

# The Constituent Assembly in Russia

By John Reed

AT five minutes past four o'clock on the morning of January 19th, 1918, while President Tchernov of the first Russian Constituent Assembly was reading aloud the project of fundamental principles of the agrarian law, a sailor stepped up to the tribune and touched him on the shoulder. Pointing to the empty seats of the Bolsheviks and the Left Social-Revolutionists, he said calmly:

"You fellows had better go home. The rest have gone. It's very late and the guard is tired."

Half an hour later, having passed a resolution calling for immediate peace, a law confiscating landed property, and declaring Russia to be a democratic federative republic, the Constituent Assembly adjourned, nevermore to meet—in this or any other world.

So ended the historic session of what was probably the most democratically-elected governing body the world has ever seen. Out of about five hundred delegates present only 170 were Bolsheviks, and some 40 Left Social Revolutionists—while the rest, about 250 Social Revolutionists of the right and center, 10 Cadets, half a dozen Mensheviks and United Social Democrats (Gorki's party), and the rest Mussulmen, Jews, Ukrainians, Estonians, Letts, etc., can be roughly characterized as "anti-Bolshevik." Did this not show that Russia, after two months of Bolshevism, rejected the party and policies of the Council of People's Commissars? No, its significance was much greater; it demonstrated conclusively and forever the impotence of the old-time political state as an expression of the will of the majority.

The next day the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviets met at Smolny and passed the following resolution, which I quote at some length because it explains the feeling behind the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly:

"The Russian revolution, since its inception, has put forward the Soviets of Workmen's, Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies as the means of organization of all the laboring and exploited classes which alone can direct the struggle of these classes for their complete economic and political liberation.

"During all the first period of the Russian revolution, the Soviets multiplied, grew and expanded, realizing by their own experience the emptiness of all illusions about a conciliation with the bourgeoisie, and the vanity of all forms of bourgeois-parliamentary democracy; and they have finally come to the conclusion that it is impossible to emancipate the oppressed classes without breaking completely with these forms, and with all conciliations of any kind. This rupture was realized by the November revolution, and the transfer of all power into the hands of the Soviets.

"The Constituent Assembly, elected upon the basis of electoral lists which were drawn up before the November revolution, is the expression of the old-time political relations between Cadets and the conciliators then in power.

"For example, the people could not, while voting for the candidates of the Socialist Revolutionary party, distinguish between the S. R. right and center, ally of the bourgeoisie, and the left S. R., partisans of Socialism. In this fashion the Constituent, which was to have been the crown of the bourgeois-parliamentary republic, could not but become an obstacle in the way of the November revolution and the Soviet power. Because it gave the power to the Soviets, and, through them, to the laboring and exploited classes, the November revolution provoked a desperate resistance on the part of the exploiters, and in the crushing of this resistance, the November revolution manifested itself plainly as the beginning of the social revolution.

"The working-class was forced to convince itself by experience that bourgeois parliamentarism had outlived its usefulness, that it was absolutely incompatible with the realization of Socialism—that not national institutions, but only class institutions are powerful enough to break the resistance of the propertied classes and lay the foundation of Socialist society.

"All restriction of the power of the Soviets, power conquered by the people of the Republic of Soviets, in favor of bourgeois parliamentarism and the Constituent, would be now a step backward and signify the failure of the entire workers' and peasants' revolution of November.

"Opened the 18th of January, the Constituent, because of well-known circumstances, gave the

majority of the party of the right Social Revolutionists, the party of Kerensky, of Avksentiev and of Tchernov. Naturally this party refused to examine the proposition made by the supreme organ of the Soviet power, a proposition clear, precise and admitting no equivocation, to adopt the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Working and Exploited People,' to recognize the November revolution and the Soviet power. By that refusal the Constituent broke all bonds with the Russian Soviet Republic. Therefore, inevitably, the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionists must withdraw from such a Constituent, forming as they do at present an immense majority in the Soviets and possessing the confidence of the workers and most of the peasants.

"Outside of the Constituent the parties of the majority of this Assembly, the right S. R. and the Mensheviks, carry on an open war against the power of the Soviets, inciting in their organs the people to overturn this power, and by that fact aiding the resistance of the exploiters to the transfer of the land and the factories into the hands of the workers.

"It is clear that the part of the Constituent which remains can only play the part of screen to the attempt of the bourgeois counter-revolution to destroy the power of the Soviets.

"In consequence, it is resolved by the Central Executive Committee:

"That the Constituent Assembly be dissolved."

What happened? Did Russia attempt to rise in revolt? Was there an outcry? The only audible protest came from the London Times, the Paris Temps, the New York Herald, and Gustave Herve. There was no revolt in Russia; on the contrary, a sort of immense sigh of relief swept the country, and the Cossacks finally began to turn against Kaledine. As for the members of the dissolved Constituent, for a few days they muttered angry plans to meet illegally in Finland or the Don and raise the banner of rebellion; but to their intense astonishment they found that the masses of the people accepted the dissolution with perfect calm,—even forgot it entirely, and turned their attention to the Third Convention of All-Russian Soviets, which assembled in the seats of the Constituent Assembly five days later, and declared Russia forever the property of the toiling masses, a republic of Soviets, the invincible sword of the social revolution . . . whole two bands played the "Internationale" and the "Marseillaise" simultaneously, and seven hundred big bearded workers and peasants kissed each other with tears rolling down their cheeks.

So ended the last act of the battle between the Russian bourgeoisie and proletariat, between the Soviets and the Constituent, between parliamentary democracy and—something new.

It will be objected that the Soviets are only a new form of parliamentary democracy, much like the primitive Anglo-Saxon "town meeting." But, as a matter of fact, the Soviet is a new invention. In the first place it consists of delegates elected by small units of the working population, with the property-holding classes excluded. Meeting frequently, its members can be recalled and replaced by their constituents at any time, and so the entire complexion of the local Soviets, and through them, the central Soviets, must change automatically with the change of mass opinion, which is particularly sensitive in time of revolution. Then consider the All-Russian Convention of Soviets, which meets at least every three months, and oftener if any special question demands it; with such a machinery of government a new Constituent Assembly of all Russia is held four times a year. And the authority of the small Soviets is not delegated to the larger Soviets, but like them, based on the direct vote of the peasants in their fields, the workmen in their factories and the soldiers in barracks and trenches.

Now in the course of the Russian revolution, which in the short space of eight months lived through almost every known form of government, the Soviets, which were founded in order to defend the interests of the proletariat in the building of new Russia, learned by experience what it has taken the working class of the world a hundred years to begin to see—that the modern constitutional democratic state is based on a civil war of the classes. In the beginning the Soviets acquiesced in the bourgeois government, themselves playing the part of a sort of democratic

threat over the heads of the Ministers.

The Russian masses had three imperative wants—peace, land, and some sort of workers' co-operation in the management of industry. As yet, however, these three demands were expressed by the Soviets in the form of: general peace in conjunction with the Allies; settlement of the land question at the Constituent Assembly; and a sort of government supervision of industry. The great majority of the Soviets was Menshevik and right Social Revolutionary—that is to say, "moderate Socialist." During the first three months of the Revolution the philosophy of the Russian democracy may be roughly summarized in the following formula:

"The social revolution is impossible. First, the Russian proletariat is not prepared; second, a Socialist Russia cannot exist in the midst of a capitalistic Europe."

Before the coalition of the Soviet leaders with the bourgeois leaders, the Soviets had emphasized the clearly-expressed will of the Russian masses, peace, land, industrial democracy. But now consider what happened. The "Socialist" ministers found themselves absolutely unable to carry on their class war against the bourgeois ministers in the Government. Whenever democratic proposals were brought forward, the bourgeois ministers threatened to resign, passively resisted, delayed, postponed. Tchernov, Socialist Minister of Agriculture, was unable to get adopted the mildest measure of a whole series of land reforms—the law relating to the valuation of real property; he was finally forced to sit quietly by and allow the arrest of the peasant Land Committees, which had been formed at the request of the first Provisional Government itself. Skobelev, Minister of Labor, was unable to persuade the rest of the Cabinet to sanction his program for the participation of the labor unions in the administration of factories, and was finally bullied into attempting to restrict the growing influence of the Factory Shop Committees. Tseretelli himself when the Cronstadt workmen and sailors deposed a tyrannical government commissar and elected one of their own was persuaded to go to Cronstadt, and in the name of the Soviets restore the previous commissar. Kerensky, threatened not only by the hostility of the Russian bourgeois government, but also by the bourgeois governments of the Allies, and especially the United States, forced upon the war-weary Russian army the great offensive of July, which crumbled into ghastly disaster at Tarnopol.

Meanwhile the Russian bourgeoisie inaugurated a plan of deliberate sabotage in factories, mines, farms, railroads. In an interview with one of the great financiers of Russia, Stepan Lianosov, I was told with amazing frankness how the propertied classes were "starving the Revolution"; coal mines were flooded, factory machinery wrecked and the shops closed down, railroads were disorganized. In the army the officer class was also working to destroy the soldiers' committees and Soviets, and restore the old-fashioned autocratic discipline so fatal to revolutionary thought. Through the complacency of Kerensky the death penalty was re-introduced—and applied to political agitators of the left wing; Socialist newspapers were shut down; and military defeat was brought about. Besides many other proofs in my possession, I publish herewith one of the secret documents discovered in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which sheds a bright light on the fall of Riga:

"Baron Faschiatti to Baron Sonnino at Rome Jassy, August 22—September 4, 1917.

"Diamandi has telegraphed to Bratiano (Rumanian premier) from the Stavka, where he is for the moment, using the direct wire between Stavka and the Russian command in Rumania, for the purpose of transmitting his conversation with General Kornilov. The General told him that he should not attach great importance to the fall of Riga. The General added that the troops abandoned Riga on his orders. . . . General Kornilov counts also on the impression which the fall of Riga will produce upon public opinion, to the end of the immediate re-establishment of discipline in the Russian army."

It was in April that Lenin came to Petrograd, with his clear vision of the consequences of Socialist coalition with the bourgeoisie, as exemplified in all the warring countries—by the Vanderfeldes, the Albert Thomas', the William English