

This week in the Russian Revolution

July 24—July 30: Counterrevolution rears its head

24 July 2017

Following the suppression of the July Insurrection, a “government of national safety” with unlimited repressive powers is announced in Petrograd. This government receives the support not only of the entire spectrum of bourgeois and reactionary parties, but also from the populist and opportunist parties in the Petrograd Soviet, who are all united in demanding “order.” The death penalty is restored in the army, and Kerensky, who is emerging as a Bonapartist figure, announces that he will beat the country into unity “with blood and iron.”

The official press is fulminating rabidly against the Bolsheviks, branding them “Germanophiles” and the recipients of “German gold” from the Kaiser. Warrants have been issued for the arrest of Bolshevik leaders, and Bolshevik newspapers are censored. The Bolsheviks are blamed for all the country’s problems, including the disorganization of economic life, the unrest in the capital, and the military defeats.

New York, July 24: Times hails Kerensky dictatorship in Russia

In a lead editorial, “A Dictatorship for Russia” (July 24) and lead news articles, “Kerensky Made Dictator of Russia” (July 24) and “Kerensky’s Rule to be Merciless” (July 25), the *New York Times* enthusiastically endorses capitalist dictatorship in Russia and the violence required to enforce it.

“[D]eliverance from a state of paralysis of authority,” the *Times* writes in its editorial, “is through a dictatorship, and if Russia is to have a dictator, KERENSKY is probably the best man to exercise the supreme power.”

The *Times* explains that, up until this point, the Provisional Government could have been successful “if only it could have secured obedience from the Russian people at home and from the armies at the front.” This has been prevented by “the poison of socialism and radicalism,” whose “infection spread until it was arrested by KERENSKY.”

The *Times* joins in the great slander against Lenin as a “German agent” who should have been “deprived of all power to do mischief long ago.” The larger obstacle, however, is socialism itself, whose “ideas must be driven out of the Russian mind, or at least sternly suppressed.”

The most immediate fear in American ruling circles, articulated by the *Times*, is that the powerful cry for peace raised up by the Russian Revolution will deprive the Allied imperialist powers of the Eastern Front, allowing Germany and Austria “to devote their entire attention” to the Western and Southern fronts. They fear more the example the Russian workers have given the working class and oppressed masses in the US and the world over.

The *Times* serves up its proposals for mass suppression without a hint of

shame. A mouthpiece of Wilson’s pious rhetoric about the “war for democracy,” the *Times*, like the American president, shows its willingness to crush liberty when it suits the interests of US capitalism.

Ottawa, July 24: Canadian parliament passes military conscription bill

The House of Commons votes in favor of the Military Service Act, enabling the Conservative government of Robert Borden to initiate conscription. Borden, reversing his previous policy, introduced the measure May 18 to compensate for spiraling Canadian casualties on the Western Front and a drop in enlistment. Demonstrations broke out almost immediately following Borden’s announcement, with a major rally in Montreal on May 24.

The debate over recent weeks has intensified divisions within the country. Tensions exist between English and French Canada, and these are exacerbated by the prospect that people from Quebec, where opposition to the war is strongest, could now be forced to serve. Many Liberal Party MPs throw their support behind the Tories, leaving former Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier leading a diminished group of Liberals in opposition. The vote in parliament sees almost all English-speaking MPs back conscription, while most deputies from French-speaking areas oppose it. One day later, an income tax bill is introduced in parliament by Finance Minister Thomas White to help raise funds for the war. Presented as a temporary measure, the country’s first income tax will remain in force permanently.

However, opposition also exists to conscription in English-speaking Canada, where the main base of support for the war comes from the ruling elite and recent immigrants from Britain.

The main fear of the ruling class is that popular opposition to conscription could trigger the emergence of a mass antiwar movement. “The people are agitated,” writes Monseigneur Bruchési, the Archbishop of Montreal, to Borden. “In the province of Quebec; we can expect deplorable revolts. Will this not end in bloodshed?”

July 25 (July 12, O.S.): Death penalty reintroduced at the Russian front

Following the July Days insurrection, many of the liberties and rights that were guaranteed in the aftermath of the February Revolution are

abruptly curtailed. The most unpopular of these counterrevolutionary measures is the reintroduction of capital punishment at the front, which had been abolished following the collapse of tsarism.

Commanders are given blanket authority to open fire on soldiers who hesitate to obey orders. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government establishes divisional “military revolutionary tribunals,” authorized to impose the death penalty. There is no appeal from the decisions of these tribunals. The convicted soldier is executed immediately.

The reintroduction of capital punishment has a profound impact on the consciousness of masses of enlisted soldiers, who see in this the reintroduction of the old tyranny. The pro-war parties that support it are dramatically discredited among soldiers. Within the populist Socialist Revolutionary party, largely based on the peasantry, the reintroduction of the death penalty dramatically sharpens internal divisions. While the SR right wing consists of open militarists, the left wing of the party is incensed.

Prominent left-wing SR Maria Spiridonova decries the measure as the “greatest shame,” as “organized judicial murder,” and as an abandonment of SR principles. Among soldiers, a rapid shift to the left is underway. The broader base of the “moderate” socialist parties, which have enjoyed popular support since the February Revolution, is eroding.

Born into the nobility, Spiridonova’s assassination of the hated tsarist police official G. N. Luzhenovsky in 1906 shocked public opinion throughout the Russian Empire. The audacity of the act, as well as her brutal torture at the hands of the police, made her a folk hero in certain radical circles. She was exiled to Siberia, where she spent 11 years, before being released after the February Revolution. The Left SRs, of which she was a leading figure, gravitated towards the Bolsheviks in the period leading up to the October Revolution, but turned against them in 1918.

Dublin, July 25: Irish Convention holds first sitting

Ninety-five delegates from political parties and cultural organizations, along with figures from public life, meet at Trinity College for the first sitting of the Irish Convention. The body has been established by British Prime Minister Lloyd George in a desperate attempt to secure a constitutional settlement that keeps Ireland within the British Empire.

Sinn Fein, which has already won three by-elections against the Irish Parliamentary Party this year, boycotts the gathering because its terms of reference state that Ireland must remain part of the Empire. The Irish Party, which still holds the majority of Irish seats in Britain’s House of Commons, has been for decades the chief advocate of a constitutional settlement that extends home rule to Dublin while retaining Ireland’s position in the Empire. The party’s leader is John Redmond, who has campaigned strongly for the British war effort. He successfully encouraged the majority of the Irish Volunteers, a militia recruited prior to the war to secure home rule for the whole of Ireland, to join the British army.

The British House of Commons passed a home rule bill in May 1914 and home rule officially came into force in September of that year. However, it was suspended for the duration of the war. Unionists in Ulster, led by Edward Carson, who supports the Lloyd George government, criticized the 1914 bill and are opposed to an Irish home rule parliament without guarantees for the unionist minority.

The main reason for Lloyd George’s urgency is the rapid radicalization of Irish workers and sections of the middle class. Public opinion has shifted even more decisively against Britain since the brutal suppression of the 1916 Easter Rising, including the cold-blooded execution of 12 of its leaders. In addition, the Irish Volunteers Redmond helped recruit into

the British war effort have suffered heavy casualties. The introduction of conscription in Ireland has been repeatedly delayed as politicians fear the backlash from an increasingly militant working class.

Petrograd, July 27 (July 14, O.S.): Kerensky announces an “Extraordinary National Council” to save Russia

Premier Kerensky announces that he is taking the emergency measure of assembling an “Extraordinary National Council” in Moscow, without waiting for the Constituent Assembly to convene. Kerensky blames the economic disorganization, the military defeats, and the unrest in the cities and the countryside on “German plotters” operating behind Russian lines. The solution to these German intrigues: impose a dictatorship, arrest the Bolsheviks, and disarm the workers.

The previous day, Kerensky announced that he had summoned two prominent tsarist generals to Petrograd from retirement: General Nicholas Ruzsky, formerly Commander-in-Chief of Russia’s northern armies, and General Iosif Romezko-Gurko, a former commander on the Russian southwestern front.

Kerensky declares: “My government will save Russia. If motives of reason, honor, and conscience prove insufficient, I will beat her into unity with blood and iron.” Kronstadt is ordered to turn over its radical and socialist leaders or face a naval blockade.

Petrograd, July 26-27 (July 13-14, O.S.): Bolshevik leadership debates the slogan “All Power to the Soviets”

An expanded meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, after a discussion, rejects Lenin’s call to abandon the slogan “All Power to the Soviets.” In his work, *On Slogans*, Lenin states that this formula was rendered obsolete following the July Insurrection and subsequent counterrevolution.

No one, no force, can overthrow the bourgeois counterrevolutionaries except the revolutionary proletariat... Soviets may appear in this new revolution, and indeed are bound to, but not the present Soviets, not organs collaborating with the bourgeoisie, but organs of revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is true that even then we shall be in favor of building the whole state on the model of the Soviets. It is not a question of Soviets in general, but of combating the present counterrevolution and the treachery of the present Soviets.

However, the majority of the Bolshevik leadership declines to abandon the slogan, which continues to enjoy enormous popularity among Petrograd workers and soldiers.

New York, July 28: Silent parade against East St. Louis “race riot”

A crowd estimated at 8,000 marches down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest the recent racist pogrom in East St. Louis that killed scores

of African Americans, as well as other recent lynchings and acts of racial violence.

The march, organized by W.E.B DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), proceeds in silence in memory of the victims of East St. Louis. It aims to pressure President Wilson to enact federal legislation to stop the epidemic of lynchings that have killed thousands of African Americans in recent decades. Wilson, who has recently reintroduced segregation into the workforce of the federal government, will do no such thing.

New York police confiscate a banner that depicts an African American woman pleading with Wilson from her knees, alongside two small children. The caption that reads, “Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?”

London, July 28: Right-wing mob violently disperses antiwar meeting

A meeting of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council at Brotherhood Church in north London is violently broken up by a right-wing mob singing “Rule Britannia.”

The council was established following the June 3 conference in Leeds, which declared its support for the February Revolution. Political leadership of the conference and the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council is in the hands of Labour Party politicians and trade unionists who embrace the defensist line put forward by the Mensheviks to legitimize the continuation of the war in the name of achieving a democratic peace.

The meeting’s location, associated with Christian socialism, has long been a venue for socialist and antiwar gatherings. In 1907, Brotherhood Church hosted the Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, participants in which included Lenin, Trotsky, Plekhanov and Luxemburg.

The riot, which involves several thousand people, had been incited by the Special Branch and right-wing newspapers. Basil Thomson, head of the Special Branch, wrote in his diary yesterday, “They will have a rude awakening tomorrow, as I have arranged for the *Daily Express* to publish the place of the meeting and strong opposition may be expected.”

Philosopher Bertrand Russell, a delegate to the meeting, would later recall what took place, writing, “The mob burst in led by a few officers; all except the officers were more or less drunk. The fiercest were viragos who used wooden boards full of rusty nails. An attempt was made by the officers to induce the women among us to retire first so they might deal as they thought fit with the pacifist men, whom they supposed to be all cowards.”

Russell continued: “Everyone had to escape as best they could while the police looked on calmly. Two of the drunken women began to attack me with their boards full of nails. While I was wondering how one defends oneself against this type of attack, one of the ladies among us went up to the police and suggested they should defend me. The police merely shrugged their shoulders. But he is an eminent philosopher, said the lady, and the police still shrugged. But he is famous all over the world as a man of learning, she continued. The police remained unmoved. But he is the brother of an earl she finally cried. At this, the police rushed to my assistance. They were, however, too late to be of any service, and I owe my life to a young woman whom I did not know, who interposed herself between me and the viragos long enough for me to make my escape.”

Only one arrest is made by the police, and the man taken into custody was a delegate. The church’s interior is completely destroyed by the mob.

Washington, July 29: Gompers convenes AALD, pledges to fight influence of socialism

The American Association for Labor and Democracy (AALD), with AFL President Samuel Gompers at its head, is convened in Washington. The new organization, whose top positions are populated by pro-war union bureaucrats and former labor radicals, pledges to speed up industry, tamp down on strikes, and fight the influence of socialism and antiwar sentiment among American workers.

According to the *New York Times*, the AALD holds that “the success of the socialistic propaganda already under way in the United States would work to the benefit of the enemies of the nation.” In order to counter socialism, the AALD will “give full attention to labor activities throughout the country and the full strength...will be directed at keeping the industrial strength of the nation at the maximum.”

As Gompers later recalls, “We developed a plan for bringing together in one organization representatives of the American trade union movement and representatives of what were known as radical organizations. Members of this organization agreed to lay aside for the period of the War whatever differences they might have upon procedure and to rally in defense of the fundamental principles for which our government stood.”

The efforts of the AFL and AALD to contain the American class struggle face long odds. This week alone the US sees strikes of iron miners in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, coal heavers in New York, and railway switchmen stalling traffic at 19 railways out of Chicago. Strikes in the copper industry have crippled production, and provoked the vigilante deportation of scores of IWW workers in Bisbee, Arizona. The threat of tie-ups in the lumber industry brings another deportation of IWW members, this week from Bemidji, Minnesota.

Helsinki, July 30 (July 17, O.S.): Provisional Government dissolves Finnish parliament

Four of the ministers in the Provisional Government—Kerensky, Chernov, Skobelev, and Tsereteli—decide to dissolve the Seim (Finnish parliament) by force. The move comes after the Finnish Social Democrats, which hold a majority of 103 seats in the 200-seat legislature, declared the Seim the sovereign power in Finland, excluding foreign and military affairs, on June 5.

The move reflects the support of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries for maintaining the system of national oppression maintained by the tsarist regime. An appeal sent by Finland’s Social Democrats, who are aligned with the socialist parties in the Provisional Government, for support for the Seim is answered by their Russian comrades with soldiers’ bayonets. Lukomsky, a monarchist holdover in the Russian military, warns that any opposition to Russian troops would result in Finnish cities, including the capital, being laid to waste.

Finland has been part of the Russian Empire since the early 19th century, when Tsar Alexander I took control of it from Sweden. Workers in Helsinki were inspired by the 1905 Russian Revolution, launching an uprising and forming red guards. The Tsar was forced to concede limited parliamentary reforms in 1906 as popular opposition continued.

Finland’s parliament was virtually powerless, since the Tsar was not obliged to accept any of the laws it passed. Sentiments in Finland are strongly in favor of secession, although bitter class differences exist between the bourgeois right-wing parties and the Social Democrats that will soon erupt into civil war. The bourgeois parties back the suppression of the Seim.

Trotsky would later write in his *History of the Russian Revolution* that the government issued a solemn manifesto—a plagiarism from the monarchy even in its literary style—dissolving the Seim. And on the first day of the offensive they placed Russian soldiers withdrawn from the front at the doors of the Finnish parliament. Thus the revolutionary masses of Russia—making their way to October—got a good lesson on the qualified place occupied by the principles of democracy in a struggle of class forces.”

Opposition to the provisional government’s suppression of the Seim soon mounts. By early September, a meeting of the Soviet of soldiers in Finland pledges military assistance to the Seim if its parties decide to recommence parliamentary sittings.

East Africa, July 30: Heavy fighting as German colonial force driven back

An offensive by allied forces under the command of South African General Jacob van Deventer engages German troops in heavy fighting in German East Africa. The German force, made up of German soldiers and colonial conscripts, is compelled to retreat.

The war in East Africa, which grew out of the inter-imperialist rivalries that developed prior to 1914 during the Scramble for Africa, is being fought over an area of 750,000 square miles, three times the size of the German Reich. It has pitted German forces on the one side against Belgian, Portuguese and British troops on the other. The British forces are composed mainly of South African, Indian and other African fighters.

Germany is attempting to resist the allied advance into German East Africa, modern-day Tanzania, while Belgian and Portuguese forces are fighting to defend their colonial possessions in the Congo and Mozambique, respectively. Britain is attempting to expand its control from its colonies in British East Africa, now Kenya, and Rhodesia, now Zambia and Zimbabwe.

On top of the approximately 150,000 allied troops who will serve in the East Africa campaign by war’s end, the British also conscript close to a million Africans to serve as carriers with the task of supplying troops in often difficult terrain. With virtually no medical care available, disease claims more casualties among soldiers than fighting. At least 95,000 carriers, including one in eight adult males from British East Africa, die during the conflict, which also claimed more than 11,000 British imperial soldiers’ lives.

Reflecting the contemptuous arrogance of the British ruling class towards its colonial subjects, one official remarks of the East African campaign that it only “stopped short of a scandal because the people who suffered the most were the carriers—and after all, who cares about native carriers?”

Brazil: Strikes spread across the country

In São Paulo, Brazil’s largest industrial center, more than 50,000 workers from all sectors have paralyzed production, trade and public transport. The working-class districts of Brás, Mooca and Ipiranga are in the hands of the strikers, who have organized themselves through the Proletarian Defense Committee.

Since the beginning of June, Brazil has seen a wave of strikes in its main industrial centers. The country, which is heavily dependent on the industrialized products of the warring countries, is experiencing an

industrial revolution mainly in the South and Southeast regions, fed by capital accumulated from coffee exports, the main product inflating Brazil’s trade balance.

Poor working conditions, low wages and the increasing cost of living are the main concerns of Brazilian workers, who are mainly concentrated in the textile and food and beverage industries. The workforce is dominated by European immigrants and their children, who came first to work on the coffee plantations, and then became the backbone of industrial production. Anarcho-syndicalism is the main political current within Brazilian workers organizations. The strike itself, however, began with unorganized women weavers walking off their jobs.

After failed attempts to contain the movement, mayor Washington Luis has stepped up police repression, leading to the killing of Spanish shoemaker José Martínez. The cry of “Death to repression! Death to repression!” is heard throughout the city, as the strike movement intensifies. The government is mobilizing troops, and the Navy has sent two warships to the port city of Santos.

With the shooting of a 12-year-old girl in the Barra Funda district, tensions have increased even further. The military sets up machine gun nests at entrances to the wealthy neighborhoods inhabited by São Paulo’s factory owners.

Inspired by the February Revolution in Russia, striking workers try to win over the soldiers, attempting to convince them that they are being exploited and their interests are the same as those of the working class.

The strike movement is continuing to spread, with mass walkouts in Rio de Janeiro, the interior industrial centers of Campinas and Ribeirão Preto, and Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil’s south, the most industrialized state in Brazil after São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Workers demand salary increases, an eight-hour day for men and six hours for women and children, reduction in food prices, fixed bread prices, reduction in housing rents and in transit fares.

Also this month: Scientific breakthrough in Göttingen, Germany

One hundred years ago this month, the method of analyzing matter using X-ray diffraction by crystalline powders was under development by Peter Debye and Paul Scherrer in Göttingen, Germany. Around the same time, a similar method was developed independently by Albert Hull at General Electric Laboratories in Schenectady, New York. The method involves shining light through a powdered material, which is reflected according to the shape of the crystals in the sample, revealing information about its microscopic structure.

The development of the powder diffraction method is a significant scientific breakthrough, which will go on to enjoy long and widespread use. On December 4, 1915, Scherrer had submitted a work to the journal *Physikalische Zeitschrift* that used this method to explore the physical structure of lithium fluoride. A second paper, dated May 28, 1916, analyzed diffraction in liquids. The third paper, dated July 18, 1917, established the physical structure of graphite: hexagonal squares. Scherrer, who is in his mid-20s, is working on his dissertation under Debye.

Also this year: Poet Hugo Sonnenschein expresses sympathy for the Russian Revolution

This year, the “stateless” poet and pacifist Hugo Sonnenschein (1889-1953) is working on his volume of poetry *Soil of the Earth*. In it, he

protests the war and expresses his sympathy for the Russian Revolution. The volume contains a portrait of the author by the painter Egon Schiele and includes the following poem, entitled *Song of the 17th Regiment*:

Listen, soldiers, your brothers
Are going to war for peace,
Wake up! Lower your weapons,
Brothers, and in this way help us to victory:
In the struggle for human rights
Against the tyranny that enslaves us—
Rise, soldiers!
Long, ye children of all countries,
Have shed your blood in vain.
Drive out the oppressors!
Who gave them judgement
Over life and death?!

Rise, soldiers!
The free Earth belongs to us,
The sun light is ours,
Rise, that each one becomes free,
With equal rights and equal duty!
See how the tyrants tremble
When they sense our will!
Rise, soldiers!
Listen, soldiers, your brothers
Go to the final war;
Be men once more
Great is the victory which is ours—
In the struggle for human rights
Against the tyrants who enslave us!
Rise, soldiers!

Czechoslovakia and following the invasion by German troops was arrested by the secret police and deported to Auschwitz in 1943, where his wife died. Following his liberation by the Red Army, he goes back to Prague. The Stalinist regime arrests him on the absurd charges that he collaborated with the secret police during the Second World War. He is sentenced to 20 years in prison. He dies in the Mirov prison in 1953.



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The volume is banned by the censors and was not published until 1920.

Sonnenschein, the son of a Jewish peasant, was born in 1889 in Gaya near Brno in what is now Slovakia. He began writing poetry as a schoolboy. As a “deserter of the bourgeoisie,” he lived the life of a drifter, as it was idealized throughout Europe prior to the First World War. He saw himself as an outsider and a rebel by conviction, as he puts it in an autobiographical sketch, “a man who is a vagabond and bastard, between the races, cultures, and classes, an unreal person, without a country.” His poems are published in Franz Pfemfert’s magazine *The Action*, among others.

In 1914, Sonnenschein was sent to the Balkan front as an infantryman, but was repeatedly arrested for his pacifist endeavors. His work, *The Legend of the World Degenerate Sonka*, appears in 1920 and is still considered his best. From then on, he also writes under the pseudonym *Sonka* or *Brother Sonka*.

In 1918, he would welcome the October Revolution with excitement and become a member of the Red Guard in Vienna. After this, he went to Prague and became a cofounder of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. In the summer of 1920, he was a delegate to the Second World Congress of the Communist International and met Lenin and Trotsky, with whom he later corresponds frequently as a member of the Left Opposition. In 1927, he was expelled from the party for his defense of Trotsky. Trotsky observes of Sonka in 1930: “First, that the author is a poet; second, that his views are rather far from the communists. But Marx once said: ‘Poets are queer fish.’ He did not mean this as an insult, for he had applied it to Freiligrath.”

In March 1934, the fascist government in Austria declared Hugo Sonnenschein a “bothersome foreigner.” He was deported to