

This week in the Russian Revolution

April 10-16: Lenin arrives at Finland Station

10 April 2017

Lenin's arrival at Finland Station in Petrograd in April 1917, 100 years ago this week, is one of the most dramatic moments in world history. Against the backdrop of hitherto unprecedented carnage and suffering, Lenin arrives in Petrograd with an unshakeable determination to orient the Bolshevik party to the perspective of international socialist revolution. This standpoint is contrary to the prevailing positions of every other political tendency, and even to those of a section of the leadership of his own party.

In the period following the February upheavals, a number of the senior Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd have wavered towards policies of adaptation to the Provisional Government and the continuation of the imperialist war. Meanwhile, Lenin's own thinking has gravitated towards positions associated with Leon Trotsky and the theory of "permanent" or "uninterrupted" international revolution. It would be no exaggeration to state that the future trajectory of human civilization itself hangs in the balance as the modestly dressed Marxist descends from the train, wearing a bowler hat and anticipating his arrest at any moment.

Zürich, April 10: Lenin on train to Petrograd

Lenin, his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and Inessa Armand, Grigori Zinoviev, Karl Radek and 27 other revolutionaries and their family members boarded the train in Zürich on April 9 to cross Germany and reach Petrograd. The train passes through Singen Offenburg, Mannheim, Frankfurt/Main, Berlin and Bergen to reach Saßnitz. The Bolshevik Karl Radek later described the trip as follows:

"Ilyich worked throughout the journey. He read, made entries in notebooks, but also concerned himself with organisational questions. ... In Frankfurt, the train stopped for a long time, and the platform was sealed off by the military. Suddenly, the cordon was broken, as German soldiers came rushing up to us. They had heard that Russian revolutionaries, who were in favour of peace, were travelling through. Each of them held a jug of beer in both hands. Excitedly they asked us whether and when peace was coming. This mood told us more about the situation than was useful for the German government."

Lenin has no other option but to travel through Germany. All internationalists have been blacklisted by the Allies (including France, Russia, Great Britain and the United States) and prevented from crossing Allied territory. The treatment of Trotsky, who was imprisoned by the British in Halifax when trying to return to Russia from New York on a Norwegian ship, serves as a warning to the revolutionaries.

Nevertheless, in the weeks and months to follow, the journey of Lenin across Germany to Russia, which had been agreed upon with the German government, becomes a central component of the propaganda by the foes of Bolshevism, who try to depict Lenin as an "agent" of the German general staff.

Politically, nothing could be further from the truth. In a joint declaration drawn up before the beginning of the journey, Lenin and other Russian émigrés declare: "The Russian internationalists who are now going to Russia in order to serve there the cause of the revolution will help us arouse the proletariat of other countries, especially of Germany and Austria, against their governments."

The German government calculates that giving passage to Lenin and other revolutionaries will foster their war aims. They seek a separate peace with Russia by all means, so as to be able to transfer the divisions fighting on the Eastern Front to the Western Front. For this purpose, they want to create the "greatest possible chaos" in Russia, so that the country will disintegrate and be forced to "beg for peace." However, contrary to the calculations of the German general staff, the October Revolution leads not only to the establishment of the first workers' state in world history, it also inspires workers and soldiers in Germany, whose revolution in November 1918 forces the German Kaiser to flee and puts an end to the involvement of Germany in World War I.

Chester, Pennsylvania, April 10: Munitions factory explosion kills 133 workers

Days after US entry into World War I, a factory explosion at a munitions plant in Eddystone, near Chester, Pennsylvania, kills 133 people. Bodies of nearly half of the victims cannot be identified and are placed in a mass grave. Most of the dead are women and girls employed in the plant's "F" building, where 18 tons of black powder was ignited by an unknown source, setting off a chain reaction that shook buildings 10 miles away. Desperate efforts to contain the resulting blaze prevent the ignition of 50 more tons of black powder stored nearby.

The factory owner immediately seeks to pin blame for the explosion on German saboteurs as a means of covering up possible negligence in regard to factory conditions. The disaster is the work of "some outside person," company president Samuel M. Vauclain tells a reporter. It is more likely caused by faulty electrical wiring in devices used in the production of shrapnel shells, according to one employee.

The plant was opened in 1916 to reap profits in the sale of weapons to the Allied powers.

Bullecourt, France, April 11: Heavy casualties in the First Battle of Bullecourt

In support of the British Arras offensive launched two days earlier, Australian soldiers launch an attack at Bullecourt with the support of

British troops. The operation has been hastily planned and proves disastrous, with more than 3,000 allied casualties on the first day and virtually no progress made.

The Australian Fourth Division attacks German lines without artillery support and the 12 tanks supposed to assist their advance break down or are destroyed before reaching enemy lines. Australian troops will be thrown into battle again at Bullecourt in early May in support of the faltering British and French offensives on the Western Front, which will result in an even bloodier fight. In the course of the two battles, there are more than 10,000 Australian casualties, prompting soldiers to refer to the town as the “blood tub.” The Second Battle of Bullecourt will claim 18,000 Allied and 11,000 German casualties. No important strategic advance will be achieved.

Rio de Janeiro, April 11: Brazil cuts diplomatic ties to Germany

The government of Venceslau Brás announces it has severed diplomatic ties with Germany, following the US declaration of war days earlier and the sinking of several Brazilian merchant vessels by German U-boats. The sinking of the freighter *Paraná* on April 5, amid a wave of anti-German propaganda, leads to attacks across Brazil on businesses and cultural organizations among the South American country’s large German immigrant population. There are also demands for the resignation of the German-born foreign minister, Lauro Müller.

World War I has altered Brazil’s economic and political relationship with the world. It entered the war an export economy, heavily dependent on coffee. The British naval blockade, followed by London’s ban on the import of coffee to free hull space for war materiel, has blocked Brazil from its European markets and augmented its economic relationship with the US. At the same time, Brazil, together with Argentina and Chile, has founded the “ABC Pact,” in part to counter growing US domination of the Western Hemisphere in the context of its intervention in the Mexican Revolution. War-born inflation has also brought forth the country’s first major organizations and strikes by its young industrial working class.

Petrograd, April 11-16 (March 29-April 3, O.S.): All-Russian Conference of Workers and Soldiers’ Soviets

Delegates meeting in Petrograd for the All-Russian Conference of Soviets—the first such conference following the overthrow of the Tsar—represent a total of 139 Soviets, six armies and 40 army units. The most important resolution is that on the war. Introduced by the Georgian Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Soviet, it supports the “declaration of war aims” issued earlier by the Provisional Government. The basic argument by Tsereteli is that now that the government is expressing the democratic interests of the masses, and rejects aggressive war aims, the war has changed its character and needs to be continued to defend the revolution. The resolution states:

In the interests of the most energetic defense of revolutionary Russia from any interference from outside, as the most decisive resistance to all attempts to prevent the further successes of the revolution, the Congress of Workers and Soldiers Deputies calls upon the democracy of Russia to mobilize all living forces of the country in all spheres of national life in order to strengthen the

front and at home.

The Bolshevik resolution, introduced by Lev Kamenev, is rejected. In the end, an overwhelming majority of 325 delegates vote for Tsereteli’s resolution. Fifty-seven delegates vote for the Bolshevik resolution introduced by Kamenev, and 20 abstain.

In another resolution, the Soviet declares its conditional support for the Provisional Government, which, as the resolution argues, “by and large” represents the interests of “Russian democracy.” The actions and decisions of the Provisional Government have to be controlled, however, the resolution declares.

With this line, the Executive Committee of the Soviet essentially seeks to continue its alliance with the Provisional Government and fosters the idea that by exerting pressure on the latter, the working masses can achieve the goals of the revolution. A third resolution calls for the immediate convening of a constituent assembly in Petrograd. Other resolutions concern workers’ rights, such as an eight-hour work day and the introduction of insurance for the unemployed, as well as the rights of soldiers.

The Bolshevik representatives at the Congress, which include Kamenev, Nogin and Sevruck, show a marked tendency to adapt to the defensist moods prevailing in the Soviet. Sevruck, who speaks on behalf of the Bolshevik organizations in a dozen Russian cities, goes so far as to publicly express his support for the war resolution of Tsereteli.

April 12 (March 30 O.S.): The Autonomous Governorate of Estonia is formed

In the former tsarist empire, ethnic Estonians were divided between two imperial administrative divisions called governorates (*guberniyas*): the Governorate of Estonia and the Governorate of Livonia. In a concession to popular demands for the national self-determination of ethnic minorities, the Provisional Government merges the two governorates into the Autonomous Governorate of Estonia on April 12. Elections to the Estonian Provincial Assembly, or *Maapäev*, by universal suffrage result in the Bolsheviks winning five of the 62 seats.

Zurich, April 14: Dadaists hold event with works by Apollinaire, Marinetti, Kandinsky, Kokoschka and others

Artists adhering to the recently formed Dadaist trend hold a Second Soiree at the Galerie Dada in Zurich, where the movement emerged in 1916. The group was disgusted by the war and the society that produced it. The artists respond with “anti-art,” work that defies conventional logic and rationality.

The soiree consists of an introduction by Tristan Tzara; performances of music by Hans Heusser and Marcel Sulzberger, played by the composers; the recitation of poems by Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jakob Van Hoddis, Albert Ehrenstein and painter Wassily Kandinsky; the reading of pieces by Futurist Filippo Marinetti and artist-critic Herwarth Walden; and the performance of a short play by Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, *Sphinx and Strawman* (1907).

One critic asserts that the “Zurich Dada soirees... were the central event in the founding of Dada as a spectacular international phenomenon,” and “have remained famous ever since in the history of the development of

European art.”

The fate of many of the artists speaks to the tragedies and traumas of the 20th century. The Frenchman Apollinaire, weakened by wounds received in World War I, will succumb to the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. The German-Jewish Van Hoddiss will die in a Nazi concentration camp. Having fled Hitler for the Soviet Union, Walden, a German, will die in a Stalinist prison in 1941. The Austrian Ehrenstein will die a pauper in New York City in 1950.

Poet Richard Huelsenbeck later commented that the Zurich police “took an interest in our carrying-on while leaving completely undisturbed a politician who was preparing a great revolution. I am referring to Lenin, who was our neighbor.”

St. Louis, Missouri, April 14: Socialist Party of America adopts internationalist resolution against war

In response to the US entry into World War I, the Socialist Party of America (SPA) held an Emergency Convention from April 7 through April 14 in St. Louis, Missouri. It was the US party’s sixth national convention since its founding in 1901 and was attended by 200 delegates from across the country, as well as several delegates from Europe.

At the opening of the convention, a committee of fifteen delegates was elected to draft a resolution on war and militarism. After several days, the committee emerged divided into three factions:

- a center majority (11 committee members) advancing an anti-war internationalist position
- a right-wing minority (one committee member) supporting the US declaration of war against Germany
- a left-wing minority (three committee members) offering significant proletarian internationalist amendments to the majority report.

Following debate and discussion, the majority report is adopted by the convention delegates, who vote 140 to 5 to 31 for the three competing statements.

Published later under the title “The Socialist Party and the War,” the majority report opens: “The Socialist Party of the United States in the present grave crisis solemnly reaffirms its allegiance to the principle of internationalism and working class solidarity the world over, and proclaims its unalterable opposition to the war just declared by the government of the United States.”

On the specific question of US war against Germany, the final draft of the resolution incorporates the following language from the left-wing minority report: “The war of the United States against Germany cannot be justified even on the plea that it is a war in defense of American rights or American ‘honor.’ Ruthless as the unrestricted submarine war policy of the German government was and is, it is not an invasion of the rights of the American people, as such, but only an interference with the opportunity of certain groups of American capitalists to coin cold profits out of the blood and sufferings of our fellow men in the warring countries of Europe.”

Subsequently, the updated majority report and the right-wing minority report were submitted to SPA members for a referendum vote. The membership overwhelmingly reaffirmed the internationalist position of the Emergency Convention in an 8-to-1 vote of 22,345 to 2,752.

Leading up to the St. Louis Emergency Convention, the SPA had been riven by internal crisis. The party had not held a national convention in more than four years and party membership had fallen by more than 30 percent since 1912. The movement lacked a Leninist-type internal party political and ideological struggle against opportunism and anti-Marxist positions. It was splitting apart under the impact of the war crisis.

Several accounts published by historians have shown that the left wing of the SPA was significantly influenced by Leon Trotsky during his brief time in New York City at the beginning of 1917. Through his writings, speeches and discussions, Trotsky opposed the pro-war, pacifist and nationalist politics that emerged within the parties of the international socialist movement during the war, including in the United States.

Within a day of his arrival in New York on January 13, Trotsky attended a meeting of a group of 20 left-wing members of the SPA and other revolutionary émigrés. Called to discuss “a program of action for the Socialists of the Left,” the meeting decided to establish a subcommittee to begin publication of a bi-monthly theoretical journal to promote the program of the Zimmerwald Left within the US. In attendance at this January meeting was Louis Boudin, the leader three months later of the left-wing faction of the war and militarism resolution committee at the Emergency Convention in St. Louis.

The journal that came out of these discussions was called *The Class Struggle* and was published from May 1917 through the founding of the Communist Party USA in 1919. Edited by Ludwig Lore, Louis Boudin and Louis Fraina, *The Class Struggle* carried regular English translations of the writings of V.I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring and other leading figures of international Marxism.

Even though he had already left New York City by the time of the April SPA Emergency Convention, the program of proletarian internationalism represented by Leon Trotsky and his theory of permanent revolution played a significant role in the orientation of the SPA left wing in regard to the world war and the February and October revolutions in Russia in 1917.

Berlin, April 15: Workers decide to go on strike

In light of new cuts in food rations coming into effect today—instead of 1,350 grams of bread per week, there will be only 450 grams—numerous factory meetings take place, especially in munitions factories. Workers decide to begin a strike the next day.

Oskar Hippe, who would later join the Trotskyist Left Opposition in Germany and at the time is working at an armament and munitions factory, writes in his memoirs:

In Berlin, the influence of the Spartacus League among both the shop stewards at the plants and the colleagues themselves was growing. Nevertheless, the leadership [of the Spartacus League] could not expect to win the majority of trade union functionaries or workers at the plant.

It was still Social Democracy and especially its left wing that exerted the greatest influence. ... Discontent was growing at the plants. The workers could no longer be appeased. The number of desertions at the front was growing. It is estimated that there were more than 30,000 deserters in Berlin.

The anti-war movement, which the Spartacus League was carrying into the factories both through oral propaganda and leaflets, and in which the USPD [Independent Social Democratic Party] also participated, was received positively by the workers. Fighting committees were built at the factories. Their first appeals to the government said: Put an end to the war, provide better food, and shorten the working time (people were working 11 hours a day). The government did not react; the trade union leadership tried to appease, but was not capable of calming down the workers. (Oskar Hippe: *und unsere Fahne ist rot* [... and red is the color

Just before the planned strike action, Richard Müller, the leader of the revolutionary shop stewards, an oppositional movement within the trade unions, is arrested and drafted into the army. Many of his comrades assume that the trade union leadership denounced him, which fans the anger of the workers even more.

Petrograd, April 16 (April 3 O.S.): Lenin arrives at the Finland Station in Petrograd

At last, locomotive 293 of the Finnish State Railway pulls into Finland Station on April 16 and Lenin appears on the platform in modest attire and wearing a bowler hat. The Bolshevik leader and his comrades are prepared for anything, and Lenin has even prepared a speech in the event he is arrested on the spot.

The Petrograd Soviet has a tradition of welcoming revolutionaries returning from exile, and grudgingly the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders of the Soviet send Lenin an official welcoming party, handing him a bouquet of red roses as he descends from the train. Lenin makes his way into the waiting room of the station and is there confronted by the Menshevik leader Nikolai Chkheidze, who nervously welcomes Lenin with a backhanded attack, invoking the slogan of “unity” in defense of the revolution—a slogan that translates into support for the Provisional Government and the war. Lenin ignores Chkheidze and waits until his oration is over.

“Thus,” Trotsky later writes, “the February revolution, garrulous and flabby and still rather stupid, greeted the man who had arrived with a resolute determination to set it straight both in thought and in will.”

When his chance comes to speak, Lenin turns his back on Chkheidze and addresses the crowd that has assembled to greet him:

“Dear Comrades, soldiers, sailors and workers! I am happy to greet in your persons the victorious Russian revolution, and greet you as the vanguard of the worldwide proletarian army. ... The piratical imperialist war is the beginning of civil war throughout Europe ... The hour is not far distant when at the call of our comrade Karl Liebknecht the peoples will turn their arms against their own capitalist exploiters ... The worldwide socialist revolution has already dawned ... Germany is seething ... Any date now the whole of European capitalism may crash. The Russian revolution accomplished by you has prepared the way and opened a new epoch. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!”

Outside, a crowd of workers, sailors and soldiers is chanting Lenin’s name. When Lenin comes into view, a detachment of soldiers presents arms with fixed bayonets and a band strikes up the *Workers’ Marsellaise*.

“I greet you without knowing yet whether or not you have believed in all the promises of the Provisional Government,” Lenin tells the crowd. “But I am convinced that when they talk to you sweetly, when they promise you a lot, they are deceiving you and the whole Russian people. The people need peace; the people need bread; the people need land. And they give you war, hunger, no bread—leave the landlords still on the land ... We must fight for the social revolution, fight to the end, until the complete victory of the proletariat. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!”

The crowd carries Lenin on their shoulders and lifts him atop an armored car positioned outside. The assembled soldiers demand another speech. It is dark, and searchlights are used to illuminate Lenin on the car. The Provisional Government has attempted to ban the use of military vehicles in demonstrations, but these injunctions are ignored by the

Bolsheviks. With an armed workers’ guard lining the streets, Lenin’s armored car proceeds through the streets in a triumphal parade. The lights of all other vehicles are dimmed except those of Lenin’s. “Those who have not lived through the revolution cannot imagine its grand solemn beauty,” Krupskaya later recalls.

The Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* reports: “In the street, standing on top of an armored car, Comrade Lenin greeted the revolutionary Russian proletariat and the revolutionary Russian army, who had succeeded not only in liberating Russia from tsarist despotism, but in starting a social revolution on an international scale, and added that the proletariat of the whole world looked with hope to the Russian proletariat’s bold steps. The whole crowd walked in a body behind the car to the Kshesinskaya mansion, where the meeting continued.”

At the Kshesinskaya mansion, behind closed doors, Lenin patiently endures the welcoming orations before launching a furious two-hour attack on those Bolshevik leaders such as Kamenev, Stalin and Muranov, who, in his absence, have wavered towards the defense of the Provisional Government and the continuation of the imperialist war. “Our party would disgrace itself for ever, kill itself politically, if it took part in such deceit,” Lenin wrote en route to Russia. “I would choose an immediate split with anyone in our party, no matter whom, rather than surrender to social patriotism.”

“The echo of the last greeting had not died away when this unusual guest let loose upon that audience a cataract of passionate thought which at times sounded almost like a lashing,” Trotsky wrote in the *History of the Russian Revolution*. “The fundamental impression made by Lenin’s speech even among those nearest to him was one of fright. All the accepted formulas, which with innumerable repetition had acquired in the course of a month a seemingly unshakeable permanence, were exploded one after another before the eyes of that audience. The short Leninist reply at the station, tossed out over the head of the startled Chkheidze, was here developed into a two hour speech addressed directly to the Petrograd cadres of Bolshevism.”

Berlin-Leipzig, April 16: Beginning of major strike wave in Germany

In Berlin, over 200,000 workers at 319 factories go on strike, protesting against insufficient food provision and the arrest of the revolutionary shop steward Richard Müller. They march through the streets in large protest demonstrations. In one leaflet, the Spartacus League writes: “The Russian working class has provided a shining example for you! Go and do what they did ... Take your destiny into your own hands!”

The strike is organized by the revolutionary shop stewards, whose core is formed by the metal workers. Karl Retzlaw, a tool grinder at Cassirer in Berlin, recalls in his memoirs that the trade union bureaucracy was doing everything possible to prevent the strike, claiming it was “against the statutes.” However, once the strike has started, the union bureaucrats immediately try to seize the leadership in order to put an end to it as quickly as possible.

Women form a disproportionate part of the strike movement, as they have not only to take care of children and the household, but also increasingly are compelled to replace the men drafted to the battlefield in the factories and perform hard labor.

In Leipzig, over 30,000 workers go on strike. They advance numerous political demands, including the formation of a workers’ council. They also call for “peace without annexations, an end to censorship, the lifting of martial law, an end to the obligation to work, the release of political prisoners and universal suffrage.” At one assembly, a worker calls upon the strikers to follow the example of the Russian workers.

Soissons and Reims, France, April 16: Nivelle Offensive launched

Along an 80 kilometer stretch of the Western Front, 19 divisions of the French army attack German positions in the Nivelle offensive. General Robert Nivelle, commander of the French army since December 1916 and the architect of the operation, has claimed that the attack will end the war in 48 hours by breaking through German defenses.

French troops are joined in their advance by 35,000 Senegalese colonial soldiers and two divisions of Russian troops, who agree only reluctantly to engage in the fighting after significant numbers are inspired by the Russian revolution to call for peace to be concluded.

The first day of battle proves disastrous for the French army, which suffers at least 40,000 casualties. Virtually no territorial gains are made. The attempt to use tanks on a mass scale is ineffectual, with 150 lost on the first day. Nivelle, convinced that a breakthrough can still be made, will continue to order advances until April 20, when the initial assault is called to a halt.

Nivelle will be removed from his position five days later. The offensive will be continued until May 9, by which time the French army will have suffered 187,000 casualties and the German army 168,000 losses.

The failure of the offensive, coming after almost three years of bitter warfare in which close to 1.5 million French soldiers have been either killed, wounded or taken prisoner, will increase discontent among the French troops, who begin to mutiny in late April.



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