

This week in the Russian Revolution

December 11-17: White forces capture Rostov

11 December 2017

After six days of fighting, the Volunteer Army commanded by the counterrevolutionary General Kaledin defeats the local Red Guard companies and occupies Rostov, a major industrial center in southern Russia. Meanwhile, conflict continues to rage in the Bolshevik leadership over the question of the Constituent Assembly.

Vladivostok, December 11 (November 28, O.S.): Japanese army occupies key strategic port

It is reported abroad on December 11 that Japanese forces have occupied the central rail terminal at Vladivostok, a key industrial port and the eastern endpoint of the Trans-Siberian Railway. "The importance of this action at this juncture cannot be overestimated," the *New York Times* gloats on December 11. "It means that the vast quantities of supplies assembled at Vladivostok for use by the Russian Provisional Government will not fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks, who have been casting eager eyes towards these for use in the civil war that has been precipitated throughout Russia by the action of the Bolsheviks Government in seeking to negotiate a separate peace with the Central Powers."

The spoils of Vladivostok include railroad cars, stockpiles of ammunition, and locomotives shipped from the US, under Russian credit purchases, for use in the Great War. The *New York Times* welcomes the actions of the Japanese army, insisting that the captured materials should at all costs be kept out of the hands of the Bolsheviks, who could then use them against the White forces that are being supported by France, Britain, and the United States.

During the Russian Civil War, Vladivostok will serve as a headquarters for imperialist and counterrevolutionary intrigues and campaigns, including the Siberian Expedition, against the Soviet Government.

San Antonio, Texas, December 11: Thirteen black soldiers executed after court martial

Thirteen African American soldiers, part of a group of 150 that had "rioted" in Houston against racist abuse on August 23, are hanged in the early morning hours today at a military base near San Antonio. Six more will follow them to the gallows, while another 41 are sentenced to life in prison.

The men were convicted in a court martial for their role in a "mutinous rioting" in August. After suffering systemic racial abuse and oppression in Houston, including the pistol whipping of one of their comrades, the soldiers had marched into the city with their military weapons. In the ensuing fighting, 16 Houston police and civilians died.

In a departure from many public executions of black men in the South, the mass hanging is carried out in the dark of night in an unknown location, without publicity and with only a few witnesses. The Wilson administration sees to it that the mutinous soldiers do not face the Texas authorities, but a military tribunal.

The silence is intentional. Wilson's "war for democracy" is permeated with hypocrisy, no more so than in the case of African Americans, 350,000 of whom are mustered into the military in segregated units. The gross injustice blacks suffer is most glaring in the cities and towns of the Jim Crow South—including Houston—where the regime of racial segregation and all its daily humiliations is enforced by brutal violence, including scores of lynchings every year.

Jerusalem, December 11: British troops enter city after seizure from Ottoman forces

General Edmund Allenby leads units of the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) on foot through the Jaffa Gate and into the Old City. Britain gained possession of the city on December 9 after defeating the Ottoman Yıldırım Army Group in over two weeks of battles.

The capture of the city is part of a major advance by British and allied forces since early November. It began with the breaching of the Ottoman Gaza-Beersheba line. Fighting over Jerusalem began with the advance of British forces into the Judean Hills starting November 17. By December 9, the EEF surrounded the city.

The Ottoman forces issued a decree surrendering the city late on December 9, which declared, "Due to the severity of the siege of the city and the suffering that this peaceful country has endured from your heavy guns; and for fear that these deadly bombs will hit the holy places, we are forced to hand over to you the city through Hussein al-Husseini, the mayor of Jerusalem, hoping that you will protect Jerusalem the way we have protected it for more than five hundred years."

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George describes Jerusalem's capture as a "Christmas present for the British people." It has been paid for with the lives of tens of thousands. Total casualties during the advance on Jerusalem after the capture of Beersheba have amounted to 43,000: 18,000 British soldiers and 25,000 Ottoman. From November 25 to December 10, when fighting over control of the city itself raged, there were 1,667 British casualties.

The advance of British and colonial troops has enabled them to establish a strategically important line from the Mediterranean to close to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea will be reached in February 1918, and this line will be held until a major offensive to take Damascus and Beirut is launched in September 1918.

Petrograd, December 11 (November 28, O.S.): First Congress of the Left SRs concludes

The First Congress of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, who after months of bitter conflict have broken with the Socialist Revolutionary Party, is concluding today in Petrograd after nine days of sessions. The Left SRs are in the midst of tense negotiations with the Bolsheviks over the formation of a coalition government. While supporting Soviet power, the Left SRs have opposed the moves of the Bolsheviks against the Petrograd City Duma and other steps aimed at combating the counterrevolution.

A central point on the agenda of the congress is the attitude toward the Constituent Assembly. During a discussion on the “current moment,” Ekaterina Kats declares that “the Constituent Assembly must take account of the will and tactics of the soviets. Insofar as the Constituent Assembly opposes their will, we will not support it and no fetishes will change us.” Another delegate, Prosh Proshian, states that “if we believe and see that the socialist revolution has begun, then state power must belong to the soviets of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies... [O]bviously we cannot and should not lay down our arms and give state power back to the Constituent Assembly... If the Constituent Assembly starts off by attempting to organize state authority... we won’t allow it.”

Their line is opposed by a moderate wing, headed by Shteinberg, Karelin and Kamkov, who assert that the Constituent Assembly still has significant support among the masses and should therefore be convened so that it can prove its bankruptcy before the eyes of the masses. Most leading Left SRs think that the Constituent Assembly should be convened as elected. The congress passes a resolution that attempts a compromise between both positions.

According to historian Alexander Rabinowitch, the resolution states that “immediate implementation of worker and peasant power was essential and that, to the extent that the Constituent Assembly constituted such a power and pursued the fundamental positions of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies and of the Emergency Congress of Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies, it should be fully supported. However, any attempt by the Constituent Assembly to transform itself into an organization for struggle against soviets of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies as organs of state power would be considered an attack on the achievements of the revolution and would need to be decisively rebuffed.”

Quotes from: Alexander Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks in Power, Indiana University Press 2009, pp. 73-74.

Petrograd, December 12 (November 29, O.S.): Bolshevik CC meeting rejects request by Kamenev’s faction for reinstatement

Conflict continues to rage within the Bolshevik leadership over the question of convening the Constituent Assembly. The conflict pits Lenin and Trotsky, who are oriented to world socialist revolution, against a faction led by Kamenev and Zinoviev, which is oriented towards creating a “homogenous socialist government” in Russia by entering a coalition with the Mensheviks and SRs. In the immediate aftermath of the October insurrection, Kamenev’s faction resigned from the Central Committee after their secret negotiations with the Mensheviks and SRs, in direct violation of party discipline, were exposed. In these discussions, Kamenev was prepared to entertain demands that Lenin and Trotsky be excluded from the new government.

On December 12, the CC considers a request for reinstatement from

Kamenev, Rykov, Miliutin and Nogin. The request, discussed as the “Letter of the Four,” is rejected. Moisei Uritsky remarks that positions of the four have not changed, and there is no guarantee that if the four are reinstated, they would not behave in the same undisciplined manner as previously.

Kamenev’s faction supports convening the Constituent Assembly—a demand shared by the counterrevolutionary Kadets who are massing troops to attack the Soviet government. Lenin’s position is that the government based on Soviet power that was established in the October Revolution is a higher and more advanced form of government than the Constituent Assembly, which corresponds to a national congress of a bourgeois republic. Lenin and Trotsky insist that to cede power to the Constituent Assembly would represent a step backwards, embolden counterrevolutionary elements, and ensure the ultimate victory of the counterrevolution.

On December 11 or 12, Lenin pens his “Theses on the Constituent Assembly,” which will be published in Pravda in the coming weeks. The first three of 19 theses are as follows:

1. The demand for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly was a perfectly legitimate part of the program of revolutionary Social-Democracy, because in a bourgeois republic the Constituent Assembly represents the highest form of democracy and because, in setting up a Pre-parliament, the imperialist republic headed by Kerensky was preparing to rig the elections and violate democracy in a number of ways.
2. While demanding the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, revolutionary Social-Democracy has ever since the beginning of the Revolution of 1917 repeatedly emphasized that a republic of Soviets is a higher form of democracy than the usual bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly.
3. For the transition from the bourgeois to the socialist system, for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Republic of Soviets (of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies) is not only a higher type of democratic institution (as compared with the usual bourgeois republic crowned by a Constituent Assembly), but is the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism ...

After the onset of Lenin’s illness in 1922-23, the “Troika” of Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Stalin will attempt to erase and invert the entire record of this struggle.

Rostov, December 15 (December 2, O.S.): Volunteer Army captures Rostov

After six days of bitter fighting, a newly formed anti-Bolshevik “Volunteer Army” defeats local Red Guard companies, marching into the city of Rostov, a major industrial center in southern Russia. The Volunteer Army, under the leadership of right-wing generals from the old regime such as Alexei Kaledin, consists primarily of the upper castes of the old tsarist armies. There are only 12 enlisted soldiers among the first 3,000 recruits, the rest of which are officers, cadets, students, and Cossacks. Kaledin, who commands the Don Cossack Host, has proclaimed that his forces will place the region under martial law until the Provisional Government is restored.

Kaledin is an ultra-reactionary who refused to accept the February

Revolution. Kaledin's forces declare war on "agitators who have come in large numbers from Germany," meaning the Bolsheviks. In the territory controlled by the Volunteer Army, all organizations of workers' power, including the Soviets, are forcibly dispersed and their headquarters are ransacked. In Iasynivka, around 20 Bolshevik workers are murdered, and their bodies are dumped into cesspools. The Volunteer Army's forces are lawless, corrupt, and disorganized, killing and looting with impunity in the territories under their control.

Bremen, December 15: Left-wing group calls for building a revolutionary party in Germany

The Bremen newspaper *Arbeiterpolitik* (*Workers' Politics*) prints a lead article by Johann Knief, writing under the pseudonym Peter Unruh.

In this article, Knief welcomes the overthrow of the Provisional Government in Russia and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. In his words, they have "cleared the path for the further progress of social revolution until the final victory of socialism. An extraordinarily great deed was done in just a few weeks; something extraordinarily monumental, which knows no parallel in world history [has occurred] ..."

Knief emphasizes that proletarian democracy must function as a "lever for social revolution." The military victory of the Bolsheviks has "brought about social upheaval, and if the economic conditions in Russia are, in contrast to the economic conditions in Western Europe and the United States of North America, not yet ripe, then the reconstruction of Russian economic life by the revolution will vastly accelerate the process of maturation."

He highlights the decisive role of the Bolshevik Party and its leadership in the revolution, as well as the courage and sacrifices of all of its members. He then repeats the criticism that *Arbeiterpolitik* had earlier advanced of the entry of the International Group (Spartacus) into the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). Following the victory of the Bolsheviks, "any semblance of legitimacy for the merger with the Independents" was gone, he argues.

According to Knief, "the international situation" demands "the formation of an independent left-radical party as the most urgent necessity." Knief concludes with a call to the friends of the group "International" to "immediately and publicly separate themselves from the pseudo-socialists of the Independents and to form an independent left radical party."

Along with Karl Radek, Paul Frölich and Anton Pannekoek, Knief is one of the leaders of the so-called *Bremer Linksradikale* (Bremen Left Radicals), which have formed the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) since 1905. They have been close to Lenin in the question of the imperialist war since 1914. However, their call to build an independent left radical party is based on their concept of the "independence of the masses," which, in their view, needs to be brought to fruition through the deed and will of the revolutionaries.

By contrast, Lenin's concept of the party focuses above all on the political leadership and the education of the masses in the class struggle. "Independence" in the sense of a revolutionary struggle of the working class independently from hostile classes can only be achieved through a Marxist leadership with an internationalist and socialist program. The views of Pannekoek and Knief on this question are influenced more by Nietzsche's voluntarism than by Marx.

to the Ukrainian people

Under conditions in which, after decades of state discrimination in the Tsarist Empire, there is broad popular support for an independent Ukraine, the Sovnarkom issues a Manifesto to the Ukrainian People, assuring them that:

Proceeding from the interests of the unity and fraternal alliance of factory workers and the working and exploited masses in the struggle for socialism, and also from the recognition of these principles by numerous decisions of the organs of revolutionary democracy, the Soviets, and especially the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, the Council of People's Commissars—the Socialist government of Russia—reaffirms that the right to self-determination belongs to all nations oppressed by tsarism and the Great Russian bourgeoisie, up to and including the right of these nations to secede from Russia... We, the Council of People's Commissars, recognize at once, unconditionally and without reservations everything that pertains to the Ukrainian people's national rights and national independence. We have not taken a single step, in the sense of restricting the Finnish people's national rights or national independence, against the bourgeois Finnish Republic, which still remains bourgeois, nor shall we take any steps restricting the national independence of any nation which had been—or desires to be—a part of the Russian Republic.

At the same time, the Manifesto includes an ultimatum to the Ukrainian Central Rada which, since the proclamation of the Third Universal, has undertaken active steps to undermine pro-Soviet tendencies and institutions in Ukraine and facilitate the counterrevolutionary onslaught against Soviet Russia. The Manifesto states:

We accuse the Rada of conducting, behind a screen of national phrases, a double-dealing bourgeois policy, which has long been expressed in the Rada's non-recognition of the Soviets and of Soviet power in the Ukraine (incidentally, the Rada has refused to convoke a territorial congress of the Ukrainian Soviets immediately, as the Soviets of the Ukraine had demanded). This ambiguous policy, which has made it impossible for us to recognize the Rada as a plenipotentiary representative of the working and exploited masses of the Ukrainian Republic, has lately led the Rada to steps which preclude all possibility of agreement. These, firstly, were steps to disorganize the front. The Rada has issued *unilateral* orders moving Ukrainian units and withdrawing them from the front, thereby breaking up the common united front *before* any demarcation, which can be carried out only through a formal agreement between the governments of the two republics. Secondly, the Rada has started to disarm the Soviet troops stationed in the Ukraine. Thirdly, the Rada has been extending support to the Cadet-Kaledin plot and revolt against Soviet power. On the patently false plea of "the Don and the Kuban" having autonomous rights, a plea that serves to cover up Kaledin's counterrevolutionary moves, which clash with the interests and demands of the vast majority of the working Cossacks, the Rada has allowed its territory to be crossed by troops on their way to Kaledin, but *has refused transit to any anti-Kaledin troops*... At the present time, in view of the circumstances set forth above, the Council of People's Commissars, with the full cognizance of the peoples of the Ukrainian and Russian Republics, asks the Rada to answer the following questions:

December 16 (December 3, O.S.): Soviet government issues manifesto

1. Will the Rada undertake to give up its attempts to disorganize

the common front?

2. Will the Rada undertake to refuse transit to any army units on their way to the Don, the Urals or elsewhere, unless it has the sanction of the Commander-in-Chief?

3. Will the Rada undertake to assist the revolutionary troops in their struggle against the counterrevolutionary Kadet-Kaledin revolt?

4. Will the Rada undertake to stop attempts to disarm the Soviet regiments and the workers' Red Guard in the Ukraine and immediately return arms to those who had been deprived of them?

In the event no satisfactory answer is received to these questions within 48 hours, the Council of People's Commissars will deem the Rada to be in a state of open war with Soviet power in Russia and the Ukraine.

In the months and years to follow, the collaboration between Ukrainian nationalist tendencies and the imperialist powers would be a major factor in the Civil War and the struggle of the Whites against the fledgling Soviet regime.

Washington, December 17: US Congress passes amendment to prohibit alcohol

By a vote of 282 to 128, the US House of Representatives passes a bill for a Constitutional amendment that will prohibit the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages. The Senate had passed a similar measure in the summer. The slightly amended House bill will be returned to the Senate for concurrence, and then sent to the state legislatures, where, if three-quarters approve, the measure will become the Eighteenth Amendment to the American Constitution. Passage is almost certain. In recent years, 28 states have passed prohibition laws.

In the preceding years, the issue of prohibition has split the United States. Dating back to the 1830s and the birth of the Temperance Movement, sections of the American bourgeoisie, spearheaded by its evangelical Protestant shock troops, have viewed the consumption of alcohol by workers, especially immigrants, as a threat to social control and an intolerable impediment to production. They have been opposed by capitalists with interests linked to agriculture, as well as the Catholic Church and the leaders of European immigrant groups, including the Germans, Irish, Italians, and Poles.

The Great War shifts the balance decisively in favor of the "dries." Now the use of grain for alcohol production is presented as a drain on the war effort, while the major German brewing families have been silenced and, in some cases, their wealth sequestered. The war has also given a new impulse to anti-immigrant xenophobia. One of prohibition's major backers is the newly re-founded Ku Klux Klan, which violently opposes all strikes and radicalism in the working class. The KKK presents prohibition as a crusade against alcohol and "loose morals."



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