

This week in the Russian Revolution

October 23-29: Bolshevik Central Committee votes for armed insurrection

23 October 2017

In an all-night secret meeting at an apartment in Petrograd's Vyborg District on October 23, Lenin, joined by Trotsky, secures a majority vote in the Bolshevik Central Committee in favor of armed insurrection.

October 23 (October 10, O.S.): Bolshevik Central Committee votes for armed insurrection

At 10 p.m., about a dozen of the Bolshevik Central Committee's 21 members gather at a secret location in Petrograd. The meeting takes place at the apartment of the left-wing Menshevik Nikolai Sukhanov, who is not at home, but whose wife is a Bolshevik.

It is the first meeting of the Central Committee, with Lenin physically present, in months. Lenin, who is still persecuted by the Provisional Government, shows up in disguise. The meeting is organized and chaired by Yakov Sverdlov.

The other CC members attending this historic meeting are: Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, Aleksandra Kollontai, Grigory Sokolnikov, Georgy Lomov, Andrei Bubnov, Moisei Uritsky and Varvara Iakovleva, who takes the minutes.

The meeting begins with an hour-long report by Lenin, who pleads for immediate action.

Over the past weeks, Lenin has conducted a determined campaign to prepare the Central Committee for an armed insurrection. However, he still must fight considerable opposition from the party leadership's right-wing, headed by Zinoviev and Kamenev.

The short and incomplete official transcript of the meeting notes:

Comrade Lenin maintains that a sort of indifference to the question of insurrection has been noticeable since the beginning of September. But this is impermissible if we are issuing the slogan of the seizure of power by the Soviets in all seriousness. It is therefore high time to pay attention to the technical aspect of the question ... The international situation is such that we must take the initiative ... Absenteeism and indifference on the part of the masses is due to their being tired of words and resolutions ...

The agrarian movement is also developing in that direction, for it is obvious that extreme effort would be needed to stem that movement. The slogan of the transfer of all land has become the general slogan of the peasants. The political situation, therefore, is mature. We must speak of the technical aspect. That is the crux of the matter. Nevertheless we, like the defencists, are inclined to

regard the systematic preparation of an uprising as something in the nature of a political sin. It is senseless to wait for the Constituent Assembly that will obviously not be on our side, for this will only make our task more involved.

The discussion about Lenin's report is tense and prolonged, and lasts throughout the night into the next morning. Kamenev and Zinoviev continue to oppose Lenin's call for an insurrection, arguing that the party should instead adopt a "defensive posture" and focus on acquiring the strongest possible representation at the Constituent Assembly. An insurrection, in their view, would be untimely. They argue that it would only precipitate an attack by the counterrevolution, which would find support in the petty bourgeois democracy.

Apart from the ongoing differences with Zinoviev and Kamenev, the discussions among the Central Committee members now revolve not so much about whether or not to prepare the uprising, but when and how. In contrast to Lenin, whose concern is that the right time for the uprising not be missed by the party, Trotsky argues that the insurrection should be prepared by a non-party body, and scheduled so that it can be sanctioned by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which is due to take place in early November.

In the end, the overwhelming majority of the Central Committee adopts Lenin's proposed resolution with 10 votes for, and only two, Kamenev and Zinoviev, against it.

This historic resolution states:

The Central Committee recognizes that the international position of the Russian revolution (the revolt in the German navy which is an extreme manifestation of the growth throughout Europe of the world socialist revolution; the threat of peace by the imperialists with the object of strangling the revolution in Russia) as well as the military situation (the indubitable decision of the Russian bourgeoisie and Kerensky and Co. to surrender Petrograd to the Germans), and the fact that the proletarian party has gained a majority in the Soviets—all this, taken in conjunction with the peasant revolt and the swing of popular confidence towards our Party (the elections in Moscow), and, finally, the obvious preparations being made for a second Kornilov revolt (the withdrawal of troops from Petrograd, the dispatch of Cossacks to Petrograd, the encircling of Minsk by Cossacks, etc.)—all this places the armed uprising on the order of the day.

Considering therefore that an armed uprising is inevitable, and that the time for it is fully ripe, the Central Committee instructs all Party organizations to be guided accordingly, and to discuss and

decide all practical questions (the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region, the withdrawal of troops from Petrograd, the action of our people in Moscow and Minsk, etc.) from this point of view.

No specific date for the insurrection is set yet. However, the Committee resolves to form a Political Bureau (Politburo), consisting of Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin, Bubnov and Sokolnikov, which is specifically tasked with directing the insurrection.

Italian Front, October 24: Battle of Caporetto leads to collapse of Italian army, government

With a massive poison gas bombardment, Austro-Hungarian and German troops launch the Battle of Caporetto (also known as the Battle of Kafreit) at 2 a.m., leading quickly to the near-explosion of the Italian army and, within two days, to the collapse of the Paolo Boselli government.

The attack, which has been jointly organized by the two Central Powers in a bid to knock Italy out of the war, sees their forces make major advances during the day. Some Austro-Hungarian and German troops gain 25 kilometres. Many Italian troops defending the frontline flee, and others are killed or pushed back by a major artillery barrage and the detonation of large mines between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m.

The defeat exacerbates a crisis in the Italian army. Around 265,000 soldiers are taken prisoner, many of whom are demoralized and no longer willing to fight due to the harsh discipline imposed by the army's chief commander, General Luigi Cadorna.

Italian ruling circles are extremely concerned about the influence of Bolshevism among the troops. In letters to Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Cadorna refers to the need to clamp down on "defeatists," a direct reference to those who have been influenced by Lenin's program and no longer wish to continue the war. Republican politician Napoleone Colajanni seeks to discredit the socialist opposition to war by associating it with support for Germany, writing, "the action of the Russian revolutionaries ensures the victory, not the defeat, of German armies." Vittorio Emanuele imposes a strict gag order on the press, fearing that news of the defeat will strengthen anti-war sentiment among the troops and population at large.

The battle culminates in a catastrophic defeat for the Italians, with 10,000 soldiers killed and 30,000 injured. Italian troops retreat across the Tagliamento River, pursued by Austro-Hungarians and Germans. They take up new positions near the Piave in early November. Reports even circulate that the Italian government is considering moving to Naples in the expectation of further attacks. Its army is saved from complete collapse largely by more than 200,000 British and French troops sent as reinforcements. Their central mission is not to fight, but to prevent the dissolution of the Italian army.

Although the battle is a victory for the Austro-Hungarian and German troops, conditions for them are little better. Their advance faces the immediate problem of poor supply lines under conditions in which the troops are already short of food and other necessities. The Austro-Hungarian and German forces lose an estimated 70,000 casualties and prisoners of war during the battle.

The battle, also known as the Twelfth Battle of Isonzo, has been fought over the past two years. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers have been slaughtered on both sides over the mountainous area.

October 25 (October 12, O.S.): Petrograd Soviet Executive Committee endorses Military Revolutionary Committee

The Petrograd Soviet endorses the plan to organize the Military Revolutionary Committee along guidelines that convert it into an instrument of insurrection. The plan is drafted by the Left Socialist Revolutionary Pavel Lazimir who, like many Left SRs, strongly sympathizes with the Bolsheviks.

The "Defense Committee," suggested at the session on October 22 by the Mensheviks and SRs as a means of helping the Provisional Government to defend the city against the looming German onslaught, is now in the process of evolving into the central tool for the overthrow of the Provisional Government.

When the Mensheviks and SRs see the guidelines they are both taken aback and dumbfounded. The Left Menshevik Sukhanov later commented, "Here they said one thing and meant another." Indeed, the regulations provide for the establishment of departments of defense, supplies, communications, and intelligence under the supervision of the Committee. In other words, the Committee, a non-party body sanctioned by the Petrograd Soviet, is to become a counter-headquarters or a nucleus for a new government. A central aim of the Committee's work is to increase the fighting capacity of the Petrograd garrison, not in defense of the Provisional Government, but rather in opposition to it. Trotsky later commented in his *History of the Russian Revolution*:

The Mensheviks observed with helpless indignation that an idea advanced by them for patriotic purposes was being converted into a screen for the preparation of an insurrection. The camouflage was by no means impenetrable—everybody understood what the talk was about—but at the same time it could not be broken through. Had not the Compromisers themselves behaved in exactly the same way in the past, grouping the garrison around themselves at critical moments and creating sovereign bodies parallel with those of the government? The Bolsheviks were merely following the traditions, so to speak, of the dual power. But they were bringing a new content into these old forms. What had formerly served the purpose of compromise was now leading to civil war. The Mensheviks demanded that it be placed in the record that they were against the undertaking as a whole. This platonic request was granted.

The Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee will serve as a role model for dozens of similar Military Revolutionary Committees that are formed in other cities and regions in the following days and weeks, and will play a critical role in the extension of workers' power throughout the country.

October 26 (October 13, O.S.): The Soldiers' Section of the Petrograd Soviet debates the Military Revolutionary Committee

In one of the most significant signs of the sharp shift to the left in Russia, the Soldiers' Section of the Petrograd Soviet, for months a stronghold of Menshevik and SR influence, speaks out in favor of the creation of the Military Revolutionary Committee.

In his speech, the sailor Pavel Dybenko from the Central Baltic Fleet (Tsentrabalt), expresses the growing insurrectionary moods among broad

layers of soldiers and sailors. Trotsky would later recall his speech as follows:

Dybenko told about the final break of the fleet with the government and their new attitudes to the command. Before the latest naval operations began, he said, the admiral addressed a question to the Congress of Sailors then sitting: Will they carry out military orders? We answered: "We will—under supervision from our side. But ... if we see that the fleet is threatened with destruction, the commanding staff will be the first to hang from the mast-head." To the Petrograd garrison this was a new language. Even in the fleet it had come into use only in the last few days. It was the language of insurrection. The little group of Mensheviks grumbled distractedly in a corner. The præsidium looked out with some alarm upon that compact mass of grey soldier coats. Not one protesting voice from their ranks! Eyes burned like coals in their excited faces. A spirit of daring was in the air.

In conclusion, stimulated by the universal sympathy, Dybenko confidently exclaimed: "They talk about the need of bringing out the Petrograd garrison for the defense of the approaches to Petrograd and of Reval in particular. Don't believe a word of it. We will defend Reval ourselves. Stay here and defend the interests of the revolution ... When we need your support we will say so ourselves, and I am confident that you will support us." This challenge, which exactly matched the mood of the soldiers, called out a veritable whirlwind of sincere enthusiasm in which the protests of a few individual Mensheviks were completely drowned. The question of removing the regiments [from Petrograd] was settled from that moment.

The Soviet's Soldiers' Section officially ratifies the plan for the creation of the Military Revolutionary Committee a few days later, on October 29 (October 16, O.S.)

October 25-26, Ireland: Sinn Fein party convention agrees on new party constitution

The Irish nationalist Sinn Fein adopts new political goals at its Ard Fheis (party convention). Delegates approve a formulation designed to reconcile the Republican wing of the party with the traditional faction under founder Arthur Griffith, who since founding the party in 1905 has called for the establishment of a dual monarchy between Britain and Ireland along the lines of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Republicans such as Cathal Brugha and Michael Collins demand an explicit commitment to republicanism. Although Sinn Fein did not participate as an organization in the 1916 Easter Rising, this would amount to an adoption of the rebels' program. Republicanism has strengthened since the rising, with the emergence of Liberty Clubs and the growth of the Irish Volunteers.

After Republicans led by Brugha organize a walkout, Eamon de Valera, who served as a commandant in the rising, proposes a compromise. It is ultimately backed unanimously by the congress. The agreement commits the party to secure "the international recognition of Ireland as an independent Irish republic." It adds, "Having achieved that status, the Irish people may by referendum freely choose the form of government." To achieve these ends, the congress agrees to "Deny the right and oppose the will of the British Parliament and British Crown or any other foreign

government to legislate for Ireland" and "Make use of any and every means available to render impotent the power of England to hold Ireland in subjection by military force or otherwise."

The armed struggle referred to is to be led by the Irish Republican Army. Brugha is also appointed the IRA's chief of staff this month.

Sinn Fein and Irish nationalist groups enjoy a dramatic rise during this period. At the same time, the struggles of the working class are intensifying. Mass strikes are a regular occurrence, and Irish workers are closely following developments in Russia. When news comes of the Bolshevik seizure of power, it will be greeted by a mass meeting of 10,000 in Dublin.

The political domination of the nationalists is above all due to the failure of the Labour Party and other workers' organizations to offer a clear alternative to Irish nationalism. Founded by James Connolly and his allies in the trade unions prior to the war, Labour adapts to Irish nationalism and permits Sinn Fein to dominate the mass opposition to British rule after 1916. Isolated by the betrayal of the Second International, Connolly made concessions to the nationalists prior to the rising. After his execution by the British in the wake of the rising, Connolly's successors intensify this policy. This will culminate in the disastrous decision not to stand any Labour Party candidates in the parliamentary elections of 1918, leaving the field clear for the nationalists of Sinn Fein to sweep the board and strengthen their popular support.

October 29 (October 16, O.S.): Enlarged Central Committee meeting confirms resolution on armed uprising

The Central Committee meets with representatives of the Bolshevik Military Organization and the Petersburg Committee to discuss remaining differences about the armed insurrection, which has been decided upon in a CC resolution from October 23 (October 10, O.S.), and concretize plans for the uprising.

Countering the opposition still voiced by Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev to an armed uprising by the working class under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, Lenin insists in the opening report:

We can't be led by the masses' mood, because it changes and defies calculation. We must proceed through objective analysis and estimation of the revolution. The masses trust the Bolsheviks and demand deeds of them, not just words. They demand a decisive policy of struggle against the war and against ruin. A basic political analysis of the revolution makes this absolutely clear, and recent anarchistic uprisings corroborate this.

In his report, Yakov Sverdlov documents an enormous growth of the party membership to now some 400,000. Sverdlov further reports on the mobilization of counter-revolutionary forces in the Donetsk Region, Minsk and the Northern Front.

Bokii and Krylenko, representing the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organization, respectively, provide differing assessments of the moods of workers and soldiers in the key districts and garrisons of Petrograd. Krylenko, reflecting the ultra-left tendencies still strong in the Bolshevik Military Organization, argues that the troops are "with us to a man" and dismisses technical aspects of the preparation for the insurrection.

Kamenev and Zinoviev reiterate their opposition to an armed insurrection, and urge the Central Committee to renounce the resolution

from October 23.

Zinoviev warns of a position “that completely isolates us.” Kamenev supports him, arguing, “We have no apparatus for an insurrection; our enemies have quite a strong apparatus, and it probably has grown during this week ... All the resolution did was allow the government to get organized itself ... Our forces are not adequate to ensure victory in an insurrection, but adequate to prevent extreme reaction. There are two tactics at conflict here: the tactic of conspiracy and the tactic of faith in the Russian revolution’s motor forces.”

Their arguments are countered by several Central Committee members, including the Ukrainian Bolshevik Mykola Skrypnyk who states, according to the transcript, “If we do not have the strength now, we will not have more later. If now we can’t keep power, later it will be even worse.” There is no guarantee for victory, Skrypnyk continues, but Kamenev and Zinoviev “are repeating what the Mensheviks and SRs said when power was offered to them. We are talking too much, when what is needed is action. The masses demand this of us. If we give them nothing, they will regard it as a crime. What is needed is preparation for an insurrection and a call to the masses.”

Toward the end of the meeting, according to the transcript, Lenin argues that “If an insurrection is politically inevitable, then we must speak about insurrection as an art. And politically, it already has ripened. It is precisely because there is bread for only one day that we cannot wait for the Constituent Assembly. Lenin proposes that the resolution be confirmed and that decisive preparations be made. Then let the Central Committee and the Soviet decide when.”

At the end, the Central Committee adopts Lenin’s resolution with 20 votes, reaffirming the necessity to prepare for an armed uprising. Kamenev and Zinoviev vote against the resolution, and three other members abstain.

The Committee then selects a “Military-Revolutionary Center,” composed of Sverdlov, Stalin, Bubnov, Uritsky and Dzerzhinsky. This Center is designed to “become part of the Soviet Revolutionary Committee” that had been formed by the Petrograd Soviet. Thereby, the Central Committee for the first time suggests that the Military Revolutionary Committee might become—as it indeed will—the main body directing the seizure of power.

Transcript quoted from Michael C. Hickey: Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution, Greenwood 2010, pp. 427-439.

Also this week: Petrograd, October 29-November 1 (October 16-19, O.S.): Workers cultural and educational organizations establish what will become the “Proletarian Culture” movement

All the proletarian-educational organizations in Petrograd hold a conference to discuss the establishment of a centralized cultural institution among workers, first in the city and then throughout Russia.

The Bolshevik Anatoly Lunacharsky has been working on the organization of such a conference for some time. In August, he addressed cultural issues at a gathering of factory committees. He argued, according to historian Lynn Mally, “against those who seemed to think that culture was some sort of dessert, a treat to be enjoyed when the political situation had stabilized.”

At the conference, held in the Petrograd city duma, some 200 workers and intellectuals meet to discuss the role of arts and education in the working class movement. Lunacharsky presides, assisted by Fedor Kalinin (the younger brother of Mikhail Kalinin), a former weaver who is there representing the unions; and two Bolshevik organizers, longtime party member Konkordiya Samoilova, and Yuri Steklov, the Old Bolshevik,

journalist, and historian.

The audience is split over the question of “past culture” and whether it can be of value to the proletariat. Lunacharsky endorses the idea of “proletarian culture,” but reminds workers they have much to learn from the culture of the past.

The final resolution reads: “In both science and art the proletariat will develop its own independent forms, but it should also make use of all the cultural achievements of the past and present in this task.”

Alexander Bogdanov, the champion of utopian-idealistic conceptions of “proletarian culture” and related ideas and Lunacharsky’s longtime mentor, is not present. He will organize a similar meeting in Moscow in February 1918.



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