

This week in the Russian Revolution

November 6-12: Bolsheviks come to power in Petrograd

6 November 2017

Kerensky's last desperate attempt to destroy the Bolshevik Party only results in the collapse of government authority. The Congress of Soviets opens with the Bolsheviks firmly in control of Petrograd. The new government formed by the Bolsheviks swiftly passes sweeping decrees on peace, land, education, and the eight-hour day.

Petrograd, November 6-7 (October 24-25, O.S.): Bolsheviks launch insurrection in response to government attacks

The Bolshevik leader Georgy Oppokov ("Lomov") is awakened in the middle of the night on November 6 by a telephone call. It is very cold, and it is well after midnight. Lomov waits a few moments before throwing off the covers and rushing to the phone. When he picks up the phone it is Trotsky.

Trotsky quickly informs Lomov that Kerensky has issued orders for the arrest of Bolshevik leaders, that Bolshevik presses are being attacked by government forces, and Kerensky is summoning loyal military units to the capital. "Kerensky is on the offensive," Trotsky declares emphatically, "We need everyone at Smolny!"

At the Smolny Institute, the headquarters of the Military Revolutionary Committee, Bolshevik leaders quickly assemble, including Trotsky, Sverdlov, Antonov, Podvoisky, and Lashevich, together with the Left SR Pavel Lazimir. They issue an emergency order to all military units titled, "Directive Number One."

The Petrograd Soviet is in direct danger; counter-revolutionary conspirators have attempted to bring cadets and shock battalions from the suburbs to Petrograd during the night. The newspapers *Soldat* and *Rabochii Put'* have been closed. You are hereby directed to bring your regiment to battle readiness [and to] await further instructions. Any procrastination or interference in executing this order will be considered a betrayal of the revolution.

Trotsky's first move is to order the Litovsky Regiment to reopen the Bolshevik newspaper *Rabochii Put'* (Workers' Path). This regiment, loyal to the Bolsheviks, quickly overwhelms the government defenders, recaptures the press, and destroys the government seals. The insurrection is officially underway. This test is the first of many confirmations of Bolshevik authority in the city.

Soldiers everywhere are receiving two sets of conflicting orders—they receive one set of orders from the officers of the Provisional Government

and the other set from the Military Revolutionary Committee. However, the efforts of Bolsheviks over the preceding days have confirmed the loyalty of broad sections of soldiers and workers to the Military Revolutionary Committee. Soldiers everywhere declare that orders not countersigned by the Military Revolutionary Committee are not valid and will not be followed.

The cruiser *Aurora*, which would become an icon of the October Revolution, receives an order from the Provisional Government to put out to sea. This is quickly contradicted by the Military Revolutionary Committee, which orders the cruiser to remain on hand to fight the counterrevolution. The *Aurora* enthusiastically carries out the latter order. "The *Aurora* in the Neva meant not only an excellent fighting unit in the service of the insurrection, but a radio-station ready for use," Trotsky later writes. "Invaluable advantage!"

The regime of "blood and iron" led by "supreme head" Alexander Kerensky shows itself to be utterly powerless. Its orders and decrees are largely ignored by the population of Petrograd. Nearly everywhere that the government challenges the Bolsheviks, the confrontation results in an expansion of the Bolsheviks' authority and the collapse of government control.

Throughout the day on November 7, the Bolsheviks and their supporters take possession of one after another strategic location in the city. Trotsky declares to a meeting of the Central Committee and delegates to the Congress of Soviets that he hopes for a bloodless victory. He receives a standing ovation. The Bolsheviks and their supporters have been able to secure nearly the entire city of Petrograd with hardly a shot being fired.

Trotsky's moves are criticized by the "moderate" wing of the Bolshevik leadership, led by Kamenev and Riazanov, who believe that the Bolsheviks have over-extended themselves.

Lenin is technically under orders from the Central Committee to remain in hiding, but he becomes convinced that his presence is needed at the Smolny to overcome the resistance of Kamenev's wing. "The government is tottering," he writes, "It must be *given the deathblow* at all costs. To delay action is fatal."

Lenin dons a disguise and makes his way to the Smolny, narrowly avoiding a patrol of cadets (which would certainly have meant death under the circumstances). Once at the Smolny, Lenin joins a discussion of the Bolshevik Central Committee, which begins drawing up a list of personnel for the new government. No one wants to use the terms "provisional government" or "ministers," and Trotsky suggests that the new ministers be called "people's commissars." Lenin approves, indicating that the term "smells of revolution." Lenin adds that the Bolshevik government should call itself "the Council of People's Commissars." In these discussions, the new government begins to take shape.

In the *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky writes, "There is no example in history of a revolutionary movement involving such gigantic

masses being so bloodless.”

(Source: Rabinowitch, Alexander, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, pp. 249-272)

Flanders, November 6: Canadian troops capture village of Passchendaele as bloody slaughter continues on Western Front

In a coordinated attack as part of the Second Battle of Passchendaele, Canadian forces seize the village of Passchendaele from its German defenders. The bloody advance of several hundred yards costs thousands of casualties on both sides and comes more than three months after the British and allied forces launched the Third Battle of Ypres, which had the taking of Passchendaele as one of its early goals.

The Canadian offensive, launched just two weeks after Australian and New Zealand forces suffered horrific losses in the first failed attempt to take the village, has been conducted in three stages beginning October 26. The operations have been made even more difficult by heavy rains, which have turned the surrounding areas into a swamp. There are reports of soldiers slipping off the narrow wooden plank roads constructed to take them to the front line and drowning in the mud under the weight of their equipment.

The Canadian Corps bears the brunt of the casualties, losing 15,654 men between October 26 and November 9. Total British casualties amount to 14,219 from the Fifth Army and 29,454 from the Second Army. From October 21 to October 31, the Germans suffer 20,500 casualties, followed by a further 9,500 from November 1 to November 10.

The British and Canadians fall short of their tactical goal of capturing high ground to the north of Passchendaele. Any prospect of mounting a subsequent attack is dashed by the catastrophic Italian defeat at the Battle of Caporetto, which compels British and French commanders to shift 12 divisions to the Italian Front between November 10 and December 12.

The capture of Passchendaele brings to an end major attacks conducted as part of the Third Battle of Ypres. The mere mention of the village's name will later come to refer to the senseless slaughter of hundreds of thousands of young men on both sides for virtually no significant territorial gains.

Petrograd, November 7 (October 25, O.S.): Congress of Soviets opens with Bolsheviks in control of Petrograd

The sailors of the Baltic Fleet, a bastion of Bolshevik support, launch their insurrection on the morning of November 7. By dawn, a naval flotilla including five heavily-armed destroyers is steaming towards Petrograd at full speed. The destroyer *Samson*, in the lead, unfurls a huge banner that reads, “Down with the coalition! Long Live the All-Russian Congress of Soviets! All Power to the Soviets!”

By early morning November 7, columns of Bolshevik sailors in black pea jackets, with rifles on their shoulders and cartridge pouches on their belts, can be seen taking up positions throughout the city. When the Kronstadt sailors come into view of the sailors aboard the *Aurora*, both groups of revolutionary sailors throw their hats into the air.

At a session of the Petrograd Soviet, Trotsky proclaims amid thunderous applause: “I declare that the Provisional Government no longer exists!” In the midst of Trotsky's speech, Lenin appears in the hall, and the delegates come to their feet with an even louder ovation. Trotsky declares, “Long live comrade Lenin, back with us again.” Trotsky and Lenin now stand

side by side on the platform as the October Revolution unfolds around them.

The desperate Kerensky appoints the Kadet Alexander Kononov to lead the cabinet. His last best hope, he believes, is to rally counter-revolutionary troops outside Petrograd to attack the Bolsheviks. For this project he receives the assistance of the American embassy. While Kerensky has claimed all year that Lenin was a “German agent” based on the fact that he rode in a German train car, Kerensky himself speeds out of Petrograd in a Renault automobile provided by American diplomats—the American flag prominently displayed. However, Kerensky is unable to rally any significant number of soldiers to support him.

At the Congress of Soviets, Lunacharsky, on behalf of the Bolsheviks, states that he welcomes the participation of other parties in the new government. However, many of the representatives of the other parties, including the Mensheviks and SRs, begin walking out of the congress and denouncing the actions of the Bolsheviks.

These “socialists” were willing to serve as ministers in a pro-war, pro-capitalist dictatorship led by Kerensky. However, they are unwilling to participate in an actual socialist government. The Mensheviks and SRs denounce the Bolshevik “conspiracy.” They demand that the Bolsheviks give power back to the Provisional Government and enter a coalition with the same forces that the day before were demanding that the Bolsheviks be thrown in jail. This prompts Trotsky, on behalf of the Bolsheviks, to famously declare:

A rising of the masses of the people requires no justification. What has happened is an insurrection, and not a conspiracy. We hardened the revolutionary energy of the Petersburg workers and soldiers. We openly forged the will of the masses for an insurrection, and not a conspiracy. The masses of the people followed our banner and our insurrection was victorious. And now we are told: Renounce your victory, make concessions, compromise. With whom? I ask: With whom ought we to compromise? With those wretched groups who have left us or who are making this proposal? But after all we've had a full view of them. No one in Russia is with them any longer ... No, here no compromise is possible. To those who have left and to those who tell us to do this we must say: You are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out; go where you ought to go: into the dust-bin of history.

While the Menshevik and SR delegates angrily depart the Congress of Soviets, the remaining delegates, including many Left SRs, pass a resolution: “The departure of the compromisers does not weaken the soviets. Inasmuch as it purges the worker and peasant revolution of counter-revolutionary influences, it strengthens them ... Down with the compromisers! Down with the servants of the bourgeoisie! Long live the triumphant uprising of soldiers, workers and peasants!”

John Reed recounts witnessing a crowd of three or four hundred well-dressed citizens marching that night to the Winter Palace in support of the Kerensky government. They are stopped by armed Bolshevik sailors who were blocking the way. The crowd shouts, “We demand to pass!” A sailor calmly tells them that he will not allow them to pass. Another sailor then comes up and disperses the crowd with the following words:

“We will spank you!” he cried, energetically. “And if necessary we will shoot you too. Go home now, and leave us in peace!”

While later dramatizations of the October Revolution would feature the Winter Palace being taken by storm, in reality the disorganized and demoralized defenders gradually disperse as Bolsheviks lay siege to it. When the Bolshevik-led forces finally burst into the room where the Provisional Government is seated around a table, the ministers inquire, "The Provisional Government is here—what do you want?" The Bolshevik Antonov responds, "You are all under arrest."

Antonov begins writing down names and formally taking the ministers into custody. When one of the soldiers supporting the Bolsheviks yells, "Bayonet all the sons of bitches on the spot," Antonov restrains them. The members of the Provisional Government are merely being detained, he says, and "I will not allow any violence against them." This was the end of the Provisional Government.

(Source: Rabinowitch, Alexander, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, pp. 273-304)

Petrograd, November 8 (October 26, O.S.): Congress of Soviets issues Decree on Peace

As its first governmental measure after the assumption of power, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies passes the Decree on Peace. Written and introduced to the Congress by Lenin, the decree proposes to all belligerent countries to start immediate negotiations for a peace without annexations and indemnities. The question of peace, as Lenin puts it in his introduction, is "a burning question, the painful question of the day."

After the decree is approved, Lenin concludes his report:

Our appeal must be addressed both to the governments and to the peoples. We cannot ignore the governments, for that would delay the possibility of concluding peace, and the people's government dare not do that; but we have no right not to appeal to the peoples at the same time. Everywhere there are differences between the governments and the peoples, and we must, therefore, help the peoples to intervene in questions of war and peace ... In proposing an immediate armistice, we appeal to the class-conscious workers of the countries that have done so much for the development of the proletarian movement. We appeal to the workers of Britain, where there was the Chartist movement, to the workers of France, who have in repeated uprisings displayed the strength of their class-consciousness, and to the workers of Germany, who waged the fight against the Anti-Socialist Law and have created powerful organizations ... The governments and the bourgeoisie will make every effort to unite their forces and drown the workers' and peasants' revolution in blood. But the three years of war have been a good lesson to the masses—the Soviet movement in other countries and the mutiny in the German navy, which was crushed by the officer cadets of Wilhelm the hangman. Finally, we must remember that we are not living in the depths of Africa, but in Europe, where news can spread quickly. The workers' movement will triumph and will pave the way to peace and socialism.

Lenin receives a standing ovation and the delegates sing the *Internationale* before proceeding to the next item on the agenda. The decree is soon published in the Petrograd Soviet's newspaper, *Izvestiia*, and its content is announced over the radio. Like the Decree on Land, the Decree on Peace is distributed in little booklets across the country.

The Bolshevik government's decree sends shockwaves throughout the world. The governments of the warring countries, shocked and stunned by the revolution in Petrograd, do not respond to the peace proposal. But fighting on the Eastern Front is instantly suspended and the Russian soldiers desert en masse from the front to return home.

November 8 (October 26, O.S.): Congress of Soviets issues Decree on Land

Right after the Decree on Peace, the Congress discusses the Decree on Land, also written and presented by Lenin. After the question of peace, the question of land is the most burning of the revolution. Tens of millions of peasants and peasant soldiers crave the expropriation of the wealthy landowners and want to obtain their own land. Throughout the year, and especially in the late summer and early fall of 1917, peasants throughout the country have seized landed estates and established organs of local self-government.

The decree abolishes private ownership of the land. All landowners are to be expropriated, without compensation. The landed estates and the numerous lands owned by the Tsarist family and the church are placed at the disposal of land committees that have been formed throughout the country in 1917, together with the local Soviets of Peasants' Deputies, pending the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. All land is to pass into the use of those who cultivate it.

Many passages in the decree were drafted by members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and, in crucial respects, the decree adopts the agrarian program of the SRs who for many years proclaimed the socialization of the land and the expropriation of the landowners without any compensation. However, while holding the ministry of agriculture in the Provisional Government for months, the SR party leadership failed to take even the mildest steps toward a realization of that program, thus alienating broad layers of peasants who looked upon it as their party. Nevertheless, many peasants still support the SR party.

When delegates confront Lenin at the Congress with the accusation of having adopted the SR program, he responds:

What of it? Does it matter who drew them [the Decree and the Mandate] up? As a democratic government, we cannot ignore the feelings of the masses even if we don't agree with them ... The peasants have learned something during the eight months of our revolution; they want to settle all land problems themselves. We are therefore opposed to all amendments to this draft law. We want no details in it, for we are writing a decree, not a program of action. Russia is vast, and local conditions vary. We trust that the peasants themselves will be able to solve the problem correctly, properly, better than we could do it. Whether they do it in our spirit or in the spirit of the Socialist Revolutionary program is not the point. The point is that the peasants should be firmly assured that there are no more landowners in the countryside, that they themselves must decide all questions, and that they themselves must arrange their own lives.

After a break, and without further discussion, the decree is adopted by an overwhelming majority of the delegates.

Petrograd, November 8 (October 26, O.S.): Congress of Soviets establishes new government

The All-Russian Congress of Soviets establishes a new government led by a Soviet of People's Commissars (*Soviet narodnykh kommissarov*, abbreviated as Sovnarkom). This all-Bolshevik list of commissars, drawn up by the Bolshevik Central Committee the night before, is approved by the Congress as follows:

The administration of the different departments of state shall be entrusted to special commissions, whose membership will insure the realization of the program of the Congress in close co-operation with the organized masses of workers, soldiers, sailors, peasants, and other employees. Government power shall be vested in a collegium of chairmen of those commissions, i.e., the Soviet of People's Commissars.

Control over the acts of the People's Commissars and the right of recall belong to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies and its Central Executive Committee.

For the present the Soviet of People's Commissars is made up of the following persons: President of the Soviet, Vladimir Ul'ianov (Lenin); Commissar of the Interior, A. I. Rykov; Commissar of Agriculture, V. P. Miliutin; Commissar of Labor, A. G. Shliapnikov; Commissar of War and Navy, Committee made up of V. A. Ovseenko (Antonov), N. V. Krylenko, and P. E. Dybenko; Commissar of Commerce and Industry, V. P. Nogin; Commissar of Education, A. V. Lunacharskii; Commissar of Finance, I. I. Skvortsov (Stepanov); Commissar of Foreign Affairs, L. D. Bronstein (Trotsky); Commissar of Justice, G. I. Oppokov (Lomov); Commissar of Food, I. A. Teodorovich; Commissar of Post and Telegraph, N. P. Avilov (Glebov); Commissar for Nationalities, I. V. Dzhugashvili (Stalin); Commissar of Railroads (not named for the time being).

(Source: Decrees of the Soviet Government (Moscow, 1957), Vol. I, pp. 20-21, accessed here)

November 9, New York: *Times* responds to Bolshevik seizure of power

In a series of articles and editorials, the *New York Times*, the leading voice of American liberalism and closely allied to the Wilson administration, responds to the Bolshevik seizure of power with a mixture of rage, confusion, fear, despair and denial.

Its most coherent (and bloodthirsty) response comes in a November 9 editorial, "The Russian Overturn," in which it condemns Kerensky for avoiding "bloodshed" and refusing earlier to "fight to the death" against "anarchy." The *Times* editorializes, "Suppose Kerensky had confronted the Council of Workmen's and Soldiers' Delegates at the outset with a threat of force ... It is certain there would have been bloodshed. There would have been a trial of strength ... All anarchy asked was time, and that Kerensky gave in full measure ... He would not declare the Bolsheviks outlawed and appeal to the army ..."

November 9-11 (October 27 - 29, O.S.): Sovnarkom issues decrees on education, the press, and the eight-hour workday

On November 11, the new People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, issues the Decree on Popular Education:

Our ideal is: equal and highest possible education for all citizens ... The problem of a genuinely democratic organization of instruction is particularly difficult to accomplish in a country impoverished by a long criminal imperialist war. But the working people who have seized power cannot possibly leave out of consideration the fact that knowledge will serve them as the mightiest weapon in their struggle for a better lot and for intellectual growth. However much the other sections of the national budget may have to be cut down—the cost of public education must be high ... The struggle against illiteracy and ignorance cannot be limited to the establishment of a regular system of school instruction for children and young persons. Adults, too, are anxious to be delivered from the low estate of persons who are unable to read and write. Schools for adults must occupy a large place in the plan of popular instruction ... Everywhere in Russia, in particular among the town workers, but also among the peasants, a powerful wave of a cultural educational movement is gathering force; workers' and soldiers' organizations of this kind are rapidly multiplying; to go to meet it, to support it in every way, to clear the road in front of it, this is the first task of a revolutionary people's government in the sphere of popular education.

The decree goes on to state that "the entire school system must be transferred to the organs of local self government" and devotes a special passage to "the teacher in society:"

No single measure in the sphere of people's education should be taken by any authority without paying careful attention to the opinion of the teaching world. On the other hand, decisions cannot by any means be arrived at exclusively through a body of specialists ... The co-operation of the pedagogues with the social forces—this is what the Commission by virtue of its composition will aim at within the State Committee as well as in its general activity.

The decree proposes a minimum wage for the poorest layers of Russia's teachers, the school teachers, stating: "It would be a disgrace to leave the teachers of the overwhelming majority of Russian children in poverty."

Like the government's previous decrees, this one is considered provisional until the convention of the Constituent Assembly.

That same day, the Sovnarkom issues the Decree on the Eight-Hour Work Day and the Duration and Division of Working Time. The Decree limits the regular workday to eight hours and sets definite rules for breaks and overtime. The Sovnarkom thus moves to solidify and broaden gains that the working class has made in many places during the revolutionary year, above all through the factory committees.

On November 9 (October 27, O.S.) the Sovnarkom takes steps to close the counterrevolutionary newspapers. "Immediately outcries were heard from all sides that the new, socialist power had violated a fundamental principle of its program by encroaching upon the freedom of the press,"

the Sovnarkom writes in that day's decree. "The Workers' and Peasants' Government calls the attention of the population to the fact that what this liberal facade actually conceals is freedom for the propertied classes, having taken hold of the lion's share of the entire press, to poison, unhindered, the minds and obscure the consciousness of the masses ... As soon as the new order becomes consolidated, all administrative pressure on the press will be terminated and it will be granted complete freedom within the bounds of legal responsibility, in keeping with a law that will be broadest and most progressive in this respect."

(Source: Decrees of the Soviet Government (Moscow, 1957), Vol. I, pp. 24-25, accessed here)

Luckau, November 11: Karl Liebknecht celebrates Bolshevik conquest of power

German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht, who has been held at the Luckau jail southeast of Berlin in harsh conditions since December 1916, receives limited and heavily censored reports of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Russia. However, he immediately appreciates the world-historic character of the events. He writes to his wife Sophie:

I have only been able to glance briefly at the newspapers. The incredible process of Russia's social and economic revolutionizing, from the dregs to the foam, which is expressed only in political, constitutional and administrative revolutionizing, is not at an end, but only beginning. It confronts unlimited prospects—much greater than the great French Revolution. The tension between what has been and what is now possible and being strived for is greater; as well as the tension between the level, the requirements and possibilities in the various cultural areas and sections of the people, which are highly differentiated; and above all, the tension between the positions, requirements, and goals of the various layers and classes in the most developed cultural and economic areas and sections of the people. The social revolution, the threat of which crippled the bourgeois revolution in Germany, appears to be stronger in Russia than the bourgeois revolution, at least temporarily, at least in Russia's most concentrated centers. Russian capitalism is of course not alone; it is supported by the English-French-American capitalism. Securing a provisional, partial solution to this problem on the question of war alone will require a titanic effort. What I am learning of these events is so sporadic, so accidental, so superficial, that I must content myself with conjectures. Nowhere do I feel the isolation of my current intellectual position more than on the Russian question.

In spite of his isolation in jail, Karl Liebknecht, as the leader of the courageous and principled socialist opposition in Germany to the Kaiser's military dictatorship and its imperialist war, is the most popular man in the trenches and sections of radicalizing workers. "What is Liebknecht saying about it?" is often the first question in discussions there. In spite of strict surveillance and censorship, he manages to smuggle out his first statement on the Russian revolution as a secret message. Via Sophie Liebknecht, he communicates with his comrades in the Spartacus League, who celebrate the Bolshevik victory.



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