

This week in the Russian Revolution

September 25 – October 1: Lenin urges Bolshevik leaders to prepare for the seizure of power

25 September 2017

Now that the Bolsheviks have obtained majorities in the Moscow and Petrograd soviets, Lenin launches a campaign to orient the party for a planned insurrection. Meanwhile, Kerensky and his supporters try to assemble a new pro-war “coalition” government.

Petrograd, September 26-29 (13-16, O.S.): Lenin advises the Central Committee that conditions are ripe for the seizure of power

While still in hiding in Finland, Lenin writes two letters, “The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power” and “Marxism and Insurrection,” in which he urges the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party to make immediate preparations for an armed insurrection and the seizure of power. He argues that the balance of forces in the country has dramatically shifted in favor of the Bolsheviks, especially in the wake of the defeated Kornilov coup.

In the difficult period that followed the July Days upheaval, when Lenin was forced underground and in fear for his life, he wrote that if “they do me in,” the party should “publish my notebook ‘Marxism on the State’ (it got held up in Stockholm). It is bound in a blue cover.” Over the next two months, Lenin would rework the material in this notebook into what is perhaps his most famous political treatise, *State and Revolution*.

“The question of the relation of the socialist proletarian revolution to the state,” Lenin writes in the preface, “is acquiring not only practical political importance, but also the significance of a most urgent problem of the day, the problem of explaining to the masses what they will have to do before long to free themselves from capitalist tyranny.”

The work on *State and Revolution* informs the campaign that Lenin now launches to orient the Bolshevik Party for a seizure of power. In “The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power,” Lenin writes:

The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies of both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands.

They can because the active majority of revolutionary elements in the two chief cities is large enough to carry the people with it, to overcome the opponent’s resistance, to smash him, and to gain and retain power. For the Bolsheviks, by immediately proposing a democratic peace, by immediately giving the land to the peasants and by reestablishing the democratic institutions and liberties which have been mangled and shattered by Kerensky, will form a

government which *nobody* will be able to overthrow.

The majority of the people are on *our side*. This was proved by the long and painful course of events from May 6 to August 31 and to September 12. The majority gained in the Soviets of the metropolitan cities *resulted* from the people coming over to *our side* ... The people are tired of the waverings of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries. It is only our victory in the metropolitan cities that will carry the peasants with us ...

The point is to make the *task* clear to the Party. The present task must be an *armed uprising* in Petrograd and Moscow (with its region), the seizing of power and the overthrow of the government. We must consider *how* to agitate for this without expressly saying as much in the press.

The seizure of power should be based, Lenin continues, on the Soviets and democratic organizations that emerged in the wake of the February Revolution. In “Marxism and Insurrection,” he elaborates:

To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that turning-point in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemy and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish *Marxism from Blanquism*...

All the objective conditions exist for a successful insurrection. We have the exceptional advantage of a situation in which only our victory in the insurrection can put an end to that most painful thing on earth, vacillation, which has worn the people out; in which only our victory in the insurrection will give the peasants land immediately; a situation in which only our victory in the insurrection can *foil* the game of a separate peace directed against the revolution—foil it by publicly proposing a fuller, more just and earlier peace, a peace that will *benefit* the revolution.

Many of the Bolshevik leaders are shocked by Lenin’s letters and, as was the case in April when he sent his *Letters from Afar*, they try to bury

them as quickly as possible. As Nikolai Bukharin would later note, "We were all aghast." The letters are not distributed among party members, even though Lenin addressed the first not only to the Central Committee but also to the Petersburg and Moscow Committees of the party. At an emergency session on the evening of September 28 (15, O.S.), most participants of an enlarged Central Committee are concerned that the letters be "quietly destroyed." The divided meeting votes to preserve only one copy of each letter and prevent their distribution among workers.

It will take several more weeks for Lenin and Trotsky to win over the party leadership to the planned seizure of power.

(Register here for the upcoming lecture on Lenin's *State and Revolution*).

London, September 26: *Times* writer warns of growth of socialism in Britain

In a special cable to the *New York Times*, a *London Times* writer warns of the increasing influence of socialism and expresses the fear of "a revolution hatching in Britain." The warning comes after months of strikes and growing anti-war sentiment in the British working class and army.

The same day, military police arrest Private Charles James Simmons, the Midlands representative of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council, at a mass meeting in Rochdale, northwest England. Simmons has been a tireless campaigner for the WSC, which was established at a conference in Leeds on June 3 in support of the February Revolution (see: May 29 – June 4: Lenin and Trotsky move towards unity as calls for Soviet power spread).

Although the leadership of the WSC remains in the hands of Labour Party politicians, pacifists and trade union bureaucrats, the British government is concerned that the councils could give an impetus to anti-war and socialist sentiments among the workers and soldiers. A concerted effort has been made by the Lloyd George government, in collaboration with the intelligence services and right-wing mobs, to prevent the WSC's twelve regional meetings from taking place. The meetings in London and Newcastle were violently dispersed in July with many injuries, while in Glasgow, Manchester and Yorkshire, the regional WSC gatherings were banned in August. Only three out of the twelve regions across the country have been able to hold meetings without them being broken up.

Britain's ruling class have good reason to be fearful. Despite the mass repression, reports emerge of soldiers initiating the creation of councils. In Tunbridge Wells, Lance Corporal Dudley, in cooperation with six battalions, established a WSC on 24 June. After the body adopted a soldiers' manifesto, it was suppressed by officers and Dudley was sent to the front.

By the end of September all twelve WSC regions have managed to elect delegates. However, the predominance of Labourites and anti-socialists in the leadership is crippling the movement, as shown by the first point of its program adopted at the WSC's national meeting in early October: "THE WORKERS' AND SOLDIERS' COUNCIL has been formed primarily as a propaganda body, not as a rival to, or to supplant, any of the existing working class organisations but to infuse into them a more active spirit of liberty."

Kiev, September 26 (13 O.S.): Workers' and soldiers' delegates refuse to turn over Kornilovist generals

Workers and soldiers' delegates in Kiev have arrested the tsarist generals Anton Denikin and Sergei Markov, both of whom supported Kornilov. Kerensky sends a government commission to take possession of the captives. The workers and soldiers understand what fate would have awaited them if Kornilov had been allowed to seize power, and they do not trust Kerensky. They refuse to turn the generals over to a government commission, proposing instead to try them before a revolutionary tribunal.

Both tsarist generals are extreme reactionaries. After the October Revolution, both generals will escape from captivity. Together with Kornilov, and with the support of the foreign imperialist powers, they will oversee the White Terror of pogroms and mass murders in the Ukraine and Western Russia, in which White partisans are exhorted to exterminate "the evil force which lives in the hearts of Jew-communists." Markov will die fighting the Bolsheviks in Russia, but Denikin will live until 1947, when he succumbs to a heart attack at the age of 74 while vacationing in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Petrograd, September 27 (14 O.S.): "Democratic Conference" convenes as Kerensky tries to assemble new government

The ostensible purpose of the "Democratic Conference," convened in Petrograd on September 27, is to rally together all of the "democratic" forces in the country against counterrevolution. The formation of yet another "coalition" government is proposed, with the conference proposing to elect a "pre-parliament" that would rule until the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. The essential political orientation of the conference is vague from the start, including the term "democratic" itself. To the conference are invited a wide variety of political forces from the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries to the administrators of rural cooperatives. The Kadets, led by Miliukov, boycott the conference.

Kerensky turned sharply to the right in the aftermath of the July Days, proclaiming himself the "supreme head" of a dictatorship of "blood and iron" and throwing the Bolshevik leaders in jail. Now Kerensky is attempting to shore up support for his regime on the left by presenting himself as a champion of freedom and democracy.

The conference convenes in the auditorium of the Alexandrinsky Theatre. The atmosphere in the capital is tense. Around 1,775 representatives are formally admitted. The organizers of the conference take pains to ensure that the Bolsheviks, who are now in control of about half of the major soviets, are represented in smaller numbers than would reflect their real strength. However, on many questions, the Bolsheviks are nevertheless able to gather around a third of the votes of the conference delegates.

Trotsky identifies three basic political camps at the conference. On the right wing, there is a small group which is still unequivocally supporting Kerensky and a coalition with the Kadets. On the left wing, represented by the Bolsheviks, there is a much larger group that demands soviet power or a socialist government. An extensive middle camp favors a new coalition but is wary of the Kadets, who generally supported the Kornilov coup.

Trotsky, newly released from prison, attends the conference and reads out a declaration of the Bolshevik faction. In this declaration, the Bolsheviks urge the conference to support immediately arming and mobilizing the workers as a bulwark against counterrevolution. The declaration further states: "In struggling for power in order to realize its program, our party has never desired and does not desire to seize power against the organized will of the majority of the toiling masses of the country." With this formulation, the Bolsheviks left open the possibility of taking power *as* the "organized will of the majority of the toiling masses of the country." The Bolsheviks' opponents react with alarm.

In his speeches before the conference, Trotsky denounces the idea of a “coalition” with forces that have enthusiastically supported Kornilov: “the whole bourgeois press either openly welcomed Kornilov or cautiously kept mum awaiting his victory ... That is why I tell you that you have no partners for a coalition!”

Trotsky also attacks Kerensky’s double standards. When the Kadets supported the overthrow of the government in the form of the Kornilov coup, Trotsky points out, Kerensky responded by inviting the Kadets to play a leading role in his new administration. However, when the Bolsheviks were (falsely) accused of trying to overthrow the government during the July Days, Kerensky did not invite them into the government, but into the jails.

When Kerensky arrives, the Bolshevik leaders on the presidium glance at each other and silently agree not to shake his hand. In front of the entire conference, Kerensky passes in front of them, hand extended.

For his part, Kerensky disingenuously attempts to distance himself from the Kornilov coup (to which he had, in fact, consented in a secret telegram to Kornilov). “I knew what they wanted,” Kerensky tries to reassure the conference. “Before they went to Kornilov they came to me and suggested that I take the same course.” His remarks, which are intended to placate the conference, instead provoke more outcry: “Who came? Who suggested?” If he knew about all this in advance, why did he not say anything or warn anyone?

Many delegates also condemn Kerensky for his reintroduction of the death penalty in the army, in violation of his own promises, prompting the volatile Kerensky to lose his temper in front of the entire conference. To the extent Kerensky’s appearance was supposed to secure him more support, his efforts meet with failure.

On the issue of forming a new coalition government, the conference is roughly evenly divided, with 766 deputies casting votes for a coalition and 688 against, with 38 abstaining. An amendment to this resolution that provides for the exclusion of the Kadets from the coalition is passed with 595 votes for and 493 against, with 72 abstaining.

However, this vote reduces the conference’s chief resolution to an absurdity: it is a vote in favor of a coalition with the bourgeoisie, but with the bourgeoisie excluded from the coalition. For that reason, the amended resolution is voted down by 813 votes to 133, with 80 abstaining. The last vote is a vote of the right and left wings of the hall against the center. In other words, the only thing that the conference strongly agrees upon is that the two sides, right and left, cannot be reconciled.

At one point, a group of sailors that Kerensky had posted to defend the conference from the Bolsheviks address Trotsky and, shaking their bayonets, demand to know: “How soon can we get to work with these things?”

Berlin, September 28: German Social Democratic Party leadership removes Karl Kautsky from *Die Neue Zeit* editorial board

In a letter from Friedrich Ebert dated September 28, the leadership of Germany’s Social Democratic Party fires Karl Kautsky as editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper *Die Neue Zeit* as of October 1. The chief editorship will be transferred to Heinrich Cunow, who served on the editorial board from 1898 to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ebert justifies the decision to remove Kautsky in the letter: “For some time now, you, together with your colleague [Emanuel] Wurm, have left the Social Democratic Party and joined the Independent Social Democratic Party [USPD] ... It is not permissible to allow an organ of the Independent Social Democratic Party to be edited by a member of another party ...”

Kautsky, in agreement with August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht,

founded the newspaper in 1883 independently of the SPD. The paper carried the deliberately apolitical subtitle “review of intellectual and public life” due to the anti-socialist laws of the period, and the newspaper has carried it ever since. However, its goal was to promote socialist consciousness. A programmatic article authored by Liebknecht and published in the first edition of the paper stated that to raise the proletariat “to the height of its task, everything worth knowing in all areas of knowledge must be made accessible to it.”

It became the party’s most important theoretical organ and enjoyed great international renown. Authors included, among others, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Paul Lafargue, Franz Mehring, Georgy Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky.

Following the mass workers’ struggles in 1905, revisionist standpoints and authors began creeping quietly into *Die Neue Zeit*, expressing themselves ever more openly after 1910. Among other things, this led to Franz Mehring, the most influential Marxist involved with the paper after Kautsky, withdrawing from the political editorial board.

Over the recent period, Kautsky has concentrated himself on increasingly long-winded scholarly treatises lacking political clarity. At the turn of the century, Kautsky led the fight against opportunism and revisionism on the pages of the newspaper. However, the character of the newspaper changed in the lead-up to the war, and even Eduard Bernstein was permitted to establish himself in its pages without opposition. The newspaper offered no space to Lenin.

Luxemburg comments on Kautsky’s editorial leadership at the turn of the century in a letter to Franz Mehring on September 8, 1917: “I am following with one laughing and one crying eye the inexhaustible source of the Kautskyan pen, which never grows tired of calmly elaborating on one topic after another with the patience of a spider, all neatly carved up into chapters with sub-titles and everything viewed ‘historically,’ that means beginning from the first nebula to the present day.”

However, once news reaches her of the October Revolution in Russia, she will remark sarcastically in a November 12 letter to Martha Rosenbaum:

Kautsky can think of nothing better to do than to statistically prove that Russia’s social relations are not yet mature enough for the dictatorship of the proletariat! A dignified ‘theoretician’ of the Independent Social Democratic Party! ... Fortunately, history long ago stopped following Kautsky’s theoretical recipes, so we can hope for the best.

Ramadi, September 28: British capture city from Ottomans in second battle

British forces capture the city of Ramadi, 60 miles west of Baghdad, in the course of the second battle in less than three months over the city, waged against troops of the Ottoman Empire.

In early July, Indian and British soldiers failed in a bloody battle to capture the Turkish garrison, which holds a strategic position on the Euphrates River. The attackers change their tactics second time around, cutting off the Ottomans’ routes of retreat and taking them by surprise. By the early morning of September 29, British forces take the last bridge into Ramadi, leading to an Ottoman surrender shortly afterwards.

The capture comes at a high price, with more than 900 British and Indian casualties. Some 120 Turkish troops are killed and a further 190 injured. The attacking soldiers take over 3,400 prisoners, and large supplies of Turkish military equipment and foodstuffs. Soldiers speak of

fighting in searing heat.

The British advance encourages local Arab tribes to switch sides and back the British and Indian campaign. It also represents a major blow to Turkish-German plans, already complicated by the failure to extend railway construction for the supplying of troops, to launch an assault on British positions in Iraq.

Elsewhere in the region, the British navy attacks Ottoman positions in Beirut, shelling the city.

Chicago, September 28, 1917: IWW leadership arrested, charged under Espionage Act

A grand jury in Chicago hands down charges against 168 leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Immediately afterwards, scores of “Wobbly” leaders are arrested across the country, including William “Big Bill” Haywood, who is jailed on \$25,000 bond. When federal agents, after arriving in ten cars at the IWW’s Chicago headquarters at 1001 Madison Avenue, invade Haywood’s office, “he swung around in his swirling chair and smiled at Special Agent Sweep, who led the party,” according to the *New York Times*.

All others are jailed on \$10,000 bond, including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the two leading Italian immigrant figures of the IWW, Carlo Tresca and Arturo Giovannitti, all three of whom are arrested in New York City. Other arrests of IWW leaders and militant workers are carried out in Minneapolis, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Des Moines, Rockford, Youngstown, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Huntington, Philadelphia, Scranton, Los Angeles, San Jose, Portland, Astoria, and Butte, as well as the arrest of a sophomore at Harvard University.

The grand jury indictment is supposedly based on “evidence” stolen from IWW offices in September 5 raids ordered by President Wilson. But there is no secret that the IWW leaders are arrested for opposition to the Great War—and their aim of rousing the American working class against it. The language of the infamous Espionage Act under which they are charged reads:

Whoever when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause, or incite or attempt to incite, insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct or attempt to obstruct the recruiting or enlistment services of the United States, and whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States into contempt, scorn, contumely, or disrepute, or shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States, or to promote the cause of its enemies ... or by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or the imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

Two days later, in Oklahoma, 120 sharecroppers and tenant farmers, all members of the Working Class Union, are indicted for their role in the anti-war “Green Corn Rebellion” of August 2 and 3.

Western Front, September 30: British forces lose more than 104,000 in September fighting

An official report on British casualties in fighting this month counts 104,598 dead, injured or missing soldiers in September.

The majority of this horrific toll has come in the course of the Third Battle of Ypres, which has continued to rage throughout the month. Fighting has intensified once again over the past ten days, with renewed British offensives reporting only modest progress as German forces launch repeated counter-attacks.

At the Battle of Polygon Wood alone, an offensive by British and allied troops launched September 26, British casualties totaled more than 15,000, with at least 1,200 deaths. More than 5,700 Australians also lost their lives.

British troops are deployed on a number of other war fronts, including in the Middle East, Africa, Italy, and the Balkans.

October 1, New York City: Columbia University fires anti-war professors

October 1, the Columbia University Board of Trustees ousts two professors, Professor James McKeen Cattell of the Department of Psychology and Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, “upon charges that they had disseminated doctrines tending to encourage a spirit of disloyalty to the Government of the United States.” They are fired without severance or pension, and, in a bid to prevent them from finding work elsewhere, the dismissals are carried out with great publicity.

The crime of Cattell, perhaps the leading academic psychologist in the US, consists of two letters he wrote to members of Congress and President Wilson in August 1916, reminding them they had not been elected to “send conscripts to Europe.” The transgression of Dana, the grandson of both Henry Wordsworth Longfellow and Richard Henry Dana (*Two Years Before the Mast*), is his membership in the pacifist People’s Council.

This act by Columbia’s trustees will lead to the introduction of tenure protection for political speech at American universities and colleges.

Also this week: More evidence emerges of atrocities against Armenians in Asia Minor

A report this week in the *New York Times* describes the murder of 1,200 people, including the entire Armenian faculty and student body of Anatolia University in the city of Mersovan (Merzifon) in the Ottoman Empire. The president of the college, the American missionary George E. White, provides a first-hand account of the massacre.

“These teachers were men of character, education, ability, and usefulness, several of them representing the fine type of graduates from American or European universities,” White recalls. “The men were separated from the women. Their hands were bound behind their backs and they were led away ...”

The men and boys are butchered with axes and their clothing and belongings are callously pillaged. White also witnesses the sale of

Armenian women into slavery at the price of around two to four dollars each. “The government officers plowed the Armenian cemetery in Marsovan and sowed it with grain as a symbol that no Armenian should live or die to be buried there. No Armenian student or teacher was left to Anatolia College,” White continues. “It was a government movement throughout—a movement against the Armenian people.”

Prior to and during the war, the Russian Empire supported Armenian nationalist movements in Asia Minor, hoping to use the Orthodox Christian minority to destabilize the teetering, multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. The bourgeois nationalist government of the “Young Turks,” which came to power in 1908, launched a campaign of methodical extermination and ethnic cleansing that escalates during the war.

The Armenian population, which has inhabited the region continuously since the time of Herodotus, is blamed for the empire’s crises and military defeats. An estimated 1.5 million people perish in the genocide. More than 800,000 Armenians will become refugees, many of whom will settle in the future Soviet Union.



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