

# The First All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets

Tess E. Smidt

The First All-Russian Congress of the Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets was the culmination of the growing power of the Petrograd and other local Soviets. It was the first national meeting of elected representatives from and by the lower classes. From June 3<sup>rd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917, the Congress debated and voted on political, social, and economic policies that would shape revolutionary Russia. The majority of these debates focused on the Soviets' relations with the Provisional Government and Russia's participation in the World War. The decisions of the Congress also motivated the worker and soldier demonstration of June 18<sup>th</sup>, which explicitly indicated the public frustration with the Provisional Government and would prove to be an important event for the Bolshevik party.

The First Congress was important to the revolution because it provided legitimacy to the socialist movement and provided an arena of debate between socialist parties. The degree of this importance, however, is debatable. This analysis of the importance of the Congress is in two parts: first a description of the statistics and events of the Congress and then a discussion of the significance of these facts for the socialist and Bolshevik movements.

## *Statistics*

The constituents of the congress fluctuated daily and the criterion for who could be a member of the congress was vague and weakly enforced. In theory, each

member of the congress represented 25,000 voters and these representatives were elected through local Soviets. The 1,080 (784 with full vote) initial participants were split between many socialist and liberal parties, the major players being the Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks with on average 285, 248, and 105 voting representatives respectively.<sup>1</sup> The total number of voting participants increased to 822 by the end of the Congress.<sup>6</sup> The main figures in the Congress were the ministers of the Provisional Government and the different socialist party leaders.

While the proceedings of the Congress do exist, they are difficult to obtain and incoherent, mirroring the lack of organization of the Congress itself.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the most important decisions and events of the congress are well documented in the speeches and memoirs of the revolutionary leaders present at the Congress.

#### *Support for the Provisional Government*

The opening issue of the Congress was whether or not to continue support of the Provisional Government. The debate of this issue is most potently and famously encapsulated in the speeches of leading Menshevik and Provisional Government Minister of Post and Telegraphs, Irakli Tsereteli, leading Bolshevik, Vladimir Lenin, and congress member and Provisional Government Minister of War, Alexander Kerensky.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Glossary of Events: All-Russian Congress of the Soviet." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/events/a/arcs.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Pokrovsky, A. "All-Russia Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (3-24 June 1917): Experience in Reconstruction of the List of Participants; The Contours of Social Portrait." *Институт Российской Истории - РАН*. Russian Academy of Science - Institute of Russian History, 2001. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.iri-ran.ru/pokrovskij.html>>.

Tsereteli emphasized the importance of creating and maintaining a central body capable of regulating the internal economy and organizing the country to concentrate resources to win the war. He said that there was no party ready to seize power. Lenin shouted from the audience "It does exist!" referring to the Bolsheviks. Tsereteli concluded that it is time for the country to stand strong, support the Provisional Government and "put an end to experiments dangerous for the fate of the revolution... that may lead to civil war."<sup>3</sup>

Lenin then asserted that continuation of the Dual Power would only create more issues than it would solve:

The Soviets are an institution which does not exist in any ordinary bourgeois-parliamentary state and cannot exist side by side with a bourgeois government. They are the new, more democratic type of state which we in our Party resolutions call a peasant-proletarian democratic republic, with power belonging solely to the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. People are wrong in thinking that this is a theoretical issue. They are wrong in pretending that it can be evaded and in protesting that at present certain institutions exist side by side with the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Yes, they do exist side by side. But this is what breeds countless misunderstandings, conflicts and friction.<sup>4</sup>

Kerensky warned the Bolsheviks that their desire to resolve "economic problems purely by political means" would result in the "victory of force over democracy."<sup>7</sup>

You Bolsheviks recommend childish prescriptions – 'arrest, kill, destroy.' What are you – socialists or the police of the old regime? (Uproar. Lenin: 'You should call him order')... You [Bolsheviks] recommend that we follow the road of the French Revolution of 1792. You recommend the way of further

---

<sup>3</sup> Sakwa, Richard. "Documents 2.4 - 2.6." *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

<sup>4</sup> "Lenin: First All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/07.htm>>.

disorganization of the country... When you in alliance with reaction, shall destroy our power, then you will have a real dictator. It is our duty, the duty of the Russian democracy to say: Don't repeat the historic mistakes. You are asked to follow the road that was once followed by France, and that will lead Russia to a new reaction, to a new shedding of democratic blood.<sup>7</sup>

The Congress ultimately voted to support the Provisional Government with 543 to 126 (52 abstentions).<sup>5</sup> The "political resolution encouraged 'the whole revolutionary democracy of Russia to join its forces more closely around the Soviets... and to energetically support the Provisional Government'".<sup>6</sup> However, the congress's support was contingent on the Provisional Government adhering to the decisions made by the Soviets.<sup>5</sup> This conditional support would continue to foster a state government that could not issue orders and in turn lose the support of the public.<sup>7,8</sup>

### *The War*

In addition to the internal struggle caused by revolution, Russia was engaged in the world war, under constant bombardment on the Western front by German

---

<sup>5</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "Leon Trotsky: The History of the Russian Revolution (1.22 The Soviet Congress and the June Demonstration)." Translated by Max Eastman, 1932. *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch22.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> "First All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies :: ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF SAINT PETERSBURG." The Saint Petersburg Encyclopedia. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.ensspb.ru/en/article.php?kod=2804022766>>.

<sup>7</sup> Kerensky, Alexander. "The Policy of the Provisional Government of 1917". *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 11, No 31 (July 1932) pp. 1-19.

pg 15: "For the new government did not know how to give orders and the population did not wish to submit, often demanding for dispositions of the government confirmation from this or that Soviet."

<sup>8</sup> Melancon, Michael. *The Syntax of Soviet Power: The Resolutions of Local Soviets and Other Institutions, March-October 1917*. *Russian Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), pp. 486-505.

pg 489: "On March 2 1917 the provisional committees issued joint statements in which the soviets agreed to support the Provisional Government 'to the extent' that it carried out a rather moderate program outlined in some detail by the soviets. The statements also called on democratic elements to recognize and support the new government on the condition that it carry out the promised reform."

forces. The Russian front experienced food and supply shortages that resulted in horrific casualties, mutinies, and immense demoralization.<sup>9</sup> Whether to continue the war or whether there was a way to come to peace was a furiously debated topic in the congress. The Provisional Government, Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks fought to continue the war, while Bolsheviks and other Left-wing parties pushed to cease the “Imperialistic war” and desert the Entente. In the middle, there were those who would’ve settled for a peace treaty involving “not annexations or contributions”, but they debated whether it was safe to make such a treaty. They feared that cutting off support from the Entente would strengthen the German’s position too greatly and leave Russia in greater danger of being annexed to the German Empire. The Congress ultimately sided with the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and opted to continue fighting.<sup>9</sup>

The Congress takes the stand that until the war is brought to an end... the Russian revolutionary democracy is obliged to keep its army in condition to take either the offensive or defensive.... The question whether to take the offensive should be decided from the purely military and strategic point of view.<sup>10</sup>

### *Bolsheviks Organize and the Backfire of the Congress Approved Demonstration*

Fueled by their failure in the Congress, the Bolsheviks sought support from the masses. Trotsky claims that the masses themselves were encouraging the

---

<sup>9</sup> Shklovsky, Victor B. and Sheldon, Richard. “At the Front-Summer 1917,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Jul., 1967), pp. 219-230

<sup>10</sup> Feldman, Robert S. “The Russian General Staff and the June 1917 Offensive”. *Soviet Studies*. Vol. 19, No. 4 (Apr., 1968), pp. 526-543

Bolsheviks to act, especially pro-Bolshevik soldiers.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, the Bolsheviks proved very successful in capturing the loyalty of the workers, frustrated with the bourgeois Provisional Government, and proceeded to secretly plan a massive demonstration for June 10<sup>th</sup> without the knowledge of other Congress leaders. The demonstration was intended to be peaceful, involving banners with slogans such as "Power to the Soviets!" and "Down with the Ten Minister-Capitalists." The Bolshevik's motive was to pressure Soviet leaders into protesting against the Congress's support of the Provisional Government.

However, the plans for the demonstration were leaked to non-Bolshevik leaders of the Congress who on June 9<sup>th</sup> called for an immediate ban on political demonstrations for the next three days, claiming that any political demonstrations would disrupt the proceedings of the Congress. The Social-Revolutionary and Menshevik leaders tried to expose the Bolsheviks for their "conspiracy" against the Congress, but the Bolsheviks in turn accused the SR's and Mensheviks of having their own conspiracy against the Bolsheviks by their demonstration ban. The Bolsheviks submitted to the ban, cancelling the demonstration. Lenin claimed that the reason why the demonstration could be canceled at such short notice was to be attributed to the loyalty of the demonstrators, comprised of workers and soldiers, to the Bolsheviks.<sup>6, 11</sup>

The ban did not stall the momentum of the Bolsheviks. Instead, the Bolsheviks used the Congress's censorship as justification of their cause aiding them

---

<sup>11</sup> Kort, Michael. "Ch. 9." *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*. 7th ed. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010. 93-105. Print.

in gaining more support within the Soviets.<sup>6, 11</sup> Lenin announced to the party in response to the congress's ban that the revolution was developing.

The cancellation was absolutely necessary, as subsequent developments proved. Today Tsereteli has delivered his historical and hysterical speech. Today the revolution has entered a new phase of its development. They began by banning our peaceful demonstration for three days, and now they want to ban it for the entire duration of the Congress. They demand that we obey the decision of the Congress under threat of expulsion from the Congress. But we have declared that we prefer arrest rather than renounce freedom of propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

The Bolshevik continued to gather members as the Congress began to plan a demonstration for June 18<sup>th</sup> to show the public support for the Provisional Government. Bolshevik support not only grew in the streets but also in the local Soviets, as Bolsheviks were elected into committee positions within local Soviets. On the day of the demonstration, Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik supporters were overwhelmed and largely outnumbered by the 400,000 workers and soldiers that carried banners with Bolshevik slogans. It is disputed whether these workers really supported the Bolsheviks or whether the banners they held were the only available with slogans the workers liked.<sup>11</sup>

### *Significance*

The significance of the Congress can be analyzed from two important angles: the significance for the socialist movement and the significance to the Bolshevik party.

---

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, Vladimir. "Speech on the Cancellation of the Demonstration, Delivered at a Meeting of the Petrograd Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.(b.), June 11 (24), 1917." 1917. MS. Petrograd. *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jun/24f.htm>>.

The Congress was a small victory for the socialist movement. It legitimized the soviet system, especially with the way it loomed over the Provisional Government, dictating what the bourgeois Provisional Government could and could not do. The Congress exemplified a new freedom of speech that would quickly disappear under Bolshevik power. The fact that so many different socialist factions coexisted and were able to debate with each other is a unique feature of the weak Dual Power:

The strength of the institutionally autonomous revolutionary state... was to be found not in its ability to use its power to suppress conflict, as was largely the case with the tsarist states, but in its capacity to sustain an active and contentious politics.<sup>13</sup>

The outcome of the Congress was two-sided for the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks failed in Congress. Every winning vote was against their wishes. On the other hand, the demonstration of June 18<sup>th</sup> showed that the workers stood behind Bolshevik slogans (figuratively and literally). The events of the Congress indicated to the Bolsheviks that they needed to rapidly organize themselves and the workers in order to overcome the Dual Power of the bourgeois ministers, Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks and continue with *their* revolution.

### *Conclusion*

The Congress concluded with the election of a Central Executive Committee (CEC) that would act on behalf of the Congress in between its bi-yearly sessions. The first Committee was not very powerful but later Committees would become

---

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg, William G., *Social Mediation and State Construction(s) in Revolutionary Russia*. Social History, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 1994), pp. 175



exceedingly more influential they became more greatly populated by Bolsheviks with the coming of the second revolution. The decisions of the First Congress would irrevocably shape the events of the following months. Despite the Congress's approval of the existence of the Provisional Government, the authority maintained by the Congress signified the further weakening of the central Provisional Government as the Soviets and masses became more organized under Bolshevik leaders. Further disillusionment caused by the war efforts that the Congress voted to continue would also earn the Bolsheviks supporters, as soldiers and families grew weary of fighting a war for the Entente. The First All-Russian Congress signified a growing change of authority as the masses under the leadership of the Bolsheviks aggressively fought to direct Russia's future.