This week in the Russian Revolution

September 4 – 10: The Kornilov affair

4 September 2017

General Kornilov orders the army to march on Petrograd, where he plans to "restore order" by carrying out a massacre of revolutionary workers and soldiers and their leaders. Confronted with the danger of a full-blooded counterrevolutionary dictatorship and mass repression, the Soviets are compelled to appeal to the working class to defend the city. The alarm is raised throughout Petrograd, and hundreds of thousands of workers spring into action.

Cologne-Wahn, Germany, September 5: Max Reichpietsch and Albin Köbis are executed

At 7:03 in the morning on the military training ground of Cologne-Wahn, a firing squad of two rows of 10 soldiers each, positioned five paces away, fires 10 shots at sailor Max Reichpietsch and then 10 shots at stoker Albin Köbis. At 7:04, the assigned doctor Werner confirms the instantaneous death of both men.

The horrific sentence is handed down only 10 days earlier by the imperial military court at Wilhelmshaven and is confirmed by Admiral Reinhard Scheer, the head of the imperial high seas fleet. The two young men are sentenced to death for "inciting a riot." On August 2, they lead a peaceful, unarmed march ashore of 600 crewmembers from the battleships Prinzregent Luitpold, Friedrich der Große and Kaiserin to protest inhumane treatment and the continuation of the war. Admiral Scheer commutes the death sentences of three others considered to be leaders of the sailors to lengthy prison terms. Fifty other sailors who participate in the protest are sentenced to a combined 400 years in prison.

The death sentences are already decided before the tribunal convenes. "We can only master the entire movement if we ruthlessly put a number of them against the wall," Admiral von Hipper proclaimed on August 4. The entire trial before the military court has the character of a show trial, anticipating the later "court proceedings" of the Nazi's People's Court (*Volksgerichtshof*) under Roland Freisler.

Even before the trial, Admiral Scheer searches for an execution site far from the ports of the imperial navy and indeed far from the entire coast—in fear of strikes and revolts in the navy and in the shipyards and factories of Kiel, Wilhelmshaven and Hamburg, which can prevent an execution at the last minute. Even the firing squad is cause for concern, to the extent that it can refuse orders should it discover the true names of the condemned. For this reason, the members of the firing squad are informed that they will be firing on British spies who threw bombs into an officer's canteen.

The parents of the condemned are only informed of the execution days after it takes place. The farewell letters of their sons are not delivered to them. In this way, the judiciary and the navy prevent the parents from being able to exercise their right to petition the Kaiser for clemency.

Even high-ranking experts of naval justice declare the death sentences unlawful and recommend their commutation to prison sentences. But the command of the imperial navy insists on making an example, and is supported in this by the imperial government. Leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) limit themselves to appeals to the admirals and the government not to enforce the death sentences. Carrying out the executions, they warn, could provoke "unrest in the population."

The death sentence for Reichpietsch is ultimately carried out because in the summer of 1917, he personally (yet unsuccessfully) seeks out support for the sailors' movement from the leaders of the centrist USPD, seen as "Bolsheviks" by the imperial navy and the supreme army command, and wins over hundreds of sailors to membership in the party. With their influence among the workers in Hamburg and Berlin, Leipzig and other industrial regions, the USPD leaders certainly have the opportunity to call for mass strikes in defense of the two sailors. However, they do not lift a finger.

Albin Köbis, fearless and unyielding, remains silent during interrogations. Before the court he stands proudly for his aims and principles, refusing to beg for mercy. In a final conversation with his friend Willi Weber, who is also condemned to death but later granted a reprieve, he says: "If it is carried out—it is bitter to be placed against the wall by these people who have no right whatsoever to do it; but sacrifices must be made for every movement; our blood will do!" His farewell letter reads:

> Dear parents!
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> Today I was sentenced to death, only I and another comrade, the others have been granted a reprieve of 15 years in prison. Why this lot falls to me, you will have heard. I am a sacrifice in the yearning for peace, more will follow. I cannot stop what is already underway; it is now 6 o'clock in the morning, at 6:30 I will be brought to Cologne … I would gladly have taken your hand once more in farewell, but I will do so in spirit. Comfort Paula and my little Fritz. I do not like to die so young, but I die with a curse upon the German military state. These are my last lines. Perhaps they will be sent to you and mother.
>
> Forever your son.

Chicago, September 5: Wilson administration orders raids on IWW offices

In perhaps the largest mass political raid in American history, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, acting under orders from the "progressive" Attorney General Thomas Gregory and President Woodrow Wilson, carries out simultaneous raids of 26 Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) offices across the US. IWW leaders, including union

National Secretary “Big Bill” Haywood, are arrested. Publication of IWW newspapers, including its flagship *Solidarity*, as well as many foreign-language newspapers directed to immigrant workers, is stopped. The FBI also raids the national offices of the Socialist Party (SP) in Chicago.

Federal agents have taken over five tons of membership lists, correspondence, pamphlets and leaflets from the IWW’s Chicago headquarters, and tons more from leaders’ homes and regional offices, many of which have been stripped bare. This theft will serve as the basis for an elaborately orchestrated show trial, set in Chicago in 1918, in which 166 IWW leaders will be tried under the notorious Espionage Act, passed months ago by Congress. All 166, including Haywood, will be convicted and imprisoned on more than 10,000 individual charges—after a mere one hour of jury deliberation. The overarching charge against the IWW leaders—as is the case with the Bolsheviks in Russia—is that they are agents of the German Kaiser.

The Wilson administration has targeted the IWW because it, unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), opposes American entry into the imperialist slaughter in Europe, and because it threatens to provide leadership to a growing wave of strikes. Some 3,000 strikes have taken place since US entry in the war in April. The aim is to politically decapitate the working class. Commenting on the raids, the District Attorney of Philadelphia admits they have been carried out “very largely to put the IWW out of business.”

The arrests are the culmination of a savage campaign against the IWW that has witnessed the mass internal deportation of Wobbly workers among miners and loggers in New Mexico, California, Washington and Minnesota, as well as the murder of organizer Frank Little in Montana. The repression continues through the week, including the arrest of 66 IWW members in Cleveland on September 7 by federal agents assisted by vigilantes in the American Protective League, and the police killing of three Italian immigrant IWW members who protested at a “loyalty” meeting in Milwaukee on September 8.

The IWW’s uncompromising militancy, its revolutionary fervor, its struggle to unionize all workers regardless of race and nationality, and its principled opposition to war win it the support of the best in the American working class, including the young James P. Cannon. However, its anarchistic philosophy leaves it vulnerable to state repression. Cannon later writes:

> The employers fought the new unionism in dead earnest. Against the program of the IWW and its little band of agitators, they brought up the heavy guns of their financial resources; public opinion moulded in their favor by press and pulpit; their private armies of labor spies and thugs; and, always and everywhere, the police power of that ‘political state’ which the IWW didn’t want to recognize….
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> The turning point came with the entrance of the United States into the First World War in the spring of 1917, and the Russian Revolution in the same year. Then ‘politics,’ which the IWW had disavowed and cast out, came back and broke down the door.
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> These two events—again coinciding in Russia and America, as in 1905—demonstrated that ‘political action’ was not merely a matter of the ballot box, subordinate to the direct conflict of the unions and employers on the economic field, but the very essence of the class struggle. In opposing actions of two different classes the ‘political state,’ which the IWW had thought to ignore, was revealed as the centralized power of the ruling class; and the holding of the state power showed in each case which class was really ruling.
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> From one side, this was shown when the Federal Government of the United States intervened directly to break up the concentration points of the IWW by wholesale arrests of its activists. The ‘political action’ of the capitalist state broke the back of the IWW as a union. The IWW was compelled to transform its principal activities into those of a defense organization, striving by legal methods and propaganda, to protect the political and civil rights of its members against the depredations of the capitalist state power.
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> From the other side, the same determining role of political action was demonstrated positively by the Russian Revolution. The Russian workers took the state power into their own hands and used that power to expropriate the capitalists and suppress all attempts at counter-revolution. That, in fact, was the first stage of the Revolution, the pre-condition for all that was to follow. Moreover, the organizing and directing center of the victorious Revolution had turned out to be, not an all-inclusive union, but a party of selected revolutionists united by a program and bound by discipline.
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> The time had come for the IWW to remember Haywood’s prophetic injunction at the Founding Convention in 1905: that the American workers should look to Russia and follow the Russian example. By war and revolution, the most imperative of all authorities, the IWW was put on notice to bring its theoretical conceptions up to date; to think and learn, and change a little.

(Quoted in James P. Cannon, *The First 10 Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant*. available here from Mehring Books).

Petrograd, September 7 (August 25, O.S.): Kornilov orders march on Petrograd

Under the pretext of needing to suppress a nonexistent “Bolshevik uprising” in the capital, Kornilov orders the army to march on the city. Right-wing agitators spread rumors of conspiracies by “German agents,” “dark forces,” and “strangers in workers’ tunics,” who are supposedly infiltrating Petrograd and plotting to cause some vaguely defined catastrophe, which can only be prevented if Kornilov rides to the rescue.

Kornilov plans to use the army to install himself as a dictator with supreme command over all civilian and military affairs in the former tsarist empire. His commanders are given orders, upon entering Petrograd, to disarm the workers and to arrest their leaders—and to shoot anyone who resists. As for the Bolsheviks, they are to be hanged as “German spies” without distinction. Kornilov dispatches a telegram: “The corps will be in place in the suburbs of Petrograd by evening of August 28. I request that Petrograd be proclaimed under martial law on August 29.”

The attempted military putsch by Kornilov receives the tacit acquiescence of the allied imperialist powers, who deem it necessary to secure Russia’s continued participation in the war. The high priests of the Russian Orthodox Church give Kornilov their blessing. The troops dispatched to Petrograd include the Caucasian Native Cavalry Division (the tsar’s infamous “Savage Division”). Kornilov’s supporters cannot conceal their eagerness for the upcoming bloodbath in the capital, boasting that these “mountain men do not care whom they kill.”

Kornilov’s move on the capital is preceded and accompanied by a complex and murky series of intrigues, betrayals and maneuvers between the Kerensky and Kornilov camps.

On fundamental questions, Kerensky is no less a “Kornilovist” than Kornilov. Both leaders agree that, to preserve the capitalist order and prosecute the war to victory, a ruthless dictatorship of “blood and iron”

must be formed to suppress the workers. They are prepared to join forces, and Kerensky has appointed Kornilov to his post at the head of the army. Both men are united in their extreme antipathy towards the Bolsheviks.

For his part, Kerensky favors forming a "directory" of handpicked strongmen, who would exercise unreviewable dictatorial emergency powers. In this government to ruthlessly crush all opposition and continue the war, Kornilov would serve at the head of the army. Kornilov, on the other hand, favors a full-blooded and openly counterrevolutionary dictatorship, complete with mass murder, terror and pogroms against Russia's "internal enemies." In this government, Kornilov would serve as the supreme head, and Kerensky might still play a role as a prominent deputy or minister.

Petrograd, September 8 (August 26, O.S.): Kerensky confirms his participation in Kornilov plot

In an oblique conversation between Kerensky and Kornilov by teleprinter on August 26 (O.S.), in which neither leader is willing to state his intention directly, Kerensky purports to confirm his submission to Kornilov's plans. However, Kerensky turns around and discloses the transcript of the conversation to the leadership of the Provisional Government, exposing the planned coup, denouncing Kornilov, and demanding for himself unlimited "emergency powers" to deal with the crisis. Kerensky unilaterally orders the removal of Kornilov from his position at the head of the army.

Kornilov, doubtless enraged and perceiving himself to have been double-crossed by Kerensky, declares that he has been the victim of a "provocation." He affirms his determination to seize power anyway, issuing the following statement for publication:

> People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. The hour of her death is near. Forced to speak openly, I, General Kornilov, declare that under the pressure of the Bolshevik majority in the Soviets [sic], the Provisional Government acts in complete harmony with the plans of the German general staff and simultaneously with the forthcoming landing of enemy forces on the coast of Riga; it is killing the army and undermines the very foundation of the country.
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> The heavy sense of inevitable ruin of the country commands me in this ominous moment to call upon all of the Russian people to come to the aid of the dying motherland.

Kerensky, whose support has collapsed over the recent months, finds himself utterly friendless and powerless to stop Kornilov. The right-wing forces throughout the country have thrown their weight enthusiastically behind Kornilov. Meanwhile, Kerensky has turned sharply to the right in recent months, alienating the workers and soldiers of Petrograd. These workers and soldiers are loyal not to Kerensky but to their factory committees and to the Soviets. Of these, the most disciplined and militant workers are organized by the Bolshevik Party.

On August 27, the increasingly desperate Kerensky appeals to the Soviets for help, including the Bolshevik Party, whose newspapers he has suppressed and whose leaders he has slandered and imprisoned. On August 28, as the Third Cavalry begins its advance on Petrograd, the stock market rockets upward in anticipation of an imminent Kornilov victory.

Paris, September 8: New French government formed after Ribot resigns

The six-month-old government led by Alexander Ribot resigns as it becomes clear it has lost support in parliament. One of the immediate triggers for its downfall is a scandal surrounding the anarchist newspaper *Bonnet Rouge*, which is alleged to have been receiving German funds. Louis Malvy, a cabinet minister, who defended the paper's right to publish, is forced to resign as a result on August 31.

Ribot's resignation brings to an end his fourth and final term as French prime minister. It occurs under conditions of deep crisis. Since the disastrous failure of the Nivelle offensive in the spring, hostility to the war has risen throughout the country. Army mutinies erupted in May and were only ruthlessly suppressed in July, while large strikes swept through the garment and war industries in May and June. Although French troops have over recent weeks managed to launch an attack around Verdun, the army remains weakened by fears among the ruling class that renewed unrest could break out.

The French Socialists, who have supported the war from the outset and held the important position of Minister of Armaments under Albert Thomas in the outgoing government, refuse to grant their support to the new administration because of Paris's refusal to give passports to the socialist delegates to attend the Stockholm conference.

The new prime minister, Paul Painlevé, will hold power for an even briefer period than his short-lived predecessor. In November, Georges Clemenceau will emerge to lead the government through the end of the war and the subsequent Versailles peace talks.

Étaples, September 9: Mutiny breaks out among British Empire troops

Several thousand mainly Australian and New Zealand troops revolt against the degrading treatment they confront by officers at the Étaples training camp on the French coast.

Étaples has won a reputation for its harsh training regime, often led by officers and noncommissioned officers who have not served at the front. In addition, Étaples is separated by a bridge from Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, which has been designated officers' territory since the start of the war. Soldiers are prevented from visiting Le Touquet by sentries posted on the bridge, prompting many of them to walk across the estuary at low tide.

A.J. Healy from the New Zealand infantry attempts to return across the bridge from one such visit—the tide having come in while he was in Le Touquet—and he is detained as a deserter by the police. When New Zealand troops hear of the arrest, they leave their barracks en masse and march to the jail cell where Healy is held. Military police arrive and fire into the crowd of soldiers, killing one. This further enflames the situation, with over 1,000 soldiers gathering to chase the police out of town.

The next day, attempts to clamp down on the situation fail when angry soldiers break through pickets on the bridge and take over Le Touquet, where mass meetings are held. The arrest of Healy has brought to a head a long list of grievances that has been brewing for many months. In August 1916, scuffles broke out after an Australian soldier verbally abused an officer because water was cut off while he was taking a shower. Soldiers intervened to prevent the soldier from being imprisoned, leading to one of them being shot by firing squad for treason.

Over 1,000 men march through the town again on September 12, but by this time a loyal contingent of officers has been sent to Étaples to restore order. Corporal Jesse Short was condemned to death for his part in the

mutiny and shot October 4. Three other soldiers were sentenced to ten years penal servitude.

September 9-11 (August 27-29): Petrograd workers rise up, organized and powerful, to stop Kornilov

When word that Kornilov's troops are on the march reaches Petrograd, alarm whistles sound at the city's factories. The Bolshevik leaders in the factory districts have long warned of this danger, and they are immediately at their posts issuing orders. Within hours, hundreds of thousands of workers spring into action.

Long lines form in the factory districts as workers enroll in the military arm of the factory committees, the "Red Guards." The workers at the weapons factories produce arms for themselves and then carry them into the field, making the final adjustments while en route. Tens of thousands of workers march with rifles on their shoulders to the city's perimeter to dig trenches, string barbed wire, and tear up railway lines leading into the capital.

All of the city's laborers are mobilized and organized, and all of the city's resources are placed at their disposal. Emergency meetings take place around the clock throughout the city, and measures are taken to organize every aspect of the city's defense like clockwork. All of the key strategic locations in the city, including key infrastructure and government buildings, are seized and secured. Telegraph workers refuse to dispatch messages for Kornilov's supporters, chauffeurs refuse to transport them, and typesetters refuse to prepare their leaflets. In many areas, military officers who support Kornilov are arrested and brought before revolutionary tribunals of workers and soldiers. In a few cases, the officers are solemnly sentenced to death.

Railway workers, once alerted to the danger, refuse to transport Kornilov's troops. Railway cars filled with lumber are positioned across the tracks, and miles of railway lines are systematically destroyed. The lightning response of the organized railway workers in particular deals Kornilov a decisive blow. In short order, his forces become stranded in railway cars strung out along hundreds of miles of track, unable to move and unable to communicate with each other. To make matters worse for Kornilov, revolutionary orators from Petrograd make their way to the stranded trains, denouncing Kornilov and urging Kornilov's soldiers not to follow his orders. To the dismay of Kornilov's generals, the soldiers begin holding meetings to decide what to do.

Kornilov's own soldiers hoist the red flag, arrest their own officers, and refuse to participate any further in the attack on Petrograd. Even the so-called Savage Division is persuaded to stand down by Caucasian Muslims who were delegates in attendance at the Soviet Congress in Petrograd. Over the Savage Division now flies a red flag that reads "Land and Freedom." The commanders have been disarmed, and an elected delegation of soldiers is en route to Petrograd.

The workers of Petrograd have not forgotten the reign of counterrevolutionary terror that followed the defeat of the 1905 revolution. They understand what is in store for them if Kornilov is allowed to enter Petrograd, and they are determined to defend the city at all costs. Further, while the Soviet leadership nominally directs the actions of the workers, the essential role in stopping Kornilov is played by the Bolshevik Party. The Menshevik-Internationalist Sukhanov later observes:

> The committee [for Struggle Against the Counterrevolution], making defense preparations, had to mobilize the worker-soldier masses. But the masses, insofar as they were organized, were organized by the Bolsheviks and followed them. At that time, theirs was the only organization that was large, welded together by elementary discipline, and linked with the democratic lowest levels of the capital. Without it, the committee was impotent. Without the Bolsheviks, it could only have passed the time with appeals and idle speeches by orators who had lost their authority. With the Bolsheviks, the committee had at its disposal the full power of the organized workers and soldiers.

Within the Bolshevik Party itself, strategic differences among the leaders continue to manifest themselves. Some of the senior Bolsheviks, in the chaotic first hours of the Kornilov crisis, wavered towards offers of alliances with the forces supporting Kerensky, including the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries—i.e., with supporters of the regime that continues to ban Bolshevik newspapers and imprison Bolshevik leaders. Lenin and his supporters firmly reject any such arrangements, insisting that the Bolshevik workers organize to fight Kornilov independently and under their own banners, without offering any support to Kerensky. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks agree to participate in joint committees for the defense of the city "for the purposes of information only."

Within days, the Red Guards are prepared to deploy 40,000 rifles in the field. Kornilov's remaining forces, vastly outnumbered and in disarray, disperse with hardly a shot being fired. The pride, optimism and confidence of the Petrograd workers soars. Having measured their strength with the counterrevolution, workers discover that they represent unquestionably the most powerful social force in the country. Fully mobilized and led by the Bolshevik Party, they are far more powerful than Kerensky and his ministers, far more powerful than Kornilov and his officers, and far more powerful than any other obstacle that stands in their way. Mass support for the Bolsheviks, which had already been surging, now begins to assume unconquerable proportions.

Recommended Reading:

Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume II, Chapters 31-33.

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Haymarket Books 2009, pp. 129-150.

Also this week: Stefan Zweig, Romain Rolland, Henri Guilbeaux, Frans Masereel – Artist friends unite against the war

On September 4, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig writes to his friend, the French author and musicologist Romain Rolland, and sends him his tragedy *Jeremias*. He thanks Rolland, writing that without his "moral example," he would have been unable to complete it.

Zweig was initially carried away by war euphoria in 1914. He saw "something fine, inspiring, even seductive in that first mass outburst of feeling … It was difficult to resist it," he wrote in his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday*. "And in spite of my hatred and abhorrence of war, I would not like to be without the memory of those first days." A few pages later, however, he admits that due to his cosmopolitan lifestyle he had "been immune" to the sudden rush of patriotism. He only discovered the real meaning of the war when he traveled to the front in Galicia in 1916 and, when upon his return journey in a hospital train, he witnessed the suffering of the wounded and dying.

Romain Rolland, with whom Zweig has been corresponding since 1913, sharply criticizes Zweig's contradictory attitude from the beginning: "You yourself must finally get rid of your blind confidence," Rolland wrote to Zweig on November 12, 1914. The writer and music historian

was surprised by the war while in Switzerland, and as a committed pacifist and internationalist European did not return to his French home. On November 13, 1916, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In Geneva, he works for the Red Cross in the office of enquiry for prisoners of war.

In his drama *Jeremias*, Zweig uses the material of the Old Testament to deal with the threat of war and its effect on the psychology of the population. A prophet who foresees the danger is treated with hostility by his people. Zweig receives an invitation to Zürich for the play's premiere, and with the blessing of his superiors is able to leave the country for Switzerland where he then spends the entire final year of the war.

He joins a group of European pacifists, which includes the journalist Henri Guilbeaux, the painter Frans Masereel, and the authors Hermann Hesse, Leonhard Frank, Annette Kolb and Fritz von Unruh. In *The World of Yesterday*, Zweig writes: "[A]s we were all fighting on the same front, in the same trenches of the mind and intellect and against the same enemy, a kind of passionate comradeship formed spontaneously between us. After twenty-four hours we were as familiar with each other as if we had known one another for years, and we were already using the familiar 'du', as men usually do on every front line."

Guilbeaux, a poet and translator (of Rainer Maria Rilke among others), was drafted as a soldier, but was soon discharged as unsuitable. At the end of April 1915, he traveled to Switzerland and like Rolland initially worked for the Red Cross providing aid for prisoners of war. Beginning in 1916, he published the journal *Demain*, which quickly developed into an organ of international war resisters, increasingly approached socialist views and provided a platform for socialists. It is banned in France.

In addition to Rolland and Zweig, those writing for the journal included the still-in-exile Lenin, Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Leon Trotsky, Karl Radek and Ernst Meyer.

Zweig writes in his autobiography: "While others kept silent, while we ourselves hesitated and carefully considered what to do or not do on every occasion, he took determined action, and it will be to the lasting credit of Guilbeaux that he founded and edited the one intellectually important antiwar journal of the First World War, *Demain* …" The woodcuts of Frans Masereel opposing wartime atrocities also appeared in the journal. Zweig writes of them: "We dreamt of being able to distribute them over cities and armies by dropping them from aircraft, like bombs, so that anyone, even without words or a knowledge of languages, could understand their grim, savage denunciations. I am sure they would have stopped the war in its tracks."

Prior to his departure from Zürich, Lenin invited Rolland and Guilbeaux to come to Russia. Rolland declined and Guilbeaux also remained in Switzerland for a time. In 1917, Guilbeaux published a volume of antiwar poems. After the October Revolution, he is targeted by spies. The French government falsifies documents to accuse him of collaboration with the Germans. He is repeatedly persecuted by the Swiss immigration police under pressure from France and is twice imprisoned. After the war, on February 21, 1919, a military tribunal sentences him to death in absentia.

He is finally able to accept Lenin's invitation in 1919. He obtains Russian citizenship and is among the signatories of the founding manifesto of the Communist International. He remains in the Soviet Union for three years.