

On the Threshold of Revolution

Leon Trotsky
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The WSWS is publishing new translations of Leon Trotsky's writings from February-March 1917. In many cases, these articles are now in English for the first time.

*This article was published in New York in the newspaper Novy mir (New World) on March 13, 1917. An English translation appeared as "On the Eve of a Revolution" in the 1918 edition of Trotsky's *Our Revolution*, edited and translated by M. J. Olgin. Below is a new translation. (Translator: Fred Williams; Copyright: WSWS)*

The streets of Petrograd have once again begun speaking the language of 1905. Just as then, during the Russo-Japanese War, the workers are demanding bread, peace and freedom. Just as then, the street cars are not moving and the newspapers are not published. The workers are letting steam out of the steam-engines, abandoning their work benches, and going out onto the streets. The government is sending out its Cossacks. And once again, as in 1905, there are only two forces that are visible on the streets of the capital: revolutionary workers and Tsarist troops.

The movement erupted due to a shortage of bread. This, of course, is not an accidental reason. In all warring countries, a shortage of food supplies is the most immediate, the most acute, cause of discontent and outrage among the masses. The entire madness of war is revealed to them most clearly of all from this standpoint: it is impossible to produce the means for living because it is necessary to create the weapons of death.

Nevertheless, attempts of the semi-official Anglo-Russian telegraph agencies to reduce everything to a temporary shortage of bread and to snowdrifts is one of the most absurd applications of the politics of the ostrich, which hides its head in the sand as soon as danger approaches. Snowdrifts, which temporarily impede the arrival of food supplies, are not the reason

why workers are shutting down the factories, street cars and print shops; nor do they explain why the workers go onto the streets to confront the Cossacks.

People have a short memory, and many ? even in our own ranks ? have managed to forget that the present war found Russia in a state of powerful revolutionary ferment. After the terrible counter-revolutionary stupor of 1908-1911, the Russian proletariat managed to heal its wounds during two to three years of industrial upsurge; then the shooting of striking miners on the Lena River in April 1912 once again awakened the revolutionary energy of the Russian working-class masses. A strike wave unfolded. In the last year before the war, the wave of economic and political strikes reached heights that had been seen only in 1905. In the summer of 1914, when the French President Poincaré came to Petersburg (presumably for negotiations with the Tsar about how to save the small and weak nations), the Russian proletariat was in a state of extreme revolutionary tension, and the president of the French Republic could see with his own eyes in the capital of his friend, the Tsar, the first barricades of the Second Russian Revolution.

The war cut short the revolutionary upsurge. The same thing was repeated that had happened ten years before, during the Russo-Japanese War. After the tumultuous strike movements of 1903, we observed an almost complete political lull in the country during the first year of the war (1904): The Petersburg workers needed twelve months at that time to get their bearings in the war and to take to the streets with their own demands and protests. This happened on the Ninth of January, 1905, when, one could say, our first revolution officially began.

The present war is immeasurably more grandiose than the Russo-Japanese War. Having mobilized millions of soldiers for "defense of the Fatherland," the Tsarist government has not only disrupted the ranks of the

proletariat, but has placed in the minds of its advanced layers new questions of immense importance. What caused the war? Must the proletariat take upon itself the “defense of the fatherland”? What should the tactics of the working class be at a time of war?

Meanwhile, Tsarism, and the upper layers of the nobility and the capitalists connected with it, have completely revealed their true nature during the war: The nature of criminal predators, blinded by boundless greed and paralyzed by their own lack of talent. The predatory appetites of the ruling clique grew to the same extent as the masses were able to see its complete inability to deal with the most important tasks of warfare, industry and food supplies that had arisen because of the war. At the same time, the suffering of the masses accumulated, grew, and became more acute ? the inevitable misery of the war, multiplied by the criminal anarchy of “Rasputin” Tsarism.

In the broadest layers of workers, who perhaps had never before been reached by a word of revolutionary agitation, a profound bitterness toward the rulers had been accumulating under the influence of the war’s events. Meanwhile, in the advanced layer of the working class, a process of critically reworking the new events has been taking place. The socialist proletariat of Russia has straightened itself out after the blow which had been delivered by the nationalist fall of the most influential parts of the International, and has understood that the new epoch summons us not to softening, but to sharpening, the revolutionary struggle. The present events in Petrograd and Moscow are the result of all this internal preparatory work.

A disorganized, compromised, disjointed government at the top. An utterly shattered army. Discontent, uncertainty and fear among the propertied classes. Profound bitterness in the lower classes of the people. A proletariat that has grown in numbers and been tempered in the fire of events. All this gives us the right to say that we are witnessing the beginning of the Second Russian Revolution. Let us hope that many of us will be its participants.

Novy mir, 13 March 1917.



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