

This week in the Russian Revolution

March 13-19: Tsar Nicholas abdicates**13 March 2017**

For three centuries, the Romanov Dynasty ruled Russia and its vast empire. In 1613, when the Romanovs assumed power in Moscow, the House of Stuart ruled in England and the Capetian Dynasty lorded over France. The Romanovs, beneficiaries of the cultural and economic backwardness of Russia, long outlived these European rivals, which fell before the muskets of the English Civil War and beneath the guillotines of the French Revolution. They survived Napoleon's armies, palace intrigues and assassinations. They mercilessly stamped out all revolutionary threats, their armies drowning in blood the Revolutions of 1848 in eastern Europe, and their Cossacks and Black Hundreds unleashing savage repression on all opposition within the empire, as well as against Russia's Jews.

The Romanovs condemned to the gallows scores of revolutionaries, including Lenin's older brother Aleksandr Ilyich Ulyanov, and sent to Siberia and foreign exile many thousands more, among them Lenin, Trotsky and Georgi Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism. In this way Tsar Nicholas II inherited the world's largest army and an empire that covers one-sixth of the world's land mass. But this seemingly timeless and powerful dynasty, the House of Romanov, will not survive this week in 1917.

This is a clip from the documentary Tsar to Lenin showing the Tsar's despotism being overthrown in the February Revolution of 1917. The film can be purchased at Mehring Books.

Petrograd, March 13 (Feb. 28, O.S.): Petrograd Soviet and Duma Committee begin negotiations over establishment of a Provisional Government

The real power in Petrograd now lies with the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies. It issues a call to the population of Petrograd and Russia demanding the formation of a Constituent Assembly. "The old regime must be decisively overthrown and give place to the rule of the people. In this lies the salvation of Russia," the Soviet states. "For the successful completion of the struggle in the interest of democracy, the people must create their own organs of power."

Anxious to maintain bourgeois order in the midst of revolutionary upheaval, Menshevik leaders of the Soviet and liberals from the Duma Committee begin frenzied negotiations over a new government. The Menshevik M. I. Skobelev, a member of both the Duma and the Soviet, later described the prevailing mood of confusion in these circles: "...events were developing so incredibly that we could not have a clear view of the further success of the revolution. We were running around during these three days, carried by events. Therefore, we didn't think it was worth putting up a real fight over the question of regency, or causing a rupture. We couldn't see the whole extent of the revolution ourselves, and didn't know whether we were in control of Petrograd."

Petrograd, March 14 (March 1, O.S.): The Petrograd Soviet issues Order No. 1

Shortly after constituting itself, the Duma Committee attempts to get the soldiers in Petrograd to return to their regiments and submit again to military discipline. This attempt outrages the rebelling soldiers, who demand that the Duma Committee issue an order reforming the military. When this request is refused, according to one account, soldiers declare, "Then we will write it ourselves!"

At the demand of soldiers, the Petrograd Soviet issues "Order No. 1," which Trotsky described as "the single worthy document of the February revolution." Illustrating the phenomenon of "dual power," the Petrograd Soviet asserts the authority to overrule the decisions of the Duma Committee. Issued as an "order," and not simply a resolution, the Petrograd Soviet instructs soldiers not to obey any orders from the Duma Committee that contradict those of the Soviet. Also, in all political matters, soldiers are told to follow the instructions of the Soviet exclusively.

The order calls on soldiers and sailors to elect committees for each military regiment and to seize control of all arms and weapons. Officers are strictly denied access to any weapons. Finally, in a manifestation of the newfound dignity of the masses engaged in revolution, the use of the disrespectful informal form of "you" (Russian, "ti") by military superiors when addressing their subordinates is abolished, as is the expectation that officers would be called "Your Excellency" and saluted when troops are off-duty.

Trotsky notes that the "audacious order became the chief argument of the bourgeoisie against the Soviet," as it was blamed for being the main hindrance to the defeat of the German armies. According to historian Rex Wade, Order No. 1 "proved to be one of the most important documents of the revolution. It set in motion a vast upheaval in military relationships, which in turn had enormous implications for political power in the following months and for the fate of the Russian army."

Petrograd, March 15 (March 2, O.S.): Nicholas abdicates; Provisional Government formed

Tsar Nicholas II abdicates, handing the throne to Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich, who is "to govern in union and harmony with the representatives of the people on such principles as they see fit to establish."

The telegraph announcing the Tsar's abdication declares: "Revolution in Petrograd! The Tsar has abdicated! The people and the army demand peace!" It further reports the formation of a Provisional Government, the arrest of government ministers by the revolutionaries, and that "30,000

soldiers from the capital's garrisons have gone over to the side of the revolution."

The Duma Committee and the Menshevik leaders of the Soviet announce the composition of the Provisional Government. Though the workers hold the power in Petrograd, most of the new ministers come from the bourgeois liberal Kadet Party. Prince Lvov is declared Prime Minister. The Provisional Government declares that it will work according to the principles of freedom of speech and the press, the right to strike, universal suffrage, and the maintenance of strict military discipline.

Zürich, March 15 (March 2, O.S.): Lenin learns of the Revolution

"Haven't you heard the news," Moisei Bronski asks Lenin in the morning, having bounded up the exile's stairs at his residence on 14 Spiegelgasse in Zürich, Switzerland. "There is revolution in Russia." Lenin sets off with Bronski searching for details. "It's staggering," Lenin writes later in the day. "If the Germans aren't lying, it has happened."

The next day Lenin instructs Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, then in Norway, to write instructions to the party in Petrograd: "Our tactics—complete distrust. No support for the Provisional Government. Distrust Kerensky above all. Arm the proletariat as the only guarantee." Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife and comrade, later recalled, "From the very first minutes when the news arrived of the February Revolution Ilyich was eager to get to Russia."

Two days later, on March 17, Lenin writes his *Draft Theses on the Revolution*. Although the information available to him is very limited, he nevertheless carves out the central issues facing the working class following the overthrow of the Tsar:

The new government cannot give the peoples of Russia (and the nations tied to us by the war) either peace, bread, or full freedom. The working class must therefore continue its fight for socialism and peace, utilising for this purpose the new situation and explaining it as widely as possible among the masses. The new government cannot give the people peace, because it represents the capitalists and landlords and because it is tied to the English and French capitalists by treaties and financial commitments... Only a workers' government that relies, first, on the overwhelming majority of the peasant population, the farm labourers and poor peasants, and, second, on an alliance with the revolutionary workers of all countries in the war, can give the people peace, bread and full freedom.

New York, March 15 (March 2, O.S.): Trotsky learns of the Revolution

Trotsky learns of the abdication of the Tsar on Thursday, March 15, in the offices of the Russian émigré newspaper *Novy Mir* at St. Mark's Place in New York. According to Kenneth D. Ackerman, his "first reaction was to commandeer the telephone" and call Natalya, his wife and comrade. Natalya celebrates with their child Sergei, who "jumped to his feet and danced on the bed." The comrades, along with thousands of others, begin to plan their return. "We were anxious to leave by the first boat," Trotsky later recalled. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are raised in the American working class to send the exiles back.

Much like Lenin, Trotsky sees the overthrow of the Tsar as only the beginning of the revolution. In his article for *Novy Mir* from March 16, he writes: "...it is necessary to liquidate not only tsarism, but the war as well. The second wave of the revolution is sweeping over the heads of the Rodziankos and Miliukovs, who are worried about restoring order and compromising with the monarchy. From its own depths, the revolution will advance its own power—the revolutionary organ of the people marching to victory. Both the main battles and the main victims lie ahead. And only then will a full and genuine victory follow." Trotsky tells the *New York Times* that the new provisional government "does not represent the interests or aims of the revolutionists" and that it will be "short lived."

"All that week, Trotsky carried the same message of incomplete revolution through a blizzard of newspaper columns and speeches," Ackerman writes. He addresses crowds numbering in the thousands, starting at Beethoven Hall on March 16. A rally of over 2,000 at Lennox Casino, a few days later, hears Trotsky speak in Russian, and others in English, German and Finnish. The latter gathering is attended by an agent of the British MI1c intelligence service, and a former member of the Tsarist Okhrana secret police, Casimir Pilenas, there to monitor Trotsky—and if possible prevent his return to Russia.

Amsterdam and Berlin, March 13: Unrest in Germany grows

The Dutch newspaper *Telegraaf* reports that mutinies among German soldiers near Namur and Huy have resulted in mass arrests so that "prisons in those towns are crowded to four and five times their normal capacity." In the city of Barmen, in North Rhine-Westphalia, the chief of police is wounded in a food riot by women throwing rocks.

In this and the following week of March 1917, a wave of strikes, usually lasting about a day, spreads in Germany's industrial regions and Berlin, over the opposition of the trade union leaders. February had seen strikes of some 40,000 workers at Krupp's arms plant in Essen and 75,000 miners in North Rhine Westphalia. Repeatedly, the military is deployed against the strikers to force them back to work.

For the working class but also broad layers of the middle class, the winter of 1916-1917 has brought a catastrophic worsening of living conditions, with bad harvests in the fall followed by extreme cold in the winter. Since the end of 1916, staple food is available only with food ration cards. According to official statistics, the average daily calorie intake in March drops to only 1,200 calories per day, as compared to 3,300 calories per day in peace times.

The staggering social inequality has become the subject of everyday conversations in queues and at the workplace. A police informant who works in Hamburg among women working in war time food kitchens, reports:

Everything is reserved for the rich, for the property owners. As soon as it comes to also making sacrifices, these ladies and gentlemen do not want to be the brothers and sisters of the working class anymore. The nice talk about 'holding out' only goes for the working class, the ruling class has already sufficiently provided for itself with its moneybag.

According to an American informant, the industrial working class in Germany

[h]as become sullen, dissatisfied with the government, almost rebellious. While the middle class remains intensely patriotic, parading before the casual observer a unified and determined Germany, fatigue of war is making alarming strides among the working people. A great many of these humble people want peace at any price... They have hungered, and grieved, and overworked for many months, with conditions steadily growing worse and with each promise of peace fading into an indefinite prospect of endurance.

Petrograd, March 16 (March 3, O.S.): Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich of Russia refuses the throne

In the early hours of March 16 (March 3, O.S.), Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, the brother of the abdicated Tsar Nicholas II, meets with the leaders of the Duma and the new Provisional Government. When the frightened Grand Duke learns that they will not protect his life as emperor, he refuses the throne. After three centuries of brutal and oppressive rule, the Romanov dynasty comes to an end.

By now, soviets of workers and soldiers have been formed in all major Russian cities. A regime of dual power has been established. Although the Provisional Government is officially in power, workers often only respond to decrees issued by Petrograd and local Soviets and decisions of their factory committees. Soldiers frequently refuse to carry out government decrees that they do not support politically. Alexander Guchkov, the new minister of war, later tells a conference of army commanders: "We do not have authority, but only the appearance of authority; the real power lies with the Soviet."

Kiev, March 17 (N.S.) (March 4, O.S.): Central Rada formed

The Central Rada (Council) is formed in Kiev at the initiative of the Society of Ukrainian Progressionists, and with the support of various Ukrainian social democratic organizations, including the Mensheviks and the Jewish Labor Bund, as well as the Ukrainian Social Revolutionaries. Mykhaylo Hrushevsky, Ukraine's leading national historian, intellectual and politician, is elected Chairman of the Rada a few days later. One of the central slogans by the Rada is: "Long live autonomous Ukraine in a Federated Russia."

As in the rest of the Empire, aptly described by Lenin as a "prison of peoples," the overthrow of the Tsar in Ukraine serves as a catalyst for the striving of the oppressed peoples for national liberation. The Ukrainians, made up for the most part of peasants, were the largest among the oppressed nationalities in the Russian Empire, comprising about 22 percent of its total population.

Petrograd, March 18 (N.S.) (March 5, O.S.): US ambassador in Russia calls for formal recognition of Provisional Government

While the Petrograd Soviet issues a decree calling for the arrest of the Tsarist family and a confiscation of all of its property, the US ambassador David R. Francis sends a telegram to Washington, urging the US government to recognize the Provisional Government immediately.

Elaborating on the considerations behind his move, Francis writes in his memoirs:

It should be borne in mind that at the time of this recognition our country was still neutral as we did not enter the war until fifteen days later. This recognition undoubtedly had a powerful influence in placing America in a position to enter the war backed by a practically unanimous public opinion. There can be no doubt that there would have been serious opposition to our allying ourselves with an absolute monarchy to make war no matter in what cause.

Trotsky on "Who Led the February Insurrection?"

In his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky would later write in the chapter, "Who Led the February Revolution?"

The mystic doctrine of spontaneousness explains nothing. In order correctly to appraise the situation and determine the moment for a blow at the enemy, it was necessary that the masses or their guiding layers should make their examination of historical events and have their criteria for estimating them. In other words, it was necessary that there should be not masses in the abstract, but masses of Petrograd workers and Russian workers in general, who had passed through the revolution of 1905, through the Moscow insurrection of December 1905, shattered against the Semenovskiy regiment of the Guard. It was necessary that throughout this mass should be scattered workers who had thought over the experience of 1905, criticised the constitutional illusions of the liberals and Mensheviks, assimilated the perspectives of the revolution, meditated hundreds of times about the question of the army, watched attentively what was going on in its midst—workers capable of making revolutionary inferences from what they observed and communicating them to others. And finally, it was necessary that there should be in the troops of the garrison itself progressive soldiers, seized, or at least touched, in the past by revolutionary propaganda.

In every factory, in each guild, in each company, in each tavern, in the military hospital, at the transfer stations, even in the depopulated villages, the molecular work of revolutionary thought was in progress. Everywhere were to be found the interpreters of events, chiefly from among the workers, from whom one inquired, 'What's the news?' and from whom one awaited the needed words. These leaders had often been left to themselves, had nourished themselves upon fragments of revolutionary generalisations arriving in their hands by various routes, had studied out by themselves between the lines of the liberal papers what they needed. Their class instinct was refined by a political criterion, and though they did not think all their ideas through to the end, nevertheless their thought ceaselessly and stubbornly worked its way in a single direction. Elements of experience, criticism, initiative, self-sacrifice, seeped down through the mass and created, invisibly to a superficial glance but no less decisively, an inner mechanics of the revolutionary movement as a conscious process....

To the question, Who led the February revolution? we can then answer definitely enough: Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin. But we must here

immediately add: This leadership proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution.

Also this week: March 15 Einstein Publishes “On the Quantum Theory of Radiation”

In the new issue of *Physikalische Zeitung* (*Physics Newspaper*), Vol. 18. No. 6, Einstein publishes his “Zur Quantentheorie der Strahlung” (The Quantum Theory of Radiation).

Until this paper, it is assumed that the fundamental interactions of radiation with matter are twofold: matter can absorb radiation with a certain probability, entering a more energetic, “excited” state, or matter in an excited state can emit radiation with a certain probability. This, it is assumed, completely describes the physics involved. Einstein realizes that a detailed working out of the physics leaves a mathematical imbalance that can be resolved by adding an additional concept called “stimulated emission,” in which radiation passing matter in an excited state has some probability of stimulating emission of additional radiation attuned to that passing by.

It seems at the time merely a matter of bookkeeping, but 36 years later, the use of stimulated emission to amplify radiation produces the MASER (Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation), and 7 years after that, the LASER (Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation). The 1964 Nobel Prize in physics would go to a trio of scientists who transform Einstein's theoretical modification into the tools that are now a critical part of 21st century technology.

Also this week: March 15, New York- Caruso in *Rigoletto* at Metropolitan Opera

Legendary Italian tenor Enrico Caruso gives a matinee performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto* to a capacity audience at the Metropolitan Opera. *The New York Times* comments, “Verdi's tragedy on Victor Hugo's ‘*Le roi s'amuse*’... touched nearly enough on yesterday's actual news of European uprisings and dethronings to be uncommonly interesting.”



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