This week in the Russian Revolution

May 8-14: Bolsheviks convene all-Russian conference amid government crisis

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The Provisional Government, staggering from the publication of a leaked telegram to the Allied imperialist governments, appeals to the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders of the Soviet to form a coalition government to save capitalist rule in Russia. Meanwhile, Lenin's struggle within the Bolshevik Party continues. Lenin secures an important victory at the party's All-Russian Conference, with a majority supporting resolutions he drafted on the Provisional Government and the war.

May 9 (April 26 O.S.): Menshevik-led Petrograd Soviet proclaims international peace conference

The Menshevik leaders of the Petrograd Soviet call for an "International Socialist Peace Conference" to advocate peace without annexations or indemnities. A delegation is tasked with traveling to the neutral and allied countries to establish contact. The Menshevik leader Matvey Skobelev declares that he is willing to negotiate with anyone, even the devil and his grandmother. The peace conference is scheduled in Stockholm for June 1, and assurances are provided that this will lead to a general peace by the end of the summer.

These maneuvers come on the heels of the publication of a secret telegram to the Allied imperialist governments by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Pavel Miliukov, in which the Provisional Government promises to abide by the tsar's secret treaties on the annexation of conquered territory. The publication of the leaked telegram prompts mass demonstrations and triggers what comes to be known as the "April Crisis." The unilateral announcement of a vague future "peace conference" is aimed at disorienting mass opposition to the war and restoring credibility to the disgraced Mensheviks, who are supporting the war and the Provisional Government.

Lenin rejects the concept of fighting the war to a negotiated peace treaty between the capitalist governments. "The workers of the world *have* a treaty of their own, namely, the Basle Manifesto of 1912… This workers' treaty calls it a 'crime' for workers of different countries to shoot at each other for the sake of the capitalists' profits," Lenin wrote in *Pravda* on May 6. "The internationalist workers of the world stand for the overthrow of *all* capitalist governments, for the rejection of all agreements and understandings with any capitalists, for *universal peace* concluded by *the revolutionary workers of all* countries, a peace capable of giving real freedom to 'every' nation."

The Menshevik efforts to convene the international peace conference are dead in the water, as the Allied imperialist governments refuse to consider ending the war on any such terms.

May 11 (April 28 O.S.): Lenin urges soldiers to fraternize at the front

In opposition to the conciliatory and collaborationist policies of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, Lenin openly embraces the growing fraternization among soldiers in the warring armies. In an article titled "The Significance of Fraternization," he writes:

> The class-conscious workers, followed by the mass of semi-proletarians and poor peasants guided by the true instinct of oppressed classes, regard fraternization with profound sympathy. Clearly, fraternization is a path to peace. Clearly, this path does not run through the capitalist governments, through an alliance with them, but runs against them. Clearly, this path tends to develop, strengthen, and consolidate fraternal confidence between the workers of different countries. Clearly, this path is beginning to wreck the hateful discipline of the barrack prisons, the discipline of blind obedience of the soldier to "his" officers and generals, to his capitalists (for most of the officers and generals either belong to the capitalist class or protect its interests). Clearly, fraternization is the revolutionary initiative of the masses, it is the awakening of the conscience, the mind, the courage of the oppressed classes; in other words, it is a rung in the ladder leading up to the socialist proletarian revolution...
>
> The soldiers must now pass to a form of fraternization in which a clear political program is discussed. We are not anarchists. We do not think that the war can be ended by a simple "refusal," a refusal of individuals, groups or casual "crowds." We are for the war being ended, as it will be, by a revolution in a number of countries, i.e., by the conquest of state power by a new class, not the capitalists, not the small proprietors (who are always half-dependent on the capitalists), but by the proletarians and semi-proletarians...
>
> Comrades, soldiers, discuss this program among yourselves and with the German soldiers.

The Mensheviks regard fraternization as "disgraceful" and "treasonous," and they are vehemently opposed to any talk of a separate peace with Germany. "Should we now stretch a fraternal hand toward the people of Central Europe to conclude a separate peace it would be an eternal shame which would lead inevitably to the downfall and annihilation of Russia," the Menshevik leader Irakli Tsereteli states. "We will not seek to break our engagements with our allies."

In a speech at the headquarters of the Provisional Government on May

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11, the bourgeois leader Mikhail Rodzianko likewise renounces the idea of a separate peace. “The war which was forced upon us, which we did not desire, and for which we are in no way responsible, must be brought to a successful termination, in such a manner that the integrity of the country and the national honor of Russia shall be entirely maintained,” Rodzianko declares. “Only the complete defeat of German militarism will ensure the happiness of the world.” In 1913, Rodzianko had told the Tsar: “A war will be joyfully welcomed and it will raise the government’s prestige”

Petrograd, May 8-12 (April 25-29, O.S.): All-Russian Bolshevik Conference elects new Central Committee, adopts resolutions on the war and the Provisional Government

At the center of the All-Russian Bolshevik Conference are Lenin’s efforts to reorient the party toward the positions advanced in his April Theses. The resolutions on the war and on the Provisional Government, both drafted by Lenin, are an important victory in this struggle. The resolution on the war, in particular, is a blow to the defensist and collaborationist moods existing in sections of the party after the overthrow of the tsar. The resolution declares:

> Our Party will patiently but persistently explain to the people the truth that wars are waged by *governments*, that wars are always indissolubly bound up with the policies of definite *classes*, that this war can be terminated by a democratic peace *only* if the entire state power, in at least several of the belligerent countries, has passed to the class of the proletarians and semi-proletarians which is really capable of putting an end to the oppressive rule of capital.

In another resolution, the Conference resolves that any unity with the Mensheviks or the Socialist Revolutionaries who support the continuation of the imperialist war and the Provisional Government—the “Petty-Bourgeois Defensist Bloc”—“is absolutely impossible.” The resolution continues, “Closer relations and unity with groups and trends that have adopted a real internationalist stand are necessary on the basis of a definite break with the policy of petty-bourgeois betrayal of socialism.”

The party also resolves to rework its program. However, matters are far from settled. As the historian Alexander Rabinowitch remarks, Lenin’s notion that the bourgeois democratic revolution has ended in Russia is avoided in all conference resolutions. Moreover, the composition of the newly elected Central Committee reflects the continued influence of the right-wing under Kamenev, which makes up five of the CC’s nine members.

The struggles within the Bolshevik party take place within the context of the struggle, led by Lenin, for a Third International and a definite break with the policy of defensism and class collaboration with the bourgeoisie. Highlighting the ongoing struggles over these issues within the Bolshevik Party, a resolution passed at the Conference—against the vote of Lenin—resolves that the Bolsheviks should attend an international conference of the Zimmerwald left on May 18 (O.S.). Lenin opposes the resolution and later openly describes it as a mistake, since the Zimmerwald Committee at this point was dominated entirely by centrist forces such as Karl Kautsky.

In a series of articles under the title “The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution,” Lenin had written a few weeks earlier:

> The Zimmerwald bog can no longer be tolerated. We must not, for the sake of the Zimmerwald “Kautskyites,” continue the semi-alliance with the chauvinist International of the Plekhanovs and Scheidemanns. We must break with this International immediately. We must remain in Zimmerwald *only* for purposes of information. It is we who must found, and right now, without delay, a *new*, revolutionary, proletarian International, or rather, we must not fear to acknowledge publicly that this new International is *already established* and operating.... Our Party must not “wait,” but must immediately *found* a Third International. Hundreds of socialists imprisoned in Germany and Britain will then heave a sigh of relief, thousands and thousands of German workers who are now holding strikes and demonstrations that are frightening that scoundrel and brigand, Wilhelm, will learn from *illegal* leaflets of our decision, of our fraternal confidence in Karl Liebknecht, and in him alone, of *our* decision to fight “revolutionary defencism” *even now*; they will read this and be strengthened in their revolutionary internationalism.

May 12-13: Guchkov and Kornilov resign

On May 12 (April 29 O.S.) the Minister of War of the Provisional Government, Alexander Guchkov, resigns in the wake of the publication of Miliukov’s leaked telegram. The Provisional Government is struggling to restore its credibility, while the prestige of the Bolsheviks is growing.

Guchkov’s resignation is followed the next day by the resignation of General Lavr Kornilov, commander of the Petrograd garrison. The former Russian Imperial Army officer declared that he was unwilling to continue submitting his orders for approval to the Soviet, which he declared put him in an “impossible position.” Kornilov announces, with apparently unintentional irony, that if workers and soldiers wanted control so badly, “Well, then, let them take the responsibility.”

On May 6, Kornilov had issued orders declaring that a German attack was imminent and demanding the organization of military reserves in Petrograd. The Petrograd Soviet, wary of tsarist counterrevolution, immediately responded with orders forbidding any of the nearby garrisons from sending troops into the capital without written permission from the Soviet.

London, May 13: 10,000 bus workers take strike action

At a general meeting of all omnibus employees of the London General Omnibus Company and Messrs Tilling held at the Euston Theatre, over 5,000 bus workers vote in favor of strike action to demand recognition for their union, the London and Provincial Union of Licensed Vehicle Workers. Only 600 workers oppose the strike call.

Other strike demands include a wartime bonus of 10s per week and the reinstatement of six bus workers previously dismissed. The bonus demand reflects anger over the growing cost of living, with foodstuffs and other basic necessities having risen sharply since Britain entered the war in 1914.

The meeting takes place after workers down tools earlier in the day. The company claims it managed to run 25 percent of omnibuses and blames the union for violating a 1912 agreement by calling the strike.

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May 14 (May 1, O.S.): Mensheviks enter new capitalist coalition government

As the Provisional Government struggles to find a way out of a deep crisis resulting from growing anti-war sentiment, the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leadership in the Petrograd Soviet resolves to allow its members to openly join the government. The decision follows an appeal on April 26 by the bourgeois ministers to form a "coalition government" with the Soviet, which led to several days of negotiations between Soviet leaders and bourgeois ministers.

The All-Russian Bolshevik Conference strongly condemns the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries for their increasingly open role as saviors of a bourgeois regime. A resolution on the coalition government, passed unanimously with 7 abstentions, states:

> The party of the proletariat declares: anyone who enters a ministry that is conducting an imperialist war, regardless of their good intentions, takes part in the imperialist policies of the capitalists. On the basis of all of this, the party of the proletariat is speaking out in the most decisive manner against sending representatives of the Soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies into the coalition ministry.

The new coalition government formed a few days later includes, among others, Alexander Kerensky as Minister of Justice; the Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli as Minister of Postal Services and Telegraphs; and the Menshevik Matvey Skobelev as Minister of Labor.

Washington, May 14: Root Commission bound for Russia

Woodrow Wilson addresses Elihu Root and his commission that is bound for Russia. Wilson gives the Root Commission broad powers to negotiate loans with the Provisional Government. Its "primary task is to save Russia to the Entente cause," as the *New York Times* baldly puts it. Root, a former Secretary of War with close connections to Wall Street, will put it just as bluntly to the Provisional Government: "No fight, no loans."

New York, May 14: *New York Times* broaches "dictatorship" for Russia

Enraged by mass opposition to war among the Russian workers and soldiers, the *New York Times*, the leading publication of the liberal section of the American ruling class, openly raises the possibility of installing a dictatorship.

The *Times* writes, referring to the "talk of dictator to save Russia": "The conviction that Russia can only be saved by the energy, resolution, ruthlessness, and statesmanship of a modern Cromwell or that she must ultimately, pass a state of disintegration in which the country as a unified element will be replaced by a number of small republics under the domination of Germany, is impressing the minds even of those who regard anything in the form of a dictatorship with fear and aversion."

New York City, May 13: Authorities ban *Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, film based on life of Margaret Sanger

A silent film that addresses the issue of sex education and family planning, *Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, directed by Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, is banned in New York City by license commissioner George Bell.

The fictional film is loosely based on the trial of Margaret Sanger, birth control activist and sex educator. Weber, one of the first major women directors in Hollywood, according to one historian, "plays the wife of a physician who decides to distribute contraceptive information when her husband refuses to break the law to do so, and ends up in court." *Hand That Rocks the Cradle* also compares "the hardships of poor, large families with the more comfortable lives of smaller, richer ones." The work is the unofficial sequel to the same team's *Where Are My Children?* (1916).

The banning of the film in New York follows the censorship of Sanger's own documentary film, *Birth Control*, by Bell the previous week. The only showing of that film is a private one May 6. The conflict between the birth control advocates and New York officials is the latest skirmish in the war between local authorities, for a long time led by the infamous Anthony Comstock, and advocates of civil liberties and freedom of speech, including information on family planning and abortion.

Both *Hand That Rocks the Cradle* and *Birth Control* are considered lost films, with no copies extant.

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