

Russian Bolshevism---Tyranny or Freedom?

By BESSIE BEATTY

(Author of the "Red Heart of Russia")

THERE is a wide divergence of opinion among American liberals concerning the Russian Soviet Government. There are even radicals in this country who are opposed to the Bolshevik idea. Among the Russians in America there is bitter disagreement, and this disagreement has been one of the largest contributing factors to the general chaotic American opinion. The majority of Russians in America, in spite of the systematic campaign of misrepresentation that has been conducted against the Russian Soviet, have a rather wonderful faith in the adventure which their countrymen across the world are making. There are a few whose positions, in view of their economic background and previous preaching, is quite as difficult to understand as any factor in the Russian situation.

Telling the story of Russia in revolt as it appeared to me, I am confronted again and again with the same questions:

"Can the Soviets be considered democratic when they deny representation to the bourgeoisie and aristocratic classes?" "Have not the Bolsheviks suppressed newspapers and imprisoned people who disagree with them?" "Are they not an autocracy of the proletariat?" "Is an autocracy of the proletariat any better than an autocracy of the Czar?"

"The Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly. How is that justified on any grounds of democracy?"

"If the Constituent Assembly was not elected under fair conditions, why did the Bolsheviks not call another election, and immediately convene another Constituent Assembly?"

Coming from the lips of the liberal, whose social vision stops with the guaranty of political rights, of free speech, free press and inviolability of person, these questions are understandable enough, but from the lips of the Socialist, whose conception of liberty is based upon an economic rather than a political foundation, such sentiments are queer indeed. It seems that the divergence of opinion among radicals in this country comes largely from confusion as to the true meaning of democracy.

Nicholai Lenin, when he overthrew the Kerensky government, made no claim to being a creator of a new democracy. He scoffed at democracy as it was practiced in the western nations. He declared that just as the French revolution challenged feudal control, the Russian Soviet challenges the bourgeois political control; and that just as the feudal control was moribund and fell, so the direct form of economic social control for which the Soviet stands will destroy every form of bourgeois political control.

He saw that the western democracies suppressed the press and imprisoned people for disagreeing with them and charging them with failure in the business of government, which is to house, to clothe, to feed and to educate its people.

He laid no claim to the establishment of a millennium in Russia. He said merely that Russia had entered into the transition period that will lead to Socialism. To the "parlor Socialists," who call him undemocratic, I heard him say:

"To imagine Socialism as these gentlemen would have it, we would have to serve it to them on a silver platter. It is impossible. It will never be. There is no other road to Socialism except the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the merciless suppression of the rule of the exploiter."

The Bolsheviks do claim that the Soviet form of government contains the rudiments of a democracy, much broader, more complete than any of the democracies of the western powers.

In America we require that a man must have attained his majority, that he must be a citizen of the United States by birth or naturalization, and that he must not be either insane or a criminal, before we permit him to vote. We do not claim that we are undemocratic because we do not per-

mit the criminal and the insane, the unnaturalized, and those who are under twenty-one, to vote. Some Americans will not even agree that we are undemocratic when we refuse the vote to American women. Russia has fewer election laws than we have, but she has one fundamental one, that if you do not work you have no right to a voice in the government. Every man and woman in Russia above the age of eighteen can immediately qualify as a voter by complying with the one fundamental electoral rule of the Soviet—by going to work. If he is a working producer, working with his hands or with his brains, whether he is a ditch digger or a superintendent, he may be admitted to participation.

The Bolsheviks disenfranchise by different standards than those used in all other democracies. The Bolsheviks disenfranchise the parasite class just as we disenfranchise the insane and the criminal classes, on the principle of the social good. They refuse to permit any individual or group of individuals to make use of the past stored labor power of the world, or to control and profit from the present labor power.

It is true that the Bolsheviks suppressed the press and imprisoned persons who disagree with them. They offered in justification the same reasons offered by the governing group in America; that it was a war measure which the safety of the government demanded. A study of the Russian papers since the November revolution will show that, drastic as this suppression of the press was, it was less drastic than that practiced in America. I mean to say that the newspapers of Russia have been full of attacks against the Bolsheviks such as would never have been permitted against the governing group in America. It is not possible to excuse it in America. Yet it would seem that we should be very timid about making overmuch of this charge when we consider that we have generations of organization and stability back of us while the new government of Russia has just come struggling into existence out of centuries of oppression, and is fighting for its life against odds such as we have never known.

As to the Constituent Assembly, I saw it come and go, and it is my honest opinion that it would have been dissolved if Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson, Clemenceau, or any other group of English, French or American statesmen had been in the position of Lenin and Trotzky. The Constituent Assembly was elected under rules laid down by the government of Kerensky, and was a relic of the political revolution in Russia. It was dissolved, not on that January morning when the sailors told the delegates it was time to go home, but on that November day when the government which created it evaporated like a pricked balloon. The Bolsheviks claimed it was not representative of the Russian masses. Their claim seems to have been upheld by the people themselves, for though there were twelve million bayonets in Russia from which to gather a nucleus of effective protest, no group in Russia has been able to make that protest.

Our evidence of the vitality of the Soviet in Russia is to be found in the fact that it has survived every form of counter-revolution from within, and Allied intervention from without. Nicholas Chaikovsky told me that it had completely swept the country, that every time one of his delegates of the Peasants' Council went back to his village, he found the people there had swung further and further to the left. Harold Williams, in a dispatch to the London Times, written while he was in Russia, declared that Bolshevism had swept the country, invading even the ranks of the Cossacks.

We are told that the position of the Bolsheviks has been maintained by force. Yet every time the Soviet formulas met the bayonets massed

against them, the bayonets went down before those formulas, and the soldiers who had come to overthrow remained to participate.

The Bolsheviks would not call a Constituent Assembly because they believed the will of the majority was better expressed in the more flexible convention of the Soviets, which had already replaced the Constituent Assembly, even before its formal dissolution.

The challenge of which Nicholai Lenin spoke is beginning to be recognized by the statesmen of the world. The Russian Soviet is at the peace table. Whatever the decision of the peace plenipotentiaries, the fact remains that Russia is there. Not the Russia of Prince Lvoff; Bakmatieff, whose campaign of misrepresentation is largely responsible for the anomalous intervention policy of the Allies; not the Russia of Korneloff or Kalden or the Czar; but the Russia of the masses of peasants and workers who are fighting and starving and dying to fling their challenge at the world.

Whether delegates of the Soviet are there in the flesh makes little difference. Soviet Russia and that which it has unloosed upon the world is uppermost in the mind of every man who sits at the board.

The challenge cannot be met by sticking the national head under the sand and denying the existence of the Soviet or the extent of its power. Continued misrepresentation of its program or its performance will not suffice to crush it. The pathetic wail of the few anti-Bolshevist Russians in America about the suppression of the press and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly will change nothing. If we are to meet the Russian situation, we must look ahead.

Military intervention has failed. It deserved to fail for its sheer criminal stupidity, if for nothing else. The scarcely less sinister policy of starving Russia into submission to the will of other nations can be hardly more successful. The paper-mache governments of the opposition which have sprung up like mushrooms all over that vast land and have been as short-lived as mushrooms, offer no hope for any working solution. It is time to make an honest effort to find out the true condition of Russia, and to understand what has really happened there.

The most essential thing in understanding the Russian situation is a realization that it cannot be judged by any of the old measuring sticks. We have here an experiment in government which has never before been made in the story of the race.

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