

AN INQUIRY INTO THE IMPERIAL RUSSIAN  
MILITARY EXPERIENCE, 1701-1917

by

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A MASTER'S REPORT

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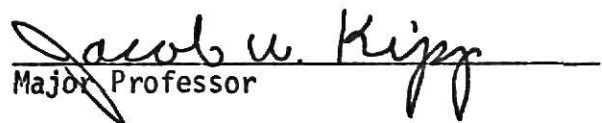
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J. N. F.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Dilemma of 1917

The mutiny of the Petrograd garrison on 10 March 1917 marked the death of the Imperial Russian Army, long a historical anomaly. The professional soldier, having reviewed the events of those last years, cannot comprehend how such a military organization could change its loyalties during a major war. Historical studies of those last years further divides a military tradition between great captains, glorious battles and campaigns, and a history of suspicion, distrust, exploitation, and fear. Such are the poles around which the Russian military tradition has struggled for its existence and ultimate survival.

Between February and October 1917, the disintegration within the Imperial Army spread like an epidemic. Millions of men--desperate for leadership and information and suffering from acute shortages of food, supplies, and the sinews of war--surrendered to the enemy or deserted to return to the interior. The military hierarchy faced a crisis on two fronts--the battlefield and the political uncertainty behind the lines. In spite of the aim of the revolutionary forces to destroy the old army, the army at the front collapsed last. Units on the eastern and southern fronts maintained some semblance of military order and discipline until

their soldiers became convinced they were forgotten men or cannon fodder.

The Petrograd garrison, comprised of elite guard units, has usually attracted the greatest study of an army in decay. In actuality, the two regiments normally stationed in Petrograd were at the front and had been there during most of the war. Each regiment had a replacement battalion in Petrograd to receive, train, and process new recruits before shipping them to the parent unit. The acute shortage of officers and cadre in Petrograd resulted in untrained and poorly supervised soldiers who later participated in the riots. In reality, the trainees were soldiers in name only, and to them duty in Petrograd represented a means of avoiding the front.<sup>1</sup> They were mentally and politically unprepared for the chaos of the revolution. When placed at the front, they were militarily unprepared to face combat. When called upon to quell the workers, they refused to suppress the rioters. Guard officers, ordered from the front to Petrograd to aid the authorities, failed to regain control of the situation in Petrograd.<sup>2</sup>

The officer corps has represented the most crucial element. In a discussion of the October Revolution and the officers' role, one historian described the officers as a totally confused group and

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<sup>1</sup>A. M. Nikolaieff, "The February Revolution and the Russian Army," Russian Review 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1946):17-25.

<sup>2</sup>Allan Weldman, "The February Revolution in the Russian Army," Soviet Studies 22, No. 1 (July 1970):3-23.