

This week in the Russian Revolution

# November 13-19: Soviet power spreads through Russia

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*In the aftermath of the October insurrection in Petrograd, Soviet power spreads through Russia. Meanwhile, matters come to a head with the “moderate” wing of the Bolshevik leadership, which adheres to a national perspective oriented towards building a coalition government.*

## **Russia, November 13-14 (October 31-November 1, O.S.): String of Bolshevik victories throughout the former Russian Empire**

On November 13 (October 31 O.S.), a force of Cossacks loyal to Kerensky and under the command of General Krasnov attempts to enter Petrograd to overthrow Soviet power. On a group of hills located 11 miles south of Petrograd known as the Pulkovo Heights, Red Guards and other pro-soviet forces organized and led by Trotsky form a defensive line. Krasnov's Cossacks are prepared to brush aside any opposition and rapidly “restore order” in the capital. They are unprepared for the tenacity of the city's defenders. After a bloody engagement, the Cossack force disintegrates, abandoning its military equipment on the field.

In the days following the October insurrection in Petrograd, Soviet power quickly spreads to other cities throughout the former tsarist empire. On November 13, the Baku Soviet assumes power. On November 14, the Tashkent Soviet takes power. By the end of the day on November 14, soviet power has been established in Yaroslavl, Tver, Smolensk, Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Samara, Saratov, Rostov and Ufa.

## **Occoquan Workhouse, Virginia, November 14: “Night of Terror” for imprisoned American suffragettes**

Thirty-three arrested suffragettes, arrested for picketing outside of the White House for women's right to vote, are brutally assaulted at their prison-workhouse in rural northern Virginia. Women, including one as old as 73 years, are attacked by several dozen prison guards, acting under the immediate orders of prison warden W.H. Whittaker.

Prison guards punch, kick, choke, and throw women against cell walls and floors. Lucy Burns, a leader of the militant National Women's Party that organized the daily pickets outside of the White House, is handcuffed and chained with her arms above her head, and left this way until morning.

The various factions of the women's movement support American involvement in the Great War. Some go so far in this support that they join Wilson in calling on women to wait for the conclusion of hostilities to

press their demands. The NWP suffragettes, instead, aim to expose the hypocrisy of Wilson's “War for Democracy” in Europe, under conditions where women do not have the right to vote in America.

The brutal treatment meted out to the imprisoned NWP, executed by District of Columbia police and prisons, is in retaliation for challenging Wilson, and part and parcel of a broader campaign of repression, which includes the force-feeding of hunger-striking prisoners. Alice Paul, another leader of the NWP, is placed in solitary confinement in the Washington, DC jail, where she is force-fed raw eggs through a feeding tube.

The practice of “high cuffing,” or torturing victims by handcuffing them with their arms above their heads, was in widespread use at the time. The technique will be most infamously used in the case of conscientious objectors Joseph and Michael Hofer. Hutterites from South Dakota who were conscripted into the American army, the brothers refused to wear the uniform. After being court-martialed and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor at Alcatraz, the brothers were tortured and murdered by the US military at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas in late 1918.

## **Moscow, November 15 (November 2, O.S.): Military Revolutionary Committee proclaims victory**

After days of heavy fighting, the Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee—composed of four Bolsheviks and three Socialist Revolutionaries—can finally proclaim victory. That same day, Nikolai Muralov, the de facto commander of the Red Guards in the struggle, is given the powers of a commander for the Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee.

Unlike in Petrograd, the struggle in Moscow was bloody and prolonged. It started just after the seizure of power in Petrograd on November 2 (October 25, O.S.). Having just suffered a crushing and to some extent unexpected defeat in Petrograd, the forces of the counterrevolution have focused all their strength on preventing Moscow from falling to the Bolsheviks. Even though they are outnumbered, the junkers manage to encircle the Bolshevik forces in the Kremlin for days, and they can be defeated only with the help of forces from Petrograd, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, and the Baltic Fleet.

Apart from the lower concentration of the working class and militant sailors and soldiers in and around Moscow, and the desperate effort to thwart the Bolshevik uprising in Moscow by the counterrevolution, a major reason for the prolonged character of the battle is the indecisiveness of the Bolshevik leadership itself. Nikolai Muralov would later often criticize the leadership's wavering, including his own, in accounts of the

Moscow insurrection.

The Central Committee member responsible for coordinating the Moscow uprising is Viktor Nogin, who forms part of the Bolshevik right-wing, which had first opposed the insurrection in Petrograd and then advocated the formation of a “coalition government” with the very parties that had just been overthrown. These positions find expression in Nogin’s less than resolute approach to the Moscow uprising. The Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee as a whole also proceeds in a less firm a manner than it had in Petrograd.

### **Paris, November 15: Clemenceau appointed Prime Minister of France**

The French ruling class responds to the Bolshevik Revolution with the elevation to prime minister of Georges Clemenceau.

Appointed by President Raymond Poincaré, Clemenceau served previously as prime minister from 1906-1909, a position he obtained through his deployment of the military against striking workers as Minister of the Interior in 1906. Out of power in the first years of the Great War, Clemenceau uses his newspaper to campaign against “bolsism”—ruling class tendencies that he claims favor reaching an accommodation with Germany.

A Radical-Socialist Party editor and fervent patriot, Clemenceau’s appointment comes at a moment of extreme danger for the French bourgeoisie. The catastrophic Nivelle Offensive in the spring of 1917 has triggered widespread mutinies in the army. Strikes and bread riots against inflation have spread in the cities. The near-dissolution of the Italian army in the Battle of Caporetto is threatening the collapse of the Allies’ Southern Front. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik October Revolution has essentially removed the Eastern Front and, through its calls for peace and socialism, threatens to trigger a European-wide revolution.

Clemenceau’s appointment signals the French state’s answer: war to the end with Germany combined with repression for the working class. Trotsky later, in *My Life*, recalls Clemenceau’s particular hatred of the Bolsheviks:

Even in the very first days, I found myself unexpectedly in diplomatic negotiations with the Eiffel Tower! During the uprising, we had been too rushed to pay heed to the foreign radios. But now, as the People’s Commissary for foreign affairs, I had to watch the reaction of the capitalist world toward the revolution. It is quite unnecessary to say that no greetings reached us from anywhere... [I]f Berlin and Vienna were still vacillating between enmity to the revolution and the hope of concluding a profitable peace, the rest of the world, not only those countries engaged in war, but the neutral ones as well echoed, in their respective languages, the sentiments of the ruling classes of the old Russia which we had overthrown. In this chorus the Eiffel Tower stood out for its very fury. In those days, it spoke even in Russian, obviously seeking some direct appeal to the hearts of the Russian people. Sometimes, when I read the Paris radios, I thought that Clemenceau himself must be sitting on top of the tower. I knew him as a journalist well enough to recognize his spirit, if not his style. The hatred in those radios almost choked in its own venom; malice reached its utmost limit. Sometimes it seemed as if the radio-scorpion on the Eiffel Tower would sting its head with its own tail.

We had the Tsarskoye Syelo station at our disposal, and so there was nothing to impose silence upon us. For several days I dictated

answers to Clemenceau’s abuse. I knew enough of the political history of France to characterize the principal dramatis personae none too flattering. I reminded them of certain forgotten facts in their past history, beginning with the Panama business. For several days a tense duel raged between Paris and the Tsarskoye Syelo station. Ether, being a neutral agent, conscientiously transmitted the arguments of both sides. And what happened? Even I had not expected such quick results. Paris changed its tone abruptly; henceforth it expressed itself in a still hostile but civil manner. Later I often remembered with pleasure that I had begun my diplomatic activity by teaching the Eiffel Tower good manners.

### **Petrograd, November 15 (2, O.S.): Soviet government issues Declaration of the Rights of Peoples**

Under the old tsarist system, national minorities were treated as second-class citizens, forcibly incorporated into the Russian Empire and subject to legal restrictions and official discrimination. The “Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia,” issued by the new government on November 15, states:

During the period of tsarism the peoples of Russia were systematically incited against one another. The results of such a policy are known: massacres and pogroms on the one hand, slavery of peoples on the other. There can be and there must be no return to this disgraceful policy of instigation. Henceforth the policy of a voluntary and honest union of the peoples of Russia must be substituted.

The declaration proclaims that the new government will observe the following principles:

1. The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state.
3. The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.
4. The free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.

### **Zürich, Switzerland, November 15-17: Police and military action against anti-war protests**

An anti-war meeting is called in the Zürich Volkshaus in Switzerland. There are so many in attendance that the meeting is moved outdoors, to the adjacent Helvetiaplatz. The “active pacifist” Max Daetwyler is the advertised speaker. In 1914, he had publicly refused a military oath of allegiance and since then has been building the “league of world peace” against the war. His motto, which he now proclaims from a fountain down to the crowd, is: If all the munitions workers simply lay down their tools, the war will stop by itself.

More than a thousand participants sing the *Internationale* and, under

Daetwyler's leadership, make their way to the nearest munitions factory. In Zurich, some 3,000 workers are employed in the production of weapons. The crowd occupies two factories, Scholer & Co. and Bamberger, Leroi & Co. and the munitions workers quickly bring their work to a halt.

Two factors have intensified the anger of the working class. Because of price increases and a shortage of food and coal, the supply situation is miserable. At the same time, the bourgeoisie enrich themselves with profits from the war and usury. Adding to this, just a few days before, on November 9, the *Volksrecht* has reported on the victory of the Russian Revolution and the peace decree of the Bolsheviks.

As a large crowd again gathers in Helvetiaplatz the next day, Daetwyler is dragged away from the fountain by approximately 30 police and hauled off along with several others. The police advance with sabres barred against the workers who put up resistance. Many are injured.

On the third day, November 17, matters escalate. Increasing numbers of workers stream into the Volkshaus. While a section of the crowd gathers at the building of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), which has been a ferocious opponent of the workers, several thousand who want to liberate the prisoners gather in front of district guardhouse number four and throw stones at the guards. The police make a sortie with sabres drawn and then bring their machine guns into position. While the crowd erects barricades, fearless young female workers position themselves in front of the machine guns. The cantonal government requests military reinforcements.

The Communist Willi Münzenberg, leader of the International Youth Secretariat, will later describe the events of this day in his autobiography (*The Third Front*) as a "reverberation of the Russian Revolution in Switzerland." According to Münzenberg, "the response of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland was ... pitifully weak." Although he and other young socialists attempt on November 17 to de-escalate the situation and provide the masses with leadership, they cannot prevent four people from being shot to death: a woodworker, a female worker, a 19-year-old and a police officer. Hundreds suffer minor injuries and almost 40 are seriously injured.

During the night, the Federal Assembly orders three battalions to the city centre of Zurich. More than a hundred people are arrested, including Münzenberg and several dozen members of the socialist youth organization. As for Daetwyler, he is declared mentally incompetent to stand trial and is sent to the Burghölzli psychiatric clinic.

The fact that the initiative has fallen to pacifists like Daetwyler indicates the total failure of the SP. It will distance itself from the events and accuse its own youth organization in Zurich of a "lack of discipline." Robert Grimm, whose own maneuver involving secret diplomatic agreements failed miserably in June, has by now openly turned against Lenin and the Russian Revolution.

### **Helsinki, November 16: General strike inspired by October Revolution extends workers control across most of Finland**

Driven by soaring unemployment and food prices, as well as the Bolshevik seizure of power, workers launched a general strike in Finland November 14. They now enjoy effective control across large parts of the country, including in Helsinki.

The strike is organized by a revolutionary central council, which was formed by organizations in the Finnish labor movement two days after the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd.

Sections of workers are demanding that the strike be transformed into an insurrection along the lines of that carried out by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd. This is resisted by the Finnish Social Democrats, a party

aligned with Second International social democracy and the German Marxist Karl Kautsky.

Ever since the February Revolution, the agitation for the eight-hour day and improvements in working conditions have spread among Finnish workers in Helsinki. But these strivings were ignored by the SDP, which, pursuing the same line as its Menshevik allies in Russia, sought to compromise with the bourgeois parties even though it enjoyed a majority in parliament. The SDP formed a government (senate) with the bourgeois parties.

The Mensheviks were responsible for suppressing the Finnish parliament in July when the parliament, at the SDP's initiative, sought to declare itself the supreme power in Finland by adopting a measure known as the Power Act. The provisional government in Petrograd, led by Kerensky, called new elections which were won by the bourgeois right-wing. The bourgeois parties used electoral fraud and outright violence against workers to secure their victory.

This has radicalized the Finnish working class, leading to the current general strike. Under pressure from the workers, the bourgeois-controlled parliament voted the previous day to adopt the Power Act, preparing the way for the declaration of Finnish independence.

At the insistence of the SDP, the strike will be ended by November 20, enabling the right-wing bourgeois government of Pehr Svinhufvudd to consolidate power. By the time the Finnish revolution eventually breaks out in late January 1918, Svinhufvud and his fascistic military commander General Mannerheim, a former officer in the tsarist military, will have had time to mobilize German shock troops and arm counter-revolutionary white guards, placing them in a much stronger position for the battles to come.

### **Petrograd, November 17 (4 O.S.): "Moderate" wing of Bolshevik leadership defeated in internal struggle**

While Lenin and Trotsky are preoccupied with defending Petrograd from the assault by counterrevolutionary forces led by Kerensky and Krasnov, the right wing of the party led by Kamenev participates in negotiations with Mensheviks and SRs, which are oriented to the creation of a "homogenous socialist government." These discussions are being pushed by the conservative leaders of the Vikzhel railway workers union, who are threatening the Bolsheviks with a mass strike.

The right wing of the Bolshevik Party remains oriented to the creation of a broad coalition government in which the Bolsheviks will participate as one of many parties, perhaps even a minority party. This essentially Menshevik position has reared its head repeatedly over the course of 1917, including in April, following Lenin's return to Russia, and in October, in connection with the Pre-Parliament. In his efforts to bring about a compromise with the Mensheviks and SRs, Kamenev is willing to give up the results of the October insurrections throughout Russia. He is even willing to discuss Menshevik and SR demands that Lenin and Trotsky be excluded from the government.

When Lenin and Trotsky become aware of these discussions, which have been conducted behind their backs, a crisis explodes in the leadership. At a tumultuous meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee, Lunacharsky argues on the side of the right wing, insisting that the party "take the path of least resistance," instead of Lenin's proposal of "taking each station with a bayonet charge." Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Central Executive Committee, Volodarsky argues for Lenin's position: "We must not yield positions which have been fought for by hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, and soldiers."

The struggle is between, on the one hand, a section of the party that sees

its task essentially as carrying out a bourgeois national revolution within the borders of the former tsarist empire, and Lenin and Trotsky, on the other hand, who are oriented to world socialist revolution. As the historian Alexander Rabinowitch observes, Trotsky is oriented to “instigating immediate decisive socialist revolutions in the more advanced countries of Europe by means of a big revolutionary bang in Russia. Judging by his statements, it is no exaggeration to suggest that most of his thinking about Russian politics was shaped by this overarching concern.” (Rabinowitch, Alexander, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, p. 35.)

In other words, for Lenin and Trotsky, any retreat from the October insurrection would have negative international consequences for the world revolution. They were both opposed to any compromise with the Mensheviks or SRs, whom last week Trotsky had famously told to go “into the dustbin of history.”

After the Central Committee passes a resolution calling for immediate termination of the Vikzhel talks, Kamenev and Zinoviev continue to carry out negotiations aimed at forming a coalition government, in gross violation of party discipline. On November 15, an exasperated Lenin presents the leaders of the “moderate” wing with an ultimatum: abide by the majority decision or face an emergency party congress. On November 17, the “moderates” resign from the Central Committee in protest. The November 18 edition of Pravda contains a scathing condemnation authored by Lenin, part of which John Reed cites in *Ten Days that Shook the World*:

Comrades! Several members of the Central Committee of our party and the Council of People’s Commissars, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Nogin, Rykov, Miliutin and a few others left yesterday [from] the Central Committee of our party, and the last three, the Council of People’s Commissars....

The comrades who left us acted like deserters, because they not only abandoned the posts entrusted to them, but also disobeyed the direct instructions of the Central Committee of our party, to the effect that they should await the decisions of the Petrograd and Moscow party organizations before retiring. We blame decisively such desertion. We are firmly convinced that all conscious workers, soldiers and peasants, belonging to our party or sympathizing with it, will also disapprove of the behavior of the deserters...

Remember, comrades, that two of these deserters, Kamenev and Zinoviev, even before the uprising in Petrograd, appeared as deserters and strike-breakers, by voting at the decisive meeting of the Central Committee [on October 23 O.S.] against the insurrection; and even *after* the resolution passed by the Central Committee, they continued their campaign... But the great impulse of the masses, the great heroism of millions of workers, soldiers and peasants, in Moscow, Petrograd, at the front, in the trenches, in the villages, pushed aside the deserters as a railway train scatters saw-dust ...

Shame upon those who are of little faith, hesitate, who doubt, who allow themselves to be frightened by the bourgeoisie, or who succumb before the cries of the latter’s direct or indirect accomplices! There is *not a shadow* of hesitation in the *masses* of Petrograd, Moscow, and the rest of Russia....

#### **Also this week: Leading French sociologist Emile Durkheim dies**

Emile Durkheim passes away on November 15. Durkheim was a

founding figure in the discipline of sociology and a leading intellectual in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was close to the leader of the French socialist party, Jean Jaurès (assassinated in 1914 for his opposition to the war), although he devoted himself to developing an anti-Marxist analysis of capitalist society that denies the central role of class conflict.

A supporter of France in World War I, in 1916 Durkheim authored “Germany Above All: The German Mental Attitude and the War,” which declared Berlin and German nationalism a disease in the European social order and the cause of the war. However, Durkheim was evidently sympathetic to Russia’s revolutionaries. In August of that year, in his capacity as head of the French Commission for Russian Refugees, Durkheim warned Trotsky and the *Nashe Slovo* group that they were about to be expelled from the country, giving them time to prepare.



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