

This week in the Russian Revolution

May 15-21: Trotsky arrives in Petrograd

15 May 2017

Upon arriving in Petrograd, Trotsky immediately assumes a leading position in the Petrograd Soviet, based on his role in 1905. Trotsky's arrival is electrifying, providing a tremendous boost to the struggle being waged by Lenin and the Bolsheviks against the collaborationist, defensist, and opportunist forces that are currently in the Soviet's majority. Meanwhile, the Mensheviks, populists, and Socialist Revolutionaries enter a "coalition" with the bourgeoisie to save the Provisional Government and continue prosecuting the imperialist war.

Petrograd, May 15 (May 2 O.S.): Miliukov resigns

In the wake of the April Crisis and the resignations of Guchkov and Kornilov last week, Pavel Miliukov resigns from his post as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government. Guchkov had been the Minister of War, and Kornilov had served as the commander of the Petrograd garrison. Miliukov, a Constitutional Democrat (Kadet), declines the offer of a position as Secretary of Education.

Miliukov is the author of the infamous telegram, dated May 1 (April 18 O.S.), which describes "the desire of the whole nation to fight the world war out to a decisive victory" and promises that Russia will "fully stand by its obligations towards our Allies." This note prompted mass anti-war demonstrations in Petrograd that have brought the Provisional Government to the brink of collapse.

Petrograd, May 17 (May 4 O.S.): Trotsky arrives in Russia

After sailing with his family across the Atlantic, Trotsky arrives in Petrograd via Sweden and Finland by train. He is welcomed by delegations from the Bolsheviks and United Internationalists, but the Mensheviks fail to send anyone. At the Finland Station, Trotsky delivers a speech calling for the preparation of a second revolution. He then goes immediately to a meeting of the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet, where the Bolsheviks move that he be elected onto the committee on the basis of his historic role as the leading spokesman of the Soviet during the 1905 revolution.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky later contrasted the enthusiastic welcome he received with that accorded to Vandervelde, a leading figure in the Second International who became one of the most adamant proponents of war in 1914. Vandervelde was traveling on the same train. "At the end of the platform, right behind me, I noticed [Henri] De Man and Vandervelde. They kept back on purpose, apparently because they were afraid to mix with the crowd. The new Socialist ministers of Russia had not arranged any welcome for their Belgian colleague. Vandervelde's

role of the day before was still too fresh in every one's memory," Trotsky wrote.

During a speech to the Petrograd Soviet the following day, Trotsky denounces the entry of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries into the bourgeois government. Declaring that the revolution can only be successful when the power is transferred to the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, he outlines "three revolutionary articles of faith: do not trust the bourgeoisie; control the leaders; rely only on your own force."

Petrograd, May 17 (May 4 O.S.): All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies convened

The All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies lasts until June 10 (May 28 O.S.). The Bolsheviks have closely followed the efforts to convene the congress, and Lenin has given the organization of peasants into soviets his earnest support. In an April 16 (O.S.) article, Lenin states:

There is no doubt that all members of our Party, all class-conscious workers, will do their utmost to support the organization of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies, will see to it that their numbers are increased and their strength consolidated, and will exert every effort to work inside these Soviets along consistent and strictly proletarian class lines...

To build up the movement, we must free it from the influence of the bourgeoisie; we must try to rid it of the inevitable weaknesses, vacillations, and mistakes of the petty bourgeoisie...

The largest parties in the Congress are the Popular Socialists, Trudoviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.

Lenin continues to fight for categorical opposition to the war and the Provisional Government

The tide is steadily turning in Lenin's struggle to reorient the Bolshevik Party along the lines of his April Theses, in which he adopted, in essence, Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In the Bolshevik Party's program for local elections, "The Municipal Platform of the Proletarian Party," authored by Lenin, the party insists on unconditional opposition to the war and any capitalist government.

1. No support for the imperialist war (either in the form of support for the war loan, or in any other form).
2. No support to the capitalist government.
3. No reinstatement of the police, which must be replaced by a people's militia.

In a mandate to Bolshevik deputies who have been elected by workers in factories and from enlisted ranks in military regiments, dated May 20 (May 7 O.S.), Lenin again insists:

(1) Our Deputy must be unconditionally opposed to the present predatory imperialist war. This war is waged by the capitalists of all countries—Russia, Germany, Britain, etc.—for profits, and the subjugation of the weak nations.

(2) So long as a capitalist government is at the head of the Russian nation, there must be no support for the government, which is carrying on a predatory war—not by a single kopek!...

While he faces opposition from the right wing of the party leadership, Lenin's positions are winning increased support in the party's rank and file.

Washington, May 18, 1917: Wilson imposes conscription

US President Woodrow Wilson signs into law the Selective Service Act, making men between the ages of 21 and 30 (later expanded to 18 to 45) liable for service in the war against Germany. Wilson has hoped that patriotic fervor would make the draft unnecessary. However, despite the 1916 "preparedness campaign," only 100,000 men are in the military. In the six weeks since the declaration of war on Germany, and despite an unprecedented propaganda campaign, only 73,000 more men have volunteered.

These numbers are low in comparison even to small European countries. US allies in the Great War—Great Britain, France, Russia, and Italy—require many millions more soldiers to replace the generation of European men already killed and maimed in the inter-imperialist bloodbath.

There is deep opposition among the American working masses to the war and the draft. Tens of millions of their ancestors left their "old country" and became workers or farmers in the US to escape the armies of the kings and queens, kaisers and tsars. The largest two immigrant groups are the Germans, whose former country they would now be asked to fight, and the Irish, whose former home is subject to British colonial oppression. African Americans, over 10 percent of the American population, are subjected—by a country that now declares itself engaged in "a war for democracy"—to savage repression. They are conscripted en masse into segregated units of the "democratic" American military.

To push Selective Service and the draft—and to marginalize opposition—Wilson unleashes George Creel and his propaganda office, the Committee on Public Information, set up by executive order in April. The CPI sends out 75,000 orators across the US to promote the war and draft registration over 10 days beginning on May 12. The speakers deliver 750,000 four-minute speeches in 5,000 cities and towns across the US.

The Selective Service Act will ultimately register 24 million men, of which 2.4 million to 2.8 million will be drafted into the military. However, the first US troops in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF),

under command of General John J. Pershing, will not arrive in France until June, and the arrival of millions of trained and equipped US soldiers will take much longer, arriving only in the summer of 1918.

Ottawa, May 18: Canadian Prime Minister announces conscription in address to parliament

In a speech to the House of Commons following his return from Britain, where he attended meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet, Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden declares his government's decision to implement military conscription.

At the outset of the war, Canada had a population of just 8 million. By its end, around 420,000 men will have served overseas and more than 60,000 will have died. The Canadian ruling elite's determination to prosecute the war in the face of mounting casualties reflects its own growing imperialist ambitions. Some representatives of the bourgeoisie have even been arguing since the early 1900s that Canada could one day displace Britain as the seat of the British Empire.

Borden refers to Canadian demands for greater influence over foreign policy in the future, stating of the future of the British Empire, "It is not proposed that the government of the United Kingdom shall, in foreign affairs, act first and consult us afterwards. The principle has been definitely and finally laid down that in these matters the Dominions shall be consulted before the Empire is committed to any important policy which might involve the issues of peace or war."

Berlin, May 18: SPD Executive Committee removes Clara Zetkin from the editorial board of *Gleichheit*

Clara Zetkin receives a letter from the executive committee of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, signed by Friedrich Ebert, informing her that she is immediately removed from the editorial board of *Gleichheit: Journal for the Interests of Women Workers*, which she has led since its founding in 1892. She is in the middle of preparations for issue 18 of Volume 27. Zetkin is removed for having joined the USPD, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany. She can now only publish a highly-censored supplement in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.

Together with her comrades and close collaborators Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring, Zetkin has supported Karl Liebknecht in his struggle against the war, organizing a peace conference for women in neutral Switzerland as early as 1915. Zetkin, who places great importance on Trotsky's pamphlet "War and the International," repeatedly stresses that the war must lead to a revolutionary transformation and that "the present world war had its origins in capitalist imperialism."

"The real reason I was reprimanded is the fundamental (*grundsätzliche*) orientation of the journal," Zetkin writes in an open letter to the socialist women of all countries. "To accept the views of the majority, the approval of war credits and to endorse the governmental policies of Social Democracy or praise them as an historic feat is something I consider to be a betrayal of the demands of international socialism. To remain silent about these politics would have been disgraceful cowardice."

May 18 (May 5 O.S.): New bourgeois "coalition government" proclaimed in Russia

With the Provisional Government thoroughly discredited by Miliukov's note, and confronting mass demonstrations, the bourgeois ministers invite leaders from the Petrograd Soviet to participate in a new coalition government.

In the Petrograd Soviet, defensist, collaborationist and petty-bourgeois opportunist forces are currently in the majority, including Mensheviks, populists and Socialist Revolutionaries. The Soviet resolves to send ministers into the new coalition government, over the opposition of the Bolsheviks.

The new coalition government includes Alexander Kerensky (Trudovik) as Minister of War, Viktor Chernov (SR) as Minister of Agriculture, Irakli Tsereteli (Menshevik) as Minister of Postal Services and Telegraph, and Matvey Skobelev (Menshevik) as Minister of Labor. With Kerensky serving as the Minister of War, the populist demagogue and "socialist" takes direct responsibility for the prosecution of the ongoing slaughter.

The Bolsheviks refuse to serve in a capitalist government that is carrying out an imperialist war, with Lenin denouncing Chernov, Chkheidze and Tsereteli as having "sunk completely to the level of defending Russian imperialism." On May 19, Lenin publishes an article entitled, "Class Collaboration With Capital, or Class Struggle Against Capital?"

"We shall—in cooperation with the capitalists—help the country out of its crisis, save it from ruin and get it out of the war"—that is what the action of the petty-bourgeois leaders, the Chernovs and Tseretelis, in joining the cabinet really amounts to. Our answer is: Your help is not enough. The crisis has advanced infinitely farther than you imagine. Only the revolutionary class, by taking revolutionary measures against capital, can save the country—and not our country alone.

The crisis is so profound, so widespread, of such vast world-wide scope, and so closely bound up with capital itself, that the class struggle against capital must inevitably assume the form of political supremacy by the proletariat and semi-proletariat. There is no other way out...

The experiment at class collaboration with capital is now being made by the Chernovs and Tseretelis, and by certain sections of the petty bourgeoisie, on a new, gigantic, all-Russia scale. All the more valuable will be its lessons for the people, when the latter become convinced—and that apparently will be soon—of the futility and hopelessness of such collaboration.

Vienna, May 18-19: Trial of Austrian social democrat Friedrich Adler

The trial of Dr. Friedrich Adler begins in Vienna, Austria on May 18. Adler assassinated the Austrian Prime Minister Karl Graf Stürgkh on October 21, 1916. The court sentences Adler to death. Emperor Charles later commutes the sentence to an 18-year prison term, which Adler will ultimately not serve thanks to a granting of amnesty in 1918.

Friedrich Adler is the son of Victor Adler, leader and founding member of the Austrian Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP). Protesting the glorification of war by the German and Austrian Social Democrats, Friedrich Adler resigned from his post as party secretary and as editor of the journal *Der Kampf* (The Struggle). His own anti-war newspaper *Das Volk* (The People) is banned.

During the trial, he complains that in the Social Democratic Party of Austria, "the bureaucratic apparatus had gained the upper hand over the long-term interests of the proletariat" and has developed itself more and

more into a "counter-revolutionary body." He tells the court that he had become convinced that only a shocking act could stop the war and with the assassination he "wanted to make a place for the revolutionary spirit in Austria once again ... It was a *profession of violence* (*Bekennntnis zur Gewalt*), ... but it was also ... a *symbolic act, a parable*."

In contrast to his party, which makes every effort to present his act as that of a madman, Adler's actions are celebrated by some sections of the war-weary working masses. They are, however, "an outburst of opportunism in despair, nothing more," Trotsky later writes in *My Life*. "After he had vented his despair, he returned to his old rut." Indeed, after the war, in 1918, Adler will work to stymie the revolutionary upheaval in Austria, and by 1919 he will become a member of parliament. He will eventually return to the Second International.

Jura, Switzerland, May 19-20: "Storming of the Bastille" of La Chaux-de-Fonds

Ernest-Paul Graber (1875-1956), a Western Switzerland socialist and publisher of the newspaper *La Sentinelle*, is freed by a crowd of thousands of people from the prison in La Chaux-de-Fonds. The city, a center of the watch-making industry, is a stronghold of socialists in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

A military court had sentenced Graber to an eight-day prison sentence for insulting the Swiss army. The offending comments were made in a report in *La Sentinelle* on a brutal case of military abuse in which a soldier nearly died during a winter march. Two officers claimed that a soldier suffering from a heart condition was a "fake," and had tied him between their horses and forced him to keep marching until he collapsed.

On the evening of May 19, a demonstration of more than a thousand socialists and workers led by a marching band gathers at the prison in which Graber had begun his sentence the night before. During a speech delivered there, the proposal is made to "do as [they had] in Russia." After several hours, the crowd manages to break down the gates and occupy the prison. Graber is taken away in triumph to a hiding place. The next day, the governing council sends a regiment of three battalions and a cavalry unit into La Chaux-de-Fonds to occupy the city for several days.

The incident shows that even in "neutral" Switzerland social conditions are explosive. The families of soldiers called up for duty receive no compensation for their loss of wages and have to get by with the earnings of the head of the family alone. The war and an unusually cold winter have led to higher prices and scarcity of basic necessities which have been rationed from the end of 1916 onward.

Graber belongs to the "Zimmerwald Left" and the wing of the Swiss social democrats who reject the armed defense of the country. However, after the national strike of November 1918, Graber would distance himself from the revolutionary politics of the Third International and follow Swiss social democratic leader Robert Grimm in the shift to the "centrist," i.e. social-patriotic camp. Two months before this "storming of the Bastille," on March 18, 1917, Lenin had visited La Chaux-de-Fonds at Graber's invitation.

Paris, May 18: Premiere of Erik Satie-Jean Cocteau ballet, with sets by Pablo Picasso

A remarkable group of artists collaborate on *Parade*, a one-act ballet, which premieres to much controversy at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

The music is composed by Erik Satie, the scenario written by Jean Cocteau and the sets and costumes designed by Pablo Picasso (Italian futurist artist Giacomo Balla assists Picasso.) The piece is presented by the legendary Ballets Russes and choreographed by Léonide Massine (who also dances). The Swiss Ernest Ansermet conducts the orchestra.

Parade is subtitled a “realistic ballet,” because it represents contemporary urban realities. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire terms it “a kind of surrealism,” apparently one of the first uses of the word. The Satie-Cocteau piece makes reference to various forms of popular entertainment, including music hall and silent films.

The plot of the ballet concerns the unsuccessful efforts of a group of circus performers to attract an audience. Picasso, who also prepares the backdrop, designs 10-foot tall costumes for some of the dancers made of wood, metal, cloth, papier-mâché and other materials. According to one commentator, the clumsy, uncomfortable costumes—constructed in the geometric shapes of buildings and skyscrapers—are “intended to be awkward, with the dancers stomping around the stage robotically to express the mechanized, dehumanized modern era.”

A portion of the Théâtre du Châtelet audience hisses and boos, and nearly causes a riot.



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