The Birth of the Propaganda State

Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929

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In March 1917, the Bolshevik Party had approximately 25,000 members, its organizations were in disarray, and its influence on the masses of workers was minimal. By November, the Party's membership had grown to 115,000, it dominated the Petrograd and Moscow soviets, and at least temporarily it had gained the support of the workers in two capitals. How important was the press in this remarkable success? On one hand, it is clear that the Leninists were skilled propagandists, and on the other that the soldiers increasingly craved peace and that the peasants insistently demanded land. But was there a casual relationship?

An examination of the press in 1917 reveals that the Bolsheviks were victorious in the political struggle even though their enemies controlled the newspapers. A crucial segment of the Russian people came to hold opinions that the Bolsheviks had already advocated. The liberal order, born out of the March Revolution, was no more able than the tsarist regime to provide the country with a stable government. The Provisional Government disintegrated, and the Bolsheviks were able to pick up the pieces.

One of the first acts of the Provisional Government was to abolish on March 4 (Old Style) the Central Administration for Press Affairs, which in effect abolished censorship. The government clarified the legal position of the press on April 27. It issued a regulation that explicitly declared the press to be free not merely from preliminary censorship but also from administrative penalties. It only required the editors of new publications to register their product.

The legal situation of the press changed considerably as a result of the confusion of the July days. The government, feeling threatened from the left, and attacked by the right for lack of firmness, reimposed military censorship. The General Staff, which had demanded for some time that some form of censorship be re instituted, now succeeded in closing down Bolshevik publications. From this time on, the inability of the government to prevent the publication of subversive materials resulted not from a lack of legal remedies but from internal weakness.

From the first moment of the democratic Revolution, the Russians lived under dual power: The Provisional Government issued laws and carried the burden of responsibility, and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies enjoyed power because it could call on the workers and soldiers to strike and to demonstrate. The commitment of the socialist Soviet to the
principle of the freedom of the press was less unequivocal than that of the "bourgeois" government. Since the Soviet could instruct the printers of any newspaper to go on strike, it was in the position to close down a newspaper if it chose. On March 7, the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet carried out a passionate debate: The right stood for unlimited freedom, but the left and the center were determined to prevent the publication of papers that they considered reactionary. Although on this occasion the left prevailed, three days later the Soviet reversed itself. Evidently the leaders of the Executive Committee realized that for the time being the monarchists posed no danger. The Moscow Soviet, to its credit, never considered censorship.  

As a result of the passionate politics of the day, and of the lifting of censorship, the press flourished as never before. Understandably, the non-socialist papers continued to dominate. They had established reputations, and they possessed financial strength that enabled them to hire the best and most experienced journalists. With the exception of the monarchist right, which withered away in the radically changed political climate, almost every political point of view found a journalistic outlet. Just as before the war, Kopeika, Malen'kaia gazeta (Little gazette), and Russkoe slovo were the most popular papers, appearing in printings of hundreds of thousands. Papers and such as Rech', Den', Novoe vremia, Birzheye vedomosti, and Ul'tro rossi (Russian morning), which appealed to the educated, also retained their readers. As Lenin pointed out, although socialist parties got 75 to 80 percent of the votes in the municipal elections, the combined circulation of their papers was less than a quarter of the total.  

The socialist press could not compete in number of copies printed and in distribution with the bourgeois papers, but it nevertheless experienced a period of remarkable growth. The non-Bolshevik socialists were publishing approximately 150 newspapers by the end of 1917.  

Considering that the March Revolution the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks were repressed as severely as the Bolsheviks, and that at the time of the revolution they hardly possessed any newspapers at all, this was a phenomenal development. Indeed, a weakness of the socialist press was that it reflected the fragmentation of socialist politics; every group published a paper on its own.  

It is remarkable how quickly Russian socialism recovered after the wartime suppression. The Petrograd Soviet started to function simultaneously with the creation of the Provisional Government and immediately, on February 28, started to publish Izvestiia (News). The central organ of the Mensheviks, Rabochaia gazeta (Workers' newspaper), appeared first on March 7, and the Socialist Revolutionary Delo naroda (The people's cause) on March 15. Among the socialist factions, however, the Bolsheviks were the quickest. The first issue of Pravda appeared on March 5.  

Pravda was created as a joint undertaking between the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks and the Petrograd Committee.  

There were considerable ideological differences between the two bodies at this time. The Petrograd Bolsheviks took a more friendly stance toward the newly formed Provisional Government. The first editorial board consisted on Kalinin, representing the Petrograd Committee, and V. M. Molotov and K. S. Eremeev of the Russian Bureau.  

It took some time to find a suitable press. The Bolsheviks, with the permission of the Petrograd Soviet, took over the printing establishment of Sel'skii vestnik (Agricultural herald), which before the revolution, had been a publication of the Ministry of Agriculture. The finances of the paper were tenuous, to say the least. The editors had at their disposal the ridiculously small sum of 100 rubles by way of working capital. Pravda did not pay for the use of the press, however, and the printers gave their services free. The editors acquired paper on credit. The first issue appeared in a printing of 100,000, and it was distributed free.  

The shifting political position of Pravda during the first weeks following the February Revolution obviously reflected the ideological confusion of the Bolshevik leadership, which was caught off balance by the revolutionary events. In this early period, the accident of personalities determined policy. Since the representatives of the Russian Bureau, Molotov, A. G. Shliapnikov, and P. A. Zaluzskii, were the most prominent Bolshevik leaders in the capital, their point of view dominated the party paper. As a result, during the first days of its existence Pravda took an uncompromising position against the Provisional Government and denounced the war in terms similar to Lenin's. But the paper's point of view abruptly changed ten days after the appearance of the first issue. M. K. Muranov (an ex-Duma deputy), Stalin, and Kamenev returned from exile, and since they outranked the relatively junior leadership that had been in Petrograd at the outbreak of the Revolution, they took control of Pravda. Their policy did not differ much from that tactic advocated by the majority of the Petrograd Soviet: defensism, as far as the war was concerned, and conditional support of the Provisional Government. Naturally, the shift did not please all Bolsheviks. Lenin was furious. It is reported that on his return to Russia on April 3, the first thing he said to Kamenev, who came to meet him at the Finnish border, was: "What is this that is being written in Pravda? We saw several issues and really cursed you out." Lenin quickly took command of the newspaper, which became an exponent of his policies and an instrument in the struggle for his April Theses. Between February and October, the Bolshevik leader published 180 articles in Pravda.  

In March and April, the Bolshevik daily appeared in printings of 80,000. The Communists considered this circulation inadequate but did not have the means to expand it. The Party did not have its own printing press and did not have enough money. Under the circumstances, the paper repeatedly turned to its readers for help. It initiated a campaign in April, aiming to collect 75,000 rubles to buy a press and start another daily. The readers responded generously, and the Bolsheviks reached their goal; how-
ever, it turned out that the money was not enough, and therefore it was necessary to start other campaigns.48

The history of Bolshevik finances has never been satisfactorily explained. It is clear that the Bolsheviks were poorer than their enemies, in spite of the support they received from the Germans. Although German support helped, it would be mistaken to overstate its significance. Undoubtedly, without foreign money Pravda's circulation would have been somewhat smaller, and some secondary publications would have never appeared, but it would be hard to maintain that the political fortunes of the revolutionaries would have been fundamentally different.49

Pravda was the flagship of the Bolshevik fleet of papers. Its special place followed from the role of Petrograd in the political life of the country. The leading figures of the Party worked in the capital, and it was here that the Party was strongest. It was only natural that the other Bolshevik papers all over the country carefully followed the line set by Pravda. Local papers reprinted a great deal of the material from the central organ of the Party. About half the printed copies of Pravda were sent out of the capital.50

The distribution system in Petrograd worked reasonably well, but the copies sent by mail often did not arrive, partly because of the general confusion and partly because of the hostility of the employees of the postal service and of the military high command. As a result, the direct influence of Pravda remained largely confined to the capital.

The second most important Bolshevik paper was Sotsial-Demokrat, published by the Moscow organization. It first appeared on March 7, which shows that the Moscow Bolsheviks were also quick to take advantage of the changing circumstances. The Bolsheviks occupied a private press, and the Moscow Soviet later sanctioned this revolutionary action. M. S. Ol'minskii, the editor of the paper, spent much of his time traveling between Moscow and Petrograd. The paper had a circulation of 60,000.51 The Moscow Bolsheviks also had to work under difficult conditions: There was never enough paper, the printing facilities were poor, and the very existence of the paper was threatened by the lack of a suitable printing shop.52

The Levenson firm, which had been obliged by the Moscow Soviet to do the printing for the Bolshevik paper, was unhappy about the arrangement and sold its facilities to the city-zemstvo union. This organization demanded more money from the Bolsheviks than the private firm was able to do. Interestingly, Moskovskie vedomosti (Moscow news), an extreme rightist paper, was printed on the same presses and had priority.53

By the end of March, the Bolsheviks published papers in Kharkov, Kiev, Samara, Saratov, Kazan, Tbilisi, Reval, and Riga. In April and May, the network further expanded.54 In spite of this expansion, the publication of newspapers continued to be a shoestring operation everywhere. Although the other socialist parties, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, were not much better off, they enjoyed the advantage of support from the local soviets.

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The Bolsheviks clearly saw the importance of taking their message to the soldiers. On March 30, the Kronstadt Bolsheviks succeeded in bringing out a daily, Volna (Wave), which became a source of strength of the Party among sailors of the Baltic fleet.55 From April 15, the Military Revolutionary Organization of the Petrograd Committee published Soldatskaia pravda (Soldier's truth).56 The paper had a circulation of 50,000, of which half was sent to the front. Other Bolshevik-front organizations later succeeded in publishing smaller papers.

In spite of their efforts, the Bolsheviks were heavily out-gunned. For the approximately 7 million soldiers in the army, the Bolsheviks could provide no more than about 100,000 copies daily. Even if we assume that each copy was read by several men, it is evident that the revolutionaries could reach only a small minority. The officers, understandably, did everything within their power to prevent the circulation of subversive, antiwar literature. The military postal service also frequently confiscated papers. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks faced stiff competition. In May, approximately 150 military papers supported the war.58 In June, the government set up a special committee on the military press under E. K. Breshko-Breshkovskaya, which had the task of improving the morale of the soldiers. The defensist socialists did not lack skillful agitators who knew how to address an audience of soldiers or workers and peasants. No amount of propaganda, however, could overcome the soldiers' ever-increasing distaste for the war. The soldiers came over to the Bolsheviks' side in spite of the relative weakness of their propaganda.

The Bolsheviks were also conspicuously unsuccessful in spreading literature among the peasants. The leadership, above all Lenin, was well aware of the importance of winning peasant support, but given the widespread illiteracy and disrupted communications, the obstacles were formidable. The Sixth Congress of the Party in July recognized the weakness of propaganda efforts in the countryside and called for increased efforts. Only in October, however, did the Moscow and Petrograd organizations start to publish papers designed specifically for peasant audiences. The Moscow paper, Derevenskaia pravda (Rural pravda), amusingly, had on its masthead: "Proletarians of the World Unite!" It came out only three times a week and had a circulation of 20,000.59 Derevenskaia bednota (Rural poor) had a slightly larger circulation. It is evident that the few copies of a paper that existed only for a few days before the Bolshevik Revolution could not possibly have had a measurable political impact. The peasants wanted to take landlord property not because the Bolsheviks persuaded them.

The violent demonstrations that occurred in the beginning of July in Petrograd changed the political atmosphere of the country. It was increasingly clear that the Provisional Government was losing control over the situation. Whether or not the Bolsheviks were responsible for the demonstrations, their political opponents took advantage of their failures and initiated a series of attacks. For a short time, it seemed that the Bolsheviks
would suffer a political eclipse. This did not happen, largely because the Provisional Government could not provide the country with stability. When a few weeks later the right, in the form of the Kornilov mutiny, attempted to change the status quo, it was the left that benefited from the failure. Counterrevolution once again seemed a more immediate danger than leftist extremism.

After the July days, the political struggle became more violent. From the beginning, the Bolshevik press suffered more than merely verbal attacks. On May 12, for example, unidentified people burned down the editorial offices of Soldatskaya pravda.60 The enemies of the Bolsheviks subjected them to all sorts of petty harassment: In Moscow, for example, newspaper boys who belonged to the union were allowed to travel on streetcars free of charge. But the union, controlled by Socialist Revolutionaries, expelled the newsboys who sold Sotsial-Demokrat.61

In the increasingly embittered political environment, the Bolsheviks were subjected to passionate press attacks. Almost the entire press was united against them, from the socialist Edinstvo (Unity) to the rightist Zhivoeslovo (Living word). The most hostile articles accused Lenin of being a German agent. Others maintained that by encouraging demonstrations and disorder the Bolsheviks played into the hands of the enemies of their country.62 The press campaign was effective. In July 1917, a political party could still be hurt by being described as a German tool. The virulence and success of this campaign had a considerable impact on Lenin. Without doubt, it contributed to his decision, taken after the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, that all hostile papers should be closed down. The enemy proved that in the struggle of words it could deal effective blows.

The attack was not limited to a press campaign. At 6 o’clock on the morning of July 5, a detachment of Cossacks and military-school students appeared at the editorial offices of Pravda, disarmed the guard, arrested the Bolsheviks who were there, and destroyed the offices.63 On the following day, a hostile crowd destroyed the presses on which both Pravda and Soldatskaya pravda had been printed. The loss was approximately one hundred and fifty thousand rubles, which was a considerable blow to party finances.64

Under the pressure of events, the government decided to close down subversive papers. It was through this order for the reimposition of military censorship that Pravda and Okopnaya pravda (Trench truth) were closed officially on July 15. These repressive moves put the Bolsheviks in a situation similar to that which prevailed before the war. Once again, they were forced to change the name of their paper. Rabochii i soldat (Worker and soldier), the successor of Pravda, reappeared only on July 23, with a circulation of 20,000. Although the circulation gradually increased, it never again reached the pre-July level. Anti-Bolshevik measures were taken elsewhere in the country, also. The military command was especially anxious to use the opportunity and close down papers it had long considered subversive.

In this period of repression, the Bolsheviks returned to their old tactic. When on August 10 the government closed down Rabochii i soldat, the Bolsheviks immediately brought out Proletarii. This paper existed for two weeks, after which it was superseded by Rabochii, which lasted for nine days and was in turn succeeded by Rabochii put.65

The new revolutionary wave and the general turn to the left that followed the Kornilov mutiny were accompanied by a growth of the revolutionary press. Circulation figures once again started to climb, and Bolshevik organizations in various parts of the country began publishing newspapers. By the time of the October Revolution, the Party had 75 publications, of which 25 were dailies.66 It is estimated that the combined circulation of these papers was 600,000 daily.

It is possible to correlate Bolshevik strength with the circulation of their newspapers only to a limited extent. It is true that following the July days, which were a period of weakness for the Party, distribution figures declined and that as the Party gained strength the figures started to increase again. It is also evident that the Bolsheviks were strongest in cities where their papers had the best distribution. However, it is difficult to establish a casual relationship. The great change in the mood of the soldiers was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in the circulation of Communist newspapers. The change occurred for reasons independent of the revolutionaries, who were simply there to take advantage of it.

The suppression of the non-Bolshevik press

The Soviet press came into being in a historically unprecedented situation: It was created and protected by a one-party revolutionary state. This fact essentially determined its character. It is understandable that the Bolshevik papers, once relieved of the pressure of competition, developed characteristics that were unique at the time. The decisive development was the immediate suppression of the free press.

Ideologically, Lenin was prepared for such a move. It is not that he had advocated censorship before. The Bolsheviks, as a revolutionary underground party, had to battle censorship, and it was natural that in their writings the revolutionaries should denounce tsarism for limiting the freedom of the press. Nor did Lenin advocate the institution of censorship after the victory of the future revolution. Neither Lenin nor anyone else envisaged the circumstances in which the Bolsheviks would emerge victorious. The revolutionaries assumed that the revolution would be carried out by the great majority of the people, and, consequently, the question of repression would not even arise. However, Lenin was never a liberal. He placed little value on "formal" freedoms, such as freedom of the press, and it was clear from his writings and actions that he would not hesitate to take steps, however brutal, when the success of his movement was at stake.
In retrospect, the first warning signal was contained in What Is to Be Done? After his famous denunciation of spontaneity, Lenin wrote:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a "third" ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology . . .

A few paragraphs later, Lenin went on:

But why, the reader will ask, does the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of least resistance, lead to the dominance of bourgeois ideology? For the simple reason that bourgeois ideology, being far older in origin than socialist ideology, is more fully developed and has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination. 63

It is a peculiar notion that bourgeois ideology is more effective because it is older, and it is somewhat surprising to find Lenin, the defender of Marxist orthodoxy, arguing that socialism was insufficiently developed. But he was unquestionably correct in maintaining that the bourgeois possessed far better means for spreading its ideas. Lenin would return to this point again and again, and it ultimately came to be a justification for censorship. However, the main significance of these passages is in showing that even in this early period Lenin did not accept the principle that one fights ideas with ideas and that he did not trust the workers to arrive at "correct" conclusions if two sides of an ideological issue were presented. It would be an exaggeration to say that these statements from What Is to Be Done? implied approval of censorship, but they are certainly consistent with Lenin's attacks on the freedom of the press two decades later.

It was during the 1905 Revolution that Lenin first explicitly discussed the question of the freedom of the press. In his article "Party Organization and Party Literature," he argued that literature should be party literature and that the literature of the proletariat should be under the control of the organization of workers, that is, the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party. Literature should be an instrument in the class struggle. 66 To those who objected that this development would result in control of creativity, he responded with two arguments: First, though individuals have the right to say anything they desire, organizations have the right to exclude those who do not agree with their fundamental principles; second, talk about absolute freedom of the press is hypocrisy, since in bourgeois society writers depend on those who finance them 67.

In 1905, Lenin did not foresee that his party soon would be in a position to suppress the opposition. He was preparing for a period when the workers would struggle against the bourgeoisie and would only begin to organize for a socialist revolution. Under the circumstances, suppressing nonsocialist papers was not an issue, because it was not a realistic possibility. Once again, however, Lenin made it clear how little regard he had for the "bourgeois" notion of free expression. Most disconcertingly, in his article he failed to draw a distinction between literature and journalism. Present advocates of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union cannot find much encouragement in it.

The February Revolution made freedom of the press a practical issue. The Bolsheviks supported the efforts of the Petrograd Soviet to close down reactionary-monarchist papers. Lenin had only scorn for the March 10 decision of the soviet, which reversed itself and allowed papers to appear without previous permission.

The traumatic events in Petrograd in early July and the new opportunities presented by the failure of the Kornilov mutiny changed Lenin's tactics in the revolutionary struggle in general and his attitude to the press in particular. In his article "How to Assure the Success of the Constituent Assembly?," published on October 15, he wrote:

The capitalists (and many SRs [Socialist Revolutionaries] and Mensheviks following them either through misunderstanding or inertia) call freedom of the press that situation in which censorship is abolished and all parties freely publish any paper they please. In reality, this is not freedom of the press but freedom for the rich, for the bourgeoisie to mislead the oppressed and exploited masses. 70

Lenin proposed to remedy the situation by suggesting that the Soviet would declare a monopoly on printing advertisements. This move would undermine the financial strength of the bourgeois press and help the socialists. Then he went further. He realized that in the short run what mattered most was the availability of paper and printing facilities. Therefore he proposed the expropriation of all paper and printing presses and their distribution according to the political strength of the parties in the two capitals.

Simultaneously, in another article, Lenin advocated closing down the major bourgeois papers such as Rube and Rushee s'low. 71 He did not make it clear how the two sets of suggestions could be reconciled. After all, the Kadets did have substantial voting strength in Petrograd and Moscow.

Throughout the years, Lenin was consistent in his attitude toward the issue of freedom of the press. It is true that in the fall of 1917 he did not renew his call for party-mindedness as developed in his 1905 article. But the reason was not a newly found liberalism. His article "How to Assure the Success of the Constituent Assembly?" was addressed to the socialists in the Petrograd Soviet. It is unlikely that he expected them to adopt his ideas, but he certainly hoped to score debating points. On the other hand, in September 1917 Lenin did not yet envisage a one-party regime in which only a single voice could be heard. Had his recommendation been followed,
the Russian people would have been exposed to a multiplicity of opinions. This was, of course, not the policy the Bolsheviks chose after they took power.

On October 25 the Bolsheviks struck, seizing the Winter Palace, the ministries, the post and telegraph buildings, and at the same time the printing presses of Russkaya volia (Russian will). The next day the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) issued a resolution, temporarily forbidding the publication of bourgeois papers and counterrevolutionary publications.

The MRC at once named a commissar for press matters, N. I. Derbyshev, a Bolshevik printer. In the middle of November, A. F. Minkin took over. He had the right to report directly to the Council of People's Commissars, Sovnarkom. Soon the soviets in major cities formed press departments.

In the first two days of its existence, the new regime attempted to close down hostile newspapers. Since all the major papers opposed what they regarded as a coup d'etat and many of them published Kerensky's manifesto, the Bolsheviks faced a difficult task. The MRC sent soldiers to occupy the offices of the major newspapers of the country; "bourgeois" and socialist papers suffered alike. The MRC attempted to close down twenty newspapers; however, at a time of great confusion the new authorities did not yet have the power to enforce their decisions, and therefore some of the offending papers continued to be printed and distributed.

It is not necessary to search for ideological reasons for trying to prevent the publication of hostile literature. It is perfectly understandable that during the transition period extraordinary measures had to be taken. A far more important question was what attitude the authorities would take toward freedom of expression once their rule was established.

On October 27, Sovnarkom published its decree on the press. This decree, after repeating Lenin's view on the bourgeois notion of the free press, gave Sovnarkom the right to close down newspapers that advocated resistance to the new authorities or attempted to "sow disorder by the publication of clearly slanderous misstatements of facts." The last paragraph asserted that the decree was temporary and that after the return of normal order, complete freedom of the press would be assured.

A few days later, on November 4, an important debate erupted in the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets (CEC). The issue was even more profound than freedom of the press. What kind of regime would follow the Revolution? At the time it was unclear whether the exclusively Bolshevik Council of Commissars could retain power or the Bolsheviks would accept a compromise and bring the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and Mensheviks into the government. The majority of the supporters of the October Revolution hoped for a socialist coalition. It was demanded in forceful terms by the union of railroad workers, who possessed considerable power through their ability to call a strike. The idea of coalition was obvi-

ously also attractive to an important element in the Bolshevik leadership. At this point the issues of coalition and the freedom of the press became intertwined. Obviously it was not possible to suppress the publications of moder-
are socialists and at the same time to induce them to participate in the government. It seems fitting that the first crucial and bitter debate that took place within the Soviet leadership concerned free expression.

The Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets had sixty-seven Bolshevik, twenty-nine Left SR, and twenty other socialist members. When Sovnarkom issued its decree on the press, the CEC did not object. The revolutionaries understood that the exceptional circumstances necessitated exceptional measures. Ten days later, however, when the issue was thoroughly discussed, circumstances had changed. The debate that took place was remarkable not because of the profundity of the views expressed but because the two points of view, both expressed with great passion, represented real and irreconcilable differences in the vision of the coming socialist order.

B. F. Malkin, a Left SR and the editor of Izvestia, said:

We firmly repudiate the notion that socialism can be introduced by armed force. In our view socialism is a struggle not merely for material advantages but for supreme moral values. The revolution's appeal lies in the fact that we are striving not just to fill our hungry bellies, but for a higher truth, the liberation of the individual. We shall win not by closing down bourgeois newspapers but because our programme and tactics express the interests of the broad toiling masses, because we can build up a solid coalition of soldiers, workers and peasants.

Later, in the heat of the debate, he responded to an opponent: "You are dishonoring the socialist movement by depriving it of its moral force."

V. A. Karelin, another Left SR, argued that suppression of views would only make those more attractive. Prominent Bolsheviks, such as Ia. Larin and D. B. Riazanov, also spoke up in the defense of free expression.

The Leninists, by contrast, were willing to subordinate all values to the immediate interests of the Revolution. In their position one can sense a certain ambivalence. They defended suppression by pointing to immediate and presumably temporary needs, but at the same time they made it clear that they had little regard for "formal" notions of freedom.

V. A. Avanesov said:

We defend the freedom of the press, but this concept must be divorced from old petit-bourgeois notions of liberty. If the new government has had the strength to abolish private landed property, thereby infringing the rights of the landlords, it would be ridiculous for Soviet power to stand up for antiquated notions about liberty of the press.

His resolution included these sentences:

The restoration of so-called "freedom of the press," i.e., the return of the printing press to the capitalists, poisoners of the people's consciousness, would be an imper-
possible capitulation to the will of capital, a surrender of one of the most important strong points of the workers' and peasants' revolution, and thus indubitably counterrevolutionary. 79

Trotsky in his speech distinguished between the present and the future. "During the civil war it it legitimate to suppress newspapers which support the other side." 80 For the future he promised a new regime in press matters but was not specific, only saying that the press would be in the hands of the soviets.

Lenin based his argument both on expediency and on principles. He put it picturesquely: "If we want progress toward social revolution, we cannot allow the addition of lies to the bombs of Kaledin." 81 He went so far as to say that allowing bourgeois papers to exist was the same as ceasing to be socialists.

The Leninist position prevailed. Avanesov's resolution was adopted by a vote of 34 to 24 with one abstention. 82 It included these sentences:

The CEC repudiates categorically any proposals leading to a restoration of the old regime in press matters, and supports the Sovnarkom unconditionally against pretensions and intrigues dictated either by petty-bourgeois prejudices or by outright servility to the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie.

The resolution not only affirmed Sovnarkom's press decree, but advocated further action:

The next measure should be to confiscate private printing presses and stocks of newspaper, and to transfer their ownership to organs of Soviet power in the center and in the provinces, so that parties and groups may have technical means to publish in proportion to the number of their adherents. 83

It was at this point that people's commissars V. Nogin, A. Rykov, V. Milutin, and I. Teodorovich resigned. 84

The November 4 meeting of the CEC was a turning point in the history of the revolution. One can well imagine that had Lenin's opponents possessed more political acumen the outcome of the vote would have been different. The concept of the future, inherent in the thinking of the defenders of the freedom of expression, was obviously profoundly different from Lenin's ideas. On the other hand, the likelihood is that if the revolutionaries had repudiated Leninist methods, the regime would not have lasted very long. The events between February and October proved that Russia could not be administered in accordance with liberal principles. Those who refused to learn this lesson were condemned to defeat. Lenin, after all, was correct: The new regime could not tolerate freedom of expression; nor could it repudiate terrorist methods.

The adoption of Avanesov's resolution did not immediately result in a Bolshevik monopoly of the press. First of all, the Leninists did not yet desire such a monopoly. It was one thing to advocate suppression of the forces hostile to the Revolution and quite another to claim that there could be only one correct interpretation of all political events. Time had to pass before the Bolsheviks came to this view. But even if the Bolsheviks did secretly desire such a monopoly, it was good politics to proceed gradually. Prematurely frightening the uncommitted might have had dangerous consequences. But most importantly, the Bolsheviks lacked the means to suppress all enemies, real or potential. The new regime's control of the workers of Petrograd and Moscow was weak, and its control of the rest of the enormous country was minimal. As a consequence, the first eight months of the Bolshevik regime represented a twilight period for the Russian press. It was a period in which liberal and socialist journalists tried to defend themselves by rallying public support and by attempting to circumvent the regulations of the new authorities. Meanwhile the Bolsheviks were making increasingly successful efforts to impose order on the country and to undermine the strength of their enemies; only when they considered themselves strong enough did they carry out frontal attacks.

The Bolsheviks' first obstacle was the Menshevik-dominated printers union. The printers' opposition to the press decree surfaced even before the CEC debate. On November 1, the union notified the MRC that if the press decree was not rescinded, "the Union would use all available means for pressure"; that is, it would call a strike. 85 On November 6, a meeting of union representatives passed a resolution (171 to 69) that made the threat explicit. 86 The MRC was forced to engage in discussion with the printers in which the arguments used at the CEC meeting were repeated. The printers proved themselves to be just as eloquent defenders of freedom as the socialist politicians. However, the position of the printers was seriously weakened by the fact that the Bolsheviks controlled a large enough minority to shatter solidarity in case of a strike. At a time of extremely high unemployment, the Bolsheviks were able to prevent a strike. 87

As in all other aspects of national life, great confusion prevailed in the regime's policy toward the press during the first weeks following the October take-over. The MRC or Sovnarkom frequently closed down newspapers, which then simply changed their names and continued to appear. Rech, for example, appeared under five different titles in the course of a few weeks, and the SR paper, Volia naroda (The people's will), had six different names. 88 The Bolsheviks arrested editors and journalists, but almost all of them were freed within a few days. Furthermore, the situation varied a great deal from city to city. In Moscow, for example, repression was far less severe than in Petrograd. The Moscow MRC went on record in support of free expression exactly when in Petrograd the CEC reaffirmed Lenin's position. The decree issued on November 6 forbade only the printing of proclamations calling for armed struggle against the Soviet power, but it allowed all papers to publish. 89 Indeed, moderate socialist publications continued to appear in Moscow until March 1918, when the government moved to that city. In the rest of the country, the views and power of the leading local
Bolsheviks determined the position of the press. In the first few months, hundreds of newspapers were closed down in provincial cities. During the transition period, the Bolsheviks often did not feel strong enough to carry out frontal attacks and therefore turned to indirect means. In the early days of the regime, they confiscated the presses of such major papers as Rech', Novoe vremia, Birzhevoy vedomosti, Zhivoe slovo, and Kopeika. These presses were taken over by Soviet publications. The confiscation of printing facilities was, of course, a heavy blow to the bourgeois papers. They were forced to find smaller presses and contract their work. The newspapers that managed to survive did so with greatly reduced circulations.

The worst problem for all the newspapers was a shortage of paper. Publications tried to protect themselves by hiding their paper supplies. Already on October 26 the MRC ordered a complete inventory of paper, and a few days later it forbade the removal of paper from Petrograd. However, in the confusion it was relatively easy to disobey the MRC; indeed, it was necessary to do so to stay in business. But when the Bolsheviks did succeed in confiscating scarce material, it was often tantamount to closing down a hostile newspaper.

As compared to the confiscation of presses, paper, and newspapers, the regulation that outlawed the printing of advertisements was only a petty harassment. Lenin first presented this idea in September 1917 and clung to it with a lack of realism that was uncharacteristic. On his initiative, Sovnarkom passed a regulation on November 15, according to which only government publications would be allowed to print advertisements after November 22, 1917. The newspapers resisted, and the socialist press, which by and large had not carried advertisements, started to do so as a solidarity gesture. A. I. Minkin, the commissar for press affairs, who foresaw the difficulties, asked and was assigned one hundred sailors from MRC to overcome resistance. In many cities the local soviets failed to take any steps to carry out this particular decree.

After the end of the Civil War, Lenin himself admitted that outlawing advertisements had been a mistake. It created a great deal of resistance and focused hostility on the Soviet regime, at the same exhibiting the powerlessness of the government. The damage inflicted by this regulation on the bourgeois press was trivial: With the economy of the nation in ruins, advertisements were no longer an important source of financial strength.

During the first months of the regime, Soviet policy toward hostile journalism was inconsistent. The authorities closed down newspapers for small violations of vague and sweeping laws while allowing others to print truly subversive material. To bring consistency into the confused situation, the Commissariat of Justice on December 18 decided to set up revolutionary tribunals for press matters. I. Z. Shteinberg, the commissar for justice and a Left SR (the Left SRs joined the government as junior partners in mid-November), issued regulations for the operation of these tribunals that appeared much too lenient for the Bolsheviks. They circumvented this leniency by using the Cheka (Extraordinary Commission, the political police), which of course remained safely in their hands. The jurisdictional struggle that erupted between the commissariat and the Cheka was resolved by Sovnarkom in favor of the Cheka. The Bolsheviks had a firm majority in Sovnarkom. On January 24, the government decided that though revolutionary tribunals would deal with newspapers as collective entities, the Cheka could continue to arrest and punish editors as "counterrevolutionaries."

Four days later Sovnarkom issued a decree on the operation of revolutionary tribunals that went much further than Shteinberg’s. Although the revolutionary tribunals were previously intended to punish those who printed falsehoods, the new regulations were aimed at those who published "anti-Soviet material," obviously a much broader and vaguer category. The punishments mandated by the new decree were also more severe: Instead of fines, jail or exile. Legal and extra legal repression became ever harsher.

The work of the press tribunals in Petrograd started at the end of January, and they were later introduced in the rest of the country. Although setting up these institutions gave one more weapon to the new regime in the struggle against its enemies, the tribunals themselves could not solve the basic problem, which was the weakness of the government. The decisions of the tribunals remained inconsistent, and anti-Soviet material, for example Gorky’s articles, continued to be published.

A study of the material of the revolutionary tribunals gives interesting glimpses of those confused days. One of the first to suffer was the major Menshevik paper, Den’ (Day). The charges against the paper were these: It changed its name several times; it described Bolshevik rule as unstable; it reported about conflicts between the workers and the government; and it wrote that the Bolsheviks had intended to hand over Petrograd to the Germans. It is unlikely that any of the leading Bolsheviks appreciated the irony of the situation. After all, Pravda not so long before changed its name just as often as Den’ did, and the Bolsheviks had also accused the Provisional Government with no justification whatever of wanting to hand over the capital to the enemy.

The signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty caused further dissension, the withdrawal of the Left SRs from the government, and a new series of repressive measures. A tribunal accused Novyi vechornyi chas (New evening hour) with frightening the public about the danger of Japanese intervention. Volodarskii, the new press commissar and chief prosecutor, charged socialist and liberal newspapers with crimes no greater than “creating the impression that Soviet rule was weak.” To close down a paper it was clearly not necessary to prove that it had written something untrue.

The final attack on the non-Bolshevik press occurred in June–August 1918. After that time only one point of view could be expressed. Why did Bolshevik tolerance came to an end at this particular moment?

To some extent, the Leninists simply responded to the moves of their
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opponents. The abortive SR rising in early July finished all possible hopes for cooperating with other socialists. During the late spring and early summer of 1918, the Civil War in the east and in the south assumed even more serious proportions. Red terror and White terror reinforced one another.

It would be naive, however, to regard the Bolsheviks as merely reactive and to see the repressive regime that emerged from the revolution as entirely the result of the bitterness of the Civil War. The existence of the Red regime was threatened more seriously during the first half of 1918 than during the second. In the first months of that year, the regime was almost destroyed by sheer anarchy; by the inability of the Bolsheviks to feed the cities and make the state machinery function. In the second half of 1918, Bolshevik rule became more repressive at least partly because now the Bolsheviks had more strength to suppress. The final closing down of all liberal and socialist newspapers in the middle of 1918 was a natural step in the process of ever-increasing repression.

The Soviet press during the Civil War

What kind of press did the Bolsheviks create in an environment in which their monopoly was assured? There was general agreement among the revolutionaries who concerned themselves with journalism that the press functioned poorly and could not carry out its assigned tasks. Observers criticized the content and format of the newspapers and also recognized their technical poverty. Worst of all, from the point of view of the Soviet leadership, their circulation remained low.

Immediately after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks enjoyed the fruits of their victory. They confiscated the paper supply, machinery, and buildings of the bourgeois papers as spoils of war. On October 27, Pravda took over the presses of Novoe vremia. On the same day, the MRC of Petrograd gave the presses of Den' to Derevenskiaia bedinostia and those of Rad' to Soldatskaia pravda.109 According to a Soviet historian, the Bolsheviks had confiscated 30 presses by the end of 1917, 70 by July 1918, and 90 by the end of that year.110 With the help of these confiscated goods, the Bolsheviks were able to increase the circulation of their papers and establish new ones. Bednota (village poor), Ekonomicheskaia zhizn' (Economic life), Zhizn' narodnosti (Life of the nationalities), Komunar (Member of the Commune), Kommunistka (Women Communist), Rabotnitsa (Worker woman), and Voennoe delo (Military affairs), among others, started to appear shortly after the Revolution.111 At the end of 1918, Soviet Russia had 563 newspapers and 753 journals. The overall circulation of Bolshevik papers had increased approximately tenfold since Lenin's government took power.

The most difficult problem continued to be the lack of paper and newsprint. In 1914 the Russian Empire produced 33 million poods of paper, but in 1920, the worst year, Soviet Russia produced only 2 million. The paper shortage in 1920 was so great that Sovnarkom was willing to use its precious foreign currency to buy 400,000 poods from Estonia.112 The paper that was available was poor in quality, often hardly better than wrapping paper. The situation in regard to newsprint was almost as bad. The quality was so poor that on occasion entire columns were completely unreadable.

The shortage of paper inevitably resulted in falling circulations. Many papers closed down, the publication schedules of others became erratic, and such major papers as Pravda and Izvestiia appeared during the second half of the Civil War in editions of only two pages. Izvestiia had the largest circulation in 1919, appearing in printings of 300,000 to 400,000 depending on the availability of paper. The average figure for Pravda was 130,000.113 Such popular papers as Krasnaiagazeta (Red newspaper), published in Petrograd as an evening daily, had so little paper that they did not accept individual subscriptions, preferring to send their copies to institutions, where they had a larger readership.114

The newspapers also suffered from a lack of trained personnel. The Menshevik-dominated printers' union continued to be hostile. There was a dearth of typesetters and of people capable of operating the machinery. As a result the appearance of the newspapers was poor. Trotsky addressed a gathering of printers with the words:

Comrade printers, our printing technique is terrible. Whole series are so blurred that you cannot make out a single line. The number of misprints, jumbled lines are innumerable. To the person who for ten years has become accustomed to reading papers and understands a phrase from two words, it is difficult, often times impossible, to decipher the idea of our newspaper articles. Under the circumstances how much more difficult is it for the young Red Army soldiers, often semiliterate?115

Looking at issues of Pravda, Izvestiia, and Petrogradskiaia pravda (Petrograd truth), just to mention the best papers of the time, one is struck by the dullness of format. The Bolsheviks had learned nothing of the techniques of the yellow press. The central papers did possess means to reproduce drawings and caricatures, but photographs never appeared.

Distribution was a major problem. The postal service did not function adequately, and at least at the beginning of the conflict, it was in the hands of nonsocialist workers. Since postal workers often refused to deliver Bolshevik newspapers, these had to be sent surreptitiously in parcels and practically smuggled here and there by traveling soldiers and activists, just as before the October Revolution. Local Party organizations constantly complained that newspapers and other propaganda material did not arrive from the center. Pravda, for example, wrote on October 27, 1918, that the Vitebsk Party Committee had received only two or three copies of Izvestiia per month.116 In 1957 Soviet historians published the correspondence between the secretariat of the Party's central committee and local Party organizations in 1917 and 1918. Complaints about the unavailability of newspapers in the villages is a constant refrain in these letters.117
Another difficulty in the development of the press was the lack of qualified journalists. The Soviet regime faced the problem of not having enough trained people in almost every area of reconstruction, but the shortage of journalists was especially acute. The regime could hardly entrust potential enemies the sensitive matter of conveying its point of view. The task did not attract party activists. Newly converted but uneducated soldiers and workers were capable of carrying out oral agitation among workers and peasants, but they of course could not write effectively. Among the top leaders, journalism did not have as much prestige as work on the front, in industry, or in administration. Lenin had to admonish his colleagues repeatedly to write more often for the newspapers. Naturally, in the provinces skilled journalists were even more scarce, and as a result the state of local journalism was indeed pitiful.

Because every local Soviet and army unit wanted to have its own paper, even one incapable of producing effective propaganda, there was a great proliferation of publications. At the end of the Civil War, more periodicals were printed in Russia than had been printed in peacetime. Soviet historians today use these figures to show how quickly the press developed. But at the time the leaders well understood that a few strong papers would have been more beneficial, and they regarded proliferation both as a sign and as a cause of weakness.

The Party, wisely, stressed the need to improve agitation among the peasantry. This policy was used to justify claims for paper on the part of local organizations. It was one thing to publish a newspaper, however, and another to carry out successful agitation. The provincial papers failed to make contact with village life. By and large they reprinted articles from Pravda and Izvestiia and filled their pages with the texts of laws and regulations. Without village correspondents and journalists willing and able to travel and investigate, information on village life came from hearsay. Papers appeared irregularly, and their "original" articles were even duller than the ones they copied from the central press. At the same time a large share of the central papers was sent out of the major cities. In 1920, for example, of the 350,000 copies of Izvestiia, 279,000 were sent out of Moscow; of the 250,000 copies of Pravda, only 41,000 remained in the capital. Bednota, aimed at the peasants, was distributed almost entirely in the villages. All in all, 65 percent of the papers printed in Moscow were sent to the provinces.

The Red Army was politically a most powerful organization. During the second half of the Civil War, when the number of civilian papers declined for the lack of resources, the military press continued to expand. At the end of 1918 there were 90 newspapers published by various military units, and in the course of 1919 the number grew to 170. For the army, distribution was no problem, and the investment in indoctrination definitely paid off.

The Bolsheviks published newspapers not only for their own soldiers but also for the enemy. They were particularly interested in reaching the soldiers of the interventionist armies. The Commissariat for Foreign Affairs established a propaganda section in December 1918, which published Call, an English-language weekly, in printings of 15,000 to 20,000. After the Comintern was formed in 1919, it took over responsibility for agitation among foreign troops. The demoralized soldiers, who did not want to be in Russia to begin with and had only the vaguest understanding of political circumstances, were willing listeners. It is quite likely that the Bolsheviks contributed to the resounding fiasco of French intervention in South Russia by further undermining the morale of the foreign soldiers.

Agitation among the soldiers was a relatively easy task compared to creating a network of newspapers for the entire country. Journalists and party leaders alike were aware of the technical and ideological weaknesses of the press and discussed these problems repeatedly. L. S. Sosnovskii, editor of Pravda, reported to the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919 on the situation of the press. He talked about the confusion in the provinces concerning the financing of newspapers. He complained about the ideological unreliability and lack of education of provincial editors and journalists. Then he submitted a set of resolutions, which the congress accepted. This was the first:

The general weakening of party work at the time of the civil war badly damaged our Party and Soviet press. A general weakness of almost all Party and Soviet publications is a remoteness from local and often from general political life. The provincial Party and Soviet press almost completely ignores local life and chooses its material on general issues extremely unsuccessfully. They print long, uninteresting articles instead of responding with short, simply written articles to the main issues of national and local life. On occasion entire pages are printed with decrees, instead of explaining in a simple and understandable language the most important point of the decree. Newspapers print rules and regulations of different offices and departments instead of making from this material a lively chronicle of local life.

The resolution blamed the failures of the press on the fact that most experienced party leaders paid too little attention to newspapers. In view of the importance of propaganda, the congress directed local organizations to send their most experienced and talented people into press work. It assigned the task of supervising the local press and commenting on questions of Party construction to the central press. The task of the local paper was exclusively to appeal to a mass audience, to discuss their problems in simple language. That this resolution had little effect can be seen from the fact that the Eleventh Congress in 1922 found it necessary to repeat all the main points.

Two congresses of journalists at the time of the Civil War, in November 1918 and May 1919, also looked for ways to improve the work. The deliberations show that the Soviet press was still in a formative stage and that journalists still held a variety of opinions about shaping its character.
The first congress was called by the Moscow committee of journalists, which invited all who were willing to cooperate with the Soviet government, Communists and noncommunists alike. 15 The top leadership of the Party paid great attention to the congress, and such important figures as Kamenev, Radek, Lunacharski, and Kollontai gave addresses. All speakers agreed that the press should pay more attention to life in the villages and factories. There was, however, an interesting disagreement over the question of audience. Sosnovskii argued that all papers should be written for simple people, but the resolution of the congress spoke of "leaders," "au ters" and "mass" papers. In spite of this resolution, the intellectual level of such leading papers as Pravda and Izvestiia was not appreciably higher than that of local papers, even if those in the capital were more professionally produced.

The journalists devoted considerable attention to the organizational aspect of their work. The resolution called for the establishment of a Central Council of Journalists (Tsentrosovet), which would not only protect the professional interests of journalists but would also be responsible for such matters as the distribution of paper and information. Nothing came of these plans. Tsentrosovet was an organization of little influence, which within a few months ceased to exist. The Party was nor about to give control of crucial matters to an outside authority; the journalists were simply disregarded. The political-ideological orientation of newspapers and the appointment of leading cadres continued to be the responsibility of the Central Committee of the Party; distribution of paper, newsprint, and machines was handled by the Central Economic Council (VSNKh); and Sovnarkom set up the Russian telegraph agency (Rosra) to distribute information.

The mood and character of the second congress of journalists in May 1919 was altogether different. The organizers understood that in the developing system there could be no such profession as journalism but simply a party function for publishing newspapers. The press would have no other task than to spread and advertise the policies and decisions of the Party. But the Party did not support even such a modest conception. The newly elected central committee of journalists soon fell apart when the party sent its members to different parts of the country. The Party had no interest in supporting even the slightest degree of professional independence among journalists: It wanted no mediators between its policies and the publicizing of those policies.

The Civil War years were the formative period of the Soviet press. The Bolsheviks repudiated the principles governing the bourgeois press, but they did not have a clear idea of the kind of newspaper that would be appropriate for the new age. There were no models to follow and many questions. What subject matter should the Communist press emphasize? What should be the style? On what level should the journalists address their readers? Lenin made a major contribution to these discussions in an article in Pravda in September 1918.

The article "About the Character of Our Newspapers" began with the practical statement that it was necessary to write simply and concisely for the masses. Lenin recommended that to be effective, journalists should deal with concrete situations. But he went much further. He argued that Soviet newspapers should devote less space to politics.

Instead of 200-400 lines, why don't we talk in 20-10 [sic] about such matters as the treachery of the Mensheviks, who are the lackeys of the bourgeoisie, or such as the Anglo-Japanese attack for the sake of reestablishing the sacred rule of capital, or such as how the American billionaires gnash their teeth about Germany. These matters are simple, well-known, and to a considerable extent already well understood by the masses.17

What should the press write about then? In Lenin's opinion more attention should be given to economics. He did not have in mind, however, the discussion of such issues as war communism, the effects of outlawing free trade in grain, or the consequence of the workers' control of the factories. He wanted detailed reports of which factories did their work well, of which ones did not, and of how success was achieved; above all, he wanted to unmask the guilty—those who did not do their work. They were class enemies. The press should be an instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat, exposing those who through poor work in fact helped the enemy. These were the last lines of the article:

Less political noise. Less intelligent-like discussions. Closer to life. More attention to how the masses of workers and peasants in fact build something new in their everyday work. More documentation of just how communist this new is.

Lenin was implying that there was no point in discussing the political and economic issues of the day, for those had been decided. It is significant that this article was written exactly at the time when the last vestiges of a critical, non-Bolshevik press disappeared. There remained no one to polemicize against. Politics as a conflict of opinion, as a presentation of alternatives, no longer existed. The public realm of discussion was drastically narrowed and remained so for decades.

It would be naive to think that the Soviet press developed as it did because editors followed the advice of the founder of the system. But Lenin's article was prophetic. Today's Pravda would please him: The journalists admonish workers to do their job well, they single out specific factories for praise or blame, and they most certainly waste no space on "intelligent-like" discussion of large political issues in terms of alternatives.