

This week in the Russian Revolution

May 1-7: April Crisis breaks out in Petrograd

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Newspapers in Petrograd publish a secret telegram by the Provisional Government's Minister of Foreign Affairs, in which Russia promises to abide by the tsar's secret treaties and "fight the world war out to a decisive victory." Workers and soldiers in Petrograd respond with massive anti-government demonstrations, triggering the April Crisis.

The Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, populists and other political tendencies that are grouped around the Provisional Government are profoundly discredited. Desperate, fragile, and with crumbling mass support, the Provisional Government teeters on the brink of collapse.

While they enjoy growing popularity, the Bolsheviks remain internally divided, with a radical wing calling for immediate armed insurrection and a right-wing of "Old Bolsheviks" that is oriented to the status quo. Lenin, who has adopted in essence Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, fights at a historic All-Russian Conference of the Bolsheviks for a clear class line and a strategic orientation to the seizure of power.

Meanwhile, the impact of the upheavals in Russia begin to be felt throughout Europe in the form of mass demonstrations, riots, and mutinies.

Petrograd, May 3 (April 20 O.S.): Miliukov's secret telegram published

A secret telegram by the Provisional Government's Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavel Miliukov to the Allied imperialist governments is published in the newspapers in Petrograd. The note, dated May 1 (April 18 O.S.), describes "the desire of the whole nation to fight the world war out to a decisive victory."

"Needless to say," the note adds, "the Provisional Government ... will fully stand by its obligations towards our Allies." This secret note, transmitted behind the backs of the Russian workers and soldiers, is not only a promise to continue the unpopular war. The reference to "obligations towards our Allies" implies that the Provisional Government will abide by the secret treaties that the deposed tsar signed with the other imperialist powers, which provide for the division and annexation of conquered territories.

"The cards are on the table," Lenin writes in a powerful statement printed in *Pravda* on the same day. "We have every reason to be grateful to Guchkov and Miliukov for their note, printed today in all the newspapers. The majority of the Executive Committee of the [Petrograd] Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, the Narodniks, Mensheviks, and all those who until now have appealed for confidence in the Provisional Government have received fitting punishment."

To those who denounce Miliukov for being "insincere," Lenin responds: "But that is not the point. The point is that Guchkov, Miliukov, [and others] are spokesmen of the *capitalists*. And the seizure of foreign lands is necessary to the capitalists. They will receive new markets, new places

to which to export capital, new opportunities to arrange profitable jobs for tens of thousands of their sons, etc. The point is that at the present moment the interests of the Russian capitalists are identical with those of the British and French capitalists. That, and that alone, is the reason why the tsar's treaties with the British and French capitalists are precious to the Provisional Government of the Russian capitalists."

"Workers and soldiers," Lenin concludes, "you must now loudly declare that there must be only one power in the country—the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, The Provisional Government, the government of a handful of capitalists, must make way for these Soviets."

Chanting "Down with Miliukov" and demanding the resignation of the "capitalist ministers," thousands of soldiers in Petrograd march on the seat of the Provisional Government in the Marinskii Palace. The soldiers declare their refusal to fight in an imperialist war for the fulfillment of the tsar's secret treaties. Soldiers and sailors from the Finland Regiment, the Moscow Regiment, the 180th Regiment and the Second Baltic Fleet participate in the demonstrations *en masse*.

In the working-class districts of Petrograd, the Bolsheviks are a flurry of activity, and the ideas associated with Lenin's April Theses attract increased support. For example, a resolution passed by the Petrograd Garrison Reserve Electro-Technical Battalion Committee on the day of the note's publication begins, "Having discussed the Provisional Government's note to the Allied governments, we consider this note a demonstration that the Provisional Government is the faithful servant not only of the imperialist countries of the Alliance, but also of the German and Austrian governments, as it assists them in strangling the German proletariat's evolving struggle for peace."

Western Front, France, May 3: Mutiny breaks out among French soldiers

Following the disastrous collapse of the Nivelle offensive, French soldiers begin refusing to follow orders at the front. The French 2nd Division initiates the disobedience by defying an order to attack in the Chemin des Dames sector. Revolts quickly spread through the ranks, forcing the French military command to call an early halt to the offensive. General Robert Nivelle, who promised to bring an end to the war by breaking the German lines, is relieved of his command on May 15.

By late May, the mutiny will have spread to 21 divisions, with soldiers beginning to elect spokesmen to call for an end to offensive operations and raise other demands. By the end of 1917, a record 27,000 soldiers will have deserted the French army.

The opposition to continuing the war reflects the impact of the Russian Revolution, itself an expression of spreading demands for peace among the masses of Europe. Two Russian divisions deployed to support French troops are the first to respond to this sentiment, participating in the Nivelle

action only reluctantly after a substantial section of the Russian soldiers vote in favor of peace. The French soldiers now follow suit, singing revolutionary songs such as the *Internationale* and flying red flags.

The mutinies are also driven by a deep hatred of the commanding staff, which French soldiers blame for the bloody slaughter during the three years of the war. By early 1917, almost 1 million French soldiers out of a pre-war population of 20 million males of fighting age have been killed in battle. This includes 306,000 casualties in 1914, 337,000 in 1915, 217,000 in 1916 and 121,000 in the early months of 1917.

Among British forces, tensions are also rising. British deserters are frequently shot on the spot, and increased incidences of disobedience will appear during the last year of the war.

The military authorities show extreme brutality in their response to the mutinies, while political authorities ensure that news of them is suppressed for fear of triggering broader opposition to war. Mass arrests and trials begin in June. A total of 3,427 courts martial will be held, which will hand down 2,878 sentences of hard labor and 629 death sentences. A total of 43 executions will be carried out.

The suppression of news of the mutinies is so successful that the full scale of the rebellion only will become clear 50 years later, when archived documents become available to historians in 1967.

May 4 (April 21 O.S.): “April Crisis” begins in Petrograd

In response to Miliukov’s note pledging Russia to the imperialist war, the Bolsheviks call for mass demonstrations with slogans demanding peace and “all power to the Soviets!” Some 100,000 workers and soldiers participate in the demonstrations—a massive turnout for the Bolsheviks under the circumstances.

The Menshevik leaders in the Petrograd Soviet are working to prop up the Provisional Government. On May 4, after having demanded an “explanation” for Miliukov’s note, the Menshevik leaders in the Petrograd Soviet declare themselves satisfied with the “explanation” and deem the “incident closed.”

While Lenin has been contending with the right wing of the Bolshevik Party, which is inclined towards adaptation to the war and the Provisional Government, he has also to contend with a radical adventurist wing, which includes members of the Petersburg Committee of the party. This wing, buoyed by the enormous turnout for the Bolshevik demonstrations, calls for the armed overthrow of the government and raises the demand, “Down with the Provisional Government!”

The Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) are staging counter-demonstrations with the slogan, “Full Confidence in the Provisional Government!” and “Down with Lenin—the Kaiser’s Hireling!” There are clashes and casualties. The bourgeois newspapers charge the Bolsheviks with attempting to incite a civil war.

On May 5 (April 22 O.S.), the Bolshevik Central Committee adopts a resolution condemning the call for the immediate armed overthrow of the government. The Bolsheviks are internally divided and, despite growing support, remain a minority in the Petrograd Soviet.

Seattle, May 5: IWW leader acquitted in Everett Massacre frame-up

Industrial Workers of the World leader Thomas Tracy is acquitted by a jury in superior court in the frame-up trial resulting from the Everett Massacre of November 5, 1916, in which at least five IWW members

were gunned down by a deputized mob of anti-union vigilantes. The IWW, a militant union that calls for the abolition of capitalism, came to Everett to defend striking shingle workers and the right to free speech, after local police and company thugs attacked union members with axe handles and effectively banned the IWW in the labor struggle that broke out in the summer of 1916.

After the massacre, Tracy and 73 other IWW members were arrested and charged with the killing of the two vigilantes, who were actually shot in the back by their own side during the massacre. After Tracy’s acquittal, charges are dropped against the other IWW members, and they are released from jail.

Stockholm, May 5: Bread riots in Sweden

Women in a working-class neighborhood of Stockholm riot after standing in line for hours for potatoes, only to be told the stock is empty. The riots spread throughout the day in Sweden’s capital city. Women hurl stones, injuring police officers.

Riots erupt the same day in Gothenburg, where women descend on bakers’ shops without ration cards. When vendors refuse to sell, they seize the bread and damage the stores, spreading the riot to butcher shops. In both cities hussars attack rioters with sabers. Dozens are wounded or arrested. Food demonstrations are also reported in Norrkoeping.

Sweden is not a belligerent in the Great War. However, the immense war-driven profits accrued to capitalists because of soaring prices in basic commodities—including foodstuffs—has exacerbated the class tensions in “neutral” Scandinavia to the point of explosion.

Petrograd, May 6 (April 23, O.S.): Provisional Government issues law to curtail powers of factory committees

Factory committees were established throughout Russia in both private and state industries in the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the tsar. They are at the forefront of the battle for the eight-hour day and in some factories take over management. By passing a law on the factory committees, the Provisional Government seeks to curtail their growing influence.

The historian Steven A. Smith comments in his book *Red Petrograd*, “The aim of the government ... was ... to institutionalize them and quell their potential extremism by legitimizing them as representative organs designed to mediate between employers and workers on the shopfloor.... Workers, however, were not prepared to have their hands tied by the new law.”

While the factory committees often fulfill the function of trade unions, in some industries their powers go well beyond that. Especially in state factories related to the war effort, the factory committees take over the factory management. At many factories, the committees provide for the reinstatement of workers who had been fired previously for participating in strikes or for opposing the war. The control over the process of hiring and firing employees has been one of the first and most important demands put forward by revolutionary workers after the February Revolution.

Washington, May 6: Gompers warns Petrograd Soviet against

“agitators”

The president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, wires the Petrograd Soviet, ostensibly on behalf of the American working class, insisting that workers in both countries prosecute the war against “Kaiserism” and “autocracy” to a victorious conclusion.

The letter is issued in response to the April Crisis in Petrograd with the express aim of delegitimizing working class opposition to the war. Gompers, who pledged to suppress strikes and wage demands of US workers after American entry into the war, denounces “German Socialists” for “underground plotting to bring about an abortive peace in the interests of Kaiserism and the ruling class.” And he blackguards as “pro-Kaiser propagandists” socialists who oppose the new bourgeois government in Russia, which he presents, alongside the US, as “the two great democracies of the world.”

Gompers’ cable follows by two days the visit to the Petrograd Soviet of British Labor leaders Will Thorne and James O’Grady, who likewise pleaded with Russian Mensheviks and SRs to continue the war against “autocracy.”

Petrograd, May 7 (April 24, O.S.): Lenin opens All-Russian Conference of the Bolsheviks with call for dictatorship of the proletariat

Within days after Lenin’s delivery of the “April Theses,” which sent shock waves through the Bolshevik Party, the first All-Russian Conference of the Bolsheviks following the overthrow of the tsar convenes in Petrograd. Attending the conference are 151 delegates representing 80,000 members.

During the conference, which continues from May 7-12, Lenin wins significant support for the April Theses and his campaign to reorient the party. Lenin, who has aligned himself with positions previously associated with Leon Trotsky, argues that the party must prepare for the next stage of the revolution, the transfer of all state power to the soviets. Lenin is not deterred by the fact that the Bolsheviks remain for the moment a minority in the Petrograd Soviet. The task of the Bolsheviks, according to Lenin, is to advance a clear, independent and internationalist class line, in opposition to the war, the Provisional Government, and all of the petty-bourgeois and opportunist tendencies that are adapting themselves to the status quo. Whatever the transient and confused moods of the masses may be at the moment, Lenin insists that the party must tell the truth, organize and arm the workers, and build soviets throughout the country.

Also this month: German artist George Grosz addresses war in painting

In 1914, the German painter Georg Ehrenfried Groß (1893-1956) volunteered for military service to preempt conscription, hoping that he could thus prevent being sent to the front.

Following an operation for sinusitis in 1915, he was deemed unfit for service and discharged from the military. He later stated: “War to me was horror, mutilation and destruction.” In protest against the jingoism and German chauvinism of the time, he changed his name in 1916 to the anglicized version: George Grosz. In January 1917, he was again drafted into the military but had a nervous breakdown just two days later. He

suffered from depression and hallucinations. During his stay at a psychiatric hospital, he assaulted a medical officer. Following a medical evaluation by the famous psychiatrist Magnus Hirschfeld, he was eventually deemed unfit for service and released from the military for good in late April 1917. Shortly thereafter, probably in early May, he paints his work *Explosion* as an allegory for the destruction of the war.

He joins the so-called Dada movement and publishes poems and drawings in the journal *Neue Jugend* (New Youth) and the Dadaist almanac. During the German Revolution of 1918/19, he would join the Marxist Spartacus League.

In a biting lithography from the portfolio “God with us” (*Gott mit uns*, the motto of the German Empire), which appears in 1920, he addresses his experiences with the Reichswehr, depicting in a sarcastic manner their inhumane brutality against their own soldiers and civilians. One year later, Grosz and his publisher Wieland Herzfelde are put on trial for insulting the Reichswehr and fined 300 Reichsmarks.



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