

Conflict Over Soldiers' Rights

On the eve of the creation of the Provisional Government, March 1, 1917, the Petrograd Soviet issued Order No. 1, granting various rights to the soldiers within the Petrograd Military District. Included in these rights was the right of enlisted soldiers to elect soldiers' committees. Many units of soldiers interpreted this to mean the right to also elect their officers.¹ Seeing this misinterpretation, the Petrograd Soviet made a clarification to the law in Order No. 2 a few days later, stating that soldiers did not have the right to elect their own officers. In his letter to the Petrograd Soviet dated March 10, 1917, A. Korolozhevich, a soldier in the Petrograd Military District, states that revocation of this perceived right of election of officers worried soldiers that other rights listed in Order No. 1 might be revoked as well. These other rights included a reduction in officers' disciplinary powers, the protection of soldiers against deprivation of "those rights which are enjoyed by any citizen" outside of service and line duties, and a reduction in the formality with which officers were to be addressed.² The fear of losing these rights prompted him to address the issue in a letter to the highest authority, the Petrograd Soviet.³

Korolozhevich questions whether the revocation of the right to vote for their officers was a fair move on the government's part given that Russia was now a constitutional state. He proposes to ask whether it is "proper to take away what [they]

¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1982, 2008) . Pg. 45

² "Order No. 1" (March 1, 1917), *Soviet History Archive*, Online, <http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/03/01.htm>

³ "Soldier A. Korolozhevich's Letter to the Petrograd Soviet", in *Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution*. Michael C. Hickey, ed. *Fighting Words* Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2011. pg. 122.

have been given, so that [they] cannot elect [their] officers.”⁴ In this question, Korolozhevich is not just stating that he wants rights, but that he finds it unfair for the government to grant them rights and then revoke them. This appeal displays his belief, or tactic of persuasion, that the rights of citizens of “a constitutional state” cannot be taken away once they are granted. The manner in which Korolozhevich appeals to the Soviet in this question is supplicating but not combative. His questioning tone implies that he is respectful of the Petrograd Soviet’s authority, but that he knows that this issue needs to be raised. As the letter progresses, however, he shifts from a questioning tone to a firmer stance on what the result of revocation will mean in the garrisons. Korolozhevich describes that before Order No. 1 was issued “no one [took] care” of the soldiers’ needs and “all the officers [cared] about was being saluted.”⁵ His feelings on how the military was run before Order No. 1 clearly run deep. By apparently revoking the newly granted right of the army soldiers to choose their officers, the Soviet was polarizing the army.

As Korolozhevich moves on in the letter, his focus changes from the issue of the election of officers to the effect of other rights potentially being taken away. At this time other parties, such as the Kadet Party, were calling for all of Order No. 1 to be revoked “in the name of preserving...military strength.”⁶ It is clear that the soldiers’ concern for loss of rights was justified from more than just Order No. 2 revoking the election of officers. Korolozhevich says that if all of Order No. 1 is revoked, then “almost nothing will have changed for [the] soldiers.”⁷ This point of returning to the old keeps coming up

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Paul N. Miliukov, *The Russian Revolution*. 1. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1978. 58-59. Print.

⁷ "Soldier A. Korolozhevich's Letter to the Petrograd Soviet", in *Competing Voices*, Hickey. pg. 122.

in the letter. It may be suggestive of possible unrest in the ranks if the order was to be revoked, as once someone is granted a right, it is very difficult to take this right away without at least some turmoil ensuing. Korolozhevich does not find it appealing to go back to the situation that the army was in before, as it would be “impossible for [soldiers] to go anywhere, to sit down, to eat, or to relax” because they will “always need to be on guard.”⁸ It is very clear that soldiers would not be happy with the revocation of these rights. His last two lines are very strong, “As much we were gladdened, we now will be miserable. The old apparently will be the new.”⁹ Once again Korolozhevich is expressing how terrible the “old” was for the soldiers and implies that if it goes back to the old, the soldiers will again be “miserable” and likely restless. By writing this letter, Korolozhevich shows the Petrograd Soviet the desires of the soldiers, as well as hinting at possible repercussions that could come from further revocation of the rights from Order No. 1.

The action of the Petrograd Soviet to issue Order No. 1 was clearly a tactical maneuver against the soon to be created Provisional Government. Most importantly, it gave the Petrograd Soviet the power of counter signature on any military proceeding. But of equal importance, by democratizing the Army it encouraged the soldiers to side with the Soviet.¹⁰ It was also “an assertion of the Soviet’s power,” and it “gladdened” the soldiers.¹¹ However, as understood from Korolozhevich’s letter, any large-scale revocation of the rights that had been previously granted could have had serious repercussions for the Petrograd Soviet. The Soviet might have lost the trust and possible backing of the soldiers, one of its strongest bases, for the critical year of 1917.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1982, 2008) . Pg. 45

¹¹ "Soldier A. Korolozhevich's Letter to the Petrograd Soviet", in *Competing Voices*, Hickey. pg. 122.