

This week in the Russian Revolution

March 20-26: Dual Power in Russia

20 March 2017

In the vacuum left by the abrupt and ignominious collapse of the “filthy and blood-stained cart of the Romanov monarchy,” to use Lenin’s words, a precarious configuration of “dual power” emerged in Petrograd. Two political centers of gravity coalesced around competing social forces within the February upheavals. On the one hand, there was the Provisional Government, a hasty arrangement of liberal democrats, reformists and populists, the authority of which was immediately recognized by the foreign imperialist powers. On the other hand, there was the Petrograd Soviet, consisting of elected deputies from factories and military regiments, which enjoyed mass support, especially among the poorest sections of society. While the Provisional Government favored a continuation of the war and the maintenance of capitalist privileges, the Petrograd Soviet became a magnet for popular demands for peace and radical social change. Outside of these bodies, the forces of reaction—the established church, the aristocracy, the old tsarist bureaucracy, landlords, and military elite—had been dealt a blow, but victory was far from assured.

Differences emerged within the Bolshevik Party as Kamenev and Stalin, returning from exile, sought to adapt the party line to the Provisional Government—to the alarm of much of the party’s rank and file. Meanwhile, Lenin began transmitting his prescient Letters From Afar, in which he warned that the new bourgeois government could not be trusted and would ultimately side with the reactionaries against the working class. He declared: “He who says that the workers must support the new government in the interests of the struggle against tsarist reaction. .. is a traitor to the workers, a traitor to the cause of the proletariat, to the cause of peace and freedom.”

Hand-written manuscript of Lenin’s Second Letter from Afar

While still in exile in Switzerland, Lenin writes the first of his four seminal “Letters from Afar.” In them, Lenin develops his analysis of the February Revolution, explaining that it is the result of a peculiar confluence of divergent political and social interests.

That the revolution succeeded so quickly and—seemingly, at the first superficial glance—so radically, is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged*, and in a strikingly “harmonious” manner. Namely, the conspiracy of the Anglo-French imperialists, who impelled Milyukov, Guchkov and Co. to seize power *for the purpose of continuing the imperialist war*, for the purpose of conducting the war still more ferociously and obstinately, for the purpose of *slaughtering fresh*

millions of Russian workers and peasants in order that the Guchkovs might obtain Constantinople, the French capitalists Syria, the British capitalists Mesopotamia, and so on. This on the one hand. On the other, there was a profound proletarian and mass popular movement of a revolutionary character (a movement of the entire poorest section of the population of town and country) for bread, for peace, for real freedom.

With the temporary convergence of these essentially hostile interests, the current stage of the revolution is marked by its transitional character and the phenomenon of dual power—the bourgeois Provisional Government, which is committed to continuing the war and safeguarding private property, on the one hand, and the Soviet, on the other hand, which Lenin describes as the “embryo of a workers’ government.”

Lenin strongly warns against any support for the bourgeois Provisional Government. Instead, Russian workers should look to their class brothers and sisters in the other belligerent countries. They should fight for “a democratic republic and complete victory of the peasantry over the landlords, instead of the Guchkov-Milyukov semi-monarchy, and then to socialism, which alone can give the war-weary people *peace, bread and freedom*.”

Berlin, March 20: Workers elect Marxist Franz Mehring as deputy to the Prussian State Parliament

By-elections are held in Berlin and Potsdam for a successor of Karl Liebknecht as deputy in the Prussian State Parliament and in the Reichstag. The by-elections were scheduled because Karl Liebknecht had been deprived of his mandates by a military court. He was sent for four years into prison, where he lived under severe conditions, for having organized and addressed an anti-war demonstration on May 1, 1916 on Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, under the slogans: “Down with the War! Down with the Government!” On the day of his trial on June 28, 1916, 55,000 metal workers went on strike to demand his release.

Liebknecht had called to put his co-fighter, Franz Mehring, on the ballot so that he could take his seat in the parliament and stand against the candidates of the pro-war Social Democratic Party (SPD), the liberal Progressive Party and others. Together with Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who are at this time both imprisoned, Franz Mehring heads the Marxist tendency International within the SPD, also known as the Spartacus group, named after its regular publication, the *Spartakusbrieife* (Spartacus Letters).

From the very beginning of World War I, this group conducted a principled and courageous struggle against the line of the SPD leadership under Philipp Scheidemann, Friedrich Ebert and the trade-union leader

Carl Legien, which has supported the imperial government and its war effort. The Spartacus group fights for a revolutionary program to mobilize the proletarian masses to overthrow the imperialist governments to end the war and establish socialism.

On the basis of this program, Franz Mehring wins 341 electoral votes in the 11th election district of Berlin. By contrast, the pro-war candidate of the SPD receives only 48 votes, and the candidate of the bourgeois liberal Progressive Party wins only 44. Nevertheless, to receive a seat in the Reichstag, the SPD and the liberal Progressive Party join forces and, by this maneuver, win against Franz Mehring in the more rural election district of Potsdam-Havelland.

The election result in Berlin indicates growing opposition to the war among class-conscious, socialist-minded workers in the industrial centers of Germany. They clearly feel encouraged by the revolutionary events in Russia. A police spy, who mingled with the women in the queues in front of grocery stores in Hamburg, reports:

Events in Russia seem to have left their impression on the masses. On several places opinions were voiced like: "We only have to do it [as the workers did] in Russia, then it soon will become different [here] as well."

London, March 20: Imperial war cabinet meets

Leaders of the United Kingdom, for the first time at a war cabinet, are joined by the Dominions of the British Empire (Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa), as well as representatives from the colonial administration in India, to discuss the progress of the war. Explaining the need for such a meeting in December 1916, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George told Britain's House of Commons, "We feel that the time has come when the Dominions ought to be more formally consulted as to the progress and course of the war, as to the steps that ought to be taken to secure victory, and as to the best methods in garnering in the fruits of their efforts as well as of our own."

The imperial war cabinet has been a longstanding demand of the Dominion governments. Britain's acceptance of the proposal reflects the growing strength of the capitalist class in the Dominions, and a weakening of British imperialism. Nonetheless, the British government retains a dominant position in policy-making, maintaining its own war cabinet meeting where decisions concerning British war aims are made separately. Meetings of the imperial war cabinet will continue until early May, before being revived again in 1918 in Paris as the war draws to a close.

Washington, March 22 (March 9, O.S.): US formally recognizes the Provisional Government

At a formal ceremony, US ambassador to the Russian Empire, David Francis, grants American recognition to the new Provisional Government, the first nation to do so. He is received by the Provisional Government Council of Ministers, headed by Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov.

In two telegram dispatches to Washington, DC the same day, Francis reports that Miliukov welcomes "the moral effect" American recognition will have on Russia. "Workmen returning to work, tramways operating," Francis writes.

Petrograd, March 23 (March 10, O.S.): Introduction of the eight-hour day

The Soviet and the Society of Factory and Works' Owners agree on the introduction of the eight-hour work day. Thus, they legitimized what had de facto already been established in numerous plants, including the Putilov, the Metal, the Cable and the New Lessner works.

Since the very inception of the labor movement, the demand for a shortened work day played a central role in working class struggles in Russia. In 1896, a shorter working day, which back then often lasted well over 14 hours, was the main demand put forward in the strike of some 30,000 textile workers in St. Petersburg. According to historian Allan Wildman, in advancing the demand for a 10-hour work day, the Petersburg workers had been influenced by the pamphlet "Rabochii den" (Working Day). This pamphlet was issued and distributed widely in the first half of 1896 by the social democratic group *Soiuz bor'by za osvobozhdenie rabochego klassa* (Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class), which was led by the young Lenin. Shaken by the strike, in 1897, the autocracy felt compelled to introduce the first-ever restriction of the working day, officially limiting it to 11.5 hours. In the revolution of 1905, the eight-hour work day became one of the main rallying slogans of the revolutionary masses, but the demand remained unfulfilled.

Following the February Revolution in 1917, it was the factory committees, which mushroomed throughout the country after the overthrow of the Tsar, that took the lead in the struggle for the eight-hour day. In Petrograd, the introduction of the eight-hour day leads to a diminution of the average working day from 10.2 hours to 8.4 hours. However, the eight-hour day is not legally binding to all employers and at small workshops and non-factory industries, where the average working day continues to exceed 10 hours. Overtime work, too, remains widespread after the revolution, since the factory committees, which are still dominated by Mensheviks and SRs, agree to overtime in order to guarantee supplies to the front for the war effort.

Paris, London, and Rome, March 24 (March 11, O.S.): Allies recognize the Provisional Government

After the recognition of the Provisional Government by Washington, Paris, London and Rome now follow suit, simultaneously recognizing the Provisional Government. Their move confirms Lenin's analysis from his first "Letter from Afar," in which he emphasized that British and French imperialism had conspired with leading Russian liberal politicians to replace the Tsarist regime by a bourgeois government, better capable of conducting the war. The Allies are desperate for Russia to maintain the Eastern Front, drawing German and Austrian forces away from the fronts in the West and the Alps.

British Ambassador George Buchanan later wires London to express concern that the Provisional Government will not deal ruthlessly enough with the Soviet. He says, of discussions with Prince Georgy Lvov, head of the Provisional Government:

Lvov does not favour the idea of taking strong measures at present, either against the Soviet or the Socialist propaganda in the army. On my telling him that the Government would never be masters of the situation so long as they allowed themselves to be dictated to by a rival organization, he said that the Soviet would

die a natural death, that the present agitation in the army would pass, and that the army would then be in a better position to help the Allies to win the war than it would have been under the old regime.

Right-wing US socialists call for armament, endorse Wilson

US preparation for entry into the European war begins to split the American Socialist Party into opposing factions. A left wing, led by longstanding leader Eugene Debs, opposes the war under all circumstances. The party machinery, however, is controlled by a reformist element led by Morris Hillquit, which, while mouthing anti-war rhetoric, is adapting itself to national patriotism.

This is not enough for the right wing, which, in two resolutions signed by prominent socialists, demands military preparedness and political support for Wilson. The signatories include: novelist Upton Sinclair; millionaire philanthropist James Graham Stokes and his activist wife Rose Pastor Stokes; Charmian London, widow of novelist Jack London; author William English Walling; journalist Charles Edward Russell; poet and playwright George Sterling; feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Petrograd, March 25 (March 12, O.S.): Lev Kamenev and Joseph Stalin return from exile

Lev Kamenev and Joseph Stalin, both members of the Bolshevik Central Committee throughout 1917, return to Petrograd from their exile and soon assume editorial responsibilities at the Bolshevik central newspaper, *Pravda* (the *Truth*). In this capacity, they strongly adapt to the Menshevik two-stage conception of the Russian Revolution, according to which the overthrow of the tsar ushers in a prolonged, bourgeois democratic phase of the revolution. Thus, in its first issue after the overthrow of the tsar, *Pravda* declares: "The fundamental problem is to establish a democratic republic."

Just like the Mensheviks, they call for support of the Provisional Government in continuing the war against Germany "in defense of the revolution." Their line reflects what is at this time a dominant mood in significant sections of the Bolshevik leadership in Russia. Thus, the Bolshevik Alexander Shliapnikov later recalled: "We agreed with the Mensheviks that we were passing through the period of the breakdown of feudal relations, and that in their place would appear all kinds of 'freedoms' proper to bourgeois relations." Trotsky commented in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: "The fear to go beyond the boundaries of a democratic revolution dictated a policy of waiting, of accommodation, and of actual retreat before the Compromisers."

This line is opposed, however, not only by Lenin and Trotsky, but also by the influential Vyborg District Committee in St. Petersburg and other local party organizations. The following weeks and months become a period of bitter inner-party struggle over the strategy and perspective of the Bolshevik Party in the revolution.

New York, March 26 (March 13, O.S.): American socialists bid farewell to Trotsky

More than 800 socialists attend a farewell celebration for Leon Trotsky at Harlem River Casino on 127th Street. Nearly \$300 is collected for Trotsky to carry back to Petrograd to assist the revolution.

In barely 10 weeks in the US, "Trotsky built up a large and enthusiastic personal following," according to early American communist Ludwig Lore. "He had created a movement, a political faction too powerful to ignore and ready to fight," in the words of biographer Kenneth D. Ackerman. "Now, with the Russian Revolution, he emerged as a unifying figure on the far left."

Trotsky speaks for two hours, delivering his remarks in Russian, and then repeating them in German. His remarks are "powerful and electrifying," in the words of anarchist Emma Goldman, who is present.

Trotsky expresses regret at having to leave the US, but, he explains, "when revolution calls, revolutionaries follow." A New York Police Department spy captures Trotsky's remarks as follows: "I am going back to Russia to overthrow the Provisional Government ... I want you people here to overthrow the damned rotten capitalistic Government of this country."



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