

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 163

### “A State Not Yet Born”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*[T]he civil war which was started by the Kadet-Kaledin counterrevolutionary revolt against the Soviet authorities...has destroyed every chance of settling in a formally democratic way the very acute problems with which history has confronted the peoples of Russia...Every direct or indirect attempt to consider the question of the Constituent Assembly from a formal, legal point of view, within the framework of ordinary bourgeois democracy and disregarding the class struggle and the civil war, would be a betrayal of the proletariat's cause...*

*[T]he crisis in connection with the Constituent Assembly can be settled only in a revolutionary way, by Soviet power adopting the most energetic, speedy, firm, and determined revolutionary measures against the Kadet-Kaledin counterrevolution, no matter behind what slogans and institutions (even participation in the Constituent Assembly) this counterrevolution may hide. Any attempt to tie the hands of Soviet power in this struggle would be tantamount to aiding counterrevolution.*

Vladimir Lenin, “Theses on the Constituent Assembly,” published in *Pravda*, December 26, 1917.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 163. A State Not Yet Born.

One of the remarkable things about the February Revolution in Russia was how the Russian nation accepted the overthrow of the Emperor and the institution of the Provisional Government. This acceptance was rapid and it was broad-based, so much so that its few opponents must have found their heads spinning. By the time they got their heads together and began thinking about how to oppose it, it was already too late. And here I'm including the Emperor himself.

The October Revolution, by contrast, did not have anything like this kind of broad-based support. As we saw in episode 156, the new Sovnarkom had difficulty winning recognition even from the civil servants in the Russian government ministries, their nominal subordinates.

But although the Bolshevik government struggled for recognition, the opposition limited itself to grumbling. Officially, this was still just a *provisional* government, meant only to keep the wheels turning until the Constituent Assembly could meet. This would be the truly democratic body that would have the authority to rule in the people's name. Elections for the Constituent Assembly were to be held just three weeks after the Bolshevik coup, so their opponents saw little reason to draw a line in the sand over the makeup of a provisional government that a) hardly had any power anyway and b) was due to be dissolved in a matter of weeks.

This was particularly true of the other socialist political parties, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. As far as they were concerned, whatever differences they had with the Bolsheviks were more like a family quarrel than real political opposition. The Bolsheviks may have been extremists and hotheads, but they were more like the twenty-something relative who comes to Thanksgiving dinner every year, only to ostentatiously refuse any turkey on the grounds that meat is murder and proceeds to lecture the rest of the family on the virtues of veganism. In other words, the Bolsheviks were annoying, yes, impractical, maybe, but still members of the family. You still invite them to dinner. And once the Bolsheviks matured enough politically to realize that you can't run a country the size of Russia on ideological declarations alone, they'll have no choice but to come back into the socialist fold.

It seems clear in hindsight that Lenin and most of the Bolshevik leadership, having fought so hard and risked so much to take control of the nation, had no intention of giving all that up without a fight. But the Constituent Assembly elections were so popular that they couldn't see a way to cancel or even postpone them, especially since they had seized power in the first place on the claim that it was the previous Provisional Government that was conspiring to prevent a democratic election.

And so the election went ahead as scheduled, and to recap, the party that won the most votes was the Socialist Revolutionary party, with about 40%. The Bolsheviks came in second with 24%. Most of the rest of the vote was divided among an array of regional and ethnic parties. No other party cracked ten percent; the Mensheviks and the Kadets each polled less than five percent.

Not all the election news was bad news for the Bolsheviks. The Socialist Revolutionary Party did so well because it was the party of the peasants. Its leaders had organized in the rural regions of the country where there was little to no Bolshevik presence. But the Bolsheviks did well among industrial workers, and they were in the big cities, especially Petrograd and Moscow.

The numbers for the Kadets look pretty sad, but they left the Bolsheviks uneasy nonetheless. The Kadets were the only non-socialist party still in the game. They were the party of the landlords and the capitalists and the middle class. They had enough money to stay in business despite their

poor showing. But most notable is that they ran second to the Bolsheviks in those crucial cities of Petrograd and Moscow.

The Bolsheviks did very well among the military, and especially well in the Petrograd and Moscow garrisons, where they racked up over 70% of the vote, and if the Russian Revolution has taught us anything so far, it has taught us that who controls Petrograd controls the state. So there's that. The popularity of the Bolsheviks among the military is no great mystery, once you understand that the Bolsheviks were the party most outspoken about ending the war. Hence Lenin's enthusiasm for doing a peace deal with the Germans at any price, as we saw in episode 157. The Bolsheviks needed the support of the soldiers, and what the soldiers want is an end to the war.

Still, no matter how you look at it, the Bolsheviks were only a minority in the Assembly, so with no obvious way to change or nullify the outcome, the Bolsheviks settled for delay. The Constituent Assembly was scheduled to meet on December 11. The Bolsheviks announced a week before that the Assembly would be postponed indefinitely because of the difficulty in certifying the winners and assembling them in Petrograd.

There was an abortive attempt by about 45 elected members of the Assembly, mostly representing districts in and around Petrograd, to defy the Bolsheviks and meet on the appointed day anyway. More than ten thousand Bolshevik opponents marched in their support, including many of those civil servants who were refusing to follow Sovnarkom. Their banners taunted the Bolsheviks by turning around their slogan into "All Power to the Constituent Assembly." Armed Bolshevik soldiers and sailors also appeared. They allowed the demonstrations and the meeting on the first day. On the second day, they barred the demonstrators. On the third day, they barred the deputies.

The Bolsheviks used the delay to launch a double-barreled propaganda assault on the legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly. There was the ideological argument, which you hear in the Lenin essay I read at the top of the episode, which claims that democratic elections are the epitome of freedom and democracy in a bourgeois state, but under revolutionary socialism, whether or not an elected assembly is democratic has to be judged by the degree to which it is in harmony with revolutionary and socialist principles. In other words, by whether it is harmony with Bolshevism.

Another argument called out the split in the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Remember that one faction of that party chose to support the Bolshevik coup. But that split had emerged only after the election lists were drawn up, and so, the Bolsheviks argued, you can't tell from the election results whether that 40% who voted Socialist Revolutionary thought they were voting for or against Bolshevism. I mean, arguably the entire 40% thought they were voting to support Bolshevism, only to have their votes nullified by reactionary elements in their own party leadership. We can't have that, can we?

Third, there was Kaledin and his armed resistance gathering in the south. So long as the government was under threat of arms from counterrevolutionary elements like the Cossacks, anyone who opposed the government was aiding the counterrevolution. Hence the linkage between the Kadets and Kaledin in that essay excerpt I read. On December 11, the same day members of the Constituent Assembly attempted to meet in defiance of Sovnarkom, Lenin issued a “Decree Concerning the Arrest of the Leaders of the Civil War against the Revolution,” in which he named the Kadets as leaders of the civil war and therefore enemies of the people and ordered the arrest of everyone prominent in the party, including some who had been elected to the Constituent Assembly. Thus the Kadets hold the distinction of being the first political party outlawed by the new Russian government.

Meanwhile, Sovnarkom continued to operate as the Russian government. I already described the Decree on Land and the Decree on Peace. Their power was limited, and many of these acts should be seen as more aspirational than effective. Remember how the Germans were uncertain whether they should bother to try to negotiate with these people? Even so, Sovnarkom’s decrees served as demonstrations to the Russian public of all the good things the people could hope for, if only they kept the Bolsheviks in power. And this became another argument against the Constituent Assembly. The election had happened before the voters could fully appreciate the benefits of Bolshevik rule.

Sovnarkom eventually agreed to January 18, 1918 as the date for the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly. They also called a meeting of the “Third Congress of Soviets” for three days later, on January 21. That group would be dominated by Bolsheviks, and by this point it is already clear in hindsight what Lenin had in mind.

When January 18 came, *Pravda’s* headline read, “Today the Hyenas of Capital and Their Hirelings Want to Seize Power from Soviet Hands.” A crowd of about 50,000 peaceful protesters marched through Petrograd, chanting “Hurrah for the Constituent Assembly.” The streets were also full of armed Bolshevik soldiers, who dispersed the demonstrators at gunpoint, sometimes by firing into the crowds. Between eight and twenty-one demonstrators were killed, depending on the source you believe.

It was only after these demonstrations were broken up, at about four in the afternoon, that the Constituent Assembly was permitted to come to order. They met in the Tauride Palace, which was swarming with armed soldiers, including in the very chamber where the Assembly met, where they heckled anti-Bolshevik speakers. Victor Chernov, the head of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was elected to preside over the session. The Bolsheviks, through Fyodor Raskolnikov, the leader of the Bolshevik sailors at Kronshtadt, and now a member of the Assembly, introduced a resolution confirming the acts of Sovnarkom, declaring Russia a “republic of soviets,” and limiting the role of the Assembly to completing the transition of Russia to a socialist state.

Of the 400 or so members present, only 136 voted in favor of the resolution. By a staggering coincidence, that number is exactly equal to the number of Bolshevik deputies. The Bolsheviks responded to their defeat by declaring the Assembly to be controlled by counterrevolutionaries and walking out. Elsewhere in the Palace, the Bolshevik Central Committee met and declared the Assembly dissolved. Lenin ordered the guards not to use force. Members who wanted to leave the Palace should be permitted to go, but not to return.

It was a replay of what had happened in December. The Assembly remained in session until four in the morning, at which time the commander of the guard told them his men were tired and ordered them to leave. When they returned the next day, they were not permitted to enter the building.

And that was that. Two days later, when the Third Congress of Soviets met, they passed every resolution submitted to them by Sovnarkom, including one that declared Sovnarkom no longer provisional, but the legitimate government of the nation, which would now be known as the “Russian Soviet Socialist Republic.”

Really the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly is a more important turning point than the October Revolution. It was possible to misconstrue what had happened then. Now the intent of Lenin and the Bolsheviks was unmistakable.

Still, Russia largely accepted its new government. Tired, starving, war weary Russians had had enough of revolutions and counterrevolutions and political debates and elections and provisional whatever. At least the Bolsheviks are going to end the war and put bread back on the shelves. Right?

[music: “The Internationale”]

In the southeast of Russia, we saw the Don Cossacks declare independence under the leadership of Alexei Kaledin, a Cossack and former general in the Russian Army. We also saw the arrival of a number of Russian generals of an anti-Bolshevik persuasion, including such familiar names as Mikhail Alexeyev, Lavr Kornilov, and Anton Denikin, all of whom we’ve already met. They recruited what was called the “Volunteer Army” under the rallying cry of defending the Constituent Assembly. The Cossacks and the Volunteer Army were loosely allied as what we’ll call the “White Army,” though they didn’t entirely trust each other.

By the beginning of 1918, the White Army forces had captured Rostov-on-the-Don and commanded a total number of fighters that approached five thousand. It was enough to focus the minds of the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd. This was only one of the many threats facing the Bolsheviks. Follow along with me as we begin with the White Army and move clockwise around Russia. Farther west, the Ukrainian Rada has declared independence and would soon cut its own deal with the Germans for independence in exchange for provision of grain to the Central Powers. The Germans themselves threaten Russia from the west. At this moment an armistice is

in place and peace talks have begun, although it won't hold and the Germans will soon go on the offensive again, as we saw in episode 157. Finland has declared independence, and although a handful of Red Guards—mostly Bolshevik sailors from Kronshadt—still control the Finnish capital, Helsinki, most of Finland is under the control of an anti-Bolshevik Finnish nationalist army commanded by Carl Gustav Mannerheim, a former Russian Army general, another one of the many removed from command by Alexander Kerensky and the old Provisional Government.

In the far north of the country, the Royal Navy has a squadron of ships off the Russian port of Archangel. Archangel had been one of the Russian ports receiving Allied military aid, which piled up in warehouses because Russia lacked the trains to ship all of it to the front. Now the British were prepared to land marines and seize the port, if necessary, to keep those weapons out of Bolshevik control.

And closing the circle, in the Far East, restless Siberian regions were acting autonomously, disregarding Petrograd with impunity, because they were too distant and the Bolsheviks had too many problems closer to home. The Japanese sent two ships to Vladivostok, to keep an eye on the warehoused military aid there.

So Russia was encircled. The Russian Army was all but gone; the Bolsheviks had only about 7,000 soldiers they could fully rely on. These were sent against the White Army, since Sovnarkom judged, probably correctly, that the Whites represented the biggest threat. Still, the decision to send troops in that direction meant the other forces arrayed against the Bolsheviks would have their way, for now. The Bolsheviks had to abandon their plan to rely on a partisan militia of Red Guards and organized a new military, the “Red Army of Workers and Peasants,” usually called the Red Army for short. And history knows the two sides in the upcoming Russian Civil War as the Red Army and the White Army.

By the end of February, the Red Army was able to retake Rostov-on-the-Don and Novochoerkassk, after the outnumbered Cossacks, despite their bravado, mostly fled. A distraught Kaledin deemed the fight against the Bolsheviks hopeless and killed himself. Kornilov led the Volunteer Army south, into the Kuban region, along the eastern shore of the Black Sea, during harsh winter conditions, a retreat known as the “Ice March.” Unfortunately for them, there was a pro-Bolshevik government in the region, and its power was reinforced by soldiers returning home from the Caucasus front.

The Volunteer Army was hopelessly outnumbered, as there were perhaps 60,000 unfriendly soldiers in the region. How willing they were to fight was another matter. The Whites wandered the region, occasionally skirmishing with other soldiers. This was obviously an untenable situation, and in April, Kornilov attempted to capture the city of Ekaterinodar, the regional capital, 4,000 Whites against a defending force of maybe 10,000. The Whites were unable to break through the city's defenses, and even worse for their cause, an artillery shell landed on the barn Kornilov was using as a headquarters and the explosion killed him. Anton Denikin took

command and led the defeated Volunteer Army back to the north. By this time, the Germans and Austrians were moving into Ukraine, forcing back the Red Army and creating some breathing space for the Whites.

I'll get back to developments in that region, but first I want to turn to the question of prisoners of war, because a highly unlikely chain of events is about to take place. When the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, Russia held about 2.4 million prisoners of war. That's a staggering number that conceals an even more staggering imbalance. More than 2.2 million of them, or 92%, are Austrian prisoners. That's more people than live in Vienna, Austria-Hungary's largest city.

When you see an imbalance that big, you can't avoid the conclusion that the Austrian Army is either really inept or that its soldiers are not so much being captured as voluntarily surrendering, or even defecting. We've discussed the shortcomings of the Austrian Army before, and we've seen incidents of mass surrenders, especially among Slavic minority soldiers, who were never too keen to fight for an Emperor who treated them as second-class subjects. The Russians knew all this and leaned into pan-Slavic ideology. The prisoner numbers alone bear witness to the effectiveness of this pan-Slavic propaganda offensive.

But for now, I want to focus on two specific Slavic peoples in Austria-Hungary, the Czechs and the Slovaks. In the years leading up to the war, the Czechs were waging a no-holds-barred political struggle in Austria to gain Czech language rights, while the Slovaks, a much smaller ethnic group, were finding their language and culture suppressed by their Magyar overlords in Hungary.

As it happened, when the Great War began in 1914, the country that had the largest ethnic Czech and Slovak populations outside Austria-Hungary was Russia. The country that had the second largest populations of both groups was the United States, by the way. I'll just remind you that in episode 115, I talked a little about the Czech-Americans who banded together to do some freelance espionage work against the Germans and Austrians on behalf of the Allies, to further the cause of an independent Czecho-Slovak state. There's more to tell about that story, but it will have to wait until next time. For today, let's focus on Czech and Slovak immigrants in Russia. There were about 200,000 Czechs living in Russia when the war began, and maybe a thousand Slovaks, mostly in the Ukraine, where you could find the Prague Hotel in Kiev, along with a Czech high school and a Czech-language newspaper.

Most of these recent Czech and Slovak immigrants into Russia were still officially subjects of the Austrian Emperor and therefore enemy aliens. Some were rounded up and put into internment camps once the war began, others were put under police surveillance. Things were hardly better for Czech political activists back in Austria. The Austrian *Reichsrat* had been suspended and many Czech activists, including deputies in the *Reichsrat* and the Bohemian Diet, were imprisoned. A few were tried for treason and executed.

In Russia, the Czech and Slovak expatriates appealed to the Russian government as fellow Slavs for exemption from the restrictions on enemy aliens. Czech committees sprang up in major Russian cities. They petitioned the Emperor and his ministers to support Czech and Slovak aspirations back home. By November 1914, Emperor Nikolai included in a statement of Russian war aims the creation of an autonomous Czech and Slovak kingdom within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one that would have the same degree of freedom and home rule as Hungary had. This was good news for the expatriates, but they were by this time already arguing for more—for a fully independent Czecho-Slovakian state.

And by this time, Czechs and Slovaks in Russia were also volunteering to join the Russian Army in order to fight for freedom for their homelands. They asked for and received the right to organize their own special Czechoslovakian military units within the Russian Army. The Russians agreed to this, provided the units had Russian commanders and that the soldiers in them became Russian subjects. That's because the legalities around all this are tricky. It could be construed as a violation of the Hague agreements for the Russian government to arm Austro-Hungarian subjects to fight against their own government, hence the requirement that these fighters be willing to become Russian subjects.

But even if Russia recognized them as Russian subjects, it didn't necessarily mean the Austrian government was going to do the same. The Austrians could and did refuse to recognize the change of nationality and treated captured Czechs and Slovaks not as prisoners of war, but as traitors, subject to prosecution, even execution. So joining one of these units was risky. As large numbers of Czechs and Slovaks surrendered to the Russians and became prisoners, the Russians began to offer these prisoners the opportunity to join one of these Russian Czecho-Slovakian units. By the end of 1915, the Russian Army had 2,000 Czecho-Slovakian troops under arms. These troops were often placed in the front lines opposite Austrian Czech units and they did their best to encourage their fellow Czechs to defect, and often it worked.

By 1917 and the February Revolution, Russia was freely inviting Czech and Slovak POWs to join its Czecho-Slovakian units, and by that summer's Kerensky Offensive, some 40,000 Czechs and Slovaks were fighting under Russian command, most of them now former POWs. History knows these soldiers as the Czechoslovak Legion.

To serve in the Russian Army was more dangerous for these turncoats than for anyone else, since the Austrian government was offering cash rewards for the apprehension of deserters, and these soldiers were legally deserters who could be summarily executed upon capture. They had no hope of ever seeing their homes again. Not so long as their homes were in Austria-Hungary. Not even in an autonomous kingdom. The only way they would ever go home would be to an independent Czecho-Slovak state. They were in a very real sense not Russian soldiers any longer. They were the army of a state not yet born.

[music: Smetana, *Má vlast - Vltava*]

After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk ended the war on the Eastern Front, the Russian government was obligated to begin repatriating the prisoners of war it held. Understandably, the soldiers of the Czechoslovak Legion did not want to return to Austria-Hungary where execution awaited them. But this was the spring of 1918. The treaty of Brest-Litovsk had allowed the Germans to achieve numerical superiority on the Western Front, and the Allies, especially France, were desperate for soldiers. There were also a number of Czech and Slovak patriots fighting for the French Army by this time, so the French invited the Czechoslovak Legion to continue their war against the Central Powers on the Western Front. On February 7, 1918, the French prime minister Georges Clemenceau and Edvard Beneš, whom you'll hear more about next time, signed an agreement making the Czechoslovak Legion formally part of the French Army, although it would fight under its own flag and own commanders, and its soldiers would take an oath of allegiance not to France, but to Czecho-Slovakia, the state not yet born.

The Legion welcomed this opportunity. It looked like a win-win for the French and for them. The only problem is geography. The Legion can't exactly take the direct route to get to the Western Front. That would lead them right into Austria-Hungary, the one place they dare not go. So a different plan was conceived, in which the Czechoslovak Legion would be transported east via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok, and from there they would travel by steamship to France. The Russian government, now located in Moscow and having been pushed around by the Germans, was eager to maintain a good relationship with the Allies and so agreed to permit the transit of the Czechoslovak Legion across Siberia to Vladivostok. They even agreed to allow the Legion to keep most of their arms, up to a certain defined limit. This limit was mostly ignored.

This would be a complex operation, transporting now more than fifty thousand soldiers across three thousand miles to Vladivostok in dozens of trains in a nation short on locomotives, short on railway cars, short on fuel, and in the middle of a civil war. And the situation is about to get even more complicated.

By the end of April 1918, the Czechoslovak Legion was in the middle of this long, slow process of journeying eastward to Vladivostok. Groups of their soldiers were strung across five thousand miles of Russian railways like beads on a string. By this time, relations between Russia and the Allies were becoming strained, which meant that relations between the Russians and the Czechoslovak Legion were becoming strained. The word went out from Moscow to local soviets to enforce those weapons limits more strictly, and soldiers of the Legion increasingly found themselves laid over in small Siberian towns waiting days or weeks for the train that would take them on the next leg of their journey.

Russian officials blamed this on a shortage of trains. But the soldiers couldn't help but notice all the other trains passing through town in the other direction while they waited. Trains carrying German and Austrian and Hungarian POWs home, soldiers who would then presumably be redeployed to fight the allies of the Czecho-Slovak nation, while the Czechoslovak Legion is playing football in Siberia.

Sometimes the Russians were more blunt. You want a train? The train will come just as soon as you've surrendered some of your weapons. Czech units would surrender some weapons in exchange for a ride to a station farther east, where more weapons would then be demanded in exchange for the next leg of the journey. Legion commanders became concerned enough about all this to call a meeting at Chelyabinsk, a town east of the Urals that you can think of as the threshold of Siberia, the western end of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Meanwhile, the rank and file of the Czechoslovak Legion kept up their spirits—pretty well, you'd have to say, considering their situation and how long they'd been away from home. They passed their long hours marching and drilling, and yes, playing football and doing calisthenics, and they waited.

At Chelyabinsk, on May 14, a band of legionnaires was waiting on the south platform of the train station for a train that would take them east, on the first leg of the long trip across Siberia. As they waited, a train pulled into the station on the opposite track, carrying civilians westward. As it stopped to take on wood for fuel, the passengers debarked and lo and behold, about eighty of them were Hungarian, recently released POWs on their way back home to Hungary.

As the two groups waited, the Czechs and the Hungarians began to mingle. They were political adversaries to be sure, but they were also neighbors and fellow soldiers who had once worn the same uniform. All of them were eager for whatever scraps of news they could get of what was happening in the outside world, and especially back home in Austria-Hungary. They laughed together. The Hungarians were short on food, so the legionnaires shared some of theirs.

Finally, the westbound train finished refueling and the passengers, including the Hungarian POWs, reboarded. As the train began pulling away though, the legionnaires heard a loud voice curse at them in Hungarian. A piece of cast iron, probably taken from the heating stove inside the car, flew out of the window. It struck a Czech soldier in the head. He fell onto the tracks and was crushed by the wheels of the train.

Angry Czechoslovak soldiers chased after the train, climbing aboard the locomotive and forcing the engineers to stop. The Hungarians were forcibly removed from the train, and might have been physically assaulted, but Czech officers intervened. Still, the Hungarians were marched back to the station. The Czechs demanded they turn over the perpetrator. The Hungarians refused. Now the Czechs drew their weapons and began threatening and striking the Hungarians, until at last they pointed out the man who had thrown the missile. He was beaten to death. The remaining Hungarians were brought to the authorities in Chelyabinsk by a squad of ten Czech soldiers.

At this time, Chelyabinsk, like most places in Russia, was governed by a local soviet. The soviet was theoretically answerable to Moscow, but Moscow was a thousand miles away and communications were spotty. Not to mention that Moscow's authority was unclear and a civil war was breaking out. In Petrograd, soldiers had fired on an anti-government demonstration. It was like the February Revolution all over again. Or maybe not.

The Chelyabinsk Soviet was a mix of workers' representatives, a few educated people, and, in this particular case, a few Hungarian POWs who had been persuaded to join the Bolshevik cause. Perhaps not the most neutral of arbitrators. They listened as the Czechs and the Hungarians each told their side of the story. The soviet decided that the surviving Hungarians were innocent of any wrongdoing and sent them on their way. Their Czech guards, on the other hand, were imprisoned.

When word got back to the rest of the legionnaires that their brothers had been imprisoned by the Russians, they organized an operation to release them. Three days later, thousands of Czech soldiers marched into Chelyabinsk and seized control of the town without firing a shot. They assured the local officials that they meant no hostility toward them or the Russian government and that all they wanted was the return of their imprisoned comrades. The local officials, sizing up the situation, wisely decided to comply with the Czech demand. The imprisoned soldiers were released, and the legionnaires withdrew from the city.

So a peaceful resolution to what could have been a very ugly confrontation. Or so it would have been, except that two days later, on May 20, in Moscow, war minister Leon Trotsky learned what had happened. Allowing tens of thousands of armed foreign fighters free passage across Russian soil never sat well. This incident was clinching proof, as far as Trotsky was concerned, that it no longer tolerable.

First, Trotsky had two officials of the Moscow branch of the Czecho-Slovak National Council imprisoned. Next, he telegraphed orders to all soviets along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The orders stated that all Czechoslovak Legion soldiers were to be disarmed, taken into custody, and either placed in a labor battalion or into the Red Army.

In the heat of the moment, Trotsky had perhaps forgotten that the Czechs controlled the telegraph office in Chelyabinsk, which was the first place his message would go. Remember when I told you that the leaders of the Czechoslovak Legion had called a meeting, coincidentally right there in Chelyabinsk, to discuss their situation. The meeting was held on May 23, and Trotsky's telegram was read aloud to the assembled officers. Afterward, the reader told the assembly, "This is what I said: 'Brethren, we have only one response to this command—we will not turn over our weapons! If you want them, come and get them!'"

In a matter of days, Czechoslovak Legion troops began seizing control of towns up and down the Trans-Siberian Railway, all the way from Chelyabinsk to Vladivostok. Within weeks, the Legion controlled the entire length of the railway. And since this was the only line of transportation or communication across Siberia, it meant that the government in Moscow had effectively lost control of everything from Chelyabinsk east, which in terms of land area at least, is most of Russia. After a Great War, two revolutions, a shaky peace purchased at the cost of humiliating concessions, and then a budding civil war, Russia found itself embroiled in yet another conflict, its enemy this time Czecho-Slovakia, a state not yet born.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Erik for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing and the bits going, so if you'd like to help out, visit our website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. Your support helps keep us going.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the tale of the state not yet born. Today you saw the first stirrings of Czechoslovakia in Russia, next time we'll look at that Czecho-Slovak National Council I mentioned, and the international effort to establish a Czecho-Slovak state. That's in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should mention that even after that fateful meeting on May 23, the Legion's commanders reiterated their position that all they wanted was passage for their soldiers to Vladivostok and from there to depart Russia peacefully for France, where they would be able to continue the fight against the Central Powers.

Leon Trotsky, on the other hand, was in no mood for compromise. On May 25, he issued an order that any armed Czechoslovak soldier encountered was to be shot on sight, and that the failure of any Russian soldier or official to carry out this order would be regarded as treason. So this isn't going to be settled anytime soon.

[music: Closing War Theme]