

This week in the Russian Revolution

# December 18-24: Peace negotiations begin at Brest-Litovsk

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## Berlin, December 18: Film production company UFA founded for war propaganda

The Universum Film AG (UFA) is founded with a starting capital of 25 million Reichsmarks. The initiative comes from General Erich Ludendorff. On July 4, in a letter to the royal ministry of war, he called for a “unification of the German film industry” in order to “achieve according to a uniform perspective a systematic and forceful influence on the masses in the interests of the state.” Ludendorff complained that Germany’s enemies, especially France, Great Britain and the United States, are far ahead of Germany in the use of the new medium of film.

Ludendorff wrote that the film industry is an “effective weapon of war.” The various companies should be purchased by the state: “But it must not be made known that the state is the buyer. The entire financial transaction must be made by a competent, influential, experienced, reliable private hand (bank) which is, above all else, loyal to the government.”

Under the leadership of Deutsche Bank, Ludendorff’s plan is put into action. Also contributing to the start-up capital are the electrical companies AEG and Robert Bosch AG, the shipping companies Hapag and Norddeutscher Lloyd, and the record company Carl Lindström AG. As an organizational core, the 450 employees of the Bild und Filmamt (BUFA, the Image and Film Office), founded in January by the supreme command (OHL), are absorbed into the UFA. Major Alexander Grau, Ludendorff’s personal advisor for press and propaganda matters, becomes director.

Propaganda, not art, is the aim of the OHL. In their films, directors and performers stitch together the “reality” as dictated by the military and allowed by the censors. The resulting concoctions are shown as newsreels in cinemas, as supporting films or used for training purposes by the army. Many of these films can be seen online today on the website filmportal.de.

*Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* (With Our Heroes on the Somme), for instance, is a three-act propaganda film which shows in re-enacted scenes the “heroic struggle” of the soldiers at the front and is intended to strengthen the “German fighting community.” It is an answer to the feature-length British propaganda film *The Battle of the Somme*, which fills the cinemas in France and Britain.

Numerous films are produced in which war propaganda is deliberately concealed in romantic stories about love, heroes and villains. No less than 900 cinemas for soldiers are quickly established at the front to maintain the mood of the soldiers during the short breaks in fighting. They are shown the war not as they experience it, but as a meaningful, legitimate fight for the liberation of “people oppressed by the enemy.” Only years later in the Weimar Republic does the UFA raise itself somewhat above the level of shallow propaganda. However, it never breaks completely with its origins as the product of German militarism and imperialist war.

## New York City, December 19: Public school teachers fired for “subversive” views

Three De Witt Clinton High School teachers are dismissed after the New York City Board of Education rules that they are guilty of “holding views subversive of discipline and of undermining good citizenship.” The teachers all appear to have German surnames: Samuel Schmalhausen, Thomas Mufson, and A. Henry Schneer.

An attorney representing the teachers aptly calls their firing “a lynching on unsupported charges.” It is alleged that one of Schmalhausen’s students has written a paper critical of President Woodrow Wilson, and, according to the Board of Education, the teacher’s marginal comments did not evince enough criticism or “outraged honor.” Schneer is condemned for lines of poetry he has written. Mufson is fired, in part, because he refused to speak at his “inquisition,” as another attorney calls the hearing.

On December 24, the Board of Education recommends that a six-month unpaid suspension be imposed on Queens elementary school teacher Fannie Ross for “conduct unbecoming a teacher” and “tactless remarks.” In volunteer work for the state census, Ross allegedly has expressed opposition to the military draft.

The Board of Education is slated to take up, on December 26, a proposal to eliminate all foreign language instruction from the elementary schools.

## Australia, December 20: Conscription plebiscite defeated amid growing anti-war sentiment

A second attempt by the Nationalist government of Prime Minister Billy Hughes to introduce conscription measures is defeated in a plebiscite marked by widespread expressions of anti-war sentiment among workers

and young people.

The government has been seeking to overcome a dramatic fall in voluntary military recruitment by introducing some form of compulsory military service for over 12 months. Massive Australian casualties in the 1916 and 1917 battles of the Western Front, coupled with a growing domestic social crisis, has resulted in mounting political disaffection. Voluntary enlistment plummets from a high of 166,000 in 1915 to just 45,000 in 1917.

The first attempt to push through conscription was defeated in a November 1916 plebiscite, triggering splits within the Labor Party and the establishment of a breakaway Nationalist government led by Hughes.

The 1917 plebiscite question is more limited than in the previous survey. Rather than mandating full conscription, it proposes a draft of 18 to 44 year olds, through a ballot, in months when voluntary enlistment is less than 7,000. The proposal is nevertheless voted down by over 53 percent of the electorate.

The plebiscite follows significant social upheavals, including a six-week strike involving 100,000 workers in New South Wales and Victoria in August and September against government attempts to boost war-time productivity through attacks on workers' conditions. The suppression of the Great Strike is followed by food riots involving thousands of working class women in Melbourne.

During the conscription plebiscite, socialists and others call anti-war meetings and demonstrations. While giving a speech in Warwick, Queensland, calling for a yes vote, Hughes is pelted with an egg by a young worker, in an incident that comes to symbolize broader opposition.

As they have throughout the war, the government carries out repressive measures, including launching an Australian army raid on the Queensland government print offices over allegations of "subversive" anti-conscription material.

#### **Russia, December 20 (December 7, O.S.): Soviet government establishes VCheKa**

Following a nationwide civil servants' strike, which forms part of the ongoing sabotage of the new state power by the remnants of the old regime, the Sovnarkom appoints a special commission to review and establish the tasks of a new body to fight counter-revolutionary elements and attempts at sabotage. Out of the discussions within that body, which are reported to the Sovnarkom, emerges the "All-Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage," abbreviated as VCheKa. Feliks Dzerzhinsky, a Polish-Russian revolutionary, is appointed as its head.

The new revolutionary government is under tremendous strain and pressure. In addition to the marauding White armies, which are supplied and funded by imperialism, the Soviet government is compelled to defend itself against industrial sabotage, theft, corruption, profiteering, speculation, assassination attempts against its leaders, and all manner of counterrevolutionary intrigues and conspiracies. These conditions leave the Soviet government with no choice but to take measures to defend itself from internal threats.

In addition, the establishment of the VCheKa is bound up with the dissolution of the Military Revolutionary Committee, which had played a key role in organizing the October uprising and had fulfilled various functions in its immediate aftermath. To ensure that revolutionary policies continue to be carried out, a body that fulfills some of the former functions of the Military Revolutionary Committee is needed. In this way, the VCheKa serves as a necessary counterweight to the significant influence of moderate Left SRs over the Commissariat of the Interior and

the Commissariat of Justice, which are obstructing the efforts of revolutionary tribunals.

The creation of the VCheKa coincides with the Sovnarkom's decision to accept, by and large, the proposal by the Left SRs for a coalition government after weeks of tense negotiations. In particular, Lenin is concerned about Left SR Isaac Steinberg serving as Commissar of Justice—a concern that turns out to be fully justified, as Steinberg will, within the first week in office, declare political amnesty for prisoners in the Smolny and try to release prisoners of the revolutionary tribunals without consulting the Sovnarkom. The VCheKa, in contrast to the Military Revolutionary Committee and the Sovnarkom, is composed exclusively of reliable Bolsheviks. Over the weeks that follow, the Bolshevik members of the Sovnarkom and the Left SRs, especially Steinberg, vie over control of the VCheKa, a struggle in which the Bolsheviks ultimately prevail.

The VCheKa, tasked with "extinguishing the resistance of exploiters," consists at first of around 40 officials, who are given command of the Sveaborg regiment and a group of Red Guards. As the civil war and class struggle intensifies in the following year, hundreds of regional committees will be established at various administrative levels throughout the country.

#### **Petrograd, December 21 (12 O.S.): Trotsky warns US ambassador against intervention**

Trotsky issues a warning to US Ambassador to Russia David R. Francis against American intervention on behalf of the White forces mobilizing behind Kaledin. The Soviet government has discovered that H.W. Anderson, head of the US Red Cross mission to Romania, has organized the delivery of 72 automobiles to Kaledin's counterrevolutionary forces in Rostov, using a letter from Francis. The documents are discovered with an individual named "Colonel Kolpashnikoff" in Petrograd, who is arrested and imprisoned at Peter and Paul Fortress. The US denies the charges—claiming that the vehicles are destined for the Middle East and are being sent there via Rostov on the Black Sea.

Trotsky's speech is cheered "wildly" at a gathering of "revolutionary organizations," according to a report in the *New York Times*. Trotsky says:

Last night we found that American agents in Russia were participating in the Kaledine movement. We arrested Colonel Kolpashnikoff, attached to the American mission to Rumania, who was trying to get a train load of automobiles, clothing and supplies to Rostov. Among the documents was a letter from David R. Francis requesting that the train be given free passage, as it was bound for the mission at Jassy. One letter from Colonel Anderson, head of the American Red Cross Mission to Rumania, to Kolpashnikoff said that if money were needed Ambassador Francis was ready to advance 100,000 rubles on the account of the Red Cross.

We think the American ambassador must break his silence now. Since the revolution he has been the most silent diplomat in Europe. Evidently he belongs to the Bismarck school, in which it was taught that silence is golden. He must explain his connection to this conspiracy.

We tell all the Ambassadors, 'If you think you can, with the help of American gold, under the guise of the holy mission of the Red Cross, support and bribe Kaledine, you are mistaken. If you think that, you are no longer representatives of America but private adventurers and the heavy hand of the revolution will reach out

after you.'

I desire to let the representatives of all the foreign powers know that we are not so blind as to let our fleet be trampled on... [T]he revolutionary government is not lacking in dignity and pride, and we are not acting under the influence of the Anglo-American bourgeoisie, but have pure principle for which we will conquer or perish.

#### **December 22 (December 9, O.S.): Bolsheviks and Left SRs agree on coalition government**

After weeks of heated negotiations, the Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, which had broken from the petty-bourgeois democratic Socialist Revolutionary Party only a few weeks ago, form a coalition government. Outside the Bolsheviks and in opposition to the SRs and Mensheviks, the Left SRs have been the only political tendency to support the seizure of power by the Congress of Soviets in November. As a political tendency, the Left SRs express a dramatic shift to the left among significant sections of the peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie. They were thus seen by the Bolsheviks as an important, if not entirely reliable, ally.

The Left SRs initially opposed entering a government with the Bolsheviks, insisting that an all-socialist coalition government, which would have included the Mensheviks and SRs, had to be formed.

In the negotiations with the Bolsheviks, the Left SRs insist on gaining control over key Commissariats. Eventually, the Bolsheviks adopt their demands, handing them several important Commissariats, including that of Agriculture, of Justice, of the Interior and of Telegraphic Agencies. However, the government would be conflict-ridden from the start. In particular, the Commissariat of Justice under the Left SR lawyer Isaac Steinberg would go on to systematically undermine the struggle against the counter-revolution by the Bolsheviks, especially when these efforts targeted members of petty-bourgeois socialist parties such as the Mensheviks and the SRs.

Even more bitter conflicts will surround the peace negotiations with Germany. In March 1918, the Left SRs will resign from the coalition in protest over the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty. In July, the Left SRs will stage an unsuccessful revolt in an effort to seize power from the Bolsheviks.

#### **Brest-Litovsk, December 22: Peace negotiations begin between the Soviet government and the Central Powers**

Peace negotiations without precedent in history begin near the city of Brest-Litovsk, not far from the front lines where a brief truce has gone into effect. On December 22, delegations sent by the Central Powers meet face to face with the representatives of the October Revolution.

On one side, there are arrayed the blood-drenched representatives of imperialism. Germany's foreign minister, Richard von Kuhlmann, attends the conference, together with Count Ottokar Czernin for Austria-Hungary and Talat Pasha and Foreign Minister Nassim Bey for the Ottoman Empire. Bulgaria sends its Minister of Justice, later followed by Prime Minister Vasil Radoslavov.

On the other side is a delegation from the Soviet government led by Bolshevik Adolph Joffe. The first delegation includes a soldier, a peasant, and a worker. The Soviet delegation also includes the world's first woman diplomat, Anastasia Bitsenko.

In 1905, Bitsenko attempted the assassination of the tsarist general Victor Sakharov, known as the "butcher of Saratov." Freed from prison in 1917, she participates in the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk as a representative of the Left SR party. She will subsequently join the Communist Party.

Trotsky later writes, "The circumstances of history willed that the delegates of the most revolutionary régime ever known to humanity should sit at the same diplomatic table with the representatives of the most reactionary caste among all the ruling classes."

A massive demonstration will be held in Petrograd on December 28 in support of a democratic peace. The position of the Soviet representatives is that the war should be ended without any annexations or indemnities, and that no country or nation should be forcibly annexed or subordinated to another. This program enjoys significant support not only throughout Russia but around the world.

The representatives of the Central Powers have entirely opposite goals. The German High Command insists that any treaty signed at Brest-Litovsk "must increase Germany's material power." Further, under cover of guaranteeing "national self-determination," the Central Powers are conspiring to establish reactionary national monarchies in territories seized from Russia.

The truce coincides with a wave of fraternization and desertions all along the front. The Bolshevik leadership considers their best strategy to be to delay the negotiations as long as possible. "To delay negotiations, there must be someone to do the delaying," Lenin later remarks, and Trotsky as the new Commissar for Foreign Affairs is subsequently dispatched to join the negotiations with this mission.

*Recommended Reading: Leon Trotsky, My Life, Chapter 31: Negotiations at Brest-Litovsk.*

#### **Berlin, December 22: Industrialist August Thyssen submits his wish list for Brest-Litovsk peace talks to the Chancellor**

August Thyssen, chairman of the largest German coal, iron, steel and arms concern apart from Krupp, submits his list of demands for the Brest-Litovsk peace talks with the new Soviet government to the Chancellor. At the top of the list is unrestricted access to the phosphorus and iron-rich ores, abandoned mines and manganese in Ukraine and the Caucasus, which are highly valuable and extremely important for steel production.

Just how critical this demand is for the survival of German imperialism is made clear by the fact that Germany controls virtually no ore mines of its own. Prior to 1914, Russia held a 50 percent share of global manganese production and accounted for three quarters of Germany's manganese ore requirements. In the meantime, the manganese mines in India and Brazil have been expanded, but they are under the control of Germany's opponents in the war: the US and Britain.

Along with Thyssen's list, a veritable flood of petitions, memorandums and lists of demands arrive at the Chancellery and the special office for peace talks led by Karl Helfferich from the full spectrum of light and heavy industry, including the German Trade Conference and other business associations over several days. According to these demands, Germany will not only have tariff-free access to all goods exported and imported by Russia, but also be given preferential treatment. There is even a plan to completely exclude Britain and the US from trade with Russia.

To expand the predominance of German big business throughout Eastern and Central Europe, all of the Baltic states, Poland and eventually the entire Ukraine are to be declared independent under the pretext of "the right of a nation to self-determination." This will mean in practice that they are dominated by Germany. And as the German Trade Conference

declares in its memorandum, concerning Russia itself, it “will be made an object of exploitation through the imposition of relevant economic agreements.”

These are precisely the same goals of conquest laid out by German imperialism in the September Program of 1914. Through the exploitation of the willingness of the Bolshevik government to make peace and the desire for peace among the masses in Russia and Germany, Berlin now seeks to impose its imperialist designs by means of a peace treaty.

#### **Paris, December 22: French socialists denounce Bolsheviks’ peace proposal**

In a resolution signed by 28 members of the Chamber of Deputies, including Albert Thomas and Jules Guesde, the French Socialist Party denounces the Bolsheviks’ call for an immediate end to the war and the initiation of peace talks.

“It is not necessary to remind you with what words of enthusiasm and hope French socialists acclaimed the dawn of the Russian revolution,” proclaims the text, published in full in today’s edition of the *New York Times*. “From that first hour also, before the parliament and in all our meetings, we have not ceased to give our endorsements to the general terms of a just, immediate and durable peace adopted by the new Russia.”

The Socialist deputies express their “deep pain” at witnessing the beginning of peace talks between the Soviet government and Germany, “which may lead to a separate peace. Such a consummation would not only permit the central empire to prepare for, or actually achieve military victory and finally to dictate their conditions in the name of force, it would even serve—it already serves—the machinations of all the enemies of democracy and socialism.”

The Socialist Party’s chief concern, as it has been from the war’s outbreak, is the defense of French imperialist interests. Through their steadfast support for the war and suppression of the class struggle, the socialists have enabled the bourgeoisie to continue the bloody conflict. Socialist Party politicians have entered French war-time governments. The most despicable role of all has been played by Thomas, who was given the task of organizing French factories for munitions production in October 1914, and served as Minister of Armament from December 1916 to September 1917.

The cynical invocation of “democracy” and “socialism” reflects their fear that revolution could rapidly spread to France. French workers and soldiers have been closely following the course of the Russian Revolution since the toppling of the tsar in February. In May, widespread mutinies gripped the army, expressing deepening anti-war sentiment among the soldiers. Powerful strikes have continued throughout the year, despite the best efforts of the Socialist Party and trade unions to prevent them in the name of national defense.

#### **Narva, December 23 (10 O.S.): Narva is transferred to the Governorate of Estonia after popular referendum**

On December 10, a referendum is held on whether the region of Narva, a historic city mostly populated by Estonians, should become part of the Governorate of Estonia. The referendum passes with 80 percent support. The plebiscite is held at the request of the Narva Soviet, with the support of its Executive Committee, which requested permission from the Sovnarkom to incorporate Narva into the Governorate of Estonia. The

request is granted in accord with the Bolshevik policy of destroying all the vestiges of former tsarist oppression of national minorities.

The following week, the Estonian and Tallinn Committees of the Estonian Bolshevik Party will hold a congress to discuss whether Estonia should form an autonomous soviet republic. The delegates ultimately decide that this is not necessary. Thanks to Soviet power, the delegates believe that the region enjoys sufficient autonomy and freedom. At the same time, the delegates do not wish to do anything to separate themselves from the revolutionary working class of Petrograd and the rest of Russia. Meanwhile, efforts by the SRs, including poet Gustav Suits, to build momentum for an independent Estonian republic fail to achieve substantial popular support.

Ever since the Soviet government concluded a truce with the Central Powers, troops have been deserting from the front en masse. Estonia is now left with a fraction of its former soldiers. In January, faced with the threat of a new German invasion, the Sovnarkom will announce the formation of new socialist armed forces: The Red Army and the Red Navy. However, the invading German forces will reach Estonia before the new socialist regiments can achieve readiness.

#### **London, December 24: Lloyd George presents British war aims**

The *New York Times* publishes the full text of a speech given by British Prime Minister David Lloyd George on London’s war aims.

The address amounts to a direct reply to the Bolsheviks’ call for an immediate peace, which is finding broad support among workers around the world. Lloyd George seeks to justify the ongoing slaughter with references to “justice” and “democracy.”

“We have arrived at the most critical hour in this terrible conflict,” the prime minister states in an address to the House of Commons, “and before any government takes the fateful decision as to the conditions under which it ought either to terminate or continue the struggle, it ought to be satisfied that the conscience of the nation is behind these conditions, for nothing else can sustain the effort which is necessary to achieve a righteous end to this war.”

Acknowledging the crucial role the Labour Party and trade unions are playing in suppressing the working class as the war proceeds, he adds, “Last week I had the privilege, not merely of perusing the Declared War Aims of the Labour Party, but also of discussing in detail with the labour leaders the meaning and intention of that declaration.”

The most hypocritical portion of Lloyd George’s speech relates to the outbreak of war and London’s views on its conclusion. He asserts that Britain entered the conflict to protect Belgium after it was invaded. He then demands that German colonies be granted “self-determination” and free access established from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Poland must be independent, he declares, and the nationalities within the Austro-Hungarian empire must be allowed self-government. Of course, there is no talk of “self-determination” for India or British possessions in Africa and Southeast Asia, all of which are part of the world’s largest empire.

“If, then, we are asked what we are fighting for,” the Lloyd George concludes, “we reply as, we have often replied: we are fighting for a just and lasting peace, and we believe that before permanent peace can be hoped for three conditions must be fulfilled; firstly, the sanctity of treaties must be established; secondly, a territorial settlement must be secured, based on the right of self-determination or the consent of the governed, and, lastly, we must seek by the creation of some international organization to limit the burden of armaments and diminish the probability of war.”

**Petrograd, December 24 (December 11, O.S.): Decree establishes workers' insurance in case of loss of work**

A Soviet decree establishes a system of fully funded unemployment benefits. An unemployed worker, provided his or her previous earnings are not in excess of three times the local average, is entitled to wages equal to the local average, but not to exceed previous earnings.

Workers who have left their previous employment without valid reason, or who have failed to take up a new job without a valid reason, are excluded from these benefits. Unemployed workers receiving these benefits are registered on labor exchanges, and the Soviet authorities take an active role in helping unemployed workers to find new employment. Private employment agencies are abolished.

On December 27 (O.S.), a decree establishing similar benefits in case of illness will follow. These measures are to be funded by special taxes on employers, followed by a progressive tax on income. The Soviet government's goal is full employment and the rapid introduction, to the fullest and widest extent possible, of rational and democratic planning.



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