

This week in the Russian Revolution

June 19-25: Bolshevik antiwar demonstration banned by Congress of Soviets

19 June 2017

The Provisional Government in Russia is preparing a major military offensive, backed by the Menshevik, petty-bourgeois, and populist leaders. However, masses of workers, peasants and soldiers oppose the planned offensive and demand peace. When the Bolsheviks call for a peaceful demonstration against the offensive, the Menshevik leaders of the Congress of Soviets are outraged and threaten the Bolsheviks with repression.

In a session of the Soviet Congress, the Menshevik leader Irakli Tsereteli loses his temper and unfurls his true counterrevolutionary colors, declaring that the Bolsheviks must be suppressed with “different methods of warfare,” prompting the Bolsheviks to walk out.

Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders, in hopes of avoiding counterrevolutionary violence, abruptly call off the demonstration, causing much resentment and consternation among workers and even within the party ranks. However, the speech by Tsereteli marks a turning point in the Russian Revolution and sends shock waves through the country. Tsereteli’s speech demonstrates how far the supposedly “socialist” Mensheviks are willing to go to defend the capitalist state and its war aims.

Bern, Switzerland, June 19: Arthur Hoffmann resigns from parliament

Swiss Federal Councilor Arthur Hoffmann, head of the Federal Political Department, submits his resignation to President E. Schulthess. It is an extremely unusual step for a member of the Swiss parliament. The resignation letter states, “The unauthorized release of a coded dispatch which I directed to National Councilor Grimm through the intermediary of the Swiss embassy in Petrograd has created a situation that could prove disastrous for the domestic and foreign relations of the country.”

The attorney and politician Hoffmann, a member of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), had worked for banks and insurance companies before his political career led him into the Swiss government in 1911. He was considered staunchly pro-German. In August 1914, during his time as president, he made sure that Hamburg-born General Ulrich Wille, infamous for his cruelty toward soldiers, took over the high command of the Swiss military during the war.

When socialist Robert Grimm, chairman of the Zimmerwald movement, established contact with Hoffmann in April 1917, to secure the return of Russian emigrants through Germany, Hoffmann seized the opportunity and sought with Grimm’s help to assess the possibility of a separate peace between the Central powers and Russia.

The secret correspondence between the German embassy in Bern, the

Swiss foreign ministry and the Swiss embassy in Petersburg accelerated quickly. Reports in the international press about the “Grimm-Hoffmann affair” created a major scandal and drew the attention of the Entente powers of France and England. The British ambassador in Bern, Sir Horace Rumbold, made it clear to Hoffmann that he had exposed the Swiss government to accusations that it was acting on behalf of Germany.

In Romandy, the French-speaking West Switzerland, the affair also provoked a wave of criticism. Notwithstanding the supposedly “strict neutrality of Switzerland,” the sympathies in the west there were more inclined towards France. Meanwhile, those living in German-speaking northern and eastern Switzerland tended to side with Germany. Since the beginning of the war, sharp tensions between both sides of the population had developed. To calm the domestic and foreign policy waters, the government replaced Hoffmann with the Genevese Gustave Ador, the president of the international committee of the Red Cross.

Petrograd, June 20 (June 7, O.S.): Lenin denounces planned Kerensky offensive

In his article, “The Diehards of June 3 Favor an Immediate Offensive,” Lenin denounces Kerensky’s planned military offensive, which had been agreed upon in a secret meeting of the Duma (parliament) on June 16 (June 3, O.S.). Attacking the Menshevik minister and leader of the Petrograd Soviet Irakli Tsereteli, together with the SR minister Viktor Chernov, Lenin writes in *Pravda*:

To favor an immediate offensive means being in favor of continuing the imperialist war, slaughtering Russian workers and peasants in order to strangle Persia, Greece, Galicia, the Balkan peoples, etc., reviving and strengthening the counterrevolution, completely nullifying all the phrases about “peace without annexations,” and waging war *for* annexations. To be against an immediate offensive means being in favor of all power passing to the Soviets, of arousing the revolutionary initiative of the oppressed classes, of an *immediate* offer by the oppressed classes of *all* countries of “peace without annexations,” peace based on the precise condition of overthrowing the tyranny of capital and liberating *all* colonies, *all* the oppressed nationalities, or nationalities not enjoying full rights, bar none. You must choose the one or the other. Tsereteli, Chernov and the rest prefer a middle course. But there is no middle course. If they vacillate or try to get away with mere talk, they, Tsereteli, Chernov and the

rest, will completely make themselves tools in the hands of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie.

Petrograd, June 21 (June 8, O.S.): Bolshevik Party leadership decides to hold peaceful demonstration on June 10

An enlarged meeting of the Central Committee and the Petrograd Committee of the Bolshevik Party approves a peaceful (i.e., unarmed) demonstration under the Bolshevik slogans “Power to the Soviets” and “Down with the Ten Minister-Capitalists,” planned for June 10. The call for the demonstration is supported by several other organizations, including the Central Council of Factory and Shop Committees and some anarchist groups. One day later, Trotsky’s *Mezhraiontsy* (Interdistrict Group) vote in favor of joining the demonstration. The antiwar demonstration is addressed to the Congress of Soviets, which is still convening in Petrograd.

The demonstration had first been proposed by the Bolshevik Military Organization in response to increasingly militant moods among the most advanced sections of the working class and the garrison in Petrograd and in Kronstadt. Just a few days earlier, the Conference of Factory Committees had adopted Bolshevik resolutions. In the industrial Vyborg District of Petrograd, 37 Bolsheviks were elected to the Duma, compared to only 22 from the Socialist Revolutionary-Menshevik Bloc and 4 Kadets.

In a growing number of factories and regiments, workers and soldiers are passing resolutions based on Bolshevik slogans and demands, most notably, “All Power to the Soviets.” Discontent with the impending Kerensky offensive is rampant, especially among the soldiers of the Petrograd garrison. Trotsky later writes in *The History of the Russian Revolution*:

The idea of a showdown between the Petrograd workers and soldiers and the congress was suggested by the whole situation. The masses were urging on the Bolsheviks. The garrison especially was seething—fearing that in connection with the offensive they would be distributed among the regiments and scattered along the front. To this was united a bitter dissatisfaction with the *Declaration of the Rights of the Soldier*, which had been a big backward step in comparison with *Order No. 1* and with the régime actually established in the army.

Petrograd, June 22 (June 9, O.S.): Soviet Congress passes three-day ban on all demonstrations

The Bolsheviks’ announcement of the planned demonstration on June 10, published in this day’s *Pravda*, explodes at the Congress of Soviets like a bombshell. The Soviet leadership, dominated by Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, regards the demonstration as a direct challenge not only to its power, but also to the Provisional Government. The Menshevik leader Chkheidze warns the Congress delegates: “If measures are not taken by the congress, tomorrow will be fatal.”

Tsereteli becomes hysterical, white as a sheet:

Let the Bolsheviks accuse us—we now move to different methods

of warfare. ... The Bolsheviks must be disarmed. The technical means they have had up to now has been too great. It cannot be left in their hands.

Tsereteli’s speech provokes a stunned silence even within the Menshevik and populist-dominated Soviet. As the Menshevik Sukhanov later notes, Tsereteli is effectively calling for disarming the proletariat.

The Bolsheviks really did not have any special stores of weapons. All the weapons were actually in the hands of soldiers and workers, the immense mass of whom were following the Bolsheviks. Disarming the Bolsheviks could mean only disarming the proletariat. More than that, it meant disarming the troops.

As spokesman of the Bolshevik faction, Lev Kamenev indignantly challenges Tsereteli: “Mr. Minister, if you are not tossing words into the wind, you have no right to limit yourself to a speech; arrest me and try me for conspiracy against the revolution.” The Bolsheviks walk out of the meeting. A heated discussion follows. On behalf of the *Mezhraiontsy*, Leon Trotsky attacks Tsereteli and defends the Bolsheviks. Yuli Martov, leader of the Menshevik-Internationalists, speaks out against Tsereteli, cautioning:

Much has been said here about Bolshevik adventurism but don’t forget that you are dealing not with a small group of Bolsheviks, but with the great masses of workers who stand behind them. Instead of trying to attract these masses of workers away from Bolshevik influence, you hasten to measures that will create a gulf between you and the more active part of the proletariat.

Martov and Fyodor Dan, another Menshevik leader, propose a different resolution that would provide “only” for a three-day ban of all demonstrations and the expulsion from the Soviet of anyone disobeying the ban. Their resolution is eventually adopted by the majority of the Soviet Congress.

A few hours later, at 2 a.m. on June 23 (June 10), the Bolshevik Central Committee decides to respect the ban and call off the planned demonstration, fearing that the demonstration might be used for an onslaught of counterrevolutionary violence.

Throughout the night, 500 members of the Soviet flock into the Petrograd neighborhoods to implore the workers and soldiers not to attend the planned demonstration. However, the workers greet them in an almost hostile mood. At some places, workers tell the Soviet delegates, “We are not your comrades.” The official organ of the Soviet, *Izvestia*, describes the nocturnal sojourn of the Soviet delegates:

All night long, without a wink of sleep, a majority of the congress, more than 500 members, dividing themselves into tens, travelled through the factories and shops and military units of Petrograd, urging everybody to stay away from the demonstration ... The congress had no authority in a good many of the factories and shops, and also in several regiments of the garrison ... The members were frequently met in a far from friendly manner, sometimes with hostility, and quite often they were sent away with insults.

Most workers only agree, grudgingly, to call off the demonstration after they learn the next morning that the Bolshevik Central Committee has decided to respect the ban.

Kiev, June 23 (June 10, O.S.): Ukrainian Rada adopts the “Pervyi Universal,” proclaiming the independence of Ukraine

The Ukrainian Rada (Central Council) adopts the “Pervyi Universal,” proclaiming an independent Ukraine. Ukraine is the focal point of growing national tensions that threaten to tear apart the Russian Empire. Accusing the Provisional Government of opposing Ukrainian national independence, the Universal declares: “Henceforth we will build our own life.” In response to the Universal, the Kadets in Petrograd denounce the Ukrainian leaders as German agents, while the Mensheviks and SRs address them, in Trotsky’s words, “with sentimental admonitions.”

The movement for national independence is mostly based in western Ukraine, centered around Kiev, which had become part of the Russian Empire only in the mid-18th century. Moreover, while the western part of Ukraine was predominantly agrarian and had a greater percentage of ethnic Ukrainians, the eastern part was much more industrialized with many of the workers being ethnic Russians or Jewish. The historian Oliver H. Radkey noted that, as a result of these social and historical differences, the “revolution assumed a predominantly national character to the west of the [Dnieper] river, and a predominantly social character to the east.... Kiev being the symbol of national contention with a truce of classes, and Kharkov that of class strife with a truce of nationalities.”

The Ukrainian Rada, supported by many West Ukrainian labor organizations, adopts the “Pervyi Universal” after months in which the Provisional Government tried to ignore the national strivings in Ukraine and other regions of the Empire, refusing to grant the oppressed nationalities the right to secede and form an independent state. This line of the Provisional Government is basically supported both by the Menshevik and the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries who fear, above all, that a breakup of the Empire would mean the defeat of Russia in the war and threaten the very existence of the Russian state.

Warsaw, June 23: German occupation authorities shut down Warsaw University

After several weeks of student protests in German-occupied Warsaw, the German Governor Hans von Beseler shuts down Warsaw University and the Polytechnic Institute in the city. They will be reopened only in November 1917. The student strike is symptomatic of the growing crisis of the German occupation in the wake of the February Revolution in Russia.

Warsaw has been under German occupation since 1915. Before the war, Warsaw and what is now central Poland had formed part of the Russian Empire. The German occupation authorities reopen Warsaw University and the Polytechnic Institute with the aim of grooming a Polish elite that would be subservient to the German occupiers. The curriculum and staff at Warsaw University are controlled by the Germans. They must continuously balance between fostering Polish nationalism as a counterweight to Russia and the socialist movement, and preventing the nationalist tendencies from getting out of control and being turned against Germany.

During the war, the universities have become a central breeding ground

for nationalist groups that seek to resurrect the Polish state. In 1916, a conflict emerges over the staffing of the theological institute that develops into a clash between students, faculty and the German occupation authorities. The issue is so contagious because the Catholic Church has traditionally maintained very close ties to the nationalist movement in Poland. In the wake of the February Revolution in Russia, the Polish national movement, putting its hope on national recognition from the Provisional Government, feels emboldened.

Warsaw students go on strike, starting May 3, the day the first Polish Constitution was passed in 1791. The student strike is dominated by nationalist forces, and numerous anti-Semitic incidents occur, with anti-Jewish slurs being directed against both faculty and students of Warsaw University. Many students support Józef Piłsudski, formerly a leader of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), who has placed his military units, the so-called “legions,” at the disposal of Austria and Germany, in the hope that their governments would support the creation of an “independent” Polish state.

Despite numerous attempts, the German authorities are unable to put an end to the strike. At the end of May, the students shift their tactics. Some return to their classes but refuse to pay their fees and formally enroll. Eventually, Beseler decides to shut down the universities and orders that all students who are not currently enrolled should be expelled.

Duluth, Minnesota, June 23: Authorities crack down on IWW

The Industrial Workers of the World is increasingly targeted by the Wilson administration and state and local authorities. The IWW is a revolutionary trade union movement that has organized sections of the American working class rejected by the business unionism of the American Federation of Labor—including iron and copper miners, textile and garment mill workers, recent immigrants, and African Americans.

In Duluth on June 23, the city imposes a law that allows the imprisonment of anyone who has no known means of work. Immediately the IWW’s offices are raided and ten are arrested. “Wobbly” leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who is staying at a nearby hotel, is also imprisoned.

Two days later, in Rockford, Illinois, 134 workers, many of them Wobblies, who are marching in an anti-draft demonstration, are arrested. The march is in response to the arrest on June 6 of several IWW members who refused to sign up for the draft.

The persecution of the IWW corresponds to American imperialism’s strategy of securing what are sometimes referred to as its “industrial forts.” At the head of Lake Superior, Duluth is, in terms of tonnage, among the busiest port cities in the US. In addition to lumber and wheat, it is the linchpin of the American steel industry, handling the bulk of the iron ore of the Mesabi Range Iron, which had been shut down by an IWW-led strike in 1916. Rockford, Illinois is a major machinery-making city. Meanwhile, authorities in Arizona and Montana are preparing to target copper miners.

Petrograd, June 24 (June 11, O.S.): Bolshevik Petersburg Committee discusses cancelled demonstration

The cancellation of the planned June 10 demonstration on short notice has provoked dissatisfaction among layers of the working class and soldiers, and within the Bolshevik Party itself. The “more fiery members,”

as Trotsky put it, tear up their membership cards out of anger and frustration.

Especially the members of the Petersburg Committee of the party, working as they do among the most militant and advanced sections of the working class in the country, are dissatisfied with the Central Committee's (CC) decision. A special session is convened today to discuss the matter. Lenin speaks on behalf of the CC. Acknowledging that the discontent is on some level legitimate, he explains:

Even in simple warfare it happens that scheduled offensives must be canceled for strategic reasons and this is all the more likely to occur in class warfare ... It is necessary to determine the situation and be bold in decisions.

In Lenin's view, the abortive June 10 demonstration marks a turning point in the revolution. Addressing Tsereteli's "historical and hysterical speech," Lenin explains:

In his speech Tsereteli showed himself to be a true counterrevolutionary. He announced that the Bolsheviks must be fought not with words, not with resolutions, but by depriving them of technical means ... The workers must soberly realize that it is no longer possible to talk about peaceful demonstrations. The situation is more serious than we expected. We were going ahead with a peaceful demonstration in order to put maximum pressure on the decisions of the Congress; this is our right, but we are accused of having organized a conspiracy to arrest the government.

Lenin urges the Petersburg Committee that "maximum calm, caution, patience and organization" are needed.

We should not give cause for attack ... let them attack us and the workers will understand that they are aiming at the very existence of the proletariat itself. But reality is on our side and it is still not certain whether their offensive will succeed: at the front there are troops, among whom the spirit of discontent is very strong; in the rear there is the high cost of living, economic chaos and so on. The Central Committee does not want to exert pressure on your decision. Your right, the right to protest against the actions of the Central Committee, is legitimate, and your decision must be a free one.

After a prolonged and heated discussion, the Petersburg Committee resolves to support the line of the Central Committee. (Quotes from Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, pp. 86-7)

Russia, June 24 (June 11, O.S.): Military reports point to rebellious antiwar moods among the troops

In a report to the High Command from the (Russian) Western front, General Anton Denikin points out that the majority of his troops have a negative opinion of the impending offensive. The report prompts General

Aleksei Brusilov to question the offensive: "Given these moods, does it make sense to prepare this blow [against the enemy]?"

Other army commanders similarly note that many soldiers reject the planned offensive and that Bolshevik propaganda has taken hold in many regiments and garrisons. Thus, the commander of the 38th army corps reports to the commander of the 10th army that soldiers from the 44th Siberian division are refusing to bolster their position. One of the soldiers reportedly declared, "We have overthrown the previous government, and we will overthrow the one by Kerensky."

Saint-Nazaire, June 25: First US troops arrive in France as allies plan major offensive

Fourteen thousand US infantrymen under the command of General John Pershing arrive in France following Washington's declaration of war on Germany on April 6. The soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) are largely untrained, and Pershing's first task is the establishment of training camps where the soldiers will conduct exercises over the next four months.

Prior to the outbreak of war, the US maintained a small army, with fewer personnel than 13 of the belligerents in the conflict. The Wilson administration is now conscripting a massive army and has enacted police-state legislation to suppress mass popular opposition within the US. Many of the soldiers conscripted into the US army are immigrants who had fled conscription in their home countries.

American troops are being rushed to France to relieve the British and French armies, which have suffered heavy casualties with little or no progress during the first months of 1917, including at the battle of Arras and during the Nivelle offensive. The French army has been in open revolt over the past month, and mutinies continue in the French ranks as the US forces arrive.

Pershing is determined that the US army fight independently. Reflecting US imperialism's growing ambitions, he rejects appeals from British and French commanders for US troops to be used as individual replacements in allied units that have suffered heavy casualties. He instead insists that the AEF be trained and sent to the front as a single unit.

British army commanders are meanwhile finalizing plans for their next major offensive. The day after the US troops arrive, General Hubert Gough confirms the 5th Army's plan for a July 31 attack on German defenses at Ypres, in what will become the Third Battle of Ypres. In a memo submitted on June 30, Gough predicts that the offensive could result in a breakout from the trenches and open warfare within 36 hours.

Also this week: Painter Félix Vallotton returns from the front

On June 23, painter Félix Vallotton (1865-1925) returns from the front. Born in Lausanne, Switzerland, the artist has been a French citizen since 1900.

When the war broke out, he volunteered for military service but was rejected due to his age. He created a series of woodcuts called *C'est la Guerre* [This is War], in which he shows the trenches, the barbarism of the conflict and the terrorized civilian population.

In 1917, he and roughly 100 other artists were invited by the Ministry of War to visit the front in Verdun from June 7-23. Some of them, like Vallotton, belong to the Nabis movement, founded in 1888/1889 by rebellious students at the Julian Academy in Paris.

Though he has little time, he paints highly stylized portraits of the war: desolate, ghostly landscapes with barren trees, flashes from exploding shells, Senegalese soldiers before their barracks in the snow and endless rows of crosses commemorating those killed in action. He works until the end of 1917 on his “Visions of the Front.” In October, his paintings are exhibited in the Musée du Luxembourg. In December 1917, he authors a text called *Art and War*. In it, he writes about the difficulty, even the impossibility, of portraying the war.

Also this week: *Scientific American* publishes predictions of the future of passenger air travel

In the June 23 edition of the *Scientific American*, the magazine reports on an interview with aircraft designer Anthony Fokker in *Vossische Zeitung*: “Passenger traffic on flying machines will assume great importance after the war. Flying machines will have preference because they are the speediest means of travelling great distances. It is my belief that they will become the most successful rivals of American liners, being able to fly across the ocean within a day and a half or two days. Immediately after the war the first flight to America will be attempted. Five years after the war the service will have reached such a state of perfection that it will seem the most natural thing in the world.”



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