

This week in the Russian Revolution

December 4-10: Guns fall silent on the Eastern Front

4 December 2017

Soviet Russia and the Central Powers agree to a 10-day truce, subsequently extended to 28 days. “We have started a resolute struggle against the war brought on by the clash of robbers over their spoils,” Lenin declares in a speech December 5. In the struggle for peace, the workers of Russia “can and have to work hand in hand with the revolutionary class of working people in all countries.”

Washington, DC, December 4: President Wilson answers Bolshevik call for peace

Woodrow Wilson, in the annual State of the Union presidential message to a joint session of Congress, answers the Bolsheviks’ call to the peoples of the world for peace. In a manner unusual for an American president, it seems that Wilson is addressing himself not just to the factions of the American ruling class represented by the politicians in Congress, but to the world. He has been forced onto this terrain by Lenin and Trotsky.

Wilson’s central message is that there can be no genuine peace until “the sinister masters of Germany [are] crushed and... utterly brought to an end.” Wilson understands, he says, “the voices of humanity that are in the air grow daily more audible, more articulate, more persuasive, and they come from the hearts of men everywhere... ‘No annexations, no contributions, no punitive indemnities.’” Wilson insists that “this crude formula” has been used by Germany “to lead the people of Russia astray and the people of every other country their agents could reach” in order to secure “a premature peace.”

Let us take this formula and use it, Wilson tells Congress. The message of a just peace, “ought to be brought under the patronage of its real friends.” After Germany’s defeat “we shall at last be free to do an unprecedented thing, and this is the time to avow our purpose to do it. We shall be free to base peace on generosity and justice, to the exclusions of all selfish claims to advantage even on the part of the victors... The wrongs, the very deep wrongs, committed in this war will have to be righted. That, of course. But they cannot and must not be righted by the commission of similar wrongs against Germany and her allies.... We are seeking permanent, not temporary, foundations for the peace of the world”

However, Wilson’s vision of a world order dominated by the US, including a rehabilitated Germany, is not shared by London and Paris—nor are his claims that Washington fights only “a war of high, disinterested purpose ... just and holy.”

To further prosecute this “just and holy” war, Wilson asks for a declaration of war against Austria-Hungary. This he receives on December 7 by a unanimous vote in the Senate and only one vote against

in the House.

Petrograd, December 5 (November 22, O.S.): Sovnarkom moves to dismantle old justice system

As part of the destruction of the state apparatus of the old regime, the Soviet government proceeds to abolish the old court system with the “Decree of the Sovnarkom Concerning the Courts No. 1.” The decree provides for the immediate abolition of “the district courts, court chambers, and the governmental senate with all its departments, the military and navy courts of all names and also all commercial courts.” Legal matters pertaining to civil and criminal law are to be dealt with in arbitration courts. Other legal matters become subject to the authority of local courts, the exact role of which will be defined in later decrees.

Finally, the decree provides for the establishment of revolutionary tribunals, named after their role models in the French Revolution. Their task consists in “guarding the revolution and its conquests” against “counter revolutionary forces” as well as in the struggle against “plunder and robbery, sabotage and similar abuses by merchants, industrialists, officials and other people...”

When the Sovnarkom receives a communication from the Moscow Soviet asking the Sovnarkom to confirm the appointment of a new commissar, Lenin replies tersely by telegram on December 2: “All power is in the hands of the Soviets. Confirmations are unnecessary. Your dismissal of the one and appointment of the other is law.”

Lisbon, December 5: Right-wing coup brings down interventionist government

A military coup supported by monarchists and clerics brings to power General Sidónio Pais, sidelining the Democratic Party government of Alfonso Costa, who has been in France pleading with the Allies for concessions to the Portuguese bourgeoisie for its commitment to the war against Germany.

Costa and his allies have viewed the Great War as an opportunity to develop capitalism in Portugal’s colonies and reaffirm its centuries-old alliance with Great Britain, which has tolerated the survival of the Portuguese Empire in exchange for its near-total subordination to London.

But Portugal’s intervention in the war has been a catastrophe. The two divisions it has sent to the Western Front are not prepared for battle.

Meanwhile, in Africa, small numbers of German forces, largely African colonials, have humiliated Portuguese regulars. In Portugal itself, the working class has emerged as the strongest social force, waging a series of bitter strikes and bread riots throughout the war, especially in 1917, that have further weakened Costa's position.

Costa will be detained on his return from France, along with other interventionists, while parliament is dissolved December 9 and President Bernardino Machado deposed December 12. In spite of sweeping aside "interventionists," Pais nonetheless continues Portugal's involvement in the war.

Brest-Litovsk, December 5: Germany and Soviet Russia agree on 10-day truce

After two days of negotiations, Soviet Russia and the Central Powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey—agree on a 10-day truce, which would be later extended to 28 days, in order to negotiate a peace treaty.

Around December 10 (November 27 O.S.), in connection with a discussion of what instructions should be given to the Soviet delegates to the negotiations, Lenin prepares an outline program that emphasizes that the "talks shall be political and economic" and the Bolshevik delegates should focus on the basic principle: "No annexations or indemnities." The Bolsheviks should insist on the withdrawal of troops from occupied territories, the return of refugees displaced by the war, and the right of national self-determination.

In his speech to the First All-Russian Congress of The Navy on December 5, Lenin is recorded as saying:

We are told that Russia will disintegrate and split up into separate republics, but we have no reason to fear this. We have nothing to fear, whatever the number of independent republics. The important thing for us is not where the state border runs, but whether or not the working people of all nations remain allied in their struggle against the bourgeoisie, irrespective of nationality. [Stormy applause] ...

We now see a national movement in the Ukraine, and we say that we stand unconditionally for the Ukrainian people's complete and unlimited freedom. We have to wipe out that old bloodstained and dirty past when the Russia of the capitalist oppressors acted as the executioner of other peoples. We are determined to wipe out that past, and leave no trace of it. [Stormy applause]

We are going to tell the Ukrainians that as Ukrainians they can go ahead and arrange their life as they see fit. But we are going to stretch out a fraternal hand to the Ukrainian workers and tell them that together with them we are going to fight against their bourgeoisie and ours. Only a socialist alliance of the working people of all countries can remove all ground for national persecution and strife. [Stormy applause]

I shall now touch on the question of war. We have started a resolute struggle against the war brought on by the clash of robbers over their spoils. Until now all parties have spoken of this struggle but have not gone beyond words and hypocrisy. Now the struggle for peace is on. It is a difficult struggle. It is highly naive to think that peace can be easily attained, and that the bourgeoisie will hand it to us on a platter as soon as we mention it. Those who ascribed this view to the Bolsheviks were cheating. The capitalists are embroiled in a life and death struggle over the share-out of the

booty. One thing is clear: to kill war is to defeat capital, and Soviet power has started the struggle to that end. We have published and will continue to publish secret treaties. We are not going to be deterred in this by anyone's anger or slander. The bourgeois gentlemen are beside themselves because the people see why they have been driven to the slaughter. They threaten Russia with the prospect of another war, in which she will find herself isolated. But we are not going to be deterred by the bourgeoisie's fierce hatred for us and for our peace movement. It will be quite futile for them to try to incite the peoples against each other in this fourth year of the war. They are sure to fail. It is not only in this country, but in all the belligerent countries that the struggle against the imperialist government at home is welling up. There has been an open mutiny in the navy even in Germany, which the imperialists tried for decades to turn into an armed camp with the entire government machine geared to stamping out the slightest sign of popular discontent. To understand the significance of this mutiny, one has to be aware that police reprisals in Germany are unparalleled. But revolution is not made to order; it results from an outburst of mass indignation. Whereas it was quite easy to drive out a band of nitwits, like Romanov and Rasputin, it is immensely more difficult to fight against the organized and strong clique of German imperialists, both crowned and uncrowned. But we can and have to work hand in hand with the revolutionary class of working people in all countries. That is the path the Soviet Government has taken by making public the secret treaties and showing that the rulers of all countries are brigands. That is not propaganda by word but by deed. [Stormy applause]

Helsinki, December 6: Finland declares independence from Russia

The Finnish government, made up of bourgeois parties under the leadership of P.E. Svinhufvud, declares Finland an independent state. The Bolshevik government in Petrograd, based on its defense of the rights of nations to self-determination, accepts the move.

The fact that Finland is declaring independence under the leadership of a bourgeois government is the responsibility of the Russian Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who in the eight months they held power from February to October continued to promote great Russian chauvinism to bolster their support for the war. At the Bolshevik's seventh party conference in April, Lenin pointed out that the Menshevik's refusal to back autonomy for Finland would strengthen separatist tendencies at a time where the main slogan in Finland was for autonomy, and not yet complete separation. "A crisis is approaching there, dissatisfaction with Governor General Rodichev is rife, but *Rabochaya Gazeta* writes that the Finns should wait for the Constituent Assembly because an agreement will there be reached between Finland and Russia. What do they mean by agreement? The Finns must declare that they are entitled to decide their destiny in their own way, and any Great Russian who denies this right is a chauvinist," Lenin declared.

In July, when the Social Democratic government in Finland declared itself autonomous and the highest power in the land, the Mensheviks and SRs endorsed Kerensky's decision to send troops to suppress the Finnish parliament. The new elections ordered by the provisional government result in the defeat of the Social Democrats and victory of the bourgeoisie, which begins arming for civil war.

Finland's Social Democrats, who have been aligned with the Russian Mensheviks, have been seeking throughout 1917, following the example of their Russian co-thinkers, to govern in coalition with the bourgeoisie.

This policy has proven disastrous for the Finnish working class, which after being gripped by the revolutionary enthusiasm triggered by the October Revolution, was prevented from taking power in November by the Social Democrats. The party leadership called off a general strike November 20 that had brought much of the country under workers control, handing power back to the bourgeoisie and giving it valuable time to arm for the approaching bloody civil war. The independence declaration was introduced into parliament November 15 in the midst of this struggle as the Finnish bourgeoisie sought to maintain control of the situation and divert social tensions.

The Finnish declaration of independence follows the adoption by the Bolsheviks of the Declaration of the Rights of Russian Peoples, which included a provision allowing all non-Russian peoples to secede.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, December 6: Largest ever man-made explosion kills nearly 2,000 people

At approximately 8:45 a.m., the French cargo ship SS Mont-Blanc collides with the Norwegian supply ship SS Imo while traveling at a speed of around 1 knot during its approach to Halifax harbor. The collision ignites highly flammable barrels of benzole fuel, engulfing the ship's deck.

Prior to the war, ships carrying a cargo like that of Mont-Blanc would not have been allowed into Halifax's harbor. Entering the harbor requires traveling through a slender waterway known as The Narrows, which is where the collision occurs.

Aware of the ship's cargo, which includes TNT and picric acid, the captain quickly orders the Mont-Blanc's crew to evacuate. Less than 20 minutes after the collision, at 9:04 a.m., Mont-Blanc explodes. The ship is torn to pieces by the force of the blast, and hunks of white-hot iron land across Halifax. The shank of Mont-Blanc's anchor, weighing half a ton, is thrown for 2 miles, while its 90mm forward gun flies 3.5 miles from the explosion site.

Virtually all structures in a half mile radius of the blast are obliterated, including the community of Richmond. So much water is vaporized that the sea floor is briefly exposed. A tsunami wipes out a First Nations community at Tufts Cove.

Confirmed deaths will reach 1,950, but the figure could be higher. Over 9,000 people suffer injuries, and the explosion starts fires in the nearby populated areas. The blast is felt in Cape Breton, over 100 miles away. The explosion will remain the largest man-made blast until the advent of nuclear weapons. Firefighter Billy Well recalled: "The sight was awful, with people hanging out of windows dead. Some with their heads missing, and some thrown onto the overhead telegraph wires."

The press and authorities in Halifax blame the explosion on German sabotage, and the German survivors of the explosion are all rounded up and imprisoned. The helmsman of the SS Imo is detained on allegations of being a German spy, based on the fact that a letter was discovered in his possession that was allegedly written in German. The letter was, in fact, written in Norwegian.

Petrograd, December 7: *Izvestiia* publishes Appeal to Muslim Peoples of the East

Izvestiia publishes an appeal by the Sovnarkom to the Muslim Peoples of the East. It is signed by Lenin in his capacity as the President of the

Soviet of People's Commissars, as well as by Joseph Stalin, the People's Commissar for Nationalities. The appeal plays an important role in establishing the popularity and prestige of the October Revolution and the Soviet government among the oppressed masses around the world. It addresses itself to both the oppressed Muslims of the former Russian Empire and those that have been exploited and subjugated by the imperialist powers for decades in the Middle East and Asia. The appeal begins:

Comrades! Brothers!

Great events are taking place in Russia. The end of the bloody war, which was begun with the purpose of partitioning other lands, is drawing near. The rule of the robbers and enslavers of the peoples of the earth is about to end. Under the blows of the Russian Revolution, the old world of serfdom and slavery is crumbling ... A new world is being born, a world of workers and free men. At the head of this revolution stands the Workers' and Peasants' Government of Russia, the Soviet of People's Commissars.

In the face of these great events we turn to you, toiling and disinherited Muslims of Russia and the East. Muslims of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz, and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tartars of Transcaucasia, Chechens and Mountaineers of the Caucasus—all those whose mosques and chapels have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled under foot by the tsars and oppressors of Russia!

Henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions, are free and inviolable. Build your national life freely and unhindered. You have a right to do so. Know that your rights, as well as the rights of all peoples of Russia, are protected by the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies.

Buenos Aires, December 8: Argentina government assembles military against strikers

Media reports state that Argentina's government is assembling its military to disperse a strike wave that has seen a near-record of more than 136,000 workers go out on strike in 1917. American packing houses are shut down, interrupting meat shipments to Allied armies in Europe. The autumn strikes come on the heels of a September general strike of railway workers that crippled rail concerns, many of them British-owned.

December 8 (November 25, O.S.): Conclusion of Extraordinary Congress of Soviets of Peasant Deputies

The Extraordinary Congress of Soviets of Peasant Deputies, adjourning on December 8, is marked by friction between the Bolsheviks, largely based on the urban working class, and Left SR and other delegates, who are based in rural areas. Some representatives refuse to acknowledge Lenin as a representative of the new government, and the congress permits him to speak only in his capacity as a member of the Bolshevik Party. Lenin ultimately agrees to these terms, telling the congress that notwithstanding his objections, "I consider it important that the opinion of the Party of the Bolsheviks should be known to this Congress of Peasants' Deputies."

When he arrives, the speaker before Lenin turns to him and announces provocatively that Lenin wants to disperse the congress at the point of a bayonet. Lenin patiently addresses these concerns in his speeches to the congress.

Lenin also addresses the question of the Constituent Assembly, a vexed issue that divides the congress. During the era of the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks had criticized the parties in power for procrastinating and delaying the convocation of the assembly. However, Lenin contends that the October insurrection has dramatically altered the situation. Lenin stresses the importance of an alliance between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks, representing an “honest alliance” between the revolutionary peasantry and the revolutionary working class. In a subsequent letter to *Pravda*, Lenin explained that “this alliance can be an ‘honest coalition,’ an honest alliance, for there is no radical divergence of interests between the wage-workers and the working and exploited peasants. Socialism is fully able to meet the interests of both. Only socialism can meet their interests. Hence the possibility and necessity for an ‘honest coalition’ between the proletarians and the working and exploited peasantry. On the contrary, a ‘coalition’ (alliance) between the working and exploited classes, on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie, on the other, cannot be an ‘honest coalition’ because of the radical divergence of interests between these classes.”

December 9-10 (November 28-29, O.S.): Government resolution bans the Kadets

The Kadet leaders are gathering their strength for a counter-revolutionary offensive. In the Don region, Generals Kornilov, Alekseev, and Kaledin are working closely with Kadet leaders such as Miliukov to mobilize their forces. Meanwhile, the Kadets are campaigning for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, which they hope to use as a counterweight to soviet power.

On December 9, a procession of thousands of well-dressed citizens, fresh from religious ceremonies, marches to the Tauride Palace in Petrograd in support of the Constituent Assembly. “Eyewitness accounts agree,” historian Alexander Rabinowitch writes, “that the appearance of workers, soldiers, and sailors was rare.” The marchers fight their way into the palace, which was locked, clashing with pro-Soviet forces, and proclaim the “First Unofficial Conference of the Constituent Assembly.”

The march is regarded by the Trotsky and the Bolshevik leadership as nothing less than an attempted insurrection against Soviet power, orchestrated by the Kadet Party, the general headquarters for the counter-revolution. A Sovnarkom meeting on the night of December 9-10 approves a formal proclamation branding the Kadets as “enemies of the people” for “organizing a counterrevolutionary insurgency.” The Sovnarkom approves a decree providing for the arrest of Kadet leaders and their trials before revolutionary tribunals. Lenin addresses the question of the Kadet Party in a speech to the Extraordinary All-Russian Congress of Peasants’ Deputies on December 4:

You say that we have declared the whole Kadet Party enemies of the people, Yes, we have. And thereby we expressed the will of the Second Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. And now that we are on the threshold of peace and the cessation of the terrible slaughter that has lasted three years, we are convinced that this is the demand of all the working people in all countries. The overthrow of imperialism in Europe is proceeding slowly and painfully, and imperialists in all countries will now see that the

people are strong, and in their strength will overthrow all who stand in their way. We shall not be deterred when people who are organizing revolt against the workers and peasants, against the Soviets, with the other hand show their credentials to the Constituent Assembly. In July we were told that we should be proclaimed enemies of the people. And we answered, “Try it.” If the bourgeois gentlemen and their followers had only tried to say that to the people openly! But they did not; they resorted to insinuation, slander and mud-slinging. When the bourgeoisie began the civil war (we witnessed it), they incited the officer cadets to revolt. And we, the victors, were merciful to them, the vanquished. More than that, we even spared their military honor. And now... we see that the conspiracy of the Kadets is continuing, we see that they are organizing revolt against the Soviets in the interests of the money-bags of greed and riches, and we publicly proclaim them enemies of the people. At a time when the terms of peace will shortly be known, when we are about to have an armistice, when the members of the land committees will be immune from arrest, when the landed estates are being confiscated, and when control will be established over the factories—at such a time they are conspiring against us, against the Soviets. We therefore declare that the party of the Kadets is a party of the bourgeoisie, that they are enemies of the people, and that we shall fight them.

Also this week: The Russian Futurists respond to the October Revolution

While the Italian Futurists under the leadership of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti embrace emerging Fascism, the Russian futurists (David Burluk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Victor Khlebnikov) turn toward the Revolution. As Trotsky writes later in *Literature and Revolution*, having been founded in the pre-revolutionary period gives Russian Futurism certain “advantages.”

It caught rhythms of movement, of action, of attack, and of destruction which were as yet vague... The workers’ Revolution in Russia broke loose before Futurism had time to free itself from its childish habits, from its yellow blouses, and from its excessive excitement, and before it could be officially recognized, that is, made into a politically harmless artistic school [for the ruling bourgeoisie] whose style is acceptable.

The seizure of power by the working class, in Trotsky’s analysis,

caught Futurism still in the stage of being a persecuted group. And this fact alone pushed Futurism towards the new masters of life, especially since the contact and rapprochement with the Revolution was made easier for Futurism by its philosophy, that is, by its lack of respect for old values and by its dynamics. But Futurism carried the features of its social origin, bourgeois Bohemia, into the new stage of its development.

Mayakovsky recites poems like “Left March” before sailors in naval theaters during the outbreak of the revolution. In his autobiography he

later writes of the October Revolution: “To recognize it or not recognize it? This question did not exist for me (and the other Moscow Futurists). That was my revolution. Went to Smolny. Worked. Wherever it was necessary. Beginning of my meeting activities.”

In his “Open Letter to the Workers” from 1918, he writes: “The revolution of content — socialism-anarchism — is unthinkable without the revolution of form — Futurism.” Both would require reinforcement and propaganda. The Futurists explain that the revolution of art has already taken place [prior to 1917]. They therefore call the “Proletarians of the factories and of the soil to a third, bloodless but cruel revolution, the revolution of the spirit.” In contrast to the Proletcultists, who prefer agitation in a less innovative form along with revolutionary content, the Futurists and their split-offs also want to revolutionize the forms of language and pictorial representation.

Many artists become active after the revolution in the building of new art schools and workshops. From 1919, Mayakovsky provides the words and images for many of the most famous Rosta windows posters, named after the telegraph agency ROSTA. The posters memorably depict political, military and economic themes—even questions of everyday life, hygiene and health—in images and verse, so that they can be grasped by people who can barely read or write.

With their conception that bourgeois art must be thrown completely overboard, the Futurists find little favor among leading Bolsheviks like Lenin and Trotsky, who believe the working class should assimilate and build upon the achievements of bourgeois and pre-bourgeois culture.

Yet in the early years of the Soviet regime, the party does not interfere in aesthetic issues. There is no question of political censorship of artistic creation. While there are lively discussions and fierce debates between artists and the party leadership, and also among party leaders, artists will develop a wealth of new styles which flourish in the years after the civil war until their strangulation by the Stalinist bureaucracy.



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