

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 144

“All Power to the Soviets”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Vladimir Lenin arrived in Petrograd on the night of April 16, 1917 and proceeded at once to the former Kshessinskaya Mansion, which the Bolsheviks were now using as their headquarters. In the small hours of April 17, Lenin addressed the gathered party faithful in a ninety-minute speech in which he rejected the view of the other Russian socialist parties, that the Provisional Government should be supported for now, with a long term goal of advancing Russia from a bourgeois-democratic government to a socialist one once the country was ready. In the fullness of time.

The Provisional Government was barely a month old, but for the leader of the Bolsheviks, it had already outlived its usefulness. Lenin called for a new era of socialism, and he demanded it now. No waiting, no compromises, no delays. Now.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 144. All Power to the Soviets.

With the Emperor deposed, millions of Russians wanted to know why they were still being asked to fight the Great War, not least the seven million soldiers on the front lines. You’ll recall that the Provisional Government, in the person of its foreign minister, Pavel Miliukov, has been walking a fine line here. The Petrograd Soviet and the socialist factions that make up the Soviet, were all adamant that war is not to be fought for the old imperialist reasons of territorial expansion. The new Russia fights only in self-defense...right?

But there was that Sykes-Picot agreement out there, the one in which the Allied powers had mutually agreed that Russia would finally get control of the Bosphorus after the Central Powers were defeated. I talked about this in some detail back in episode 120, and if you’ve been listening to this podcast from the beginning, you know that this has been a central aim of Russian foreign policy for at least fifty years now, and has more than a little to do with the Great Power rivalries in the Balkans that led to this mess of a Great War in the first place.

With Britain and France, Russia's opponents back in the days of the Crimean War, now onboard with the idea of allowing a Russian annexation of the Straits, and with Germany and Austria hopefully soon to be defeated and in no position to object, Russia finds the forbidden fruit finally ready for plucking, so to speak, only now a bunch of noisy leftists were demanding that Russia forego the prize she had sought for so long.

The existence and the terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement were a secret, but there were rumors. One source of these rumors was a little-known military project under way on the Black Sea. The Russian Black Sea Fleet was under the command of the 42-year old Admiral Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak. Since 1916, Kolchak has been planning an amphibious assault on Constantinople, or Tsargrad, "Caesar's City," to use the traditional Slavic name. Kolchak had created what he had romantically named the Tsargradsky Regiment to be the spearhead for the Russian assault, which he hoped to launch by July of this year.

All this was already humming along according to the timetable when the February Revolution struck, and it kept humming right along under the Provisional Government. The new war minister, Alexander Guchkov, knew about it. The new foreign minister, Pavel Miliukov, knew about it. Presumably, the whole Provisional Government knew about it. Hence the reluctance on their part to making a full and unambiguous renunciation of territorial ambition. As Miliukov himself put it, in a private conversation with a fellow member of the Constitutional Democratic party, "[I]t would be absurd and criminal to renounce the biggest prize of the war...in the name of some humanitarian and cosmopolitan idea of international socialism."

The socialists, the Petrograd Soviet, and the Ispolkom did not have *all* this information, but as I said, they were hearing rumors and they were getting increasingly suspicious. The more the Ispolkom pressed the Government to disavow any territorial claims, and the harder the Provisional Government danced around the issue without making the simple and unambiguous statement Ispolkom was looking for, well, the more it seemed as if the government had something to hide.

On April 4, Foreign Minister Miliukov held a press conference to address this very issue: war aims. He did his best to frame Russia's ambitions in the Wilsonian language of self-determination. Yes, Russia wanted to seize Habsburg lands, but not for imperialist reasons. Rather, Russia wanted to see an independent Czecho-Slovakian state. It wanted the Ukrainians of Galicia brought into union with the Ukrainians of Russia. As for the Straits question, well, Miliukov argued that Constantinople and the Straits weren't really Turkish, since the population that lived there was mostly Orthodox peoples living under Turkish oppression. To transfer rule of them from Turks to fellow Orthodox was not an imperialist aspiration, and would, as he put it, "in no way contradict the principles advanced by Woodrow Wilson..."

Miliukov's suggestion that a city that has served as the Ottoman capital for five centuries now wasn't really Ottoman is hard to take seriously, but the fact that he was making it speaks

volumes about the Provisional Government's intentions. Another action that speaks volumes about the Provisional Government's intentions took place at the mouth of the Bosphorus on the very same day Miliukov held his press conference in Petrograd. A Russian naval squadron including three seaplane carriers plus escorts sent reconnaissance aircraft over Constantinople and the Bosphorus in preparation for the coming assault, because—surprise!—Russia now has seaplane carriers. Turkish aircraft intercepted and drove the Russian planes away, but presumably they got at least some of the reconnaissance information they were there to collect.

The Petrograd Soviet reacted sharply to these developments, demanding that Miliukov back down. The Provisional Government was at this moment preparing to sell its first series of war bonds to the Russian public in order to fund the war, and the threat that the Soviet might oppose the bond campaign was enough to force the Government to issue a clarification that didn't *exactly* say that the Government renounced all territorial claims on other nations, but it did promise that "[t]he purpose of free Russia is not domination over other nations, or the seizure of their national possessions or forcible occupation of foreign territories, but the establishment of a stable peace on the basis of self-determination of peoples." This was enough to satisfy the Petrograd Soviet, at least for the moment. The two power centers of revolutionary Russia had struck a delicate balance over their conflicting views on war policy.

A week later, into this delicate balance stepped Vladimir Lenin.

[music: Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 3*]

Before Lenin arrived from Switzerland, the Bolsheviks in Petrograd were a ship without a rudder. They are at best the third-largest faction in the Petrograd Soviet. The largest are the Mensheviks, the opposing faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, and the Social Revolutionary Party, which despite its radical-sounding name is perhaps less radical even than the Mensheviks. Nobody is as extreme as the Bolsheviks, though before Lenin's arrival, the Bolsheviks were approaching things cautiously, tending to go along with the other socialist factions. Even Joseph Stalin, who was now editing *Pravda*, the Bolshevik newspaper, penned editorials in support of the Provisional Government.

On his journey back to Russia, Lenin spent his time writing out what *he* viewed as the proper Bolshevik response to the Provisional Government. This document is known to history as the "April Theses," and it's pretty strong stuff.

The Petrograd Soviet is supposed to be the conscience of the revolution. It stands apart from the Provisional Government, but sees its duty as keeping the Provisional Government on the straight and narrow. Most socialists in Russia at this time were more worried about the threat of a counterrevolution, than they were about moving the socialist revolution forward. Such a counterrevolution would likely be led by right-wing aristocrats and monarchists in the officer corps, so it was important to keep a wary eye on the Army.

In this context, most socialists figured the best way to preserve the gains made during the February Revolution and keep the path clear for a future socialist revolution was to guard against counterrevolutionary elements while making sure the Provisional Government followed through on its pledges to protect civil and political liberties and create a democratic government. Most socialists saw these reforms as a necessary pre-condition to the establishment of socialism.

And in spite of socialism's embrace of pacifism, most Russian socialists grudgingly supported the war effort, a view that was called "socialist defensism," meaning that a since a Russian defeat at the hands of Imperial Germany would likely lead to a rollback of the gains made after the February Revolution and snuff out the spark of socialism before it had any chance to catch fire, defending socialism meant defending Russia. Military defeat would likely lead to German demands for a more autocratic government, perhaps even put the former Emperor or his brother back on the throne, and it was a foregone conclusion that Kaiser Wilhelm would never tolerate a full-blown socialist state on his doorstep, not so long as he had the means to prevent it.

So "socialist defensism" means continuing the war against the Kaiser and the Germans. Most socialists accepted that, for the moment, the interests of the socialists and the Provisional Government were pretty closely aligned, so long as the Provisional Government meant what it said about setting up a new government with civil liberties and democratic elections, and as long as they were sincere in renouncing any imperialist annexation of new territory and fought the war only for the defense of Russia.

Lenin, in his April Theses, forcefully rejected these views. He declared that the Bolsheviks were not willing to wait. Bolsheviks should reject talk of a Provisional Government run by the bourgeoisie transitioning into a liberal democracy transitioning into a socialist government at some to-be-determined future date. The capitalists can't be trusted; they'll break all their promises just as soon as they think they can get away with it. Lenin wanted socialism now. And he wanted the Provisional Government gone yesterday. The Bolsheviks would not support the Provisional Government, and socialists who did Lenin condemned as traitors to the cause.

Lenin held that political power in Russia should be turned over immediately to the soviets everywhere and at all levels. The Army should be abolished and replaced with a people's militia. All land should be confiscated, and all factories and banks brought under soviet control. As for the war effort, Lenin dismissed "socialist defensism" as a fraud. The Provisional Government was just as imperialist as the Emperor had been, or as the other nations fighting the war still were. "Socialist defensism" was just an excuse for old-style imperialism with a sugar coating. To Lenin, preserving and safeguarding the Russian state did not matter, except insofar as Russia was the first rung on the ladder that led to socialist revolution worldwide. Just as the Bolsheviks were the vanguard of the socialist revolution in Russia, the Russian proletariat would be the vanguard that spread the revolution across the world. The other socialist parties had forgotten the fundamental truth of international socialism: that the working classes of all nations were allies

together against their common enemy, the capitalists of all nations. The enemy was just as much in Petrograd as in Berlin.

This was radical stuff, even by Bolshevik standards, so radical that even *Pravda* at first refused to print it. But now Lenin and Grigori Zinoviev, Lenin's aide and associate, who had worked with him in Switzerland and returned to Russia with him, joined the editorial board, and *Pravda* and the Bolsheviks would soon embrace Lenin's uncompromising stand.

The February Revolution had brought down an Emperor, and it had done it simply by filling the streets of Petrograd with protesting soldiers and workers. This was not lost on Lenin, who drew the logical conclusion that if a 300-year old Imperial dynasty can be brought down by a few days of street demonstrations, surely the ramshackle Provisional Government could too, and probably with less effort than that. And so, Lenin and *Pravda* and the Bolsheviks took a hard line against the Provisional Government on every issue, condemning every Government action as a betrayal of the Revolution and blaming all of Russia's problems on Provisional Government incompetence or malice.

This continuing stream of criticism appeared in *Pravda* and in several other Bolshevik publications aimed at specific readerships, including, significantly, *Soldatskaya Pravda*, or *Soldier's Truth*, a newspaper prepared especially for the Petrograd Garrison. The goal was nothing less than to incite a second February Revolution.

I want to pause here for a moment to highlight something you may already be wondering about. After Lenin returned to Petrograd, the Bolsheviks suddenly seemed to have a whole lot of new spending money. Suddenly, not only was there *Pravda*, there were several of these baby *Pravdas*, if you will. *Soldatskaya Pravda*, the one specially for the Petrograd Garrison, one specially for front-line soldiers, one specially for sailors in the Russian Navy, one specially for factory workers and so on. The Bolsheviks were suddenly printing hundreds of thousands of newspapers every day and distributing them to the very people who brought down the Emperor—the soldiers and workers in Petrograd. And there were pamphlets and flyers by the thousands as well.

Where was all this coming from? Well, the Bolsheviks had spent hundreds of thousands of rubles, the equivalent of millions of US dollars in our time, to buy an entire printing company, pay the salaries of its workers, and put them to work producing all this printed matter.

So where was the money coming from? No one can say with absolute certainty, but there are good reasons to think that this was German money. Just before the deal to allow Lenin's train to pass through Germany had been worked out, the German government had allocated five million gold marks to encourage revolutionary instability in Russia. Overall, the German government may have spent fifty million gold marks, which is about a billion US dollars in today's money.

From the German perspective, even this kind of cost would be a bargain, if it took Russia out of the war. Indeed, in 1917 it would have been easy to argue that the difference between a German victory and a German defeat might well come down to whether or not there was a socialist revolution in Russia.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks always denied being the beneficiaries of this German spending, and we may never know for certain that they were knowing recipients of German largesse, but here's the thing. The Germans would have had to have been crazy *not* to try to meddle in revolutionary Russia to overthrow the shaky Russian Provisional Government, committed as it is to keeping up the fight. And once you get past *that* hurdle, it's painfully obvious which faction in Petrograd is the one most closely aligned with the German interest in ending the war.

As for Lenin, well, there's an old quote often attributed to Lenin, in which he purportedly says that the capitalists will sell you the rope you hang them with. This was widely quoted during my Cold War youth, although in fact there's no evidence Lenin ever actually said it. But I bring it up because here we have a case of imperialist-capitalist Germany not *selling* the rope but actually *donating* it to the Bolshevik cause. It's barely possible that the Bolsheviks were receiving German support but Lenin was kept in the dark about it somehow, but it seems far more likely that Lenin would have cheerfully accepted German aid for exactly this reason: to him, it would have looked like the capitalists were donating the rope he intended to hang them with.

It also seems plausible that German money was what helped Lenin win all those arguments within the Bolshevik movement, and why Stalin and *Pravda* so quickly gave in and began falling in line behind the April Theses.

[music: Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 3*]

In Lenin's view, which now became the Bolshevik view, which now became *Pravda's* view, the Provisional Government could do nothing right. Domestically, if there were food shortages or civil disorder, it was the fault of the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks wanted to end the war at any price, even if Germany's peace terms were harsh, and yet they faulted the Government for every military setback and accused it of secretly selling out Petrograd to the Germans while at the same time criticizing it for keeping up the fight, and laying out accusations of secret conspiracies with the capitalists of Britain and France as the real reason Russia was still fighting, even as the Provisional Government denied all of it.

Supporters of the Provisional Government accused Lenin and the Bolsheviks of merely wanting to seize power for themselves. But Lenin had been shrewd. His call for all power to be transferred to the soviets inoculated the Bolsheviks against this accusation. Bolsheviks could, and did, point out that they themselves were only a minority on the soviets. Since Bolsheviks did not control the soviets, how can you argue that they seek power merely for themselves?

And this brings us back around to the question of war aims. The latest “clarification” from the Provisional Government satisfied the Petrograd Soviet, but it didn’t satisfy Lenin. Nor did it satisfy Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov, the leader of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, who, like Lenin, had just returned from exile. Miliukov wasn’t helping his own cause any. On April 24, he spoke on war aims in Moscow and affirmed the government’s commitment to “the reunification of Armenia” and the satisfying of “the national aspirations of the Austrian Slavs.” This sounds an awful lot like a veiled promise to annex eastern Anatolia and Galicia, respectively.

The government’s socialist critics now demanded the government send to Russia’s allies that same “clarification” of its non-annexationist war policy that it had made to the Petrograd Soviet. Miliukov resisted this demand, and that only fueled the socialists’ suspicions. His refusal to speak the same words to London or Paris that he had agreed to in Petrograd seemed to confirm all the ugliest conspiracy theories about him and the Provisional Government, that they were talking a good socialist line at home while following through with the same old imperialist policies abroad.

Miliukov explained that his objection was based on a fear that if Russia renounced its share of the territorial claims she and the other Allied powers had already agreed to, this would be seen in London and Paris and Rome as a sign that Russia was contemplating quitting the war and signing a separate peace with Germany. Now, that argument didn’t even fly with the other ministers in the Provisional Government, with Alexander Kerensky particularly vehement that Miliukov had to do better than that. Remember that Kerensky is the only person who holds a seat both on Ispolkom, the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, and in the Provisional Government, so he is feeling the heat from the socialists more than anyone else in the government.

The ministers directed Miliukov to draft an explanatory note that could accompany the statement when it was sent to the Allies, and Miliukov came up with one that satisfied everyone in the Provisional Government, even Kerensky. The explanatory note pledged Russia’s allegiance to the ideals of the alliance and her fidelity to her alliance obligations. The clarification and the explanatory note were cabled to the Allies on May 1, and they were published in Petrograd newspapers on May 3.

The result was the biggest socialist uproar yet. Many people noticed immediately how Miliukov’s “clarification” still tap danced around the question of annexations instead of setting down an unambiguous disavowal in plain English, I mean, in plain Russian. The Soviet was particularly loud in its objections, moving Ispolkom to meet that very same day and pass a resolution declaring that “revolutionary democracy will not permit the spilling of blood” for the sake of territorial aggrandizement. In the pages of *Pravda*, Lenin declared that socialists who supported the Provisional Government were now getting their just desserts. “The point is that [Guchkov and Miliukov] are spokesmen of the capitalists...[T]he interests of the Russian capitalists are identical with those of the British and French capitalists. That and that alone is the

reason why the tsar's treaties with the British and the French capitalists are precious to the Provisional Government of the Russian capitalists."

That afternoon, armed units of the Petrograd Garrison marched on the Mariinsky Palace, where the Provisional Government was now meeting, and shouted their demands that Miliukov resign. The Bolsheviks had had nothing to do with this spontaneous demonstration, but the next day, they were out on the streets, calling on workers and soldiers to keep up the pressure. Bolsheviks marched through Petrograd with banners that read "Down with the Provisional Government," "Down with the War," and "All Power to the Soviets."

But the Provisional Government had its supporters, and they were in the streets too, carrying banners that read "Long live the Provisional Government" and "Down with Lenin." When the two groups met, there was pushing, then punching, then shots fired. Three demonstrators were killed, in the first incident of political violence since the February Revolution.

The Provisional Government took no action. They did not order the use of force to disperse the protests. They did not even publicly defend Miliukov. The new commander of the Petrograd Garrison, the 46-year old General Lavr Kornilov, attempted to take matters into his own hands. When violence broke out in the streets of Petrograd, Kornilov ordered loyal units into the streets to restore order. But Ispolkom demurred, issuing its own order that the soldiers return to their barracks. They believed this was a political problem, to be resolved by political means, and issued a decree to the Petrograd Garrison that henceforth no order sending soldiers onto the streets of Petrograd should be considered valid unless it came already approved by Ispolkom.

A few hours later, Ispolkom declared a ban on political demonstrations in Petrograd for the next 48 hours, warning that anyone who promoted political violence was a "traitor to the Revolution." The Bolsheviks responded by organizing demonstrations in Moscow. But there as in Petrograd, Bolshevik demonstrators found themselves outnumbered by pro-government demonstrators.

If this was an attempt by the Bolsheviks to provoke a second round of street demonstrations and bring down the Provisional Government, it failed, but the Provisional Government did not escape this political crisis unscathed. The protests left it looking weak and indecisive.

On May 9, the Government made a public appeal, inviting the socialist parties to join the Provisional Government. Two days later, Ispolkom voted to reject the invitation, but under pressure from Kerensky, they reversed course a few days later. A shake-up in the Government followed. Guchkov, the Octobrist war minister, and Miliukov, the Constitutional Democratic foreign minister, both resigned.

Guchkov had been a leader of the Octobrist party in the Duma. That was a monarchist party, although Guchkov had later become convinced that the Emperor needed to be replaced. He joined the Progressive Bloc and had been one of the Duma leaders who had met with Nikolai and persuaded him to abdicate.

It tells you something about the state of Russian politics that people like Guchkov and Miliukov, who two months ago were extremists skirting the edge of treason, now find themselves too conservative to be part of a Russian government that is becoming increasingly leftist. Or perhaps increasingly chaotic, though these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Kerensky himself would take over as war minister, and six socialists, members of the Social Revolutionary Party and the Mensheviks, would take seats in the newly reshuffled Government, including Social Revolutionary Party leader Viktor Chernov, who would become minister of agriculture, and the Menshevik leader, a Georgian named Irakli Tsereteli, would become minister of post and telegraph.

Ispolkom exacted a price in exchange for socialist participation in the government. The socialists demanded a review of all agreements between Russia and her allies, democratization of the armed forces, increased efforts to end the war, and for God's sake, can we finally get some movement on land reform and on calling that Constituent Assembly you guys keep promising us? For its part, the Government demanded that Ispolkom recognize its authority as the one and only national government of Russia and its right to command the armed forces, already. Jeez.

All and all, this was a step in the right direction. These two distinct, and sometimes conflicting, centers of political power, the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet, are now coalescing into something like a single entity in which all political parties are represented, something like the national unity coalitions that govern Britain and France.

Except for the Bolsheviks, the only socialist faction that stubbornly continues to refuse to join the Provisional Government. *Pravda* continued to insist that the Provisional Government was irredeemably pro-capitalist and that any socialist who supported it was at best a fool and at worst a traitor. But note that now that the other socialist factions have joined the government, they have taken ownership of its deeds, and the Bolsheviks are now the only group that could claim the mantle of opposition. If you didn't like the government, you had nowhere to go but to the Bolsheviks.

We'll have to stop there for today. I'd like to thank Mikio for making a donation and thank you to Jim for becoming a patron of the podcast. And I'd also like to thank every one of you listening for being a listener. You make it all worthwhile. And if you're not already a donor or patron and would like to become one, you can visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, where you can click on the Patreon button and become a patron for as little as \$2 a month, or make a one-time donation via PayPal or even by the historical method of putting a check in the mail.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as the Bolsheviks finally make their move to seize power in Petrograd...and fail miserably. The July Days, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. On May 17, in the midst of the government shakeup in Petrograd, Leon Trotsky stepped off his train at the Finland Station, the same station where Lenin had arrived six weeks earlier.

Trotsky was not at this point a Bolshevik, although his political views were scarcely distinguishable from them. He gave a speech at the station on his arrival, in which he called for a second Russian revolution. From the station, he went immediately to a meeting of Ispolkom, where the Bolsheviks proposed he be given a seat on the committee, in recognition of his role in the St. Petersburg Soviet of 1905. Trotsky was given the seat, and in his first speech before Ispolkom, he too denounced the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionary Party for participating in the Provisional Government.

He didn't get much applause after that speech. One Menshevik wrote afterward that "[a]lthough Trotsky did not belong to the Bolshevik Party, rumors were already going around to the effect that he was worse than Lenin."

[music: Closing War Theme]