

This week in the Russian Revolution

April 24-30: Trotsky released from British prison camp in Canada

24 April 2017

Trotsky is released from a British prison camp in Canada, where he had fraternized continuously with the German soldiers held there. The soldiers send him off with salutations to the Russian revolution and denunciations of the German monarchy, while an improvised band plays a revolutionary march. In Petrograd, the Bolshevik Party is in turmoil following the shock of Lenin's April Theses, which were published in Pravda on April 20 (7 O.S.). A city conference of the party opens in which Lenin's positions find substantial support.

Undeterred by the revolutionary mood of the masses of Europe, the imperialist elites continue to march tens of thousands of young men into slaughter. In Russia, the Provisional Government supports continuing the war. Throughout Europe, entire populations are subsisting on rations, and starvation is rampant.

Berlin, April 24, 1917: USPD seeks to prevent renewed strike

The mass strikes of the previous weeks, even though they were ended early and without any palpable success, starkly exposed the revolutionary crisis in the heart of German imperialism. The Marxist Spartacus League begins distributing leaflets under the title "The Lessons of the Great Mass Strikes," declaring that the workers "let themselves be deceived (hoodwinked)."

The mass strike of the Berlin workers is over—the mass misery, the mass lawlessness, the state of siege and the genocide are continuing! And so does the famine! True, the government has promised that the bread deficit will be balanced by allocations of meat and potatoes... But were our provisions previously anywhere near sufficient? ... We allowed the government to fob us with guarantees of a continuation of the old misery!

Spartacus condemns the right-wing trade union leaders for their collaboration with the Supreme Army Command (OHL) and the government. The leaflet concludes with a call for new, major strike actions on May Day: "Workers! Arm yourself for May Day. Work at all workshops and factories shall stop on this day completely! Forward to the struggle for peace, freedom, bread!"

The party leaders and deputies of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), Georg Ledebour and Wilhelm Dittmann, immediately distance themselves from this call for a strike in the German Reichstag (parliament).

During the strike, the USPD leaders had hurried from one factory to another, holding forth radical speeches. It was the USPD leaders who took care that the strikers limited their demands to purely economic issues like the food situation or the call for democratic reforms, and put their hopes on negotiations between the USPD politicians and the government. This allowed the right-wing trade unions to put an end to the strike by referring to verbal promises by the government.

Macedonian Front, April 25: Battle of Doiran between the British and Bulgarians begins

After a four-day artillery barrage, British infantry forces advance with the aim of breaking through Bulgarian lines on the Macedonian Front. Up to 43,000 soldiers organized in three divisions have been brought together for the attack.

The Macedonian Front emerged in late 1915. Following Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia in July 1914, Austro-Hungarian troops were initially repelled during their advance on Serbian territory. A second invasion launched in conjunction with German and Bulgarian forces in October 1915 proved more decisive, forcing the Serbian army to retreat to the Albanian Adriatic coast. French and British troops were sent to Greece but arrived too late to support the retreating Serbians. The allied forces then established the Macedonian Front, which stretched from the Albanian coast to the Aegean coast. It pitted British, French, Russian, Italian, Albanian and Serbian forces against Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, German and for a time Ottoman troops.

At Doiran, British troops initially capture some of the Bulgarian trenches but are forced to retreat to their original positions when the attack fails elsewhere. Subsequent attempts to launch fresh advances are pushed back until April 27. Frustrated by the failure to make a breakthrough, British commanders order another assault in early May, which is again defeated. By the time the Battle of Doiran ends on May 8, there will have been some 12,000 British and more than 2,000 Bulgarian casualties.

Berlin, April 26, 1917: Trade union leadership grovels before Supreme Army Command (OHL)

The mood among the workers in the big factories in Berlin remains rebellious. The German Supreme Commander, Field Marshal General Paul von Hindenburg, therefore issues a circular letter, condemning any

strike or call for one as “treason to the fatherland and the soldiers at the front.” The social democratic trade union leaders rush to assure the imperial government of their unrestrained devotion and full support for the war, promising to choke off any future strikes.

The central leadership of the trade unions and unions of employees writes to the president of the war office, Wilhelm Groener:

We thank Your Honorable Excellence for conveying us the letter by Mister Field Marshal General von Hindenburg. We declare our full agreement with the guiding ideas of this presentation.

In this hour, work stops have to be avoided. The maintenance and security of the Reich are of the highest priority. We will tirelessly point to the fact that those who weaken our troops’ power to resist by arbitrarily reducing the deliveries of means for the defense (i.e., through strikes), are committing a sin against our country....We ask Your Honorable Excellence to give notice of this writing to Mister Field Marshal General von Hindenburg.

This letter is reprinted the following day, on April 27, in the central party newspaper of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), *Vorwärts* (Forward).

St.-Jean-de-Maurienne, France, April 26: Imperialist powers negotiate division of Anatolia

Representatives of Italy, France and Great Britain meet at this village in southeastern France to secure Italian entry into fighting in the Middle East. This is procured by offering Italy control over southwestern Anatolia, in present-day Turkey. Russia, whose Provisional Government is anxious to maintain Allied promises offering it control over Istanbul and its straits, is not invited to the conference. The Agreement of St.-Jean-de-Maurienne follows the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which envisions the dividing up of the Middle East between Britain and France.

The imperialist powers plan to totally dismember the multiethnic, multireligious Ottoman Empire. In the Levant, Arabian Peninsula and Anatolia, Britain, France and Italy intend to dominate newly created Arab and Turkish successor colonies. In eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, Russia, first under Tsar Nicholas and subsequently under the Provisional Government, is utilizing Armenian nationalism to threaten the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the east through the creation of an Armenian state dominated by Russia.

Meanwhile, Turkish nationalists, who increasingly dominate the Ottoman government, have launched a savage campaign of ethnic cleansing and wholesale slaughter against the empire’s Armenians, in which between 600,000 and 1.5 million people are murdered by the state.

Petrograd, April 27 (14 O.S.): Petrograd City Conference of Bolsheviks opens

At a Petrograd City Conference of the Bolsheviks, which lasts until April 22 (O.S.), Lenin wins substantial approval for his *April Theses*. In a vote of 37 to three, the Conference adopts a resolution condemning the Provisional Government and calling for an eventual transfer of power to the soviets, which was drafted by Lenin. It is the first significant victory

by Lenin within the party since his return to Petrograd.

In his *April Theses*, Lenin has adopted in essence Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. Lenin calls for a formal split with the Mensheviks, the renaming of the party as the Communist Party, the formation of a new revolutionary international, and a strategic orientation to the seizure of power by the Russian working class and the extension of the revolution throughout Europe. At the city conference, Lenin’s views were opposed by the right-wing in the party leadership, which includes Kamenev and Rykov.

While Lenin’s *April Theses* have shocked many of the “Old Bolsheviks” in the party’s leadership, they will find significant support in the party’s ranks. At the city conference, Lenin is elected honorary chairman and gives the main political report, which is titled, “Current Tasks—Present Situation.” He is also selected to sit on the committee that produces the key resolutions “On the Attitude Towards the Provisional Government” and “On the War.” Lenin makes the motions for the adoption of the resolutions “On the Municipal Elections” and “On the Attitude Towards the Parties of Socialist-Revolutionaries, Menshevik Social-Democrats, ‘non-factional’ Social-Democrats and other kindred political trends.”

The Bolshevik Party has not held a formal congress since 1912. The resolutions at this week’s city conference will provide the foundation for the resolutions of the upcoming Seventh All-Russia Conference of Bolsheviks.

Berlin, April 27, 1917: Campaign of revenge against striking workers

With the critical backing of the leading social democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* (Forward), an order by General Wilhelm Groener is displayed in all factories:

In the West near Arras, at the Aisne and in the Champagne our brothers, grey from the fields, are standing in the heaviest and bloodiest battle of world history....Whoever goes on strike while our armed forces are facing the enemy is a miserable cur (*Hundsfott*). I hereby order that all honorable workers, courageous men and women of all kinds shall unite at the munition factories and inform their comrades of what the hardship of our time and the future of our fatherland require from us all: Work and again work until the fortunate end of the war... Read Hindenburg’s letter again and again and you will recognize where our worst enemies are hiding. The worst enemies are right among us—the faint-hearted, and those who are even much worse and agitate for strike. They need to be denounced before the entire people, these traitors to the fatherland and the armed forces....

This so-called “miserable cur order” (*Hundsfott Aufruf*) quickly becomes notorious among the workers and achieves the opposite effect. The hatred of the emperor and the Supreme Army Command is growing, not only at the front in the trenches, but also at home.

The trade union functionaries, by contrast, follow and implement the order most eagerly. The trade unions leaders help identify thousands of workers who had taken part in the strikes, especially the most active elements and strike leaders. They are drafted immediately to the military and sent to the front—often to their deaths.

In this fight, the centrist leadership of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) stands on the same side of the barricades as the right-wing SPD and trade union leaders. At a meeting with General

Groener, the chairman of the USPD, Hugo Haase, promises the general “that there will be no strike on May Day” and that he would use all his authority to prevent the outbreak of a strike under any circumstances. However, this fact will become known only seven years after the end of the First World War.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, April 29 (April 16 O.S.): Trotsky released from internment camp

Trotsky and the other Russian exiles detained at the Amherst prisoner of war camp are informed by camp commander Colonel Morris that they are to leave and are ordered to pack their things. Unaware of their final destination, and in light of the treatment they have experienced at the hands of the British, they protest and refuse to depart the camp until they are told where they are to go.

The guards resort to forcible measures, carrying out the prisoners’ belongings. In the face of growing agitation among the hundreds of sailors and soldiers, Morris eventually divulges that Trotsky and the other exiles are to set sail on a Danish steamer for Europe.

Trotsky would later recall the warm response he received from the sailors and soldiers during his imprisonment. In *My Life*, he described his Canadian internment as “like one continuous mass meeting.” He added, “I told the prisoners about the Russian revolution, about Liebknecht, about Lenin, and about the causes of the collapse of the old International, and the intervention of the United States in the war. Besides these speeches, we had constant group discussions. Our friendship grew warmer every day.”

On one occasion, when the British guards prohibited Trotsky from continuing to speak in public, a petition with the signatures of 533 of the approximately 850 inmates was submitted protesting this action.

By contrast, the small group of imprisoned army officers, whose living quarters were separated from the rest of the soldiers by a wooden partition, was hostile towards Trotsky.

These relations continue as Trotsky departs.

As we were being taken away from the camp, our fellow prisoners gave us a most impressive send-off. Although the officers shut themselves up in their compartment, and only a few poked their noses through the chinks, the sailors and workers lined the passage on both sides, an improvised band played the revolutionary march, and friendly hands were extended to us from every quarter. One of the prisoners delivered a short speech acclaiming the Russian revolution and cursing the German monarchy. Even now it makes me happy to remember that in the very midst of the war, we were fraternizing with German sailors in Amherst.

A critical role in securing the release of Trotsky and his fellow Russian prisoners had been played by the Petrograd Soviet, which pressured the bourgeois Provisional Government to demand their freedom.

Summing up the questions that remained unanswered about his detention, Trotsky writes in a letter addressed to Foreign Minister Mil'yukov during his trip across the Atlantic:

Who arrested us, and on what grounds? That the general order to detain those Russian citizens who happened to hold views not

acceptable to the British Government really emanated from the British Government, is without any doubt, for Mr. Lloyd George could not miss the happily offered opportunity, to reveal, at last, that titanic energy, in the name of which he came to power. There is one more question, namely, who pointed us out to the British-Canadian authorities as persons who should be detained? Who furnished Halifax in the short space of three or four days the information as to our views? A line of circumstances points to the fact that this allied service was rendered by the renovated Russian consulate, the same consulate which had removed Nicholas’ portrait from its reception room and has stricken the word “Imperial” from its title.

German painter Max Slevogt publishes works on the war

This year, the German impressionist painter Max Slevogt (1868-1932) publishes his *War Diary* with drawings and watercolour paintings and his portfolio *History*. In both works, he tries to deal with the horrors of the war. The portfolio includes nightmarish lithographs such as *The Supreme Army Command* in which a figure, reminiscent of Field Marshal General Paul von Hindenburg, tips with his index finger at a head, which is placed on a rostrum. The head exposes parts of the brain, pieces of which are scattered on the floor. Other lithographs bear titles such as *The Dream of a Victor*, *Pegasus in Military Service* and *Final*. The latter shows an eagle flying above a gnarled tree while a man, disabled from the war, hobbles past a series of crosses put up near the tree.

Like many German artists, Max Slevogt had initially volunteered for the front in 1914—not as a soldier, but as an official war painter. However, he did not produce great battle paintings, as one might have expected from an artist who was well recognized in the empire. Rather, his works, including the watercolour works *Cathedrals of Lions*, the *Procurement of the Wounded in a Church* and the *Fallen Englishmen*, depict brutal destruction. His initial enthusiasm for the war quickly disappeared once he was at the front. He was allowed to return home where he could work his impressions into art.



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