

This week in the Russian Revolution

July 31—August 6: The nightmare in Flanders

31 July 2017

Perhaps more than any other battle in world history, the Third Battle of Ypres will endure for generations as a symbol of pointless and fratricidal barbarism. Poison gas, swamped battlefields, barbed wire, bayonet charges against machine guns, the endless rain of high explosive shells, infection, disease, the arrogance and incompetence of the officers, the soaring cost in young lives—the nightmare in Flanders leaves a lasting mark on human consciousness.

While popular moods continue to turn against the war, counterrevolution is in full swing in Russia. Trotsky is jailed in Petrograd, and Kerensky is assembling a Bonapartist government to save capitalism, prosecute the war to victory, and crush all resistance from workers, peasants and soldiers.

Belgium, July 31: The Third Battle of Ypres begins

At 3:50 on the morning of July 31, 1917, the allied troops of Great Britain and France begin the so-called Third Great Flanders Offensive, also known as the Third Battle of Ypres. It is preceded by several weeks of continuous heavy artillery fire of German positions.

Eighteen divisions of the British Fifth Army cross 23 kilometers from Deulemont on the Lys to the north of Steenstraat in Belgium to attack the German Fourth Army. France is only able to deploy three divisions because most of its forces have been paralyzed by serious mutinies in recent weeks.

The offensive is intended to tie up the forces of the Central Powers on the Western Front and to prevent them from deploying reinforcements to the east, where the Russian armies are retreating in a state of collapse. The commander-in-chief of the British army in France, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, plans to break through to the Belgian coast to conquer the German U-Boat bases near Ostend and Zeebrugge. This is intended to avert the threat posed by the German U-Boats to the British navy and provide an opportunity to surround the German troops.

Twenty-six British and six French divisions; 3,535 artillery guns (1,423 of them heavy artillery); and 680 planes are made available for the offensive. The German Fourth Army has at its disposal only 18 divisions and much fewer arms. Rain and the destruction of drainage systems by artillery fire turn the swampy terrain into a muddy wasteland in which any troop movements, especially for the artillery, are extremely difficult. It becomes a grueling battle of attrition and a terrible slaughter that continues through November. For months, the ruins of a single location are fought over. For the first time, aerial battles take place involving more than 100 fighter planes. Only with difficulty does the German military command manage to replace the divisions which are quickly disabled.

Outnumbered and outgunned, the Germans overcome their disadvantage by using mustard gas for the first time, the barbaric chemical agent that burns the airways and skin within seconds. Professor Adolf Julius Meyer,

the creator of mustard gas, later boasts: “The effect of mustard gas in the Flanders battle of 1917 grew more and more and it was often the case that the enemy was happy if he was able to keep a quarter of his men unharmed.”

The fighting lasts through mid-November. The military objectives of the offensive are not achieved. The only result—a relocation of the front line by 8 kilometers—is paid for on the British side with approximately 50,000 killed; 38,000 missing in action; and 236,000 wounded. On the German side, approximately 46,000 are killed and missing while 281,000 are wounded and seriously ill.

Petrograd, July 31 (July 18, O.S.): Kerensky appoints General Kornilov as commander-in-chief

Following a meeting with generals in the high command on July 29 (July 16, O.S.), Alexander Kerensky announces his decision to appoint Lavr Kornilov as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, replacing Aleksei Brusilov. The appointment of Kornilov is an expression of the growing influence of the military on the Provisional Government in the wake of the July Days. Popular achievements of the February Revolution are being quickly abolished.

The day after his appointment, Kornilov issues a telegram bluntly declaring that he will not submit to any kind of civilian oversight. He demands that the government accept all demands put forward by the top generals at the meeting on July 29. These demands include the introduction of capital punishment for soldiers both at the front and in the rear and total independence for the generals in appointing commanders and issuing operational directives. The generals take particular exception to the existence of soviets of enlisted soldiers, which have asserted the authority to discuss and vote on orders received from officers.

The right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries Boris Savinkov and Maximilian Filonenko had pressured Kerensky to appoint Kornilov as commander of the southwestern front in June and also coaxed him into appointing him as commander-in-chief. The Kadet Party, conservatives, and the old tsarist military cliques look toward Kornilov as a possible strongman in an authoritarian dictatorship they seek to establish in place of the dual power regime that has existed since February.

Kornilov, born in 1870 to a family of Cossack officers, is distinguished by his exceptional cruelty and narrow-mindedness. A future White Army commander, whose units will wear the death’s head, his political sympathies lie with the monarchist and fascistic Black Hundreds. He is despised by the revolutionary masses, by his own soldiers in particular, and even by other generals. General Alekseev once called him “a man with a lion’s heart and the brains of a sheep.”

Yet it is the very brutishness of his hatred of the revolution that qualifies Kornilov for the post of commander-in-chief amid the rising tide of

counterrevolution. Drawing no distinction whatsoever between the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and “moderate” petty-bourgeois socialist parties like the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, on the other, for him all parties that have supported the February Revolution and the Provisional Government merge into one mass of Russia’s “internal enemies” that must be ruthlessly crushed.

Western Front, July 31: Two poets, Hedd Wyn and Francis Ledwidge, killed in action

Irish poet Francis Ledwidge and Welsh poet Hedd Wyn are both killed during the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres.

Ledwidge, born in 1887, was associated with the Gaelic revival movement prior to the war, and he was also active in trade union circles. He tried and failed to establish a local club of the Gaelic League, a literary and cultural organization that promoted the use of the Irish language and was associated with the development of nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century. He was more successful in creating a local branch of the Irish Volunteers in Slane, the organization formed in response to the creation of the Ulster Volunteers to ensure the implementation of home rule for Ireland. Though Ledwidge initially sided with the minority of the Irish Volunteers, which, on the outbreak of war, opposed participation in the British army, he soon shifted his position and joined the military in October 1914.

Ledwidge’s poetry was influenced by rural life. He also responded to the radicalism of the 1916 Easter Rising, writing in “O’Connell Street:”

*A Noble failure is not vain
But hath a victory of its own
A bright delectance from the slain
Is down the generations thrown.*

Wyn, born Ellis Humphry Evans in 1887, is also killed near Ypres. He adopted the name Hedd Wyn, meaning blessed peace in Welsh, in 1910. His poetry drew heavily on the influences of the Romantic era, including themes of nature and spirituality, although he has also written several war poems since the conflict broke out. Wyn initially opposed the war on Christian pacifist grounds. He was conscripted in 1916 and then arrested by the military police in early 1917 after overstaying a period of leave at home. Wyn posthumously won an award at the National Eisteddfod, a festival of poetry and music, for his poem Yr Arwr.

Some of Wyn’s works have been translated, including the poem Rhyfel (War), which begins,

*Why must I live in this grim age,
When, to a far horizon, God
Has ebbed away, and man, with rage,
Now wields the sceptre and the rod?*

Vatican, August 1: Pope Benedict XV warns that European civilization is committing suicide

“Is the civilized world to be but a field of death?” the pope asks. “And

must Europe, so glorious and so flourishing, go, as if driven by a universal folly, into the abyss and lend a hand to her own suicide?” The pope urges the belligerent nations to open peace negotiations.

The Catholic Church has not taken a side in the Great War, but as the head of one of Europe’s oldest and most reactionary institutions, the pope expresses concern that the profound unpopularity of the war will lead to upheavals and revolutions that could challenge the existing order.

Benedict XV adheres to his predecessor Leo XIII’s visceral hatred of socialists, whom the latter branded a “wicked confederacy” of men who “defile the flesh, despise dominion and blaspheme majesty.” On July 25, 1920, following the establishment of Soviet power in Russia, Benedict XV will issue an edict that denounces socialism as “the sworn enemy of Christian principles.” In this document, the pope expresses alarm that “in the vows and in the expectation of the most seditious,” he sees “emergence of a certain universal republic, which is founded on the absolute equality of men and on the communion of goods” and “in which there is no distinction of nationality, the father’s authority over his children is not acknowledged, nor public authority over citizens, nor God over human affairs.”

Butte, Montana, August 1: IWW organizer Frank Little lynched by company thugs

In the midst of fierce class struggles in Montana’s copper mines, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Frank Little is murdered in Butte, Montana.

Little, an executive board member of the IWW who publicly opposes US involvement in World War I, is abducted in the middle of the night from the boarding house where he is staying. The kidnappers—widely acknowledged to be company thugs hired by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company—drag Little behind their car, beat him and then hang him on a railway trestle. His official cause of death is listed as “strangulation by hanging.”

Thousands of workers in Butte turn out for Little’s funeral. Little arrived in Butte on July 18, having avoided deportation with miners from Bisbee, Arizona because of a broken ankle. He immediately began agitating against US imperialism’s involvement in World War I and against the copper companies that dominate Butte.

In June, Butte miners marched against conscription and a catastrophe at the Speculator Mine that killed almost 200 miners. Nearly 20 percent of US copper is mined by 12,000 workers in and around Butte.

Little, who was born in 1879, became an organizer for the IWW in 1906, campaigning for free speech and organizing lumberjacks and other workers in the US West. During a 1913 strike of ore-dock workers in Duluth, Minnesota, Little worked with fellow IWW organizer James P. Cannon, who would go on to lead the Trotskyist movement in the United States.

No one was ever charged or convicted in relation to Little’s lynching.

Oklahoma, August 2: “Green Corn Rebellion” of tenant farmers against conscription

An uprising involving thousands of Oklahoma tenant farmers and allies—white, black, and American Indians of the Muskogee and Seminole nations—against the imposition of military conscription is met with massive repression, resulting in hundreds of arrests and three deaths.

Called the “Green Corn Rebellion” because the tenant farmers allegedly intend to march on Washington, DC, surviving on roasted green corn as they move, the rebellion emerges in a part of the United States where socialism has had a major influence. In Seminole County, the center of the rebellion, the Socialist Party won 22 percent of the vote in the 1916 presidential election. The same year saw the emergence of a union of tenant farmers calling itself the “Working Class Union,” or WCU, which was inspired by the revolutionary trade unionism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The WCU, which claims 35,000 members in Oklahoma, has armed itself and carried out violent reprisals against the vigilante “justice” of the rural elite.

According to one local newspaper account, a statement has been issued to the tenant farmers calling for resistance to conscription:

Now is the time to rebel against this war with Germany, boys. Boys, get together and don't go. Rich man's war. Poor man's fight. The war is over with Germany if you don't go and J.P. Morgan & Co. is lost. Their great speculation is the only cause of the war.

An army of some 800 to 1,000 farmers respond to the call to arms on August 2, burning down bridges and cutting telegraph lines. However, after a skirmish with a large sheriff's posse, the men disperse. Three are killed in the exchange. Mass repression follows. Some 450 are arrested, of whom 150 receive lengthy prison sentences lasting as long as 10 years. The Oklahoma Socialist Party, facing persecution, disbands. The IWW in Oklahoma is also targeted.

Lanarkshire, Scotland, August 2: More than 50,000 miners down tools to protest rising food prices

Over 50,000 miners throughout the Lanarkshire coalfields stop work for a day to protest the spiraling cost of living. Prices for basic foodstuffs have risen sharply across Britain since the beginning of the war, and the government began announcing restrictions on some foodstuffs in the spring.

But workers' wages have stagnated, making many foodstuffs unaffordable. The one-day strike is organized by the Executive Committee of the Lanarkshire Miners. The protest takes place in the face of bitter opposition from the pro-war established trade unions, which have conspired with the bosses and government to block strikes and protests during the war. The executive of the Scottish Miners has refused to be represented at a regional meeting of the workers and soldiers council to be held August 11, organized following the Leeds convention, which declared its support for the February Revolution in June.

In the Coalburn district in south Lanarkshire, workers pass an additional resolution threatening a down tools policy if the government seeks to impose military or industrial conscription in the area.

The miners' action marks a growing politicization of the struggles of workers in Glasgow and surrounding industrialized areas, which have been led by the Clyde Workers Committee since its foundation in February 1915. In May 1915, thousands of workers, led by socialists, launched a rent strike to oppose rent increases. The movement spread across the city, leading to mass demonstrations and 20,000 workers refusing to pay rent hikes by November 1915. As the movement spread, gaining support in the city's slum areas, the government was forced to impose a rent freeze at pre-war levels to prevent a further escalation of the

protests.

Sydney, August 2: “Great strike” of 100,000 Australian workers begins

Several thousand transport workers gather at the Eveleigh railway workshops and the Randwick tram depot in Sydney, Australia, to discuss plans for industrial action. The meetings vote for an indefinite strike in opposition to new attacks on working conditions.

The immediate trigger for the dispute is the introduction of time cards, designed to monitor productivity. They are part of a broader overhaul, which includes increases to the number of foremen monitoring transport workers, as part of the drive to boost production and efficiency for the war effort.

Over the coming weeks, the strike will rapidly spread throughout the country's east coast states, including New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. It will come to involve 100,000 workers in transport and other industries, making it the largest industrial action to that point in Australian history.

Underlying the mass movement is growing opposition to the war. In October 1916, workers defeat a government plebiscite, aimed at introducing conscription to provide new cannon fodder for the battles of the Western Front. In 1917, the carnage in Europe escalates, with 77,000 Australian troops killed, wounded or missing. News of catastrophic losses on the battlefields of Messines and Bullecourt in France fortifies anti-war sentiment.

The New South Wales premier, William Holman, of the Nationalist Party, formed earlier in the year through a split in the Labor Party, denounces the strike as the work of “the enemies of Britain and her allies.” He warns that “many Trade Unions have become the tools of Disloyalists and Revolutionaries.”

The state and federal governments prepare to repress the strike. Holman and Nationalist Party Prime Minister Billy Hughes declare that the revolutionary-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World is responsible for the action, and is seeking to sabotage wartime productivity.

In July 1917, the Nationalist and Labor Parties had passed the Unlawful Associations Act through the federal parliament. The bill was directed at illegalizing the IWW, which had already been subjected to frame-ups and persecution, and other socialist organizations. Hughes declared that the IWW was “the great menace to society.”

London, August 2: John Maclean calls for release of anti-war socialists interned by British government

John Maclean, a leading member of the British Socialist Party who was only released a month ago from prison, issues an appeal in the BSP's newspaper *The Call* for the release of Peter Petroff, a socialist and former member of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, who has been detained without charge by the British authorities since January 1916 because of his anti-war stance.

Petroff played a role in the 1905 revolution before being exiled to Siberia. He later escaped to Britain, where he made contact with Maclean and other members of the Social Democratic Federation, which later went on to form the BSP. Since 1916, the BSP has been under the leadership of anti-war forces who defeated the pro-war, nationalist faction led by Henry Hyndman. Petroff adopted an anti-war stance in 1914 and contributed

articles to, among other publications, *Nashe Slovo*, the Russian-language daily published in Paris in 1915 and 1916 to which Trotsky contributed. Working with the Clyde Workers Committee, Petroff has addressed a number of mass meetings on the war and the 1905 Russian revolution. However, Petroff distanced himself from Lenin's efforts at Zimmerwald to turn the world war into a civil war.

Petroff's internment was instigated by Hyndman, who published a vitriolic denunciation of Petroff in the BSP's newspaper *Justice* in December 1915, entitled, "Who and What is Peter Petroff?" This article all but accused him of being pro-German and denounced him for his opposition to the provision of financial support to the International Socialist Bureau of the Second International. Petroff wrote of Hyndman's role, "This paragraph appeared on the same day I was arrested in Fife, where I was to speak at two meetings of miners. At the same time raids were made upon the offices of the Russian Seamen's Union and the Central Bureau of the Foreign Committee of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. Thus the action of those responsible for *Justice* curiously coincided with the action of the authorities."

As well as Petroff and his wife, Irma, Maclean raises the case of J. B. Askew, a socialist and translator of many of Kautsky's works into English, who is also detained.

Petroff will remain detained until January 1918, when the British authorities deport him to the Soviet Union. He will go on to work for the Soviet government, later breaking with the party and leaving the Soviet Union over the rise of Stalinism.

Wilhelmshaven, Germany, August 4: 600 sailors disobey orders and march ashore in protest

Around 7:00 a.m., 600 sailors of the battleship *Prinzregent Luitpold* (Prince Regent Luitpold), the flagships *Kaiserin* (Empress) and *Friedrich der Große* (Friedrich the Great), and several other ships of the second, third and fourth squadrons of the German Navy's High Seas Fleet begin to march ashore. The immediate cause of the protest action is the arbitrary imprisonment and severe punishments with which the commandant of the *Prinzregent Luitpold* has responded to the spontaneous walkout of 49 of his subordinates the previous day. Those sailors had revolted against the needless replacement of the free time promised to them with military exercises.

The High Seas Fleet has not been involved in combat operations for months due to the superiority of the British fleet and its naval blockade. Therefore, the repeated calls for unnecessary military drills at a time when sailors face starvation rationing of miserable food are seen as pure harassment. The second, broader reason for the protest is hatred of the war and the political suppression of all opposition to it.

The sailor Max Reichpietsch and the stoker Albin Köbis lead the protest. In the tavern *Zum weißen Schwan* (The White Swan) in the small town of Rüttersiel near Wilhelmshaven, where all the sailors have gathered, Max Reichpietsch calls for the participation of sailors in the rationing of meals through a committee of their own choosing. Above all, however, he calls for immediate peace without annexations. Influenced by the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), he points to the significance of the Stockholm Peace Conference. If it does not succeed, he argues, then the sailors of the High Seas Fleet would have to pressure the government with joint protest actions to achieve peace.

Albin Köbis concludes his speech with the words: "We are the true patriots. Down with the war! We will wage war no longer!"

Although the sailors limit their march to three hours and willingly maintain combat readiness with watch duty on the ship, the ship

commanders and admirals of the fleet retaliate against them without mercy. Those sailors identified as the instigators, as well as several who had only participated, are imprisoned by the dozen, brought to land and cruelly interrogated under torture and threat of the death penalty. The commanders have enough spies among the sailors, with whose statements military investigators manage to coerce some confessions and to trump up charges sufficient to bring the sailors before a military tribunal in a matter of days.

For weeks, under the leadership of Reichpietsch, Köbis and a few other sailors have built an organization in secret, a so-called league of soldiers, and a movement of confidants of the soldiers. In June, Reichpietsch and Köbis had appealed to the leadership of the USPD for support and won hundreds of sailors to membership in the party. But party chairman Wilhelm Dittman is rather frightened by Reichpietsch's visit to Berlin and warns against "illegal actions"—he limits his support for the revolutionary sailors to urging caution in their activities.

The league of soldiers has taken a systematic and careful approach to building their revolt against the war. It is politically and organizationally unprepared for the unexpected early outbreak of spontaneous protest actions arising from the events at the beginning of August. Thanks to informants, lists are found containing the names of sailors who had supported with their signatures the Stockholm Peace Conference and the call for an immediate negotiated peace.

That is sufficient for their accusers to call for death sentences, decades or life in prison on the grounds of "high treason" and "insurrection." For the time being, the rebellion is crushed.

Petrograd, August 5 (July 23, O.S.): Trotsky and Lunacharsky thrown in prison

While the Mensheviks and SRs are being invited to join a new coalition government, as for Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, "there was no talk of an invitation to enter the Government, but of an invitation to enter the Kresty prison," as Trotsky later wryly observes.

After the Provisional Government issues an arrest warrant for the leading Bolsheviks, including Lenin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, Trotsky publishes an open letter to the ministers of the Provisional Government in the journal *Novaya Zhizn*. He writes: "I consider it necessary to bring to your attention the following: I share the principled position of Lenin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and I have advocated it in the Forward (*Vperiod*) journal and in all of my public speeches." The authorities respond to this letter by issuing a warrant for his arrest as well.

August 6 (July 24, O.S.): Kerensky officially forms second coalition Government

A new coalition cabinet is formed with Alexander Kerensky at its head. This cabinet includes Kerensky as Minister-President and Minister of War and Navy, Nikolai Nekrasov as Vice-President and Minister of Finance, Victor Chernov (SR) as Minister of Agriculture, Matvey Skobelev (Menshevik) as Minister of Labour, and Nikolai Avksentiev (SR) as Minister of Internal Affairs. This government proposes to restore "order," defend capitalism, continue prosecuting the war, and crack down on "enemy agents" within Russia.

This new government issues a lofty proclamation making various popular promises: to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly on a

certain date, to guarantee self-government, to abolish the relics of the tsarist system of social estates and privileges, to carry out land reform, and to guarantee the eight-hour day, job security, and social insurance. Not a single one of these promises will be kept.

On August 7 (July 25, O.S.), at a joint meeting of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and the Executive Committee of the Congress of Peasants' Deputies, the Mensheviks and SR leaders adopt a resolution urging the most strident support for the new coalition government.

In his pamphlet "The Beginning of Bonapartism," which will be published in the coming weeks, Lenin, who is now in hiding, warns that Kerensky is emerging as a Bonapartist dictator:

Now that the Cabinet of Kerensky, Nekrasov, Avksentiev and Co. has been formed, the gravest and most disastrous error Marxists could make would be to mistake words for deeds, deceptive appearances for reality... Let's leave this pastime to the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries who have already gone as far as to play the part of clowns around the Bonapartist Kerensky....

If we *only* said the counter-revolution had temporarily gained the upper hand here in Russia we should be dodging the issue. If we analyzed the origin of Bonapartism and, fearlessly facing the truth, told the working class and the whole people that the beginning of Bonapartism is a fact, we should thereby start a real and stubborn struggle to overthrow Bonapartism, a struggle waged on a large political scale and based on far-reaching class interests...

Let the Party loudly and clearly tell the people the whole truth that Bonapartism is beginning; that the "new" government of Kerensky, Avksentiev and Co. is merely a screen for the counter-revolutionary Cadets and the military clique which is in power at present; that the people can get no peace, the peasants no land, the workers no eight-hour day, and the hungry no bread unless the counter-revolution is completely stamped out. Let the Party say so, and every step in the march of events will bear it out.

With remarkable speed Russia has gone through a whole epoch in which the majority of the people put their faith in the petty-bourgeois Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. And now the majority of the working people are beginning to pay heavily for their credulity.

All indications are that the march of events is continuing at a very fast pace and that the country is approaching the next epoch, when the majority of the working people will have to entrust their fate to the revolutionary proletariat. The revolutionary proletariat will take power and begin a socialist revolution; despite all the difficulties and possible zigzags of development, it will draw the workers of all the advanced countries into the revolution, and will defeat both war and capitalism.



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