

This week in the Russian Revolution

August 28 – September 3: Surge in support for the Bolsheviks

28 August 2017

Kerensky's fortunes are in free fall. His military campaign produced a disaster, and a German counteroffensive results in the seizure of Riga and menaces Petrograd. Since July, Kerensky has turned sharply to the right, abrogating the reforms that followed the February Revolution, suppressing the Bolshevik press, and arresting Bolshevik leaders. But his attempt to unite the counterrevolutionary forces behind him at the Moscow State Conference ends in acrimonious failure. As support for Kerensky collapses, so too does support for all of the opportunist and petty-bourgeois parties that had placed themselves at his disposal, including the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.

The elites are deserting Kerensky, throwing their support instead behind the bloodthirsty tsarist general Kornilov, who is plotting to establish a counterrevolutionary dictatorship by means of a military coup. Meanwhile, the masses have had enough of the temporizing of the "moderate" Soviet leaders, and—to the alarm and dismay of all other parties and leaders—they are turning in vast numbers to the Bolsheviks.

August 29 (August 16, O.S.): Bolshevik Central Committee reaffirms subordinate position of the Military Organization

A meeting of the newly elected Bolshevik Central Committee reaffirms the subordinate position of the Military Organization. The Military Organization is allowed to continue publishing its newspaper *Soldat* (The Soldier), which it has started issuing following the ban on the Bolsheviks' *Rabochii i soldat* a few days earlier. However, a member of the Central Committee is placed on the editorial board with a right to veto publications. Moreover, Iakov Sverdlov and Felix Dzerzhinsky are delegated to conduct discussions with the Military Organization bureau so as to establish a better working relationship with the Central Committee, and to maintain control over *Soldat*.

The conflict between the Central Committee and the Military Organization dates back to the July uprising, in the lead up to which the Military Organization's newspapers took a much more favorable attitude toward the rebellious moods in the masses than the Central Committee, which put an emphasis on cautioning against a premature uprising.

In the wake of this experience, the Central Committee has sought to curtail the independent actions and publications of the Military Organization, with some even calling for its abolition. The Central Committee also set up a special internal commission to investigate the role of the Military Organization in the precipitation of the July uprising. However, apparently after the intervention of Lenin, the Military Organization is cleared of most charges.

The Military Organization has by now largely recovered from the

impact of the July defeat. Despite the government repression, already by mid-August it could organize well-attended meetings in the Petrograd garrison to protest repression, as well as the ongoing existence of the Duma and State Council.

Military Organization representatives report that membership is again increasing. The organization's secretary notes that it is precisely the government repression that accounts for the Bolsheviks' renewed success, stating that the new upsurge of Bolshevik influence is due "not to agitation, which is still difficult to conduct, but to new punishment regulations, the repression of revolutionary soldiers, and temporizing on the part of the 'defencists.'"

Quote from: Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Haymarket Books 2009, p. 76.

Sydney, August 30: Worker involved in Australian "Great Strike" shot dead by right-wing scab

Mervyn Flanagan, an unemployed drayman, has been shot dead by Reginald Wearne, a right-wing scab, in Camperdown, a working-class suburb in Sydney's inner-west. The killing takes place in the context of an intense, government-led crackdown on the "Great Strike," a stoppage that began earlier in the month, taking on the proportions of a general strike in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, Australia's most populous states.

Flanagan, 31, unemployed and poverty-stricken, and his brother James were with a group of striking workers on Bridge Road, when they encountered Wearne and other scabs. During the ensuing confrontation, Flanagan was shot through the heart and another worker, Henry Williams, was shot in the leg.

Wearne, the brother of conservative politician Walter Wearne, who has played a central role in coordinating attacks on the strike, is among thousands of scab-laborers who have been mobilized from rural areas by the conservative NSW government of William Holman. Dubbed the "farmer's army," each of the scabs is armed by the government with a revolver. The politician wrote to his brother after the shooting to congratulate him: "You have played the game in a manner which makes your family feel proud. It may be bad luck for the striker which I very much doubt."

The strike, which began in early August in the railway and tram workshops in Sydney against the introduction of time-cards and attempts to boost productivity, spread rapidly over the ensuing weeks, involving as many as 100,000 workers throughout the east coast of Australia. The movement is heavily influenced by socialists, left-wing unionists, and opponents of the war. The National Party Prime Minister, Billy Hughes,

and his colleagues in NSW and Victoria, have denounced the strike as the work of “revolutionaries” and “disloyalists” and have actively encouraged violence by scabs and police.

Thousands of workers will take part in a funeral procession for Flanagan in early September, marching from Trades Hall to a nearby train station. One participant later writes, “Those weeping folk, that sorrowing wife, those broken men, little baby faces moved me in a strange way and brought home the tragedy of despotism now sweeping over our fair land gathering its victims one by one.”

Wearne is charged with manslaughter, but is acquitted with the help of a legal defense funded by prominent landowners, lawyers, politicians, and businessmen. Instead, Flanagan’s brother and another striker, Henry Williams, are convicted of having used violence to prevent Wearne from “following his lawful occupation.”

Flanders, August 31: Slaughter continues on Western Front

Heavy casualties on a daily basis have continued to pile up on both sides over the past month. A series of inconclusive battles have been fought around Ypres, following the initiation by the British of the Third Battle of Ypres on July 31.

On August 10, a German officer noted that, two weeks into the battle, casualties on the German side averaged between 1,500 and 2,000 per day. Later estimates suggest that between August 22 and 25, amidst a series of local and unsuccessful attacks by the British, another 3,000 German men were lost. British historian J. E. Edmonds records total British casualties from July 31 to August 28 as 68,010, of whom 10,266 died.

A German soldier who has arrived at the front with the 413th Württemberg Infantry Regiment on August 24 describes the scene around him,

All around horrific desolation, hell cannot look more dismal. Shell holes alongside shell holes, almost all of them full to the brim with water, the entire ground torn to shreds. It was impossible to tell whether this had been a meadow or arable land, had a well-tended garden brought joy to someone’s heart or had the ground never been planted, the shells had torn up so many holes.

One of the major British operations this month was the Battle of Langemarck, with operations from August 16 to 18. Although initial gains were made, German counterattacks forced the British 5th Army to retreat, and the German 4th Army has maintained control of the strategically important Gheluvelt Plateau.

Meanwhile, a French offensive, launched at Verdun on August 20, is further stretching the German army, which is not able to counterattack because many of its divisions have been shifted to Ypres to confront the British.

Petrograd, September 2: Support for Bolsheviks surges in local elections

In elections to the Petrograd City Duma, Bolsheviks win 33 percent of the vote, up from about 20 percent in May, out of around 550,000 votes cast. This surge in support is all the more remarkable given that the

Bolshevik press is being suppressed, many of the party’s leaders are in prison, and Lenin is in hiding. But the Bolsheviks are gathering momentum not only in spite of the repression, but in part because of it. Since Lenin’s return to Russia and the April Theses, the Bolsheviks have been identified with the most consistent and implacable hostility to the Provisional Government and its policies.

Before the elections, a column in the Bolshevik paper *Proletarii* (Proletarian) makes a detailed argument for votes:

Every worker, peasant, and soldier must cast their vote for this list only.

For this list only, because only our party is struggling resolutely and bravely against the raging bourgeois-aristocratic counterrevolutionary dictatorship, against introduction of the death penalty, against destruction of workers’ and soldiers’ organizations, against liquidation of all the freedoms obtained through the people’s sweat and blood.

You must vote only for our party’s list, because only it is struggling resolutely and bravely with the peasants against the landlords, with the workers against the factory and plant owners, and with the oppressed everywhere against all the oppressors. Only our party has resolutely and bravely pursued the war’s speediest end, conclusion of a people’s peace, transfer of land to the peasants, and introduction of workers’ control over production ... We alone are saying: we must create a new environment for people ... Let the people, all the people, enjoy clean, safe, orderly streets.

Comrade workers, soldiers, and peasants, understand that questions of the city’s welfare are closely connected to questions of all Russia’s welfare. Petrograd’s supply problems, financial problems, and other problems cannot be solved without solving these problems for all Russia. Understand this, and vote only for the party that is struggling to solve all these problems, that is struggling for the workers, soldiers, and poor peasants. Anyone who is against the death penalty and against shootings, chaos, and arrests, anyone who is for the revolution against the counterrevolution—must vote for List No. 6.

For the nearby Peterhoff District Duma elections the next day, the Bolsheviks declare:

The Bolsheviks are the only party that does not cooperate with the people’s enemies, with those who preach that Cossack whips are the “revolution’s salvation.” With your vote, show that imprisonments and newspaper closures cannot kill the revolutionary democracy’s left wing. Everyone, put list No. 2 in the ballot box ...

Because they are the only ones who, not only in words, but in deeds are

Against

The death penalty for soldiers

The war of aggression

Capitalist plunder

For

Transferring power to the workers and poor peasants

Immediate confiscation of the land

Establishment of workers’ control over production

Limitations on capitalists’ profits

Source: Michael C. Hickey, *Fighting Words: Fighting Voices From the Russian Revolution* (2011), pp. 380-81.

As their mass support surges, the Bolsheviks grow more and more bold. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky narrates a scene from the Petrograd Soviet on August 31 (August 18, O.S.), when a resolution is put forward demanding the re-abolition of capital punishment in the armed forces, which has recently been reintroduced by the Kerensky government.

Before the voting, Tseretelli asked this challenging question: "If as a consequence of your resolution, the death penalty is not abolished, then will you bring the crowd into the street and demand the overthrow of the government?" "Yes," shouted the Bolsheviks in answer. "Yes, we will call out the crowd, and we will try our best to overthrow the government." "You have lifted your heads high these days," said Tseretelli. The Bolsheviks had lifted their heads together with the masses. The Compromisers had lowered their heads as the heads of the masses were lifted. The demand for an abolition of the death penalty was adopted by all votes—about 900—against 4. Those four were [Menshevik leaders] Tseretelli, Chkheidze, Dan, Lieber! Four days later, at a joint session of Mensheviks and groups surrounding them, where upon fundamental questions a resolution of Tseretelli was adopted in opposition to that of Martov, the demand for an immediate abolition of the death penalty was passed without debate. Tseretelli, no longer able to resist the pressure, remained silent.

Washington D.C., September 1: US Senate rejects taxes on war profits

An amendment to a war finance bill, put forward by Senator Hiram Johnson of California, which would have subjected to a 72 percent levy the "excess" war profits of great American industrial concerns, is soundly defeated in the US Senate by a margin of 62-17. Proposals from other senators for a more modest tax levy are also expected to be rejected. To ensure the toothlessness of whatever derisory taxation scheme will ultimately be put in place, the bill's architects have proposed fines for corporate tax evasion ranging from a mere \$20 to \$1,000.

Republican Senator Robert La Follette, of Wisconsin, takes to the floor of the Senate to warn the American ruling class of the dangers of war policies that are not "borne equally by all."

It would be a reproach to our present civilization if we waited to prevent ... one class of our citizens, comparatively small, from becoming enormously rich out of the war, while the other and much larger class was impoverished by the war ... In the name of common decency let us make the penalties for the evasion of the tax law as severe as we have made the penalties for the evasion of the draft.

September 1-3: German forces break through Russian lines in the Battle of Riga

On September 1, the German armed forces launch a major surprise

attack across the River Dvina in present-day Latvia, quickly leading to the encirclement of Riga. The Russian forces in this region are the last lines of defense on the approach to Petrograd.

The attack across the River Dvina, in the region of Uxkull, is preceded by a sudden and massive artillery bombardment. Nearly 1,200 German artillery guns have been arrayed against 66 Russian guns. German naval forces simultaneously enter the Gulf of Riga. The Russian side is caught wholly unprepared. Communications break down, and necessary supplies are lacking. Soldiers and sailors, sensing the danger to Petrograd, fight desperately, with some units facing off against overwhelming odds and suffering horrific losses. Using aircraft, poison gas, and flamethrowers, German forces punch through the secondary lines of defense in a series of rapid maneuvers.

The fall of Riga is abetted by the treacherous plotting of Kornilov, who is preparing to use the army to establish himself as a military dictator in Petrograd. "In order to carry out the march on Petrograd, Kornilov had need of the surrender of Riga," Trotsky later writes. "To strengthen the Riga position, to take serious measures of defense, would have meant to destroy the plan of another campaign immeasurably more important for Kornilov." On the same day that the German forces launch their attack on Riga, Kornilov sends a telegram to Kerensky: "I insistently assert the necessity of subordinating to me the Petrograd district."

However, this does not stop Kornilov from blaming the fall of Riga on a "nest" of Bolshevik propagandists and "German spies" in the army. In response to the defeat, Kornilov gives an order by telegram for officers to randomly shoot soldiers on the side of the road as punishment for their supposedly universal cowardice. The soldiers, in fact, have fought valiantly, and Kornilov's order is protested even by his leading officers. Kornilov, in a rage, threatens to court-martial his own officers for insubordination.

Russian forces suffer around 25,000 casualties. German losses are estimated at 5,000. In response to the German breakthrough, a general order is given to evacuate the region. After heavy shelling, Riga falls on September 3 to the German Eighth Army under the command of General Oskar von Hutier. While the Russian Twelfth Army has been able to escape the encirclement, the road is now open to Petrograd. Among the Russian elites and their imperialist allies, there is discussion about whether it would not be better to let the Germans capture Petrograd, moving the government to Moscow and letting the German Kaiser deal with the troublesome workers and their soviets.

Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), September 2: Founding of the far-right German Fatherland Party

The far-right German Fatherland Party (DVLP) is founded in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad).

In leading circles of the army and naval command, the corporate headquarters and state authorities, anger and resentment grows throughout the summer of 1917 over the increasingly rebellious opposition in the population to war and the "lax approach" of the imperial government. The imminent danger of the proletarian revolution spreading from Russia to Germany forces them to act.

The final push toward the founding of their own party comes in July with the peace resolution approved by a majority of the Reichstag. This enrages them not because of its content, which is completely meaningless, but because it came into existence "under pressure from the streets."

In the weeks that follow, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and captains of industry like Carl Duisberg (Bayer AG, IG Farben) campaign in the nationalist press against the "negotiated peace" called for in the

resolution, denouncing it as a “sacrificial peace” and a “Jewish peace,” and ranting against “febleness” and “treason” on the “homefront.” They say a “victor’s peace” with the most annexations possible should be achieved whatever the cost. This would include:

- The annexation of Belgium
- The annexation of the ore basins of Briey and Longwy in France
- The annexation of the French channel coast including Normandy
- The annexation of Luxemburg
- A subjugation of the Netherlands to German policy (up to annexation)
- A self-contained colonial empire in Africa including the Belgian Congo
- The creation of a Polish state subordinate to Germany
- Annexation of the Russian Baltic governorates and Lithuania (and a large-scale “Germanization” of the region)
- The annexation of parts of western Belarus and western Ukraine
- “Freedom of the Seas”—in the sense that the German fleet must be capable of securing worldwide “German interests”
- The surrender of Gibraltar and Cyprus by Great Britain
- Payment of vast amounts of compensation by the hostile powers

The founders of the party issue a barely disguised call for the installation of the dictatorship of a “strongman” and the dissolution of the Reichstag, because it places party interests over the well-being of the fatherland. Instead of a collaboration of the military and the government with the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as part of a “state of truce,” they want a “ruthless military intervention” against protest demonstrations, strikes and meetings of the working class. Even Kaiser Wilhelm II is too soft for them. They would prefer a person like the militarist crown prince or General Field Marshal von Hindenburg.

Anti-Semitism, extreme nationalism and ethnic ideology are naturally a part of their arsenal, with which they seek to build an extra-parliamentary mass movement as the social basis for a dictatorship against the working class.

Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and civil servant Wolfgang Kapp, who three years later will organize a putsch against the Weimar Republic, are chosen as leaders of the party. The title of honorary chairman is bestowed upon Duke Johann Albrecht zu Mecklenburg.

Practically every leading industrialist is a member of the party, including Max Roetger (formerly of Krupp, then representative of industrial interests), Carl Duisberg (Bayer AG, IG Farben) Wilhelm von Siemens, Carl Ziese (shipbuilding industry), Ernst von Borsig (metal industry), Hugo Stinnes (mining and electrical industry), Emil Kirdfort (coal and steel industry), Alfred Hugenberg (media), Freiherr von Wangenheim (agriculture and landowner representative), Johann Christian Eberle (banking), and Herman Röchling (Völklingen Ironworks). The Bavarian state association founded shortly after includes writer Ludwig Thoma and Cosima Wagner, the widow of composer Richard Wagner.

The captains of heavy industry provide key financial support to the new party. Nevertheless, the party exists for barely more than a year. It breaks up in the days of the November Revolution of 1918-1919, but many commanders and members of the counterrevolutionary Freikorps troops and even many of the first members of the Nazi party come from within its ranks.

England, September 3: Up to 150 killed in air raids

Night raids by Gotha aircraft bombers beginning at 22:30 targeting Chatham, Sheerness and the surrounding area kill at least 131 sailors and soldiers and injure 90 more. Official government sources report only one civilian death, although other reports note up to 20.

The Germans have shifted their strategy to carrying out night raids to

avoid Britain’s air defences. The bombing is the first night raid launched by Gothas. Another raid the following night on the Home Counties and London claims the lives of 16 civilians. British air defences remain erratic. While managing to bring down some German planes, reports by the end of September note that eight people have been killed on the ground and over 60 injured by falling shrapnel from British anti-aircraft fire.



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