

This week in the Russian Revolution

# September 11-17: After the Kornilov Affair—Kerensky attempts to form dictatorial regime, Trotsky released from prison

11 September 2017

*The Kornilov coup was defeated by organized mass resistance on the part of the working class in Petrograd, in which the Bolsheviks played a critical role. In the face of overwhelming pressure, the government releases the Bolshevik leaders from prison on bail. Meanwhile, Kerensky attempts to form a new government, declaring himself the commander-in-chief of the army and announcing the formation of a dictatorial regime consisting of a five-member "Directory."*

## **London, September 11: First group of British prisoners of war arrives in England after repatriation**

The first contingent of British prisoners of war arrives home after repatriation from Switzerland.

The number of soldiers taken prisoner on all sides has risen sharply throughout the war. By 1918, close to 1 million Germans will have been imprisoned, including 424,000 in France, 328,000 in Britain and 168,000 in Russia. Over 2 million Austro-Hungarian soldiers end up in Russian prison camps, and 25 percent of them do not survive.

Conditions in prison camps are bad, with reprisals against prisoners of war, even though such treatment is banned under The Hague Convention. German internees later report beatings in Allied camps and forced labor within firing range of the front lines.

Around 2.4 million prisoners are taken by Germany. There are reports from German camps of psychological abuse and denial of adequate food. Disease epidemics, including cholera and typhus, have broken out. Reprisal camps, located near the front or in areas with a harsh climate, consist of tents in the mud and have much higher death rates than normal camps. One observer of prisoners returning from a reprisal camp notes, "These men—these soldiers—marched, but they were dead; beneath each blue greatcoat was the head of a dead man: their eyes hollow, their cheekbones jutting out, their emaciated grimaces those of graveyard skulls."

The repatriation of the British soldiers is arranged by the International Committee of the Red Cross, which also brings about prisoner exchanges involving tens of thousands of seriously wounded troops on all sides. By the end of the war, some 68,000 prisoners from most of the warring nations have been interned under military discipline in Switzerland as part of the exchanges. The Red Cross also establishes the International Prisoner of War Agency in Geneva, which helps soldiers and civilians separated by the conflict contact each other. It receives an average of 16,500 letters per day, asking for information about missing persons.

## **Petrograd, September 11-13 (August 29-31 O.S.): Organized mass resistance stops Kornilov coup**

Kornilov's march on Petrograd provokes an unprecedented eruption of organized mass resistance by workers and soldiers, in which the Bolsheviks play a key role (See: September 4 – 10: The Kornilov affair). The threat of a bloodbath in the city forces the Soviet leaders to consent to mobilizing and arming the city's working class. Confronted by tens of thousands of Bolshevik-led Red Guards in fortified positions around the city, and facing mass mutinies and desertions within the ranks of its own forces, the Kornilov movement evaporates in a matter of a few short days.

Kornilov selects the old tsarist general Krymov to lead the march on Petrograd because he will not hesitate "to hang the entire Soviet membership." Now Krymov is forced to watch, with his own eyes, as soldiers of his own First Don Cossack Division desert to attend mass rallies. The soldiers who had been counted upon to perpetrate the massacre in Petrograd are now marching under red flags and demanding the arrest of the generals behind the putsch. On September 12, Krymov surrenders to a government emissary in return for guarantees for his own safety.

By September 13, sensing which direction the wind is blowing, the army commanders are declaring their loyalty to Kerensky. When Krymov meets with Kerensky in Petrograd, Kerensky browbeats him for his participation in the plot, although as historian Alexander Rabinowitch notes, Krymov was "accused of crimes against the state by a man who for some time had been privately voicing similar convictions."

Krymov leaves the interrogation despondent. As he makes his way through the quiet streets of Petrograd, where he had planned to carry out so many hangings and shootings, he is doubtless confronted with indications on all sides that the city is firmly in the control of the organized working class. He travels to the apartment of a friend, where he states, "The last card for saving the motherland has been beaten—life is no longer worth living." He states that he needs a rest, and then once alone in a room, shoots himself in the chest.

## **Petrograd, September 12 (August 30, O.S.): Kerensky attempts to form dictatorship**

The collapse of the Kornilov putsch leaves a massive vacuum in Russian politics. The landlords, elite military castes, financiers, and capitalists had

thrown their weight openly behind Kornilov. These layers are now seething with resentment and disappointed hopes. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government, with its talk of “blood and iron” and its renunciation of the reforms that followed the February Revolution, has alienated masses of workers, soldiers, and peasants.

Kerensky attempts to fill the vacuum with an authoritarian regime headed by himself and based on the right-wing Kadets. He orders the arrest of Kornilov and declares himself to be the supreme commander-in-chief of the army, the position formerly held by Kornilov. On September 12, he announces the formation of a dictatorship consisting of a five-member “Directory.” For the political composition of his new government, he relies more than ever on the pro-war and pro-capitalist Kadet Party.

Despite Kerensky’s posturing as the leader of a tougher-than-ever law-and-order government, he is increasingly isolated. His turn to the Kadets provokes mass anger, and assemblies of workers and soldiers throughout the country pass resolutions and declarations of “no confidence” in his government and demanding: “Power for the Soviets!” Rabinowitch cites a number of examples:

Workers from the machine shop of the Petrograd pipe factory, after discussing “the current moment” on August 28 [O.S.], declared: “In view of the emerging bourgeois counterrevolutionary movement, as well as the attacks on freedom and on all the democratic gains of the Russian proletariat by the former tsarist *oprichniki* [police thugs], all power must be transferred to the soviet of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies.” The same day eight thousand workers in the Metallist factory approved a declaration of no confidence in the “minister-socialists,” presumably for their willingness to cooperate with the bourgeoisie. These workers demanded the immediate creation of a “forceful revolutionary government.” On the twenty-ninth an angry meeting of several thousand workers in the mammoth Putilov factory agreed that “the future government has to be composed solely of representatives of the revolutionary classes,” adding that “any negotiations regarding the creation of a coalition government at a time when the bourgeoisie and its representative Kornilov are making war on the people will be considered treachery to the cause of freedom.” Meanwhile, employees of the Novo-Admiralteisky shipbuilding plant, after considering the existing political situation, insisted that “state power must not remain in the hands of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie a minute longer. It must be put into the hands of workers, soldiers, and poorer peasantry and be responsible to the soviets of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants deputies.”

Kerensky, whose behavior was always highly emotional and erratic, now wanders the corridors of power in a daze. In Miliukov’s opinion, Kerensky suffers from some kind of anxiety disorder, the symptoms of which now become more pronounced than ever. Miliukov describes how Kerensky suffers from extreme lethargy in the morning, but then experiences sudden fits of manic energy in the afternoons. Sometimes he sits idle for long periods of time, as if he had nothing urgent to do. Even his closest allies and supporters begin to lose confidence in his ability to govern the country, especially as its all-powerful “supreme head.” In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky cites the reminiscences of one contemporary observer:

Kerensky gave me the impression of a kind of emptiness in the

whole situation, and a strange unprecedented tranquility. He had around him his invariable ‘little *aides-de-camp*,’ but there was no longer the continual crowd surrounding him, neither delegations nor lime-lights ... There appeared strange periods of a kind of leisure, and I got the rare opportunity to converse with him for whole hours, during which he would manifest a strange unhurriedness.

On September 14 (September 1, O.S.), Russia is declared a “republic,” but this does nothing to help Kerensky’s situation. For the right wing, which favors the restoration of the monarchy, this only increases resentment. For workers and soldiers, it is too little, too late. Trotsky writes:

Inexorable historical forces were dragging the rulers down. Nobody seriously believed in the success of the new government. Kerensky’s isolation was beyond mending. The ruling classes could not forget his betrayal of Kornilov. “Those who were ready to fight against the Bolsheviks,” writes the Cossack officer Kakliugin, “did not want to do it in the name of, or in defense of, the power of the Provisional Government.” Although hanging on to the power, Kerensky himself feared to make any use of it. The growing force of the opposition paralyzed his will to the last fibre.

#### **New York, September 12: *New York Times* hails Kornilov**

The *New York Times* hails the would-be butcher of the Russian Revolution, General Lavr Kornilov, in its September 12 lead editorial, exposing once again the fraud that America is interested in “making the world safe for democracy.”

“He is,” the *New York Times* writes, “merely the representative of those forces which, long blamably quiescent, have at last coalesced to stop the rapid deliquescence of Russia, to keep it a nation, to stop its dissolution, to save it, in a word.”

The leading publication of American liberalism condemns Russia as “reel[ing] in drunken frenzy over the precipice of socialism into the abyss of anarchy.” It instead celebrates the most reactionary elements in Russian society, including “the whole force of Cossacks ... under the leadership of General Kaledines [sic],” as well as “the peasant proprietors enroll[ed] in the Knights of St. George.”

The *Times* condemns Kerensky for failing to openly embrace Kornilov—though it remains silent over its previous calls that Kerensky himself assume dictatorial powers. Kerensky “had his choice to make, and when the test came, he preferred to throw his lot in with socialism,” the *Times* writes.

#### **Berlin, September 12: Massive loss of membership in the SPD**

On September 12, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) paper *Vorwärts* (Forward) publishes the “Report of the executive committee to the congress for the fiscal years 1914/1917.” The report claims that the party has done everything it can for the preservation of peace. The peace resolution adopted by the Reichstag on July 19 is presented as proof of how “seriously the work for peace is taken.” This toothless resolution,

which merely calls for a negotiated peace between the imperialist powers without annexations or indemnities, was ignored by the military high command as well as the other belligerent governments.

The trend in membership numbers documented in the same report shows that from 1914 to March 31, 1917, the number of party members has fallen from 1,085,905 to 243,061, or by more than three-quarters. By 1915, a year after the SPD's approval of war credits, the number is halved.

With the founding of the centrist independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in April 1917, the SPD suddenly undergoes a further decline. Around 100,000 of the most militant opponents of the war from among SPD members desert for the USPD. Only a body of around 150,000 to 180,000 members, including the apparatus of higher functionaries and several members of the editorial board, remain in the SPD. The membership strongholds in industrial centers have fallen particularly sharply.

The SPD policy of "state truce," i.e. the suppression of all labor struggles and the direct support of the imperialist war, explains the mass exodus. What was established by decades of bitter and devoted struggles of the proletariat, a strong workers party with the goal of socialist revolution, has organizationally crumbled following the historic political betrayal of 1914.

This departure from the SPD is especially pronounced among the most oppressed layers of the working class and the men drafted into military service. The latter have either fallen at the front or, as survivors, turn away from what Rosa Luxemburg calls the "stinking corpse of the SPD."

The number of female members has fallen by almost two thirds, from 174,754 prior to the war to 66,608 by the end of March 1917. The reasons are obvious. Working women must not only feed their families under the catastrophic conditions of the war economy, but also take on the heavy labor in the factories in place of the drafted men. How can they be expected to trust a party that shares responsibility for these conditions?

### **Stockholm, September 12: Third Zimmerwald Conference adopts manifesto calling for international mass strikes against war**

At the Third Zimmerwald Conference in Stockholm, delegates from Germany, Russia, Poland, Romania, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Switzerland adopt a "peace manifesto from Stockholm," an appeal to the proletarians of all countries.

The Zimmerwald movement occupies an intermediate position between, on the one hand, the efforts of parties of the Second International to convene the "Stockholm Peace Conference," which would purport to negotiate a "peace of understanding" between the imperialist powers, and, on the other hand, the call for a Third International, supported by Lenin and Trotsky, based on a decisive break with all social-chauvinist, centrist, and opportunist tendencies.

The Zimmerwald manifesto castigates the treacherous politics of the right-wing social democrats in every country. The efforts to convene the Stockholm Peace Conference, the manifesto declares, are futile and only condemn the workers and peasants to a continuation of the mass slaughter. The appeal closes with the words: "The hour has struck for the beginning of the great joint struggle in all countries to bring about peace, for the liberation of the people by the socialist proletariat. The means to achieve it is the united international mass strike ..."

Only the Menshevik delegate Axelrod votes against the manifesto. Despite the almost unanimous adoption of the appeal, the conference is characterized by political impotence. In the Zimmerwald movement, named after the first international conference of socialist war resisters held

in 1915 in the Swiss village of Zimmerwald, there are only a handful of Lenin's supporters represented. The overwhelming majority are centrists of various shades. On the right wing are figures such as Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour (Independent Social Democratic Party, USPD) from Germany and the Russian Mensheviks. On the left wing, in addition to the Bolsheviks, is Angelica Balabanoff, who leans toward the Bolsheviks and is ultimately elected secretary of the organizing committee of the ISC (International Socialist Committee).

From the beginning of the conference on September 5, the proposal not to participate in the social-chauvinist Stockholm Conference planned for mid-September encounters opposition from the German USPD leaders and the Menshevik delegates. The issue resolves itself by the end of the Zimmerwald conference, when it is announced that the Stockholm Peace Conference, repeatedly delayed during the summer, is postponed again indefinitely. The hostility between the social-chauvinists of the allied powers and those of the central powers is too great for them to sit down together at a table.

There are heated debates over another topic: the attitude of the Zimmerwald organizations to the Russian Revolution and its tasks. The fear that this issue could lead to the break-up of the conference is probably why it was not placed on the agenda in the first place. But the Russian delegate Orlovsky submits a declaration in the name of the central and foreign committees of the Bolsheviks. It condemns the participation of the Mensheviks in the Kerensky government in Russia.

The reintroduction of the death penalty in the military, the shooting down of the Petrograd workers in the July Days, the incarceration of their leaders, the unprecedented campaign of slander and witch-hunts against the Bolsheviks—on all of these issues the Bolsheviks demand that the Zimmerwald conference take a clear position and denounce the Mensheviks. Axelrod and Yermanski (Menshevik-Internationalists) protest these demands, and the majority of the conference refuses to allow discussion on these questions.

Nevertheless, in a report by the ISC, Angelica Balabanoff later characterizes the conference and its manifesto as a great step forward. The call for international mass strikes for peace, she declares, means transitioning from a politics of words to a politics of actions.

Lenin disagrees completely. From hiding in Finland, he renews the call for a decisive break with the Zimmerwald movement, which he describes as still moving along the path of the Second International. According to Lenin, the centrists who dominate it only carry forward with their left phrases the work that social chauvinists like the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany or the Mensheviks in Russia, by now hated by the masses, can no longer accomplish for the ruling class: lulling the proletariat with peace resolutions and false hopes and preventing them from preparing for the conquest of power.

The demand for a united international general strike, Lenin states, correctly calls for international actions of class struggle, but remains within the framework of exerting pressure on the imperialist governments instead of concretely envisaging their overthrow in every country.

At the April conference of the Bolsheviks from May 7 to 12, Lenin advocated a break with the Zimmerwald movement, characterizing it as a hindrance on the masses. All energy, he declared, should be devoted to preparations for the founding of the Third International. The Bolshevik Party is not yet united on this question. The Bolshevik Party generally rejects taking part in the Stockholm Peace Conference, but many Bolsheviks still support remaining in a left bloc of the Zimmerwald movement.

At the request of the German USPD representatives and the Mensheviks, the Zimmerwald conference decides that the appeal for a mass strike should not be published immediately. They must wait for a more favorable moment, they say. The conference participants should all return home first. They must also wait for the consent of those delegates

from the allied countries who are absent from Stockholm. The Bolsheviks, however, demand the immediate publication of the manifesto.

Two weeks after the conference ends, Luise Zietz, a member of the USPD executive committee, suddenly appears at the organizational committee of the ISC in Stockholm and urgently pleads that publication be delayed even longer, perhaps until the following year. She explains that the USPD leaders fear reprisals from the state. They are already under investigation for having met with Max Reichpietsch and other representatives of the sailors' movement and allegedly encouraging their uprising. The USPD leaders deny any responsibility for the actions of the sailors, saying they had nothing to do with it and had always warned the sailors against illegal actions.

The organizational committee of the ISC initially rejects the request. At the same time, however, a private communication by George Ledebour arrives from Berlin, stating his disagreement with the mission of Comrade Luise Zietz which had brought her to Stockholm in the name of the USPD. In the end, the ISC agrees to delay publication until December 1917. By that point, the entire appeal will already be obsolete.

### **Lisbon, September 14: Labor struggles escalate into a general strike**

A general strike begins in the working-class districts of Lisbon, Portugal. Since as early as September 1, the workers of the post and telegraph offices have been on strike demanding higher wages. The striking workers present a list of demands and seek arbitration in parliament. But the government of Afonso Costa orders the violent suppression of the strike, following which the workers expand their struggle. All businesses and factories are closed. Several people, including soldiers, are wounded in a bombing.

Strikers are branded as deserters and subjected to mass arrests. In response, a solidarity strike spreads throughout Lisbon in mid-September. The workers demand the release of hundreds of their imprisoned colleagues.

For the entire summer of 1917, strikes, food riots and looting take place in Portugal. Demonstrations of peasants against the government end in May 1917, leaving two dead in the city of Porto. After demonstrations against the government on June 12 also lead to fatalities, the Portuguese government calls for a state of siege. On September 5, there are mutinies on Portuguese war ships. Many sailors are arrested.

Even before Portugal's entry into the war in 1916, there are raids on bakeries and greengrocers due to food shortages in Lisbon and other cities. Food riots and strikes break out, which in 1917 are repeatedly inflamed by the lack of supplies.

### **San Francisco, September 17: Strike of 25,000 iron workers and machinists halts construction of naval vessels**

Some 25,000 skilled machinists have walked out from upwards of a hundred San Francisco Bay Area factories and shops, bringing to a halt approximately \$150 million in naval and merchant marine vessel construction. Several separate unions appear to be involved, but media accounts do not mention union leadership of the strike, which is driven by demands for higher wages.

The strike—the largest in the history of the Pacific Coast, according to one report—begins in two major plants, the Union Iron Works and the Moore and Scott Iron Works, where 8,500 and 2,700 men are on strike,

respectively. Union Iron Works handles approximately \$125 million in government war contracts, which impose wage caps with the aim of curbing inflation while guaranteeing corporate profits.

Word spreads, and, by the end of the day, the strike stops production at nearly every business employing machinists in the Bay Area, including another large Union Iron Works facility in Oakland, where 2,500 are on walkout. By one estimate, the strike hits 31 foundries, 60 moulding shops, 12 boiler factories, and a number of garment shops.

Striking machinists join up with streetcar workers, who have been out for weeks in a bitter strike against San Francisco United Railroads, and attack streetcars driven by scab crews. Police are called to deal with “riots” of machinists and streetcar workers in five different locations in the city.

### **Petrograd, September 17 (September 4, O.S.): Trotsky released from Kresty prison**

Trotsky is released from prison, having been detained by the Provisional Government for over a month as part of the effort to punish the working class for the July Days and crush the Bolshevik Party. With the collapse of the Kornilov movement in the face of organized mass resistance, Kerensky's hand is forced. Without withdrawing the indictment against Trotsky and other Bolsheviks, the government allows them to be freed on bail for the sum of 3,000 rubles.

The Petrograd Soviet and the trade unions secure Trotsky's release from solitary confinement, declaring they have “the honor of furnishing bail for the esteemed leader of the revolutionary proletariat.”

Trotsky proceeds directly to the Smolny Institute, the headquarters of the Soviet and the Committee for the Struggle against Counter-Revolution, which has been forced to call upon the Bolshevik-led masses to organize the defense of Petrograd. That same day, Kerensky attempts to disband the Committee by ordering it to dissolve. His edict is ignored.

The tide of working-class militancy continues to rise. The day Trotsky leaves the fortress jail on Kresty Island, 700,000 railway workers go on strike.

Writing many years later in his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky recalls Kornilov's approach on Petrograd during his imprisonment. At the time, Trotsky is under the guard of Bolshevik-worker detachments, there to defend the workers' leader should Kornilov's forces enter the city.

In May, when Tsereteli was hounding the sailors and disarming the machine-gun companies, I warned him that the day was probably not far distant when he would have to seek help from the sailors against some general who would be soaping the hangman's rope for the revolution. In August, such a general made his appearance in the person of Kornilov. Tsereteli called for the help of the Kronstadt bluejackets; they did not refuse it. The cruiser *Aurora* entered the waters of the Neva. I was already in the Kresty prison when I saw this quick fulfilment of my prophecy. The sailors from the *Aurora* sent a special delegation to the prison to ask my advice: should they defend the Winter Palace or take it by assault? I advised them to put off the squaring of their account with Kerensky until they had finished Kornilov. “What's ours will not escape us.”

“It won't?”

“It will not.”

Trotsky later observes, “The army that rose against Kornilov was the army-to-be of the October revolution.”

**Also this week: The first Technicolor film, “The Gulf Between,” premieres in the United States**

On September 13, 1917, the first Technicolor film, *The Gulf Between*, is released in the United States. The film is the fourth feature to be made in color, the first three color features being *With our King and Queen Through India* (1912), *The World, the Flesh and The Devil* (1914) and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1914), which were made in Kinemacolor. The color process involves photographing and projecting a black-and-white film behind alternating red and green filters.

Filmed on location in Jacksonville, Florida, *The Gulf Between* is produced by the Technicolor Motion Picture Organization using its “System 1” technique, whereby two frames of a single strip of film are photographed simultaneously, one behind a green filter and the other behind a red filter. As a result, only a limited amount of the color spectrum could be reproduced. Blues, yellows, and purples could not be captured.

David Pierce, co-author of *The Dawn of Technicolor, 1915-1935*, would later say in an interview with the George Eastman Museum, “Hollywood was somewhat ambivalent about Technicolor and the prospect of going to all color production. They recognized that it gave them additional artistic tools but at the same time it promised to be much more expensive, both on the production side and the cost of each print that would go out to a theater. They weren’t sure if the additional income from exhibitors would outweigh the additional production costs.”

The film was shown in Boston and New York followed by a tour of a few major eastern cities, but due to the technical problems of showing the film it was the only picture made in the Technicolor System 1 process.

The plot, as described by a film magazine of the time, concerns a lost girl named Marie (played by actress Grace Darmond) who is raised by a smuggler and grows up with no memory of her previous life. She eventually falls in love with a young man named Richard (Niles Welch) and is reunited with her old family with the help of the smuggler captain.

A contemporary review in *Photoplay Magazine* said that while the use of Technicolor “is a tremendous step forward, it is not always satisfactory” adding, “The unfortunate thing about this picture is that the story is dull, trite, and drawn out interminable. A good tense tale would have forced us to forget occasionally the close scrutiny of the colors.”

The film, like many of the silent era, is presumed lost, with only short fragments surviving.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**