

This week in the Russian Revolution

March 6-12: February Revolution erupts in Petrograd

6 March 2017

The eruption of the February Revolution in Petrograd finds the two greatest figures of Russian Marxism—Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky—in exile. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, exiled from Russia since 1900, is in Zurich, Switzerland. Trotsky, the leading figure of the 1905 Russian Revolution, for which he was imprisoned and then exiled, is now living in the Bronx, New York, and writing for the New York Russian emigré newspaper Novy Mir, after having been driven out of France and Spain. Both Lenin and Trotsky, along with scores of other political exiles, follow events in Russia closely, anxiously awaiting their chance to return.

Petrograd, March 7 (February 22, O.S.): Lock-out of Putilov workers

As the Duma reopens, some 30,000 workers at the Putilov factory are locked out by management. The police block an attempted demonstration by the Putilov workers. The lock-out inflames tensions in the city. During the strike, groups of Putilov workers had contacted two Duma deputies, Nikolai Chkheidze and Alexander Kerensky. In a meeting with Kerensky, the workers warn that the strike might trigger a major political movement and that “something very serious might happen.”

The workers at the Putilov factory also played a catalytic role in the Russian Revolution of 1905. That year, a demonstration by Putilov factory workers, joined by thousands of other workers under the leadership of Father Gapon, was violently broken up by the police, killing and wounding thousands in events that came to be called “Bloody Sunday.”

*The clip above is from *Tsar to Lenin*, available for purchase at *Mehring Books*.*

Petrograd, March 8 (February 23, O.S.): Bread riots sweep Russian capital

On International Women’s Day, disturbances that break out among lines of women waiting for bread in the cold, touch off massive demonstrations calling for the overthrow of the monarchy and an end to the war. Some 90,000 workers go on strike, although both the Menshevik and Bolshevik organizations oppose calling for a strike.

Trotsky was later to remark: “Thus the fact is that the February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organisations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat—the women

textile workers, among them no doubt many soldiers’ wives. The overgrown breadlines had provided the last stimulus.”

New York, March 8: Debs and Trotsky together at Cooper Union

Eugene Debs, the leading figure of American socialism, invites Trotsky to join him before a mass anti-war audience at Cooper Union in New York. During his brief stay in New York, Trotsky comes into open conflict with the reformist leader of socialism in New York, Morris Hillquit, who is seeking to adapt the Socialist Party to a pro-war position. Debs supports Trotsky.

“Speaking for myself,” Debs thunders to the Cooper Union audience, 57 years and one week after Lincoln delivered his famous “Cooper Union” speech in the same venue, “I shall absolutely refuse to go to war for any capitalist government on this earth. I have made my choice. I would ... rather be lined up against a wall and shot for treason to Wall Street than live as a traitor to the working class.”

Trotsky later writes, in *My Life*, of “the quenchless inner flame” of Debs’ socialism. “Whenever we met, he embraced and kissed me.” Debs was a “sincere revolutionary.” Not Hillquit, who Trotsky describes as “a Babbitt of Babbitts ... the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists.”

Petrograd, March 9 (February 24, O.S.): General strike begins

Over 214,000 workers at 224 factories participate in the strike. Mass meetings at some of the city’s major squares draw crowds of hundreds of thousands of people in the afternoon. The mayor, Alexander Balk, reports to the commander of the Petrograd military district, Sergey Khabalov, that the police are not capable of “stopping the movement and gathering of the people.” About two dozen policemen are beaten up. Tsar Nikolai II and his family are still in the military headquarters in Mogilev where they spent most of the war. As Trotsky would later pointedly write in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: “The dynasty fell by shaking, like rotten fruit, before the revolution even had time to approach its first problems.”

New York, March 10 (February 25, O. S.): J.P. Morgan receives \$41 million in British gold

The British government sends \$41 million in gold bullion to J.P. Morgan Chase & Company from Canada, the largest shipment of gold in a day. Twenty-five million dollars' worth of the gold is deposited at the New York Assay office, and the remainder is sent to the Philadelphia mint.

The shipment, which serves as collateral for US war credits, dramatizes the dependence of the Allies on US support—and the growing need for Washington to realize an Allied victory in order to recuperate its investments. At prevailing reserve requirement rates, the \$41 million can facilitate \$200 million in war loans to the British. With each new tranche, the center of world finance shifts from the City of London to Wall Street.

Petrograd, March 10: Strikes and protests spread

By now, the number of strikes has risen to about 305,000 workers from 421 factories. Dozens of mass demonstrations take place in the city center. Slogans include: “Down with the government!” “Down with the war,” “Bread, peace, freedom!” and “Long live the republic!” The demonstrations also attract broad layers of the intelligentsia and artisans. High school students join the strikes. Workers have prepared themselves for violent confrontations with the police by arming themselves with knives, crude weapons and pieces of metal. Some demonstrators are killed as police shoot into the crowds. In a first sign of revolutionary turmoil spreading to the army, some Cossacks that are employed against the demonstrators start to fraternize with them.

When Tsar Nikolai II learns of the revolution in the evening, he demands that General Khabalov immediately put an end to the uprising in the capital. This same night, the police begin mass arrests of socialist politicians, including five members of the Bolsheviks' Petrograd Committee.

The Vyborg Regional Committee of the Bolshevik Party, located in the stronghold of the Bolsheviks' influence in Petrograd, assumes de facto leadership of the party's activities in the capital.

Petrograd, March 11 (February 26, O.S.): Russian government launches violent crackdown

The workers cannot strike on a Sunday, but they continue to hold mass demonstrations. The government launches a bloody crackdown on the revolutionary movement. Police use heavy gunfire to break up crowds, often shooting from rooftops or high windows. In one of the most violent incidents of that day, military guards kill some 40 demonstrators at the Palace Square, wounding 40 more. Nevertheless, the government cannot get the movement under control. There are increasing reports of soldiers deserting the army and joining the demonstrators. In the evening, the Tsar resolves to have the work of the Duma discontinued indefinitely.

Beijing, March 11: China severs ties with Germany

The Chinese parliament votes 158 to 37 in the Senate and 331 to 87 in the House to break all diplomatic ties with the German and Austro-Hungarian governments. The move is part of the attempt by the nationalist government of Prime Minister Tuan Chi-jiui to tack between the rival

imperialist powers in World War I. It presages direct Chinese entry into the conflict on the side of the Allies.

China has maintained a posture of neutrality since war broke out in 1914. Its turn away from Germany is motivated in part by a desire to be rid of German concessions in Tianjin and Hankou and Berlin's share of indemnities being extracted from China over the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century. Chinese leaders also hope that the move will prompt the Allies to ease their own demands for indemnities and their stranglehold over the economy. However, the US government, which has placed pressure on China to rupture ties with Berlin, responds by signing secret agreements with Japan guaranteeing Tokyo's concessions and financial interests in China.

The vote prompts a political crisis, with opposition from President Li Yuan-hung and others to direct participation in the war. Sun Yat-Sen, who played a leading role in the 1911 revolution, and has developed financial and political ties with the German government, warns of the anti-imperialist sentiment of the Chinese masses. “The Chinese people may not be able to distinguish between foreigners of different nationalities and if the simple and honest people are taught to kill Teutons, they might be led to slaughter all white foreigners in the country.”

Baghdad, March 11: Ancient capital falls to British

The Ottoman Empire's forces abandon Baghdad after a successful British drive on the ancient Arab capital makes its further defense untenable. Ottoman forces under Khalil Pasha retreat further north toward Kirkuk and Mosul, at the doorstep of the Anatolian peninsula. The Ottoman Empire has ruled the region of the Middle East that includes Baghdad, Basra, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine since the 16th century.

Entering the city at the head of an army of some 50,000, heavily comprised of colonial soldiers conscripted into the Indian Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stanley Maude proclaims, “Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.”

A central factor in the conflict that gave rise to World War I is Germany's growing influence in the region, reflected in its projected Baghdad-Berlin rail line. British and French imperialism, moreover, have concluded a secret agreement dividing up the Middle Eastern portion of the Ottoman Empire as spoils of war—London will take Baghdad, Basra and Palestine; Paris will receive Lebanon and Syria. The Russian Empire has assented to the agreement in return for Istanbul, the Turkish straits and Armenia. For breaking its alliance with Germany and joining the Allies, Italy has been promised southeastern Anatolia and its islands.

Mexico City, March 11: Carranza elected president of Mexico

The first election after the Mexican Revolution with universal manhood suffrage results in the victory of the Constitutionalist Army leader Venustiano Carranza, a northern landowner. The election of the nationalist Carranza, who opposed the right-wing Huerta government out of fear that the revolution could turn against the landed classes, deepens a process of political consolidation and prepares the way for the crushing of the peasant armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

Carranza pledges to carry out key measures of the Constitution enacted in January 1917 in defiance of US interests. Article 27 (outlining limited land redistribution among peasants and communal *ejidos* and

nationalization of key mineral resources such as oil) and Article 123 (calling for labor protections and social benefits) threaten American capitalist property holdings, particularly companies like Doheny Petroleum and Guggenheim Smelting and Refining.

As US President Wilson pushes for entry into the war, he seizes upon the interception of the Zimmermann Telegram between Germany and Mexico to both ramp up war hysteria domestically and to bend Carranza's embattled government to the will of US financial interests. US occupation forces, under General Pershing, have only recently abandoned their occupation of northern Mexico in a failed bid to crush Villa.

Petrograd, March 12 (February 27, O.S.): Soviet formed; armed insurrection spreads

In a panicked telegram to the Tsar, Mikhail Rodzianko, the head of the Duma, writes: "The government is completely incapable of suppressing the unrest. No hope can be placed on the forces of garrison. The reserve battalions of the guard regiments are engaged in an insurrection. Officers are being killed. ... A civil war has begun and continues to heat up..." In obvious despair, Rodzianko urges the Tsar to not dismantle the Duma. The Tsar dismisses the warnings of the "fat-bellied Rodzianko," as he called him.

After a failed mutiny in another regiment the day earlier, the armed insurrection in the army begins in the evening of that day in the training detachment of the Volynsky Guard Regiment. The mutinies quickly spread to other regiments. Many regiments, recruited largely from poor peasants and workers, had been in conversation with the demonstrators and strikers in the previous days and share their desire to end the war. Trotsky commented on the relationship between the workers and the army in these days with the following words, "The molecular interpenetration of the army with the people was going on continuously. The workers watched the temperature of the army and instantly sensed its approach to the critical mark. Exactly this was what gave such unconquerable force to the assault of the masses, confident of victory."

Petrograd is placed under martial law. However, as Trotsky later observed, "They did not even succeed in pasting up the declaration of martial law through the city: the burgomaster, Balka, could find neither paste nor brushes. Nothing would stick together for those functionaries any longer; they already belonged to the kingdom of shades."

Concerned leaders of the Duma form the Duma Committee and try to establish control over military units that had not yet mutinied.

At 9:00 in the evening, a group of some 250 workers, soldiers and intellectuals create the Petrograd Soviet at the Tauride Palace. An Executive Committee is established and the Menshevik Nikolay Chkheidze is elected Chairman, reflecting the dominance of Mensheviks particularly in the early months of the Petrograd Soviet's existence.

Washington, March 12: Gompers, AFL, pledge support for war effort

After an all-night session, the heads of the American Federation of Labor and railroad unions, with a combined membership of some 3 million workers, unanimously pledge their support "to our country in every field of activity" in the event the US should "be drawn into the maelstrom of the European conflict." The resolution stops short of a no-strike pledge, instead suggesting that unrest can be avoided by inviting the AFL into collaboration with corporations and the government.

"Government must recognize the organized labor movement as the agency through which it must co-operate with wage earners," the resolution declares.

Gompers, in declaring his fealty to the cause of "national defense" in imperialist war, is following in the footsteps of all the labor movements of Europe. He has already been invited by the Wilson administration onto the newly-created Council of National Defense to help make ready for war on the American working class, where anti-militarism is overwhelming:

"Opposition to the military was deeply ingrained, emotional, a part of its folklore, and based on historical experiences," historian Simeon Larson writes. "The military were not impartial representatives of all the people but an instrument in the employ of big business to be used for strikebreaking purposes. Memories of the industrial battles of the past, of the union men and women killed by the military, of the Ludlows and the Calumets, were constantly rekindled in the union press as a reminder to the working man of the dangers of America rearmed."

Also this week: Gance's *Mater Dolorosa* opens in Paris

French director Abel Gance (*J'Accuse, Napoleon*) releases *Mater Dolorosa*. The psychological melodrama follows the story of neglected wife Manon Berliac (Emmy Lynn), who finds love in the arms of her husband's brother. The drama is carried forward by the chiaroscuro cinematography of Gance's collaborator, Léonce-Henri Burel. Released to great success as *The Torture of Silence* in the US, a nude scene and subtitles are censored or altered.

French film theorist Jean Mitry writes that *Mater Dolorosa* "surprises, astonishes, by means of lighting effects, the knowing use of light and shadow to intensify dramatic scenes, the intimate fidelity of the decors, singling out particular details, and a thousand unusual qualities for a French film. In fact it was the most successful French film of the year."



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