

This week in the Russian Revolution

August 21-August 27: Kerensky attempts to marshal the counterrevolution

21 August 2017

With the installation of General Kornilov at the head of the army, Kerensky has turned sharply to the right. He convenes the Moscow State Conference to unite all of the counterrevolutionary forces in Russia behind him. He invites the generals of the old tsarist army, top clergy, former tsarist bureaucrats, the Cossack warlords, representatives of the big banks and commercial enterprises, trade union leaders, and the great rural landlords. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries also attend, cheering enthusiastically when the self-proclaimed “supreme head” of the country takes the stage.

Moscow, August 21-23 (August 8-10, O.S.): Leading industrialists, army generals and Kadets line up behind Kornilov

Some 400 leading industrialists, Kadets and military leaders convene at the “Conference of Public Figures” in Moscow. The conference meetings are closed to the public to prevent “disruptions.” The conference essentially constitutes a series of conspiratorial discussions within the Russian military, economic and political elites in preparation for a military dictatorship.

Delegates include many Kadets, led by Pavel Miliukov; wealthy industrialists such as Riabushinsky, Tretiakov, Konovalov and Vishnegradsky; and the top military brass, including the generals Alekseev, Brusilov, Iudenich, and the Cossack general Kaledin. In the words of historian William Rosenberg, “To outside observers, and particularly workers, peasants and soldiers who read the left-wing press, no meeting could have better illustrated the deep social cleavage that now rent Russian society.” (William Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, Princeton University Press 1974, p. 211)

On August 22 (August 9, O.S.), the conference adopts a pledge of confidence in Kornilov, condemning all attacks on his authority in the army and the rear as “treachery” and stating that “all thinking Russia” was looking upon Kornilov with hope and faith. (See August 14-20: The Kornilov menace)

The declaration concludes with a paean to Kornilov: “May God help you in your great task of reconstructing a powerful army and saving Russia.” The declaration is dispatched to Kornilov and circulated widely the same day.

In another resolution, introduced by the leading Kadet Miliukov, the conference delegates openly call for the removal of all socialist parties from the government and public political life: “The causes and roots of Russia’s present evil are evident. Its sources are the subordination of the great national tasks of the revolution to the visionary aspirations of socialist parties. ... Time will not wait; it is impossible to delay. In the

name of Russia’s salvation and the rebirth of freedom, the government must immediately and decisively break with all servants of utopia.”

At the end of the conference, the leading industrialists meet up with the military generals in a special private session. They discuss the need for the “most severe measures” to establish military discipline and for a new government “which would finally give the possibility of setting up a firm, unlimited state authority,” something which, in their opinion, was “absolutely necessary... in the present time.” (Quotes from William Rosenberg, *Ibid.*)

On August 23 (August 10, O.S.) Kerensky and Kornilov meet in person. As a prelude to the meeting, troops loyal to Kornilov surround the Winter Palace and place a machine gun in the vestibule. At the meeting itself, Kornilov presents demands for the suppression of the soviets and for placing railroads and factories under direct military control. Kerensky’s responses are evasive and noncommittal, but he appears to accede to Kornilov’s demands as they pertain to the restoration of tsarist discipline in the army.

Kornilov is plotting a military coup, and is positioning troops to move on Petrograd. On August 24 (August 11, O.S.), he tells his chief of staff that it is “high time to hang the German agents and spies headed by Lenin” and to “disperse the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers in such a way that it would not reassemble anywhere.” Kornilov expresses delight at the appointment of the arch-reactionary General Krymov to command the troops menacing Petrograd, as Krymov would not hesitate “to hang the entire Soviet membership.”

(Quotes from Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Haymarket Books 2009, pp. 106-9.)

Magdeburg, August 21: Strike movement spreads in Germany

An August 21 article in the Magdeburg newspaper *Volksstimme* (People’s Voice), “Threat of weaver strike in Owl Mountains,” reports that in the region that was once home to the Silesian hunger revolts of 1844 there is now a “powerful movement of textile workers” that threatens to lead to a major strike.

The workers demand a minimum wage that will enable them to make a reasonable living, reports the newspaper. The employers are only willing to concede to a 25 percent wage increase. At the same time, they demand a 10-hour increase to the workweek, bringing the total to 55 hours per week. The textile workers, many of whom must care for children and other family members, are not willing or able to add an entire day to the workweek. The entire population of the region has already suffered from years of malnutrition, the article reports. Tensions mount day by day.

Moreover, work in the factories is more difficult than usual because the raw materials are of a poorer quality due to the war.

In May 1917, the textile workers union had repeatedly negotiated in vain with employers for higher wages. Through negotiations with the war office, they succeed in gaining recognition for workers performing hard labor at some workplaces important to the war effort as military employees. All those performing “lighter work,” including the vast majority of textile workers, remain excluded from this benefit. To “safeguard the delivery of urgent military supplies of linen and canvas,” the Prussian ministry of war grants certain factories permission for an unlimited extension of working hours. All of this contributes to the discontent of the workforce in the textile factories.

At the end of July through mid-August, around 10,000 coal miners in Silesia have already gone on strike. Soon, 16,000 workers of the chemical giant Leuna Works and thousands of workers at other central German industrial sites will walk out. In the cities, protest rallies and street demonstrations increase.

Unrest mounts daily in the Rhine Province around Düsseldorf and in the Ruhr District, according to reports in the foreign press. The domestic press remains silent—due to censorship. In Essen, workers demand 10 pounds of potatoes as a basic ration each week. However, at a meeting with workers delegates, the war food authorities inform them that in the next 20 weeks there will be no more than 8 pounds per week.

In the strikes of the summer of 1917, as in April, concerns over food and the question of wages play the leading role. Because the workers understand that their plight is above all a result of the war economy, they begin to express more strongly their political discontent and their rejection of the war. They come into conflict with the truce politics of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade union leadership, which reached an agreement with the supreme army command and the government to neither carry out nor support any labor struggles for the duration of the war. Political demands are now posed ever more loudly.

In mid-August 1917, members of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in Magdeburg distribute a call for a general strike for peace. Police and military authorities respond with severe repression and arrest several known leaders of the workers. Several hundred workers at the Magdeburg Krupp-Gruson Works then go out on strike because of the arrest of their leaders. They are unsuccessful, not least because the official trade union leadership collaborates closely with the military authorities to suppress their struggle. The workers see the arrests as a disciplinary act and send a delegation to the representative commanding authority and demand the release of their leaders. He informs the delegation that they are suspected of high treason because they distributed leaflets that summoned the workers to a general strike. Those arrested are sentenced to 3 to 9 months in prison.

Turin, August 22-25: General strike shakes city of Turin

Thousands of women demonstrate on August 22 in the industrial city of Turin when 80 bakeries close their shops due to a bread shortage. The protest spreads rapidly in the working-class districts and ultimately throughout the entire workforce.

A worker later reports, “We stopped working, gathered in front of the factory gate and shouted: ‘We haven’t eaten anything. We cannot work. We want bread.’ The boss of my company, Pietro Diatto, was very worried and tried to butter up the workers: ‘You are right. How can anyone work without eating? I will call the military supplier right away and order a truck full of bread. In the meantime, please go back to work, for your own sake and that of your families.’ The workers were quiet for a

moment. For an instant they looked around at each other as though they were silently gauging the opinion of the others. Then they all shouted together: ‘We aren’t interested in bread. We want peace! Down with the profiteers! Down with the war!’”

One day later there is a general strike in which even greater political demands are raised. The workers demand the end of the war.

The workers take up arms and entire districts of the city are barricaded. The government sends troops into the city. For three days workers in the suburbs fight on the barricades against an overpowering military, which advances with tanks and artillery, until the rebellion is drowned in blood.

According to official numbers, there are 50 fatalities and 200 wounded. Eight hundred are arrested. The leadership of the socialists is accused of inciting a revolution and sentenced to prison. They are replaced by a 12-member committee, including the young journalist Antonio Gramsci.

In February, the Turin Fiat workers had welcomed the Russian Revolution with the words “Fare come in Russia!” (Do as the Russians do!). Despite a ban on strikes and a state of emergency, the year brings repeated unrest and strikes in the factories. Young workers from the countryside, those spared from military service because they are indispensable, and women stop their work in protest. Longer strikes occur in Mailand, Terni, Piombino, Naples, Livorno and Prato. In Sestri Ponente, a months-long strike takes place in the iron and metal industry. Altogether, approximately 170,000 workers participate in strikes and uprisings against price increases, shortages in basic commodities and the bloated war bureaucracy in 1917. A number of soldiers also rebel during this time. Desertions increase.

August 23 (August 10, O.S.): Provisional Government shuts down Bolshevik newspaper *Rabochii i soldat*

In an ongoing attempt to silence the Bolshevik party, the Provisional Government, which has earlier banned the Bolsheviks’ central organ *Pravda*, now also prohibits the publication of *Rabochii i soldat* (The Worker and the Soldier), the newspaper which had replaced *Pravda*. However, the Bolshevik leadership refuses to give in to the pressure of the government and promptly issues a new organ—*Proletarii* (The Proletarian). The first issue of *Proletarii* appears just three days after the ban of *Rabochii i soldat*, on August 26 (August 13, O.S.).

Houston, Texas, August 23: Black soldiers battle city police

A group of 150 black soldiers march from Camp Logan to the city of Houston in retribution for abuse at the hands of local police. Four soldiers and sixteen police and civilians die in the night’s fighting. Nineteen of the soldiers will be court martialled and hung for the uprising, and another 41 are thrown in prison for life.

The Wilson administration, in its “war for democracy,” has called on all sections of the American population to send fathers, brothers and sons to fight and die. But African Americans are mustered into segregated units, where they suffer degrading treatment and are compelled to take on harder labor and dangerous assignments. The Great War arrives in the aftermath of the implementation of the vicious Jim Crow regime across the American South. This is a period when lawmen and vigilantes have virtual free rein to terrorize and murder blacks.

Houston, a segregated southern metropolis, is no exception. The soldiers of the 24th United States Infantry Regiment at nearby Camp Logan suffer

every manner of humiliation, culminating in the pistol whipping of soldiers by Houston police. A rumor spreads at Camp Logan that one of the soldiers has been murdered, and tensions reach the breaking point. The men decide to seize weapons from their base and then march on the city, exacting revenge on several police and civilians on the way. After accidentally killing a soldier, the men disband. Houston is placed under martial law.

The resulting courts martial result in death sentences for 29 men. Wilson personally reviews the cases, granting executive commutations for ten soldiers, bearing in mind the “splendid loyalty” of African Americans in the war and as encouragement “to further zeal and service to the country.”

London, August 23: British government creates Jewish battalion to fight Ottomans in Palestine

The Lloyd George government announces the founding of a Jewish battalion to function within the British army to fight Ottoman troops in Palestine. Zionists including Vladimir Jabotinsky and Chaim Weizmann have led the campaign for the creation of such a force since 1915 as a step in the direction of fighting for an independent Jewish state.

The initiative began in February 1915 when Jabotinsky, together with Joseph Trumpeldor, agreed to establish a military unit made up of Russian émigré Jews in Palestine. General Maxwell, at a meeting with Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor in March of the same year, said he could not create an army unit made up of foreign nationals, but offered to establish a transportation corps. Trumpeldor acceded to this proposal and began to recruit Jews in Egypt, while Jabotinsky went to Europe to seek support for a unit.

As the war progressed, British imperialism began to see the benefit of aiding Zionism in terms of British geostrategic interests in the region. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith opposed backing Zionist calls for a Jewish homeland, but when Lloyd George replaced him in December 1916 he began advocating an alliance with Zionism.

The British policy is fraught with contradictions that lay the basis for future conflicts in the Middle East. Jews currently make up only 12 percent of the population in Palestine. Moreover, McMahon, the British High Commissioner at Cairo, agreed with Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, in early 1916 to support an independent Arab state after the war if they rose up against the Ottomans. On this basis, two Arab princes launched the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule in June 1916.

London has simultaneously concluded the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, the terms of which have been concealed from the Arabs. The Sykes-Picot Agreement carves out British and French spheres of influence, with London taking over much of Iraq, while Paris gains most of Syria and parts of northern Iraq. The deal also gives control of Haifa and Acre to Britain, enabling them to access the Mediterranean, but designates the so-called Brown Zone, the region around Jerusalem, as an area over which negotiations would have to be held. London hopes that by backing a Zionist fighting force, it can strengthen its hand against France for control over this area.

The newly founded Jewish battalion is designated as the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. The 39th Battalion will be established in April 1918 in Nova Scotia and be composed of Jews from North America. The battalions are deployed to fight the Ottomans in the Jordan Valley and north of Jerusalem.

Butte, Montana, August 23: Strike of smelter workers shuts down

Anaconda

A strike of smelter workers at the Anaconda Company in Butte, Montana, has forced the copper concern, which is controlled by Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, to shut down all of its properties in the region, idling some 15,000 workers and bringing its formidable copper production to a halt. Butte is a flashpoint of class strife. Frank Little of the I.W.W. was brutally murdered here just one month ago. Just over two months ago, over 160 miners were killed here by a mine fire.

Moscow, August 25-28 (August 12-15, O.S.): Counterrevolutionaries convene at Moscow State Conference

Around 2,500 representatives of Russia’s ruling elite attend the conference convened by Kerensky in Moscow to rally all of the counterrevolutionary forces in Russia behind a government of “blood and iron,” with Kerensky at the “supreme head.”

Delegations of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) from the Central Executive Committees of the soviets attend the conference, furiously applauding when Kerensky takes the stage. The Bolsheviks intend to appear at the conference and walk out over its counterrevolutionary form and program. However, the Menshevik and SR leaders prevent a Bolshevik walkout by preemptively excluding Bolsheviks from all the soviet delegations.

On the right wing of the hall are arrayed the supporters of the monarchy, the clergy, the old tyranny in the army and the countryside, and the Black Hundred supporters. These elements have been politically in hiding since the February Revolution, but are now more than eager to openly shout their enthusiasm for the bloody suppression of the masses. On the “left” wing of the conference are the Mensheviks and SRs. When given an opportunity to speak at the conference, Menshevik and SR leaders praise the Provisional Government and its policies, seeking to ingratiate themselves with the reactionary elites by repudiating the strivings of the masses for peace and socialism.

When Kerensky takes the stage, he seeks to placate the monarchist right by omitting any reference to a “republic” from his speech. Instead, Kerensky begins by shaking his fist in the direction of the imaginary Bolsheviks, without referring to them by name, and threatening that any resistance to the government “will be put down with blood and iron.” The entire conference erupts in emphatic applause at this threat, including the Mensheviks and SRs.

However, Kerensky is not only afraid of the threat from below posed by the Bolsheviks and the revolutionary masses. He also faces the mounting threat from the extreme right, represented by Kornilov. Accordingly, Kerensky addresses a threat to the right wing of the conference: “Whatever ultimatums no matter who may present to me, I will know how to subdue him to the will of the supreme power, and to me, its supreme head.” This threat is greeted with more muted applause, largely restricted to the left wing of the hall.

Kornilov’s entrance into Moscow is like something out of the medieval era. When Kornilov’s train pulls into the station, red-robed Turkoman guards with drawn swords leap onto the platform and take up ceremonial positions as if celebrating the entrance of a tsar. Then Kornilov appears in full dress uniform and is greeted with a cascade of flowers. Trotsky describes Kornilov’s entrance at the state conference in *The History of the Russian Revolution*:

When Kornilov appeared in his *loge*, the right conference gave him a stormy ovation, the left remained seated almost as a body. Cries of “get up!” from the officers’ loges were followed with coarse abuse ...

“General! You have the floor!” The session has now arrived at its critical moment. What will the high commander-in-chief have to say, after Kerensky has insistently but vainly urged him to limit himself to a mere outline of the military situation? Miliukov writes as an eye-witness: “The short, stumpy but strong figure of a man with Kalmuck features, appeared up the stage, darting sharp piercing glances from his small black eyes in which there was a vicious glint. The hall rocked with applause. All leapt to their feet with the exception of ... the soldiers.” Shouts of indignation mingled with abuse were addressed from the right to the delegates who did not stand: “You roughnecks, get up!” From the delegates not standing the answer comes back: “Serfs!” The uproar turns into a storm. Kerensky demands that they all quietly listen to the “first soldier of the Provisional Government.”

In the sharp, fragmentary, imperious tone appropriate to a general who intends to save the country, Kornilov read a manuscript written for him by the adventurer Zavoiko at the dictation of the adventurer Filonenko. But the program proffered in the manuscript was considerably more moderate than the design to which it formed an introduction. Kornilov did not hesitate to paint the condition of the army and the situation at the front in the blackest colors, and with an obvious intent to cause fright. The central point in his speech was a military prognosis: “The enemy is already knocking at the gates of Riga, and if the instability of our army does not make it possible to restrain him on the shores of the Gulf of Riga, then the road to Petrograd is open.” Here Kornilov hauls off and deals a blow to the government: “By a whole series of legislative measures introduced after the revolution by people strange to the spirit and understanding of an army, the army has been converted into a crazy mob trembling only for its own life.”

The inference is obvious: There is no hope for Riga, and the commander-in-chief openly and challengingly says so before the whole world, as though inviting the Germans to seize the defenseless city. And Petrograd? Kornilov’s thought was this: If I am empowered to carry out my program, Petrograd may still be saved, but hurry up! The Moscow Bolshevik paper wrote: “What is this, a warning or a threat? The Tarnopol defeat made Kornilov commander-in-chief, the surrender of Riga might make him dictator.”

Archbishop Platon then takes the floor of the conference to declare: “I have come here in order to say to Russia from this platform: Do not be troubled, dear one. Have no fear, my own one ... If a miracle is necessary for the salvation of Russia, then in answer to the prayers of his church, God will accomplish this miracle.” However, he attacks the left wing of the conference by complaining that in the previous speeches, he “had not once heard even by a slip of the tongue the word God.” Trotsky later remarks, “These churchmen who had been squirming in the dust at the feet of Rasputin were now bold enough publicly to confess the revolutionary government.”

However, notwithstanding all the loud cheering, Kerensky’s attempt to unite all the counterrevolutionary forces in the country ends in chaos and failure. When a young Cossack officer addressing the conference frankly states that the enlisted soldiers do not trust the officers, a voice from the officers’ benches shouts, “German marks!” At this, the conference explodes with a furious clamor of recriminations and counter-recriminations, and the president’s bell clanging for order goes unheeded.

It appears that a physical brawl is about to break out, and Kerensky’s oratory is unable to bring the conference together. Trotsky narrates the ignominious conclusion of the conference:

After all that had taken place Kerensky declared in his concluding speech: “I believe and I even know ... that we have achieved a better understanding of each other, that we have achieved a greater respect for each other.” Never before had the duplicity of the February regime risen to such disgusting and futile heights of falsity. Himself unable to sustain this tone, the orator suddenly burst out in the midst of his concluding phrases into a wail of threat and despair. As Miliukov describes it: “With a broken voice which fell from a hysterical shriek to a tragic whisper, Kerensky threatened an imaginary enemy, intently searching for him throughout the hall with inflamed eyes ...” Miliukov really knew better than anybody else that this enemy was not imaginary. “Today citizens of the Russian land, I will no longer dream ... May my heart become a stone ...” Thus Kerensky raged: “Let all those flowers and dreams of humanity dry up. (A woman’s voice from the gallery: ‘You cannot do that. Your heart will not permit you.’) I throw far away the key of my heart, beloved people. I will think only of the state.”

The hall was stupefied, and this time both halves of it. The social symbol of the State Conference wound up with an insufferable monologue from a melodrama. That woman’s voice raised in defense of the flowers of the heart sounded like a cry for help, like an S.O.S. from the peaceful, sunny, bloodless February revolution. The curtain came down at last upon the State Conference.

While the counterrevolutionaries are furiously cheering Kerensky and Kornilov at the State Conference, a massive general strike breaks out among Moscow workers, with more than 400,000 workers participating. According to a later Soviet encyclopedia entry, strikes and mass meetings simultaneously take place in Kiev, Kharkov, Ekaterinburg, Vladimir, Saratov, and Nizhny Novgorod.

At the conference itself, all mention of the political party that will be in power in two months is systematically excluded from the speeches and discussions. The representatives of the old regime collectively pretend that the Bolsheviks do not exist.

Recommended Reading: Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume II, Chapter 30: “The State Conference in Moscow.”

Wilhelmshaven, August 26: Military tribunal imposes death sentences for antiwar protest leaders

A military tribunal of the German Navy condemns to death the sailors and stokers Bernhard Spanderen, Max Reichpietsch, Albin Köbis, Hans Beckers, Willi Sachse and Willi Weber for “acts of treason” and “inciting a rebellion treasonous to the military.” On August 1, Bernhard Spanderen had spontaneously organized a three-hour march ashore by 49 sailors in protest of the arbitrary harassment of the crew by their commanding officer. The other five are accused of “an act of rebellion” for having organized the next day a protest march in response to the immediate arrest and severe punishment of their 49 comrades, in which 600 sailors of the fourth fleet participated. During this larger, four-hour protest, the sailors demanded not only the release and legal immunity of their 49 comrades, but also the immediate end of the war.

All the sailors are unarmed during their protest action and even provide the guards necessary for the maintenance of combat readiness during the protest. Nevertheless, the military court imposes the harshest possible sentences, as if the accused had carried out a successful armed uprising. In addition to the six death sentences, 19 sailors are given severe prison sentences of 5 to 15 years, while another 56 are given up to 10 years. Hundreds are demoted and sent to the front to join the “suicide squads” of the army.

The rulings do not even comply with the completely undemocratic regulations of the military penal code of the German empire, since not even the attempt of an uprising can be proven. Furthermore, confessions and eyewitness testimony are coerced by the investigating counselors of the tribunal, Dr. Dobrindt and Dr. Breil, who have the prisoners held at gunpoint and threatened with immediate execution if they do not confess. In addition, the two counselors of the tribunal are the investigators, prosecutors and, in the case of Dobrindt, even the judge all in one.

Many experts and even the leadership of the military jurisdiction recommend that the death sentences should not be enforced but should be commuted instead to life sentences. They fear that publicity over the death sentences would “dangerously stoke the mood of the population.”

For the same reason, and not out of democratic principles, on August 9 the Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman Friedrich Ebert also warns against the executions in a discussion with the Reich Marine Minister. To counteract the unrest in the army and navy, he promises the strictest secrecy “about the entire matter.” As the minutes of the meeting note, he at the same time dutifully hastens to ensure that he condemns as “blatant treason” the “stupidities of the sailors,” which are no doubt the “sorry effort of a local group of ruthless journeymen.”

On September 2, the supreme commander of the navy approves two of the death sentences despite the opposing recommendations and warnings by several military jurists, ordering that they be carried out immediately to set a frightening example for all crewmen. In the early morning of September 5, Max Reichpietsch and Albin Köbis are shot.



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