



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

The Fall of Kerensky: Circumstantial Narrative of Capture of the Winter Palace and Kerensky's Escape—The Women Defenders

Source: *Current History (1916-1940)*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Part II (February, 1918), pp. 302-307

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45324834>

Accessed: 26-07-2023 14:42 +00:00

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Current History (1916-1940)*

The Fall of Kerensky

Circumstantial Narrative of Capture of the Winter Palace and Kerensky's Escape—The Women Defenders

The narrative herewith, giving the details of the downfall of Alexander Kerensky, was written for The London Morning Post by its Petrograd correspondent. It is the first detailed account of the dramatic episode that has reached this country. The recital of events is printed in full, but the editorial comments of the writer, who exhibits a passionate hatred for Kerensky, are omitted.

ON the morning of Nov. 6, 1917, Kerensky held on the Palace Square a farewell parade of the Women's Battalion shortly proceeding to the front. It consisted of five companies, something over a thousand total strength, under the command of Captain Loskov, who had trained them. Kerensky then proceeded to the Council of the Russian Republic (the "pre-Parliament") sitting in the Mariinsky Palace, and made there a great demagogic speech which roused intense enthusiasm on delivery, but universal criticism after cool consideration, and failed to save a vote adverse to his Government. In the course of this speech he announced that he and his Government were seriously threatened by the Bolsheviks, and called upon all men to declare at once whether they were for the Russian Republic or against it. The same afternoon the Bolsheviks quietly captured Petrograd, restored traffic over the bridges which the Kerensky Government had swung open and guarded, took over everything except the actual building of the Winter Palace, and set up in the Smolny Institute, three-quarters of a mile east of the State Duma and on the Neva, a new Government of men mostly with German names passing under Russian names.

The whole operation of capturing Petrograd was done in the most admirable military manner; the troops were perfectly sober throughout, under proper discipline, and in possession of definite plain military orders which they carried

out with courtesy and firmness. The land approaches to the Winter Palace were taken and strongly picketed without opposition. The cruiser Aurora and three destroyers arrived from Helsingfors, the big ship anchoring in the stream about a mile and a half below the Winter Palace, the three destroyers taking up positions opposite the palace under the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul. The naval contingent was got to Petrograd by orders, which turned out to be forged, from the "Centrofleet," (the Head Centre Committee of the United Sailors' Committees.) When the orders came to put out of harbor the men had demurred, alleging the bad weather, and it was only the strong order from their own "Centrofleet" which compelled their obedience.

The Palace Defenses

During Kerensky's tenure of the Winter Palace, where he kept up a more than royally extravagant state, the premises had been guarded by various bodies of cadets, as being the most trustworthy wearers of military uniform in Petrograd. An exceptionally strong body of cadets from several military schools had been concentrated in the Winter Palace on Tuesday, and the Women's Battalion was ordered to remain there on duty in place of starting for the front. There were also six guns and about a score of Maxims. A company of one of the "Death Battalions" was also got in at the last minute. But no arrangements had been made either for the comfort or even the victualing of a force which now exceeded two thousand. The Death Battalion men had no boots and were only partially armed; they demanded arms and equipment, and in particular clamored for food. Getting nothing they left the palace. The various Colonels commanding cadet units began withdrawing their boys for the same reasons.

Captain Loskov of the Women's Bat-

talion marched away with four companies, leaving only the 2d Company of something under two hundred in the palace. The artillerymen took their six guns from the interior courtyard of the palace out upon the Palace Square, apparently intending to return to barracks, but fell into the hands of the opposing forces without reluctance. In this way by repeated defections, due mainly to the entire neglect of any kind of preparations, the forces available for the defense of the Winter Palace fell below a thousand, two-thirds of whom were boys and a few men, Maxim-gunners, and oddments, while something under two hundred were women. The Women's Battalion must be specially mentioned. First, they were women. They had joined to defend their country from the foreign foe, and were entirely opposed to any form of participation in political quarrels.

During the "insurrection" against Kerensky's Government last July these women soldiers were specially ordered into Petrograd from their training camp in the country to help to save the Government. They had then hardly more than begun their training, and, indeed, had never yet fired a shot from their rifles. On that occasion their commanding officer successfully pleaded with Kerensky that it was unwise, from the military point of view, to attempt to utilize raw, untrained troops, even men, and these were women untrained; moreover, the women soldiers were on the eve of mutiny at being called in to take part in a political quarrel. As the women were not actually needed in July, the plea prevailed. It was not so now; the women were trained and ready for the front; they did not put forward the second plea on this occasion, but their feelings were entirely against taking any part in what was only dubiously for their country's good, and very certainly required them to shoot down their own fellow-countrymen. Presumably, the 2d Company remained to vindicate the honor of the corps, which they fully accomplished as soldiers, only to suffer afterward as women. Captain Loskov, with the other four companies, appears to have taken train for the front, for noth-

ing is yet known of their whereabouts. The 2d Company came under the command of their honorary Colonel in Chief, who, in another capacity, was present in the palace.

Dictator's Last Refuge

Throughout Tuesday evening, night, and all Wednesday the Winter Palace building, not even including the Palace Square, was the sole territory out of All the Russias, covering one-sixth of the globe, that the Kerensky Government could command. It was defended by boys and women. But an oversight, or the sheer ignorance of the Bolsheviki, lost them, in spite of otherwise admirable military dispositions, all they seemed to have won. From the official residence of the Minister of War, not half a mile from the palace and already in the hands of the Bolsheviki, runs a direct cable to Field Headquarters, which are, again, directly connected with all parts of Russia. This cable was in charge of a couple of young officers, with a staff of four telegraphists. The operating room is in the attics, which were not searched by the captors, and there is telephonic direct communication from this room to the palace. One of the officers repaired to the palace, and for forty-eight hours the cable worked unhampered in the interests of the Kerensky Government to all ends of Russia. It was a damning oversight for the victors of Petrograd.

Within the palace Tuesday evening and night passed in a state of sheer panic. All the Ministers, including Kerensky, were there, but one who had ventured out was recognized and made prisoner while attempting to return. Eyewitnesses describe the scene as purely farcical. Every one was giving orders, and everybody else issuing counterorders. Ministers bustled about from room to room, talking at random. Even Kerensky was seen wildly asking all and sundry, "What are we to do now?" "Can you suggest anything to be done?" down to a despairing "What shall I do?" An officer newly arrived with dispatches from the front was placed in command of all the forces left in the palace. He proposed to hold the Palace Square, but was not allowed to take a single soldier, boy or girl, outside

the seeming safety of the massive palace walls. Dr. Kishkin, the "Cadet" Minister, a well-known Moscow specialist in psychiatry, and who has a private asylum for the insane there, was appropriately declared Military Governor General of Petrograd and the Petrograd Military District. Other appointments were made on the principle of dismissing holders of office who were not inside the palace, and filling these paper vacancies with the names of all kinds of people who happened to share the enforced seclusion of the Kerensky Government.

Military Bungling

Here is an example of the military orders issued during this time of panic. A Captain in charge of one of the posts served by the Cadets came to one of these sentries and asked: "How many of you are there now free?" "If all the posts are served there may be five left." "Where are they?" The Captain went to find these five, and told them he had a special charge of great trust for them. There is an underground passage from the cellars of the Winter Palace leading some couple of hundred yards away to the barracks of the premier regiment of foot guards, the Preobrajensky Regiment of ancient fame. It is closed by a stout door and strong gate, a considerable way down this gloomy passage. To this point the Cadets were led and given strict orders to let none pass on pain of death. They demurred that five boys were an inadequate guard to hold a barrier with 10,000 soldiers on the other side well provided with machine guns and able to bring cannon up if necessary. The Captain admitted the justice of this military argument, and went to find some more boys. He got together about a score, who, when told what was expected of them, demurred openly, and finally the underground passage was left undefended. Nor was it ever used by the attacking party, who, being Petrograd reservists, may possibly have known nothing of its existence.

In the early hours of Nov. 7, in the pitch darkness of the night, a motor launch quietly put in to the narrow little waterway known as the Zimnaja Kan-

avka, between the Winter Palace and the Hermitage. Into this swift craft Kerensky with his adjutant, disguised in the topcoats and uniform caps of the Imperial lackeys, silently lowered himself, having stolen out by a back way from the Palace precincts. It was a simple matter to put ashore after a noiseless voyage by the Neva and one of its canals at a point within easy reach of the railway station, but in all probability the escape was managed first by motor-car after the launch had cleared the danger zone in the near neighborhood of the Palace. Kerensky proceeded to Bikhov, some score of miles from Field Headquarters.

A Dramatic Escape

It was a dramatic escape. But were the "enemy" really hoodwinked, and did it really take place as told? The Bolsheviks were in no haste to seize the prey they held so securely in their toils. They took things leisurely. And Kerensky got away on this, as on the previous occasion, when the Bolsheviks last July threatened his Government with extinction. In September, when Korniloff was falsely said to be marching on Petrograd with the same hostile intentions, it was to the Bolsheviks that Kerensky had recourse for assistance.

Throughout Nov. 7 there was little hindrance to foot traffic about the Winter Palace Square and adjoining streets, save for the stretch of quay facing the palace. But at 6 o'clock on Wednesday evening orders came to stop all movement, and the pickets closed up and prepared for action. Shortly after 6 P. M. the Provisional Government received a formal summons to surrender. It had spent Wednesday in compiling a number of proclamations to the nation, which it circulated—how widely is still unknown—by means of the direct wire to Field Headquarters. Konovalov took the lead after the disappearance of Kerensky, and his signature stands below a proclamation which tells the nation, among other things, at a time when the whole Petrograd garrison had twelve hours before declared against the Provisional Government, that, "owing to the want of firmness and indecision of a part of the Petrograd garrison, not all the disposi-

tions of the Provisional Government could be carried out," &c. A number of speeches were made in the palace by various Ministers, who informed their hearers that the Bolsheviks were surrounded; that troops were momentarily expected to arrive from the front, and that even if fired upon they must hold out. No reply was sent to the first formal demand, which was followed later in the evening by a definite ultimatum. The Provisional Government requested some extension of the time named, which was granted. But about 10 at night it became evident that the Winter Palace must be taken by force.

Situation Becomes Impossible

In a military sense the situation was foolish and impossible. At point-blank range down the river were the big guns of a cruiser. Opposite the palace stood the fortress, with an unknown force of artillery assembled there, and under its walls three destroyers. The Neva opposite the Winter Palace is not 600 yards wide, a trifling range for a modern rifle, to say nothing of naval guns. The land approaches to the palace were held by an overwhelming force, and from any part of Petrograd any number of guns might have been brought to bear against so large a mark with certainty. The defense was not a score of Maxims and the rifles of a few hundred boys and girls. In such circumstances the Provisional Government decided that the boys and girls must support their valiant defiance of the ultimatum. It can only be characterized as a wicked decision. The naval guns alone could have made a heap of ruins of this magnificent palace in ten minutes if properly served. Apart from the lives of the boys and girls called upon to defend the nominal masters of some fifteen million soldiers, the Winter Palace is estimated to contain art treasures and precious objects of every kind of historic and intrinsic value, to a total amount of £50,000,000.

Owing to the royal state maintained for months past by Kerensky and company in the Imperial Palace of the Czars, and the splendid banquets given to political adherents, the treasures of the Winter Palace, unlike those of the Her-

mitage, had not been removed except for such smaller articles as disappeared from time to time by the hands of all and sundry who visited the modern exponent of that most vicious form of government, the "autocracy of the tongue." The Bolsheviks were merciful, or, as subsequent events made more likely, they had a just appreciation of the value of the loot contained in the Winter Palace. When all terms and extensions of time had expired, the cruiser fired a salvo of blank from its big guns, the destroyer artillery followed suit, and the fortress guns filled up intervals, while from the land side began a fight between the boys and girls against thousands of soldiers and sailors with rifles, Maxims, armored cars, and some field guns. The first naval salvo was fired at about 9:30 P. M. on Wednesday. From that time till two in the morning the same program was repeated some half-dozen times, the guns of the cruiser and destroyers using nothing but blank ammunition.

Cowardly Soldiers

On the land side the fight was equally farcical, but the laugh was on the other side. The valiant soldiery who had carried out the peaceful work of seizing Petrograd with admirable military precision, firmness, and a courtesy not witnessed for eight months past, went to pieces when the bullets began to fly. The women soldiers gave a very good account of themselves, as an incident that occurred on the Millionaja Street will show. Up this street, which runs from the corner of the Winter Palace past the Hermitage, the Preobrazhensky Barracks, the Palace of the Annexe, which is technically a part of the Winter Palace, and a series of other palaces, a body of five or six hundred soldiers was spread about, firing upon the defenders of the Winter Palace. The women replied with such effect that a panic ensued, and a rush was made for the doors and gateway of the Annexe. The door is of very massive ancient construction, and it resisted the pressure of the frightened mob, whose efforts strained it so that it cannot be got open now; the gate, a great double-leaved heavy iron one barred with massive

bolts, was broken open, and into the yard poured a mob of frightened soldiery, seeking escape from the marksmanship of the Second Company of the Women's Battalion, then using their weapons for the first time in actual fighting. It was doubtless these cowards who later on forgot the Second Company were soldiers but remembered they were women. The fighting casualties of the women soldiers were one wounded in the foot with a bullet. And they accounted for over a score of the casualties of the attackers.

Provisional Government's Surrender

The din of big naval artillery, field guns, Maxims, and rifle firing continued at intervals for nearly five hours, the heavens being lit up with a rosy glow some thirty times from the big gun flashes of the cruiser. At last the minor artillery began to use shell, but the firing, whether purposely or not, was somewhat erratic. Three shells fell in the town, all more or less in line with the Winter Palace, but the gunners overshot by 600, 1,000, and 3,500 yards respectively with these three. The first two failed to explode, and caused little damage. The last wrecked two flats in the region known as the "Izmailov Streets," the regular lines of streets originally forming the cantonments of the Izmailov Guards Regiment. Two corners of the heavy plaster cornice of the Winter Palace were knocked off by shellfire, but only one shell struck squarely. It pierced the massive walls, and, without exploding, contrived utterly to wreck one of the magnificent historical pictures which adorn the vast walls of the palace.

Treatment of Women Soldiers

The Provisional Government surrendered shortly after 2 o'clock in the morning of Thursday, and were marched off in custody to the fortress. With them went some 500 of the Cadets. But the valiant women soldiers had a harder fate. The mixed mob of soldiery, sailors, armed hooligans, and others of their friends quickly flooded the whole palace.

And first of all their vengeance fell upon the fighters who, now that they had laid down their arms, were no longer dangerous to the precious lives of the

armed mob; they were only women now. About a score were handled as might be expected from the cowardly crew, and many were flung over the parapet into the swift waters of the Neva. Some 140 were at last sent off under escort of so-called soldiers to the barracks of the Pavlovsk Regiment at the far end of the Millionaja Street. On the way one at least had her face smashed in by a brutal blow from a rifle butt. The Pavlovsk Guards are a famous regiment; but their name is borne in Petrograd by the usual mob in uniform, who have never seen any fighting other than that of civil tumult. These reserve formations under the grand old names are peculiar to Petrograd, and the Pavlovsk nominal Guards were the first to come out into the streets against their Czar last March. They have maintained the reputation they gained for themselves in those evil days. While in their charge as prisoners three more of the women soldiers suffered the indignities that war brings upon women too often. The rest were saved by the personal exertions of the British General Knox, who went to the headquarters of the Bolsheviki at the Smolny Institute and demanded in the name of England the immediate release of all these women prisoners.

And the priceless art and other treasures of the Winter Palace—where are they now? The soldiery and their friends spent the night, the next day, and a good deal of Friday in stripping and removing everything they thought good to take, and destroying most of the rest. Like mad, senseless barbarians in the palaces of the Caesars, they slashed criss-cross innumerable great works of art. Portraits of the Czars were treated with especial ferocity. One singular—or was it intentional?—exception to the general fury strikes the eye and wakens a train of reflection. Amid a number of portraits ripped to shreds hangs untouched that of the German Moltke! Did these barbarians know whom they spared? Or was the work of destruction carried on under direction of the German double-name Russians who are the Bolshevik leaders? Such is the fact, whatever be the explanation. Priceless

carpets, rugs, tapestries, were cut to pieces either in wantonness or to provide wrappings for more attractive loot. Down in the vaults, where hundreds of imperial table services are safely stored ready for use, priceless china, gold, silver, much of it the work of great artists long dead and gone; up in the attics where lay thousands of those artistic presentations of "bread and salt" platter and salt-box in precious metals or choice carvings; through the great rooms of state and the private chambers of the Emperors of Russia and their successors, the rulers of today, the marauders strove and fought, missing little and leaving nothing undamaged.

Vanished Art Treasures

From the Winter Palace the mob of marauding soldiery and others passed to the adjacent Hermitage, bursting open the gallery doorways. Happily, here they found less food for their lust: the Her-

mitage was long ago "evacuated" beyond the reach of the "democracy" of Russia. But the private quarters of the Curator were forcibly entered and pilaged. A Sister of Mercy, who accompanied the soldiers to dress their wounds, but had had no occasion for her skill with these men, who had their own opinion about what amounts to fighting when the bullets fly, saw her chance, and, putting on all the valuable furs she could find, wrapped herself around with lace, secreted other feminine fripperies about her person, and walked away home some £10,000 richer than the disappointed men who had no eye for these things. It is not only the Emperors of All the Russias who have lost their family goods; nor Russia alone that has lost no small part of the art treasures of the nation; the world itself is the poorer for the senseless, unspeakable crime of sacking the Winter Palace.

Causes of the Russian Revolution

By Frederic Masson

Member of the Académie Française

[Translated for CURRENT HISTORY MAGAZINE from *Les Annales*, Paris]

AMID the uncertainty that envelops the course of events in Russia, it appears to me singularly appropriate to recall a statement that is already old, for it dates from Feb. 20, 1917, some days before the outbreak of the revolution. This backward glance answers more than one question regarding the present situation in Russia. The statement is by a Russian, who wrote as follows:

"It is a useless and difficult task for a stranger to try to understand, when we ourselves are unable to grasp the whole course of events, and especially their causes. The roots of the evil date from the beginning of the war, but the flowering of all these horrors has been visible since the advent of Baron Stürmer to power. Adroitly brought out by the Empress and Rasputin from the oblivion in which he was vegetating, this gloomy gentleman was, without rhyme or rea-

son, called to the Premiership with Ministers who had held the public confidence under his predecessor, Gorymekin; men such as Sazonoff, General Polivanoff, Secretary Bark, Count Ignatieff, and Admiral Grigorovitch.

"At the outset Stürmer encouraged the Czar to appear before the Duma in order to strengthen his own position. The trick did not work. Then he began by throwing overboard the War Minister, Polivanoff, who was very popular in the Duma and Imperial Council, and who was now replaced by General Shuvaieff, head of the commissary, and an honest man. Then came Sazonoff's turn—in July, 1916. Stürmer had the audacity to take his portfolio, at the same time retaining the Premiership.

"At this point Protopopoff returned from his parliamentary tour of allied countries, where he had been warmly welcomed as a Liberal of the Left Centre