the revolution.

If elites are defined in terms of power, however, all officers enjoyed legal rights and privileges that clearly distinguished them from soldiers and sailors. The pressures of the war meant that there was now no such thing as a lower-ranked, non-noble officer with few prospects; new recruits were promoted rapidly to fill the ever-present gaps in the officer corps. Some adopted the mentality and outlook traditionally assigned to officers; they were suspicious of politics, saw themselves as distinctly superior to their men, and used terms such as honour and duty before the motherland to govern their behaviour.[5] More importantly, social and political discourse in 1917 rarely made distinctions within the officer corps. Officers were an elite group and potential threat, irrespective of their backgrounds, views, or political affiliations.

Supporters of the Union of Officers were convinced that not only did officers require a new organization to represent their professional interests, but that such a body could influence the military leadership and the government. Yet its desire to unite and mobilize officers revealed divisions that were not purely based on social background or length of service. It was difficult mobilizing officers who were dispersed across the front and who feared repercussions from militant soldiers. Some politicized officers had formed earlier organizations, whilst others saw the union as a means of conspiring against the government. Most wanted to restore order in the military and the country, but opposed plans to overthrow the government. So while the union's leadership represented some of the most authoritarian thinking in 1917, it is misleading to view the union as inherently 'counter-revolutionary'. It marginalizes its everyday activities supporting officers and ignores the fact that the reckless actions of its leaders alienated many members.

[3] See G. Ioffe, *Krakh Rossiiskoi monarkhicheskoi kontrrevoliutsii* (Moscow, 1977); M. Kapustin, *Zagovor generalov* (*iz istorii Kornilovshchiny i ee razgroma*) (Moscow, 1968); N. Ivanov, *Kontrrevoliutsiia v Rossii v 1917 godu i ee razgrom* (Moscow, 1977); V. Vladimirova, *Kontr-revoliutsiia v 1917g.* (*Kornilovshchina*) (Moscow, 1924).

[4] A. Wildman, *The end of the Russian imperial army* (2 vols., Princeton, 1980–7), I, pp. 22–3, 100–1.

[5] See S. Volkov, *Russkii ofitserskii korpus* (Moscow, 1993).

All elite organizations faced the same issues: the determination to mobilize into unions to combat bodies formed by other social groups and professions; the belief that they could influence the government; divisions over the best means to exert influence; growing discontent with the social unrest and the new political system; and indecision over plans for a counter-revolution.[6] Nonetheless, the mobilization of these groups exacerbated political conflict as 1917 progressed. Popular opinion was formed by the people's own demands and their reactions to policies, but it was influenced by the demands and activities of their political opponents. By summer 1917, conservative elites had re-emerged nationally. They lacked popular support, but their experience, wealth, and position made them threatening opponents, whilst their expanding organizations provided a visible sign of this threat.[7] The growing prominence of officers, in particular, fuelled fears of counter-revolution across Russia, yet the government was reliant on officers to maintain its own position and fight the war, and the influence of officers grew in 1917 as both of these became more problematic. This dynamic was crucial to the lack of political consensus during the Russian Revolution, and the ultimate failure of the Provisional Government and democracy.

II

The idea for a union of officers originated among a small group of staff officers based at the military headquarters (Stavka) in Mogilev. They were deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation within the military. On 1 March, Order No. 1 provided soldiers with new rights, whilst the proliferation of soldiers' committees had further undermined the authority of officers. There were already organizations claiming to represent officers that enjoyed a degree of influence. Socialist officers, usually from the junior ranks, had rallied to the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in late February to mobilize forces against any attempt to suppress the revolution. A few days later, they established the Union of Officer-Republicans to promote a democratic republic across the military.[8] Most officers, however, viewed socialism with intense suspicion and greater numbers, including senior officers, were involved in the Soviet of Officers' Deputies, which elected an executive committee on 11 March. This did include socialists, but openly supported the new government.[9] Both groups published newspapers, but

[6] On industrialists and landowners, Z. Galili, 'Commercial-industrial circles in revolution: the failure of "industrial progressivism"', in Frankel et al., eds., *Revolution in Russia*, pp. 188–216; M. Rendle, 'Conservatism and revolution: the All-Russian Union of Landowners, 1916–1918', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 84 (2006), pp. 481–507.

[7] On images of counter-revolution in 1917, D. Shlapentokh, *The counter-revolution in revolution* (London, 1999).

[8] Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii (GARF), f. 4018 [Soiuz ofitserov-respublikantsev narodnoi armii. 1917], op. 1, d. 2, ll. 5–6; A. Tarasov-Rodionov, *February 1917* (Westport, CT, 1973), pp. 214–19.

[9] *Rech'*, no. 62, 14 Mar. 1917.

only the former established branches across the military. The soviet remained deliberately broad, claiming to represent the whole officer corps.

The staff officers in Stavka did not believe, however, that the Soviet of Officers' Deputies did represent the views of the majority of officers, seeing it as a political body dominated by officers based in the rear. These officers did not understand the pressures at the front and were involved in plans for future reform that, in the opinion of the Stavka officers, would further harm officers. On 12 April, the soviet publicized plans for a conference in Petrograd during May. This prompted the officers at Stavka, led by Lieutenant-Colonels D. A. Lebedev and V. M. Pronin, to circulate proposals a few days later for a rival congress in Stavka.[10] They intended to use the gathering to form a new professional union for officers and established a nine-man committee to organize the conference. It pledged full support for the Provisional Government as the sole legal authority, but stressed the need for strict discipline to maintain the fighting capability of the military. It also warned officers – in a clear jibe towards the Soviet of Officers – to avoid politics and urged them instead to join a professional officers' union. The new union would establish branches across the military, issue publications, and mobilize officers across the front to defend their interests. It would not engage in party politics, but concentrate on the everyday concerns of officers and represent them to the government. Although the union had not been formally created, the organizing committee acted as if it had. It issued appeals in the name of the union, urged existing supporters to agitate, and called for new members.[11]

Officers had mixed reactions. A few weeks earlier, staff officers on the Romanian front had argued that a new union would simply expose political differences among the officers and antagonize the soldiers. A conference would be sufficient to discuss pertinent military and political issues.[12] Others disagreed. Lieutenant-Colonel L. N. Novosil'tsev, for example, was a liberal (Kadet) member of the fourth Duma. He had helped to establish the authority of the Provisional Government in Kaluga, but was quickly disillusioned by the radicalism of junior officers and the proliferation of soldiers' committees. He feared that the officer corps would disintegrate across party lines and felt that officers in Petrograd were 'careerists' pandering to the revolution (a view shared by others). He welcomed the proposals from Stavka and was elected to represent his division.[13] The high command's initial concerns also faded amid fears that the views of most officers were being misrepresented. It was unjust to forbid officers to unite when the forthcoming declaration of soldiers' rights would permit organizations in the military.[14]

[10] *Rech'*, no. 84, 12 Apr. 1917; no. 89, 17 Apr. 1917.

[11] *Rech'*, no. 90, 18 Apr. 1917; no. 95, 25 Apr. 1917; no. 103, 4 May 1917.

[12] *Vestnik Rumynskogo fronta*, no. 1, 3 Apr. 1917, reprinted in A. Panov, ed., *Armiia i politika: ofitserskii korpus v politicheskoi istorii Rossii. Dokumenty i materialy* (7 vols., Moscow and Kaluga, 2002–3), II, pp. 81–2.

[13] GARF, f. 6422 [L. N. Novosil'tsev], op. 1, d. 1, ll. 125ob, 135ob–137.

[14] A. Denikin, *The Russian Turmoil* (Westport, CT, 1973), pp. 229–30.

Questions about the proposed union's purpose resurfaced during a preliminary meeting held on 5 May, prior to the formal opening of the All-Russian Congress of the Union of Officers of the Army and the Fleet in Stavka on 7 May 1917. One delegate asked why there were two simultaneous congresses of officers (Petrograd and Stavka), arguing that everyone should transfer to Petrograd to achieve the complete unity of all front and rear officers. Others, though, were sceptical that issues could be discussed objectively in the politicized atmosphere of Petrograd. Non-military, political bodies were dominant in the capital and political topics took precedence. In contrast, Stavka's location at the centre of the war effort meant that the officers involved had the knowledge and experience to discuss the questions of immediate importance for maintaining the fighting capabilities of the military.[15]

Another delegate questioned whether, as in Petrograd, soldiers should be represented and, if so, whether they should have a right to vote on issues discussed. The congress's organizing committee had intended to allow soldiers to attend, but only as observers. One delegate exploded: 'why is it that whenever officers speak or gather, the question always arises – and what about the soldiers?' For him, the whole point of the congress was that it was for officers. Others agreed, apparently shouting that it was shameful that all social groups could unite apart from officers. Officers had spilt three years' worth of blood, but could not say what they felt. Lebedev lost control of the meeting as chair and was replaced by Novosil'tsev (due to his greater political experience). In the end, 53 per cent of those present voted to allow soldiers a vote but, after all that, the soldiers refused; they wanted to observe, but did not want to be associated with any resolutions.[16] The revolution had forced officers to accept the soldiers' presence, but it was the conviction that officers should express their views independently of outside interference, and that a new union could best achieve this goal, that dominated the subsequent congress.

Sources suggest that 298 officers attended the main congress, which lasted from 7 to 22 May. Roughly 80 per cent were from the front and 20 per cent from the rear (mostly from active regiments), whilst more appeared during the congress.[17] Sessions covered the current situation in the military; factors affecting the war effort; the relationship between officers and soldiers; discipline; the authority of officers; and the general position of officers.[18] The outlook was negative. General M. V. Alekseev, the commander-in-chief, and his chief of staff, General A. I. Denikin, gave opening speeches painting a pessimistic picture of Russia's situation, despairing at the lack of patriotism among the soldiers. The congress's solutions were predictable: restore the chain of command and the authority of

[15] GARF, f. 4018, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 10b–2.

[16] GARF, f. 4018, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 1–10b.

[17] *Vestnik glavnago komiteta soiuza ofitserov armii i flota* (*VGKO*), no. 1, 14 June 1917.

[18] GARF, f. 1780 [Chrezvychainaia komissiia dlia rassledovaniia dela o byvshem verkhovnom glavno-komanduiushchem generale L. G. Kornilove i ego souchastnikakh], op. 1, d. 71, ll. 49–530b (a summary of events).

officers; re-establish the means to enforce orders; remove soldiers' committees from operational matters; and place emphasis on soldiers' duties. 'Thoughtless' and 'unscrupulous' officers exacerbated the situation (through participation in politics as much as anything else) and there needed to be educational work among officers, alongside officers' courts to enforce duty. The congress agreed that all orders relating to the military must come from the government, but most favoured stronger state policies on all of the above issues.

Novosil'tsev saw his job as chair to ensure that the congress was productive. He was afraid that socialists would force it to shut and worked quickly to draw up programmes, establish committees, and vote on resolutions. He was convinced that only creating a permanent union would prevent the congress's opinions from being quickly forgotten. This determination was essential as many continued to prevaricate over the need for a union purely for officers. There were alternative proposals for a general military union of officers and soldiers that had the support of the soldiers and the minister of war, A. F. Kerenskii. Novosil'tsev and others felt that this would simply be another body marginalizing officers and pushed through the new union. They formed a bloc to lobby delegates and forge a majority for the union's supporters.[19] The congress duly ratified the regulations of the Union of Officers of the Army and Fleet on 21 May. A main committee was elected with Novosil'tsev as president, Pronin and Lieutenant-Colonel V. I. Sidorin as his deputies, and Captain V. E. Rozhenko as secretary.[20] Alekseev and Denikin were honorary president and member respectively, thereby cementing links with the high command. The union was committed to carrying out government orders and reforms, but its leaders passionately believed that officers had the right to express their views.

By establishing a permanent union, these officers placed themselves in a better position than their counterparts in Petrograd (who were also divided, but voted against creating a formal union) to mobilize officers, and to benefit from their growing discontent at the deteriorating situation. Nevertheless, politics remained in the background. Novosil'tsev argued, to deep applause, that 'political questions are questions of secondary importance. The vital question is about the life of Russia and all of our attention and strength will be devoted to this.' Yet, another speaker noted that 'military and professional questions were deeply entwined with political ones'. Officers needed 'to establish what kind of government and what kind of voice will lead the country. Then we need to direct our activities towards helping it.'[21] This also received warm applause and demonstrated the inherent problem facing these officers; in defending their professional interests, they inevitably highlighted, especially as the revolution developed, their preferred political system. In arguing for stronger measures to restore order and authority in the military, delegates appeared to be supporting a stronger, more

[19] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 144–7.
[20] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 40–6 (the regulations).
[21] GARF, f. 4018, op. 1, d. 4, l. 2.

authoritarian government in Russia. There was no such thing as a purely professional union in 1917.

III

The union's activities revolved around providing support and information, whilst articulating various demands designed to improve the authority and position of officers. It discussed reform proposals and technical issues; it assisted in cultural and educational work amongst officers; and it provided practical support, including legal aid, for its members. It established a newspaper, *Vestnik glavnago komiteta soiuza ofitserov armii i flota*, which published five issues between 14 June and 24 August.[22] This was the main vehicle publicizing the union's activities, supplemented by brochures and appeals. Issues included copies of letters that the main committee sent to various authorities protesting at the mistreatment of officers, alongside articles on policies. The union produced reports on key issues such as soldiers' committees and the condition of the military. By late August, the union had improved the educational resources available for officers. Libraries were organized in several railway stations just behind the front line, as convenient transport hubs. An agreement was reached with young teachers in Moscow to supply suitable literature on practical issues (war and the land), as well as state structures, history, workers, co-operatives, and foreign affairs. This material was distributed free of charge.[23]

The union was convinced that a lack of understanding contributed to what it saw as the 'politicization' of officers and it tried to target officers who actively supported revolutionary change, arguing that they were not capable of leading the military. Initially, the union promoted 'comrade courts' – courts controlled and staffed by officers – to cleanse and control officers.[24] However, these courts could not enforce their rulings and the union resorted to blacklists, distributed across the military and published in the *Vestnik*. These never contained more than a few names (for urging peace or spreading socialist propaganda) and provoked as much opposition as support amongst officers.[25]

Otherwise, the union concentrated on agitating for reforms that would restore discipline, revive the authority of officers, and reduce the influence of soldiers' committees. These goals received a boost after Russia launched an ill-fated offensive on 18 June.[26] The union suspected that only a few troops would fight and its fears were realised. The majority of officers viewed this disaster as a national humiliation and support grew for the union's increasingly strident demands; in particular, the restoration of the death penalty and the return of disciplinary

[22] Copies are in GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71.

[23] *VGKO*, no. 5, 24 Aug. 1917; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, l. 100.

[24] *VGKO*, no. 2, 22 June 1917; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, l. 36.

[25] For blacklists; *VGKO*, no. 4, 25 July 1917; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, l. 58; d. 72, l. 45. For contrasting views of their value; d. 72, l. 102; d. 97, ll. 126–127ob.

[26] R. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2005), pp. 175–83.

authority to commanders, unrestricted by 'irresponsible collective organs'.[27] The union's new mood was visible in the pages of its newspaper. Initially, the paper was preoccupied with the need to promote the union, whilst the second and third issues were defensive, stressing its popularity, clarifying the term 'professional', and supporting the offensive. In the aftermath of the failed offensive, the fourth issue saw defence turn to attack, with uncompromising articles condemning critics. The final issue, on the eve of the Kornilov revolt, emphasized the strength of the union and outlined measures that the government had to implement to save Russia.

By mid-July, the government appeared to be listening to officers. The death penalty was reintroduced on 12 July. Bolsheviks newspapers were prohibited on 15 July. The government took control of the network of military commissars previously controlled by the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies on the same day, and started to prosecute all military crimes (especially not fulfilling duties or orders), imprisoning offenders. Some armies established investigative commissions that prosecuted thousands of offenders.[28] Officers reasserted their authority and the influence of committees temporarily waned. The union took some of the credit,[29] but the real position is questionable. Soviet historians linked the union's demands with changes in government policy throughout this period, primarily to support their view of the union as a counter-revolutionary body, rather than an objective assessment of the union's influence.[30] It had influence at the highest levels of the military. All three commanders-in-chief prior to August (Alekseev, General A. A. Brusilov, and Kornilov) were honorary chairs and their chiefs of staff were honorary members (Denikin and General A. S. Lukomskii). Stavka provided the headquarters for the union and essential printing facilities for the *Vestnik* and other propaganda. The union gained a veneer of officialdom and was seen as a mouthpiece of the high command, especially under Kornilov. On 5 August, Cornet P. A. Kravchenko (a committee member) boasted that the union had very good relations with Stavka that enabled a 'wide range' of possibilities to punish an offending officer.[31] Yet, the government's own concerns undoubtedly played a greater role, particularly since Kerenskii, minister-president from 8 July, did not believe in a union for officers. He favoured a broad military union and saw the union as a reactive body. By August, the government was trying (unsuccessfully) to remove it from Stavka.[32]

[27] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, l. 78; *Novoe vremia*, no. 14833, 22 July 1917, reprinted in R. Browder and A. Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* (3 vols., Stanford, CA, 1961) (*RPG*), III, pp. 1016–17.

[28] One commission sentenced 37 officers and 12,725 soldiers by the end of Aug.; *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Russkoi armii* (*27 fevralia–24 oktiabria 1917 goda*) (Moscow, 1968), pp. 376–7.

[29] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 89–89ob.

[30] A. Andreev, *Soldatskie massy garnizonov Russkoi armii v oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1975), p. 154.

[31] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 88–88ob.

[32] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, l. 152ob; *Delo generala L. G. Kornilova* (2 vols., Moscow, 2003), II, pp. 346–7.

IV

Furthermore, although the union gathered more support after the failed offensive, the extent to which this increased membership is unclear, as is the actual size of the union, as there are no membership lists. It was probably considered too dangerous to keep records, a feeling that was justified after the Bolsheviks seized power in October. The *Vestnik* was quick to proclaim success. Apparently, 15,000 copies of the first issue were distributed, alongside 8,000 copies of the union's regulations, and these were insufficient. The union proposed to produce 50,000 copies of the second edition of its regulations and a daily newspaper. The newspaper never appeared, but the regulations reached a third edition on 15 July. Financial contributions came from individuals, regiments, and organizations, ranging from a few rubles to more than 16,000.[33] Branches of the union were established in all of the armies and in the rear at Petrograd, Moscow, Kiev, Kazan', Odessa, Saratov, Sevastopol, and elsewhere, apparently encompassing tens of thousands of members, including senior officers.[34] It also gained support from ad hoc 'societies' of officers that had emerged locally after February. As one declared, they sympathized with the union's objectives and welcomed the chance to become part of a broader (and hopefully more influential) body. In at least one case, a society transferred intact to become a cell of the union.[35]

Numbers of copies do not equate to numbers of members, but the union attracted sizeable interest from an increasingly disillusioned officer corps. The claim that each *Vestnik* attracted a flurry of inquiries and a significant increase in members seems reasonable, explaining why all associations and unions strove to publicize their views as widely as possible.[36] Indeed, local branches produced their own 'bulletins', hoping to replicate this effect.[37] The main committee, on at least one occasion, agreed to loan 1,000 rubles – a sizeable sum – specifically to enable a branch to establish a newspaper.[38] By 9 July, the union had to advertise for a scribe and a typist (without 'harmful political views') to deal with the administrative workload. It was promised that the commander-in-chief would transfer the successful candidate to Stavka, demonstrating the union's influence.[39] Letters indicate sizeable support for a professional union that would protect officers, promote their interests, and help those arrested by the soldiers.

Other indicators suggest that the union was slower to develop than it wished to portray. The main committee initially seemed to assume that officers would simply organize themselves in support. It envisaged officers forming cells in regiments and companies. When enough of these existed, representatives from them would form sub-branches in divisions, staffs, and garrisons. These would then feed into local branches at army or regional level. By early July, however,

[33] *VGKO*, no. 2, 22 June 1917 (statistics); GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 61–76 (the 3rd edn).
[34] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, l. 60.
[35] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 83–4, 96, 113–113ob.
[36] *VGKO*, no. 5, 24 Aug. 1917.
[37] For example, the branch in the Tenth Army: GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 44–49ob.
[38] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 73, l. 18.
[39] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 36–36ob.

supporters were allowed to create sub-branches without having formed cells, as long as they had sixteen members. By late August, the union was stressing that only three to five people, a group of friends in effect, were sufficient to create a cell and join an existing branch.[40] These are technical details, but they prompted fierce debates and suggest that the union struggled to recruit members at the lowest levels in the military, where officers were concerned with maintaining good relations with soldiers. Reports from local areas are also mixed. The union in the Third Army had over 500 members in mid-July, but reports from the Black Sea and the Caucasus described problems in organizing branches.[41] These concerns led to greater central organization within the union by mid-July with membership, judicial, and cultural and educational committees formed, a move that comparable bodies made much earlier.[42]

The union also faced cases of resistance from senior officers. The May congress had not involved large sections of the military. In some cases, adverts about the congress and the new union did not get through due to the war. Elsewhere, though, commanders had decided that such measures were pointless or harmful and had prevented officers under their command from attending. General Grigor'ev, commander of Omsk military region, confiscated literature about the union and prohibited attendance. Seventeen officers complained and the union protested to the ministry of war (which was supportive) stressing officers' rights as citizens. Later issues of *Vestnik* contained substantial attacks on Grigor'ev, but he was not alone; General Tsiurikov prohibited all officer organizations in the Sixth Army to avoid conflict. These actions worried the union and it threatened legal action.[43] Elsewhere, hierarchical practices were needed to overcome opposition. On 7 June, an assembly of officers in the First Caucasian Rifle Regiment voted on whether to join. A third of the votes were against, but they were forced to join as the majority then voted to prohibit officers from remaining in the regiment if they were not members.[44]

It is impossible to draw firm conclusions about the level of support enjoyed by the union. It could certainly attract hundreds in some places, but much depended on the degree of unrest in a particular regiment or locality and the attitude of local commanders. It is equally impossible to say anything about the social background or political orientation of members. Most officers of all backgrounds would have sympathized with the union's main objectives, but active members tended to be of a conservative mindset, although not necessarily a reactionary one. Ultimately, as the union admitted, most officers remained apathetic or 'mistaken' (non-members or prepared passively to accept events) and all officers' bodies struggled to mobilize officers throughout 1917.

[40] *VGKO*, no. 3, 12 July 1917; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 57–57ob.

[41] *VGKO*, no. 5, 24 Aug. 1917; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, ll. 5–5ob (Black Sea); d. 73, ll. 46–46ob (Caucasus).

[42] *VGKO*, no. 4, 25 July 1917.

[43] *VGKO*, no. 1, 14 June 1917; no. 2, 22 June 1917; no. 3, 12 July 1917.

[44] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, l. 7.

The information available on the union's leadership – the thirty-two-man main committee – is also incomplete.[45] Members ranged from the lowest rank (ensign) to colonels, but lieutenant-colonels (eleven members) and captains (also eleven) dominated. There were only four ensigns. The average age where available (from sixteen members) was thirty-four. Although Novosil'tsev (forty-five) was older, his deputies, Pronin and Sidorin (both thirty-five), were not. The army predominated, although a few probably represented the fleet. Of the eleven with known social backgrounds, seven were from the nobility, two from the peasantry, and one each from clergy and merchant backgrounds. At least seven had graduated from the elite general staff academy.

The backgrounds of Novosil'tsev, Pronin, and Sidorin, along with a few other prominent figures, support the view of Wildman, cited above, that the union represented a narrow segment of the officer corps. However, other information and the anonymity of many members, suggest that a significant number came from less traditional (and harder to trace) backgrounds. Ensign A. V. Ivanov helped organize the union's founding congress and served as one of its secretaries. He had been imprisoned for socialist agitation alongside the Menshevik, I. G. Tsereteli, prior to the war, but now supported a non-political, professional union for officers. Lieutenant-Colonel I. G. Soots was an Estonian who advocated greater independence for national minorities within the Russian empire against the wishes of many officers.[46] The union, therefore, recruited across the officers corps. Active members were representative of the mass of officers, originating from diverse social and political backgrounds (although those with Ivanov's history were more likely to join the socialist officers' union). Prominent members, though, were from traditional backgrounds and they left a more visible mark on the surviving evidence.

V

Divisions in the main committee are most evident when examining growing political ambitions within the union. Despite his speech to the congress denouncing political objectives, Novosil'tsev described how on 23 May, a day after the congress finished, Pronin told him that a military dictatorship was the only way to save the army (and, by implication, the country) from destruction. Novosil'tsev agreed to act in that direction, but argued that only a few committee members should be involved initially to maintain secrecy. The two co-opted Sidorin, Rozhenko, and Kravchenko.[47] They aimed to cultivate greater links between officers and other groups in order to gather support for political change. Some of these links were open. The union publicly hoped to benefit from patriotism arising from the war to bolster its finances and to foster greater political influence, looking at industrialists and Kadets respectively. Connections already

[45] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 71, l. 34.
[46] *Delo Kornilova*, II, pp. 125–6, 322–3.
[47] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 155ob, 159.

existed from before 1917, but these needed to be extended and strengthened, whilst Pronin and Novosil'tsev were now also keen to gauge the political mood among other groups.

Industrialists had numerous organizations, long-running newspapers, sizeable finances, and significant influence, as prominent members held government posts after February. There were divisions, particularly between industrialists in Petrograd and Moscow, but by summer 1917, they all agreed on the need for 'strong government'. They were also seeking alliances with other like-minded groups and funded various military groups to aid the war effort. In May, the political section of the Union of Trade and Industry heard a report on the new Union of Officers from a representative, before providing 25,000 rubles for it to establish a newspaper and organize propaganda.[48] This was a massive boost. Some officers were suspicious of 'capitalists', but as one branch noted, all organizations needed money and there was nothing illegal or reprehensible in accepting it from capitalists.[49] Industrialists also formed the Republican Centre in May, which promoted the war effort, attacked socialists (especially Bolsheviks), and pressed for law and order.[50] Publicly, it supported a republic for Russia, but many members favoured an authoritarian government or dictatorship.[51] Novosil'tsev and Pronin were members of the centre's military section, which sought to unite the numerous patriotic groups that existed across the military.

The only potential political target was the liberal Kadet party. In the new revolutionary politics, conservative parties had disappeared; liberals were the new 'conservatives' with socialists as the only alternatives. Furthermore, Novosil'tsev had represented the Kadets in the last Duma, albeit on its conservative wing. Novosil'tsev, Sidorin, and Kravchenko started visiting Kadets in Moscow and Petrograd from early June, reporting on the situation in the military, whilst judging their opinions on events. The officers, though, were unimpressed, feeling that the Kadets did not fully understand the extent of the disintegration of the military and were even favouring the plans for an offensive. The Kadets seemed disillusioned with the government, but unwilling to talk in detail about alternatives.[52] They were cautious about supporting groups, such as the union, that were seen as 'counter-revolutionary'.

Novosil'tsev and the others took time to agree on a possible figurehead for a military dictatorship. Alekseev was the first choice, but some officers believed that he should have provided greater resistance to the revolutionary reforms to the military. The focus shifted to Vice-Admiral A. V. Kolchak, commander of the Black Sea fleet, whose determination had preserved order there until early June. Kolchak expressed his willingness to participate in 'illegal activities' in talks with

[48] V. Laverychev, *Po tu storonu barrikad* (Moscow, 1967), p. 194.
[49] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 72, l. 51.
[50] *RPG*, III, pp. 1534–5; GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 77, ll. 121–120b.
[51] F. Vinberg, *V plenu u 'obez'ian'* (*zapiski 'kontr-revoliutsionera'*) (Kiev, 1918), pp. 98–9.
[52] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 159ob–163ob.

Novosil'tsev as long as there were 'serious plans', and he was briefly involved in the Republican Centre.[53] He was, though, too reactionary for liberals, whilst the government saw him as a threat and dispatched him on a mission to America in late July. Instead, General L. G. Kornilov's outspoken defence of officers, together with his success during the failed offensive in June, saw him gain undisputed support. His appointment as commander-in-chief on 18 July was widely supported by conservatives and galvanized elites. He immediately met the main committee of the union, expressing his support for their activities. Novosil'tsev, Sidorin, and Pronin remained behind for a private meeting. They argued that a military dictatorship was the only solution to the chaos. Kornilov did not rule it out, although he rejected a return to Tsarism. He declared that he would act if necessary, but he was still confident that he could enact positive change in co-operation with the existing government.[54]

By early August, the union was operating on different levels. The majority of the main committee was busy defending the professional interests of officers, publishing materials, and agitating for support. Open links were forged with other elite and conservative groups based on practical and financial co-operation. However, a small group was using these connections to discuss political alternatives to the Provisional Government, especially a dictatorship dominated by the military. Soviet historians usually incriminated a large section of the main committee, if not all of them, in this 'conspiracy'.[55] Evidence suggests that no more than several were active. Other committee members later vehemently denied knowledge of any 'plot' and their accounts have a ring of truth. The background of some, for example Ivanov and Soots mentioned above, makes them unlikely to favour anything that would threaten the achievements of February. The Estonian, Soots, denied that he would have jeopardised the revolution and the freedoms gained by national minorities, although he admitted that he may have been excluded from political discussions because of these views. These figures and others stressed that they were only active in defending the *professional* interests of officers.[56] They were aware that Novosil'tsev and others travelled to Moscow and Petrograd to obtain financial support; beyond that, they were occupied with their own duties in the union and unaware of plans for political change.

VI

There is no doubt that the union's increasingly assertive voice and growing presence, combined with the new government policies, escalated tensions and

[53] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 155ob, 165.

[54] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 180ob–181ob.

[55] Ioffe argued that the 'authoritarian' group were in the majority, whilst a small group favoured compromise to maintain stability and were loyal to the government; G. Ioffe, *Semnadtsatyi god* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 74–5.

[56] *Delo Kornilova*, II, pp. 125–6, 322–3. See also a later account, S. Riasnianskii, 'Vospominaniia o soiuze ofitserov i Bykhove', *Vestnik pervopokhodnika*, 79–81 (1968), pp. 64–9.

fostered popular suspicions. Soldiers saw no need for unions of officers. As one soldiers' soviet noted, if officers were loyal, they were welcome to participate in soldiers' bodies. Some soldiers quickly highlighted the political threat of permitting any kind of representation for officers.[57] Others responded to particular aspects of the union's programme, arguing that the removal of politics from the military, for example, would deprive millions of the right to democracy. The restoration of the 'counter-revolutionary' death penalty fuelled distrust and, on 11 August, Kaluga garrison stated that members of officers' unions 'should be considered a traitor to the revolution'.[58] Occasionally, suspicions turned violent with protests and beatings affecting those promoting the union. Captain S. N. Riasnianskii, a member of the main committee, admitted that he and others were even threatened with death. More frequently, the troops' mistrust made it difficult for officers to meet and organize, with numerous assemblies disrupted or dispersed.[59]

On 4 August, *Izvestiia*, published by the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in Petrograd, launched a stinging attack on Kornilov (as did other newspapers at this time) calling for his dismissal. On 7 August, the union publicly described these as 'shameful' comments and urged support for Kornilov as the last chance of a bright future for Russia. On 10 August, various groups, including the union, issued a joint declaration along the same lines.[60] The union received dozens of supportive telegrams from across the military, mostly its own branches, but also from 'assemblies' of officers. They all echoed the call to support Kornilov. The measures that he was proposing – restoring discipline, limiting the influence of committees, and removing the interference of committees in military matters, for example – had their complete agreement. His removal was unthinkable. As one branch of the union noted, 'General Kornilov has given us the confidence that the army may yet be saved and with it Russia. His energetic activities have already yielded results and the army is now on the path to revival.'[61]

However, Kornilov and the union should have been careful not to read too much more into these declarations of support. If some were aggressive, riling against the influence of German money and socialists in general,[62] others re-emphasized that officers, including union members, were only united on what needed to be done to improve the situation within the military and remained divided politically. Addressing rumours of 'counter-revolution', several specifically stressed that they would only happily carry out 'legal orders'.[63] Most officers did not see the need for strong measures, or even the importance of Kornilov in delivering these measures, as incompatible with the current government. Several

[57] *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v voennykh okrugakh. Mart 1917g.-mart 1918g.* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 83, 105, 135.
[58] *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Russkoi armii*, p. 570; *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v voennykh*, pp. 210–11.
[59] Riasnianskii, 'Vospominaniia', p. 64; K. Oberuchev, *Ofitsery v Russkoi revoliutsii* (New York, NY, 1918), pp. 39–43.
[60] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 58–61.
[61] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 22–220b. Similar messages were forwarded to Kornilov (l. 3).
[62] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 7, 21.
[63] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 4, 130b, 63–5.

messages finished by expressing their support for the government, whilst still castigating it for not acting decisively against the attacks on Kornilov.[64] There was little sense of active support for further political change.

Uncertainty also characterized the first public meeting of conservative and liberal groups, the first Congress of Public Figures in Moscow on 8–10 August 1917. Almost 400 attended, including politicians, senior officers, industrialists, landowners, clergy, and officers' bodies. The congress discussed a range of issues and expressed its support for Kornilov on 9 August. It elected a permanent council (which included Novosil'tsev) to monitor important developments.[65] Rozhenko and Novosil'tsev outlined their plans for political change at several private meetings. According to one witness, the officers expected the imminent removal of Kornilov. If this happened, they proposed rallying around him, overthrowing the government, and establishing a dictatorship to suppress the Petrograd soviet. They needed the support of 'state' figures to create a new government. The intentions behind the plan were met favourably – 'the bright star of Kornilov burned like a meteor in the night sky' with the promise of greater authority and order. The practical aspects, however, were 'unexpectedly naïve and rash'. The 'adventure' was poorly planned and success was assumed. P. N. Miliukov, leader of the Kadets, voiced the general view when he praised the patriotism of the officers, but declared that the Kadets could not provide active support, as the plans were unlikely to gain popular support.[66]

A report, purportedly delivered to one of these meetings, provided more detail.[67] Anarchy and the precedence of class interests over state concerns proved that Russians were unprepared for democracy. Therefore, the Constituent Assembly should be abandoned temporarily. Russians voted for 'demagogic' parties without understanding their policies and proportional representation provided influence to marginal parties. Instead, a military dictator was needed to regain authority. His activities would be controlled and focused towards establishing 'elementary order' (securing the safety of the individual and of property through law and the courts), conducting educational and cultural work, introducing social reforms to improve the lives of workers, and achieving greater equality in landownership and payment of taxes. A national assembly would be created once order was re-established with a constitutional monarchy as a

[64] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 74, ll. 28–30.

[65] *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v avguste 1917g.* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 360–2. Also V. Polikarpov, *Voennaia kontrrevoliutsiia v Rossii, 1905–1917* (Moscow, 1990), pp. 233–8.

[66] N. Savich, *Vospominaniia* (St Petersburg, 1993), pp. 246–50. Similar views are in *RPG*, III, p. 1542. The Kadets were split; few were actively involved, but many would have supported Kornilov if he had succeeded (N. Dumova, *Kadetskaia partiia v period pervoi mirovoi voiny i fevral'skoi revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 189–91; W. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1974), pp. 222–8). V. A. Maklakov accused Miliukov of encouraging the union by not rejecting their plans outright; Katkov, *Kornilov revolt*, pp. 142–3.

[67] GARF, f. 3529 [Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie 1917g.], op. 1, d. 31, ll. 1–5. The evidence that it was delivered at this congress comes from details added by an archivist, but it seems representative of officers' views.

possible future compromise to guarantee law, order, and social reform. If this was the report delivered, the arguments stressing the temporary and beneficial nature of the proposed dictatorship would help explain the sympathy of liberals and others who had supported the democratic ideals of February.

The government's attempt to reconcile differences and foster support started a few days later at the Moscow State Conference (12–15 August). The conference vividly displayed the divisions. The 'right' stood on one side considering proposals to replace the government with a dictatorship. The 'left' stood on the other side, mostly calling for the transfer of power to the soviet. In the middle, Kerenskii inevitably failed to bring the two together. Officially, the union had two representatives,[68] but members were present in the staffs of armies and military regions, military schools, Cossacks, and, in Novosil'tsev's case, as a Duma deputy. Their numbers were small in comparison with the 2,400–600 individuals who attended, but they were vocal, especially when in tandem with landowners, industrialists, and other elites. Senior generals, including Alekseev, one of the union's official representatives, reiterated the usual demands,[69] but divisions among officers continued. Representatives of the Soviet of Officers' Deputies, although now arguing for greater discipline and authority for officers, directly refuted a dictatorship, believing that it would destroy the army and the country. Instead, legal order and cultural enlightenment would revive discipline. Novosil'tsev found it 'strange' to be talking about educating not fighting,[70] but clearly some officers remained committed to the revolution.

The weeks after the Moscow Conference saw tensions escalate between Kornilov and the government, culminating in the infamous 'Kornilov revolt' from 27 to 31 August, one of the central events of 1917. Kornilov was determined to deal with the corrosive influence, as he saw it, of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in Petrograd. The question was whether this would be done with government support or without it. Fears of a rumoured Bolshevik coup, together with misplaced confidence about his level of support, led to a growing assertiveness on his part. Kerenskii was also keen to limit the soviet, but he wanted to restrict its authority, rather than eradicate it. Sympathetic to pleas for a strong government, he was nevertheless determined to remain in power. Kornilov started moving troops into position, but a compromise appeared possible up to the last minute. Events finally exploded on 27 August. A garbled conversation with Kornilov fuelled Kerenskii's fears that Kornilov intended to replace him. He dismissed Kornilov as commander-in-chief. Kornilov refused to depart, denounced his 'betrayal' by the government, and loyal troops under General A. M. Krymov moved towards Petrograd. Soldiers and workers mobilized, hindering Krymov's advance and quickly convinced his troops that they were being used as part of a counter-revolutionary coup rather than acting to save the

[68] GARF, f. 3529, op. 1, d. 7, l. 21.
[69] GARF, f. 3529, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 27–40, 62–9; *RPG*, III, pp. 1474–80.
[70] GARF, f. 3529, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 40–1; GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 193ob–194.

government as they had been told. By 31 August, Krymov had committed suicide, the revolt had disintegrated, and Kornilov and a number of his closest associates were arrested.[71]

The union's role in these events was mixed. Pronin, Sidorin, and, to a lesser extent, Novosil'tsev (along with officers in other organizations), were more determined supporters of a dictatorship than Kornilov himself, who was prepared to compromise with the government if his demands were met. Miliukov, who had meetings with both the officers and Kornilov, felt that the officers were even driving the conspiracy.[72] Nevertheless, events took Novosil'tsev and others by surprise. In talks with the government on 23 August, Kornilov had finally agreed to demands that the union's 'harmful' activities should be transferred from Stavka to Moscow. Novosil'tsev was in Moscow finding premises when the revolt broke out. He felt that they were 'not ready'; 'public figures' would not commit and existing preparations would be ruined. He returned on 28 August, but could only join others in writing appeals.[73]

On 28 August, the union printed 10,000 copies of an appeal declaring that officers needed to unite to save Kornilov from a Bolshevik-influenced government, and the military from internal and external enemies. Power needed to be strong prior to the Constituent Assembly.[74] This appeal seemed to demonstrate conclusively that the entire main committee of the union was involved in the revolt. Unsurprisingly, its members argued otherwise when interrogated in early September. They denied participating in a plot and argued that they had little choice but to support Kornilov. Rumours started circulating on 27 August that Kornilov had been dismissed. When the available members of the committee met in the morning of 28 August (accounts vary, but probably no more than a dozen), they were 'completely bewildered'. The government had previously supported Kornilov, but had now apparently dismissed him. There was no replacement, whilst Kornilov's appeals sounded sincere. They decided to support Kornilov. The appeal came later from Pronin who, along with Rozhenko, was a close confidant of Kornilov and had the greatest involvement in events in Stavka (Sidorin was entrusted to mobilize officers in Petrograd, although he proved ineffective). Pronin gave the first draft of the appeal to Rozhenko, who thought that someone else close to Kornilov had written it. Rozhenko presented it to a second meeting of the committee in the afternoon, which approved it unanimously after making several alterations. Novosil'tsev then signed it. None saw it as a 'counter-revolutionary' appeal. Indeed, Colonel L. I. Sazonov, a legal expert at Stavka who was on the union's judicial committee, only attended the afternoon meeting, but was certain that there was nothing criminal about the text as they were not calling for an overthrow of the government, merely

[71] Munck, *Kornilov revolt*, pp. 40–123.
[72] P. Miliukov, *The Russian Revolution* (3 vols., Gulf Breeze, 1978–87), II, pp. 137–43.
[73] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 202–4.
[74] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 44, l. 50.

supporting Kornilov in the absence of a clear successor or plan for the military.[75]

All officers comment on the confusing and chaotic nature of events, and the fact that Kornilov could not effectively mobilize his most loyal supporters meant that the revolt was doomed to fail from the beginning. For every officer that responded favourably to the revolt, several did not and hundreds kept their heads down, irrespective of what they thought. Several generals, such as Lukomskii and Denikin, openly supported Kornilov, but could offer little practical help. Many were simply confused; General B. V. Gerua recalled how a telegram from Kerenskii calling Kornilov a traitor arrived at the same time as one from Kornilov alleging that Kerenskii was a 'German traitor'.[76] Wildman noted that the revolt demonstrated the weakness of officers and that 'hard-core support' for Kornilov was 'exceedingly slight'.[77] Ultimately, there was confusion over his aims. Soviet historians talk of his 'programme' and its 'exceptionally reactionary' character. By 'programme', they mean his appeals and the gossip of associates conflated with their own assumptions.[78] There was no programme of specific policies. During the revolt, Kornilov issued vague patriotic appeals designed to foster support across society. He gave primacy to the Constituent Assembly and, on 28 August, invited ministers to form a government of people's defence with him,[79] but it was too vague to convince elites that he could succeed.

VII

Thirty officers were arrested for participating in Kornilov's revolt and imprisoned, including Generals Kornilov, Lukomskii, and Denikin, and thirteen committee members of the union, including Novosil'tsev and Pronin. Further investigations tried to identify others; commissars asked for lists of officers who were in Stavka from 26 August onwards and explanations of their activities. The personnel at Stavka were changed and officers were not to contact former staff or fulfil previous orders.[80] Unofficial arrests of officers by committees and soldiers returned to the high levels seen after the February Revolution. The government argued that punishment had to be conducted legally,[81] but soldiers wanted immediate action. Many demanded the liquidation of the union as a 'nest of counter-revolutionaries' as well as, to a lesser extent, other officers' bodies. Some argued that Kornilov and his conspirators, as traitors, were prime candidates for

[75] This account comes from the testimonies of eight committee members; *Delo Kornilova*, II, pp. 29–31, 125–7, 275–83, 296–8, 313–24. Pronin and Rozhenko were involved in agitating among officers and sending supporters to Siderin in Petrograd to support Krymov, but few were recruited.

[76] B. Gerua, *Vospominaniia o moei zhizni* (2 vols., Paris, 1969–70), II, pp. 212–13.

[77] Wildman, 'Officers of the General Staff', p. 98.

[78] For example, Ivanov, *Kontrrevoliutsiia*, pp. 84–96.

[79] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 53, ll. 23–4.

[80] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 19, 39; d. 44, ll. 109–10, 112–112ob, 117–23.

[81] *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v sentiabre 1917g.* (Moscow, 1961), pp. 222–3.

the restored death penalty. Some desired a complete 'cleansing' of the command structure. Others forced officers to sign documents declaring that they were not and had not been members of the union, and would not take part in counter-revolutionary activities. Several were shot in Helsinki for refusing to comply. Officers should not be allowed to form their own organizations; even officers' canteens should close, according to one regiment.[82] The Union of Officers was not actually banned by the government, despite the pressure. Nevertheless, with its members forced to keep their heads down, it ceased to be an active body. Numerous officers distanced themselves from it, whilst some branches dis-associated themselves from Kornilov. The commander of Moscow military region, General A. I. Verkhovskii, ordered a search of the Moscow branch in the immediate aftermath of the revolt and closed it completely a couple of days later.[83]

Alekseev attempted to protect officers during his short-lived period as chief of staff after the revolt. After his dismissal, he wrote a letter to Miliukov on 12 September demanding that he help prevent the thirty imprisoned officers from standing trial. Alekseev also requested Miliukov to ask industrialists to contribute 300,000 rubles to help support the families of those arrested. After all, they had been heavily involved in the pre-Kornilov meetings and Alekseev threatened to make this public.[84] Officers, though, were back at square one: the military had deteriorated further, their position was worse than ever, and they had less chance to make their voice heard. The deep gulf between officers and soldiers, as General I. P. Sytin noted on 10 September, was now a chasm.[85] Furthermore, the government was now weaker than before and unable to implement any orders to safeguard the position and interests of officers.

In the Second Army, the commissar, K. Grodskii, distributed two telegrams on 9–10 September designed to rehabilitate officers. He expressed confidence in officers, arguing that the majority believed in the government and that only a small number of staff officers supported Kornilov. He believed that most officers had joined the union as a professional union and had nothing to do with the political activities of its leaders in Stavka. The union was a means of protecting officers from the politics that had invaded the military after February. He wanted assemblies of officers to express their opinions of the union, which would, he hoped, stop a few individuals placing the whole organization under suspicion.[86]

Grodskii was providing officers with a loophole to disavow Kornilov, the revolt, and the union. Nonetheless, by the time replies started returning a fortnight later,

[82] See *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v voennykh*, pp. 233–4; *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v sentiabre*, pp. 394–8, 408, 410, 417; and *Baltiiskie moriaki v podgotovke i provedenii velikoi oktiabr'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1957), pp. 216–17, 252–3. On Helsinki; 'Baltiiskii flot nakanune oktiabria (iz dnevnika I. I. Rengartena)', *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 35 (1929), pp. 18–19. Similar demands were made by workers and peasants across Russia; GARF, f. 1778 [Kantseliariia ministra-predsedatelia vremennogo pravitel'stva. 1917], op. 1, d. 238.

[83] *Rech'*, no. 205, 1 Sept. 1917; no. 207, 3 Sept. 1917.

[84] *RPG*, III, pp. 1604–6.

[85] *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Russkoi armii*, pp. 406–7.

[86] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 75–6, 91–910b.

the immediate backlash from the revolt had died down and officers clearly felt able to express frank opinions. Some assemblies did assert that they had refused to join the union earlier, suspicious of its political activities, the leadership's authoritarian stance, and its divisive impact.[87] Some merely noted that they had considered the union to be a purely professional organization.[88] The majority, though, were resolute in their continued support for the original published objectives of the union – improving the fighting capabilities of the military, promoting patriotism and supporting officers. The main committee, they argued, in becoming involved in politics, had followed a path against the wishes of many members, who should not be held responsible. Furthermore, several argued that they, as members of a professional group (officers), continued to support the need for a union to represent their interests within a 'democratic' Russia. Disbanding the union would only strengthen and justify the misguided suspicions of the backward soldiers.[89] Grodskii certainly expected greater condemnation of the union. He forwarded one reply to the commander-in-chief and minister of war on 4 October in which officers condemned the misguided and ineffectual nature of the union, declared that they were disbanding their branch, and called for the prosecution of its leadership.[90] There is no evidence that he passed on the other messages.

Nevertheless, Novosil'tsev noted that the union was in limbo after the revolt with many local branches inactive or closed. A few individual members (for example, Sidorin) were involved in plans for an armed uprising in October, but Novosil'tsev was unsure what to do after his release on 22 October.[91] Technically, the union continued until January 1918. Novosil'tsev and at least twelve other committee members fled south after the October Revolution and joined Alekseev's volunteer army to fight the Bolsheviks. Novosil'tsev felt that there was no need for the union in the new army, which prioritized the authority of officers and strict discipline. Others disagreed and it was not until 1918 that they were convinced otherwise.[92]

VIII

Overall, the Union of Officers was not particularly successful. This was hardly surprising given its struggle for support, the intense suspicion of soldiers and sailors, and the growing radicalism of the population. Nevertheless, although the union's leaders and members were aware of this, sizeable numbers still felt it

[87] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 96–96ob, 99, 121, 127, 138–138ob.

[88] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 107, 113, 118, 122.

[89] GARF, f. 1780, op. 1, d. 62, ll. 97–97ob, 100–102ob, 109, 123, 125–125ob, 128, 131, 133–135ob.

[90] N. Kakurin, ed., *Razlozhenie armii v 1917 godu* (Moscow, 1925), pp. 114–15.

[91] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, l. 223. On Sidorin, GARF, f. R-336 [Sledstvennaia komissiia revoliutsionnogo tribunala], op. 1, d. 277, l. 95ob. Later investigations by the Bolsheviks failed to highlight union activity after Kornilov, d. 34a, ll. 30–46ob.

[92] GARF, f. 6422, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 226–27ob, 235–235ob.

essential that officers had their own union. This would not be a union representing certain political viewpoints, such as the Union of Officer-Republicans, or a union closely linked with other political bodies and social groups, such as the Soviet of Officers' Deputies, but a professional union representing the everyday interests and concerns of officers. Despite their minority position, these officers believed that such a union could serve to unite officers dispersed across the front, articulate their views, and take a valuable part in the flawed democracy of 1917, especially alongside organizations representing other elite groups. Clearly not even the majority of officers were members, but the union established a sizeable presence across the military, especially among middle-ranking and senior officers. This provided it with disproportionate influence in Stavka, making it one of the most vocal groups calling for firmer measures in the military and the country.

Ultimately, there was no such thing as a purely 'professional' organization in 1917. As the revolution progressed, social and political tensions grew, and the 'professional' demands of various groups became inextricably linked to political goals. Increasingly, in the case of the Union of Officers, demands for stronger policies led to talk of a stronger government to defend their interests. This placed officers at odds with the popular mood, encouraging popular suspicions of the union to increase alongside demands for its closure. It also highlighted that officers only agreed about problems, not solutions. The union was popularly seen as 'counter-revolutionary', but most of its members were not against the February Revolution or the Provisional Government, but the disintegration of the military and the growing social unrest. Certainly, a group within the union's leadership took this discontent to its extreme, exemplifying the military's distrust of civilian politicians by demanding a military dictatorship. Most officers, though, recognized that this was not likely to succeed, and would intensify conflict and further worsen the position of officers. Many did not even desire it. Instead, officers constantly argued about how best to restore order in the military, even within the Union of Officers, helping to explain the catastrophic failure of Kornilov's revolt. Yet, even amidst its repercussions in September, officers still believed that they needed representation.

More broadly, the gathering activity of elite groups like officers, culminating in Kornilov's revolt, helped foster fears of counter-revolution, shift the popular mood to the left, and exacerbate social unrest. In response, conservative elites could only demand authoritarian measures from the government and, increasingly, consider a change of government. This dynamic lay at the heart of the revolutionary process, signalling the failure of the Provisional Government and the democratic experiment in 1917, whilst laying the foundations for the Bolshevik revolution and civil war.