

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 143

### “Disabling the Russian Colossus”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On March 22, 1917, just one week after the abdication of the Russian Emperor, Nikolai II, the Swiss Foreign Minister contacted the German embassy in Bern to inform them that a number of “Russian revolutionaries desire to return to Russia via Germany, since they are afraid to go through France on account of the submarine risk.”

The German Foreign Office queried the Kaiser and the military on this request. The High Command—Hindenburg and Ludendorff—said they had no objection. Kaiser Wilhelm relished the idea, declaring that the return of these radicals would assist in “disabling the Russian colossus.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 143. Disabling the Russian Colossus.

Lev Davidovich Bronstein was born on November 7, 1879 in a tiny rural village that at that time was called Yanovka, in the Russian Empire. In our time, the village is called Bereslavka, and it is in Ukraine. The Bronstein family were Jewish, as were most of the families in Yanovka, but this family was a little better off than most.

Better off enough that when little Lev turned eight years old, his family could afford to send him to Odessa to be educated. Here was a much more cosmopolitan atmosphere than in little Yanovka, and Lev would learn about other nations and other cultures and learn to speak English, French, and German. Young Lev was slender, of average height, with dark, wild hair, spectacles, and had a very serious, scholarly look to him. He had ambitions to go to college and major in mathematics, and it’s not hard to believe that in a different world from ours, he might have become a noted mathematician. But not in our world. In our world, revolutionary politics got him

first. He dropped out of school, embraced Marxism, and began organizing labor unions by the age of sixteen.

He was doing union organizing because Russian socialist theory of the time held that labor organizing would help raise the political consciousness of the Russian proletariat. This was because labor unions were illegal. Once the workers saw for themselves how quickly the simple acts of organizing, asking for higher wages, and bargaining collectively would bring down the heavy hand of the Imperial Russian state, they would understand that the lot of the working class would never improve except by revolution.

Well, the heavy hand of the Imperial Russian state certainly came down pretty hard on young Lev Bronstein. He was arrested in January 1898, just weeks after his eighteenth birthday, at a time when the Russian government was cracking down hard on socialist organizing, and he was kept in prison for more than two years awaiting trial. It was while he was in prison that he met and married his first wife, Alexandra Sokolovskaya.

After their trials and convictions, Lev and Alexandra were sentenced to four years of internal exile in Siberia. During this period, they had two daughters and Lev discovered *Iskra*, or *Spark*, the underground Russian socialist newspaper published by Lenin from his exile in London. We've come across *Iskra* before in this podcast; the paper took its name from a line in a Russian revolutionary poem which loosely translates as "It only takes a spark to ignite a flame."

Soon Lev Bronstein was submitting articles to *Iskra*. He escaped from his exile in 1902, supposedly at the urging of Alexandra, whom he left behind. What happened to her afterward isn't entirely clear, but what is clear is that Lev regarded his first marriage as over, as we will see.

Lev escaped Siberia, escaped Russia, and abandoned the family name in favor of "Trotsky," the name he would use for the rest of his life, and I'll just be calling him Leon Trotsky from now on, if it's all the same to you. Trotsky was the surname of the head jailer of the prison in Odessa where he was held for a time, and taking it as his own name shows, I think, a strong sense of irony.

He took his new name with him to London, where he joined with Lenin and the other Russian socialists there who were writing and publishing *Iskra*. Trotsky quickly became the paper's leading contributor at the still-tender age of 23. He took his place in the Russian socialist expatriate community in London, where he met his second wife, Natalia Sedova. They married in 1903, and would have two sons together. When Lenin precipitated the split in the Russian Social Democratic Party between the so-called Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Trotsky decided not to side with either faction, earning him the hostility of both.

When the Revolution of 1905 broke out in Russia, The Trotskys returned to St. Petersburg, now using the name Yanovsky, after the village of Leon's birth. He wrote for the Menshevik

newspaper there and became involved in the St. Petersburg Soviet, eventually rising to the chairmanship. After the members of the Soviet were arrested in 1906, Trotsky was sentenced to internal exile in Siberia once again, and escaped once again, ending up this time in Vienna, where he became involved with Russian, German, and Austrian Social Democrats and joined the editorial staff of another Russian-language underground socialist newspaper, called *Pravda*, or *Truth*. *Pravda* sought to avoid taking sides in the Bolshevik-Menshevik dispute and tried to appeal to both sides, and had some success at this, for a while.

You may recall that we ran into Leon Trotsky during his Vienna days briefly back in episode 51.

The final split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks came in 1912 over the issue of what was delicately called “expropriation,” or in plain English, committing armed robberies to raise money for the cause, as we saw Joseph Stalin doing back in episode 139. The Mensheviks wanted to ban the practice; Lenin refused to support the ban, and the split led to the collapse of *Pravda* in Vienna, although the Bolsheviks took advantage of liberalized press laws in Russia to immediately start their own newspaper in St. Petersburg, which they also called *Pravda*, much to Trotsky’s annoyance.

When the Great War began, Trotsky fled Vienna for Switzerland to avoid being interned as an enemy alien. From there he moved to Paris, where he began writing for another socialist newspaper. While Trotsky was more moderate than Lenin, or at least more conciliatory, in the infighting among socialist factions, the one issue on which he stood squarely in Lenin’s camp was the war. Like Lenin, Trotsky opposed the war unconditionally and demanded, as the slogan went, “peace without indemnities or annexations, peace without conquerors or conquered.”

His anti-war agitation became too much even for the Third Republic, and Trotsky was deported to Spain in 1916. The Spanish didn’t want him either and re-deported him to the United States. He arrived in New York City in January 1917, and lived in the Bronx for three months, where he wrote for *Der Forverts*, a Yiddish-language socialist daily newspaper usually referred to in English as *The Jewish Daily Forward*. It had over a hundred thousand readers at this time and was an influential publication. As you might have guessed, *Der Forverts* took its name from the German Social Democratic Party newspaper *Vorwärts*, which we’ve encountered a couple of times in this podcast, beginning all the way back in episode 2.

If you don’t mind my interjecting a personal note here, when I was in college in Philadelphia in the 1970s, you could still buy Yiddish-language editions of *Der Forverts* from street-corner newsstands. Which I often did. I had studied German, and if you know German and can recognize the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, you can usually work out the meaning of a Yiddish news article. I still own a copy of *Harkavy’s Jewish-English Dictionary*, the 1910 edition, which I bought back in those days to help me with this little hobby.

But back to business. The February Revolution came just two months after the Trotsky family arrived in New York City, hardly giving them enough time even to memorize their new address

and figure out where the best grocery store in the neighborhood was. In a matter of days, Leon was dragging them all back to Russia.

I should say, he dragged them as far as New York harbor, where they boarded *SS Kristianiafjord*, the flagship of the new Norwegian America Line, bound for neutral Norway, and from thence they planned to continue on to Petrograd. But when *Kristianiafjord* made a stop at Halifax, in Nova Scotia, Royal Navy police boarded the ship. They were acting on a tip from the British Secret Service Bureau, what we know today as MI5, that dangerous Russian revolutionaries were on the ship. As Trotsky himself tells the story, the British officers treated the citizens of neutral America, Norway, and the Netherlands with respect, but were hostile to the Russians who, as Trotsky put it, had the misfortune to belong to a nation allied to England.

British authorities decided to remove nine Russians from the ship, including the entire Trotsky family. The Trotskys declined to leave the ship voluntarily and were physically carried off, including the two boys, aged eleven and nine. It was, in Trotsky's words, their "first lesson in British democracy."

I'm sorry if I keep quoting him; I can't help it. He has a way with words. No wonder he was such a popular writer.

Mrs. Trotsky and the boys were permitted to stay in a hotel in Halifax, albeit under close police supervision, while Trotsky himself and the other five Russians were sent to the Canadian internment camp outside Amherst, Nova Scotia, which mostly housed German POWs and interned German civilians. When the Russians asked the camp commander why they were being held, he told them, "You are dangerous to the present Russian government." The prisoners pointed out that they had been traveling under passports issued to them by the present Russian government through its consulate in New York City for the express purpose of returning to Russia. The commander considered this for a moment and replied, "You are dangerous to the Allies in general."

The British had apparently been monitoring Trotsky since his days in Paris and regarded him as a threat, first to the Russian Emperor, then to the Russian Provisional Government, and always to the Allies collectively. But what of the position of the new Russian government? Officially, all political prisoners were granted amnesty and there should be no obstacle to Trotsky returning home. They let Stalin loose, and he had been involved in armed robbery. The worst thing Trotsky had ever done was to write nasty things about his betters in the newspaper.

Trotsky believed that the Provisional Government was secretly encouraging the British to hold him because they viewed him as a threat, and that may well be true. In Russia, Trotsky's case became a *cause célèbre* among the socialists. In Petrograd, *Pravda* railed against the detention of the Trotskys and the other Russians, railed against the British government, and demanded that the Russian Provisional Government secure their release.

Meanwhile, in the Amherst internment camp—which Trotsky called a concentration camp—Leon Trotsky went to work doing what he had done his entire adult life, in and out of prison: he held mass meetings. He taught the German prisoners about socialist theory and the history of the German Social Democratic Party. The rank and file prisoners ate it up; the German officers were appalled, until finally they protested to the British authorities who ran the camp, who in turn forbade Trotsky from leading any more meetings. Over 500 of the camp's 800 German inmates signed a petition protesting this action, as Trotsky himself delighted in the irony of British authorities acting to uphold loyalty to Kaiser Wilhelm among their German prisoners and against the Russian who was trying to subvert it.

Now remind me. What is this war about, again, and who is on which side?

In a matter of weeks, the internment of Leon Trotsky grew sufficiently embarrassing that the Provisional Government, through its foreign minister, Pavel Miliukov, was forced to ask the British government to release Trotsky and the other Russians and permit them to return home to Russia. Trotsky spent an eventful three weeks and five days in British custody, and finally arrived in Russia on May 17.

[music: Arensky, *Piano Trio No. 1*]

And now it's time for me to formally introduce you to Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. I've mentioned him a few times before in the podcast, most notably in episodes 18 and 34, where I described him as "Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who writes under the pen name 'Lenin.'" And so he does.

He was born in the town of Simbirsk, on the River Volga and the threshold of Siberia, on April 22, 1870, and in 1924 Simbirsk would be renamed Ulyanovsk in his honor. Ironically, eleven years later in the very same town would be born his future political rival Alexander Kerensky.

It is hard to say much about Lenin's personal life or the development of his political convictions. In his own lifetime, Lenin seldom spoke or wrote about his past. He seemed content to identify himself with the socialist movement and the movement with him and let it go at that. After his death, his Soviet biographers tended to depict Lenin as having emerged from the womb with his political ideology and his vision of the future Soviet Union already fully formed in his mind.

His family's ethnic background was mixed and included Russian, German, Jewish, and Swedish and possibly some minority peoples of the Volga region. Lenin's parents were successful people who had risen from the peasantry to a comfortable middle-class life and appear to have been pretty conservative people, loyal to the Emperor and with no sign of radical political convictions. Vladimir was the third of eight children. He had one older brother, Alexander, whom he looked up to, except that Alexander's interest was chemistry—he set up his own chemistry and biology lab in one of the rooms of the Ulyanov home—while his younger brother Vladimir was already taking up radical politics and spoke dismissively of Alexander's absorption in science.

In January 1886, when Vladimir was still only fifteen years old, his father died unexpectedly of a brain hemorrhage. The sudden, tragic loss of his father, who was devoutly Orthodox, hit Vladimir hard, and it appears to have caused him to lose whatever religious faith he may have had. It also no doubt left him emotionally vulnerable to the next tragedy in his life, which came just a few weeks later when his beloved older brother was arrested by the secret police as part of a plot to assassinate the Emperor, Alexander III. Alexander Ulyanov had turned out to be not quite so apolitical as Vladimir had believed. He was in fact secretly a member of *Narodnaya Volya*, The People's Will, the underground radical group responsible for the assassination of the previous Emperor, Alexander II, as we saw back in episode 27. Alexander had been part of a group planning to assassinate the new Emperor on the sixth anniversary of the murder of his father. Alexander's contribution to the plot was to use his knowledge of chemistry to construct bombs for the would-be assassins.

At his trial, Alexander represented himself, confessed his guilt, and confessed to anything and everything in an effort to protect the others. He told the court: "My purpose was to aid in the liberation of the unhappy Russian people. Under a system which permits no freedom of expression and crushes every attempt to work for their welfare and enlightenment by legal means, the only instrument that remains is terror...Terror is our answer to the violence of the state."

Some of the conspirators received clemency from the Emperor; Alexander refused to ask for it and become one of five members of the conspiracy who were executed in May. This loss surely had an effect on the now 16-year old Vladimir. He grew up, went to college, was expelled from college for being part of a political demonstration, began reading the works of Karl Marx, and somewhere along this timeline presumably moved away from the agrarian-socialist revolutionary terrorism his older brother had embraced and toward the more intellectual and scientific proletarian socialism espoused by the Marxists.

By the 1890s, Vladimir Ulyanov, now in his mid-twenties, had already lost most of his hair and begun wearing the goatee that would define his look for the rest of his life. He began organizing underground socialist groups and printing and distributing banned socialist publications. The secret police caught up to him, and in 1897, he was sentenced to three years of internal exile in Siberia. There he married fellow Marxist Nadezhda Krupskaya. They would remain married until Vladimir's death in 1924, but they would have no children.

During this period of exile, he spent his time studying and writing, and witnessed two developments that would cement his political views. The first was the failure of the Russian socialist campaign to increase political awareness among the working class by helping organize unions and collective bargaining, which I mentioned before when I was talking about Trotsky. The idea was that this activity would lead to an increased political consciousness in the working class, but in practice it hadn't worked out that way. What it actually led to in the working class was an increased consciousness of wages and working conditions. This brought Lenin around to

the doctrine of vanguardism, which I've mentioned before. In contrast to the view that the socialist revolution would come when the mass of workers had had enough and rose up spontaneously, vanguardism holds that the working class, by definition, doesn't lead revolutions. They work in factories to support themselves and their families. Hence, socialist party leadership of intellectuals and political activists—the *intelligentsia*, to use the Russian word—must take the lead and direct the revolution themselves.

Second was the German socialist Eduard Bernstein and his doctrine of “revisionism,” which I talked about back in episode 18. Bernstein argued that Marx did not and could not have all the answers, that capitalist society was not developing the way Marx had predicted, and therefore socialists needed to revise and modify their political program based on political and social developments since Marx. Lenin was an orthodox Marxist, to whom this was heresy. He rejected revisionism. He rejected the right of people who disagreed with orthodox Marxism—that is to say, with Lenin—even to call themselves socialists. From this we get the Lenin who founded *Iskra* to present the argument for orthodox Marxism, and we also get the Lenin who rejects working in coalition with socialists who disagree with him on doctrine.

Instead, we get Lenin the Bolshevist, the man who wants to expel from the party anyone who doesn't toe the party line. This is in some degree Lenin reverting to the days of the old *Narodnaya Volya* organization his brother was a part of. He had moved on from their ideology, but was now embracing their organizational methods. A small, close-knit, secretive group united in a single purpose, as opposed to an open political party that anyone could join, even if they didn't accept every one of the party's principles.

This is the point in his life where Lenin becomes Lenin, both figuratively and literally. Literally, because this is when he starts using “Lenin” as a pen name; figuratively because this is where he engenders the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, and insists that individual party members agree with the party program in every particular, or else. Lenin's biographers often accuse him of being personally inflexible and demanding and ponder how through sheer stubbornness and force of will he could imprint what many of us would call a character defect first on an entire political movement, and then on an entire nation, and not just any nation, but one of the largest and most powerful states of the twentieth century, and marvel—or shudder—at this incredible accomplishment.

Or we could ask Lenin himself. Lenin's defense of his approach to politics is to assert that a smaller group of people united in purpose can accomplish much more than a larger number of people more diffuse in purpose and who may even quarrel among themselves over their methods and goals. As someone who once made his living in politics myself, I can agree with that. It's not something we who believe in democracy like to dwell on, but the truth is that a sufficiently zealous minority can and often does get its way over a larger but more inactive or apathetic majority, so yeah, I'd say he's got a point.

So which is it? What accounts for Lenin's political style, in which loyalty to the party program is everything? Is he a shrewd, even ruthless, political operator who knows how to get things done and isn't afraid to step on toes to do it? Or is he simply a narrow-minded egotist, intolerant of dissent, who leads his movement in this way because it's the only kind of leadership he's capable of providing? Well, why not both? They aren't mutually exclusive interpretations, are they?

Soon after Lenin had served his three years in exile, he moved to Munich and founded *Iskra*, printed in Germany and smuggled into Russia. *Iskra* was where he began using Lenin as his pen name. The police in Germany interfered with the operation of *Iskra*, so Lenin and his supporters moved the paper to London in 1902.

The next stage of Lenin's career I've already talked about in this episode and in earlier ones. The Russian Social Democratic Party met in exile in London in 1903 because it couldn't legally meet in Russia. This is the meeting where the Bolshevik-Menshevik split took place, over the issue of whether party members could be free to express personal opinions that differed from the party position. The split led to Lenin resigning from *Iskra*; he would found a new newspaper, *Vpered*, which means "Forward," with some of the funding coming from the Japanese military intelligence officer, Colonel Akashi, who provided financial support to Russian dissidents as a way of undermining Russia during the Russo-Japanese War, episode 34.

After the Revolution of 1905 and the reforms it brought, Lenin returned to St. Petersburg for a time. The Bolshevik and Menshevik factions seemed to be resolving their differences, but then split again on the question of whether armed robbery was an acceptable means of achieving the socialist revolution. Lenin left the country again in 1907 after the Imperial government began cracking down on socialists again. He lived for a time in Paris and London, and then in Galicia, where we was when the Great War broke out. The Austrians arrested him as an enemy alien, but when they learned about his anti-Imperial political activities, they let him go, and Lenin and his wife moved to neutral Switzerland.

Lenin participated in the Zimmerwald conferences during the war, the socialist anti-war conferences. Lenin was bitterly disappointed in the German SPD for supporting the war. He opposed the war as nothing more than an imperialist project and hoped that the military exhaustion of the belligerent nations would lead to socialist revolutions. He supported what would be called "socialist defeatism," a radical doctrine even by socialist standards. Whereas other socialists opposed war and urged their governments to seek peace, Lenin wanted socialists to actively undermine their own nation's war efforts and bring about their own nation's defeat. Whereas other socialists urged their supporters to refuse military service, Lenin urged them to join the army, in order to spread anti-government propaganda and encourage mutiny. This, he believed, would end the imperialist war and would bring about the war that mattered: the one between the proletariat and the capitalists.

[music: Arensky, *Piano Trio No. 1*]



Lenin was still in Switzerland when the February Revolution broke out. His initial reaction was that, first, the February Revolution didn't mean much. The capitalists and the bourgeoisie had already been the real rulers; the February Revolution merely made it official. Second, Lenin at first saw no compelling reason why he should return to Russia, and third, he saw no opportunity to return to Russia. The French and British governments were hostile to Russian socialists, particularly the most extreme among them. Look at how they had treated Trotsky. Lenin would need the cooperation of both governments to travel from Switzerland to Russia, and he was unlikely to get it for either of them.

But Lenin's defeatist views were well known. He regarded socialists who supported the war as traitors. Even the Germans knew this. Maybe especially the Germans. They were monitoring Lenin's activities closely, and it did not escape their notice that Lenin's and the Imperial German government's wishes in this matter were pretty closely aligned. It is possible they were already sending him some money to support his publications by this time. Lenin did not want to return to Russia through Germany. If the Germans allowed him safe passage, everyone in Russia would assume he was acting as a German agent. He'd lose all his credibility.

Some of Lenin's supporters suggested that the German government might be open to a deal, under which Russia would release some interned German prisoners in exchange for permitting a group of Russian exiles to travel through Germany.

And that brings us back around to where I began the podcast: the point where the Swiss government opened a dialogue with the German government on the question of Lenin and his fellow Russian socialist exiles. The Germans were downright eager to see Lenin in Petrograd, but working out that prisoner exchange deal with the Russian Provisional Government was likely to be a time consuming project. And as we saw in the case of Leon Trotsky, amnesty or no amnesty, it was very likely the Provisional Government would prefer that Lenin stay in Switzerland for the foreseeable future, and so could be expected to drag out any negotiation involving Lenin's return until roughly the Wednesday after Doomsday.

By early April, the Bolsheviks and the German government had worked out a deal. Lenin and his traveling companions would pass through German territory from Switzerland to the Baltic and thence on to Sweden in a "sealed train." This means a diplomatically sealed train. It doesn't mean that the train was literally sealed, or that Lenin and the other passengers were locked inside. It meant that passengers and luggage would not move on or off the car while it was passing through German territory; therefore there would be no passport control. In other words, the train might move physically through German territory, but diplomatically speaking, Lenin would be moving directly from Swiss jurisdiction to Swedish jurisdiction. He would not request nor receive permission to enter or leave Germany, he would have no German visa in his passport, and so technically the German government could say it had done nothing to assist Lenin and Lenin could say he received no assistance from the German government.

But as I say, the train wasn't literally sealed. In fact, the group of travelers, about thirty in all, including Lenin, his wife, and some of his closest supporters, as well as some who are unknown to us, changed trains at their first stop in Germany, and passengers got out and walked the platform during stops along the way. But the car containing the Bolsheviks was kept separate from other rail cars. They left Zürich on the afternoon of April 9, to the jeers of about a hundred Russians who shouted that they were "pigs" or "traitors" or that the trip was being funded by the Kaiser. Lenin reportedly told a friend that in three months, he and the others would either be in power, or be hanging from a gallows.

The train rode a circuitous route, passing through Frankfurt and Berlin before reaching the Baltic port of Sassnitz in the afternoon of April 12, almost exactly 72 hours after its passengers had left Switzerland. Lenin passed the time by jotting down his thoughts. Typically Lenin thoughts like: "No support to the new government...arming of the proletariat...no rapprochement with other parties..." Lenin and Mrs. Lenin discussed how, wherever in Germany they traveled, the lack of young men was noticeable everywhere, because of the war.

From Sassnitz, Lenin and the others traveled aboard a Swedish steam-powered passenger ferry named *Queen Victoria* to the port town of Trelleborg, on the southern tip of Sweden. From there, another train carried him to Stockholm, where Swedish supporters took Lenin to a department store to buy him some nicer clothes for his arrival in Petrograd. Lenin reluctantly submitted to this indignity.

Lenin's party next rode another train north, to the border between Sweden and Russian Finland. They approached the border crossing uncertain as to whether they would be permitted to cross, but there was no difficulty. From there, more trains took them down the length of Finland, through Helsinki, and on to Finland Station in Petrograd. Lenin debarked from his train at about 10:30 at night, to be greeted by a crowd of Bolshevik supporters, including soldiers and sailors. An armored car was waiting for him outside. Lenin climbed on top of it and gave an impromptu speech to the crowd in the streets, telling them, "The people need peace, the people need bread, the people need land. And they give you war, hunger, no food, and the land remains with the landowners...We must fight for the social revolution...till the complete victory of the proletariat. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!"

The armored car took Lenin to the mansion the Bolsheviks had seized during the February Revolution and converted into their party headquarters, and he addressed a crowd in the street below from a balcony. He would speak from here many times in the weeks to come. In the words of Leon Trotsky, "Thus the February Revolution, garrulous and flabby and still rather stupid, greeted the man who had arrived with a determination to set it straight..."

Lenin's arrival in Petrograd would prove a major turning point in the Russian Revolution, indeed in the history of the twentieth century. It would not have been possible without German cooperation. I don't know how they teach this in schools today, but if you'll indulge me for a

minute, I'd like to say a word about how they taught this in my day. Back then, I was taught that the German government had committed a tremendously foolish, short-sighted, costly, historically ill-considered disastrous mistake in allowing Lenin to return to Russia.

Now I was in school during the Cold War, and to be fair, during the Cold War one might have reasonably wondered whether the Russian Revolution and Lenin's return to Petrograd had set in motion a chain of events that would lead to nuclear war and the end of civilization. Also, there was the division of Germany into East and West Germany, so the argument was that Germany in effect committed suicide when it aided Lenin, and it may have brought down the rest of Western civilization along with it, all for the sake of winning a war Germany was going to lose anyway.

You know, I bet they do still teach it that way.

This is entirely the wrong way to think about this decision. You can't blame Kaiser Wilhelm for failing to foresee the Cold War. It was perfectly reasonable for the German government to conclude that Lenin wanted Russia out of the war as badly as they did, and therefore he was a *de facto* ally of Germany. Compared to the immediate harm the war is doing to Germany, speculation about what kind of government Lenin might institute, if he did somehow manage to overthrow the Russian Provisional Government, and what this hypothetical Russian state's future policy toward Germany might be, well, that's pretty farfetched thinking. The German government would have been crazy to pass up an opportunity to win the Great War based on this kind of idle speculation.

Besides, if you want to blame the German government for everything the Soviet Union did and became, what about blaming the Japanese government for funding Lenin at a critical period in his career, episode 34? What about blaming the Allies, Britain, France, and the United States, for pressing the Russian Provisional Government to continue the war in the face of massive domestic unrest? The very same logic applies, doesn't it? Britain, France, and the US, all democratic nations by the way, pressured the Provisional Government to take a hugely unpopular position on the war, even though Russia would in fact quit the war anyway, and the Allies would win the war anyway. So the Allies forced the Provisional Government to commit suicide by continuing the war, which led to the creation of the Soviet Union with zero benefit to the Allies in exchange. It seems to me that's at least as culpable a deed as anything Germany did.

Also, in my day, much was made of the so-called "sealed train," as in, "of course the Germans sealed the train; they didn't want any Bolshevism getting into *their* country," as if Bolshevism were a virus or something. Winston Churchill made this analogy quite explicitly, writing that Germany "turned upon Russia the most grisly of all weapons. They transported Lenin in a sealed truck like a plague bacillus from Switzerland to Russia." I hope I've already disabused you of this misconception. As we've seen, the "sealed train" was a diplomatic nicety, meant to give Lenin space to deny he'd accepted any special assistance from Germany.

Well, enough of my ranting. The “sealed train” business is a gross exaggeration, but there’s no denying the return of Lenin to Russia is a momentous event in the history of the twentieth century, but it will have to wait for a future episode. Several future episodes, I suspect.

We’ll have to stop here for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d like to give a big thank you to Martin for his donation and thank you to Matt for becoming a patron of the podcast. Patrons and donors help keep the podcast going, and if you’d like to help out, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), where you can get more information and you can also leave a comment to let me know what you thought of today’s episode. You can also share your views on our podcast Facebook page, or tweet them to @History20th.

I’ve been doing some traveling these past couple of months, getting caught up with family and friends, which is nice but it also causes the schedule to slip a little for the production of new podcast episodes. I’m settled in at home now, and I’m planning to spend some time hunkered down getting caught up, but unfortunately it seems I’m going to have to stick to the three weeks on and one week off schedule for a few more months. I hope you’ll bear with me. That means next week will be an “off” week, but I hope you’ll join me in two weeks’ time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we begin the first of a three-week set of episodes examining the increasingly chaotic and increasingly alarming internal situation in Russia. All Power to the Soviets, in two weeks’ time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned that mansion in Petrograd that the Bolsheviks had seized and made into their party headquarters, remember? The owner of that house, prior to March 1917, was none other than Matilda Kshessinskaya, the ethnically Polish Russian ballet dancer. We first met her all the way back in episode 28, when she became the then-Crown Prince Nikolai’s mistress. We encountered her again in episodes 44 and 45, when she became the sometime-friend, sometime-foe of Sergei Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes*. She had become a world-famous ballet dancer and star of the Imperial Ballet and the *Ballets Russes*. When Nikolai became Emperor, he gave her the elegant *art nouveau* mansion that Lenin is now using to give speeches from.

She never did lose her taste for Romanov men. They were useful to her career, and they sometimes gave her mansions in St. Petersburg. She had an affair with Grand Duke Sergei and later with Grand Duke Andrei, both cousins of the Emperor. When the February Revolution began, Matilda was living in her mansion in Petrograd, but she felt threatened at once by the political unrest outside her front door and quickly fled the country. Afterward, she lived in France for the rest of her life. Her then-current squeeze, Grand Duke Andrei, later escaped the Bolsheviks and caught up to her in France, where they married and had one son.

In the 1920s, Matilda Kshessinskaya would open a ballet school in Paris and teach the techniques she had learned at the Imperial Ballet to a new generation of dancers including Margot Fonteyn. She would outlive her husband, who died in 1956 at the age of 77. In fact, she made it all the

way to her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday, finally passing away in 1971, perhaps the last prominent figure from the days of Imperial Russia.

In the year 2017, a Russian film titled *Matilda* was released. I haven't seen it myself, but it was an historical romance, centering on the affair between Matilda and Crown Prince Nikolai. The film provoked controversy in Russia, apparently because the sex scenes were pretty explicit, which is a little awkward because Nikolai is now a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church.

As for the Kshessinskaya Mansion, after the October Revolution, it would become a government building. In 1955, it became the home of the Museum of the October Revolution, and in 1991, it was rechristened the State Museum of the Political History of Russia.

[music: Closing War Theme]