

This week in the Russian Revolution

August 14-20: The Kornilov menace

14 August 2017

Among the landowners, capitalists and old tsarist military castes, Kerensky is increasingly viewed as wavering and ineffective. These sentiments have been magnified by the July Days and the ignominious collapse of the military offensive. What is needed instead, they believe, is a military dictator who will smash the power of the soviets and ruthlessly purge Russia of all "internal enemies," including the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries without distinction. The favored candidate for the role is the vicious tsarist general Kornilov, the commander-in-chief of the army.

In Petrograd, the Bolshevik Party's strength is surging back after the short-term reversal of its fortunes following the July Days. Moreover, Menshevik and SR leaders are shocked to find that formerly loyal workers and soldiers are defecting to the ranks of the Bolsheviks.

August 14: China enters the war

The Great War continues to drag more and more of the world into the maelstrom. China enters the fray on August 14 with a declaration of war against Germany. China's entry into the war catalyzes social conflict within the country, radically intensifying the ongoing differentiation of social forces. China has been in a state of deep crisis since the collapse of the Manchu Dynasty in 1911-12, and especially following the failed attempt to restore the monarchy last month.

After the defeats suffered at the hands of Britain in the Opium War of 1839-42, China has been the subject of a protracted and contested imperialist carve-up. Britain, France, Germany and the United States, among other foreign powers, have attempted to dominate the region. Portions of major cities such as Shanghai, Tientsin and Dalian are ruled by the imperialists outright, while the rest of the country remains mired in economic backwardness, violent civil strife and warlordism. Japan, an ally of Britain, has seized the opportunity presented by the outbreak of war to deploy tens of thousands of troops to seize control of the Shantung peninsula, west of Korea, from Germany.

Huge numbers of Chinese workers are being drawn into the war effort. Approximately 100,000 workers are recruited by Britain, 35,000 by France, and 50,000 or more by Russia. These workers are not deployed as soldiers but are transported around the world as laborers. Chinese workers toil in factories and mines, dig trenches, load and unload provisions at the docks and train stations, dig graves, and construct military buildings. They are often compelled to work within range of enemy artillery. Estimates of Chinese casualties vary, but include as many as 3,000 in France and 30,000 in Russia.

Glasgow, August 15: Trades Council unanimously adopts motion

calling on Labour to leave the government

The Glasgow Trades Council, the main trade union organization in the city, which also functions as the city's Labour Party, adopts a motion without opposition calling on Labour to withdraw from the Lloyd George government in Britain.

The motion is triggered by the government's refusal to issue passports to Labour's delegates for the Stockholm conference. But the council makes broader criticisms of Labour, noting that its involvement in the government requires that it enforce the "slavish Munitions Act," which prohibits engineers from striking or leaving their existing employer. The council further criticizes the party for imposing military conscription and attacks on civil liberties. Nevertheless, Labour has no intention of abandoning its loyal service to British imperialism and will continue to have members in the government during the war.

Some of the most militant working-class struggles have occurred in Glasgow and the surrounding areas during the war, beginning with the engineers' strike in February 1915 that led to the formation of the Clyde Workers Committee. The authorities' concern about the strength of antiwar and socialist sentiments in the area was reflected in the decision taken Aug. 9 to ban the regional meeting of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council scheduled to have taken place August 11.

The Trades Council meeting also adopts a report on the banned assembly, which vows to work to overturn the ban and hold the conference at the earliest possible opportunity. Three days later, on August 18, the Lloyd George government, with the support of its Labour representatives, issues a ban on a strike by engineers and firefighters.

August 16 (August 3, O.S.): Kornilov meets with Provisional Government authorities

After his appointment as commander-in-chief of the army on July 31 (July 18, O.S.), Kornilov's star has been rising in bourgeois and reactionary circles, where Kerensky is increasingly seen as weak and inadequate. Organizations of military officers, tsarist officials, and landowners are turning to Kornilov as the necessary strongman, a military dictator who unlike Kerensky would not stoop to negotiate with the soviets and the moderate "socialist" parties that lead them, but would instead use force to crush them utterly.

A cruel, backward man whose sympathies lie with the Black Hundreds, Kornilov was described by one contemporary as "an absolute ignoramus in the realm of politics." Kornilov's military career is not particularly distinguished. His main claim to fame is that during the failed Kerensky offensive, Kornilov unilaterally gave orders that retreating soldiers should be fired upon without mercy. This act made him the subject of fear and

hatred among workers and soldiers, but in reactionary circles it qualified him as a national hero.

A far-right figure, Kornilov regards even the bourgeois politicians in the Provisional Government as semi-treasonous, based merely on the fact that they are sharing a coalition with the “socialist” Mensheviks and SRs (whom he regards as “Russia’s internal enemies” and very likely “German spies”). Kornilov’s program, insofar as he has one, consists of using machine guns and artillery against all opposition to the government and to the war.

Kornilov is encamped at army headquarters at Mogilev, south of Petrograd, where he holds court with a gang of old tsarist generals, intriguers, and right-wing extremists. When Kerensky appointed him as commander-in-chief, Kornilov responded by announcing publicly that he would submit to no civilian authority and would do as he pleased with the army.

When Kornilov visits the cabinet in Petrograd on August 16 (3 O.S.), he brings with him a number of counterrevolutionary demands: a return to the old tsarist military discipline in the army, disempowerment of the soviets of soldiers, and freedom from civilian control. When word of the nature of these demands makes its way into the press, controversy erupts. The rise of Kornilov further discredits the Mensheviks and SRs, who continue to support the government that has installed Kornilov in his present position at the head of the military.

Petrograd, August 16: Lenin denounces Lev Kamenev’s proposal to participate in the Stockholm “peace conference”

The Bolshevik Party newspaper *Pravda* publishes an article in which Lenin criticizes Lev Kamenev, a Bolshevik leader, for having proposed in a speech on August 6 that the Bolsheviks take part in the Stockholm “peace conference.”

The Stockholm conference has been organized by the social democratic politicians of the Netherlands and Scandinavia and was promoted with special enthusiasm by the centrist Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) throughout the summer. The aim of the conference is to put pressure on the governments of the belligerent imperialist powers to end the war by means of a negotiated peace. The social democratic and centrist delegates seek to facilitate this imperialist peace with exploratory talks in Stockholm.

Since May, all preliminary attempts to set the conference into motion have failed. Too great are the differences among the delegates, all of whom defend in essence the war aims of their own governments. Nevertheless, a final attempt is made and the conference is now scheduled for September.

By supporting this endeavor and even the participation of the Bolsheviks in it, Kamenev has flouted the party resolution of the Seventh All-Russian Conference of the Bolsheviks held three months earlier. It reads: “Our party will naturally participate neither in the commission nor at all in the planned conference together with the quasi-socialist ministers who have gone over to the side of their bourgeoisie.” As justification, Kamenev claims in his speech that due to the mere fact that the governments of Paris and London oppose the Stockholm conference and refuse passports to the French and British delegates, the conference and its participants take on a progressive character. “From that moment,” the conference “ceases to be a blind instrument in the hands of the social imperialists.” Lenin’s response is unequivocal:

We cannot tolerate a situation in which the party of the

internationalists, which is responsible to the whole world for revolutionary internationalism, compromises itself by flirting with the machinations of the Russian and German social-imperialists, of the ministers of the bourgeois imperialist government of the Chernovs, Skobelevs and Co.

We have decided to build a Third International, and we must do so despite all difficulties. Not a single step backward to deals with the social-imperialists and deserters from socialism! (“Kamenev’s Speech in the C.E.C. on the Stockholm Conference”)

Kamenev’s position is not without support within the party. Trotsky writes in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: “Lenin wrote a formidable article, which appeared, however, only ten days after Kamenev’s speech. The resolute insistence of Lenin himself and other members of the Central Committee was required to induce the editorial staff, headed by Stalin, to publish the protesting article.”

Since his arrival in Petrograd, Lenin has won the overwhelming majority of the party ranks to his April Theses, which call for a sharp break with the opportunist and centrist parties, along with an orientation towards international socialist revolution and the seizure of power by the working class. But in the leadership there remains a significant tendency that resists this line. Trotsky later writes:

The revolutionary tradition of the party, the pressure of the workers from below, and Lenin’s criticism from above, compelled the upper stratum during the months of April and May—employing the words of Stalin—“to come out on a new road.” But one would have to be completely ignorant of political psychology to imagine that a mere voting for the theses of Lenin meant an actual and complete renunciation of the “mistaken position on fundamental questions.” In reality those crass democratic views organically fortified during the war, merely accommodated themselves to the new program, remaining in silent opposition to it. ...

A convulsion of doubt went through the party after the July Days. The isolation of the proletarian vanguard frightened many leaders, especially in the provinces. During the Kornilov days these frightened ones tried to get in contact with the Compromisers, which again evoked a warning cry from Lenin.

August 16 (August 3, O.S.): Bolshevik Congress passes resolution on slogans

Following discussions about Lenin’s proposal to abandon the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” at the Sixth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, convened by the Bolsheviks, a resolution committee, consisting of Stalin, Sokolnikov, Bubnov, Miliutin, Nogin, Nikolai Bukharin and Georgii Lomov, submits a new draft resolution—likely in consultation with Lenin, who is in hiding in Razliv and cannot attend the Congress.

The new draft resolution includes almost verbatim sections from the previously proposed resolution (See: August 7-13: Mezhrayontsy unite with the Bolsheviks). It affirms Lenin’s position that a peaceful transfer of power to the Soviets has now become impossible. Instead of the previous slogan “All Power to the Soviets,” the resolution calls for “complete liquidation of the dictatorship of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie.” In the weeks to follow, the Bolshevik press withdraws references to the old slogan.

August 17 (August 4, O.S.): Bolshevik Central Committee curtails independence of the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organization

At its first meeting, the newly elected Bolshevik Central Committee resolves to work towards a more unified political organization, which includes curtailing the independence of the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organization of the party.

Both are associated with the more radical wing of the Bolshevik Party, having played a central role in the July Days. These sections of the party are seen as having encouraged—in spite of the resolutions and directives of the Central Committee to the contrary—the rebellious moods among the workers and soldiers. The Bolshevik Military Organization, in particular, consists of tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors who joined the party after the February Revolution. The organization previously enjoyed relative autonomy, including a separate newspaper with its own editorial board.

The Central Committee decides to take over the Bolshevik Military Organization's newspaper *Rabochii i soldat* (Worker and Soldier) to replace *Pravda*, which has been banned by the authorities. An editorial board with five members is assembled, only one of which is a representative of the Military Organization.

Only a few days later, on August 23 (August 10, O.S.), the Provisional Government shuts down *Rabochii i soldat*, and the Military Organization and the Central Committee again resume publication of separate organs in Petrograd.

In a conversation with Yakov Sverdlov, the party's chief organizer, Lenin insists: "It is necessary to help them [the Military Organization], but there should be no pressure and no reprimands. To the contrary, they should be supported: those who don't take risks never win; without defeats there are no victories." The Military Organization will go on to play a central role in the Bolshevik seizure of power.

New York, August 17: John Reed departs for Petrograd

John "Jack" Reed and his wife Louise Bryant depart for Petrograd, both as journalists wishing to witness the Russian Revolution and as socialist partisans wishing to support its most radical aims.

Reed is a man with an upper-class pedigree, born to a wealthy Portland family. He was sent off as a young man to an elite boarding school and then to Harvard, where his talents as a poet and a writer distinguished him, along with his leadership of the cheerleading squad. Yet after leaving Harvard, the young journalist sided not with America's wealthy elite, but the oppressed.

His writings were too radical for *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*, where he got his start, and so Reed made his way to Max Eastman's *The Masses*. He was jailed in 1913 for attempting to lend support to the IWW strike of immigrant mill workers in Paterson. Later he same year he traveled to Mexico, following the army of Pancho Villa, whom he befriended, and wrote the book *Insurgent Mexico*.

Reed opposes World War I, writing of American entry in *The Masses* :

The day the German note [the Zimmerman Telegram] arrived, Wall Street flung the American flag to the breeze, the brokers on

the floor of the Stock Exchange sang "The Star Spangled Banner" with tears rolling down their cheeks, and the stock market went up... Whose war is this? Not mine. I know that hundreds of thousands of American workingmen employed by our great financial "patriots" are not paid a living wage. I have seen poor men sent to jail for long terms without trial, and even without any charge. Peaceful strikers, and their wives and children, have been shot to death, burned to death, by private detectives and militiamen. The rich have steadily become richer, and the cost of living higher, and the workers proportionally poorer. These toilers don't want war—not even civil war. But the speculators, the employers, the plutocracy—they want it, just as they did in Germany and in England; and with lies and sophistries they will whip up our blood until we are savage—and then we'll fight and die for them... ("Whose War?," April 1917)

In 1916 he traveled to the Balkans and Russia with the Canadian-born illustrator Boardman Robinson, where the two report on the war's devastation on the working masses, resulting in the book *The War in Eastern Europe* .

Reed welcomed the February Russian Revolution, and soon decided he must travel to Petrograd, using funds from the sale of the Cape Cod cottage he and his wife have shared with playwright Eugene O'Neill to birth control activist Margaret Sanger. He will arrive in Russia in time to produce one of the best-known chronicles of the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

Italo-Austrian front, August 18: Eleventh Battle of Isonzo begins

The Eleventh Battle of Isonzo, which lasts a fortnight, is one of twelve Isonzo battles along the Italo-Austrian front. In two weeks, the fierce conflict produces 160,000 casualties (30,000 dead) on the Italian side and 120,000 (20,000 dead) among the Austro-Hungarian forces. Tens of thousands are either unaccounted for or taken prisoner on both sides.

For the first time, the Italian army deploys Arditi forces, the equivalent of the German storm troopers, specialized soldiers trained to infiltrate the enemy line and fight savagely at close quarters. The Banjšice Plateau, today on the Italian-Slovenian border, becomes a human slaughterhouse. While the battle technically ends on August 31, ferocious fighting in the area continues well into the first three weeks of September, leading to tens of thousands of deaths, with the Austro-Hungarian forces suffering a setback that eventually contributes to the Central Powers' decision to focus on the Italian front.

Infantry machine gun operator Agostino Tambuscio described the hellish conditions: "Exhausted, my limbs hurting, I lie on the ground. It feels like a soft bed under me, feather-like... At the first dawning light I recognize a human shape... I slept on top of an Austrian cadaver... My hands, my clothes, human blood everywhere..." In another letter: "Thirst is tormenting us... A bin is full of a viscous milk-like liquid... [It's] mules' urine... It enters my mouth violently and quenches my thirst..."

During the same battle, Corporal Duilio Faustinelli writes, "Many were born in 1898, it was the first time they were on the front line. One of them on his knees, he looked like he was praying: his head was mangled, his brains had gotten splashed over my uniform and face..."

Finland, August 18 (August 5, O.S.): Russian Provisional Government

sends troops to suppress unrest

Protests, strikes and unrest in Finnish cities, driven by the high price and scarcity of food, are suppressed by Russian soldiers dispatched by the Provisional Government. The use of military force follows by less than two weeks the Provisional Government's decision to unilaterally suspend the Finnish parliament, after the Social Democrat-controlled chamber had passed a law purporting to grant Finland expanded autonomy.

Reflecting the political weakness of the Finnish ruling elite and its fear of social revolution, the Finnish bourgeois parties have supported the dissolution of parliament. Meanwhile, the support among the Russian Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries for the suppression of protests in Finland is bound up with their alliance with the Russian bourgeoisie and their determination to continue the pursuit of Russian national interests in the imperialist war. Of the Russian parties, only the Bolsheviks support the right of oppressed nationalities within the former tsarist empire to self-determination. Writing on the Finnish situation in *Pravda* in May, Lenin observed:

Comrades, workers and peasants, do not be influenced by the annexationist policy of the Russian capitalists, Guchkov, Milyukov, and the Provisional Government towards Finland, Courland, Ukraine, etc.! Do not fear to recognize the right of all these nations to secede! Nations must be won over to the idea of an alliance with the Great Russians not by force, but by a really voluntary and really free agreement, which is impossible without the right of secession.

The freer Russia is, and the more resolutely our republic recognizes the right of non-Great-Russian nations to secede, the more strongly will other nations be attracted towards an alliance with us, the less friction will there be, the more rarely will actual secession occur, the shorter the period of secession will last, and the closer and more enduring—in the long run—will the fraternal alliance be between the Russian proletarian and peasant republic and the republics of all other nations.

Thessaloniki, August 18: Great Fire of Thessaloniki leaves over 70,000 homeless

At around 3 p.m., a spark from a kitchen pan falls into a pile of hay at a house in Greece's second largest city, Thessaloniki. The blaze it triggers quickly spreads, encouraged by strong winds. Over the next 30 hours, it will consume over 30 percent of the city's buildings, leaving at least 70,000 of an estimated population of between 150,000 and 200,000 homeless.

The city center, including commercial buildings, religious centers and monuments, is virtually destroyed. Poet Yiorgos Vafopoulos would write in his autobiography, "There where once the labyrinthine alleys of the Jewish district had spread out, were now only stones and smoldering ashes. In the other quarter, where the grand shops and hotels tower, tragic ruins reminded one of their former glory. And all these sad remains of a rich big city were swathed in heavy clouds of smoke."

The impact of the fire is made all the worse by a lack of firefighters. Only private firefighting units operate in the area, and they lack training and equipment. In addition, Thessaloniki has become home over the past two years to large contingents of French and British troops fighting on the Macedonian front. They have redirected much of the city's water supplies

to serve their military camps on its outskirts, leaving a water shortage that is exacerbated by this summer's drought.

Thessaloniki has emerged as one of the most modern cities in the Balkans, although conditions in its poor neighborhoods are terrible. It was home to the Venizelos rebel government from September 1916 to June 1917, when the pro-allied Prime Minister returned to Athens after the abdication of King Constantine, whose pro-German inclinations meant Greece had remained neutral in the war until that point.

A multicultural population lives in Thessaloniki, including Sephardic Jews, Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims of Turkish and other origins. The fire hits the Jewish population particularly hard. More than 50,000 Jews are made homeless, and half of the city's Jewish population will emigrate after the fire, having lost much of their property. 16 of 33 synagogues and over 4,000 out of some 7,000 shops are destroyed.

Spokane, Wilmington, New York, and Birmingham: Strikes and repression across US

Workers' struggles—and government, corporate, and union attempts to contain them—proliferate across the US this week.

In Spokane, an IWW threat of a general strike involving lumber workers, construction workers, and harvest hands from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana, has been met with preemptive repression, with the entire Spokane leadership of the organization—27 members, including regional secretary James Rowan—arrested by federalized soldiers of the Idaho National Guard. "You are military prisoners, and are not detained under civil law," the US Army Major leading the raid tells the prisoners.

The IWW, which has conducted a lumber industry strike since early summer, is demanding a ten-hour day in the wheat fields and the release of class war prisoners already arrested in the wave of government repression targeting the syndicalist labor union.

Meanwhile, a shipyard strike stretching from New York to Wilmington has gained in strength, involving some 11,000 workers. Other walkouts are threatened in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, possibly crippling the rapid growth of the American navy and commercial merchant marine. Leaders of several unions gather at Tammany Hall to implore the Wilson administration to ask shipbuilding firms to meet workers' demands.

In Birmingham, Alabama, a planned strike of 25,000 coal miners has been scuttled by officials of the United Mine Workers (UMW), who have told rank-and-file miners that the union president and secretary, John White and William Green, have won an audience with Secretary of Labor William Wilson. Wilson, the first Secretary of Labor, is extolled by the unions as a "friend of the working man." In fact, it is reported on August 17 that the Wilson administration is preparing to assert federal control over the coal industry as a means of controlling inflation—in other words, to tamp down wages and control strikes.

Also this week: Leonhard Frank publishes a collection of antiwar stories under the title *Man is Good*

The short story collection *Man is Good* by German author Leonhard Frank (1882-1961) is published in Zürich, Switzerland. Frank is one of the few artists who in 1914 did not let themselves be carried away by patriotic enthusiasm for war. In 1915, he was forced to flee to Switzerland to avoid

political persecution by the courts. Outraged, he had publicly slapped a social democratic journalist who celebrated the torpedoing of the British luxury liner Lusitania by a German U-boat. Around 1,200 people perished in the sinking.

Given the revolutionary mood seething within the population, *Man is Good* is immediately banned in Germany. But the author arranges for 500 copies to be bound, disguised in the cover of the Swiss Civil Code, and smuggled through secret channels into Germany where it is illegally distributed by opponents of the war. A socialist print shop reprints 500,000 copies on newspaper and sends them to soldiers at the front.

The effect on readers is staggering. The collection's five interrelated stories—The Father, The War Widow, The Mother, The Lovers, The War Cripple—describe individual fates in which one recognizes oneself or the fate of one's relatives, friends or neighbors. In the first story, the father is a lowly waiter. He has raised his son strictly in the militarist spirit of the German empire. Only the shock of the news of his "death on the field of honor" leads the father to consider his own responsibility. He comes to the conclusion that he must awaken his fellow man to human kindness and call on him to oppose the killing. He begins to speak with everyone he encounters and mobilizes them for a protest march:

Our people, as we see it, consist only of cripples and wretched looking children, women and geriatrics. If one now gathers from the battlefields the arms and legs, the scattered body parts, the millions of mangled bodies—your sons and husbands among them—and throws them on your streets, right before your eyes, would you even then say: one just has to accept it?

Leonhard Frank then portrays with sensitivity how the war widow grapples with the death of her husband. She attempts to console herself with the fact that hers is the fate of millions of women: "I sacrificed my husband on the altar of the fatherland ... as all other war widows have." She only succeeds in keeping away the still unendurable pain over her late husband with the words: "He died a hero's death for the fatherland."

Only gradually is she able to work through the thirst for revenge against the "enemy" in the midst of her everyday experiences, and to really mourn her husband. In the end, heeding the call and following the example of a twenty-year-old, she joins the protest march of the waiter, which has now become a mass movement.

With shocking realism, the author describes the "butcher's kitchen," the operating room of the mobile field hospital, in which a surgeon carries out endless lifesaving amputations until he himself reaches the point of exhaustion. He travels home by train with the cripples, the blind and the patients gone insane. He travels through the country and observes: "Has the old order, discipline and docility begun to show cracks? Has the new spirit gotten out of hand and penetrated through to the peasants? ... They are beginning to think. This tremendous suffering has broken the ossification. That spirit is spreading through the country. The old ways are breaking up, stricken by suffering and the wild longing for freedom. The individual wants to shape his own destiny. The individual is beginning to think."

When the waiter interjects, "We will all be executed ... before," the surgeon says: "You see ... the gentlemen cannot risk any more today; they know that today for every job that becomes vacant in this way, a hundred applicants will immediately be there, behind whom millions more stand. That is how it is today ... even the brave social democrat [Karl Liebknecht] sits in prison for nothing; this incident is drilled into a hundred thousand heads."

"That book was a European sensation," literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki later writes. In the 1920s, it is reprinted multiple times in large

print runs and is read on a massive scale. In 1933, like other works by Leonhard Frank, it will be burned by the Nazis, and the author will be forced to emigrate once again.



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