

PIETER C. VAN DUIN - ZUZANA POLÁČKOVÁ¹

Pieter C. van Duin, University of Leiden, Leiden, Holandské kráľovstvo

Zuzana Poláčková, Historický ústav SAV, Bratislava

THE BIG BANG OF COMMUNISM: THE BOLSHEVIKS' DESTRUCTION OF THE RUSSIAN CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY AND THE MAKING OF THE FIRST COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP (NOVEMBER 1917-JANUARY 1918)

This essay examines the suppression by the Bolsheviks in January 1918 of Russia's first democratically elected parliament, the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, and the various steps taken and arguments used by them during the preceding weeks to achieve this goal. Although Lenin and his Bolshevik party had never intended to tolerate the emergence of the Constituent Assembly as a competing political institution to their so-called Soviet democracy, they had to take care to present their repressive intervention as a rational and inevitable act from a revolutionary point of view. This crucial historical episode reveals the true character of the communist movement and communist ideology, which developed into one of the most dangerous threats to European democracy. There were several socialist parties in Russia who tried to fight the Bolsheviks and to present a democratic-socialist alternative, in particular the moderate ('Right') wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. The last section of this essay pays some additional attention to Viktor Chernov, a leader of the democratic group of Socialist-Revolutionaries and the President of the Constituent Assembly. In 1921 he fled to Czechoslovakia, where he lived until 1929.

Key words. Communism; Bolshevism; democracy; Russia; Socialist-Revolutionaries; Viktor Chernov

The Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd on 7 November 1917 (25 October on the Old Russian calendar), known among faithful communists as the 'Great October Revolution', was shocking to most non-Bolsheviks and even to some Bolshevik party members themselves. It was a politically explosive event and potentially expansionist in its long-term consequences. The deputies of the more moderate Russian socialist parties – the Mensheviks and the 'Right-

¹ *This work is the partial result of the Project „Individual and Society–their Mutual Reflexion in Historical Process“ granted by Slovak Research and Development Agency under the contract No. APVV-15-0349.*

Wing' Socialist Revolutionaries – at the Second All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets, which was held at the same time as the Bolshevik coup took place, walked out of the Congress in protest. Over the next few weeks the Bolsheviks established control in several cities in central and northwest Russia, but they were less successful in the countryside and in ethnically non-Russian areas. There were many obstacles to be removed and many nasty problems to be solved if they were to consolidate their power in the Russian Empire. Especially crucial was the neutralization of their political opponents, and of competing political institutions.

The historical significance of the Russian Constituent Assembly

If we had to answer the question which particular event or episode during the early weeks of the Bolshevik regime was possibly the most significant and revealing in terms of the Bolsheviks' ideology and political practice, the answer must probably be the destruction of the fragile foundation of Russian parliamentary democracy, i.e., of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly. On 19 January 1918 the Constituent Assembly, which had convened in Petrograd for the first time since the elections to it on 25 November 1917, was forcibly dissolved.² It was seen by the Bolsheviks as a major impediment to their hold on power, and therefore it had to be blown up and eliminated. Although the final suppression of the Constituent Assembly had in some ways the appearance of an anti-climax rather than a climax, it was in fact, politically speaking, a big bang-like phenomenon – an explosive, critical moment from an historical and symbolic point of view. The elimination of this first veritable Russian parliament created the political space for the Bolsheviks to expand their power and to create a new political universe of communist one-party rule. Although the real power of the Constituent Assembly was limited from the start given the prevailing circumstances in Petrograd or Moscow, where the Bolsheviks ruled supreme and increasingly unhindered, its very existence reminded the Russian people of a form of representative democracy that was different and probably more transparent than the revolutionary alternative of 'Soviet democracy' – the power of the workers', soldiers' and peasants' councils which could easily be manipulated by the Bolshevik leaders with their demagogic and populist talents. If the Bolshevik regime with its quasi-democratic instrument of Soviet power was to continue or to survive, then even a symbolic 'bourgeois-democratic' parliament had better be destroyed.

² The Constituent Assembly, the All-Russian democratic elections of 25 November 1917, and the suppression of the Assembly continue to be the subject of historical research and various interpretations. See for example Oliver Henry Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls: The Election to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, 1917* (Ithaca, 1989), an updated version of O.H. Radkey, *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917* (Cambridge, MA, 1950); Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, 2005); Christopher Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life* (London, 2005); Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2007). Of undiminished importance remains Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1* (Harmondsworth, 1950) for its both informative and incisive qualities.

Although the suppression of the Constituent Assembly happened with relatively little violence having to be applied, its disappearance was the result of a violent act of Bolshevik arbitrariness and indeed explosive in terms of its fundamental political implications. The resulting institutional vacuum provided an ideal context for the Bolsheviks to extend their alternative political order without fear of being obstructed by any serious democratic alternative. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, therefore, was the 'destructive-creative' incipient moment, the political big bang, of communism. It was the historic beginning of the new phenomenon of communist dictatorship, which after 1945 also expanded into Central and Eastern Europe.

The Constituent Assembly, to which elections were to be held on 25 November 1917 as had finally been decided by the Russian Provisional Government (the election had been postponed a few times), was actually to be the institutional and constitutional beginning of the new democratic Russia. However, the Provisional Government had been incapable of stabilizing the political situation in Russia, and also incapable – as were other political forces in the country – of stopping the revolutionary aggression of the well-organized Bolshevik party and the 'military-revolutionary committee' of the Petrograd Soviet controlled by them.³ None the less the idea of the exclusive democratic legitimacy of the future Constituent Assembly could not be immediately eliminated from the Russian political landscape or political consciousness. The Bolsheviks pretended that they included the role of the Constituent Assembly and of the impending democratic elections in their programme and their long-term political perspective. Initially there was even some disagreement within the Bolshevik ranks on how to deal with the Constituent Assembly and its position in the new (democratic or socialist) Russia. These differences related to how the character of the Russian revolution was being assessed by different Bolshevik and other revolutionary leaders. Was the revolution primarily a democratic revolution that was not yet moving to the stage of a 'proletarian' revolution? Was it, alternatively, an incipient socialist revolution that was turning its back on bourgeois-democratic ideas and institutions? The distribution of the land to the peasants or the granting of independence to the non-Russian nations, were bourgeois-democratic rather than socialist measures. But the institution of the power of the workers, supported by soldiers and peasants, pointed to a socialist and anti-capitalist transformation – of course, under Bolshevik leadership. Russia had not even reached the stage of constructing a democratic system or of a developed capitalist society, but the revolutionary impatience and fanaticism of the Bolsheviks ensured that the idea of immediately moving towards the stage of a socialist revolution became predominant. The Bolshevik coup of 7 November 1917 was clear proof of this. Bolshevik leaders like Lenin and Trotsky were not impressed by the idea that Russia should first become a capitalist or democratic society in accordance with the European model. The Bolsheviks were on a world-revolutionary mission and claimed that their concept of

³ See for the crucial features of the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd on 7 November (25 October) 1917, briefly, Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, pp. 108-10.

‘Soviet power’ represented a superior form of proletarian and popular democracy – superior to the ‘bourgeois-democratic’ model of an institution like the Constituent Assembly.

On 8 November 1917, the day following the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd, a decree was issued which established a ‘Council of People’s Commissars’ as a new, ‘provisional workers’ and peasants’ government.’ It would exercise authority ‘until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly.’ The Bolsheviks obviously recognised in their propaganda and first political moves the legitimacy of a democratically elected Assembly, and even pretended that the ‘Council of People’s Commissars’ was a provisional institution. The decree also declared that ‘the land question in all its magnitude can be settled only by the nation-wide Constituent Assembly.’ The Bolsheviks thus tried to demonstrate that they had not forgotten either about the status or about the tasks – democratic and social reforms – of the Russian Constituent Assembly. However, another decree issued on the same day proclaimed that ‘all power belongs to the Soviets.’ In the new revolutionary situation the question of political power was confusing and contradictory, not in the last place on the rhetorical level. The major Bolshevik leaders argued that Russia had entered the transition from a bourgeois-democratic to a proletarian and socialist revolution. But the earlier democratic ‘stage’ could not be simply ignored nor could the other socialist parties, especially the ‘Left Wing’ of the Socialist Revolutionaries with their mass base among the peasantry and their partial affinity to the Bolsheviks. The critical question was what the results of a democratic election to the Constituent Assembly were going to be.

The Election of 25 November 1917 and its consequences

On 25 November, then, the Bolshevik regime – now in control of Moscow and other cities besides Petrograd – really had to face the elections to the Constituent Assembly. As it was not deemed wise to try to stop them – in many parts of Russia it was not even in a position to do so – another strategy was necessary. What Lenin, the great Bolshevik leader, thought about this problem at that moment, is not entirely clear. According to Trotsky, in a book about Lenin he wrote in 1924, Lenin wanted to postpone the elections but was overruled by some other Bolshevik leaders. Lenin himself wrote in 1920 that he had defended Bolshevik participation in the elections because it would help to ‘prove to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be broken up.’⁴ Thus on the one hand, Lenin and other Bolsheviks may have been anxious about the complicating consequences for the Bolshevik regime of a disappointing Bolshevik election result. On the other hand, Lenin may have believed that the Constituent Assembly would prove to be just as ineffective and chaotic as the short-lived State Dumas had been ten years earlier. The Assembly might immediately appear counter-revolutionary in comparison with the Soviets

⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

and Bolshevik policies. Its political failure or refusal to introduce far-reaching reforms would be an instructive demonstration to the workers and peasants of the uselessness of a bourgeois-democratic parliament in Russia. It could never be an alternative to the socialist revolution, but there was no absolute certainty that things would really work out this way.

A leading Bolshevik, M. Uritsky, was appointed by the new revolutionary government as commissar to supervise the work of the electoral commission which had been appointed by the old Provisional Government. Thus, the electoral commission was not dissolved by the Bolsheviks but it complained of being placed under duress and refused to cooperate with Uritsky. The Bolsheviks probably felt they had no choice but to tolerate this given the complicated political circumstances surrounding the preparations for the elections across Russia. And so it happened that in most districts of Russia the elections were held on 25 November as originally planned, and were conducted without serious interference from any political side. Of the more than 800 members of the Constituent Assembly originally provided for, more than 700 could be elected – a great success given the context of war conditions and increasing chaos in the slowly disintegrating Russian Empire. At this early stage in their revolutionary career, the Bolsheviks had to manoeuvre cautiously in order not to lose such political credibility as they enjoyed among a part of the population. They could not prevent the elections from being held, and had they wished to manipulate the results they could not do so everywhere, for the territory they controlled was as yet too small. Although they controlled much of central Russia and many of the major cities, they had to tolerate political communication across the country at the time of the elections. They may also have believed that they would achieve a good result, especially in the Russian cities.

The Bolsheviks, indeed, proved to be the strongest party amongst the Russian urban working class. However, the election results also justified the apprehensions of those Bolsheviks who had been sceptical about this first Russian experiment in bourgeois democracy. The Bolsheviks won 24% of the vote and were the second strongest party, but the real winners were the Socialist-Revolutionaries. Although the exact figures on the election results are in dispute due to the large number of invalid ballots and the fact that the records were never completed, the results are by and large clear and generally accepted. More than 60% of citizens with the right to vote actually voted, and 90% of the votes polled were counted – a good 40 million of more than 44,5 million votes. Of the more than 700 elected members of the Constituent Assembly, the Socialist-Revolutionaries won an absolute majority. Of 84 elected members of the non-Russian nationalities, amongst whom the Ukrainians were the largest group, most were strongly anti-Bolshevik, including the Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries, who were the third largest party with 7.7 % of the vote. The Constitutional Democrats (4.7 %) and the Mensheviks (2.6 %) were

marginal parties in Russia as a whole, but in Moscow, for example, the Constitutional Democrats won 35.7 % of the vote.⁵

It was not clear when the Constituent Assembly would be convoked in Petrograd. At all events, Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders understood that some clever manoeuvring was necessary in order to neutralise the possible ‘counter-revolutionary’ impact of the Constituent Assembly in session. Agitation among workers, soldiers and peasants, political intimidation, and tactical moves to divide the Bolsheviks’ opponents were seen as crucial. Perhaps most important of all was concluding a tactical alliance with the left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionaries, who on some – but not all – issues had similar ideas to the Bolsheviks. On 27 November Lenin told the Extraordinary All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies in Petrograd, where the Socialist-Revolutionaries were the dominant political force, that the Constituent Assembly should not distract them from the fight against capitalism and for social revolution. The work of the Assembly would depend on the mood in the country and they could directly influence it, he said, ‘but don’t forget your rifles.’⁶ Lenin and the other Bolsheviks at the Peasants’ Congress were successful in bringing about a deeper split in the ranks of the Socialist-Revolutionaries. Agreement on a political coalition was reached between the Bolsheviks and the Left-Wing Socialist-Revolutionaries, who at that critical moment managed to secure a majority in the Congress. On 28 November a joint meeting of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’ Deputies (in theory the highest political organ in revolutionary Russia), the Petrograd Soviet, and the Executive Committee of the Peasants’ Congress was held to celebrate the act of union. The CEC was enlarged by the addition of peasants’ delegates and delegates of the army, the fleet and the trade unions, and now became officially known as the ‘All-Russian CEC of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies.’⁷ More crucially, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries were appointed to three People’s Commissariats, including that for Agriculture, and to several minor government posts. The Bolshevik policy of co-opting the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries was succeeding.

The agreement with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries reinforced the position of the Bolsheviks, especially because it provided them with an argument to explain away the results of the elections to the Constituent Assembly, i.e., the ‘deceptive’ character of the victory of the Socialist-Revolutionaries. The latter had entered the elections as a single party, but now the larger, Left

⁵ Carr gives a figure of 707 elected members of the Constituent Assembly, of whom 410 were Socialist-Revolutionaries; elsewhere slightly different figures are given, such as a total of 703 elected members including 380 Socialist Revolutionaries, whose share of the vote must in any case have been 55-60%. See Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Vol. 1, p. 120 with references to I.S. Malchevsky (ed.), *Vserossiiskoe Uchreditel'noe Sobranie* (Moscow, 1930) and M.V. Vishnyak, *Vserossiiskoe Uchreditel'noe Sobranie* (Paris, 1932); Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls*, passim; James R. Millar (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, Vol. 3 (London, 2004), p. 1930.

⁶ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Extraordinary All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies: Speech on the Agrarian Question’, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26 (Moscow, 1972), pp. 321-32.

⁷ Hereafter the ‘All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies’ will be referred to as, shortly, CEC.

section of the party at the Petrograd Peasants' Congress had made a coalition with the Bolsheviks and formally split away from the other, 'Right' section, which continued its opposition to the Bolsheviks. The point was that amongst the delegates of the Socialist-Revolutionaries elected to the Constitutional Assembly, the Right wing had a great majority, which was entirely different from the Left predominance in the membership of the Peasants' Congress. It was argued that the Right-Wing parliamentary majority did not represent the views of the Socialist-Revolutionary voters on the new vital point of working with the Bolsheviks for the social revolution. According to Lenin, the people voted for a party 'which no longer existed.' He repeated this argument in a speech at the congress of railwaymen in January 1918 immediately after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, tendentiously attributing the election results to the fact that the elections took place 'on lists drawn up before the October Revolution.' Two years later Lenin also argued that in the large industrial cities the Bolsheviks had almost everywhere been the largest party in the elections, and in matters of revolution the principle applied that 'the town inevitably leads the country after it; the country inevitably follows the town.'⁸ Here the Bolshevik leader expressed his real attitude to the peasants. Apart from that, the political scholasticism of the Bolsheviks always had an answer to any question and always an argument to justify its political manoeuvres or power-hungry actions.

The results of the election made it almost certain that the Constituent Assembly would serve as a rallying-point for opposition to the Soviet regime, both from the anti-Bolshevik socialists and from the surviving bourgeois politicians. An attempt was made in the name of former ministers of the Provisional Government to convene the Constituent Assembly in the second week of December. This was against the wish of the Soviet government (Council of People's Commissars) and was resisted by force. On 4 December the People's Commissar for Naval Affairs, Pavel Dybenko, ordered to keep 7,000 pro-Bolshevik Kronstadt sailors on full alert in case of convocation of the Assembly. A meeting of some 20,000 Kronstadt 'soldiers, sailors, workers and peasants' resolved to only support a Constituent Assembly that was 'so composed as to confirm the achievements of the October Revolution' and would be free of 'leaders of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.'⁹ This was the kind of language and attitude that the Bolsheviks wanted to hear. After the split between the Right and Left Socialist-Revolutionaries had become final and three Left Socialist-Revolutionaries had been included in the Soviet government, the Bolsheviks felt more emboldened to pursue an aggressive forward policy. On 11 December a significant step was made: the Soviet government accused the liberal Constitutional Democratic Party ('Cadets') of being involved in counter-revolutionary activity, declared it 'a party of enemies of the people', and announced that these 'political leaders of the counter-revolutionary civil war' would be arrested.¹⁰ Thus the decree proclaiming all of this already spoke of a 'civil war', a notion that was

⁸ Quoted in Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, pp. 121-2.

⁹ Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 180.

¹⁰ Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, p. 277. On 29 December the *Decree on the Arrest of the Leaders of the Civil War*

useful to justify the suppression of the Constitutional Democrats or other opposition forces. But although the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and many of the Mensheviks sided with the Constitutional Democrats in protesting against the repressive measures of the Bolshevik regime, the Bolsheviks did as yet not venture to apply such measures to the anti-Bolshevik socialists.

The Bolsheviks' strategy against the Constituent Assembly

From the second week of December 1917, policy regarding the Constituent Assembly was the subject of constant preoccupation in the Bolshevik party. At a meeting of the Bolshevik central committee on 12 December Nikolai Bukharin raised the question whether the Assembly should be convened at all and answered in the affirmative, arguing as Lenin occasionally did that 'constitutional illusions are still alive in the broad masses' and therefore had to be exposed in political practice. But he wished to expel the Constitutional Democrats and to turn the Left (Bolshevik-Left Socialist-Revolutionary) block of the Assembly into a 'revolutionary convention' effecting the transition from bourgeois to socialist revolution. In a speech to the CEC on 14 December, however, Lenin sounded much harsher on the issue and gave a serious warning. He said that they should not call the Constituent Assembly as originally conceived, because it 'was conceived against the people and we carried out the rising [October coup] to make certain that it will not be used against the people ... When a revolutionary class is struggling against the propertied classes which offer resistance, that resistance has to be suppressed.' In other words, the Constituent Assembly should be regarded, not as a democratic parliament that was to be taken seriously, but as a defensive instrument and institution of the old ruling class. Twelve days later he followed up these statements with a more elaborate set of 'Theses' on the question, perhaps his most significant analysis of the character of the October Revolution and the most revealing as regards his contempt for 'bourgeois democracy.' The Soviet government led by Lenin postponed the convocation of the Constitutional Assembly until January 1918, blaming the delay on technical difficulties and machinations of their enemies.

On 26 December 1917 Lenin's *Theses on the Constituent Assembly* were published anonymously in the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda*.¹¹ They uncompromisingly brought into the open what Lenin had believed for months already, namely that the bourgeois revolution in Russia was a spent force and that they should turn their back on it and pursue the road to socialism. Of course, 'in a bourgeois republic the constituent assembly is the highest form of the democratic principle',

against the Revolution, drawn up by Lenin, was published. The freedom of the non-socialist press already had been limited since November, and the persecution of the Constitutional Democrats was originally justified by their alleged support of General Kornilov's aborted anti-Bolshevik counter-coup; now it was justified by their support of General Kaledin of the anti-Bolshevik Don Cossacks.

¹¹ See V.I. Lenin, 'Theses on the Constituent Assembly', *Collected Works*, Vol. 26 (Moscow, 1972), pp. 379-83.

he wrote, but after the achievement of the bourgeois revolution in February 1917 the situation had changed. It is amazing to see that Lenin seemed to believe that Russia had already completed this 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution, which in his eyes – in his quasi-Marxist scholasticism – had apparently been done in the miraculously short period of eight months. Indeed, the Russian bourgeois revolution had been followed by a second, socialist revolution in October. Thus, he could argue that ever since the beginning of the October Revolution, 'revolutionary Social-Democracy' had insisted that 'a republic of Soviets is a higher form of democracy than the usual bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly.' Soviet democracy was the only political form capable of assuring the 'least painful transition to socialism', and therefore it was this form of democracy that was now on the agenda. At the same time the counter-revolutionary rising in which the Constitutional Democrats were involved as well, had 'taken away all possibility of resolving the most acute questions in a formally democratic way.' Lenin's crafty, Jesuitical form of reasoning was a phenomenon in itself. The new situation had created an inevitable clash between the Constituent Assembly and 'the will and interest of the working and exploited classes who began on 25 October the socialist revolution against the bourgeoisie.' Lenin used the split between the anti-Bolshevik Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries to argue that the Constituent Assembly did not truly represent the Russian people any longer because the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries were now included in the new government and agreed that Soviet democracy should prevail. This was another fine piece of reasoning which 'logically' followed from the Bolsheviks' political theology. Along these lines they could argue that the interests of the October revolution 'stand higher than the formal rights of the Constituent Assembly.' Indeed, any 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 civil war, would be a betrayal of the proletariat's cause, and the adoption of the bourgeois standpoint.' What was on the agenda now, was the 'tasks of the dictatorship of the proletariat.'¹²

Lenin proposed that the Constituent Assembly agree to new elections in order to better represent the current 'will of the people', and that it accept the Soviet government in the interim. He wrote that the 'only chance of securing a painless solution to the crisis which has arisen owing to the divergence between the elections to the Constituent Assembly, on the one hand, and the will of the people and the interests of the working and exploited classes, on the other, is for the people to exercise ... the right to elect the members of the Constituent Assembly anew ...' The Constituent Assembly moreover should unconditionally recognize 'Soviet power, the Soviet revolution, and its policy on the questions of peace, the land and workers' control', and 'resolutely join the camp of the enemies of the Cadet-Kaledin counter-revolution.' Otherwise a crisis in connexion with the Constituent Assembly 'can be solved only by revolutionary means.'¹³ It seems that not

¹² Ibid.; see also Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, pp. 123-4.

¹³ Lenin, 'Theses on the Constituent Assembly.' The Constitutional Democrats (Cadets) were, again, fully identified with the activities of Aleksei Maximovich Kaledin, the Cavalry General of the anti-Bolshevik Don Cossacks. At the same time

all Bolshevik leaders or indeed all Bolshevik delegates elected to the Constituent Assembly had immediately been willing to support a policy of sidelining or suppressing the Assembly. But on 24 December Lenin had prevailed at a meeting of the Bolshevik central committee, which ordered the Bolshevik delegates to the Constituent Assembly to follow Lenin's line of subordinating it to the Soviet government. For the Bolsheviks Lenin's *Theses on the Constituent Assembly* became accepted party doctrine, which meant that they abandoned any pretension of respecting bourgeois constitutionalism and effectively decided its fate. As for the democratic socialist parties, they came better to understand what the Bolshevik-led 'proletarian revolution' meant. The acceptance of the *Theses* by the Bolshevik party had two important results. First, it made irrevocable the breach between the Bolsheviks and those socialist parties – notably the 'Right' Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks – who supported the view that the revolution was still in its democratic stage. Once the thesis of the 'proletarian' character of the revolution was accepted, those who defended the 'bourgeois-democratic' view logically became 'counter-revolutionaries.' Secondly, it sealed the fate of the Constituent Assembly. Once the democratic revolution had been superseded by the 'socialist revolution', it became an anachronism or worse, counter-revolutionary. Such was the cold logic of Bolshevik political theology. The Constituent Assembly could either surrender or had to be wiped out.

The suggestion that the action finally taken against the Constituent Assembly in January was the result of a sudden, unpremeditated decision prompted by anything unexpected that happened after the assembly met, must be dismissed as erroneous, as E.H. Carr has convincingly argued.¹⁴ The action of the Bolsheviks was the outcome of a considered policy, whereby the thesis of the transition to a socialist revolutionary stage was decisive in ideological terms. Of course, the Bolsheviks wanted to maintain power anyhow, and their theory of a 'superior proletarian democracy' was expedient in that respect. At the same time it was outlandish to socialists who attached importance to the rule of law, democratic procedure or the toleration of political pluralism. But these were things which did not matter to many of the revolutionaries who were used to Russian conditions and least of all to those who had been influenced by the peculiar Leninist and Bolshevik understanding of 'socialist revolution.' Authoritarianism, violence and quasi-Marxist dogmatism were joined together in the Russian phenomenon of Bolshevism with Lenin and his Bolsheviks believing they had history on their side in forcing their violent revolution upon Russia and destroying their enemies; although dressed in Marxist language their revolutionary voluntarism remained what it was. Lenin's *Theses on the Constituent Assembly* were nothing less than a declaration of war on the Assembly and on the political parties who might try to use it against the Soviet government. Therefore, a number of tactical steps were taken. On 30 December 1917 a leader of the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, Nikolai Avksentiev, was arrested

Lenin could without any problem, and in good Jacobin fashion, identify his own policies and ideology with 'the will of the people'; see Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 192.

¹⁴ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, p. 125.

together with some of his followers 'for the organization of a counter-revolutionary conspiracy.' It was the first time that a measure like this was taken against a representative of a socialist party. The Constituent Assembly itself was not preventively suppressed but dealt with in an indirect manner. Indeed, on 2 January 1918 a decree of the Council of People's Commissars convened the Assembly for 18 January, subject to the attainment of a quorum of 400 members. Significantly however two days later the CEC, the permanent organ of 'Soviet power', passed a resolution summoning the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets for 21 January, and an All-Russian Congress of Peasants' Deputies a few days later. Grigori Zinoviev explained to this CEC meeting the evolving Bolshevik strategy regarding the Assembly in terms of Leninist doctrine, and was quite open about the approaching final confrontation. He said that they saw 'in the rivalry of the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets the historical dispute between two revolutions, the bourgeois revolution and the socialist revolution.' The Constituent Assembly was irrelevant to 'the people's, the socialist, revolution.' As this statement incidentally shows, the Bolshevik concept of socialist revolution was often vague, sometimes being defined as a 'proletarian', sometimes as a 'people's revolution.' This was typical of the populist, demagogic and conspiratorial character of Bolshevik revolutionary politics.¹⁵

The resolution passed by the CEC meeting attacked the slogan 'all power to the Constituent Assembly' that was raised by the supporters of the Assembly, denouncing it as the rallying-point of 'counter-revolutionary elements' and as actually meaning 'down with the Soviets.' The purpose of the resolution was 'to support with all the organized force of the Soviets the Left half of the Constituent Assembly against the Right, bourgeois and compromisers', half.' But while the anti-Bolshevik socialists were denounced as 'compromisers', the strategy of the Bolsheviks themselves was in fact an ambiguous compromise in terms of the insincere and manipulative way they dealt with the Constituent Assembly. A Menshevik delegate at the CEC meeting, Sukhanov, made this clear by putting the logical dilemma: if there was a bourgeois revolution going on, then the Constituent Assembly should be fully supported; but if they were witnessing an emerging socialist revolution, then the Assembly should not be summoned at all. However, the political tactics and strategy of the Bolsheviks was a dimension in itself and not subject to this kind of logical reasoning. These tactics were none the less correctly diagnosed in a protest issued by the non-Bolshevik deputies from the semi-illegal first CEC:¹⁶ the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets was being summoned 'in order to torpedo the Constituent Assembly.'

The preparations for the final campaign against the Constituent Assembly were completed at a meeting of the CEC on 16 January, when the 'Declaration of Rights of the Working and

¹⁵ Of course, the populism of the Bolsheviks was not the same thing as the 'populism' of the Narodniks – the latter was a theory of society and revolution, the former a question of rhetoric and strategy.

¹⁶ It is interesting that the CEC elected by the First Congress of Soviets, which had convened before the Bolshevik coup and which contained a large number of Mensheviks and 'Right' Socialist-Revolutionaries, continued to meet semi-illegally. Its records of meetings held between 19 November 1917 and 24 January 1918 were published in 1925; see Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, p. 126n3.

Exploited People' was drafted; the idea was to force the Assembly to adopt it. It reiterated the ideological principle that Russia had been declared 'a republic of Soviets of workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies', and that all power 'in the centre and locally' belonged to these Soviets. The Constituent Assembly was supposed to endorse Soviet policy and to pass what amounted to an act of abdication which said among other things:¹⁷

'Being elected on the basis of party lists compiled before the October revolution, when the people could not yet rise in its masses against the exploiters and, not having yet experienced the full force of the resistance of the exploiters in defence of their class privileges, had not yet undertaken in practical form the building of a socialist society, the Constituent Assembly would think it fundamentally incorrect, even from the formal standpoint, to set itself up against the Soviet power ... Supporting the Soviet power and the decrees of the Council of People's Commissars, the Constituent Assembly recognizes that its tasks are confined to the general working out of the fundamental principles of the socialist reconstruction of society.'

The Constituent Assembly was thus supposed to eliminate itself in a manner that came close to the behaviour of people in later communist show trials. In this respect Russia and the world were witnessing a political novelty as well – a veritable big bang of modern communist manipulation and debased psychology. *Izvestiya* of 17 January 1918 carried the text of yet another resolution adopted at the CEC meeting of 16 January, which declared that 'any attempt on the part of any person or institution whatever to usurp this or that function of state power will be regarded as a counter-revolutionary act. Any such attempt will be crushed by all means at the disposal of the Soviet power, including the use of armed force.'¹⁸ Only the 'Soviet power' (in reality the Bolsheviks) had the right to 'usurp' such functions of state power, not a bourgeois institution like the Constituent Assembly.

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly

The outlawing of the Constitutional Democrats and the arrest of several leading Right Socialist-Revolutionaries had obviously weakened the potential offensive power of the Constituent Assembly, which could do hardly more than try to defend itself. Yet the Bolsheviks were uncertain how easy or difficult it would be to impose their dictates. When in the morning of 18 January 1918 a large crowd gathered in Petrograd to march on the Tauride Palace (where the Assembly would meet) to demonstrate its support, it was shot at and dispersed by soldiers loyal to the Soviet (Bolshevik-Left Socialist-Revolutionary) government. Several persons were killed, peaceful demonstrators who were described by the *Pravda* of 19 January 1918 as 'armed

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 127, citing Malchevsky (ed.), *Vserossiiskoe Uchreditel'noe Sobranie*, pp. 4-6.

¹⁸ Quoted in Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Vol. 1, p. 127.

conspirators.¹⁹ The demonstration attracted fewer workers and soldiers than the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and others had hoped, and apparently consisted mainly of middle-class students, civil servants and professionals.²⁰

The Constituent Assembly – at which some 400 of the elected 700 delegates were present, the quorum decided by the Council of People's Commissars – finally opened at 4 p.m. with armed guards being present everywhere in the building and weapons being pointed at speaking delegates.²¹ The Bolshevik Yakov Sverdlov, chairman of the CEC, ousted from the tribune the oldest member of the assembly, who in accordance with tradition was about to open the proceedings, and in the name of the CEC declared the assembly open. The French Revolution, he said, had issued its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen which was 'a declaration of rights to the free exploitation of those not possessing the tools and means of production'; the Russian revolution must issue its own declaration of rights. He then read the draft Declaration of the Rights of Working and Exploited People prepared by the CEC two days earlier and requested the Constituent Assembly to adopt it; by doing so the Assembly would 'correctly express the wishes of the people.' This using of the concept of 'the people' – as well as its will, its wishes and so on – had become standard populist practice of the Bolshevik leaders. It is remarkable that somewhat later, another Bolshevik delegate, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov, protested against Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and others using the term 'the people' in a 'bourgeois-democratic' sense, i.e., in the political sense of citizens of the state, not as a social category. He argued that their concept of 'the people' or 'the will of the people' was a mere fiction needed by the ruling classes but for a Marxist 'an inconceivable notion', because 'the people does not act as a single unit.' That the Bolshevik propaganda was constantly using this same notion of a quasi-homogeneous 'people', and claimed to be the true voice of the wishes and interests of the workers, peasants etc. collectively referred to as 'the people', Skvortsov-Stepanov ignored; he also ignored the democratic principle of pluralist political representation. However, the fundamental contradiction between the Bolsheviks and the anti-Bolshevik socialists was crystal-clear to his dogmatic mind: 'It is all over between us', thus he addressed the latter, 'You belong to one world, with the Cadets and the bourgeoisie, and we to the other, with the peasants and the workers.'²² It sounded like a threat, another declaration of war against democratic socialists.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 130n2.

²⁰ Nikolai N. Smirnov, 'Constituent Assembly', in Edward Acton, Vladimir I. Cherniaev and William G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution 1914-1921* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1997), p. 332; Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London, 1997), p. 514.

²¹ See I.S. Malchevsky (ed.), *Vserossiiskoe Uchreditel'noe Sobranie* (Moscow, 1930), pp. 29-110 for reports on the one and only session of the Constituent Assembly on 18-19 January 1918. Passages from this source in English translation can be found in the previous and following footnotes. Since the session of the Constituent Assembly lasted for only 13 hours and then was suppressed, there are no proper records produced by the Assembly itself.

²² Quoted in Fyodor Fyodorovich Raskolnikov, *Tales of Sub-Lieutenant Ilyin: The Tale of a Lost Day* (Moscow, 1934; English transl. London, 1982), and reproduced in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov (eds.), *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922* (Indianapolis, 2009), pp. 219-20.

But the war of the Bolsheviks had not been completely won yet. The attempt of Sverdlov to immediately take over the Constituent Assembly caused an indignant reaction on the part of the majority of non-Bolshevik delegates, who refused to bow to him and who elected Viktor Chernov to be President of the Assembly. When a vote was held, Chernov, a prominent leader of the 'Right', anti-Bolshevik, Socialist-Revolutionaries, got 244 votes against 153 for Maria Spiridonova of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries. Chernov was one of the founders of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party and its primary theoretician; he had also been Minister for Agriculture in the Russian Provisional Government. However, he feared 'a brawl' if he were too assertive under the circumstances prevailing in the Tauride Palace.²³ Nevertheless the Constituent Assembly was numerically dominated by the anti-Bolshevik Socialist-Revolutionaries. When the Bolsheviks placed the decrees of the Second Soviet Congress and the 'Declaration of the Rights of Working and Exploited People' before the Assembly for endorsement, they were rejected by a majority of 237 to 136 in favour of an alternative motion of the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries to discuss current questions of policy instead of endorsing Soviet decisions. The Constituent Assembly was opposed to Soviet government and would not agree to new elections. The Right Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, although in favour of socialism as a programme for the future, thought Russia unready for anything like 'Soviet democracy' given the backward state of the country's society and political system (and, of course, the ease with which it could be manipulated by the likes of Lenin).

A separate meeting of the Bolsheviks and Left Socialist-Revolutionaries in the Tauride Palace now decided to dissolve the Assembly. In the early hours of the morning the Bolshevik Fyodor Raskolnikov, the Deputy People's Commissar for Naval Affairs, told the Assembly that in view of its 'counter-revolutionary majority' the Bolsheviks would leave it. An hour later the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries withdrew as well. While the Bolshevik central committee remained in session elsewhere in the building, Lenin instructed personally the armed guards to wait until the other deputies left, telling them there was no need to disperse the Assembly: '... just let them go on chattering as long as they like and then break up, and tomorrow we won't let a single one of them come in.' Yet the procedure was speeded up a little. Around 4 a.m. on 19 January 1918, twelve hours after the Constituent Assembly had started its proceedings, the sailor in command of the military guard in the Tauride Palace, A.G. Zheleznyakov, apparently acting on instructions from the Bolsheviks, went to Chernov and said: 'The guard is tired. I propose that you close the meeting and let everybody go home.'²⁴ These historic words, this banal and simultaneously

²³ Daly and Trofimov (eds.), *Russia in War and Revolution*, pp. 214-5. See for Chernov Maureen Perrie, 'Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov', in George Jackson and Robert Devlin (eds.), *Dictionary of the Russian Revolution* (Westport, CT, 1989), pp. 116-9.

²⁴ Ronald W. Clark, *Lenin: The Man Behind the Mask* (London, 1988), pp. 304-5; Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 516; Raskolnikov, *Tales of Sub-Lieutenant Ilyin: The Tale of a Lost Day*.

dramatic gesture, perfectly illustrated the indifference and contempt with which the Bolsheviks looked at the irrelevant institution of a 'bourgeois' parliament.

Shortly before 5 a.m. the Constituent Assembly decided to adjourn for twelve hours, scheduling the next meeting for 5 p.m. on 19 January – however, it never met again. Its re-assembly was prevented by simply locking down the Tauride Palace and placing an armed guard at the door. Thus the deputies were prevented from entering the building, and when they tried they found the Constituent Assembly to have been declared dissolved by the Soviet government. That day the government also called the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets for 23 January (two days later than originally planned by the CEC) as a 'democratic' counterweight to the Constituent Assembly; it was, indeed, to meet in the Tauride Palace. The Soviet Congress contained a large Bolshevik majority and confirmed the formal dissolution of the Constituent Assembly decreed on 19 January; on this fateful day the government decree dissolving the Assembly had already been ratified by the CEC following a two-hour speech by Lenin.²⁵ The ideological foundation of Bolshevik policy had also been expounded by Bukharin, one of the few Bolshevik leaders who took the trouble to speak to the Constituent Assembly (Skvortsov-Stepanov was much lower in the Bolshevik hierarchy). Bukharin had declared: 'The watershed which at this moment divides the assembly into ... two irreconcilable camps, camps of principle – this watershed runs along the line: for socialism or against socialism.' For the Bolsheviks it was as simple as that. One could be on the side of the Bolshevik revolution or against it, and no nuances or compromises were possible. Chernov had proclaimed the 'will to socialism', but put it in a different, more evolutionary perspective than the impatient Bolsheviks did. Bukharin's response to this revealed again the fundamental difference between democratic socialists and 'activist' Bolsheviks: 'But of what socialism was citizen Chernov speaking? Of the socialism which will come in 200 years, which will be made by our grandchildren? ... We speak of a living, active, creative socialism, about which we do not only want to speak, but which we want to realize. And that, comrades, is what is called being an active socialist.'²⁶

Bolshevism indeed was the revolutionary and violent activism of an authoritarian minority which managed to manoeuvre itself into power. It is not difficult to understand why another activist revolutionary leader, Mussolini, was an admirer of Lenin.²⁷ But also a man like the Left Socialist-Revolutionary leader Steinberg, the People's Commissar for Justice, dismissed the proposal of the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries in the Constituent Assembly to discuss questions of policy (the primary task of a democratic parliament), for these 'already had been decided.' He said that the Assembly only had to submit to the will of the working people as set forth in the pro-

²⁵ Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 193. Lenin's 'Speech on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly' and his 'Draft Decree on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly', both of 19 January 1918, can be found in the *Lenin Internet Archive*.

²⁶ Quoted in Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, p. 128.

²⁷ Mussolini had expressed his admiration for Lenin as late as 1924; see Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (Milan, 2002), p. 159.

gramme of the Second Soviet Congress. In complete contrast to this had been the speech of the Georgian Menshevik deputy Irakli Tsereteli, who argued against ‘anarchic attempts to introduce a socialist economy in a backward country’ and stressed that the class struggle of the workers for their final liberation could only be conducted under conditions of ‘popular sovereignty based on universal and equal suffrage.’ This sounded like the socialism of European democratic culture, not that of Russian revolutionary Bolshevism.²⁸ During the Constituent Assembly’s last hour, Chernov had submitted a draft Law on Land Reform and one on making Russia a democratic federal republic, both of which were adopted by the Assembly. But the brief moment of parliamentary democratic debates and reform proposals was over.²⁹

It is a painful fact that the act of forcibly dissolving the Constituent Assembly passed almost without protest. This was not only the result of Bolshevik power and intimidation, but also of the weakness and hesitations of the Constituent Assembly itself. As the ‘Right’ Socialist-Revolutionary Stankevich later observed: ‘The impression of the ‘injustice’ committed by the Bolsheviks against the Constituent Assembly was attenuated to a considerable extent by dissatisfaction with the Constituent Assembly itself, by its (as was said) ‘undignified behaviour’, and by the timidity and feebleness of its president Chernov. The Constituent Assembly was blamed more than the Bolsheviks who dispersed it.’³⁰ In other words, it was also a case of intrinsic political weakness, or actually demoralisation. But above all it was a demonstration of the lack of any solid basis and popular support in Russia for the principles and institutions of bourgeois democracy, European style. Neither in political circles nor among the common people, and least of all among the peasants, was there any remarkable reaction to the closure of the Constituent Assembly.³¹ Nevertheless, some deputies continued to hold a number of secret meetings, but they found that the political conditions were increasingly dangerous. The central committee of the ‘Right’ Socialist-Revolutionaries decided in January 1918 against armed resistance, because ‘Bolshevism, unlike the Tsarist autocracy, is based on workers and soldiers who are still blinded, have not lost faith in it, and do not see that it is fatal to the cause of the working class.’³² The Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks tried for some time to work within the Soviet system, and returned to the CEC, the Petrograd Soviet, and other local soviets they had walked out of during the Bolshevik coup in November 1917. They hoped that they could strengthen their position in Soviet elections and then, perhaps, re-convene the Constituent Assembly as a truly democratic platform. Soviet elections in the winter and spring of 1918 did indeed return Socialist-Revolutionary and anti-

²⁸ See for the interesting figure of Irakli Tsereteli W.H. Roobol, *Tsereteli – A Democrat in the Russian Revolution: A Political Biography* (The Hague, 1976); see also Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy 1883-1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

²⁹ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, pp. 128-9.

³⁰ V.B. Stankevich, *Vospominaniya, 1914-1919* (Berlin, 1920), p. 302, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 130.

³¹ Cf. Radkey, *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917*, p. 2; Clark, *Lenin: The Man Behind the Mask*, p. 305; Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, pp. 517-9; Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, p. 130.

³² Quoted in Scott Smith, ‘The Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Civil War’, in Vladimir N. Brovkin (ed.), *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars* (New Haven, 1997), pp. 83-104.

Bolshevik majorities in some places, but the Bolsheviks and the Soviet government refused to accept these election results and dissolved anti-Bolshevik Soviets. Attempts by the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks to form alternative worker assemblies were partly successful but had little impact on the power monopoly of the Bolshevik-dominated Soviets. The signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk by the Bolsheviks in March 1918 was another reason for the Socialist-Revolutionaries to abandon their illusions. The party leadership, and also many Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, increasingly viewed the Bolshevik government as an ally of Germany, and in May the party council of the Socialist-Revolutionaries decided to start an uprising against the Bolshevik regime with the ultimate aim of reconvening the Constituent Assembly.³³

A postscript on Viktor Chernov (1873–1952)

It is of importance to pay some additional attention to the President of the Constituent Assembly Viktor Chernov, perhaps the principal symbol of the suppression of parliamentary democracy in Russia. Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov, also known by his political pseudonym Boris Olenin, is not only an interesting person in terms of his Russian experience and political ideas, but was also associated with Czechoslovakia in the 1920s.³⁴ Since he was a prominent socialist leader opposing the dictatorial politics of the Bolsheviks and communism, he is worth looking at from both a Russian, a European, and a Czechoslovak point of view. Chernov defended the idea of democratic socialism and believed that the peasants were an important social class who deserved to be taken seriously instead of being looked down upon as Marxists and Leninists tended to do. In early 1921, when the Bolsheviks were winning the Civil War and anti-Bolshevik politicians had to fear for their life, he fled to Czechoslovakia.

Viktor Chernov had been born in 1873 in a provincial town southeast of Saratov as the son of a former serf peasant, who had risen to become a low-level functionary in the local civil service. He attended the gymnasium in Saratov, a hotbed of radicalism, where he joined a discussion circle in which he studied the works of Nikolai Dobrolyubov, a revolutionary democrat, and Nikolai Mikhailovsky, a theoretician of the *Narodniki* ('populist') movement. As a student in the Law Department at Moscow University he again joined a radical discussion circle, defending populist (Narodnik) views against the Marxist rivals of the Narodniks. The Narodniks were the forebears of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and believed in the revolutionary potential of the peasants, although the latter would need intellectual leaders to successfully organize a peasant movement. After Chernov had joined the Narodniks in the early 1890s, he became in 1894 a member of Mark Natanson's *People's Right* group which wanted to unite all socialist movements in Rus-

³³ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁴ See Perrie, 'Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov'; Elena Chinyayeva, *Russians Outside Russia: The Émigré Community in Czechoslovakia 1918-1938* (Munich, 2001), passim.

sia. In the same year he was arrested for his political activities, spending nine months in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg; then he was sentenced to a period of exile in central Russia. After spending some time organizing the peasants around Tambov, Chernov went to Zürich in 1899. He joined the Socialist-Revolutionary Party when it was founded in 1902, became a member of its central committee, wrote the party's platform, and became the editor of its newspaper *Revoljucionnaya Rossiya* ('Revolutionary Russia'). He returned to Russia after the revolution of 1905. Chernov was elected as a Socialist-Revolutionary candidate in the elections to the Second Duma in 1907 and became a leader of the Socialist-Revolutionary parliamentary faction, although he also seems to have had some affinity to the Mensheviks. In 1907 he published his *Philosophical and Sociological Studies* in which he espoused the views of Richard Avenarius (1843-96), a German-Swiss philosopher who formulated the positivist doctrine of 'empirical criticism' which opposed both metaphysics and philosophical materialism. Chernov's positivism, empiricism, and refusal to subscribe to a Marxist or dogmatic philosophical materialism, exposed him to criticism from Lenin in his work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. In addition, Chernov's rejection of rigid Marxist class analysis and its one-sided focus on the industrial proletariat, and his opposition to the policies of Bolshevism made him an adversary of Lenin and his special brand of conspiratorial revolutionary politics.

Being again in exile in Europe by the time the First World War broke out, Chernov initially supported the viewpoint of the left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, which condemned the war all-round as an 'imperialist war.' However, after his return to Russia following the February Revolution in 1917 he changed his mind and advocated defending Russia against the Germans. From May to September 1917 Chernov was Minister for Agriculture in Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government. During 1917 he also edited *Delo Naroda* ('The Cause of the People') and became popular as a leader of the party which represented the interests of the peasants. He opposed the Bolsheviks as well as the left wing of his own party, who tended to identify with many of the Bolsheviks' aims; this tendency increased when the latter included the peasants in their revolutionary programme for strategic reasons. After the suppression of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 Chernov became a member of the anti-Bolshevik government in Samara as the leader of the moderate Socialist-Revolutionaries. In 1921 he fled to Czechoslovakia, where eventually he became the principal leader of the All-Russian political émigré organization *Socialist League of the New East*, founded in 1927.³⁵ The League included Russian and Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries and Belorussian and Armenian anti-Bolshevik socialists. Its ideological platform embraced Agrarian Socialism, democratic socialism, and the self-determination of nations, which was seen as an important democratic objective as well. The latter issue triggered a controversy and serious disagreements. The League defended the right to self-determination of the national minorities of the Soviet Union, even calling for the break-

³⁵ Chinyaeva, *Russians Outside Russia: The Émigré Community in Czechoslovakia 1918-1938*, p. 112.

up of the Union into separate states. This caused a split between Chernov and the majority of the émigré Russian Socialist-Revolutionaries, who opposed this radical programme and left the organization. The position of the League on the national question also troubled the Czechoslovak authorities, who feared the possible implications if this idea became influential amongst the national minorities in Czechoslovakia. In 1929 the League had begun publishing *Vestnik sotsialisticheskoi ligi novogo vostoka* ('Messenger of the Socialist League of the New East') in Prague, but in the same year Chernov left Czechoslovakia for the United States and the organization ceased its activities.

Chernov wrote a book entitled *The Great Russian Revolution*, an English translation of which appeared in 1936. He died in New York City on 15 April 1952 as a staunch anti-communist. By that time the communist dictatorship, now in its late-Stalinist phase, had come to comprise Czechoslovakia and other European countries. Chernov did not witness how the communist universe suddenly began to shrink, indeed to implode, 37 years later. Its period of expansion following the big bang of 1917-18 came to an end after hardly more than 70 years. Though a lifetime it was infinitesimal compared to the cosmological universe whose expansion still continues. But for people a lifetime is almost like the universe itself.