

This week in the Russian Revolution

April 3-9: US declares war on Germany

3 April 2017

The workers' movement around the world is demanding an end to the imperialist carnage in Europe, but the capitalist elites are howling for more blood. The United States declares war on Germany and mobilizes hundreds of thousands of young men to use as cannon fodder. In Russia, the bourgeois Provisional Government, supported by the Mensheviks, promises to continue the war and releases a statement of war aims. There seems to be no way out of the nightmare of trenches, barbed wire, poison gas, machine guns, mud, disease and artillery barrages, which have already claimed millions of lives. Meanwhile, prices are rising and food is more and more scarce at home.

En route to Russia via Oslo, Trotsky is forcibly removed from his ship and imprisoned by British officials. Preparing to depart Switzerland for Russia, Lenin insists that the seizure of power by the working class is necessary to stop the imperialist bloodbath and achieve popular demands. Aligning himself with positions previously associated with Trotsky, Lenin states that socialism cannot be immediately achieved in the former tsarist empire alone. Instead, he understands the seizure of power by the working class in Russia as the opening move in a broader international socialist revolution. Lenin declares: "Long live the proletarian revolution that is beginning in Europe!"

Halifax, Nova Scotia, April 3: Trotsky forcibly removed from ship

After days of questioning by British officials, naval officers forcibly remove Leon Trotsky from the steamship Christianiafjord at the Canadian port of Halifax en route to Oslo, Norway. After a tip-off from a British agent to stop the ship, the British officers subjected Trotsky, his family and the other Russian passengers to a "downright cross-examination," as Trotsky would later recall in his autobiography *My Life*, even though they were in possession of all of the necessary travel documents. The officers were "asking us about our convictions, our political plans, and so forth," Trotsky continued. "I absolutely refused to enter into a discussion of such matters with them. 'You may have all the information you want as to my identity, but nothing else.' Russian politics were not yet under the control of the British naval police."

The naval officers issue an order for Trotsky, his family and five other Russians to leave the boat. Trotsky and his family refuse, arguing the order is illegal. Trotsky recalled, "Armed bluejackets pounced on us, and amid shouts of 'shame' from a large part of the passengers, carried us bodily to a naval cutter, which delivered us in Halifax under the convoy of a cruiser. While a group of sailors were holding me fast, my older boy ran to help me and struck an officer with his little fist. 'Shall I hit him again, papa?' he shouted. He was eleven then, and it was his first lesson in British democracy."

Trotsky is taken to a prisoner of war camp for Germans in Amherst, where around 850 German soldiers are being held, while his wife Natalia and two children, aged 9 and 11, are also arrested but left in Halifax. He is only informed a day later of the official reason for their detention by Colonel Morris, the camp commander, who declares, "You are dangerous to the present Russian government."

Petrograd, April 3-4 (March 21-22 O.S.): *Pravda* publishes edited version of Lenin's first "Letter from Afar"

The editorial board of *Pravda* publishes a heavily edited version of the first of Lenin's first "Letter from Afar."

The letter reflects the development of Lenin's own theoretical conception of the Russian revolution following the February upheavals. Without mentioning the Theory of Permanent Revolution by name, Lenin puts forward positions that had been historically associated with Leon Trotsky.

"Let us not harbor any illusions," Lenin writes. The antagonism between the forces of tsarist reaction and the bourgeois liberals "is not profound, it is temporary, the result solely of the present conjuncture of circumstances, of the abrupt turn of events in the imperialist war." Lenin predicts that when the Provisional Government failed to deliver on popular demands for peace and radical social change, the bourgeoisie would align with the forces of the old monarchy to suppress the poorer peasants and workers.

The Provisional Government, Lenin writes, "cannot, even if it sincerely wanted to (only infants can think that Guchkov and Lvov are sincere), cannot give the people either peace, bread, or freedom." Based on an alliance with the semi-proletarian and small-peasant population, and with the international working class, the Russian proletariat, "utilizing the peculiarities of the present transition situation, can and will proceed, first, to the achievement of 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."

In Lenin's absence, a right-wing minority led by Kamenev, Stalin, and Muranov has been using the Bolshevik newspaper to promote a pro-government, pro-war line, provoking intense turmoil within the party. The *Pravda* editorial board cuts out about 20 percent of the letter, rewriting some passages entirely. The effect of the edits was to tone down or remove criticisms of the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders and of the Provisional Government.

Washington, April 6: US declares war on Germany

Washington's declaration of war against Germany marks a turning point in US history, signaling a qualitative intensification of the violent assertion of the American ruling class's imperialist ambitions throughout the globe. Washington's ever more reckless and bloody drive for global hegemony will shape human history over the next century.

In his request for a declaration of war by Congress, President Woodrow Wilson cites the threat of German submarines to trade in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean as well as German diplomatic maneuvers with Mexico. By the time of the formal declaration of war, US capitalism has become inextricably entangled in the conflict, with US exports to the warring nations rising from \$824.8 million in 1913 to \$2.25 billion in 1917. Betraying all of his previous campaign pledges to keep the US out of the war, Wilson famously declared that the intervention of the US military was required to "make the world safe for democracy."

Trotsky had analyzed the processes underlying America's entry into the war in his article "War and the Revolution," published in *Novy Mir* on March 22:

The capitalist classes of the United States cannot stop. The war industry and its foster brother, finance capital, exert pressure on the will of the rulers, while fear of the extreme crisis pushes them from below—into the abyss of war ... the "pacifist" government of the United States is compelled to fulfill its predestined task: to draw the last great power into the bloody school of war. This fact shows us the degree to which the bourgeoisie has lost the possibility and capability of controlling events and peoples. The unbridled forces of capitalism act with automatic ruthlessness.

In a banner headline, the New York Times boasts that the US will raise a new army of 500,000 soldiers to send into the conflict. By the end of the war, the American armed forces will suffer over 116,000 dead and 204,000 wounded.

Petrograd, April 6 (March 23 O.S.): Mass funeral for revolutionary martyrs held at Mars Field

Hundreds of thousands of workers, soldiers and other residents of Petrograd march to Mars Field to honor those who were killed during the five days of the February Revolution. An estimated 800,000 pass by the martyrs' graves during the day to commemorate the more than 1,300 who died.

While the February revolution would later be mythologized as "bloodless," in reality the monarchy responded violently to the threat posed by the mass demonstrations, and would gladly have drowned the revolution in blood. The vast majority of those killed in the February revolution were demonstrators mowed down by the police, who concealed themselves in the upper floors of buildings, and by army units on February 26.

Workers carry red coffins on their shoulders, and they also bear political banners as they march. The contingent of workers from the Vyborg

district, according to Trotsky's account, stands out with many Bolshevik banners, although these continue to wave side by side with those of the Mensheviks. The marchers are met on Mars Field by the leadership of the Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky later wrote in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, "When the coffins were lowered into the grave there sounded from Peter and Paul fortress the first funeral salute, startling the innumerable masses of the people. That cannon had a new sound: our cannon, our salute."

Trotsky added, "The funeral procession—in its mood a procession triumphant with the joy of life—was a mighty concluding chord in the symphony of the five days."

Gotha, April 6-8: Founding Congress of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD)

The 143 participants of the Congress represent a membership of 100,000, most of them previous members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) who rejected the latter's policy of "party truce" (Burgfrieden) with the capitalists and the government.

The founders had not intended, much less politically prepared, the creation of the USPD. It was preceded by a national conference of all groups and tendencies within the SPD on January 7, 1917, which rejected the pro-war policies of the SPD leadership and its delegation in the Reichstag (the German parliament). One of them was the centrist Social Democratic Working Group (SAG), which did not want to create a new party, despite their proclaimed opposition to the war. However, the SPD leadership reacted to this conference within 10 days by immediately expelling all members and supporters of these groups, thus forcing them to found the USPD.

The new party includes two, fundamentally different tendencies.

The first is led by centrist politicians such as Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, Hugo Haase and Paul Dittmann, who advocate a "peace without annexations and reparations." This peace, they argue, can be achieved by exerting "pressure on the imperial government" through delegates in the Reichstag, which would be supported by protests of the working masses. This program is primarily aimed at containing the growing hatred of the working masses of the war and the government, and preventing a mobilization of the working class and its seizure of power.

The second, revolutionary tendency is led by the Spartacus League of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. They represent a minority of the delegates at the Founding Congress. Following Liebknecht's slogan, according to which "the main enemy is at home," they fight for an end to the war and an overthrow of the imperialist governments by the international working class. However, at the time of the founding Congress, both Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht have been imprisoned for numerous months. This in part explains the fact that the supporters of the Spartacus League at times advocate contradictory positions at the Congress.

Rosa Luxemburg describes the demand of the centrist USPD leaders for a "peace without annexations" as a left fig-leaf for the pro-war, social chauvinist policies of the SPD. At the end of the Congress, however, the manifesto, drafted by Karl Kautsky, is adopted with only one vote against, even though it contains precisely this pacifist "peace program."

While the Spartacus League's demand for independence within the USPD is granted, the group does not build its own firm organization, nor does it constitute itself as a faction within the USPD. The Spartacus League does not split with the USPD until after the beginning of the November Revolution in Germany in 1918.

Read more in the Historical Foundations of the German section of the ICFI.

Petrograd, April 7 (March 25, O.S.): Provisional Government establishes state monopoly on grain

In light of the continuing food crisis, the Provisional Government feels compelled to introduce a law "On the transfer of bread under the control [v rasporiashchenie] of the state." According to the law, everyone who owns bread and grain is required to report how much they own to the state. Any amount of bread and grain exceeding the allocated ration is to be transferred to the state through local food provision committees. Peasants who do not hand out their grain and bread are subject to requisitions. The measure achieves the opposite of the intended result. Angered by the law, many peasants withhold their grain supplies and bread. The food crisis—one of the primary causes for the February Revolution—deepens.

Petrograd, April 9 (March 27, O.S.): Provisional Government issues "Declaration of War Aims"

The Provisional Government issues the "Declaration of War Aims," signed by Prime Minister Lvov. The declaration shifts responsibility for the war to the Tsarist regime, while vaguely asserting that "free Russia" is not seeking to suppress other people and instead supports "a complete peace on the basis of the full self-determination of people." Thus, while avoiding the slogan of "peace without annexations and indemnities," the declaration creates the impression that the Provisional Government only pursues a defensive war.

The declaration is the result of an internal dispute between the Provisional Government and the Soviet leadership. One day after the US officially entered World War I, which greatly encouraged the Russian bourgeoisie's pursuit of the war, Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov had publicly declared that the Russian government was fighting to seize Constantinople, Armenia, Northern Persia and divide Austria and Turkey all while allegedly respecting the "right of nations to self-determination." Fearing above all that this would discredit the Provisional Government, the Menshevik Tsereteli insisted that the government issue a declaration that it was pursuing the war for defensive purposes only.

Although the declaration was, in Trotsky's words, "empty," it found an enthusiastic response not only among the Mensheviks, but also among the right-wing Bolsheviks, chief among them Stalin and Kamenev. Four days before Lenin's return to Russia, *Pravda* published an editorial stating, "The Provisional Government has clearly and definitely announced before the whole people that the aim of Russia is not the domination of other nations." Lenin, by contrast, denounces the declaration. In his article, *The War and the Provisional Government*, from April 13, he cites a statement made by Miliukov, who, soon after the declaration's publication, openly

said that it contained "not peace terms, but merely general principles" and that the "peace terms can be worked out only with the consent of our Allies". Lenin writes:

People who fan the flames of war are continuing to speak in the name of Russia. The workers and soldiers are being fed with platitudes about peace without annexations, while on the quiet a policy is being pursued which benefits only a small clique of millionaires who thrive on war. Comrades, workers and soldiers! Read this statement of Miliukov and expose it at all your meetings! Make it understood that you do not wish to die for the sake of secret conventions concluded by Tsar Nicholas II, which are still sacred to Miliukov!

Switzerland, April 8 (March 27 O.S.): Lenin pens farewell letter to Swiss workers

Before leaving Switzerland, Lenin pens a "Farewell Letter to Swiss Workers" that sets forth his conception of the Russian Revolution as the opening stage in the world socialist revolution. Lenin writes:

To the Russian proletariat has fallen the great honor of beginning the series of revolutions which the imperialist war has made an objective inevitability. But the idea that the Russian proletariat is the chosen revolutionary proletariat among the workers of the world is absolutely alien to us. We know perfectly well that the proletariat of Russia is less organized, less prepared and less class-conscious than the proletariat of other countries. It is not its special qualities, but rather the special conjuncture of historical circumstances that for a certain, perhaps very short, time has made the proletariat of Russia the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world.

Russia is a peasant country, one of the most backward of European countries. Socialism cannot triumph there directly and immediately. ... Single-handed, the Russian proletariat cannot bring the socialist revolution to a victorious conclusion. But it can give the Russian revolution a mighty sweep that would create the most favorable conditions for a socialist revolution, and would, in a sense, start it. It can facilitate the rise of a situation in which its chief, its most trustworthy and most reliable collaborator, the European and American socialist proletariat, could join the decisive battles.

London, April 5: British government imposes ban on food hoarding

An order issued by Lord Devonport, the government's Food Controller, prohibits the hoarding of any foodstuffs in homes and permits searches to be conducted of residences where such practices are suspected. The move reflects the growing shortage of food in Britain, which the government and ruling elite worry could cause social unrest.

The food crisis has been intensifying since early 1917, when Germany began its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, allowing U-boats to target merchant shipping. Coupled with a poor harvest in 1916, this

pushed up food prices, which had already increased by 61 percent between July 1914 and July 1916. Malnourishment has been spreading among poorer communities, with outbreaks of scurvy reported in Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle.

A voluntary rationing system came into effect on February 1. Devonport suggests people eat 4 pounds of bread, 2 and a half pounds of meat and three-quarter pound of sugar per week, amounting to a mere 1,300 calories per day. Later in April, the government will impose additional orders restricting the sale of cakes and pastries, the sale of certain items in tea shops and new guidelines for the production of flour.

Social tensions have been rising. Striking munitions workers in Barrow, who downed tools on March 21 over poor working conditions and forced overtime, were made to accept a government-imposed end to the labor dispute. On April 4, the government threatened to impose fines of £5 on all strikers, as well as penal servitude for life for all strike leaders.

By this time in the slaughter of World War I, a large number of writers and painters had been killed in combat, including British writer H. H. Munro (better known by the pen name Saki), British poet Rupert Brooke, American poet Alan Seeger (the uncle of Pete Seeger), French novelist Henri-Alban Fournier (better known as Alain-Fournier), Czech poet František Gellner, German painters Franz Marc and August Macke, Italian painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni and French artist and sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Dozens more writers and painters would die.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Arras, France, April 9: Battle of Arras begins on the Western Front

British and Allied troops on the Western Front launch a major offensive aimed at breaking through German defenses and taking the war out of the trenches, where it has been largely deadlocked since 1914. The operations are timed to coincide with a French offensive to be launched a week later, which the French general Nivelle boasts will end the war.

Despite initial modest gains, the offensive will turn into a horrifying bloodbath. In the course of some five weeks of fighting, from April 9 to May 16, the Battle of Arras will claim close to 160,000 British and Allied casualties and 125,000 on the German side.

One of the early successes of the battle sees Canadian troops capture Vimy Ridge, a strategic point north of Arras. However, by the end of April 12, the Canadian Corps will have suffered 10,602 casualties. Nonetheless, Canadian nationalists will later seize on this catastrophe, which did nothing to break the stalemate of trench warfare, as the moment Canada “emerged as an independent nation.”

Northern France, April 9: Two English poets killed on the same day

Two English poets are killed in fighting in northern France, less than 20 miles apart from one another. Edward Thomas, the better-known figure, dies during the first day of the bloody Battle of Arras.

R.E. Vernède perishes after being wounded by machine gun fire leading an advance near Havrincourt. Vernède had earlier been wounded during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Vernède is best known today for his *War Poems, And Other Verses* (1917).

Thomas is also remembered as a war poet, although he had enjoyed a successful career as a literary critic and only turned to poetry in 1914. The American poet Robert Frost, then living in Britain, had encouraged Thomas to write poetry, and his famed “The Road Not Taken” was apparently inspired by walks he took with Thomas and the latter’s indecisiveness.