Soviet Russia and Peace

By ARTHUR RANSOME

Report of a Meeting of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets

THERE was a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Soviet Government on February 10, to consider the Allied invitation to the Prinkipo Conference and Chicherin's note in answer.

Before proceeding to an account of that meeting, it will be well to make a short summary of the note in question. Chicherin, after referring to the fact that no invitation had been addressed to them and that the absence of a reply from them was being considered as the rejection of a proposal they had never received, said that in spite of the more and more favorable position, the Russian Soviet Government considered a cessation of hostilities so desirable that it was ready immediately to begin negotiations, and, as it had more than once declared, to secure agreement "even at the cost of serious concessions in so far as these should not threaten the development of the Republic." "Taking into consideration that the enemies against whom it has to struggle borrow their strength of resistance exclusively from the help shown them by the powers of the Entente, and that these powers are the only actual enemy of the Russian Soviet Government, the latter addresses itself precisely to the powers of the Entente, setting out the points on which it considers such concessions possible with a view for the ending of every kind of conflict with the aforesaid powers." There follows a list of the concessions they are prepared to make. The first of these is recognition of their debts, the interest on which, "in view of Russia's difficult financial position and her unsatisfactory credit," they propose to guarantee in raw materials. Then, "in view of the interest continually expressed by foreign capital in the question of the exploitation for its advantage of the natural resources of Russia, the Soviet Government is ready to give to subjects of the powers of the Entente mineral, timber and other concessions, to be defined in detail, on condition that the economic and social structure of Soviet Russia shall not be touched by the internal arrangements of these concessions." The last point is that which roused most opposition. It expresses a willingness to negotiate even concerning such annexations, hidden or open, as the Allies may have in mind. The words used are: "The Russian Soviet Government has not the intention of excluding at all costs consideration of the question of annexations, etc. . . . " Then, "by annexations must be understood the retention of this or that part of the territory of what was the Russian Empire, not including Poland and Finland, of armed forces of the Entente or of such forces as are maintained by the governments of the Entente or enjoy their financial, military, technical or other support." There follows a statement that the extent of the concessions will depend on the military position. Chicherin proceeds to give a rather optimistic account of the external and internal situation. Finally he touches on the question of propagada. "The Russian Soviet Government, while pointing out that it cannot limit the freedom of the revolutionary press, declares its readiness, in case of necessity, to include in the general agreement with the powers of the Entente the obligation not to interfere in their internal affairs." The note ends thus: "On the foregoing basis the Russian Soviet Government is ready immediately to begin negotiations either on Prinkipo island or in any other place whatsoever with all the powers of the Entente together or with separate powers of their number, or with any Russian political groupings whatsover, according to the wishes of the powers of the Entente. The Russian Soviet Government begs the powers of the Entente immediately to inform it whether to send its representatives, and precisely when and by what route." This note was dated February 4th, and was sent out by wireless.

From the moment when the note appeared in the newspapers of February 5th, it had been the main subject of conversation. Every point in it was criticized and counter-criticized, but even its critics, though anxious to preserve their criticism as a basis for political action afterwards, were desperately anxious that it should meet with a reply. No one in Moscow at that time could have the slightest misgiving about the warlike tendencies of the revolution. The overwhelming mass of the people and of the revolutionary leaders want peace, and only continued warfare forced upon them could turn desire for peace into desperate, resentful aggression. Everywhere I heard the same story: "We cannot get things straight while we have to fight all the time." They would not admit it, I am sure, but few of the Soviet leaders who have now for eighteen months been wrestling with the difficulties of European Russia have not acquired, as it were in spite of themselves, a national, domestic point of view. They are thinking less about world revolution than about getting bread in Moscow, or increasing the output of textiles, or building river power-stations to free the northern industrial district from its dependence on the distant coal-fields. I was consequently anxious to hear what the Executive Committee would have to say, knowing that there I should listen to some expresion of the theoretical standpoint from which my hard-working friends had been drawn away by interests nearer home.

The Executive Committee met as usual in the big hall of the Hotel Metropole, and it met as usual very late. The sitting was to begin at seven, and, foolishly thinking that Russians might have changed their nature in the last six months, I was punctual and found the hall nearly empty, because a party meeting of the Communists in the room next door was not finished. The hall looked just as it used to look, with a red banner over the præsidium and another at the opposite end, both inscribed "The All Russian Executive Committee," "Proletariat of all lands, unite," and so on. As the room gradually filled, I met many acquaintances.

Old Professor Pokrofsky came in, blinking through his spectacles, bent a little, in a very old coat, with a small black fur hat, his hands clasped together, just as, so I have been told, in its manner to rouse enthusiasm of any kind. he walked unhappily to and fro in the fortress at Brest during the second period of the negotiations. I did not think he would recognize me, but he came up at once, and reminded me of the packing of the archives at the time when it seemed likely that the Germans would take Petrograd. He told me of a mass of material they are publishing about the origin of the war. He said that Finland came out of it best of anybody, but that France and Russia showed in a very bad light.

Just then, Demian Biedny rolled in, fatter than he used to be (admirers from the country send him food) with a round face, shrewd laughing eyes, and cynical mouth, a typical peasant, and the poet of the revolution. He was passably shaved, his little yellow moustache was trimmed, he was wearing new leather breeches, and seemed altogether a more prosperous poet than the untidy ruffian I first met about a year or more ago before his satirical poems in "Pravda" and other revolutionary papers had reached the heights of popularity to which they have since attained. In the old days before the revolution in Petrograd he used to send his poems to the revolutionary papers. A few were published and scandalized the more austere and serious-minded revolutionaries, who held a meeting to decide whether any more were to be printed. Since the revolution, he has rapidly come into his own, and is now a sort of licensed jester, flagellating Communists and non-Communists alike. Even in this assembly he had about him a little of the manner of Robert Burns in Edinburgh society. He told me with expansive glee that they had printed two hundred and fifty thousand of his last book, that the whole edition was sold in two weeks, and that he had had his portrait painted by a real artist. It is actually true that of his eighteen different works, only two are obtainable today.

All this time the room was filling, as the party meeting ended and the members of the Executive Committee came in to take their places. I was asking Litvinov whether he was going to speak, when a little hairy energetic man came up and with great delight showed us the new matches invented in the Soviet laboratories. Russia is short of matchwood, and without paraffin. Besides which I think I am right in saying that the bulk of the matches used in the north came from factories in Finland. In these new Bolshevik matches neither wood nor paraffin is used. Waste paper is a substitute for one, and the grease that is left after cleaning wool is a substitute for the other. The little man, Berg, secretary of the Præsidium of the Council of Public Economy, gave me a packet of his matches. They are the matches in a folding cover that used to be common in Paris. You break off a match before striking it. They strike and burn better than any matches I have ever bought in Russia, and I do not see why they should not be made in England, where we have to import all the materials of which ordinary matches are made. I told Berg I should try to patent them and so turn myself into a capitalist. Another Communist, who was listening, laughed, and said that most fortunes were founded in just such a fraudulent way.

Then there was Steklov of the "Izvestia," Madame Kolontai, and a lot of other people whose names I do not remember. Little Bu-