

liberty for the richer class to seize into their hands the lion's share of the whole press and by this means to poison the minds and bring confusion into the consciousness of the masses.

Everyone knows that the bourgeois press is one of the most powerful weapons of the bourgeoisie. Especially in this critical moment when the new authority, that of the workers and peasants, is in process of consolidation, it was impossible to leave this weapon in the hands of the enemy at a time when it is not less dangerous than bombs and machine guns. This is why temporary and extraordinary measures have been adopted for the purpose of cutting off the stream of mire and calumny in which the yellow and green press would be glad to drown the young victory of the people.

As soon as the new order will be consolidated, all administrative measures against the press will be suspended; full liberty will be given it within the limits of responsibility before the laws, in accordance with the broadest and most progressive regulations in this respect.

Bearing in mind, however, the fact that any restrictions of the freedom of the press, even in critical moments, are admissible only within the bounds of necessity, the Council of People's Commissaries decrees as follows:

General rules on the press.

The following organs of the press shall be subject to be closed: (a) those inciting to open resistance or disobedience towards the Workers' and Peasants' Government; (b) those sowing confusion by means of an obviously calumnious perversion of facts; (c) those inciting to acts of a criminal character punishable by the penal laws.

The temporary or permanent closing of any organ of the press shall be carried out by a resolution of the Council of People's Commissars.

The present decree is of a temporary nature and will be revoked by special *ukaz* [governmental order] when the normal conditions of public life will be reestablished.

Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars,  
Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin)

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English translation in *Bolshevik Propaganda: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, U. S. Senate, 65th Congress, 3rd Session, Feb. 11, 1919 to Mar. 10, 1919* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1919), p. 1243.

## DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLES OF RUSSIA, NOVEMBER 2 [15], 1917

The October revolution of the workmen and peasants began under the common banner of emancipation.

The peasants are being emancipated from the power of the landowners, for there is no longer the landowner's property right in the land—it has been abolished. The soldiers and sailors are being emancipated from the power of autocratic generals, for generals will henceforth be elective and subject to recall. The workingmen are being emancipated from the whims and arbitrary will of the capitalists, for henceforth there will be established the control of the workers over mills and factories. Everything living and capable of life is being emancipated from the hateful shackles.

There remain only the peoples of Russia, who have suffered and are suffering oppression and arbitrariness, and whose emancipation must immediately be begun, whose liberation must be effected resolutely and definitely.

During the period of tsarism the peoples of Russia were systematically incited against one another. The results of such a policy are known—massacres and programs on the one hand, slavery of peoples on the other. There can be and there must be no return to this disgraceful policy of instigation. Henceforth the policy of a voluntary and honest union of the peoples of Russia must be substituted.

In the period of imperialism, after the February revolution, when the power was transferred to the hands of the Kadet [leading liberal party] bourgeoisie, the naked policy of instigation gave way to one of cowardly distrust of the peoples of Russia, to a policy of fault-finding and provocation, of "freedom" and "equality" of peoples. The results of such a policy are known: the growth of national enmity, the impairment of mutual trust.

An end must be put to this unworthy policy of falsehood and distrust, of fault-finding and provocation. Henceforth it must be replaced by an open and honest policy which leads to complete mutual trust of the people of Russia. Only as the result of such a trust can there be formed an honest and lasting union of the peoples of Russia. Only as the result of such a union can the workmen and peasants of the peoples of Russia be cemented into one revolutionary force able to resist all attempts on the part of the imperialist-annexationist bourgeoisie.

Starting with these assumptions, the First Congress of Soviets, in June of this year, proclaimed the right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination. The Second Congress of Soviets, in October of this year, reaffirmed this inalienable right of the peoples of Russia more decisively and definitely. The united will of these congresses, the Council of the People's Commissaries, resolved to base its activity upon the question of the nationalities of Russia, as expressed in the following principles:

The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.

The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state.

The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.

The free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.

The concrete decrees that follow from these principles will be immediately elaborated after the setting up of a Commission on Nationality Affairs.

Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars,  
V. Ulianov (Lenin)  
People's Commissar of Nationality Affairs,  
Iosef Jugashvili (Stalin)

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English translation in *The Nation*, December 28, 1919.

## The Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly

*The convening of the Constituent Assembly, something like a constitutional convention, had long been the goal of liberal and socialist opponents of tsarism. The Provisional Government had delayed calling it because of the war, and many fundamental reforms were thereby postponed. The Bolsheviks supported the convening of the Assembly, and elections took place in mid-November, but the results were disappointing to the Leninists. Although the overwhelming majority of the population had voted for socialist parties, the largest number of votes went*

to the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) (40 percent), while the Bolsheviks came in second (24 percent). The SRs won most of the rural districts, while Bolsheviks did better than any other single party in most major cities of Russia, including Moscow and Petrograd, and among the soldiers at the various fronts.

Before the Assembly opened its first session on January 5, Red Guards fired on an unarmed demonstration of its supporters. Ten people were killed. The Assembly met for only one day before Red Guards prevented the delegates from reconvening. In a session of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets, Lenin presented his view that the country stood before a stark choice: Soviet power and socialism, or the Constituent Assembly and bourgeois democracy. Historians, who have long debated whether the October Revolution was an authentic expression of popular will or a coup d'état, have far less disagreement about the events of January 5-6. A minority party, the Bolsheviks, with considerable strength among soldiers and workers, overthrew the democratically elected Constituent Assembly through the use of force. That dissolution marked an indisputable coup d'état and opened the way to civil war. A country deeply divided between those who wished to preserve the victories of the February Revolution and those anxious to move on to Soviet power settled their political differences with violence and terror.

## DISSOLUTION OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY IS DISCUSSED AT THE ALL-RUSSIAN CENTRAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF SOVIETS. TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION 6 JANUARY 1918

Chairman: Sverdlov

11.30 p.m.

### I. Shooting of Persons Demonstrating in Support of the Constituent Assembly

SVERDLOV: [Bolshevik]: Today's emergency session has been called to consider the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. I propose the following agenda: confirmation of the CPC's decree on the dissolution; incorrect compilation of party lists in the Constituent Assembly elections.

RYAZANOV: [Bolshevik], on a point of order: I protest in the strongest terms against yesterday's bloodshed, when peaceful demonstrators were fired upon. I demand that the CEC suspend its sessions until the Third Congress of Soviets, which should consider whether the CPC acted correctly in permitting such excesses, and I further demand that a commission be set up at once to investigate these events.

SHTEYNBERG: [Left SR]: As PC of Justice, I support this proposal for a commission of inquiry. Yesterday's incident has made everyone rather excited. When I went round all the places where clashes occurred I discovered that only minor injuries had been caused. However, this morning [in the CPC] I insisted that an investigating commission be set up, and I repeat this demand now.

The proposal is adopted unanimously. The commission is to consist of seven persons, chosen by the fractions, to whom trade-union representatives are to be added. It is to be organized by the Presidium.

### 2. Dissolution of Constituent Assembly

LENIN: [Bolshevik] (*Sustained applause*): The conflict between soviet power and the Constituent Assembly was foreshadowed by the whole history of the Russian revolution, faced as it is with the unheard-of problems of reconstructing society on socialist lines. After the events of 1905 there could be no doubt that tsarism was at its last gasp. Only the backwardness and ignorance of the countryside allowed it to climb back from the abyss. In the 1917 revolution the party of the imperialist bourgeoisie [i.e. the Kadet party] has been turned by force of circumstance into a republican one, and democratic organizations have emerged in the form of soviets. These were created as early as 1905: already then socialists realized that their appearance signified something entirely new in the history of world revolution. The soviets, created by the people entirely on their own [initiative], are a form of democracy that has no equal in any other country.

The [February] revolution brought forth two forces: the masses, who united for the purpose of overthrowing tsarism, and the organizations of labouring people. When I hear enemies of the October revolution crying how impossible of realization, how utopian, the ideas of socialism are, I generally put to them the simple and obvious question: 'what are the soviets?', 'what led to the emergence of these popular organizations, which have no parallel in history . . . ?' And to this question none of them has ever given me, or could ever give me, a definite answer. Their stubborn defence of the bourgeois order leads them to oppose these mighty organizations, the like of which no revolution hitherto ever witnessed.

Whoever is fighting the landlords joins the soviets of peasants' deputies. The soviets are made up of all those who want to engage in creative work instead of idling. A network of them has spread over the whole country. The denser this network becomes, the less chance there will be for exploitation of working people, for the existence of soviets is incompatible with a flourishing bourgeois order. This explains all the contradictions into which bourgeois representatives fall. They are struggling against our soviets solely in order to advance their own interests.

The transition from capitalism to socialism involves a long and bitter struggle. Having overthrown tsarism, the Russian revolution has inevitably gone further. It could not limit itself to ensuring the victory of a bourgeois [order], for the war imposed untold sufferings upon the people, and their exhaustion created conditions in which social revolution could break out. There is accordingly nothing more ridiculous than to assert that the deepening of the revolution, the growing indignation of the masses, has been stimulated by a single party, by a single individual, or—as [our enemies] scream—by the will of some 'dictator'. The revolutionary conflagration has come about exclusively as the consequence of the incredible sufferings to which Russia has been subjected by the war. This relentlessly forced working people to choose: either to take a bold, desperate and fearless step [forward] or else to perish, to die a hungry death. (*Applause.*)

The revolutionary [impulse] expressed itself in the creation of soviets, bastions of the revolution of labour. The Russian people have made a gigantic leap from tsarism to soviets. This is an incontestable and unprecedented fact. At a time when in all [other] countries bourgeois parliaments, inhibited by the limitations of capitalism and [respect for] property, have never given any support to the revolutionary movement,

the soviets, stoking the fires of revolution, are imperiously telling the people to fight, to take everything into their hands, to organize themselves.

No doubt all manner of mistakes and blunders will be made in the course of deepening this revolution, called into being by the mighty soviets. But it is no secret that every revolutionary movement is invariably accompanied by chaos, destruction, and disorder. Bourgeois society involves war and slaughter too, and it is this which has so accentuated the conflict between the Constituent Assembly and the soviets.

Those who keep on telling us that we used to defend the assembly but are now 'dissolving' it have no sense and are just uttering empty phrases. Formerly, we preferred the Constituent Assembly to tsarism, to the republic of Kerensky, but as the soviets developed [we saw that] they, as revolutionary organs of the entire people, were incomparably superior to all parliaments anywhere in the world. I stressed this point already in April. The soviets, by effecting a radical breach in bourgeois and landlord property, by assisting the insurrection which finally swept away all traces of the bourgeois order, pushed us on to the course which led the people to build their lives for themselves.

We have set about this great [task of] construction, and we are right to have done so. The socialist revolution cannot be served up to the people in a neat, smooth package. It is inevitably accompanied by civil war, by sabotage and resistance. Those who assert the contrary are either lying or blind. (*Stormy applause.*)

The events of 20 April, when the people—independently, without any orders by 'dictators' or parties—manifested their opposition to the compromisers' government, demonstrated already then the feeble basis on which bourgeois [power] rested. The masses sensed their own strength, and to please them, or rather to deceive them, there began that celebrated ministerial leapfrog [of the first coalition]. But the people saw through this, especially once Kerensky, who had in his pockets the secret robber treaties with the imperialists, launched the offensive. The people gradually came to understand that they were being deceived by everything the compromisers were doing. Their patience began to run out, and the result of all this was the October revolution. The people learned from their experience of tortures, death sentences and mass shootings. It is no use assuring them that the revolt of the labouring people is the work of the Bolsheviks, or of some kind of 'dictators'. This is clear from the schism apparent among the masses at their various congresses, conferences, meetings and so on. As yet the people have not finally assimilated the [lessons of the] October revolution.

This revolution showed in practice how they should proceed in taking the land, the natural resources, the means of transport and production, into their hands, into the hands of the workers' and peasants' state. 'All power to the soviets!' was our slogan. That is what we are fighting for. The people wanted the Constituent Assembly convoked—and so we convoked it. But they at once realized what this notorious Constituent Assembly amounted to. And now we have fulfilled the people's will by [transferring] all power to the soviets. We shall crush the saboteurs.

When I left Smolny, pulsating with vitality, and went to the Tauride Palace I felt as though I were amidst corpses and lifeless mummies. The enemies of socialism used every available means in their fight. They resorted to violence and sabotage; they even exploited knowledge, humanity's great pride, against the labouring people. They were able to delay the advance towards socialist revolution, but they could not halt it and

they never shall. For the soviets are too strong: they have begun to smash the antiquated foundations of the bourgeois order, not in a gentlemanly fashion but in the [rough] manner of proletarians and peasants.

The transfer of all power to the Constituent Assembly [would be] another compromise with the pernicious bourgeoisie. The Russian soviets place the interests of the toiling masses much higher than the interests of the treacherous conciliators, who have donned a fresh disguise. The speeches of Chernov and Tsereteli gave off a mouldy smell. These politicians of bygone times are still whining about stopping the civil war. But so long as Kaledin exists, so long as the slogan 'All power to the Constituent Assembly!' masks the slogan 'Down with soviet power!', civil war is inevitable, for we shall not for anything in the world surrender soviet power! (*Stormy applause.*)

And when the Constituent Assembly announced its readiness to postpone once again [decisions on] all the urgent issues presented to it by the soviets, we answered: there is not a moment to lose. And so by the will of the Soviet government the Constituent Assembly, which refused to recognize the people's power, has been dissolved. The general staff of the Ryabushinskys has been defeated. If the latter resists, this will only lead to a new upsurge of civil war. The Constituent Assembly is dissolved and the revolutionary Soviet Republic will triumph, cost what it may. (*Stormy applause, turning into a prolonged ovation.*)

STROYEV: for the United SDs [Mensheviks]: The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly seems to me a dizzying jump into the unknown. I remind the Left SRs that not long ago they were numbered among defenders of the assembly. Too soon have they shed this 'illusion', and in so doing also their [allegiance to their] red banners and to political liberty. On the basis of the Constituent Assembly it would have been possible to unite the whole of revolutionary democracy. This course is no longer possible. As late as November the Bolsheviks were also in favour of broadening the basis of the revolution, but now they have betrayed this principle.

Yesterday red banners were being snatched from the worker's hands. One more illusion is being done away with. The respect for socialist banners reddened with proletarian blood . . . (*Cries of 'That's enough!' Uproar.*) I am used to speaking against noises like these. I made speeches despite [interruptions] by the Black Hundreds . . . and should like to think that now I am under the protection of the red flag. (*Tremendous uproar. The chairman calls on the speaker to refrain from such comparisons.*) The Bolsheviks who control the government failed to carry out the will of the Second Congress of Soviets, . . . which resolved to call the Constituent Assembly, not to dissolve it . . . (*Cries and hisses in the hall.*)

Amidst the commotion Stroyev tries to continue his speech but is forced to leave the tribune. [Before doing so he reads a resolution which ends as follows:]

. . . The Constituent Assembly alone is capable of uniting all parts of Russia to end the civil war which is accelerating the country's economic ruin and to solve all the essential questions raised by the revolution . . . In view of this the CEC resolves that the CPC shall enable the Constituent Assembly to continue its labours without interference, and that a new government shall be formed in agreement with the assembly's socialist majority.

SELIVANOV: for the [Left] SR Maximalists: Once again we have heard from this tribune the whining of the United SDs. We still remember what they said about our

October revolution, and then about nationalization of the banks. They keep on repeating themselves and threatening us with every kind of misfortune. I call on the assembly to ignore the whining of these petty-bourgeois intellectuals and to carry on with the revolution. Now that the Constituent Assembly has at last been closed down, Russia will march ahead rapidly to a Soviet Republic of Labour (*Applause.*)

**RYAZANOV:** Explaining his vote: We are taking an extremely serious step which affects not just Russia but the whole world proletariat. I never made a fetish of the Constituent Assembly but I believe that, having convoked it, we should have given it time to show its true face. This was not done. In a single day the people could not assess its [value] or compare their own opinions with its performance. Before dissolving the assembly we should have shown that it had to be dissolved by confronting it with the Third Congress of Soviets and letting the people decide between them. For this reason I shall vote against the [motion approving] dissolution of the Constituent Assembly.

**AVILOV:** [Menshevik Internationalist]: Lenin talked exclusively about the superiority of the soviet form of organization but failed to say why the Constituent Assembly did not reflect the people's will . . .

**KARELIN:** [Left SR] greeted by stormy applause, reads the text of the decree.

**SUKHANOV:** [Menshevik Internationalist] given the floor for an amendment: It is false to assert that the Constituent Assembly refused to acknowledge the conquests of the October revolution, and I suggest that this passage be omitted from the resolution—as well as the immediately following passage, namely the approval given to the dissolution. (*Cries of indignation; laughter.*)

**LOZOVSKY:** [Bolshevik] supporting the amendment: The CEC has committed a tremendous mistake, indeed a crime, in voting in favour of the decree, for in so doing it has assumed the function of the [rightful] legislative organ. It is also wrong to say that the people have seen the assembly's real face, since not even Petrograd, let alone Russia, has had a chance to take proper stock of it.

The amendment is rejected. The resolution is put to the vote and passed with 2 dissentients and 5 abstentions.

### 3. *Incorporation of Radical Constituent Assembly Deputies into the CEC*

As Karelin ascends the tribune **KRAMAROV:** [Menshevik Internationalist] calls out: 'Bolshevik lackey!' Storm of indignation in the hall. The chairman demands that he retract the expression. When he merely modifies it the chairman excludes him from the session, adding that the Presidium will consider his misconduct.

**KARELIN:** Kramarov's remark applies to the whole Left SR fraction, not just to myself, and I bear him no personal grudge—although it was ill-mannered. I oppose his exclusion since in a class organization such as the CEC we should preserve comradely relations.

I propose that those Bolshevik and Left SR deputies to the Constituent Assembly who walked out of that body be invited to take part in the work of the CEC, as this will improve our liaison with the provinces.

An UNIDENTIFIED member moves that the same right be extended to the national-minority deputies who walked out.

Resolution adopted unanimously, except for the United SDs, who take no part in the vote.

John L. H. Keep (trans. and ed.). *The Debate on Soviet Power: Minutes of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets, Second Convocation, October 1917–January 1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 260–267.

## I. N. Steinberg, "The Cheka is Cheated"

*I. N. Steinberg was a Left Social Revolutionary who was appointed People's Commissar of Justice on December 12 [25], 1917 in what became the Soviet coalition government of Bolsheviks and Left SRs. He had already protested in the Central Executive Committee of Soviets against the Bolshevik outlawing of the Kadet party, and throughout his tenure as Commissar of Justice he struggled against the extralegal exercise of power by the Bolsheviks. He frequently confronted Feliks Dzerzhinskii, the head of the Cheka, the security police established in December, and its use of political terror. Steinberg resigned from the government, along with his fellow Left SRs, in March 1918 over the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with Germany, and a year later he himself became a prisoner of the Cheka. He left Russia for Germany in 1923 and eventually became an American citizen. With the death of Stalin in 1953. I. N. Steinberg was the last surviving member of the first and only Soviet coalition government.*

The decree against the Kadets, which had been passed on December 1, 1917, was, of course, a formidable obstacle in the path of justice. Although it had not been ratified with the enthusiasm the Bolsheviks had anticipated, we could not deny the effect it might have on the aroused emotions of the masses. It was, after all, almost an invitation to terror issued by the most authoritative institution in the country. Once the idea of impunity toward supposed counter-revolutionaries penetrated the minds of irresponsible individuals, one could expect lynching incidents to spread among the population.

But during the first few weeks of the new coalition Soviet Government, both parties strained to prevent such acts of spontaneous "mob justice." Characteristic, in this sense, was a sudden and sober conflict with the garrison at the Peter and Paul Fortress in Petrograd. This fortress had become a dual symbol of ruthless czarist reaction and sublime revolutionary martyrdom. Inside one of the thick walls of the fortress, the Troubetzkoy Bastion, hundreds of courageous revolutionaries had been held prisoner. Many did not leave the fortress alive. For decades men had dreamt of the day when the Russian "Bastille" would be destroyed forever.

I want to record here in melancholy remembrance that, within a few days of my appointment as Commissar of Justice, Maria Spiridonova, the spiritual leader of our movement, came to see me. Spiridonova herself had experienced revolutionary martyrdom in Siberian prisons from the time she was twenty-one. Her soul was saturated not only with the pain which she had felt, but with the suffering of thousands of prisoners she had known. In their name she came to me demanding that we blow up the Peter and Paul Fortress, the infamy of the shattered regime. Unfortunately it proved impossible to accede to her noble demand because—expert engineers informed us—