

This week in the Russian Revolution

June 26–July 2: Bolshevik slogans dominate at massive Petrograd demonstration

26 June 2017

As Russia's Provisional Government launches a major new military offensive on the Eastern Front, the efforts of the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders of the Petrograd Soviet to block the Bolsheviks from advancing their demands for peace, bread, and land fail spectacularly this week when a Soviet-sponsored demonstration, which draws hundreds of thousands of workers, is dominated by Bolshevik slogans, including, "Down with the Ten Minister-Capitalists!," "Down with the Offensive!" and "All Power to the Soviets!"

London, June 26: Report exposes horrific conditions for soldiers, lack of military planning in Persian Gulf

The Mesopotamia Commission, established following the surrender of British-commanded Indian forces at Kut-al-Amara in Mesopotamia in March 1916, publishes its report on the initial failure of British military operations in the region. The report pins the blame for the disastrous decision to advance to Baghdad on General John Nixon.

An Indian Expeditionary Force was sent to the Persian Gulf in November 1914 after London declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The initial focus of the intervention was the protection of the refineries, pipelines and other facilities of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, but broader strategic considerations were at play.

Germany had increased its presence in the Ottoman Empire and expanded its trade relations with the region following the construction of the Baghdad railway. Britain feared that a failure to push back German-Ottoman control could result in the undermining of London's colonial domination of India, the crown jewel of its global empire.

The Indian force initially made rapid gains, capturing Basra and Kut-al-Amara. But Nixon then ordered an advance on Baghdad, several hundred miles to the north, which was repulsed by Turkish reinforcements. Turkish troops subsequently besieged British and Indian forces at Kut, forcing the surrender of more than 13,000 soldiers in April 1916.

The Mesopotamia Commission report details how provisions for the troops were completely inadequate. In November 1915, 208 tons of supplies were required at the front, but only 150 tons could be supplied. By April 1916, requirements rose to 598 tons daily, with only 250 tons being supplied.

The attempt to scapegoat Nixon is aimed at avoiding calling into question broader British imperialist ambitions in the region, which conform entirely with the reckless advance on Baghdad. The city was captured by Britain in March 1917. By the end of the war, fighting will have spread as far north as Baku as London seeks desperately to retain its hegemonic position.

Berlin, June 27: German social democrats back government's claims to Alsace-Lorraine

The majority Social Democratic Party of Germany (MSPD) publishes a memorandum by its delegation at the "Stockholm Peace Conference" in the newspaper *Vorwärts* (Forward), which, on all points, including the conflict over Alsace-Lorraine, affirms the war aims of the Kaiser and his military high command.

The true role of this "peace conference" thus becomes clear: The Social Democrats want to pressure their governments to ensure the war ends on the best possible terms for them. A peace "without annexations or reparations" could be quite advantageous for German imperialism. First, since the intervention of the United States, a catastrophic military defeat has been looming. Second, the "waiver" of reparations by countries devastated by German imperialism would be an invaluable advantage. Third, the SPD, like the German government, considers this a way to avoid the revolutionary uprising within the Reich expected in the event of a military defeat.

As Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg have foreseen, the delegates see themselves as negotiators acting on behalf of their own governments in support of just such a fraudulent peace agreement. Their goal is a return to the status quo, i.e., to imperialist relations as they were prior to 1914—but without failing to obtain this or that territorial asset for their own ruling class. No wonder that Alsace-Lorraine becomes the largest bone of contention in Stockholm. The French delegation demands from distant Paris the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France. Their personal presence in Stockholm is prevented by the French government, which refuses them visas. The Dutch delegation serves as the messenger through which both bitterly hostile "socialists" can exchange their nationalist demands and angry responses.

SPD Chairman Philipp Scheidemann categorically declares in Stockholm: "Alsace-Lorraine was never an independent state. Ethnographically [it is] 9/10 German. No historic right of France to this territory." Eduard David adds that the question of Alsace-Lorraine is "an internal German matter."

At the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, Alsace-Lorraine was forcibly annexed by the victorious German Reich, though the majority of its population in 1871 was loyal to France and the aims of the French Revolution. Friedrich Engels, like Karl Marx, strongly condemned the 1871 annexation by Germany because it would inevitably lead to a new war. In 1892, Engels warned against efforts to resolve the issue through any means other than the proletariat seizing power in Germany, France and England.

Petrograd, June 27 (June 14, O.S.): Bolsheviks prepare for Soviet-organized demonstration

Today's *Pravda* announces that the Bolsheviks will participate in the Soviet-organized July 1 (June 18, O.S.) demonstration, but marching under its own banners. The Bolsheviks' plan, as Zinoviev puts it, is to create "a demonstration within a demonstration."

On June 12 (O.S.), the Soviet leadership, dominated by Mensheviks and SRs, censured the Bolsheviks *in absentia* for their part in organizing the abortive June 10 demonstration. At the same session, the Soviet felt it was necessary to announce their own demonstration on June 18.

In the run-up to the demonstration, the Bolsheviks organize "a skilled political campaign in a country where mass political campaigning was a relatively unknown art," in the words of historian Alexander Rabinowitch. Hundreds of experienced agitators who have come to Petrograd for the Congress of Soviets and the Conference of Bolshevik Military Organizations tour the city's factories and military units. Latsis, a leading Bolshevik from the industrial Vyborg district, notes in his diary on June 15 (O.S.): "Intense preparations for the demonstration are being carried out. Today we held a meeting of factory representatives at which a decision was taken to march under slogans originally prepared for the cancelled demonstration." The following day, he writes: "The preparations are going well—mass meetings at all factories and military units are adopting our slogans."

In a report to war minister Kerensky, General P.A. Polovtsev warns that amid growing dissatisfaction with the Provisional Government, "increasingly a differentiation in the mood of the masses can be observed. ... In this situation, in spite of all the measures being taken, it is not certain that the coming grandiose demonstration will not take undesirable forms."

(Quotes by Latsis and Polovtsev from Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, Indiana University Press 1991, p. 105).

Petrograd, June 30 (17 O.S.): Kolchak in secret discussions with American diplomats

A secret meeting takes place between Alexander Kolchak and two Americans: Senator Elihu Root and Admiral James H. Glennon, who are on a diplomatic mission in Russia to ensure the former tsarist empire's continued participation in the Great War. The pretext for the secret meeting is a discussion regarding naval techniques related to mines and anti-submarine operations.

Glennon asks Kolchak, "What would you say if I requested the government to commission you to America, since the study of this question would require a long time, and we must leave in a few days?"

Alexander Kolchak is a decorated naval officer and polar explorer. In monarchist and reactionary circles, where profound resentment is seething against the prominent role being played by socialists in Petrograd, the name of this nobleman and devout autocrat is increasingly popular. Kerensky grants Kolchak the requested commission. Kolchak's sojourns will take him to London, where he will meet the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, and to New York, before he is returned to Russia via Japan.

After returning to Russia, Kolchak will proclaim himself the Supreme Ruler and preside over the White Terror in Eastern Russia, in which his forces distinguish themselves by their genocidal violence against the revolution: burying victims alive, razing villages, brutal torture, mass rapes and floggings. Trotsky would later describe Kolchak as "the embodiment of all the former injustice of Russian life," whose goal was to

"transform the whole country into a frightful hard-labor prison, in which the warders and executioners would be the exploiters. ... and the convicts would be the workers and peasants."

Perth, Scotland, June 30: Socialist and anti-war agitator John MacLean released from prison

The British authorities decide to release socialist John MacLean after 14 months of a three-year prison sentence for sedition after growing popular demonstrations calling for him to be set free.

MacLean, an advocate of socialist revolution, has opposed the war since its outbreak in 1914 and has since been arrested twice under the Defence of the Realm Act for his anti-war agitation.

MacLean joined the Social Democratic Federation and has been a member of the British Socialist Party since its founding in 1911. He later became heavily involved in the Clyde Workers Committee (CWC). The CWC emerged out of a strike for higher pay by munitions workers in February 1915, which the pro-war Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) trade union refused to support. It has since developed into an organizing center for workers throughout the heavily industrialized areas surrounding Glasgow, where anti-war sentiments among the working class are strong. Other leading figures in the CWC, such as Willy Gallacher, have also been arrested by the authorities due to their anti-war stance.

In September 1914, MacLean challenged those in the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) who lined up on the side of British imperialism, writing in the SDF newspaper *Justice* on the war's outbreak, "Even supposing Germany is to blame, the motive force is not the ambitions of the Kaiser, nor the brute philosophy of the Prussian militarists, but the profit of the plundering class of Germany. Colonial expansion was denied the Germans because the British, the Russians, and the French had picked up most of the available parts of the world. What could the Germans do but build up an army and a navy that would hold its own against all comers? This it has done steadily for the last generation. It is mere cant to talk of German militarism when Britain has led the world in the navy business."

Petrograd, July 1 (June 18, O.S.): Soviet organized demonstration dominated by Bolshevik slogans

At 9 AM, the soldiers and factory workers begin to move down the Nevsky Prospekt, Petrograd's main street, to the strains of the Workers' Marseillaise. The demonstration soon swells to include some 400,000 people.

Trotsky describes the demonstration in his *History of the Russian Revolution*:

The delegates of the congress [of Soviets], assembled on Mars Field, read and counted the placards. The first Bolshevik slogans were met half-laughingly—Tseretelli had so confidently thrown down his challenge the day before. But these same slogans were repeated again and again. "Down with the Ten Minister-Capitalists!" "Down with the Offensive", "All Power to the Soviets!" The ironical smiles froze, and then gradually disappeared. Bolshevik banners floated everywhere. The delegates stopped counting the uncomfortable totals. The triumph of the Bolsheviks was too obvious. "Here and there," writes Sukhanov,

“the chain of Bolshevik banners and columns would be broken by specifically Social Revolutionary or official Soviet slogans. But these were drowned in the mass. Soviet officialdom was recounting the next day ‘how fiercely here and there the crowd tore up banners bearing the slogan ‘Confidence to the Provisional Government.’’”

Such is the influence of the Bolsheviks that the Kadet Pavel Miliukov would later note in his memoirs that they had dominated the parade and that “even in a demonstration friendly to the government to speak of support for the coalition government was simply impossible.”

Evaluating the growing influence of Bolshevism among the Petrograd masses at that point, Trotsky writes:

Of course not all the workers and soldiers in the capital took part in the demonstration, and not all the demonstrators were Bolsheviks. But by this time not one of them wanted a coalition. Those workers who still remained hostile to Bolshevism did not know what to oppose to it. Their hostility was thus converted into a watchful neutrality. Under the Bolshevik slogans marched no small number of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who had not yet broken with their party, but had already lost faith in its slogans. The demonstration of June 18 made an enormous impression on its own participants. The masses saw that the Bolsheviks had become a power, and the vacillating were drawn to them. In Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav, and many other provincial towns the demonstrations revealed an immense growth of the influence of the Bolsheviks. Everywhere the same slogans were advanced, and they struck at the very heart of the February régime.

Galicia, July 1 (June 18, O.S.): Russian military launches offensive

While hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers protest the war and the Provisional Government in Petrograd, the Seventh and Eleventh Armies of the Russian military launch an offensive to seize the Galician town of Lemberg (also Lviv or Lvov), which is controlled by the Austrian military. The Russian public will only learn the next day about the beginning of the offensive, by which the Provisional Government hopes to channel the growing social discontent in the country, restore the morale among the troops, and relieve pressure on the Western Front prior to the arrival of American forces.

Layers of the professional middle classes in the cities and the upper classes greet the offensive and indulge in a new wave of patriotism. The leadership of the Petrograd Soviet expressed its approval to war minister Kerensky on June 25 (June 12, O.S.). Nearly all newspapers, except from the Bolshevik *Pravda*, back the offensive. Among soldiers and factory workers, however, the offensive is deeply unpopular.

Butte, Montana and Bisbee, Arizona, July 1: IWW strike shuts down US copper production

A strike led by the Metal Mine Workers’ Industrial Union, an affiliate of the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), has shut down the

copper mines of Montana, Arizona, and Alaska, along with smelting operations in Utah and zinc mines in Montana. Affected are some of the largest copper concerns in the country, including Anaconda in Butte, Phelps Dodge in Bisbee, Arizona, and Kennecott in Alaska.

The strikes “threaten the plans of the Government,” the *New York Times* notes, “in procuring a large amount of copper for manufacture of munitions of war.” The *Times* alleges German orchestration. The strike, its informant insists, “is being engineered from German sources and financed by German money.” Allegations of German and Austrian control of the strike are brought to the floor of the US Senate by Charles Spalding Thomas, a Colorado Democrat.

Petrograd, July 2 (June 19, O.S.): Provisional Government raids Durnovo villa

At 3 AM, forces of the Provisional Government raid the Durnovo villa, located in the Vyborg District in Petrograd, which had been seized by anarchists after the February Revolution.

The raid is a response to the release of Khaustov, the editor of the Bolshevik Military Organization’s newspaper, from the Vyborg prison the previous day. Radical workers and soldiers left the Soviet-organized demonstration the previous day at around 3 PM and marched toward the prison, demanding the immediate release of Khaustov, who was arrested on June 22 (June 9, O.S.). The crowd of some 1,500 or 2,000 men obtained his release at gunpoint.

Khaustov, an officer in the Seventh Army, joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and, in the words of Raskolnikov, maintained “an instinctive attraction for anarchism, for rebellion.”

The raid of the Durnovo villa provokes a renewed explosion of strikes and protests by workers and soldiers in the Vyborg District of Petrograd and in other industrial centers.

East St. Louis, July 2, 1917: Scores killed in racist pogrom

Scores of African Americans are brutally murdered by racist mobs in this industrial city and railway hub of southern Illinois. A large military and police presence stands idly by as homes and businesses are burnt and blacks, mostly recent migrants from the American South, are beaten to death and shot in the streets.

Such is the devastation—and the crowding in the African-American sections of the city—that the death total is unclear, but estimates range from 40 to over 200. Blacks fleeing homes that have been set alight are gunned down as they exit. Fires rage early into the morning on July 3, devastating the segregated “Black Valley” neighborhood, as well as another neighborhood heavily populated by African-American migrants along Railroad Avenue.

Martial law is imposed under General Frank S. Dickson at 8 PM. Over 500 white rioters are arrested. Hundreds of blacks seek refuge in City Hall.

A “race riot” earlier in the year, taking place on May 28, resulted in the killing of several blacks and significant property destruction. Since then, gangs of whites have regularly attacked blacks in East St. Louis. The July 2 riots begin after black residents open fire on white policemen, killing two, perhaps mistaking them for one of the white gangs.

The unchecked brutality of the riot suggests police and military collusion: “All the impartial witnesses agree that the police were either

indifferent or encouraged the barbarities, and that the major part of the National Guard was indifferent or inactive,” according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. “No organized effort was made to protect the Negroes or disperse the murdering groups...Ten determined officers could have prevented most of the outrages. One hundred men acting with authority and vigor might have prevented any outrage.”

The Great War has blocked American industry from its usual sources of cheap labor—the displaced European peasantry. In its stead, hundreds of thousands of African Americans move to the North in what comes to be called the “Great Black Migration.” They flee sharecropping, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation in the South and join the multinational working class in the industrial North.

They are not welcomed by the American Federation of Labor, many of whose unions maintain racial exclusion, or by the Democratic Party, whose longstanding ties to the Southern elite make it the primary political bastion of racism in the North.

All of these ingredients are present in East St. Louis. Dominated by the Democratic Party, the city’s politicians, joined by the Central Labor Council, have sought to blame overcrowding and wage stagnation, relative to high inflation, on black migrants, many of whom have taken jobs at the Aluminum Ore Company and the American Steel Company.

Athens, July 2: Greece declares war on Central Powers

After the removal of pro-German King Constantine I earlier this month at the initiative of France and Britain, newly-appointed Greek Prime Minister Eleutherios Venizelos returns to Athens and announces Greek entry into World War I. For the past nine months, Venizelos has led an alternative government in Thessaloniki which collaborated with the Allied forces. The declaration of war is formally issued by King Alexander, Constantine’s second son, who was given the crown after his father’s abdication.

Venizelos, who has supported Greek participation in the war on the side of the Allies since 1914, has been carefully coordinating his plans with the French and British, who had been enforcing a naval blockade of Greece for several months. After an ultimatum was issued to Constantine, French troops invaded the isthmus of Corinth and more were deployed off the Greek coast.

Supporters of Constantine are either forced into exile or rounded up and imprisoned by the new government.

Greek troops will now join British, French, Italian and Serbian forces battling German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces on the Macedonian Front. Athens will mobilize nine divisions to take part in the fighting, which will result in an estimated 5,000 Greek deaths.

Also this week: Ongoing strike wave in the Habsburg Empire

Since May, a large and unbroken strike wave has persisted in all the industrial centres of the Habsburg Empire. The regions particularly affected include the imperial capital Vienna, the Skoda works of Pilsen, metal production and heavy industry in Ostrava, and the giant munitions factories in Steinfeld. For the most part, the strikes are not led by the trade unions, because they have been discredited by their collaboration with the government. Instead, they are led by strike committees in the factories or they break out completely spontaneously without identifiable organisers.

Lieutenant field marshal Eduard Zanontoni, the city commandant of

Prague, notes during these days: “From 31 May [1917] onwards, there was not a single month that passed in which I did not witness some wicked and difficult days in Prague. Strikes followed each other in quick succession, in particular among the metalworkers, who were primarily tasked with producing the ammunition. On repeated occasions, all the factories in Prague stood empty and it was only through the use of force that the workers could be made to resume their work [...]. I had the task of creating order myself with force of arms when the situation in the factories got out of control.”

The workers demand an eight-hour work day, better food supplies and higher wages. The railway workers go out on strike even though the railways have been militarized. Only when threatened with the most severe punishments are the strikes broken off. But the strike wave is so vast that even repeated announcements on the prohibition of strikes are ineffective. For that reason, the army goes even further, snatching workers out of bed and forcibly dragging them off to work.

Zanontoni writes in his private log: “The fact that under such auspices, work cannot be flourishing and fruitful, is self-evident, which is why I have never fully supported such measures, and was following only higher commands and not my own conviction. And so, together with the Gendarmerie and military patrols, I must repeatedly fetch the workers in the early morning (5 o’clock) from their homes and have them taken to the factories. The extensive authorisations that were needed for this purpose with respect to the details can be imagined by anyone who knows that it was always thousands and tens of thousands of workers for whom these measures were required, who lived in the suburbs of Prague and in the villages in the surrounding area, which were at times a great distance away, in hundreds of houses.” (Zanontoni’s private log, cited by Manfried Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918*, Wien-Köln-Weimar 2014; p 727).



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