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of sullen-faced generals. To make matters worse, Brusilov at once caused grave offence by failing to receive a group of senior officers, who had come to the station to welcome him, and, in a gesture of democracy, turning instead to shake the hands of the private soldiers. The first soldiers were so confused — it was customary for the generals to salute them — that they dropped their rifles on grasped them clumsily in their left arm whilst shaking hands with their new Commander-in-Chief.³

Unlike most of the senior commanders, Brusilov believed in working together with the soldiers' democratic organs. As he saw it, the restoration of the army's morale and the launching of a new offensive could only be achieved in partnership with them. Such optimism in the democratic order contrasted starkly with the scepticism of General Alexeev, the previous Commander-in-Chief, who had so far been doubtful that a successful offensive could be launched with the armed forces in their present revolutionary state. But then Brusilov had always been convinced that God had chosen him to lead Russia's armies to victory. 'Despite all the difficulties,' he wrote to his brother shortly after his arrival at Mogilev, 'I never despair because I know that God has placed this burden on my shoulders and that the fate of the Fatherland lies in His hands. I have a deep faith, as deep as my faith in God Himself, that we shall be victorious in this titanic struggle.'⁴

Ever since the Inter-Allied Conference at Chantilly in November 1915, Russia had been under growing pressure from her Allies to launch a new offensive on the Eastern Front. The Entente leaders wanted 1917 to be the year of final victory, and it was assumed that a combined offensive in the east and the west would be enough to defeat the Central Powers. The legitimacy of the Provisional Government among the Western Powers — and the financial support which it gained from them — rested largely on its declared intention to fulfil this obligation to the Allies. Yet, at the same time, the revolution had increased the already considerable doubts about Russia's fighting capacity. At a meeting of his Front commanders on 18 March Alexeev dismissed the French demand for a new offensive in the spring: the roads were still covered in ice; horses and fodder were in short supply; the reserve units were falling apart; military discipline was breaking down; and the Soviet, which controlled all the essential levers of power, was still reluctant to support anything beyond a purely defensive strategy. Most of the commanders agreed with him that it was impossible to launch a new offensive before June or even July. Brusilov was the only one to support the idea of a spring offensive. In a telegram to the meeting he claimed that his soldiers were eager to fight. It was such an extraordinarily optimistic statement — and no doubt largely the product of his own wishful thinking — that Alexeev asked the Quartermaster-General to check the telegram's authenticity. 'What luck it would be', he scribbled at the bottom of the cable, 'if reality were to justify

these hopes.' Coming as it did from the key South-Western Front, where any attack would have to be launched, Brusilov's message certainly helped to bring the cautious Alexeev around to the idea of an earlier offensive during May. He outlined his reasons to Guchkov on 30 March:

If we fail to go on the attack, we will not escape having to fight but will simply condemn ourselves to fighting at a time and place convenient to the enemy. And if we fail to co-operate with our allies, we cannot expect them to come to our aid when we need it. Disorder in the army will have a no less detrimental effect on defence than it will on offence. *Even if we are not fully confident of success, we should go on the offensive. Results of unsuccessful defence are worse than those of unsuccessful offence...* The faster we throw our troops into action the sooner their passion for politics will cool. General Brusilov based his support on these considerations... *It can be said that the less steady the troops, the less successful defence is likely to be; hence the more desirable it is to undertake active operations."*

It was a terrible gamble. There was no guarantee that the risks of attack would be less than those of defence; and even less reason to suppose, as Alexeev and Brusilov had done, that the fighting spirit of the troops could be galvanized by launching an offensive. With hindsight it is clear that the military and political leaders of the Provisional Government were deluded by their own optimism. They grossly underestimated the likely costs of a new offensive. Alexeev, for one, predicted that the Russian losses would be in the region of 6,000 men; but the actual number turned out to be just short of 400,000, and the number of deserters perhaps even greater. This was a huge human price to pay for a piece of wishful thinking. Politically, the costs were even higher. For there is no doubt that the launching — let alone the failure — of the offensive led directly to the summer crisis which culminated in the downfall of the Provisional Government and the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. No doubt the military leaders had assumed that by launching an early offensive they could pre-empt a German attack, which their intelligence had misinformed them was set to take place in the summer. But the Germans had in fact been committed for some time to a 'peace offensive' in the east so that they could release troops for transfer to the west. A defensive strategy thus made much more sense, given the weakness of Russia's army and its rear. But by June, when the offensive was launched, the Russian leaders had become obsessed with the idea of attack — the offensive had come to symbolize the 'national spirit' of the revolution — and they were blind to the possibility that it might end in catastrophe.

More than anything else, the summer offensive swung the soldiers to the Bolsheviks, the only major party which stood uncompromisingly for an