THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE BRITISH LEFT
The October Revolution and the Suppression
of the Constituent Assembly

The “Unknown” Bolsheviks Begin to Register

As bogeyman of the Right or icon of the Left, Lenin was so quickly to become a household name that it is difficult to recapture the degree of ignorance that was the norm among those on the British Left until well into 1917 — and in Russia as well, if M. Philips Price’s The Truth About the Allied Intervention in Russia is to be believed. In July 1919, a review in the Workers’ Dreadnought quoted a passage that began: “By the winters of 1915–16 and 1916–17 when no one in Russia but the intellectuals had heard of the Bolsheviks . . .” Siegfried Bloch’s “Reminiscences of Lenin,” published in the same paper some seven weeks later, confirmed that “generally speaking most working class organisations were ignorant of Lenin’s existence.” 1 In July 1919, looking back on the
situation two years previously, no less than Theodore Rothstein, by then the chief Bolshevik representative in Britain, wrote that Russia had been seen as “a far-distant and almost unknown country.”

As a Russian émigré, Rothstein would have been among the few individuals on the British Left who was aware of the existence of the Bolsheviks prior to 1917. It is true that many of the crucial decisions that shaped the Bolshevik party were taken at congresses in London, that some of these had been reported at the time in *Justice*, and that some on the Left, especially in the SDF, had been actively involved in aiding Russian revolutionaries (which included gun-running) during and in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. But all this had little impact in terms of registering the existence of the Bolsheviks in the minds of even the active members of socialist organizations in Britain.

Little if anything was heard of the Bolsheviks in *The Call* — later to become *The Communist* — until quite late in 1917. There was much more about Rosa Luxemburg, whom the paper mentioned in July 1916, and Karl Liebknecht, whose arrest and trial was reported throughout that year. As late as December 1916, a report of the court martial of “workmen” accused of belonging to “the Russian Social Democratic Party” made no mention of that party being long divided, in everything but name, into two completely separate organizations. At the BSP annual conference in the spring of 1917 — which took place after the February Revolution — fraternal greetings came from Georgy Chicherin, the future successor of Trotsky as People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs. But this was “on behalf of the Russian Socialist Groups in London” rather than on behalf of the Bolsheviks.

In March 1917, *The Herald* reported on the Russian Anti-Conscription League, in London, greeting the Social Democratic Party as the “true representatives of the revolutionary proletariat.” In the same issue, in articles on the Russian Revolution by Lansbury and H.N. Brailsford, as well as in an editorial titled “Holy Russia,” the Grand Duke Michael and Professor Miliukoff, reported as taking charge of foreign affairs, were the only contemporary Russians mentioned. In *The Call*, it is Trotsky rather than Lenin who first appears, as the editor
of *Nashe Slovo* who had been driven out of Europe by the Entente governments and greeted by a “great meeting” in New York.  

An exception to Lenin’s “invisibility” on the British Left was the hostile *Justice*, already clearly anti-Bolshevik because of its positions on the war. In April 1917, the paper reported on Lenin’s “discomfiture” in the aftermath of his speech to soviet delegates advocating a separate peace with Germany, which apparently failed to provoke enthusiasm.  

And in its April edition *The Socialist* characterized the Russian Revolution as “middle class” and explained: “There are two social Democratic parties in Russia each with its own separate organisation and Duma faction. The ‘Bolshevik’ section endorses the irreconcilable Marxist position, the Meshevik [sic] section has revisionist leanings.” Most of the rest of the British socialist press, however, showed very little awareness until later in 1917. The Bolsheviks were first mentioned in the *Dreadnought* in June, as “the Maximalist Socialists,” on the basis of a Reuter report of the Petrograd municipal elections, which gave them 117,760 votes out of 507,982 for socialist candidates generally, something the paper thought “augurs well for the Constituent Assembly.” The same report had appeared in *Labour Leader* the previous week.  

Lenin now appeared for the first time in the *Dreadnought*. At the end of June 1917, an editorial noted the revolutionary potential of the soviets:

> Today the Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ delegates, on which the Socialists are all-powerful, may become the Government of Russia if it wills. The Maximalist and Leninite Socialists desire this, but the more cautious elements on the Council are not yet prepared to take this step. They say that Russia cannot stand alone as a Socialist State, that she cannot dissociate herself from the commerce and diplomacy of the rest of Europe, and that a Socialist Government cannot take part in capitalist trading and diplomacy. They say that until it is possible to establish a Socialist Europe it is better to have, not a Russian Socialist Government, but a strong Socialist block in the Parliament, able to force the Liberals to do its will. They fear that if the bourgeois parties are given...
no part in the Government they will join the counter-revolutionary parties. The Maximalists and Leninites, on the other hand, desire to cut adrift from the capitalist parties altogether, and to establish a Socialist system of organisation of industry in Russia, before Russian capitalism, which is as yet in its infancy, gains power and becomes more difficult than at present to overthrow. We deeply sympathise with this view.12

Meanwhile, “N. Lenin” appeared in the June issue of The Socialist, as the “famous Russian Socialist leader of the Revolutionary Section of the Council of Workmen’s and Soldier’s delegates — the organisation that overthrew the Czarist regime.” Lenin was, if not unknown, at least unmentioned for some considerable time in the pages of The Herald. In the issue of 17 July, Brailsford referred to the Mensheviks, whom he described as the Social Democratic “Minimalists.” The “‘Maximalist’ Social-Democrats who follow Lenin” appeared in another of his articles at the end of that month:

It may be true that this party has in its ranks undesirables. It has had money “from Stockholm” it is said. It is probable that these undesirables may have come from German sources, or possibly from Mr Ford’s vast donations. All this is being investigated. When it is said, however, that Lenin himself is in German pay it is well to preserve a stiff and sceptical attitude. The evidence so far is flimsy and the Socialist Members who are not Leninites protested against its publication. Lenin is a man of great magnetism, great ability, some learning and a rigid academic mind.

Readers should be slow to believe him to be “a corrupt traitor,” Brailsford cautioned. Such allegations were intended to “destroy Socialism.” But while the “Maximalists” had arguments that should be considered, there was no possible excuse for their recent actions during the July Days, when they had made an abortive attempt to seize power in the name of the soviets. They were, said Brailsford, a minority of about a quarter in the Petrograd Workers’ Council and came sixth in the municipal elections. “Their attempted revolution was happily a fiasco.”13
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The Workers’ Dreadnought of the same day, 28 July 1917 — the first issue under the paper’s new title — saw the soviets as “all-powerful.” The majority lacked the courage “to break with the war” and were maintaining the government in power “though possessing the power to form a Socialist Administration, whilst the Leninites are alleged to be using violence or threats of violence to force the Council to become the sole Executive Council of Russia.” On 11 August, Pankhurst wrote: “The continued refusal of the soldiers to fight, together with the severe and growing privations in Petrograd, appear at last, to be bringing the Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Delegates and the majority of the Socialist leaders to the position adopted at the outset by Lenin (a position we ourselves have advocated from the first) namely, that Free Russia must refuse to continue fighting in a capitalist war.”

By this time, The Call, getting its French Revolution chronology slightly confused, was complaining that the Provisional Government had been “turned into a Directory with Kerensky as the First Consul.” Moreover, capital punishment had been restored “by the very hands that abolished it in the first days of the Revolution” and Lenin, Trotsky, and other “Extremists” imprisoned. Brailsford, in The Herald, interpreted all the conflicts in Russia as arising from resistance to the imminent ending of private property in land, while “the most popular organisation of the Socialist movement seems to be that most Russian and least academic of all the groups, the Socialist Revolutionary Party.” In the same issue, Michael Farbman, the Manchester Guardian’s Petrograd correspondent, blamed “the Anarchists and Extremists (Bolsheviks)” for opposition to the international peace conference in Stockholm. Soon after this, the Kornilov revolt had The Herald declaring, “We stand by Kerensky.” It was left to the pro-war Justice, with its very different perspective, to sense an incipient coup. Following the Kornilov episode there would, said Justice, be “ministerial dictatorship under Kerensky, or military dictatorship under Kornilov, or committee dictatorship by the Soviet or the Maximalists.”

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The Bolsheviks Take Power

By the middle of October 1917, *The Call*, like the *Dreadnought*, saw “the Soviet” as “the only body that can rally the people of Russia in defence of the revolution.” It concluded that “the Soviet must take power.” By now the Bolsheviks had come into much sharper focus, mainly via articles by “A Russian Socialist” who, at the end of September, identified “two rival Social-Democratic parties, one of opportunist tendencies, the *Mensheviks*, and the other of revolutionary tendencies, the *Bolsheviks*.” Three weeks later, the same contributor condemned “the Opportunist Socialists.” It was no wonder that “the entire proletariat and most of the Soviets” had gone over to the Bolsheviks. “This means an open war, and the commencement of a new chapter of the Revolution.”

“Get Ready for the Downfall,” the paper told its readers at the beginning of November, predicting revolutions in all the belligerent countries. “Mankind is on the eve of a gigantic Revolution which will be as universal as the war itself. Italy, France, Russia (a second time), Austria, Germany — all will be in it.” The “International” page of the same issue reported “a remarkable shift to the ‘Left’ observable at present in Russia, which finds its expression in the overwhelming victories of the Bolsheviks (so-called Maximalists — that is to say followers of Lenin) in the elections to the Councils of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Delegates and the municipalities; and the rout of the Revolutionary Socialists and the Mensheviks (Opportunist Social-Democrats).” The writer produced figures to show that the Bolsheviks were now predominant in Petrograd, Moscow, and most of “Great Russia,” while the Menshevik influence was confined to the “periphery.”

The following week, *Justice* reported: “The Maximalists appear to have obtained control of the Soviet at Petrograd. Trotsky is now its president and is reported to have sent a request to the Petrograd garrison not to execute any military orders but those approved by the Petrograd Committee. This will bring the Petrograd Soviet in direct antagonism to the Provisional Government.” A week later, *Justice*’s “Bolshevik Coup d’Etat” headline contrasted with *The Call*’s
“Second Russian Revolution.” *The Call* regretted that “the Soviet” had “surrendered its power at the beginning of the Revolution.” But now “Maximalist” opinion had rapidly spread, and the “programme of the new revolutionary Government brings the immediate objects of the Revolution back to what it was at the commencement: immediate democratic peace, the granting of land to the peasants, and the Convocation of the Constituent Assembly.” The last of these “immediate objects” is particularly noteworthy.

**How the British Left Reacted to the October Revolution**

It was taken for granted that the next major item on the Russian domestic agenda would be the long-delayed elections to the Constituent Assembly. In the meantime, what were British socialists to make of “October”? According to *The Call*, “Socialists — genuine and not make-believe Socialists” — had seized power in Russia. And, using a term that would become increasingly common, if not clearer or more precise, in the socialist press over the next few years, it added: “For the first time we have the dictatorship of the proletariat established under our eyes.” As the paper explained a week later, the Bolsheviks had seized power only to thwart “the Imperialist classes,” who were plotting “for the final overthrow of the Revolution and the establishment of a military dictatorship à la Napoleon.” The Bolsheviks had from the first offered to share power with the other socialist parties “in accordance with their principle that the authority must belong not to any political party, but to the Soviet of Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants as a whole. But the other parties have refused point blank to have any thing to do with them.”

The “glorious meaning of the Commune of Paris” now had come true in Russia, the paper concluded, following “those steps which Karl Kautsky so well described . . . in his beautiful booklet ‘On the Morrow of the Socialist Revolution.’” *The Call* complained, however, about the lack of enthusiasm in Britain “at the marvellous spectacle of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and of the initiation of measures with courage and intelligence, ushering in the long-yearned-for Socialist order of...
society.” As E.C. Fairchild put it early in the new year: “The thing we hoped to live to see is come — the rule of the common workman.”

*Labour Leader* had been edited since 1916 by Katharine Bruce Glasier, though Philip Snowden — ILP chairman from 1917 to 1920 and an MP until defeated in the post-war election of 1918 — was “Supervising Editor.” His role consisted of writing a weekly, signed “page of comments on political events,” as well as “leading articles.” On 15 November 1917, he reported that “Extremists” had taken power in Russia. He blamed the Allies’ failure to respond to pleas from “the Russian Government and the Soviet” for peace negotiations. The *Socialist* wondered in response how Snowden could find anything “tragic” in “the ascendancy of anti-militarist Socialists.”

In *The Herald*, a series of articles by Brailsford covered the international scene, particularly the prospects for peace. Like Snowden, he saw the “new Russian Revolution” as the more or less inevitable consequence of the failure of Allied governments genuinely to pursue peace. “In the towns of Great Russia there is no doubt that the masses to-day follow the Maximalists,” he reported, though he was doubtful whether this support was reflected in the rural areas or, especially, in the non-Russian periphery of the former tsarist empire. At the same time, Brailsford argued that “on any reading of sane democracy the Maximalists have acted ill.” With the election of the long-awaited Constituent Assembly now so close, it was “a piece of reckless and uncalculating folly” to seize power. He still doubted that Lenin and Trotsky were “corrupt” but believed that “some of their lieutenants might well be so.” The “real crime” was following Kornilov in “perpetuating an epoch of violence.”

But by the following week, developments in Russia were starting to be portrayed more positively in the pages of *Labour Leader* and *The Herald*. In the *Leader*, Edward Bernard foresaw the emergence of “a coalition Socialist Government” following negotiations between other left-wing parties and “the Lenin-Trotzky group.” This coalition would “undoubtedly” obtain “a majority in the Constituent Assembly.” Brailsford, who for the first time referred to “the Bolshevik or
‘Maximalist’ party,” was now judging the “Western mistrust of the Bolsheviks” to be “grossly exaggerated.” Like Snowden and Bernard, he saw the best hope for the future of Russia in the Constituent Assembly. No dictator could govern “this amorphous mass,” he argued; a “government responsible to an elected assembly” was needed. “The only substitute which might conceivably serve the purpose would be an assembly of delegates from the elected Municipal and County Councils (Zemstvos).”

In an article a week later, Brailsford was again critical of the Bolsheviks who had “vetoed Stockholm,” the abortive international socialist meeting aimed at ending the war, thinking themselves “too pure” to meet the German Majority Social Democrats and seeming to be abandoning principle in seeking a separate peace with Germany. He thought that in this respect Lenin and Trotsky, “the Bolshevik dictators,” had “rushed far beyond what Russian opinion — even Extremist opinion” desired. The beginnings of a divergence between Brailsford and Herald editor Lansbury are apparent in an editorial note making it clear that the former’s “own personal views” expressed in the article were “not necessarily ours.”

But, as was the case with Snowden and Labour Leader, the paper continued to voice support for the Bolsheviks’ efforts at peace making. At the end of December, The Herald praised “Bolshevik Statesmanship” for working towards “a general peace.”

According to Snowden, writing in Labour Leader early in December, early results of the Constituent Assembly elections showed that the “Bolshevists” were “far more representative of the Russian people than we have been led to believe” and would be the single largest party in the assembly. Together with the “Peasants’ Social Revolutionary Party,” they would be able to “form a responsible and representative government.” At the end of that month, Brailsford suggested that the assembly election results meant that the Bolsheviks’ “representation only entitles them to second place, and the Revolutionary Socialists thanks to the support of the majority of the peasants may have an absolute majority.” He concluded: “The Constituent Assembly with its
overwhelming Socialist majority would have placed the new order on secure ground. Until the Bolsheviks hasten its meeting, even at the cost of resigning power, it seems doubtful whether a united Russia can conclude a peace or lay her own foundation.”

There was hope in some quarters that something like “normality” might be resumed in Russia before too long. In a report dated 10 November, the New Statesman’s own eyewitness in Petrograd, Julius West, saw Lenin as already exhibiting familiar political skills. In dealing with the controversial question of the rights, or otherwise, of deserters, “Lenin smoothed the troubled waters by saying that the Government would consider the matter. How quickly Parliamentary technique can be mastered.” And, West noted, “the new Cabinet had already acquired the vice of keeping the public in the dark.”

Within a few years of these events, all the confusions, ambiguities, and uncertainties disappeared. On 5 November 1921, shortly before the fourth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, The Call’s successor, The Communist, published a long article by T.A. Jackson and R.W. Postgate, “The Story of the Russian Revolution,” which opened:

On November 7th 1917 — four years ago! — the impossible happened. The organised workers of Russia, acting through the All-Russian Congress of Workers’ Councils (Soviets) and led and inspired by the Communist Party (the ‘Bolsheviks’), declared themselves the ruling authority of Russia.

Even for The Call, things had not seemed quite so simple and straightforward at the time.

The Crucial Turning Point:
The Suppression of the Constituent Assembly

The first absolutely crucial issue regarding Russia was not the October Revolution but the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Before this, it had still been possible to justify the earlier Bolshevik takeover from a conventional democratic point of view by
stressing the representativeness of the soviets compared to the self-appointed elite of the Duma parties, who had set up the Provisional Government, now overthrown. That the much-delayed elections for the Constituent Assembly, for which the Bolsheviks themselves had been calling for so long, were going ahead suggested that no irrevocable breach with democratic legitimacy had been made. No one, certainly no one in Britain — at this point — seems to have advanced the notion that the assembly represented a now outmoded form of “bourgeois democracy,” while the soviets embodied “working class democracy” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (although, as we have seen, the latter phrase had appeared in The Call, in connection with acquisition of power by the soviets).

Should the dissolution of the assembly be condemned as an act of tyranny or justified as the beginning of a transition to a higher form of society — and of democracy? This was the crucial turning point. If claims to a superior form of democracy embodied in the soviets were now to be sustained, the reality of soviet democracy in Russia would have to support these. If it could not, socialists would either have to convince themselves that some less than democratic form of socialism could still be supported or else dissociate themselves, or at least distance themselves, from the Bolshevik dictatorship.

In 1917, not even The Call — the weekly organ of the BSP, the organization that, in effect, became the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 — had criticized the election of a Constituent Assembly or rejected it as “bourgeois.” On the contrary, in March 1917 the paper had associated the assembly with the triumph over the “Liberals and Radicals . . . who betrayed the Revolution twelve years ago.” It was “one of the sweetest acts of revenge on the part of Dame History that now these very gentlemen have had to swallow the entire revolutionary programme down to articles about a Constituent Assembly and the organisation of a national militia.”34 The following week, a manifesto of the BSP praised the “Russian Social-Democratic workers” for insisting on “complete popular control” and demanding a “biennial single-Chamber Parliament.”35
Similarly, at the end of June, Sylvia Pankhurst welcomed the high voting figures for Socialist candidates, reported by Reuter, in the Petrograd municipal elections, seeing them as anticipating the results of elections for the Constituent Assembly. Soon her paper was reporting that the elections were to be held in the autumn and that “the Socialists confidently expect a big majority.” 

Neither paper suggested that parliaments or constituent assemblies were fundamentally “bourgeois” and outmoded. At the end of September, the *Dreadnought* was able to report that those “variously called Bolsheviks, Maximalists and Leninists,” now with a majority in the soviet, wished it to “become the Government of Russia until the Elections for the Constituent Assembly have taken place” (emphasis added). The provisional governments were again criticized: “The elections to the Constituent Assembly have been delayed again, but it seems that the mass of the people in Russia should demand the holding of these elections, in which all will have a voice.”

In a November *Workers’ Dreadnought* editorial welcoming “The Lenin Revolution,” Pankhurst quoted the view of *Daily News* correspondent Arthur Ransome that the soviets were “the broadest elected body in Russia” and reminded her readers that “since the first outbreak of revolution the Bolsheviks have consistently demanded that until the Constituent Assembly is elected the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council shall take over the Government of Russia.” She went on to conclude that “the power of the people may maintain the Bolshevik Government or if it should fall, the votes cast in the elections for the Constituent Assembly may re-instate it.”

As the results of the Constituent Assembly elections began to come in, there was great optimism in socialist ranks, not least among those who within weeks would be defending that body’s forcible dissolution. Early in December, “a Student of the Revolution” claimed in *The Call* that “the Bolshevik success has been due to the fact that the masses of the town proletariat and town garrisons have revolted, at last, against the systematic surrender of the Revolution to the capitalists and landowners,” who had attempted to “overthrow the Soviets and the rule
of democracy in general.” If the Bolsheviks could “last long enough to meet the Constituent Assembly they will have effected a real revolution — in a social as well as a political sense.” By the following week, Zelda Coates thought the early results showed that “the Bolsheviks have the vast masses behind them.” Pankhurst agreed: “It is certain that whether the Bolsheviks have a clear majority or not, the various Socialist parties command a vast majority in the Russian Parliament.”

Julius West’s eyewitness view in the _New Statesman_ was less sanguine. The split within the Social Revolutionary party “made a common ticket an absurdity.” Moreover, he wrote: “The Bolsheviks had virtually secured a monopoly for themselves (which they extended to other Socialist parties) by suppressing the ‘bourgeois’ papers. They had prohibited open-air meetings, though for that matter the provisional government had done the same, and ‘the falling snow was doing its best in the same direction.’”

We have already seen the hopes about the Constituent Assembly entertained by Snowden, in _Labour Leader_, and by Brailsford, in _The Herald_, in December 1917. Early in the new year, writing in _The Herald_, Guardian correspondent Michael Farbman blamed successive provisional governments for the “Bolshevik Ascendancy.” They had continued imperialist policies and had tried to postpone elections for the Constituent Assembly until “after the achievement of peace.” In addition, during the interval between the “Kornilov affair” and “Lenin’s coup,” they had created an “anti-democratic Cabinet” under Allied pressure, which had included the Cadets (members of the Constitutional Democratic Party) instead of the “expected purely Socialist Government” that would have saved Russia. The Mensheviks had mistakenly continued to back Kerensky, and “the Coalition Government was not pulled down, it faded away like a mirage. Its absurd unreality is the explanation of the miraculous Bolshevik success.”

The following week, the same paper published a message to British workers from Maxim Litvinov, the “Plenipotentiary for Great Britain of the Russian People’s Government,” which described how “the workmen and soldiers of Petrograd, Moscow, and other towns found
themselves compelled to break finally with the middle classes and to restore full power to the Soviets.” The “true proletarian revolution of November” had followed and “a mighty class war” had begun. This can now easily be read as preparing the way for the acceptance of the completion of the Bolshevik seizure of power, but there was no expectation anywhere in the British socialist press, still less any demand, that the Constituent Assembly would be superseded. Even the hostile *Justice*, when it considered “rumours that the Bolshevik Administration would suppress the new Assembly and proclaim the Soviet Congress next Sunday a kind of National Convention,” dismissed them because, it argued, such action would create conflict with the Social Revolutionaries, who had a majority in the assembly.

**The Suppression of the Assembly: Immediate Reactions**

Given his later anti-Communism and the “moderation” and constitutionality represented by the Labour Party, one might expect that — in spite of his participation a few months previously in the “Leeds Soviet Convention” — Philip Snowden would have been among the first to condemn the suppression of the Constituent Assembly. The reality was somewhat different — surprisingly so.

The first issue of *Labour Leader* following the dissolution of the assembly appeared on 24 January 1918. Snowden was cautious. “The situation in Russia still continues to be chaotic,” he wrote, arguing that “the Bolsheviks hold power because they appear to be the only large party who have sufficient cohesion.” He expressed his regret that “the Bolsheviks and the Social Revolutionaries cannot make some working arrangement, for there appears to be no difference in their economic ideas and programme.” Internal divisions would, he felt, weaken the Bolsheviks in the peace negotiations with Germany. “With the limited knowledge we have of the actual state of affairs in Russia,” he continued, “it would be foolish to dogmatise or take sides definitely in a temporary conflict. We are naturally prone to look at what is happening from our British point of view and to come to conclusions, or at
least to be inclined to do so, influenced by our tradition and training in constitutional methods.”

Though falling well short of a ringing endorsement of the Bolsheviks’ action, this was hardly the blistering condemnation that might have been expected from such a quarter. The same issue’s (unsigned) “International Notes” were even more forbearing, while still expressing reservations. Citing Ransome’s Daily News despatches and Philips Price’s “admirably sincere articles in the Manchester Guardian,” they asserted that, the SRs having failed “to show the courage and determination to carry out their own programme,” the Bolsheviks had decided that “the whole government of the country, both central and local, should be in the hands of the Workers’ Soviets.” The report went on:

The Bolsheviks believe — apparently with good reason — that they alone are able to secure a democratic peace. The Bolsheviks were, therefore, faced with the alternative of dissolving the Constituent Assembly or allowing Russia to give way to Germany and to compromise with the capitalist forces. They chose the former knowing that it was a definite breach of the accepted standards of democratic government.

The writer went on to say that events were moving fast and that Lenin’s actions might retrospectively be “justified by the support he will now receive.” It was “unfair” to say that “he rules by force,” since “the Soviets are assured of support locally, as well as centrally, and are in actual daily contact with the rank and file of the nation.”

While Lansbury’s Herald did not explicitly endorse the crushing of the assembly, and Brailsford remained convinced that it ought to be reinstated, the paper did publish, on 9 February, a “Russian Workers’ Appeal to Britons” from the “International Bureau of Workers’, Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.” The Constituent Assembly was not mentioned:

The Russian working classes are not striving for a republic of the type of American trust magnates or French stock exchange sharks. They want to wield full political power and to replace the bureaucracy by the rule

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of the Soviets as the local government organs. The Russian working classes will not be content with the establishment of democracy, but will use democracy as a means for accomplishing all the stages necessary to lead Russia step by step to an efficient Socialistic organisation of production.

The same issue offers other signs of an indulgent attitude to the Bolshevik takeover. Farbman wrote of the Bolsheviks “establishing the proletariat in power” and their “magnificent demonstration of democratic diplomacy at Brest Litovsk.” A week later, an editorial note referred to “our friend Litvinoff,” soon to be congratulated for his speech — at a Central Hall meeting whose platform included Lansbury — for “the manner in which he dispelled and blew away into the clouds the capitalist lies which have been spread already about the revolution.” The following week, the paper was scorning the “Anti-Bolsheviks” who “warn us of the terrible results of applied democracy.”

Lansbury’s own equivocal views of the Bolsheviks appeared a week later under the heading “The Revolution I Want.” “The Bolsheviks, in my judgement, have not failed and will not fail, whatever may happen to Trotsky, Lenin, and their comrades,” he wrote. “They have lit a fire in the world which will never be put out.” Lansbury detected in their internationalism “the true pure doctrine of Christianity,” although he also thought they had “suffered a setback because they have convinced themselves that freedom of speech, freedom of organisation, would ruin the revolution. From the point of view of the moment they were right. I am certain, though, that the revolution of the near future which is quickly coming to this country, will base itself not on violence but on reason.”

The only Herald voice that really opposed the suppression of the assembly was, unsurprisingly, Brailsford’s. But even he saw some positive features in the new Bolshevik regime and avoided any straightforward denunciation. He commended the “far-sighted policy” of Lenin and Trotsky, who had “shown themselves the greatest tacticians in Europe,” although he questioned their “exact purpose.”
Was it “a general peace or a general revolution?” He doubted whether the Bolsheviks’ adoption of the tactics of the French revolutionaries in 1792, such as appealing for foreign revolutions (in this case particularly those in Germany) to come to their aid, could succeed: “Even the Minority leaders among the German Socialists are not Bolsheviks. Bernstein stands for evolution, and even the Marxist Kautsky has sharply criticised the whole Bolshevik theory (which seems to me more syndicalist than Socialist) and especially the suppression of the Constituent Assembly. Let us watch our steps when we hear the Pied Piper’s flute.”

Returning to his critique of Bolshevik strategy early in March, Brailsford warned of the danger of intervention:

If Russia had a government which obviously and visibly reposed on the confidence of the people, it might defy retaliation at home and intervention from abroad. There is only one expedient acknowledged by the mass of civilised mankind by which a government may prove that it rests on the consent of its people. It must have the majority of a regularly elected assembly. A Russian Government may be as boldly Socialist as it pleases, on one condition, that it has the votes of the Russian people behind it. If a Socialist Government in Russia had the Constituent Assembly behind it, foreign intervention would be morally impossible. No professedly “democratic” government could refuse to “recognise” it, or act, openly at least, against it. If to-morrow the intervention would begin our protests would be answered by the argument that the Lenin-Trotsky regime is anti-democratic, and the interfering Governments would profess to be acting in the interests of the Russian people. May I make a practical proposal, which it is not too soon to consider now? It is that when our International Socialist Conference meets, one of its chief acts should be to send a delegation to Russia to mediate between the various Socialist parties, with a view to the restoration of the Constituent Assembly. Sooner or later it will be our duty to defend Russia against European intervention. We should fail unless we can point to proof that Russia herself is content with her own Government.
Pankhurst was far from calling for the assembly’s restoration, but “What About Russia Now?” — her very long editorial in the 26 January issue of the *Dreadnought* — began by acknowledging the degree to which the action of the Bolsheviks had caused consternation:

“There is the democracy of your Socialists,” “Substituting one tyranny for another,” “Bolshevik autocracy,” “What about Russia now?”; such are the cries that assail us.

And what have we to answer? Firstly that all Press news and comments must be received with critical caution and reserve, because they have passed through the censor’s hand, and usually come from anti-Socialist sources in the first instance, and because all our great dailies are opposed to Socialism.

Now let us consider what the Bolsheviks have done. In the decree for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, as transmitted from Petrograd by the Bolshevik Agency, the Russian Socialist Government says:

The old bourgeois parliamentarianism has seen its day that it is unable to cope with the tasks of socialism.

It points out that the Soviets or Councils of Workers’ and Soldiers’, Sailors’ and Peasants’ delegates have been from the first the organs of the Revolution. The decree declares that the Revolution:

created the Soviets, as the only organisation of the exploited working classes in a position to direct the struggle of these classes for their complete political and economic emancipation.

It may be said with equal justice that the Soviets created the Revolution. They sprang into being at its outbreak, they carried through the deposition of the Czar in March, and every subsequent advance has been initiated by the Soviets.

According to Pankhurst, as events in Russia had unfolded they had given strong support to
those, calling themselves Syndicalists, Industrial Unionists or simply Marxian Socialists who interpret the great teacher’s doctrines from the industrial standpoint, who believe that Parliaments as we know them are destined to pass away into the limbo of forgotten things, their places being taken by organisations of the people built on an occupational basis. The failure of the Constituent Assembly, even though decided on an adult suffrage ballot, to return members prepared to support the policy of the Soviets is strong evidence that the industrialists have found the true path.

But why then did the Bolsheviks go ahead with the Constituent Assembly elections?

Pankhurst was clearly puzzled and concerned about this point, to the extent of offering three alternative explanations. For one thing, the Bolsheviks might have wished to demonstrate that “the capitalist parties have no following in Russia.” The results had certainly been effective in that respect, she argued, since “the Cadets (or Liberals; no parliamentarian now calls himself Conservative in Russia) have secured only 14 seats in the Assembly, and but for proportional representation might have had not one single one.” Or the Bolsheviks might have intended the whole episode — election and dissolution — “to divide definitely and clearly in the popular mind, the politicians who are in favour of Socialism, but do not want to have it in their time, from those who are, like themselves, striving for its immediate establishment.”

Finally, Pankhurst argued, it might be “that the Bolsheviks have been disappointed in the elections, that having faith in the desire of the Russian people to secure peace and the enactment of the maximum Socialist programme, they believed that a majority of those prepared to carry out this programme would be elected.” This view she thought supported by the statement in the decree that voters had been unable “to distinguish between the Revolutionary Socialists of the Right, partisans of the bourgeoisie, and the Revolutionary Socialists of the Left, partisans of Socialism.”

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But, whatever the motives of the Bolsheviks, the suppression of the assembly should, Pankhurst insisted, be defended on democratic grounds because the soviet system was “more closely in touch with and more directly represents its constituents than the Constituent Assembly or any existing parliament.” And she urged readers to put aside their doubts:

Therefore do not say that the news from Russia is bad because, in the stress of a great struggle to establish Socialism, the Russian Socialist Government fiercely assailed and hardly pressed by capitalism and its minions both at home and abroad, has found it wisest to break with the Constituent Assembly, and to confide the direction of policy to the democratically constituted organisations of the workers, instead of to an Assembly to which the wiles and crafts of politicians has admitted a large proportion of capitalist wolves clothed in the bright promises of a Socialist lamb.  

If Pankhurst showed some appreciation of the concerns that the Bolsheviks’ action in suppressing the assembly had generated, the reaction of The Call, in its issue of 31 January, was much more confident and dismissive of criticism:

The suppression of the Constituent Assembly has seemingly caused some perturbation among those who are no doubt sincere friends of the Russian Revolution. These friends do not yet appreciate that in Russia today we have the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and it is this that some of those who pose as “revolutionaries” describe as appalling. Some people imagine that to make a revolution is as easy as making a new house. The elections took place before the subservience of Kerensky, and the parties supporting him, to Imperialism was discovered. When it was discovered, these parties were discredited, and the Bolsheviks took power backed by the will and bayonets of the vast majority of the people. The majority of deputies of the Constituent Assembly no longer represented those who voted for them. Its suppression was absolutely justified. The Soviets are the direct expression of the will
of the soldiers, workers and peasants. The Russian Revolution is a working-class revolution, and the workers must rule until it is no longer possible for the capitalists and landlords as a class to lift up their head. When that time comes, and classes are abolished, the Russian people will devise the most democratic form of administration best suited to the circumstances. In the meantime “All Power to the Soviets.”

This seems to suggest that the “most democratic form of administration” would be something different from the soviets themselves. In the same issue of The Call, a BSP executive resolution — aimed at the Labour Party Conference — sent fraternal greetings to “the Russian Social-Democracy” and hailed “with profound admiration and deep joy the establishment of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” It also offered its own interpretation of recent events in Russia: “The Council of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ delegates, which under the sanction of the great November Revolution, has assumed all the power of the State, has taken the first real step to bring to an end the bloodiest war in history.”

The tendency on the British Left to interpret Russian events in terms of the wishful thinking of the beholder is nowhere better exemplified than in the SLP’s reaction, expressed in the February 1918 issue of The Socialist. Rather than empathizing with the Bolsheviks, it identified them as trying to follow the SLP’s own impeccable approach. It excused those it still called the “Russian Maximalists” for being unable to “rigidly apply S.L.P. tactics” because of “the peculiar and limited conditions” under which they were operating. But they clearly shared the “emphatic insistence that the Political State must be replaced by an Industrial Administration.” This explained and fully justified the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly: “It is because the Maximalists are true democrats that they have vested the industrial administration of Russia in the hands of industrial and agricultural committees.” And in the March issue, the usual piece commemorating the Paris Commune commended the Bolsheviks for “avoiding the error of mis-educated Socialists, namely, the maintenance of the

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political State. The Bolsheviks rightly abolished the constituent assembly; rightly too, they established an industrial government of Soviets. This is the policy of the S.L.P. which we have propagated for years.”

As the article went on to point out, this was, indeed, no less than the “Triumph of S.L.P. Tactics in Russia.” In Russia our friends have destroyed the political state — the constituent assembly — and are now organising industrial administrative Councils. Let every non-S.L.P.-er read “Principles of Industrial Unionism” (2d) (written years ago) and see whether, in the light now coming from Russia the S.L.P. is not the party of the workers.

The Labour Party Conferences of 1918: Litvinov Versus Kerensky

Unusually, there were two Labour Party conferences in 1918, one at the end of January and another in June. The first met in Nottingham and was addressed by Litvinov. In an editorial in Justice, Fred H. Gorle, was aghast at the prospect:

This week we may have the spectacle of Maxim Litvinoff — the representative . . . of the suppressors of the first democratic assembly of Russia . . . being cheered at Nottingham by thousands of people under the impression that they are applauding the Russian Revolution, instead of the sabotage of the Russian Revolution; democracy and liberty, instead of the suppression of democracy and liberty.

But what are we to say of Arthur Henderson, of George Lansbury, of Ramsay MacDonald, and of all those who have allowed the workers of this country to be so misled about the masqueraders of Socialism, Lenin and Trotsky? 53

A separate note in the same issue asked who had invited Litvinov to the January conference. An answer of sorts was to be supplied at the June conference, to which Kerensky was invited — an invitation that was challenged at the opening of the event. Henderson, the Labour Party secretary, then made a statement defending the invitation. 54 According to the official conference report, having taken full responsibility
for Kerensky’s invitation, Henderson went on to describe how, shortly before the Nottingham conference in January, “a prominent representative of the left wing — he hoped they understood where the left wing was” came to his office to say that “another prominent and distinguished representative of Russia” was in London. Henderson did not agree with Litvinov’s views, but he had been “sufficiently long in that Movement to realise that one of its most valuable assets was its spirit of toleration.” So he had suggested that Litvinov be invited, and the Labour Party executive committee had agreed “with striking unanimity.” Litvinov had come to the conference and made a speech. The delegates “did not agree,” Henderson noted, “but they listened — they listened as ladies and gentlemen and as strong believers in the right of free speech.”

At the January conference, the reception accorded to Litvinov — whose address, “To the Workers of Great Britain,” had already appeared in the 10 January 1918 issue of Labour Leader — was, said the New Statesman, “full of significance.” The paper reported enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution and the overthrow of tsardom:

But the solid mass of delegates who filled the floor was sternly silent and unresponsive when Mr Litvinoff, who had to bring his narrative down to date, explained that, in such times, it was impracticable to have respect for “forms of Democracy.” The Labour Party has no sympathy with the arbitrary dismissal of the Representative Assembly; and the Bolshevik stock has gone down with a run.

According to Justice, Litvinov had said that “democracy was ‘all right in its way’ but if it went against the desires of the Bolsheviks it was their determination to carry through their policy at all costs. This speech was received by our own Bolsheviks, who were present in considerable numbers in the gallery, with vociferous applause.”

In contrast, Labour Leader offered a very different, and rather surprising, version of the events, very supportive of the Bolshevik emissary. It said that Litvinov had been given standing ovation by delegates and reported him as telling the conference that in Russia “the
land has been given to the peasants” and “the factories are under the supervision of their Shop Steward Committees” — a reference, the paper said, “to the developing British organisation which the conference appreciated.” 58 Similarly, The Herald, the self-proclaimed “National Labour Weekly,” reported that for the “Russian ambassador” the audience “rose to its feet and cheered again and again” and that his speech was punctuated by cheers “all through.” His defence of the Bolsheviks was “listened to with rapt attention and when he declared that the land had gone to the peasants, workshops to the workers, and the army put under control of committees, who elected officers, settled questions of discipline, the hall rang with approving cheers.” 59

If the first Labour Party Conference of 1918 seems, in spite of the New Statesman’s account, something of a triumph for Litvinov and the Bolsheviks, the second conference, in the summer, saw delegates more clearly polarized. This is evident from the Workers’ Dreadnought report. When Kerensky appeared, “there were cheers; people stood up and waved their hands. He was Russian and that was enough for most of them. Someone cried ‘Where are Lenin and Trotsky?’ There were hisses and groans. ‘To hell with Kerensky! — to hell with Kerensky!’ Walton Newbold shouted.” (Newbold was soon to emerge as one of the leaders of the “Left Wing of the I.L.P.” and would later become a Communist M.P.) According to the Dreadnought report, Henderson, as Kerensky’s sponsor, was given a rough ride, and both Sylvia Pankhurst and Dora Montefiore were prominent in demanding, without success, that Litvinov should also be allowed to speak.

In his speech, the report continued, Kerensky attacked the Soviet government, which he described as a “dictatorship not of the proletariat, but over the proletariat who have lost all the political rights which the Revolution gave them.” He declared that the Bolsheviks had “destroyed the liberty of the elections, even in the councils of workmen” and had “made an end of all institutions of self-government that have been elected by universal suffrage.” When Litvinov tried to reply, “the chairman stopped him speaking and allowed Kerensky to make a calumnious attack.” 60
By this time, Lansbury was, for the moment, distancing himself from the Bolsheviks, criticizing their “haste and violence,” which was “likely to promote a reaction against any form of Socialism.” In the same issue of The Herald, Farbman noted the “warm welcome” given to Kerensky and regretted the “outburst of obstruction” directed at him during the conference. Clearly, Labour Party opinion, as represented by the 1918 conferences, was divided on the legitimacy of the suppression of the Constituent Assembly.

Snowden’s Early Optimism

The most surprising reactions to the dissolution of the assembly were those of Labour Leader and, above all, of Philip Snowden. Within a few years, the latter’s attacks on the Bolsheviks would bring about a public conflict with the editor, Katharine Bruce Glasier, that would end with both leaving the paper and may have contributed to its replacement by the New Leader in 1922. In retrospect, it is easy to understand the support given to the Bolsheviks in the Leader’s regular “International Notes,” contributed by Emile Burns, who was later part of the “Left Wing of the I.L.P.” and eventually joined the Communist Party in which he became a prominent figure. But Snowden’s is a very different and still surprising case. There seem to have been two main factors in Snowden’s early indulgence: his assumption, as a “practical” politician, that the Bolsheviks would eventually conform to a more familiar — and less “revolutionary” — pattern, and, crucially, the absolute priority he gave to ending the war as soon as possible.

Yet Snowden’s optimism about the Bolsheviks persisted even after the end of the war. At the beginning of 1919, he was still viewing Bolshevik survival in power as proof that the party was “supported by the majority of the Russian people.” Interventionists believed, he claimed, that “Democratic Socialism must be stamped out wherever it shows its head.” A week later, he predicted that all the main sections of the Russian socialist movement would once more be united. The Mensheviks were said to have “adopted the Soviet programme” and the Right SRs to have declared against Allied intervention. Early in
March 1919, a report in the *Leader*, reprinted from *Humanité*, declared that “all Russian Socialists, whatever their particular school, have rallied round the commissaries of the people.”

Writing his autobiography in the early 1930s, Snowden summed up the great significance of the January 1918 Labour Party conference: “The acute difference between the pro-War and the pacifist section which had showed itself so markedly at the previous conference had almost disappeared. Men who supported the continuation of the War were in such a hopeless minority that, at the Nottingham Conference, with the exception of the Chairman, who occupied a privileged position, they remained silent.” This almost certainly reflects his concerns and priorities at the time. Peace was everything; the Russian Revolution was important mainly because of the bearing it might have on this. Yet, having decided to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt, mainly on the basis of their peace-making potential, Snowden continued to do so for over a year following the extinguishing of the Constituent Assembly.

“Replacing” the Constituent Assembly: Retrospective Justifications

Given its virtual apologia for the suppression of the assembly earlier in the month, it is not surprising that *Labour Leader* should, at the end of January 1918, publish a sympathetic report of the recent Soviet Congress, which, it said, “takes the place of the Constituent Assembly.” The editor’s comments, introducing a “statement sent us by the International Bureau of the Council of Workmen’s, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ deputies themselves,” were headlined “The Russian Government’s Defence: What the Soviets Have Done and Are Doing Today.” She urged that “members of the I.L.P. cannot commit themselves to unreserved approbation of all the methods employed . . . but only future generations can justly sit in judgement upon what has been done.”

The only party of the British Left that unequivocally denounced the suppression of the assembly was the unfortunately named National Socialist Party, made up of the pro-war “Hyndmanites” who had left
the BSP. Its first conference, held in August 1918, passed “with acclamation” the following motion by Hyndman and J. Hunter Watts, both long-time members of the “Old Guard of the S.D.F.:

That this Conference sends to our Russian comrades of the Social-Revolutionary Party its sincere good wishes and hopes that after they have overthrown Bolshevik tyranny and beaten down monarchist intrigues they will succeed in re-establishing a thoroughly democratic Constituent Assembly.66

Shortly afterwards, denouncing Lenin as “a furious fanatic destitute of any moral sense, either personal or political,” Hyndman called for support for the “Union of the Regeneration of Russia,” a general coalition of democratic forces “headed by men who represent the Constituent Assembly crushed by Lenin.”67

This was not a stance likely to find support elsewhere on the Left. At the end of May, reviewing Litvinov’s The Bolshevik Revolution: Its Rise and Meaning, which the BSP was publishing as a shilling pamphlet, Eden and Cedar Paul noted wearily that it included “an apologia for that which the political ‘democrats’ regard as the Bolsheviks’ greatest crime — the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly.”68 In June, the Dreadnought confessed surprise at an answer given to an Avanti! correspondent by Kamenev and Zahkind. When asked, “Why have you dissolved the Constituent Assembly?” they were quoted as replying:

Because the fight with the capitalists is not finished, as long as it continues the Soviet must be the sole fighting organisation of the workers. When all have submitted the divers social strata will again be able to send their legitimate representatives freely to the legislative and administrative assembly.

This response seemed contradictory to the Dreadnought’s firm belief that “the Soviet form of Government is a more modern and more democratic form than the old Parliament elected on a territorial basis.”

According to Litvinov’s The Bolshevik Revolution, as summarized in the same issue of the paper, the Bolsheviks had, with the exception...
of Lenin, initially thought that “the exercise of power by the Soviets would be but temporary, and would be voluntarily resigned to a Constituent Assembly representing all classes in which the bourgeoisie would form the Government.” As Litvinov saw it, not to have suppressed the assembly “would have meant the reestablishment of the rule of those very classes which had nearly ruined the revolution.” The split in the Social Revolutionary Party had not been apparent until after the assembly election, and “had the election been held a couple of months later it would have shown a large majority for the Bolshevik policy.” Soviet rule, or the “dictatorship of the proletariat and peasant class,” would continue “pending the re-construction of society which would do away with classes altogether and admit every citizen of Russia to the full exercise of civic rights.”

This was all very well, the Dreadnought concluded, but we do not know, and Mr Litvinoff does not enlighten us, as to whether the mass of the Bolsheviki now think that after the secure establishment of the Socialist Republic, the Soviet form of government will pass away and Russia revert to the older parliamentary type, in which candidates represent electoral constituents and are elected for long terms, without being responsible to, or having to report to any definite body of persons. For our own part, we believe that the Soviet Government will persist, no doubt with development and growing improvement, and is destined to become the new governmental model for the Socialist republics which will shortly follow Russia all over the civilised globe. The master mind of Lenin has no doubt foreseen this all along!69

As the war ended and revolution broke out in Germany, the Dreadnought saw this prediction coming to pass. An editorial at the end of November 1918 quoted a statement from the Spartacist League: “The whole control of the country is now in the hands of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council. A Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils is to be summoned as soon as possible. At present there is no talk of a National Assembly.”70 A fortnight later the Dreadnought reported that the Bolshevik government had sent a “wireless” from the Tsarskoe Selo
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station urging German workers not to let themselves be persuaded to call a Constituent Assembly. “You know where you have been landed through your Reichstag. Only a Council of Workers, Soldiers and Sailors and a Workers’ Government will gain the confidence of the workers and soldiers of other countries.”

The issues surrounding the Constituent Assembly and its suppression continued to be rehearsed and debated in the years that followed. Justifications of the Bolsheviks’ action came from more or less “detached” observers in Russia and from leading Bolsheviks themselves, as well as from enthusiastic foreign supporters. A year after the crushing of the assembly, The Socialist carried a piece by Klara Zetkin, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul, from the women’s supplement of the Leipziger Volkzeitung. According to Zetkin, “the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, far from involving a sacrifice of democracy, made democracy more effective.” With “the economic and social power of the possessing classes . . . still sufficient to exercise considerable influence upon the election results,” the assembly could not be regarded “as the unfalsified expression of the opinions and the will of the workers. In so far as we can speak of a popular will, that will was indubitably incorporated in the decisions of the soviets.”

A particularly vehement defence of the assembly’s dissolution, republished in the Dreadnought in April 1919, came from a left-wing American publication, The Public. Whereas in the United States it was criminals and the insane who were disenfranchised, in soviet Russia it was the parasitic classes who were excluded from participation in the soviets. In any case, the Bolshevik claim that the Constituent Assembly was unrepresentative of “the Russian masses” seemed to be upheld by events, given that no effective protest at its suppression had materialized. This argument had been advanced from time to time before. As The Call had insisted the previous summer: “The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly stirred no ripple on the faces of the immense sea of the Russian masses; while the threatened curtailment of the powers of the Soviets, two months preceding destroyed the Provisional Government.” Similarly, after John Ward, an implacable
opponent of the Bolsheviks, gave a very hostile and highly coloured account of the assembly’s suppression to the recent special Trades Union Congress at the end of 1919, the Dreadnought drew on the accounts of two Americans to refute him — The Red Heart of Russia, by Bessie Beatty, war correspondent of the San Francisco Bulletin, and Louise Bryant’s Six Red Months in Russia. According to Bryant, the end of the assembly came about “because the people were with the Soviets.”

By 1921, for the Communist Party at least, the whole issue could be dealt with dismissively. In the first part of The Story of the Russian Revolution, Jackson and Postgate (whose account of the October Revolution was quoted earlier) noted:

Much has been made of this “suppression of a democratically elected body” as though it were a trampling on by an armed minority upon the rights of a liberty-loving majority.

The Assembly was not the expression of anything beyond the superior propaganda resources during the Kerensky regime of the Aristocratic Kadets, the Middle Class Mensheviks, and the agricultural bourgeois Right Social Revolutionaries.

A common feature of arguments in defence of the suppression was the claim that, irrespective of the assembly election results, the Bolsheviks now enjoyed overwhelming majority support. In June 1918, in response to Kerensky’s address to the Labour Party conference, Litvinov claimed that there had been “only five anti-Soviet candidates” in the recent Petrograd Soviet elections, which had returned 233 “supporters of the Soviets” — Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries. No explanation of what could be meant by “anti-Soviet” in this context was given.

When Admiral Koltchak, the White Russian leader, “as a sop to public protests,” subsequently declared in favour of eventual elections to a new constituent assembly, rejecting the Allied suggestion that, if this proved impossible, the body elected at the end of 1917 should be reassembled, the Dreadnought claimed that his decision tacitly acknowledged that “a majority of the members of that Assembly are now in the Soviet Ranks!” and that “experience of life under the Soviets and
The practices of Koltchak and his like has induced the majority of the Mensheviki and Social Revolutionaries to join in helping the Soviets.” 78 Such optimistic claims continued to be accompanied by the assertion that soviets represented, in Lenin’s words, “a higher form of democracy than the ordinary bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly.” 79 It is to the arguments used to sustain this claim that we now turn.