

This week in the Russian Revolution

May 29 – June 4: Lenin and Trotsky move toward unity as calls for Soviet power spread

29 May 2017

This week in 1917, In the pages of Pravda, Lenin issues a call for immediate unity with Trotsky's Mezhraiontsy group. The unity of Lenin and Trotsky is also recognized by their enemies. For the first time, newspapers in Britain and the US fuse the names "Lenin and Trotsky" in their pages.

Lenin and Trotsky have been brought together politically by the imperialist world war and the course of the Russian Revolution. Both leaders insist on the transfer of power to the working class as the first blow of world revolution and for a final break with the nationalist and opportunist socialist tendencies that support the capitalist Provisional Government and its prosecution of the Great War.

Earlier differences between the two greatest revolutionists of the 20th century have been lifted by Lenin's April Theses, which in essence adopts Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, and Trotsky's recognition of the necessity of Lenin's concept of the party. Raskolnikov later recalls of Lenin and Trotsky, "Their rapprochement ... was completely and unquestionably determined, from the moment of [Trotsky's] return to Russia. After his very first speeches all of us old Leninists felt he was ours."

Petrograd, May 31 (May 18, O.S.): *Pravda* publishes Lenin's proposal for Bolshevik unity with Trotsky's Mezhraiontsy

The central Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* publishes an article by Lenin, introducing the Bolshevik proposal for a unification with Trotsky's Mezhraiontsy Group (Inter-District Organization). Lenin also considers a reunification with the Menshevik Internationalists, headed by Yulii Martov, who oppose the Menshevik leadership's support for a continuation of the war and the Provisional Government.

Lenin brought the proposal to the Mezhraiontsy conference on May 23 (May 10, O.S.), and it was approved by the Bolshevik Central Committee. At the conference, Lenin urged the Mezhraiontsy to immediately join the Bolshevik Party. Without putting forward any conditions of his own, Lenin offered them full democratic rights in the Bolshevik Party and a free discussion, as well as positions on the leading bodies and the editorial staff of *Pravda*.

Now, Lenin writes in *Pravda* that:

The political resolutions of the Inter-District Organization have in general adopted the sound course of breaking with the "defencists". Under the circumstances, any division of forces would, in our opinion, be utterly unjustifiable.

The Mezhraiontsy include a formidable group of Marxist leaders, many of whom would play a major role in the October Revolution and the early Soviet government. Along with Trotsky, they include Anatoly Lunacharsky, Adolf Ioffe, Lev Karakhan, Moisei Uritsky, David Riazanov, and Konstantin Yureniev. A few former members of the Mezhraiontsy, including Grigory Sokolnikov, have already joined the Bolshevik Party.

Even though there is broad agreement between the Bolsheviks and the Mezhraiontsy about questions of program and strategic orientation, thanks to the reorientation of the Bolshevik Party by Lenin on the basis of the April Theses, opposition to a merger remains among many Mezhraiontsy. Judging by the scarce records available, this opposition is largely directed at Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party. Echoing earlier disagreements, leading Mezhraiontsy like Yureniev insist that there is a lack of democracy in the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky finds himself in a minority among the Mezhraiontsy fighting for a swift merger with the Bolshevik Party.

New York, May 31: *Times* condemns Lenin and Trotsky

The *New York Times*, for the first time, places in conjunction the names of Lenin and Trotsky. For the next several years, the two great revolutionaries will often be put side by side in the pages of the western media.

The article, which is first a cable sent to the *London Daily Chronicle*, "Socialist Ministers Warn Nation of Peril," quotes the Provisional Government's Menshevik Minister of Labor, Matvey Skobelev, who warns of the danger of renewed revolution: "We are walking on the edge of a knife across an abyss."

The *Times* attempts to reassure its readers: "It is true that the extreme Socialists—Lenine, Trotsky, and their fellows—continue their destructive work. ... but the influence of the extremists is now waning."

Petrograd, May 31 (May 18, O.S.): *Pravda* reports on workers' resolution demanding transfer of power to the Soviets

According to a report published in *Pravda*, thousands of workers at the Shchetinin factory have supported a resolution condemning the Petrograd Soviet's decision to enter the Coalition Government. In the resolution, the workers demand an immediate transfer of power to the Soviets. The

resolution, coming amid a growing strike wave throughout Russia, is symptomatic of alienation from the policies of the leadership of the Petrograd Soviet among broader layers of the working class.

The next day, some 8,000 working class youth march through Petrograd, demanding protection at the workplace and voting rights for youth. Their banners read, “Down with the war! All power to the Soviets!”

Detroit, May 30: IWW offices raided

An alleged plan to shut down commerce on the Great Lakes—the transport route for much of American industrial production—was supposedly broken up by a federal raid on the Detroit offices of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), according to media reports.

Federal, state, and local authorities are increasingly using the pretext of American entry into war to crush dissent and outlaw strikes. Across the US, reports emerge of individuals being arrested or monitored for protesting the draft, or otherwise interfering with war mobilization.

On June 1, Woodrow Wilson releases an executive order, in advance of the national draft registration day on June 5, subjecting any individual who flees the US to avoid the draft with imprisonment upon their return.

The “liberal” constitutional lawyer Louis Marshall meanwhile calls for opposition to the draft to be punished by death. He writes on June 3, “Any man who urges another not to register on June 5, or argues that the order is illegal and need not be obeyed, or who even intimates that one required to register can safely refrain from registering—such a man, in my opinion, has committed the crime of treason against the United States and may be punished by death.”

Vienna, May 30: Austria’s Imperial Council convened amidst growing national tensions

Austria’s Imperial Council (*Reichsrat*), which represents the Austrian half of the Habsburg dynasty’s “Dual Monarchy” known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, holds its first session today since the outbreak of war with Serbia in July 1914. For close to three years, successive Austrian prime ministers have governed on the basis of emergency decrees from the Emperor.

Charles I’s decision to recall the Council exposes the deepening national divisions within the Empire. When the council opens, deputies representing Slovenians, Serbs and Croats in Austrian-controlled lands issue a declaration calling for the unification of the areas in which these Slavic peoples live to form a third pillar within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Dual Monarchy, which has been based on a compromise between Austrian and Hungarian parts since 1867, has also been attacked by Czech nationalists. Edvard Beneš, in exile in Paris where he is seeking diplomatic support for an independent Czechoslovak state, has called on deputies from Bohemia and Moravia to boycott the vote on the budget, and appeals for freedom of the press and an end to the prosecutions for high treason of Czech soldiers who refused to fight in the Austro-Hungarian army. The Polish deputies, meanwhile, are advocating for a united Poland.

Charles seeks to counter mounting nationalist tensions the following day in his throne speech, promising freedom for the national and cultural development of equal peoples within the Empire—after the war has been won. He reaffirms his absolute right to conclude peace in the name of the

Empire.

Missy-aux-Bois, France, June 1: Mutineers seize control of town as unrest in army grows

French army mutineers seize control of the town of Missy-aux-Bois in the department of Aisne as the rebellion that began in the army at the beginning of May continues to spread. The soldiers proclaim the creation of an anti-war government. Loyal troops soon arrive to regain control of the situation, but the army still confronts widespread unrest.

Two days earlier, on May 30, soldiers met in an assembly outside the village of Daucourt to establish a soviet made up of three men from each company to take over the 269th Regiment. At Sainte-Menehould, two regiments mutinied and seized their barracks amid cries of “peace or revolution.” Shots were fired at officers and a general was rescued just before being put up against a wall and shot.

Order was only established after officers promised to expand the number of soldiers allowed to go on home leave.

Baku, June 1 (May 19, O.S.): Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumyan elected to chair editorial board of party newspaper

The Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in Baku establishes a party newspaper, with Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumyan elected to chair the editorial board. The Committee resolves to deepen its work among the Azerbaijani workers and strive to increase their representation in the Baku Soviet. To that end, the newspaper will be published in Azeri.

Following the February Revolution, the Provisional Government formed a Special Transcaucasian Committee to replace Russian imperial rule in Transcaucasia (now Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). At the same time, and at the encouragement of Bolsheviks and other groups, numerous soviets and committees began springing up throughout the region. The most significant of these will be the Baku Soviet, dominated by Shaumyan, who earns the affectionate nickname, “Caucasian Lenin.”

Shaumyan led a powerful general strike in Baku in 1914, which was crushed by the Russian imperial army. He was thrown into prison for his role in the strike.

The region is the site of heavy fighting during the Great War. During the Caucasian campaign, Russian armies suffered 140,000 military casualties and Ottoman armies 300,000. As is the case elsewhere in the former Russian Empire, the popular demand by the oppressed peoples of the region for self-determination emerges explosively following the collapse of the tsarist regime.

Petrograd, June 3 (May 21 O.S.): Russian Minister of Justice denounces transfer of power to Kronstadt Soviet

The Russian Minister of Justice Pereverzev announces to the international press that the naval base Kronstadt will be declared outlawed and cut off from the rest of the country unless it obeys the Provisional Government. On May 26 (13, O.S.) the Kronstadt Soviet adopted a resolution putting all control over the civic and military affairs at the base

in the hands of the Soviet. The resolution marks the beginning of the formation of the Kronstadt Republic.

The Kronstadt Soviet is headed by Anatoly Lamanov, an ex-student and lower-rank officer who comes from a Russian military family and advocates radical policies, while supporting the war against Germany.

The Kronstadt sailors are one of the main bases of support for Leon Trotsky. One day after the Kronstadt Soviet passes the resolution defying the authority of the Provisional Government, Trotsky speaks in Kronstadt, debating the Menshevik Mark Broido in what one historian calls “the beginning of that special relationship [between Trotsky and the Kronstadt Soviet] which made him its tribune and advocate in Petrograd.” Countering Broido, who argues that the revolution in Russia can remain only within the confines of bourgeois democracy and that the fate of the Russian revolution could not be made dependent on the “problematic expectation of revolution in other countries,” Trotsky says:

I lived in France for two years during the war, and I’m telling you that France is closer to social revolution than any other country ... If it’s the fate of the Russian revolution as a whole that concerns you, then you had better grasp this: whatever turn the war may take, unless there is a social revolution in Europe, England and Germany will crush us anyway. That is how the question stands.

Expressing his full support for the Kronstadt Soviet’s resolution, Trotsky urges the sailors to fight for a broadening of Soviet power throughout the country:

You yourselves have drafted a resolution about taking power into your own hands! Don’t you agree that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, and what is good for Kronstadt is also good for any town?

It is you who stand in the front line, while the others have fallen behind. It is up to you to call upon them to adopt your standpoint. What you have to say is: we are standing as firm as a rock, and you too must stand firm, take power into your own hands and demand that the central power of Russia be transferred to the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.

Russia, June 4 (May 22 O.S.): Brusilov appointed supreme commander of the Russian army

Aleksander Kerensky, as the new Minister of War, is preparing a major military offensive. In a flowery “order” addressed to soldiers, he proclaims that the war is now being prosecuted for “the lofty ideals of our revolution, for liberty, equality and fraternity.” He declares, “On the point of your bayonets you will bring peace, right, truth, and justice.”

The newly appointed supreme commander, General Alexei Brusilov, is renowned for his role in a major offensive operation the previous year, known as the Brusilov Offensive or “June Advance,” which was one of the bloodiest military engagements in world history. On the day of his appointment as supreme commander, Brusilov relays to General Alekseev a report by the commander of the 7th Army regarding Kerensky’s visit to the front:

The arrival of the Minister of War had a favorable influence. In a general way it would seem that the relations between officers and soldiers are getting more stable. The majority realize the necessity for an offensive ... Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks exist; their speeches at the Congress were met very unfavorably, but there is no doubt that on the ignorant masses their influence continues to be harmful and the struggle against it is difficult.

Leeds, June 3: British socialists declare support for Russian revolution, continuation of war

A mass gathering of democrats and socialists takes place at the Coliseum in Leeds, organized by the United Socialist Council, a body composed of representatives from the British Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party and the trade unions. The *Manchester Guardian* reports that there are 1,200 delegates in attendance, and the event will later be described as the largest anti-war assembly in Britain during the First World War.

While anti-war sentiment among those in attendance is strong, the leadership of the meeting remains firmly in the hands of opportunists from the ILP, trade unions and Labour Party. This is reflected in the first resolution, moved by Labour MP Ramsay MacDonald and entitled “Russia Hail!” which states that the February Revolution has “removed the standing menace of aggressive imperialism from Eastern Europe.”

The second resolution is moved by ILP MP Philip Snowden and deals with foreign policy. It advances the defensist line of the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary-dominated Soviet executive committee in Russia and calls for a “democratic” peace, declaring that the Leeds convention “hails with the greatest satisfaction the declaration of the foreign policy and the war aims of the Russian Provisional Government,” which has recently pledged to continue waging the imperialist war in the name of defending the revolution.

Criticizing the hypocrisy of some now hailing the February Revolution, Irish socialist William O’Brien tells the meeting, “I gather, from reading some of the capitalist newspapers, that revolution is popular nowadays. Twelve months ago you had a revolution in Ireland. The papers and the politicians that acclaimed the revolution in Russia did not acclaim the revolution in Ireland, where the leaders were taken out and shot like dogs ... one of them some of you knew—James Connolly.”

Other leading speakers at the convention include the suffragist and socialist Sylvia Pankhurst and the philosopher Bertrand Russell.

The convention concludes by passing a resolution calling for the establishment of workers’ and soldiers’ councils in Britain, although this demand is opposed by some forces aligned with the unions. An open-air demonstration to have taken place in the evening is banned by the lord mayor, who has received authorization from the home secretary in the Lloyd George government to do so.

Washington, June 4: US banks, corporations, profit from European slaughter

John Skelton Williams, US Controller of Currency, announces that total deposits held by US banks have reached over \$13 billion, an increase of nearly \$2 billion in one year. American banks are also rich from loans to Britain and France. It is announced that eight London banks are seeking the renewal of a \$50 million revolving line of credit with the US Treasury

and major US banks. Great Britain by itself has already taken on \$400 million in debt to the US, but, the *New York Times* reports, “it needs a much larger sum to pay for supplies purchased here.”

These supplies are often cast in steel. In 1916, for the first time since 1906, America’s massive steel industry was working at full capacity. Now, in 1917, demand outstrips production. The largest consumer is the US government, whose purchases drive up costs for Britain and France, who must purchase US-made products at inflated prices—and in dollars borrowed from US banks.

As part of the “democratic” campaign to fund the US war effort, Wilson has signed into law the “Liberty Loan” or Emergency Loan Act, authorizing the sale of \$1.9 billion in bonds at 3.5 percent yield. Millions of Americans will purchase these bonds. However, the very wealthy and largest corporations will devour the lion’s share, including US Steel and First National Bank, which this week in 1917 have each purchased \$25 million.

The increases in production are creating a situation of near-full employment. The Pittsburgh steel-milling region is employing 1 million workers—men and children—paying out a combined daily payroll, however, of only \$1.5 million. Wages are falling behind war-profit driven inflation. Strike activity is increasing across the US.

Leipzig, June 4: Left-wing opponents of war tried before the German Imperial Court of Justice

On June 4, several socialist opponents of the war and peace activists are brought before the Imperial Court of Justice in Leipzig for distributing anti-war leaflets. Among them is state parliamentary representative Friedrich Westmeyer, a close friend and kindred spirit to Clara Zetkin.

It was Westmeyer’s harsh critique that had earlier led Karl Liebknecht to reconsider his adherence to party discipline during the first vote for war credits in 1914 and to make the decision to oppose them in the second vote. At the beginning of 1916, Westmeyer also took part in the “founding conference” of the Spartacus League held in Liebknecht’s apartment. He supported the position of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and insisted they not compromise with the conciliators in the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) around Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour.

Despite an official ban on public speaking, Westmeyer organized demonstrations against food shortages and price increases. On May 1, 1916, he led a major unauthorized demonstration in Stuttgart. Like many other oppositional workers and socialists, on February 2, 1917 he was drafted and sent poorly trained to the front lines of the war.

There he will contract what is probably Typhus and dies on November 14, 1917 in a military hospital in Rethel near Reims. The Stuttgart police brag: “With the death of Friedrich Westmeyer, the radicals of Württemberg have been deprived of their most influential and dangerous leader, and since a larger number of other leaders and agitators have also been called up for military duty, they now lack a firm leadership and organization, something which is certainly a welcome development in these uneasy times.”

Rosa Luxemburg writes to Clara Zetkin from her Breslauer prison on November 11, 1917: “Westmeyer is a major loss. I always thought he would still play a role in great times.”

Dresden, June 3: German premiere of three new plays by Oskar Kokoschka

The Albert Theater in Dresden presents the German premiere of three expressionistic one-act plays by the Austrian poet and painter Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980): “Murder, the Womens’ Hope,” “Hiob,” and “The Burning Bramble.” The author also directed the plays and served as production designer.

Because of his unrequited love for Alma Mahler, the widow of the composer Gustav Mahler, Kokoschka volunteered for the army in 1915. He was seriously wounded on the Ukrainian front where he was shot in the head and stabbed in the chest with a bayonet. After his recovery, he was sent back to the front in 1916 where he was again wounded. He was then deployed as a war painter.

He would draw some 30 images, mostly using colored chalk, depicting the movement of troops, artillery positions and destroyed villages. After being wounded for the second time, he became a pacifist and, starting in 1917, worked on an anti-war portfolio. This includes a drawing of “Soldiers, fighting each other with crucifixes.” Female bodies are hanging from the crucifixes in an apparent allusion to the suffering of the civilian population.

Because of his wound in the head, he was sent to a sanatorium in Dresden to recover in late 1916. He is now seeking a professorship at the local art academy (which he eventually gets in 1919). During his time in Dresden, Kokoschka draws many of his most famous paintings, including a self-portrait, in which he is pointing with his right forefinger to the spot where he was stabbed with a bayonet.



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