

This week in the Russian Revolution

# October 2 - 8: Trotsky elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet

2 October 2017

*The election of Leon Trotsky to the most important post in revolutionary Russia epitomizes the surging strength of the Bolsheviks. However, the immense popular shift in favor of the Bolsheviks coincides with a sharp crisis in the party leadership.*

*In Lessons of October (1924), Trotsky recalls that “our influence in the army grew, not from day to day, but from hour to hour. It was no longer a question of prognosis or perspective; it was literally a question of how we were to act the next day.”*

## **Petrograd: Sharp divisions in the Bolshevik leadership over the question of boycotting the Pre-Parliament**

The “Democratic Conference” continues this week. Organized by the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, the purpose of this conference is to build another “coalition” government and elect a “Pre-Parliament” that will govern until a Constituent Assembly is convened. However, the conference has been organized in such a way as to mask and minimize the real strength of the Bolsheviks. While the Bolsheviks are the most powerful political force in the country, they are allowed only a little over a hundred out of more than 1,700 seats in the chamber.

When public opinion turned in favor of the Bolsheviks following the Kornilov coup, major disagreements emerged in the party leadership over what course of action to take. Lenin does not believe that the party should be involved with the Democratic Conference at all, and he has called instead for the Bolshevik leaders to develop concrete plans to seize power. However, his position at this point commands only a minority within the top levels of the Bolshevik leadership.

On October 4 (September 21, O.S.), the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, which is split 8 votes to 7, convenes a meeting consisting of the Bolshevik delegates to the Democratic Conference. In keeping with the party’s traditions of internal democracy, a full discussion takes place on the issues that have arisen.

As spokesman for the Central Committee, Trotsky proposes a Bolshevik walkout from the Democratic Conference and a boycott of the Pre-Parliament. The discussion is protracted and passionate speeches are given on both sides. The proposed boycott is opposed by the “moderate” wing of the Bolshevik Party, led by Rykov, Kamenev, and Riazanov.

“It might seem, and for the majority it did seem, that this hot debate was purely tactical in character,” Trotsky later recalls. “In reality the quarrel revived the April disagreements [i.e., over Lenin’s April Theses] and initiated the disagreements of October. The question was whether the party should accommodate its tasks to the development of a bourgeois republic, or should actually set itself the goal of conquering state power.”

After the matter is put to a vote, Trotsky’s position is defeated by 77 votes to 50. The supporters of Lenin and Trotsky are compelled for the moment to submit to the democratic decision of the majority. Accordingly, Riazanov, on the floor of the Democratic Conference, announces on October 5 that the Bolshevik Party will participate in the Pre-Parliament in order to “expose all attempts at a new coalition with the bourgeoisie.” Trotsky writes: “That sounded very radical, but it really meant substituting a policy of oppositional exposure for a policy of revolutionary action.”

Lenin, still in hiding in Finland, writes in support of Trotsky’s position:

Trotsky was for the boycott. Bravo, Comrade Trotsky! Boycottism was defeated in the faction of the Bolsheviks who attended the Democratic Conference. Long live the boycott! We cannot and must not under any circumstances reconcile ourselves to participation [in the Pre-Parliament]. A group at one of the conferences is not the highest organ of the party and even the decisions of the highest organs are subject to revision on the basis of experience. We must strive at all cost to have the boycott question solved at a plenary meeting of the Central Committee and at an extraordinary party congress.

“We must boycott the Pre-Parliament,” Lenin writes. “We must go out into the soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants’ deputies, go out into the trade unions, go out in general to the masses. We must summon them to the struggle. We must give them a correct and clear slogan: To drive out the Bonapartist gang of Kerensky with its fake Pre-Parliament.”

The debates taking place in Petrograd are mirrored in all the local organizations of the party throughout the former tsarist empire. Majorities and minorities form over the question of the boycott, which is perhaps the most intense internal conflict in the history of the Bolshevik Party to date. In some cases, a majority of the local leaders are against the boycott, but the majority of the rank-and-file party members pass resolutions in support of Lenin and Trotsky’s position. In Kiev, an overwhelming majority of the leadership is against the boycott, but a full conference of the membership resoundingly approves of the boycott.

On October 5, the party newspaper publishes Lenin’s article—“Heroes of Fraud and the Mistakes of the Bolsheviks”—as “Heroes of Fraud,” with all of his criticisms of the Bolsheviks removed. One of the omitted passages reads:

The Bolsheviks should have walked out of the meeting [Democratic Conference] in protest and should not have allowed

themselves to be caught by the conference trap set to divert the people's attention from the serious questions...

How it happened can be understood—history made a *very* sharp turn at the time of the Kornilov revolt. The party failed to keep pace with the incredibly fast tempo of history at this turning-point. The party allowed itself to be diverted, for the time being, into the trap of a despicable talking-shop...

Why cast pearls before Kerensky's friends? Why divert the attention of proletarian forces to a farcical conference?

Meanwhile, the food crisis is sharpening and industrial production continues to decline precipitously. Food is being rationed in Petrograd and Moscow at below basic subsistence levels. The Russian winter is approaching, and in many areas workers and soldiers are literally starving. At some demonstrations, banners simply declare, "We are starving." Lenin is emphatic that the party has only a narrow window of time to act, and that it must act quickly and decisively. On October 6, Lenin writes: "There is not the slightest doubt that there are noticeable vacillations at the top of our party that may become *ruinous*."

### **New York City, October 3: *Times* supports firing of Columbia antiwar professors**

The *New York Times*, in its October 3 lead editorial, praises Columbia University's decision, taken last week, to dismiss two antiwar professors. The Board of Trustees "have done their duty to the university and its good fame by expelling" the professors, the leading organ of American liberalism writes. The *Times* suggests similar firings be carried out across the US, condemning professors "who cover themselves with the threadbare cloak of 'academic freedom'... for mischievous, unreasonable, and dangerous speech, a specious radicalism that tends to mislead the young." The *Times* further accuses antiwar professors of engaging in speech that "disseminates treason."

Professor James McKeen Cattell's "treason" consists of writing to President Wilson in August 1916, reminding him that he had not been elected to "send conscripts to Europe"—and indeed, Wilson won the popular vote on the basis of the infamously deceitful slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War." Professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana is fired for his membership in the pacifist People's Council.

Not everyone agrees with the editors of the *Times*. The eminent American historian, Charles Beard, though himself in favor of US involvement in the war, resigns on October 8 from Columbia to protest the firings, stating, "the University is really under the control of a small and active group of trustees who have no standing in the world of education, who are reactionary and visionless in politics, narrow and medieval in religion."

Simultaneously, the *New York Times* is leading the crusade to expel from the US Senate Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, who stands accused by a police organization, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, of making "treasonous" antiwar statements in a recent speech in St. Paul. "Expulsion of this dangerous and disloyal member would be creditable to the Senate," the *Times* editors write.

### **Flanders, October 4: British and allied forces advance by yards at terrible cost in the Battle of Broodseinde**

British, Australian and New Zealand forces attack German defenders on the east end of the Gheluvelt Plateau, an important area on the way to Paschendaele that has been captured from German defenders over the course of the past two weeks. The average advance of the allied troops over the course of today's battle is 1,000 yards.

Thousands pay for their lives for this modest gain. The Second Army, which leads the offensive with the Fifth Army, suffers 12,236 casualties in the week ending October 5. For the same period, the Fifth Army loses 3,305 men. A particular burden is carried by Australian and New Zealand units. Close to 2,000 New Zealand casualties are reported during the week of the battle.

Enthused by the advance, top British commanders including Douglas Haig initially push for a deeper penetration into German territory, but high losses and resistance force these plans to be abandoned.

The battle is a setback for the German defenders, and will later be referred to as the "black day" of October 4. From October 1 to 10, the official German casualty count is 35,000, although others put the figure higher. But the allied advance does not prove decisive. The onset of bad weather makes it impossible for British and allied forces to move their artillery forward, and slows down future attacks. German reinforcements strengthen the area, preventing a breakthrough to the Belgian coast, which was the goal of the Third Battle of Ypres at its launch in July.

The slaughter near Ypres will continue through a series of battles over the coming month before concluding in mid-November in a bloody impasse.

### **Washington D.C., October 6: New law gives Wilson power to seize "enemy" property, censor opposition**

The Trading with the Enemy Act goes into effect this week, giving the president of the United States far-reaching antidemocratic powers in the name of restricting trade with "enemies" during the war. It is, in the words of the *New York Times*, "one of the most drastic pieces of legislation ever passed by Congress."

The act creates a new police bureaucracy, the Office of Alien Property Custodian, headed up by Wilson ally A. Mitchell Palmer, who immediately begins seizing millions of dollars' worth of "enemy" assets. The biggest branch of the new bureaucracy will be placed in St. Louis, home to a large German-American population. Palmer is authorized to seize assets not only of Germans and Austro-Hungarians, but also their "allies," and place these in a "Liberty Bond" investment trust for the duration of the war. It is estimated that over \$1 billion will be subject to government seizure under this new regime.

Acting in the name of the new law, as well as the Espionage Act, Wilson orders the creation a Censorship Board, comprised of representatives of the War and Navy departments, the War Trade Board, and the war propaganda bureaucracy dubbed the Committee on Public Information, that has "full power" to investigate and control mail, radio, and telegraph communications. The law further requires foreign language newspapers to apply for a federal license with the Postmaster General to use the federal mail service. All foreign language newspapers, furthermore, will be required to submit English-language translations of each edition prior to being approved for circulation in the mail.

### **France, October 7: Worst harvest reported in over 50 years**

As the slaughter at the front grinds on, conditions for France's civilian population continue to deteriorate. News of the worst harvest in 50 years prompts the introduction of new rations, as the country's agricultural output falls to less than half its prewar average.

Problems with supplying food have contributed to rising social opposition throughout the year. The poor quality of food was a major factor behind the mutinies that rocked the French army during the spring and early summer, while workers in the major cities such as Paris have demonstrated as their wages can no longer keep pace with sharp increases in food prices. In the first quarter of 1917 alone, food prices shot up by 25 percent.

### **Petrograd, October 8 (September 25, O.S.): Kerensky forms third coalition government**

After months of negotiations, Alexander Kerensky forms the third coalition government. It is a crisis-ridden and unpopular government from the start. Konovalov, a wealthy Moscow industrialist, is vice-president and Minister of Commerce and Industry. Tereshchenko, a sugar manufacturer from Kiev, remains in charge of foreign affairs. In total, ten members of the SRs and the Mensheviks join the government, but almost all of them are unpopular and lesser-known figures.

Kerensky is thoroughly discredited due to his involvement in the failed coup by Kornilov. His last weeks in office are marked by an almost total paralysis of will. Trotsky later described the government with the following words:

The ministers kept looking round and listening in alarm, waiting, jotting down little notes of evasion, occupying themselves with trifles.... a tint of the involuntary comic lay over the whole activity of the Provisional Government. These people did not know what to do or where to turn. They did not govern, they played at government as little boys play soldier, though far more amusingly.

The coalition's work would be marked by "its attempt to carry through the business of the July days: to behead the revolution by shattering the Bolsheviks" (Trotsky). But the bourgeoisie's hold on power is now incomparably weaker than it was after the July days. The Kadet Miliukov later candidly formulated the question looming over the government: "Is it not now too late to declare war on the Bolsheviks?"

### **Petrograd, October 8 (September 25, O.S.): Trotsky elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet**

Leon Trotsky is elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, replacing the Menshevik leader Nikolai Chkheidze. Trotsky's return to the position he last held in 1905 is greeted with a loud ovation.

Ever since the February Revolution, the Bolshevik Party has been a minority in the soviets, which have been controlled by Mensheviks and SRs. In April, the Bolsheviks could barely muster 100 votes in the Petrograd Soviet against the war, as compared with 2,000 votes for defensist resolutions. From the Presidium of the Petrograd Soviet, figures such as Skobelev, Chkheidze, Plekhanov, and Tsereteli have baited and denounced the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks now control the Presidium—on which sit Bolshevik leaders Trotsky, Kamenev, Rykov, and Fedorov, together with two SRs and one Menshevik—as well as its Central Executive Committee. The Bolsheviks have majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets as well as an emerging majority of all provincial soviets.

In a speech on the day of his election, Trotsky declares: "Now we feel distinctly stronger. Yet the list of new ministers [of the Provisional Government] published in the evening papers...attests to the fact that the revolution has reached [another] critical point." In his speech, Trotsky compares and contrasts the present situation to the circumstances that faced the revolution in 1905. The revolutionary tide is turning, but complex political challenges remain.

Addressing his opponents among the Mensheviks and SRs, he states: "We belong to different parties and have our own work to conduct, but in directing the work of the Petrograd Soviet we will observe the individual rights and complete freedom of all fractions."

A resolution by the Petrograd Soviet, drafted and read by Trotsky—calling for the Kerensky government to resign in favor of a soviet government—is passed immediately with overwhelming approval:

The news of the formation of the government will be met by the whole revolutionary democracy with one answer: Resign! Relying upon this unanimous voice of the authentic democracy, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets will create a genuinely revolutionary government.

### **Also this month: 100-inch mirror installed as world's largest telescope nears completion in Pasadena, California**

Engineers under the direction of astronomer George Hale begin final assembly this month of the latest addition to the family of telescopes at the Mount Wilson Observatory: the 100-inch Hooker Telescope. It will be the world's largest telescope until 1949, and will be a key instrument in one of the most versatile and fruitful astronomical observatories of the 20th century.

The mirror for the Hooker telescope was first commissioned by Hale in 1906 as the successor to the as-yet-incomplete 60-inch telescope, also on Mt. Wilson. It is designed to study a series of questions that had been plaguing astronomy, including the nature of the so-called "island universes" and the "spiral nebulae." Are these a part of our own Milky Way or even more distant? This question will be definitively answered by Edwin Hubble in 1923, when it will be shown that the "Andromeda nebula" is external to the Milky Way.

These discoveries dramatically reshape our understanding of humanity's place in the universe. The Milky Way, previously the extent of our horizons, turns out to be only one out of between 200 billion and 2 trillion similar formations, which constitute the basic granular organization of the universe that will later become known as "galaxies."

The construction of the telescope had to go through a variety of engineering and funding hurdles. When Hale first began the project, he had only secured one-tenth of the necessary funding to purchase, grind and polish the mirror, build the telescope's mounting and construct the dome to house the telescope. It was only through the direct intervention of Andrew Carnegie in 1910 that Hale received the necessary funding to complete the project.

Construction is further delayed by the Great War. Optical and instrument shops, funds and personnel that had been previously used to develop astronomical instruments are now dedicated to supporting the

American war drive.

On top of the difficulty in securing the component parts and labor, a variety of engineering problems surface. The mirror can only be ground and polished in the summer months because the artificial heat generated in the observatory during the winter caused the glass to warp out of position. Getting the equipment to the top of the mountain represents its own challenge: it is necessary to transport the mirror, the concrete and metal for the dome, and one hundred tons of mounting equipment up a treacherous 9-mile dust footpath. Getting just the mirror up the mountain takes eight hours on a specially designed rig.

The immense effort and ingenuity will prove to be worth it over the course of the next several decades. Along with proving the existence of other galaxies, the Hooker telescope will be used by Hubble and his assistant Milton Humason to show that the Universe is expanding, by Fritz Zwicky to find the first evidence of dark matter, by Albert Michelson to precisely determine the diameter of stars, by Henry Russell to develop the star classification system still in use today, and by Walter Baade to calculate the distances to certain stars, doubling the size of the known universe at the time.

English poet Alfred Noyes is inspired by the first test of the Hooker telescope on the night of November 1-2, chronicling the unfolding drama of the first starlight images taken by the telescope with his poem "Watchers of the Sky."

*... The explorers of the sky, the pioneers  
Of science, now made ready to attack  
That darkness once again,  
and win new worlds.*



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