

## This week in the Russian Revolution

**June 5-11: Horror on the Western Front**

5 June 2017

*The Great War, which brought forth the Russian Revolution, continues to rage. In one moment on the Western Front, some 10,000 men and boys are killed or buried alive when the British detonate explosives under German trenches at Messines. Even more are dying in intense and strategically meaningless mountain fighting between Italy and Austria on the Southern Front.*

*Meanwhile, the United States is mobilizing to join the inter-imperialist struggle, subjecting millions of men to conscription. It will take the Americans many more months to train, equip and transport this force to France. In the meantime, the Allies fear that Russia, driven by the demand for peace among its workers and peasants, will withdraw from the fighting, ending the Eastern Front, thereby allowing Germany to bring its full force down on Britain and France before the US arrives. To forestall this, Wilson issues a public appeal to the Provisional Government, demanding that Germany be defeated before conditions of a “just” peace—supposedly without annexations—can be implemented.*

*In Petrograd, the differences between the various social forces involved in the revolution are sharpening. The Provisional Government, backed by the opportunist, populist, and “socialist” leaders in the Petrograd Soviet, confronts defiant Kronstadt sailors who refuse to recognize its authority.*

**Kronstadt, June 5 (May 23 OS): Kronstadt Soviet accepts ultimatum by the Provisional Government**

As its conflict with the Provisional Government escalates, the Kronstadt Soviet holds an extraordinary session. Following the resolution of the Kronstadt Soviet from May 26 (May 13, O.S.), which declared that the Soviet holds all power in Kronstadt and will not answer to the Provisional Government, the Petrograd Soviet sent a high-ranking delegation to Kronstadt on June 1 (May 19, O.S.), consisting of the Socialist Revolutionary Avram Gots, the Bundist Mark Liber and the Menshevik Vasilii Anisimov.

The delegates, who arrived on June 3 (May 21, O.S.), managed to persuade the Kronstadt Soviet to adopt an “elucidation” to the previous resolution, acknowledging “indispensable relations” with the Provisional Government so long as power has not yet passed to the Soviets.

Shortly thereafter, the Menshevik ministers Tsereteli and Skobelev hurry to Kronstadt on June 4 (May 22, O.S.). They demand full recognition of the central government and its commissar as well as a proper trial for dozens of Kronstadt officers who have been arrested by the sailors. Otherwise, they threaten, the Provisional Government will treat Kronstadt as a “rebellious province.”

At the extraordinary session of the Kronstadt Soviet on the morning of June 5 (May 23, O.S.), a resolution is adopted accepting the demands of Tsereteli and Skobelev. The next day, however, thousands of angry sailors take to the streets denouncing the recognition of the Provisional

Government and accusing the Soviet deputies of having “sold themselves to the bourgeoisie.”

**Butte, Montana, June 5: Miners demonstrate against conscription**

A crowd estimated in the thousands marches in this copper mining city against the Wilson administration’s imposition of the draft. The parade begins with an estimated 600, led by miners’ wives marching behind a twelve-foot red flag. It is soon attacked by police and “patriotic citizens,” but does not disperse. “Women paraders fought the police, and the crowd swelled to several thousand,” the *New York Times* reports.

Mayor W.H. Maloney mounts a business clock in the center of the city and orders the crowd to disperse within 15 minutes. At that point, “Troops that had been held at their barracks came at a run with their bayonets fixed.” The demonstrators then reassemble outside the Finnish socialist hall, where the crowd is addressed by a woman speaking in Finnish.

The leadership of an Irish anti-conscription organization called the Pearce Connolly Club are jailed the same day for distributing anti-conscription literature in Butte. The city is placed under martial law.

Demonstrations against conscription are also reported among the miners of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula at Hancock, Houghton, Calumet, and Nagaunee, where national guardsmen, local police, and vigilantes are used to disperse and arrest protesters.

Arrests, beatings, and public humiliations of individual “slackers” are reported from across the US. Many of these individuals are publicly forced to kiss the American flag.

June 5, Conscription Day, is nonetheless declared to be a success by the Wilson administration, with estimates that some 9 million American men—overwhelmingly workers and farmers—enroll in the draft.

**Flagstaff, Arizona, June 5: American Indians refuse conscription**

American Indians refuse conscription at several locations across the US. At Flagstaff, Navajo Indians drive draft officials and other officers off their reservation when they attempt to impose conscription. Ute Indians in Colorado refuse to register and have reportedly threatened to burn the nearby city of Ignacio. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, leaders of the Pueblo are arrested and charged with “conspiring to prevent registration.”

Only two decades have passed from the conclusion of the bloody Plains Indians Wars—the killing and forced dispossession of the tribes of the trans-Mississippi West to make way for American mining, railroading, and ranching interests. American Indians have been forced onto poverty-stricken reservations and, through the Dawes Act of 1887, compelled to

privatize their lands and give up traditional cultural practices. Now they are asked to fight and die in Wilson's "war for democracy."

### **Petrograd, June 6 (May 24, O.S.): Lenin intervenes in Petrograd District Council Elections**

On June 6, the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* publishes Lenin's succinct analysis of the tendencies running in the Petrograd District Council Elections, which the Bolsheviks are contesting. Lenin divides the numerous contenders into five basic groups based on their essential class alignments and characteristics. First are the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets), the party of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie, landlords and capitalists. Next, there is the newly formed Radical-Democratic Party, a capitalist formation that is "something in the nature of Kadets in disguise." In the third category, Lenin groups together what he describes as a "motley assortment of Narodniks (Trudoviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, and Popular Socialists) and Mensheviks. . . A regular petty-bourgeois hodgepodge and petty-bourgeois lack of principles!" Fourth, there is a group of supposedly "nonpartisan" parties, including "House Management," which Lenin calls "philistinism at its local narrowest."

In the final category, Lenin groups the Bolsheviks with two other groups, the Interdistrict Group (*Mezhraiontsy*) and the internationalist Mensheviks. "This bloc is strictly based on principles and is openly proclaimed in resolutions passed by our Party's Petrograd and All-Russia conferences," Lenin writes. "The fundamental issue in contemporary political life both in Russia and the rest of the world is that of the struggle of proletarian internationalism against the chauvinism (or 'defensism') of the big and petty bourgeoisie."

"Partisanship, as we know," Lenin writes, "is both a condition for and index of political development. The more politically developed and enlightened the given population or given class is, the higher, as a general rule, is its party organization. This rule is borne out by the experience of all civilized countries. From the point of view of the class struggle that is obviously how it should be."

### **Petrograd, June 7 (May 25 O.S.): Lenin outlines plan to address economic disorganization**

The state of economic disorganization in the former tsarist empire has reached catastrophic proportions. Amid a growing strike wave in the cities, peasant unrest and anarchy in the countryside, and the cumulative losses, waste, and deprivations of the ongoing war, Russia confronts a calamitous breakdown of production. In particular, without adequate agricultural production in the countryside, millions of people in urban areas face starvation. The early stages of this calamity are already making themselves felt in Petrograd.

"Only by the greatest exertion of all the nation's forces and the adoption of a number of immediate revolutionary measures, both in the local areas and at the center of government, can this debacle be effectively coped with," Lenin writes. The economic chaos cannot be effectively combated by measures that leave the capitalists and landlords in control and preserve their privileges intact, as has already been shown by events. "The only way to avert disaster is to establish effective workers' control over the production and distribution of goods

"Workers' control should similarly be extended to all financial and

banking operations with the aim of discovering the true financial state of affairs; such control to be participated in by councils and conventions of employees of banks and syndicates, which are to be organized forthwith," Lenin continues, with "all commercial and bank books open" to inspection by workers' committees. These measures are to be followed by "general and compulsory labor service," which will ensure "maximum economy in the expenditure of labor-power," with production of war materials being replaced by the production of "goods necessary for the country's economic rehabilitation."

Throughout the week, numerous army divisions and factory committees demand an end to the war and an immediate transfer of power to the Soviets.

### **Messines, Belgium, June 7: 10,000 German soldiers slaughtered in massive mine blasts**

At 3:10 a.m., the British Second Army detonates around 450 tons of ammonal explosives under German positions. The attack has been prepared for over a year, with a system of mines dug deep under German trenches on Messines ridge, which the British intend to capture in the battle that begins today.

The British set off 26 mines within a 20-second period, with horrific results: 10,000 German soldiers are instantly killed or buried alive. Many survivors are stunned, retreat, or surrender to the approximately 80,000 British and Allied troops that advance behind creeping artillery barrages. The front line of German defenses is largely destroyed, assisting in the Allied advance. The mine planted at Spanbroekmolen forms a crater with a diameter of 76 meters and a depth of 12 meters.

The blast is reportedly heard in London and Dublin. In Lille, France, many believe that it is an earthquake. British troops capture German trenches within hours of the explosions and consolidate their control over key battlefield positions in subsequent days.

The detonation of the mines at Messines, the largest manmade explosion before the detonation of an atomic bomb, shifts the strategic situation on the Western Front in favor of the Allies. It was an unmitigated disaster for the German army. The seizure of Messines ridge by the Allies prepares the way for the Third Battle of Ypres, which will begin next month. The Allies hope to push back German lines in this area to cut off their supply lines and access to the Belgian coast.

### **Petrograd, June 8 (May 26, O.S.): Trotsky defends Kronstadt sailors before the Petrograd Soviet**

Amid militant protests of the Kronstadt sailors, who, in opposition to their own Soviet leadership, insist on breaking off ties with the Provisional Government, the Petrograd Soviet holds an extraordinary session, which Vladimir Voitinsky later remembers as "one of the most dramatic moments of the year 1917." The Menshevik Tsereteli introduces the resolution by the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, taking on the role as chief prosecutor against the Kronstadt sailors. Trotsky speaks in defense of the rebellious Kronstadters, while Iulii Martov, a Menshevik-Internationalist, pleads for patience and a delay of a decision.

Introducing the resolution, Tsereteli denounces Kronstadt as a "hotbed of anarchy and a disgrace to the revolution." The resolution condemns Kronstadt for its "secession from the revolutionary democracy." Trotsky opposes the resolution and denounces the Petrograd Soviet leadership,

declaring:

Yes! The Kronstadters are anarchists, but when the final battle for the revolution comes, those gentlemen who now incite you to a showdown with the Kronstadters will soap the [hangman's] ropes for all of us, while it will be the Kronstadters who will fight and die with us.

With 580 to 162 votes, with 74 abstentions, the resolution by Tsereteli is adopted. The Bolshevik faction votes against the resolution. That same night, the Provisional Government, emboldened by the stance taken by the opportunists and populists in the Petrograd Soviet, holds an extraordinary session and issues an order instructing all Kronstadt citizens to “unconditionally execute all orders of the Provisional Government.”

### **Butte, Montana, June 8: Fire kills 163 copper miners**

A fire at the Speculator Mine, caused by a carbide lamp igniting an electrical cable, kills 163 men. The fire spreads from the cable, 4,000 feet underground, to shaft timbers, and smoke and carbon monoxide spread throughout the mine's hundreds of miles of tunnels. Several hundred miners escape through underground connections to other mines, but many remain trapped. With no ventilation and no proper rescue procedures in place, they die of asphyxiation over the coming days, many of them leaving notes to loved ones.

There is no alarm system in the mine, so miners working at a distance from the fire are unaware of the spreading, odorless, carbon monoxide. The mine has no evacuation system, not even signs indicating directions to the surface in the event the shaft is blocked. Michael Punke, a historian of the disaster, later comments on the “shocking contrast between the high degree of technology applied to extract copper-ore (gigantic steam engines, hydraulic drilling equipment, sophisticated chemical smelting processes) and the rudimentary consideration given to low-tech measures to improve miner safety (exit signs, open-flame lanterns, dust abatement).”

Montana's copper mines are a bonanza for the world's richest family, the Rockefellers, and their Standard Oil empire. Rockefeller has consolidated almost all copper properties in the first years of this century. Before that time, unions organized almost all of Butte's workers, earning the city the nickname the “Gibraltar of Organized Labor.” As Punke notes, “Standard literally shut the unions down.”

The war means even more production and profit for Standard. “With prices higher, attention to safety became even less of a consideration,” Punke explains. “Immigration trends also played to the Company's benefit. A new wave of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe created a near limitless supply of potential miners. Anyone protesting the working conditions in the mine was blacklisted—and easily replaced.”

### **Kronstadt, June 9 (May 27, O.S.): Kronstadt sailors adopt Trotsky's “Appeal from the Sailors, Soldiers and Workers of Kronstadt”**

With both the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government mobilizing against the Kronstadt sailors, Trotsky, one of the most popular figures among the sailors, hurries to the naval base. With the strong

support of the Bolshevik Ivan Flerovsky, he urges the sailors to temporarily give in to the ultimatum of the government. He argues:

If you do not keep the agreement, comrades, this will be a breach of promise, and they will make you comply somehow, I do not know how precisely; I am not saying that they will send troops, but I think they may refuse to supply bread and money. I do not think it is worthwhile squabbling over this matter, and, since an agreement was reached, it must be kept, so that Kronstadt's name remain undefiled.

The mood among the sailors is militant, and it is difficult for Trotsky and Flerovsky to calm them down. Eventually, the Kronstadt sailors grudgingly adopt the “Appeal from the Sailors, Soldiers and Workers of Kronstadt to the Revolutionary People of Petrograd and to the Whole People of Russia,” which was drafted by Trotsky. Despite a temporary de-escalation of the situation, relations between the Kronstadt sailors, on the one hand, and the Soviet and the Provisional Government in Petrograd, on the other, remain tense in the weeks to come. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky would later write on the events in Kronstadt:

Tempered in the terrible régime of the czarist fleet and the naval fortress, accustomed to stern work, to sacrifices, but also to fury, these sailors, now when the curtain of the new life was beginning to rise before them, a life in which they felt themselves to be the coming masters, tightened all their sinews in order to prove themselves worthy of the revolution. They thirstily threw themselves upon both friends and enemies in Petrograd and almost dragged them by force to Kronstadt, in order to show them what revolutionary seamen are in action. Such moral tension could not of course last forever, but it lasted a long time. The Kronstadt sailor became a kind of fighting crusader of the revolution. But what revolution? Not that revolution incarnated in the minister Tsereteli and his commissar Pepelyaev. Kronstadt stood there as a herald of the advancing second revolution. For that reason, it was hated by all those for whom the first revolution had been more than enough.

### **Washington, June 9: Wilson issues open letter to Russia's Provisional Government**

In a letter addressed to Russia's Provisional Government, US President Woodrow Wilson adapts himself to the Petrograd Soviet's call for peace without annexations, but insists that Germany must first be defeated. The letter is made public today, though it was written on May 22 and wired to US ambassador to Russia David R. Francis, in advance of the diplomatic mission of Elihu Root, whose express aim is to keep Russia in the war.

Wilson, in his usual grandiloquent tone, insists that the US is fighting only for the noblest and most disinterested reasons:

“She is fighting for no advantage or selfish object of her own but for the liberation of peoples everywhere from the aggressions of autocratic force.” Yet Germany, which Wilson insists faces “inevitable ultimate defeat [sic],” wishes to return to the “status quo ante.” This the American president cannot tolerate. “It was the status quo ante out of which this iniquitous war issued forth, the power of the Imperial German Government within the Empire and its widespread domination and

influence outside of that Empire. That status must be altered in such fashion as to prevent any such hideous thing from ever happening again.”

After dressing up the American aim of reducing Germany and dominating Europe in the rhetoric of democratic liberalism and national self-determination, Wilson appeals to the Provisional Government to continue prosecuting the war. Meanwhile, his diplomats, behind the scenes, warn Kerensky that the US will refuse to provide loans if Russia does not. “The day has come to conquer or submit,” Wilson concludes. “If the forces of autocracy can divide us, they will overcome us; if we stand together, victory is certain and the liberty which victory will secure. We can afford then to be generous, but we cannot afford then or now to be weak or omit any single guarantee of justice and security.”

### **Stockholm, June 5-11, 1917: In “Peace Conference” talks, German delegation represents the interests of German imperialism**

During this week in 1917, a delegation of the most right-wing leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) holds preliminary talks in Stockholm for an “international peace conference,” in which the social-chauvinist parties of all the warring countries are to take part. The goal of the conference is to influence the governments of those countries to make peace without annexations or reparations. Among the German delegates are party leaders Philipp Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert as well as trade union leader Carl Legien. Also taking part is the Dutch-Scandinavian committee that initiated the conference.

As early as April 19, at the high point of the April strikes, the SPD came out in favor of participating in the conference. Since then, the military, economic and internal political situation of German imperialism has deteriorated from week to week. In a letter to Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, Scheidemann points out the possibility for Germany of peace without annexations or reparations, advocated by the Petrograd Soviet—a separate peace with Russia. This would prevent both a complete military defeat and a revolution. He wrote:

There is now only one way to avoid the worst calamity... The council of workers and soldiers has provided the formula: peace without annexations or reparations! ... Russia will remain in the hands of the Entente powers so long as the German government does not choose a general peace based on the Petersburg formula... Everything is at stake!

The actions of the German delegation in Stockholm confirm Lenin’s assessment that they are “tools in the hands of the secret diplomacy of German imperialism.” The French and British delegations did not receive passports for the conference from their governments because each knew very well why the German delegation was going. In this way, the British and French governments wish to prevent a separate peace between Russia and Germany.

Rosa Luxemburg characterized those going to Stockholm in the following way:

The socialist peace work carried out here will consist of negotiations over the future map of Europe, the question of annexations, reparations, etc. Instead of discussing the tasks of the class struggle, the ways and means of bringing about peace through the proletariat’s own actions, instead of working out a

program for the organization of social and political conditions by the revolutionary proletariat in line with socialism, the dirty work of the bourgeoisie will be performed by representatives of the proletariat. Socialists are endeavoring, by the sweat of their brows, to prepare an understanding between capitalist governments. (Burning Questions of Our Time III, Stockholm).

### **Athens, June 11: Allies present ultimatum to King Constantine I of Greece**

Britain, France and Russia issue an ultimatum to the neutral Greek government demanding the abdication of King Constantine I within 24 hours. The move is part of an Allied strategy to bring Greece into the war on their side, and it is accompanied by an invasion of Thessaly by Allied troops and the occupation of the Isthmus of Corinth by French forces.

Constantine has displayed pro-German tendencies, which led to his dismissal, earlier in the war, of Prime Minister Eleutherios Venizelos, who sympathized with the Allies. In 1914, Venizelos attempted to bring Greece into the conflict on the side of Serbia, which Greece had promised to aid against Bulgarian attack in a 1913 defense agreement. Constantine’s supporters argued that the treaty was voided if one of the great powers fought on the side of Bulgaria. The king removed Venizelos from power in October 1915.

Venizelos then established an alternative government in Thessaloniki by means of a military coup and reached an agreement with France, Britain and Russia to act as protecting powers. After fighting broke out in Athens between a small contingent of Allied troops and royalist forces in December 1916, triggering riots targeting Venizelos supporters, France and Britain imposed a naval blockade on the parts of the country under Constantine’s control.

Given only 24 hours to respond, Constantine confirms his abdication June 12 and designates his second son, Alexander, as his successor. Venizelos soon sets off for Athens, where he plans to reunite the country under a single government and bring Greece into the war to fight Bulgarian, German and Austro-Hungarian troops on the Macedonian Front.

### **Italo-Austrian Front: Heavy casualties at Isonzo, Ortigara, Grande Strada**

The Tenth Battle of Isonzo, fought from May 12 to June 5, 1917, is one of numerous battles underway along the bloody Italo-Austrian front, in which hundreds of thousands perish on both sides. During less than four weeks, the ferocious conflict produces 160,000 casualties (36,000 dead) on the Italian side and 125,000 (17,000 dead) on the Austro-Hungarian. Tens of thousands are taken prisoner on both sides.

Lieutenant Grenadier Giuseppe Russo records his impressions. “The landscape is terrifying: enormous holes produced by large calibers, one after the next, sowing death among the ranks of soldiers advancing, human limbs launched in every direction, unrecognizable cadavers, still bloody, dying and wounded soldiers asking for help as we walk over so much extermination...”

As the Tenth Battle of Isonzo comes to an end, another battle broke out in the same region, on Mount Ortigara, only five days later. In less than 20 days, the battle produces up to 28,000 casualties among the Italians and nearly 9,000 on the Austro-Hungarian side. It is considered a disastrous

strategic failure for Italy's army.

In the four weeks between May 22 and June 20, a large number of mines are detonated in the Grande Strada area of the Dolomite Mountains, including in the area of Lagazuoi, where 75 tons of explosives bring down entire sections of mountains. The tunnel warfare develops around crucial supply routes like the *Strada delle 52 Gallerie*, an Italian military road passing through 52 tunnels built to facilitate communication and supply the front.



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