

This week in the Russian Revolution

March 27-April 2: Trotsky departs for Petrograd

27 March 2017

Waving goodbye to cheering crowds in New York, and parting with promises to bring down the Provisional Government and stop the war, Trotsky sets sail for Russia via Oslo aboard a Norwegian liner. Lenin remains stranded in Switzerland, where he is feverishly working to shape Bolshevik policy in Petrograd from afar.

In Petrograd itself, the Bolshevik Party is in turmoil. In Lenin's absence, a right-wing minority of senior party figures led by Muranov, Kamenev and Stalin are attempting to reorient the party on a pro-government, pro-war basis. After Kamenev publishes an article supporting the continued prosecution of the war by the Provisional Government, the lower ranks of the Bolshevik Party respond furiously with calls for his expulsion.

The imperialist slaughter throughout Europe grinds on, and millions have already perished. American imperialism is now poised to intervene, mobilizing hundreds of thousands more men to hurl into the bloodbath. All eyes are turned to the old tsarist capital, where the only hope for peace has begun to glimmer.

New York, March 27 (March 14, O.S.): Trotsky sets sail for Europe

Trotsky, along with his wife and comrade Natalia and their two sons, Sergei and Lyova, depart New York City aboard the Norwegian liner *Kristianiafjord*, destined for Oslo. From there, Trotsky intends to travel by train across Sweden and Finland to Petrograd.

Hundreds of supporters arrive to see Trotsky off at the pier. "Rain fell in torrents," remembered German-American socialist Ludwig Lore. "When Trotsky arrived he was lifted on the shoulders of his admirers to the top of a huge packing box and with his beaming face and happy smile he bade a last farewell."

But Trotsky has been monitored for weeks by agents of the British intelligence service, who fear that his return to Russia will precipitate a new revolution and remove Russia from the war. In dispatches to London, the British agents promote the lie that Trotsky is a recipient of German money and part of a Jewish plot, an idea promoted by British agent Casimir Pilenas, a former member of the Tsarist Okhrana, and his associate Boris Brasol. The latter, now in New York, had prosecuted the notorious blood libel case against Jewish factory owner Menahem Mendel in Kiev in 1913. Next year, in 1918, Pilenas and Brasol will promote the English-language translation of the Tsarist anti-Semitic forgery, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

On the basis of such bogus allegations, the British military stops the *Kristianiafjord* from departing Halifax, Nova Scotia, after a scheduled stop on March 30. Trotsky and his Russian fellow travelers are interrogated by British authorities under Captain O.M. Makins. "My

relations to internal Russian politics [are] not at present under the control of the British naval police," Trotsky responds.

Germany, March 27: Government announces drastic cuts in food rations

Government authorities announce that further reductions of food rations will take effect on April 15. Bread is to be reduced to 170 grams per day, potatoes to 2,500 grams per week. In addition, adults are entitled to receive only 80 grams of butter, 250 grams of meat, 180 grams of sugar and half an egg per week. Additional allowances for youth and heavy laborers are either to be wiped out completely or to be substantially cut. However, there is not even enough food to provide for the allocated rations. Women can get hold of them, if at all, only after standing in lines for many hours.

Due to the British naval blockade, about a third of agrarian produce that had been imported before the war is now missing. In early 1917, the US stopped the clandestine trade to Germany that had been channeled through neutral states. Meanwhile, the harvests in Germany yield ever poorer results, as the chemical industry uses most of the nitrogen available for the production of ammunition, rather than fertilizer.

Along with the news about the revolutionary developments in Russia, these cuts in rations will within a few days trigger the first major mass strike movement since the beginning of the war.

Spain, March 27: UGT and CNT unions call for a general strike

The two largest unions in Spain, the General Union of Workers (UGT), aligned with the Socialist Party, and the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labor (CNT), publish a joint manifesto calling for a "general strike for an indefinite period," without a specific date. The documents from the Workers' Assembly that day protest the growing "hunger and tragedy" and demand "fundamental changes to the system that guarantee the people a minimum of dignified life conditions and the development of its emancipating activities."

Even after working 10 or more unregulated hours each day, workers' living standards have been undermined by the soaring prices for food and rent, chiefly as a result of the war in Europe. The price index more than doubled between 1913 and 1917, while salaries had only increased 25 percent. The government of Prime Minister Count of Romanones, backed

by King Alfonso XIII, is entering a deep crisis. It has sought to implement cuts in the military while fearing that troops will not be reliable in the effort to quash strikes.

By 1916, the peasantry had begun to occupy estates and burn crops in protest. Miners in Asturias and construction workers in Barcelona and rail workers nationally went on strike. The pressure from workers led the UGT and the CNT to participate in more joint actions and eventually carry out a one-day general strike on December 18, 1916, with thousands of workers protesting across the country.

Petrograd, March 28 (March 15, O.S.): Right-wing minority in the Bolshevik Party promotes defensism

A right-wing minority within the Bolsheviks' Petrograd organization—which includes Lev Kamenev, Joseph Stalin, and Matvei Muranov—takes advantage of Lenin's absence to advance a pro-war, pro-government line.

A double breach of party discipline occurs on March 28 (March 15 O.S.), with the appearance of a lead article authored by Kamenev in the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*. In addition to the article's diversion from party policy, Kamenev's name had been banned from appearing in bylines in the paper after he testified in the trial of Bolshevik Duma deputies in 1915, trying to ingratiate himself with the court.

The March 28 issue of *Pravda* states, "If the democratic forces in Germany and Austria pay no heed to our voice, then we shall defend our fatherland to the last drop of our blood."

"When one army stands opposed to another army, no policy could be more absurd than the policy of proposing that one of them should lay down arms and go home," Kamenev wrote. "The people will remain intrepidly at their post, answering bullet with bullet and shell with shell. This is beyond dispute. We must not allow any disorganization of the armed forces of the revolution."

The conduct of the Muranov-Stalin-Kamenev group provokes an uproar within the party. At a meeting of the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee in Petrograd on March 28, a leading Bolshevik from Moscow demands to know why Kamenev's name was in the paper at all. Kamenev's article is repudiated in a vote at the meeting. *Pravda's* entire editorial board is replaced.

On March 31, Kamenev convinces the Petersburg Committee of the party to adopt a policy of support for the Provisional Government. Intense turmoil within the party continues over the coming days, with rank-and-file Bolsheviks demanding the expulsion from the party of Kamenev and everyone responsible for his article.

Petrograd, March 29 (March 16 OS): Provisional Government recognizes Polish independence

The Provisional Government issues a declaration vaguely acknowledging the right of Poland to independence and calling for a "free" military alliance between an "independent Poland" and "free Russia." The partition of Poland between the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire formed a key component of the restorationist order in Europe following the French Revolution.

The Marxist movement had put the demand for Polish independence on its banner as early as 1847. In 1905, the revolution in the Russian Empire found two of its most powerful strongholds in Warsaw and Lodz, and

Rosa Luxemburg's Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland. When the Provisional Government acknowledged Polish independence, it could tap into deep-rooted sympathies among the Russian masses for the democratic strivings of the long-oppressed Polish working population.

However, the political motives of the Provisional Government, which ignored the national aspirations of virtually all other oppressed nationalities in the Empire, were not democratic. In World War I, the "Polish Question" emerged as one of the issues in the fight over control of Europe between the imperialist powers.

Poland's three partitioning powers fought on opposing sides of the barricades, turning the country into one of the war's central battlefields. The socioeconomic infrastructure of all parts of Poland was destroyed, millions were displaced, wounded or killed.

Exploiting the plight of the population in Poland, US President Woodrow Wilson issued a decree in December 1915 introducing a "day of aid" for the Polish people. In 1916, the "relief effort" for Poland became one of the main preoccupations of the US State Department. Concerned by the efforts of the US government, Germany and Austria rushed to be the first to recognize "Polish independence": In the so called "Two Emperors Manifesto" of November 1916, they recognized "an independent Kingdom of Poland." The Manifesto also provided for the formation of a Polish army that was to be put under the control of the German High Command.

Thus, the Provisional Government's declaration essentially aimed at gaining the support of the Polish elites, which had been strengthened and encouraged by the US and the German declarations, to find in them an ally against the Central Powers. It said: "The Polish state, united with Russia in a free union, will be a firm bulwark against the pressure of the central powers against Slavdom." Moreover, the nominal "independence" of Poland remained a vague prospect. It was to be decided upon by a Constituent Assembly yet to be convened in Russia.

Berlin, March 29: Centrist group asks government for peace effort

The "Social Democratic Working Group" (SAG), a faction in the Reichstag (parliament) that had been expelled from the right-wing leadership of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1916, introduces a resolution to the Reichstag "entreating" (ersucht) the imperial government of "his Majesty," Emperor Wilhelm II, to undertake a peace effort. It also "entreats" for the submission of a bill according to which future declarations of war and peace treaties would require the approval of the Reichstag. Furthermore, the resolution asks for bills to realize certain domestic reforms.

Pacifist leaders of the SAG such as Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, Paul Dittmann, Hugo Haase, and Georg Ledebour are concerned about the growing radicalization of the war-tired working masses both at home and in the trenches. Their "program of action," as they themselves call the resolution for the Reichstag, is designed to channel the opposition to the war back into a parliamentary direction and thereby prevent a revolutionary development.

Rosa Luxemburg sharply polemicizes against the group's policies in the Spartacus Letter No. 5 from May 1917: "The SAG has responded to the Russian Revolution by putting forward an entirely new 'action program,' including a long list of terribly radical requests which they want to present to the Reichstag. They've left nothing out! Virtually the entire party program has been written off and now it is to be submitted to the House ...

"So that is of the greatest importance at this hour: To issue appeals to the Reichstag?! To *this* Reichstag of the imperialist Mamluk guard! ...

"And this sickly theory of ... substituting the parliamentary 'struggle'

for the revolution is being preached to the workers at just the moment when the question of peace and the entire future of international socialism depends on the German working class finally ridding itself of the fatal infatuation of official German social democracy which has been instilled in it for decades: namely, the dogma that in Germany everything that is elsewhere won on the revolutionary path, is attainable 'on the floor of parliament' through the wagging tongues of the Reichstag deputies!"

Stockholm, March 29: Swedish prime minister resigns

Swedish Prime Minister Hjalmar Hammarskjöld tenders his resignation, resulting in the collapse of his non-party, conservative government, which was loyal to the King and in power since February 1914. Hammarskjöld pursued a policy of neutrality during the war, including a retention of trade ties with Germany. This provoked opposition from those who saw his stance as pro-German, particularly after he refused to sanction a trade deal with Britain negotiated by Marcus Wallenberg, brother of Foreign Minister Knut Wallenberg.

While the refusal of the trade deal triggers the government's collapse, it takes place under conditions of mounting social tensions. Prices for basic foodstuffs have risen by 20 percent due to the lack of imports, provoking unrest among workers, many of whom refer to Hammarskjöld's administration as the "Hungerskjöld" government. Within weeks of Hammarskjöld's departure, food riots break out in a number of cities, and in June a large crowd will gather at the Swedish parliament to protest the food crisis.

Kiel, March 31 (March 18 O.S.): 26,000 striking shipyard workers demand peace

At the largest marine shipyards in the port city of Kiel, located in the north of Germany, 26,000 workers stop work and march to the city center. Workers that head the demonstration demand immediate peace on their banners. It is the first major strike demonstration by thousands of workers that focuses on this political demand. The Deputy General Command of the IXth Army Corps, stationed in the city, comments on the protest with a mixture of anger and concern: "The wind has carried the seed of weed [from Russia] here and it has, as many definite signs indicate, already started to blossom!"

Copenhagen, March 31: Denmark hands over West Indies to US

The United States formally takes possession of the Danish West Indies for the sum of \$25 million in gold coin (\$1.4 billion in gold coin in 2017) and renames them the US Virgin Islands. The deal for the islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix is based on a treaty negotiated between the two nations in 1915-16.

The islands are acquired by the US as a means of guarding the Panama Canal and to prevent the possibility that Germany might acquire them. The sum paid for the islands is comparatively small given the vast profits US imperialism is making as arms supplier and financier of the Allies in World War I.

Also this Week: German and Russian soldiers fraternize in the trenches

The German conscript Dominik Richert describes in his memoirs the response of the soldiers at the German-Russian front to the news about the February Revolution:

The whole battalion was standing in a circle around the commander: "Soldiers," he began, "the war on this front has basically come to an end. A revolution has erupted in Russia. The Tsar is overthrown. The garrison of St. Petersburg, 30,000 men, has joined the revolutionaries." We were listening, with our mouths wide open, then were allowed to return to our quarters. We discussed all sorts of possible and impossible suppositions [...] Almost everybody was excited that life in the trenches would now soon be over.

In the last week of March, military discipline is disintegrating on both sides of the German-Russian front. Individual soldiers and entire battalions are determined that the war must now come to an end. On various occasions, Russian and German soldiers fraternize in the trenches, while a wave of desertions begins in the Russian army.

Also this week: Important exhibition of "Painter-Gravers of America" opens in New York

The first annual exhibition of the Painter-Gravers of America presents work by such distinguished figures as George Bellows, John Sloan, Childe Hassam, Edward Hopper, Albert Sterner, Jerome Myers, Anne Goldthwaite and Boardman Robinson.

The *New York Times* review notes, "One room is dedicated exclusively to the lithographs. Here George Bellows is seen in his role as social commentator. Some one has compared him to Hogarth, and he is like the great Londoner in his passion for the scenes of city life." Bellows contributed many drawings and prints to *The Masses*, the socialist journal.

One of the lithographs that draws attention is "Serbian Refugees" by the Canadian-born Robinson. Another radical, Robinson had traveled to Eastern Europe along with journalist John Reed in 1915 to see the consequences of the war. The two collaborated on *The War in Eastern Europe* (1916). Robinson subsequently lost his job with the *New York Tribune* because of his anti-war views. After *The Masses* was suppressed under the Espionage Act, Robinson went on to work on *The Liberator* and *The New Masses*, working with editor Max Eastman.

Also this week: African American composer, musician Scott Joplin dies at 49

Ragtime composer and pianist Scott Joplin died in New York City at the age of 49. He had been suffering from dementia paralytica, a result of having contracted syphilis. Though poor and living in relative obscurity at the time of his death, he left behind more than 40 original ragtime compositions, one ballet and two operas, only one of which, *Treemonisha*, survives today.

While doubts remain about its accuracy, Joplin's birthdate is frequently given as November 24, 1868. The future composer grew up in northeast Texas. His father, a farm worker and folk musician, had been born into slavery in North Carolina. His mother, a domestic worker, was born free in Kentucky.

From late adolescence through his teenage years, Joplin was mentored by German immigrant and "professor of music," Julius Weiss. Weiss provided the young Joplin with free piano lessons and classes in music theory over a five-year period. The two forged a lifelong bond.

The heavily syncopated style developed by Joplin provided American popular music with a distinct rhythmic sensibility. It became a vital ingredient in the development of jazz and blues. Joplin's work experienced a major revival in the 1970s with the appearance of an important album by pianist Joshua Rifkin, *Scott Joplin: Piano Rags* (1970).



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