

## This week in the Russian Revolution

## April 17-23: Lenin issues April Theses

17 April 2017

*One hundred years ago this week, in the midst of unprecedented devastation and growing signs of working class unrest throughout Europe, Lenin follows his return to Petrograd with an unexpected declaration of war against a section of the leadership of his own party, which is still a minority in the soviets. Trotsky later refers to Lenin's campaign inside the party, which opened with the publication of the April Theses, as the "struggle for the rearming of the Bolshevik ranks."*

*Without a fundamental change in the strategic orientation of the Bolshevik Party, accepting in essence Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution, the taking of power by the working class in October would not have been possible. And this strategic realignment would not be possible without the struggles of Lenin personally, who brings to bear a brilliant intellect, all his accumulated authority and prestige in the workers' movement, and an untiring resolve. It is difficult to identify another moment in history when the activity of a single individual will have such a significant and far-reaching impact, ensuring the victory of a revolution that will touch the lives of generations to come all around the world.*

*In an entry into his diary dated March 25, 1935, Trotsky writes: "Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place—on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring—of this I have not the slightest doubt! If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, I doubt whether I could have managed to overcome the resistance of the Bolshevik leaders. The struggle with 'Trotskyism' (i.e., with the proletarian revolution) would have commenced in May, 1917, and the outcome of the revolution would have been in question. But I repeat, granted the presence of Lenin the October Revolution would have been victorious anyway."*

**Petrograd, April 17 (April 4, O.S.): Lenin's April Theses published**

Immediately after his return to Petrograd, Lenin launches a determined struggle inside the Bolshevik Party for its strategic realignment along the lines of the struggle for a proletarian revolution against the bourgeois Provisional Government.

In the weeks between the February upheavals and Lenin's return, the right wing of the Bolshevik Party, including senior figures in Petrograd such as Kamenev and Stalin, has adapted the party's line to the Provisional Government and the continuation of the war, in the name of "defending the revolution."

In the April Theses, Lenin unambiguously characterizes the war as "predatory" and "imperialist," declaring his support instead for fraternization among the warring armies. On the question of the Provisional Government, Lenin demands "no support" for the pro-war, pro-capitalist government produced by the February Revolution, which

must be displaced by a workers' state.

He writes that Bolsheviks should not demand a parliamentary republic, which would be "a retrograde step" in light of fact that soviets have already formed. Instead, Lenin insists that the demand should be for "a republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Labourers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom," which he characterizes as "the *only possible* form of revolutionary government." This conception will be reflected in the iconic slogan: "All power to the soviets!"

Lenin proposes renaming the party and the formation of a new "revolutionary international" to replace the Second International, which had been disgraced by its support for the war. Lenin openly embraces the fact that the party may be, for the moment, a "small minority" in the Petrograd Soviet, aligning itself against "a bloc of *all* the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements," including the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. From members of the party's right wing, some of whom have gone so far as to contemplate a merger with the Mensheviks, Lenin's theses are met with accusations of "Trotskyism."

In the period since 1905, the Bolshevik Party has advanced the slogan of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry." This slogan occupies an intermediate position between Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution and the Menshevik conception of the Russian Revolution as essentially bourgeois. Plekhanov and the Mensheviks denounce Lenin for implying that it is possible to have a bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, Trotsky agrees with Lenin that the bourgeoisie in Russia cannot play a revolutionary role, but has criticized Lenin's position for implying that, to preserve its alliance with the peasantry, the working class would restrain itself from carrying out socialist measures, keeping the revolution within bourgeois-democratic parameters. Further, Trotsky observes, "In bourgeois Russia of the twentieth century, there could not even be talk of the seizure of power by the revolutionary peasantry."

With the April Theses, much to the shock of many leading Bolsheviks, Lenin abandons the conception of the "democratic dictatorship" of the two revolutionary classes in Russia, instead adopting the assessment, previously identified with Trotsky, that what is necessary is the seizure of power by the Russian working class, relying on the extension of the revolution by the working class internationally.

To accomplish this strategic realignment, Lenin is able to appeal for support to lower tiers of the leadership and a party rank-and-file steeped in the proletarian internationalist traditions for which Lenin had consistently fought over the preceding decades, including in the struggles against the Mensheviks, and to defend Marxism from every form of opportunism and revisionism. Trotsky later writes:

"In his April theses which seemed so paradoxical, Lenin was relying against the old formula upon the living tradition of the party—its irreconcilable attitude to the ruling classes and its

hostility to all half-way measures—whereas the “old Bolsheviks” were opposing a still fresh although already outdated memory to the concrete development of the class struggle. But Lenin’s support was too strong, prepared by the whole historic struggle of the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks....

“Lenin was not an accidental element in the historic development but a product of the whole past of Russian history. He was embedded in it with deepest roots. Along with the vanguard of the workers, he had lived through their struggle in the course of the preceding quarter century. ... Lenin did not oppose the party from outside, but was himself its most complete expression. In educating it he had educated himself in it. His divergence from the ruling circles of the Bolsheviks meant the struggle of the future of the party against its past. If Lenin had not been artificially separated from the party by the conditions of emigration and war, the external mechanics of the crisis would not have been so dramatic, and would not have overshadowed to such a degree the inner continuity of the party’s development.”

#### Further Reading:

David North, “Toward a reconsideration of Trotsky’s legacy and his place in the history of the 20th century.”

Leon Trotsky, “Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution.”

### **London, April 17: British newspapers publish propaganda story about German corpse factory**

The *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, two newspapers owned by Lord Northcliffe, publish lurid accounts of the alleged existence of a “Corpse Utilisation Factory” (Kadaververwertungsanstalt) behind German lines. According to the propaganda piece, the German army rendered down the dead bodies of soldiers to produce fat, which is then used to make soap or candles. The tale has been circulating as rumor for some time, but this is the first time British newspapers have carried the story.

The origin of the story was a Belgian newspaper, *La Belgique*, published in the Netherlands. The account, which the *Times* published under the headline, “The Germans and their dead,” was fabricated from a brief story in a German newspaper describing the smell of a factory where animal corpses were rendered down to extract fats and other properties. Amplifying the attempt to whip up anti-German sentiment, *Punch*, the popular satirical magazine, carried a cartoon on April 25 entitled, “Cannon fodder and after,” which depicted the alleged factory.

The story is only the latest in a stream of anti-German propaganda in the British press, which sought to incite popular opinion against Germany as early as 1914 with exaggerated accounts of the German army’s atrocities in Belgium.

### **Recklinghausen-Berlin, April 17: Strike wave in Germany continues**

Over 500 miners at Harpener pit in Recklinghausen, a city in the northwest of Germany, go on strike. Strikes also take place at other factories in the Ruhr area and in industrial cities throughout the country, including in Magdeburg, Halle, Hamburg, Kiel, Nürnberg, Barmen, Leipzig and Braunschweig. In order to suppress future strikes, martial law is declared in Magdeburg. The military puts up posters throughout the

city, threatening strike participants with severe penalties and forced conscription. In Berlin, the leading Social Democrats Gustav Bauer and Philipp Scheidemann urge the Secretary of State Karl Helfferich and General Lieutenant Wilhelm Groener to welcome a delegation from striking factories in Leipzig. To receive the delegation would cost nothing, they argue, but not to receive them could easily lead to a situation getting out of control and leading to “senseless bloodshed.”

The trade union leaders Alwin Körsten, Alfred Cohen and Wilhelm Siering in Berlin are received by the military high command, which promises them that the arrested revolutionary shop steward Richard Müller will be released. The trade union leaders threaten the workers that they would lose all gained conquests if they do not end the strike and abandon the political demands raised at the assembly in Leipzig, which included a peace without annexations, an end to martial law and universal suffrage. The strike committee abandons these demands and decides on April 18 that the workers should go back to work. Upon return from Berlin, the delegation from Leipzig agrees to this decision. This is supposed to end the strike, but it does not.

At numerous factories in Berlin, more workers meetings take place on April 17 which are attended by members of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) and the revolutionary Spartacus League. They call for a continuation of the strike, based on the demands advanced in Leipzig. According to various estimates, between 25,000 and 50,000 workers condemn the betrayal of the trade union leadership and declare their readiness to continue the strike.

Workers at the Berlin factory of Knorr-Bremse raise and focus on the demand for the release of the leading German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht. They elect Pal Scholze, a revolutionary shop steward, as the head of their workers’ council, who immediately calls upon all other workers to follow their example.

One day later, the military cracks down on the strike movement, arresting numerous strike leaders, including Scholze. The factories which had been part of the strike are placed under military rule.

### **Gaza, April 19: Second Battle of Gaza ends with heavy casualties**

The second attempt in three weeks by British, Australian and New Zealand troops, moving northeast from Egypt, to capture Gaza, in the Turkish-controlled territory of Palestine, ends catastrophically. At the end of three days of battle, the official casualty number on the Allied side is more than 6,400, with unofficial figures as high as 14,000.

The first battle, fought on March 26, and the second, which began on April 17, have been characterized by incompetence on the part of the commanding staff. Following the loss of 4,000 men in the first battle, compared to 2,400 Turkish casualties, General Archibald Murray reported to London that the British forces had been victorious, so as to safeguard his own position. Believing their troops to be on the verge of a breakthrough, London ordered Murray to attempt a second assault in quick succession.

After his troops make slow gains during the first two days, commanding officer Charles Dobell decides to launch a frontal assault on the well-defended Turkish positions. This results in heavy losses, with the 54th (East Anglian) Division suffering 2,800 casualties alone. The attempt to use tanks in the dry desert fails.

In the aftermath of the second defeat, Murray and Dobell would be relieved of their posts and sent home to England. The allied armies are forced to call on reinforcements from Italy and France before renewing their offensive in the fall.

## **Kreuznach, April 23: German army leadership outlines extensive plans for annexations**

The German Supreme Army Command (OHL) and German Reich Chancellor Theodor von Bethmann-Hollweg meet in Kreuznach for a conference to discuss Germany's war aims. The February Revolution encourages hopes in the German army leadership that a separate peace with Russia can be achieved.

The Kreuznach program thus outlines the most far-reaching annexationist plans, which are based on the assumption that Germany can dictate peace conditions on both the Eastern and Western Front. In the East, Kurland and Lithuania (roughly corresponding to what is today the Baltics), and a substantial part of Poland are to be annexed. The German army wants to keep the Kingdom of Romania as big as possible, while placing it under de facto German domination.

As compensation, Russia should get Eastern Galicia and parts of Moldova. Austro-Hungary is supposed to get Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. In the West, the Supreme Army Command reconfirms the earlier annexationist plans by Germany which include the establishment of Belgium as a vassal state, the annexation of Luxemburg and Longwy-Briey and de facto control over Alsace-Lorraine.

The head of the German navy cabinet, General Alfred Müller, later writes that the annexationist plans discussed at the conference testified to a "complete lack of measurement in both East and West." The historian George W.F. Hallgarten characterizes the conference result as an "orgy of Ludendorff's militarism" and as the sum total of all anarchic economic interests of German industry and the banks, "which the dilettante on the imperial throne made his own."

## **Berlin, April 23: German trade unions and government prepare for future crackdowns as war escalates**

Following the end of the strike, both the General Commission of the German trade unions and government seek to prepare for future movements of the working class.

The General Commission of the trade unions issues a circular letter to the factory managers, saying: "Germany is not Russia. The toying around with revolution by the working society [meaning the revolutionary shop stewards] and the Spartacus group only threaten the German labor movement, especially its trade union organizations and the defense force of the country. So far, we were able to prevent the relevant sides from resorting to sharper measures. However, if the working group will continue to succeed in unleashing wild strikes, then such measures will be inevitable."

On April 25, Reich Chancellor Theodor von Bethmann-Hollweg issues a decree according to which any call for or attempt at a strike at factories that are important for the war effort, as well as attempts to prevent strikebreakers doing their work, should be regarded as assistance to a hostile power or as intentional damage to the armament of Germany. Those accused of these "crimes" are to be charged with high treason.

## **Lenin "absolutely without supporters," according to Menshevik leader**

discounting the significance of Lenin's return to Russia. After stating that Lenin demands "immediate and unconditional conclusion of peace, civil war against the army and Government, and vengeance against Kerenski [sic] and Cheidze [sic], whom he describes as traitors to the cause of international socialism," the report paraphrases the Menshevik Chkheidze as smugly stating that "the Russian Revolution would absorb Lenine [sic]." If, on the other hand "he remained outside, it would be no great loss," as he is "left absolutely without supporters."

"The sharp repulse given to this firebrand was a healthy sign of the growth of practical sense in the Socialist wing," the correspondent of the British newspaper writes.



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