

This week in the Russian Revolution

July 3-9: Lenin warns against premature insurrection

3 July 2017

Kerensky's military offensive is developing into a terrible massacre of Russian soldiers. In the old tsarist capital, workers and soldiers are ready to explode with anger, despair, and frustration.

In the Bolshevik Party's middle and lower ranks, including in the Bolshevik Military Organization, many are demanding an immediate insurrection. Lenin and the party's senior leaders do not believe that the Bolshevik Party can immediately take and hold power by force, and the leadership counsels patience. "Time is on our side," Lenin says, warning that "uncoordinated and disorganized actions" would only weaken the movement.

"Finding no channel, the aroused energy of the masses spent itself in self-dependent activities, guerrilla manifestations, sporadic seizures," Trotsky later writes. "The workers, soldiers and peasants were trying to solve in a partial way those problems which the power created by them had refused to solve. More than anything else, indecisiveness in their leaders exhausts the nerves of the masses. Fruitless waiting impels them to more and more insistent knockings at that door which will not open to them, or to actual outbreaks of despair."

Kerensky's offensive begins to collapse

The Provisional Government, backed by the Menshevik and populist leaders in the Petrograd Soviet, has long clamored for a military offensive. The "socialist" Kerensky has tried to weld the anti-war moods of the masses together with support for the war by claiming that soldiers carry peace on their bayonets. Soldiers are told that they are fighting to uphold Russian national honor, to support the Allies, and to defend the revolution. Pro-government banners read: "War until final victory!"

Meanwhile, many of the soldiers who have been sent to the front have been deeply influenced by Bolsheviks, who are denouncing the capitalist government, opposing the offensive, and publishing the secret agreements for which the war is being fought. Large numbers of soldiers have joined the Bolshevik Party ranks since the beginning of the year. When Bolsheviks circulate through the regiments appealing for soldiers to fraternize with their class brothers in the opposing armies, the Bolsheviks are labeled traitors and "German agents."

At last, Kerensky's planned offensive in Galicia in Central Europe is underway, lasting from July 1 to July 19 (beginning June 18, O.S.). The Russian Seventh, Eighth, and Eleventh armies, together with the Romanian First Army, confront the South Army, Seventh Army, and Third Armies of the German Empire and Austria-Hungary.

After some initial successes, the offensive encounters better organized resistance, and a terrible massacre of Russian soldiers begins. By the end

of the offensive, Russian casualties will reach 60,000. By votes of elected committees of enlisted soldiers (see Order No. 1), the Russian soldiers mutiny by companies and divisions. The elected committees repudiate orders from the officers, and control of the army begins to slip from the hands of the generals.

Petrograd, July 3 (June 20, O.S.): Lenin warns against premature uprising at First All-Russian Conference of Bolshevik Military Organizations

In his first speech before the First All-Russian Conference of Bolshevik Military Organizations, which convenes since June 29 (June 16, O.S.), Lenin urges the participants to be patient and not encourage a premature uprising against the government. In the Bolshevik Military Organization, radical and impatient moods are widespread. The 107 delegates in Petrograd represent between 26,000 and 30,000 party members from the provisional garrisons and the northern, western and southwestern front. Most of them—including many of the delegates—joined the Bolsheviks only in 1917, after the overthrow of the Tsar.

Most soldier-delegates had come to the conference sessions directly from the front, with rifles on their back. Describing the moods at the conference, the Bolshevik A. Ia. Arosev wrote:

Almost all of the comrades here report that they left their provincial organizations at a moment of vivid and clear protest against the usurping politics of the government, against the orders of Kerensky. Everywhere are heard the voices of comrade soldiers to the effect that the time for a decisive man-to-man fight for power has come...

The successful demonstration on July 1 (June 18, O.S.) in Petrograd has increased the fighting spirit and hope in an easy victory among the delegates and soldiers. On behalf of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Lenin speaks out against the increasing support for an immediate armed uprising against the Provisional Government, arguing that the proletariat is not yet in a position to hold power throughout the country.

We must be especially attentive and careful, so as not to be drawn into a provocation. .. One wrong move on our part can wreck everything. .. If we were now able to seize power, it is naive

to think that having taken it we would be able to hold it. .. the majority of the masses are wavering but still believe the SRs and Mensheviks. This is a basic fact, and it determines the behavior of our party.. . No, in order to gain power seriously (not by Blanquist methods), the proletarian party must fight for influence inside the Soviet, patiently, unswervingly, explaining to the masses from day to day the error of their petty bourgeois illusions. .. Events should not be anticipated. Time is on our side.

Given that Lenin is widely seen as the most consistent and vocal advocate of a transfer of power to the Soviets, his position comes for many as a disappointment. One observer noted that for the “hotheads” at the conference, Lenin’s speech was like a “cold shower.” The conference eventually passes a resolution that corresponds to Lenin’s line, with point three calling for a firm struggle against anarchist moods and attempts at partial and disorganized revolutionary actions. However, sentiments in favor of an immediate armed uprising remain strong among the Bolshevik Military Organization. In order to clarify the situation and the tasks of the party among the members, the Bolshevik Central Committee decides to convene the Sixth Party Congress on August 2 (July 20, O.S.).

(Quotes from Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 113 and 121-2)

Petrograd, July 3 (June 20, O.S.): First Machine Gun Regiment plans armed demonstration

The First Machine Gun Regiment in Petrograd opposes an order to surrender its arms and tries to garner support for an armed demonstration among other military units of the city. The machine gunners are also angry because they are being denied vacation and are threatened with a draft to the front. As soon as the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet gets word of the planned armed demonstration, it issues a telegram to all units of the Petrograd Garrison:

The Executive Committee’s Military Section absolutely condemns the machine gunners’ call, which acts against the All-Russian Congress and Petrograd Soviet and is a stab in the back of the army heroically and selflessly fighting at the front for the triumph of the revolution, the establishment of universal peace, and the common good of all people.. . The Military Section calls on all regiments to remain calm, not to listen to any appeals by individual groups or regiments and to be ready to act at the first call for the Provisional Government, in coordination with the Soviet, for the protection of freedom and against the threatening anarchy.

(Quoted in Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 118-9)

Petrograd, July 4 (June 21, O.S.): *Pravda* editorial cautions patience

In an editorial published in today’s *Pravda* under the title “The Revolution, the Offensive, and Our Party,” Lenin again urges caution and

warns against a premature armed uprising against the government. He reiterates his assessment that the majority of soldiers and workers still maintain illusions in the petty-bourgeois politics of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries:

The army marched to death because it believed it was making sacrifices for freedom, the revolution and early peace. But the army did so because it is only a part of the people, who at this stage of the revolution are following the Socialist-Revolutionary and the Menshevik parties. This general and basic fact, the trust of the majority in the petty-bourgeois policy of the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries which is dependent on the capitalists, determines our Party’s stand and conduct. We shall keep up our efforts to expose government policy, resolutely warning the workers and soldiers, as in the past, against pinning their hopes on uncoordinated and disorganized actions.

Meanwhile, the First Machine Gun Regiment, in response to both the pressure from the Soviet and the rejection of an uprising by the Bolshevik leadership, abandons its plans for an armed demonstration. Instead, the machine gunners pass a resolution, rejecting future troop levies by the Provisional Government. The resolution states:

In the future we will deploy to the front only when the war has taken a revolutionary character; this will occur only when the capitalists have been removed from the government and the government has been transferred into the hands of the democracy represented by the All-Russian Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies.

The resolution warns that should the regiment be threatened with forcible dissolution, the machine gunners would “not stop at using armed strength to break up the Provisional Government and other organizations supporting it.” (Quoted in Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, Indiana University Press 1991, p. 119)

Petrograd, July 5 (June 22, O.S.): Bolshevik Military Organization clashes with Central and Petersburg Committees

Although a joint meeting of the Bolshevik Military Organization and the Bolshevik Central Committee the day before has resolved not to support a premature uprising, members of the Military Organization propose a possible armed demonstration against the Provisional Government. At an informal meeting with the members of the Central Committee and the Petersburg Committee, this proposal is discussed and clear differences in the appraisal of the political situation emerge.

Semashko, a member of the Petrograd Military Organization who commands some 15,000 machine gunners, accuses the PC and the CC of lacking “a clear understanding” of the party’s strength, arguing, “Almost the whole garrison is with us.”

According to historian Alexander Rabinowitch, only one representative of the Military Organization – Mikhail Lashevich, an old Bolshevik, non-commissioned officer in the First Machine Gun Regiment and member of the Petrograd Soviet—defends the line of the Central Committee at this meeting. The Military Organization fails to bring the CC and the PC to

adopt its position. However, its main newspaper *Soldatskaya Pravda* (literally “*The Soldiers’ Truth*”), which enjoys virtual autonomy, begins to diverge from the Bolshevik central organ *Pravda*. While *Pravda*, like Lenin, cautions patience, *Soldatskaya Pravda* is more sympathetic to insurrectionist moods.

Explaining the impatient moods among the masses in Petrograd, and especially the soldiers, Leon Trotsky later writes:

In general, the soldiers were more impatient than the workers—both because they were directly threatened with a transfer to the front, and because it was much harder for them to understand considerations of political strategy. Moreover, each one had his rifle; and ever since February the soldier had been inclined to overestimate the independent power of a rifle.

Amsterdam, July 5: Nine die when soldiers open fire on “Potato Revolt”

Nine people are killed in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, after soldiers open fire on a large crowd demanding food. A further 114 are wounded.

The trigger for the protests was the arrival in late June of a ship carrying potatoes and food supplies for the army. Although the Netherlands has remained neutral in the war, prices for food have skyrocketed since 1914. Even potatoes, a staple source of nutrition, are hard to come by, which has resulted in mounting protests.

Women, often carrying their children, began plundering stores on June 28. The movement has spread since the beginning of July, drawing in workers from the capital. The authorities only manage to restore order after seven days, following today’s bloody clampdown.

The brutal response of the authorities reflects their fear of mounting working-class opposition. The media and ruling elite have been closely following the Russian Revolution and fear that the growing unrest among the people marks the beginning of a similar movement in the Netherlands. Frequent warnings are made of the “red menace.”

New York, July 6, 1917: Roosevelt, Gompers near blows over East St. Louis “race riot” at Russia meeting

At a Carnegie Hall meeting celebrating “Russian democracy,” former US President Theodore Roosevelt and American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers nearly come to blows over the race riot in East St. Louis the previous week, which resulted in the deaths of scores of African Americans and made thousands more homeless.

Roosevelt, taking the podium before Gompers at the event, convened by an organization called “American Friends of Russian Freedom,” condemns the savagery of the attack as “a stain on the American name.” He expresses concern that the barbarism in East St. Louis is deeply embarrassing to American imperialist claims to be the standard bearer of freedom and democracy: “[W]hen we applaud the birth of democracy in another people, the spirit which insists on treating each man on the basis of his right as a man, refusing to deny the humblest the rights that are his, when we present such a greeting to the representatives of a foreign nation, it behooves us to express our deep condemnation of acts that give the lie to our words within our own country.”

Gompers takes the podium immediately following Roosevelt, and like the latter departs from his prepared remarks about Russia to discuss East St. Louis. He offers an apology for the attacks, asserting that they result from “luring negroes from the South... used in undermining the conditions of the laborer in East St. Louis.” Gompers, as president of the AFL, is the head of a federation in which many member organizations bar blacks from joining, and that is politically subordinated to the Democratic Party, the chief instrument of Jim Crow segregation in the South and racial-ethnic patronage in the northern cities.

Roosevelt interrupts the order of speakers at the event to respond. Standing over Gompers, Roosevelt shakes his fist in the face of the union head at such close proximity that it appears to audience members that he is making contact. “In the past I have listened to the same form of excuse advanced on behalf of the Russian autocracy for pogroms of Jews,” Roosevelt observes.

The exchange between Roosevelt and Gompers overshadows the event’s celebration of Russia’s Provisional Government, and the introduction of its new ambassador to the US, Boris Bakhmetev.

Baku, July 6 (June 23 O.S.): Baku factory workers endorse resolutions of Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees

In Baku (modern-day Azerbaijan), an assembly of factory workers passes a resolution requesting that the Baku Soviet establish state control over production and distribution of consumer items. The Bolshevik Prokofy Dzhaparidze delivers a report on the meetings and conferences that have been taking place in Petrograd. The workers’ delegates in Baku endorse the resolutions of the Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees, declaring their solidarity with the Petrograd workers and their struggles.

During the same meeting, workers from 78 firms are organized under a central commission to combat the decline of production and the dismissals of workers. The assembly also votes that workers will dedicate a half-day’s pay to needy families that have been impacted by the war.

Dzhaparidze is a heroic representative of the Marxist movement in the region. Born in Racha in 1880, in what was then the Kutais Governorate in the Russian Empire (now in modern-day Georgia), he moved to Baku at 24 to engage in political work in the Muslim Social Democratic Party (Gummet), which grew into a mass movement. Like all Bolshevik leaders, he worked for years under constant threat of arrest, persecution, and violence from reactionary vigilantes. He was sentenced to five years’ exile in 1909 for his political activities. His articles regularly appeared in Bolshevik journals and magazines such as *Baku Worker*, *Gudok*, and *Baku Proletariat*.

Along with leading Bolshevik Stepan Shaumyan, Dzhaparidze would be one of the 26 “Baku Commissars” who were betrayed and murdered by the local government of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1918. The Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky later writes, “May your blood never cool—never! The 26—Dzhaparidze and Shaumyan!” Dzhaparidze was 38 years old.

Berlin, July 6: Leading politician Matthias Erzberger pushes for the overthrow of Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg

In the central committee of the German Reichstag, the influential Reichstag deputy Matthias Erzberger of the Catholic Centre Party calls for

the adoption of a resolution on peace, basing itself not on annexations but on an “understanding” with the hostile imperialist powers. The reason: the war against the United States, Great Britain and France can no longer be won.

This sudden change in course in the Centre Party’s war policy is coordinated with the social chauvinist Majority Social Democratic Party (MSPD) in the Reichstag, the Progressive People’s Party (FVP) and the right-wing National Liberal Party. All four factions come together in an “inter-party committee” and form a new Reichstag majority which lines up against Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg and against the war policies of the government aimed at conquests in western and Eastern Europe. All four parties, including the MSPD of Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Noske, had previously given their unreserved support to this policy of conquest.

This surprising change in course provokes the so-called “July Crisis” in Berlin, which ultimately leads to the fall of Bethmann-Hollweg. It is triggered not only by the defeats of the Navy in the U-boat war and the disastrous military situation at the front, but especially by the revolutionary stirrings within the working class in Germany. Once again, a strike wave is spreading. There are even mutinies and protests on naval ships demanding an end to the war.

Aqaba, July 6: Arab forces capture Red Sea port from Ottoman Empire

Arab forces under the command of British officer T.E. Lawrence lead a successful offensive against the Red Sea port of Aqaba, forcing the small Ottoman garrison to surrender.

The advance of approximately 5,000 Bedouin and other Arab fighters, whose numbers have increased as local tribes joined on the way, was engineered by Lawrence as part of a plan to strengthen Britain’s position in Egypt. Aqaba was the last remaining port controlled by the Ottomans on the Red Sea coast. Its capture now frees up British troops to advance from Egypt against Ottoman forces in Palestine.

For over a year, Britain and France have actively been encouraging the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule in the Arab peninsula and Greater Syria. With the promise of an Arab homeland, London and Paris have managed to secure the assistance of several powerful local leaders, including Faisal I bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi, to whom Lawrence is assigned as an adviser. These promises are false, and the British and French imperialists never intended to honor them.

The full extent of the calculated double-cross will become clear thanks to the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks publish the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret deal thrashed out between France and Britain to determine how the Middle East would be carved up between them after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire.

Vienna, July 8: All industrial companies in the Habsburg Empire are militarized

In an effort to combat the strike wave spreading through Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary since May, Emperor Charles I militarizes all industrial companies in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All workers eligible for military service are placed in “militia units” inside the factories and subjected to military discipline. They are no longer allowed to participate in political activities and are governed by military law.

This intensification of the military dictatorship brings to an end the emperor’s attempts to keep domestic peace with a few minor social reforms. Following the February Revolution in Russia, Charles placed a cap on rent increases and introduced some improvements in the health sector. On July 2, he granted amnesty for all those imprisoned or condemned to death for political activities, including treason, lèse-majesté, insurrection and rioting.

None of this brings about the desired effect. It makes the Emperor appear weak in the eyes of his court camarilla, the aristocracy and the capitalists, and ineffective in the eyes of the workers. There are no changes in the horrible conditions of life. The regular terrible news from the front reaches a population suffering from an unprecedented famine and pervasive disease at home.

The aristocracy and the emperor are deeply shaken by the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas, and they are terrified that the Russian Revolution could spread to the West.

Scapa Flow, Orkney, July 9: Explosion of British battleship kills 845 sailors

At around 11:20 p.m., eyewitnesses report seeing a flame burst from the dreadnought battleship HMS Vanguard at its moorings in the port of Scapa Flow, located north of the British mainland on the island of Orkney. When a cloud of smoke clears after several minutes, the ship has vanished and only debris can be seen scattered in the sea.

845 sailors die in the blast. Of the three men who survive the initial blast, two die of burns in the following days. The cause of the explosion is put down to a pocket of heat from the boiler reaching the magazine and igniting cordite.

Summer 1917: Egon Schiele organizes war exhibition in the Vienna Prater

In 1914, the painter Egon Schiele (1890-1918) was not among those artists who greeted the war as a “cleansing storm.” Because of his weak constitution, he was initially rejected as unfit for military service, but in 1915, four days after his marriage to Edith Harms, he was drafted. He was spared, however, from experiencing the front.

Schiele, an uncompromisingly rebellious artist, was known for his erotic nudes of morbid, ascetic bodies drawn with nervous strokes. He created a scandal and was even sent to prison because of his belief in artistic freedom. His sensitivity to the social problems of his time found expression in his numerous paintings of proletarian girls, his first models. His portraits also reveal a great empathy. Influenced by his relationship with Edith, he underwent a definite artistic maturation. His work became less provocative but often more effective.

Schiele served initially as a writer in the POW camp Mühling. Here he drew the camp and portraits of prisoners and colleagues, but produced only one oil painting, *The Old Mill*. In his war journal of 1916, Schiele wrote that he befriended Russian officers in the camp. He discussed with them their mutual desire for peace and a vision of a united Europe without war and nationalism.

In 1917, he was transferred to Vienna as a military administrative employee. In the summer he and his colleague, Albert Paris Gütersloh, were ordered to organize a war exhibition in the Vienna Prater. The theme of the commissioned work was rather appalling—the war is to be trivialized

and portrayed as “enjoyable”—but Schiele was happy to finally escape his permanent state of financial distress. Karl Kraus wrote: “The war on display! I would visit a peace exhibition in which there was nothing to see but the victors hanged, the heroes of the money war who, as the fatherland cried out, heard only: now come the spoils!”

That same year, Schiele also took part in exhibitions in Vienna, Munich, Amsterdam, Stockholm and Copenhagen and became known the world over. He produced his most famous landscape, *Four Trees*. In the foreground are black trees with withering leaves, on the horizon is the red sun in the evening sky. The painting takes up a central theme of his work: life and death.

In 1918, he achieved his first great artistic and material success with the 49th exhibition of the “Viennese Secession,” devoted to Schiele and his artist friends. The poster for the Secession exhibition was based on an older painting, *The Friends (Round Table)*. The colors in the painting are dark, while Schiele himself appears in white. In the poster, he wears red and is immersed in a book like his friends. One senses the atmosphere of spirited work, an awakening: with his friend and teacher Gustav Klimt and the composer Arnold Schönberg, Schiele planned to found an art gallery for a cultural revival after the war. But Klimt died in the middle of preparations, on February 6, 1918. In the autumn of the same year, Schiele’s wife Edith, six months pregnant, died in the second wave of the terrible Spanish flu epidemic. Three days later, on October 31, 1918, Schiele died of the same disease. A fragile, restless and immensely productive artistic life was cut short.

More works by Egon Schiele are available here.



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