The State Conference in Moscow, 1917: class, nationality, and the building of a post-imperial community

Ivan Sablin

To cite this article: Ivan Sablin (2022) The State Conference in Moscow, 1917: class, nationality, and the building of a post-imperial community, Parliaments, Estates and Representation, 42:1, 38-59, DOI: 10.1080/02606755.2022.2039455

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02606755.2022.2039455

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 24 Feb 2022.

Article views: 171

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The State Conference in Moscow, 1917: class, nationality, and the building of a post-imperial community

Ivan Sablin
Department of History, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

ABSTRACT
The State Conference in Moscow, a one-time quasi-parliamentary assembly of over 2,500 delegates, was intended to help the Provisional Government resolve the military, political, and economic crises of the First World War and the Russian Revolution by building a broad public consensus. Due to the inadequate representation at the conference, its duration and procedure, and the radically divergent platforms of major political forces, the assembly functioned as a political rally rather than a parliament. The attempt to resolve the crises by (re)constituting a Russian political community failed due to the conflicts formulated in terms of class and nationality and the contradictions between coercive discipline and self-organization as the principles of state- and nation-building. Even though the idea of the Russian nation prevailed at the conference, its participants did not agree if a post-imperial political community was to be homogeneous or composite, inclusive or exclusive, and if it was to be organized in a top-down or bottom-up manner.

KEYWORDS
Russian Revolution; empire; socialism; nationalism; class; nationality

Introduction
The Provisional Government felt that it could not rule the country without a parliament and intended to replace it with a surrogate. [...] I was present at this [State] Conference, and, of course, apart from a demonstration, absolutely nothing came of this venture. It is impossible to imagine a single parliament in the world that would gather, sit down, and immediately resolve all burning and not burning issues. The work of a serious parliament does not happen like that, it is organized gradually and methodically, and the plenary, so to say, ostentatious sessions are least of all suitable for this work.¹

In this concise evaluation of the Provisional Government’s first experiment with parliamentarism, Apollon Vasil’evich Eropkin, a centre-right deputy of the First and Third State Dumas of the Russian Empire, managed to grasp its main problems. The State Conference in Moscow (Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie v Moskve), which brought over 2,500 people together on 12–15 August 1917,² did not become a proper parliament. It could not

²The article used the Julian calendar, which was then still in force in Russia.

CONTACT Ivan Sablin Ivan.sablin@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de Department of History, Heidelberg University, Grabengasse 3–5, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
build a broad consensus in the context of the defeats at the front of the First World War and the deep economic crisis. The Conference aggravated political fissures between socialists and non-socialists and between the groups, which were defined through class and nationality. The Conference did not agree on a viable project of building a composite political community, failing to resolve the crisis of post-imperial sovereignty institutionally or discursively.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was profoundly influenced by parliamentarism. The Imperial State Duma played a key role at the beginning of the Revolution in February and March 1917, while the much anticipated universally elected All-Russian Constituent Assembly was supposed to conclude the post-imperial transformation. In the context of the broad opposition to the Duma and the delays of the Constituent Assembly the unaccountable Provisional Government that had limited legitimacy made attempts to establish a parliamentary body. The State Conference was occasionally called a parliament mainly by its critics. It was more frequently referred to as the ‘Assembly of the Land’ (Zemskii sobor). This nineteenth-century term referred to early modern assemblies and was used to aggrandize and ridicule the State Conference.

The State Conference was an institution of dissensus, but its design, procedure, and competence did not make it a parliament. The time for deliberation and proper debate was insufficient, and the speakers mainly articulated political programmes, which made the Conference akin to a rally. The assembly had no legislative authority, no formal influence on the Provisional Government, and did not even adopt any resolutions. The assembly was not elected by popular vote. It included deputies of the four State Dumas and delegates, who were nominated by local self-government bodies, cooperative societies, soviet executive committees, non-Russian national parties and organizations, the military, banks, and multiple individual organizations, institutions, and interest groups. This corporatist system became a fusion of the imperial politics of difference, which was reflected in the ‘curial’ elections to the imperial parliament, and the extra-parliamentary self-organization, which became prominent in 1905–1917. This irregular, non-universal, and unequal representation undermined the Conference’s legitimacy. The curial system also contradicted the turbulent party politics.

The representation system sidelined non-Russian national groups and marginalized social classes, despite their predominance in the population. The State Conference was

3M.A. Savel’ev and V. Rakhmetov (eds), Protokoly Tsentral’nogo komiteta RSDRP, avgust 1917–fevral’ 1918 (Moscow, 1929), p. 18.
7soviet (council) was the bodies of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ representation, which were formed through nomination and at the time had an unclear legal status.
more inclusive than the institutions of the Tsarist regime but still was disproportionally representative of the pre-revolutionary elites. The perspectives that nations and classes were stable collective entities with common political goals pervaded the debates in and around the Conference. The composite post-imperial space, with its overlapping and situationally articulated difference, was addressed only when the bottom-up, inclusionary visions of the Russian community were put forward. But in the context of the First World War and the crisis of imperial sovereignty, many proponents of the composite approach to political community-building suggested postponing the satisfaction of particularistic demands until the Constituent Assembly or even until the end of the war. The non-recognition of particularistic issues by some delegates and the suggestions to delay their resolution by others resulted in two major conflicts, which were formulated in terms of class and nationality, respectively.

The third conflict pertained to the competing visions of a Russian political community. Most of the delegates seemed to agree that the consolidation of the Russian political community was a solution to the crisis of imperial sovereignty. Even those who viewed class as the main principle of the political organization did not dismiss the idea of the Russian nation. Moderate and radical socialists alike used the dual meaning of the word narod, ‘nation’ or the ‘common people’, when constructing the idea of a toiling people as the true nation. The debates, however, revealed two conflicting approaches to the building of a Russian political community. Non-socialists, except for non-Russian representatives, predominantly subscribed to a top-down, homogenizing organization of the Russian nation. Most socialists advocated a bottom-up, composite approach to the building of the post-imperial community, with an immediate or delayed satisfaction of particularistic interests. This opposition between coercive discipline and self-organization further undermined the anticipated consensus.

The discourse, which accompanied post-imperial community-building, was as heterogeneous, synthetic, and ambivalent as any other nationalist discourse. Historical actors appealed to inclusionary and exclusionary understandings of the Russian nation. The inclusionary, composite approaches to imperial and post-imperial community-building did not imply total assimilation since the Russian community remained internally diverse. They also stressed the importance of retaining the shared imperial space rather than preserving imperial hierarchies. The different approaches to the building of a post-imperial community also used ‘patriotism’, which took the form of a state-centred discourse, valuing the preservation of Russia, and that of an aspirational, progressive discourse, envisioning a better future for it.

The fissure on community-building involved political parties and non-partisan delegates. It put most representatives of right and liberal groups, the Constitutional

---

Democratic Party (KD) or the Party of People’s Freedom in the first place, on one side, and the so-called democracy (demokratia), which in the context of the Revolution denoted socialist parties, left-leaning organizations, or non-privileged strata in general, on the other. At the Conference, the disagreements among socialists were minor since it was mainly the members of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (SR) and the Mensheviks that were present there. The Mensheviks-Internationalists, who had their own faction, and the left-leaning SRs, who would form a separate party in the fall of 1917, nevertheless provided a more radical, class-based outlook on the Revolution and the war. The Bolsheviks, the anarchists, and other radical left groups were barely represented and did not articulate their programmes at the Conference.

There is hardly any analysis of the State Conference available in English, although it is briefly mentioned in most studies of the Revolution. Daniel Orlovsky briefly addressed the Conference as one of the Provisional Government’s attempts ‘to create legitimacy through pseudo-parliaments (or advisory bodies based upon principles of corporate representation)’ but did not discuss it in detail. William G. Rosenberg was one of the few authors who discussed the Conference in more detail but focused on the position of the KD Party.

This article used the verbatim reports and other documents of the State Conference, available at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and newspapers of different political orientation. The verbatim reports were cited based on their published version since it not only proved to be an accurate reproduction of the typed documents in the archive but also contained additional audience reactions, which had been collected from newspapers. The right newspapers Moskovskie vedomosti (Moscow) and Vechernee vremia (Petrograd), the KD Rech’ (Petrograd), the liberal Sovremennoe slovo (Petrograd), the moderate socialist Narodnoe slovo (Petrograd) and Edinstvo (Petrograd), the SR Delo naroda (Petrograd), the Menshevik Vpered! (Moscow), and the Bolshevik Sotsial-demokrat (Moscow) were used for reconstructing the broader political context. A brief review of several Russian-language periodicals published in Baku, Kyiv, Mogilev, Pskov, Tomsk, Tiflis, and Vologda demonstrated that commentary on the State Conference was rare and, if present, similar to that in the central, Petrograd and Moscow, newspapers of the respective

15B.I. Kolonitskii, “Democracy” in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution’, Slavic Review 57, (1998), pp. 95–106. When this meaning was being implied, the article used the ‘democracy’ in quotation marks.
16The Mensheviks were formerly a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and continued to claim its name. Since 1917, they were a separate political party.
17The Bolsheviks were also a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and in 1917 they became a separate party.
21M.N. Pokrovskii and Ia.A. Iakovlev (eds), Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, 12–15 avgusta 1917 goda: stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow, 1930).
22Delo naroda and Vpered! represented moderate opinions within the two parties.
political orientation. Photographs were received from the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia (GTsMSIR).

**Background and composition**

The State Conference was an attempt of the Provisional Government to build a broad public consensus in the context of the military defeats and the deep economic crisis. Major political forces, however, approached the Conference with caution or outright rejected it. The preparations for the Conference intensified the fissures in Russian politics, contributing *inter alia* to the consolidation of non-socialist groups.

The Provisional Committee of the State Duma created the Provisional Government in agreement with the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies on 2 March 1917. Two socialist Duma deputies—Nikolai Semenovich Chkheidze, a Georgian Menshevik, and Aleksandr Fedorovich Kerenskii, a member of the Labour Faction—were members of the Duma Committee and the leaders of the Soviet Executive Committee. Chkheidze focused on soviet politics and later headed the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies (VTsIK), while Kerenskii joined the Provisional Government as Minister of Justice and then as War and Navy Minister. The anticipated All-Russian Constituent Assembly was supposed to conclude the Revolution. Up to its overthrow during the Bolshevik–Left SR coup on 25–26 October 1917, the Provisional Government was never accountable to a parliamentary body. The Duma formally existed until early October, but the Provisional Government never allowed it to reassemble after the Tsar suspended it in February. The Petrograd Soviet, based on an unequal and non-universal representation of workers and soldiers, the all-Russian congresses of soviets, and the soviet executive committees did not acquire parliamentary functions, even though radical socialists called for transferring all power to the soviets.

Right-wing and liberal politicians suggested combining the State Duma and the Petrograd Soviet in a one-time assembly already in April 1917. Provisional Government returned to this idea in the aftermath of the ‘July Days’, the anti-government protests of the radical left and the riots on 3–5 July after a failed Russian offensive at the front, and a ministerial crisis, the resignation of three KD ministers in protest to the concessions to the Ukrainian Central Rada. On 8 July the Provisional Government adopted a declaration outlining its main objectives: the struggle against the ‘external enemy’, the Central Powers, and the protection of the ‘new state order’ from ‘anarchist and counter-revolutionary’ attacks. The Government reaffirmed its earlier socialist slogans of waging only defensive war and facilitating a universal peace agreement and vowed to ensure that the elections to the Constituent Assembly took place in September. It also pledged to facilitate the establishment of universally elected bodies at local and regional levels and issue further legislation on civil equality and labour rights. Although the land question was left for the Constituent Assembly to resolve, the Provisional Government reaffirmed its support for transferring the land to the ‘toilers’ and promised to implement

---

preparatory measures. The declaration also appealed to ‘all living forces of the country’ for support and sacrifices for ‘saving the country’.25

The central executive bodies of soviets and most other organizations across Russia supported the Provisional Government during the ‘July Days.’ Kerenskii became Minister-President, while the Government remained coalitional and included moderate socialists and liberals. As the problems at the front and the economic crisis continued, the Provisional Government engaged in establishing stricter discipline, reintroducing, for instance, the death penalty in the military on 12 July. The same day, the Provisional Government resolved to convene ‘an assembly of representatives of civil society organizations’, so that the ‘most drastic measures’ for ‘saving the country’ were implemented in ‘complete harmony and unity’ with the country. In practical terms, the Government intended to report on the situation and its plans in this assembly.26 Kerenskii specified that this assembly was also supposed to inform the Government about the opinion ‘of the whole country’, but he expected it to grant the Government ‘unconditional confidence’.27 On 19 July Kerenskii appointed General Lavr Georgievich Kornilov, a proponent of harsh policies, Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.28 Shortly before the convocation of the assembly, which became known as the State Conference, the Provisional Government postponed the elections to the Constituent Assembly and its convocation until November.29

The Menshevik Minister of Posts and Telegraphs Aleksei Maksimovich Nikitin headed the organizational committee of the future State Conference. In addition to the Duma deputies and the executive committees of soviets, as proposed in April, numerous organizations were invited to nominate their representatives. The final composition of the Conference was up to negotiation. Over July and August many organizations and institutions applied for representation or additional seats. Some of these requests were granted. The composition of the Conference was highly diverse and unsystematic, including such minor organizations as, for instance, the Religious Philosophical Society of Rybinsk. Some seats were given to non-Russian organizations, parties, and groups, such as the Ukrainian Central Rada, the Latvian National Democratic Party, or the Executive Committee of the Muslim Nationalities. Some seats were assigned directly to specific non-Russian nationalities, even though non-Russians were as diverse in their political views as the Russians. Some nationalities were not invited.30 The Ukrainian Central Rada declined the invitation, denouncing the Conference as unrepresentative and ‘bourgeois’ in its composition. It argued that only the All-Russian Constituent Assembly and the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly could manifest the genuine will of the people of the whole country and Ukraine, respectively, and establish a democratic federative republic.31

25Vestnik Vremennogo pravitel’stva, 6 May 1917: 1; 9 July 1917: 1.
26Vestnik Vremennogo pravitel’stva, 13 July 1917: 1–2.
27Rudneva, Demokraticheskoe soveshchanie, p.15.
28Smith, Russia in Revolution, p. 145.
29Vestnik Vremennogo pravitel’stva, 10 August 1917: 3.
Most seats were given to the four State Dumas (488), cooperative societies (313), trade unions (176), trade and industrial (that is, business) organizations and banks (150), municipal self-government bodies (147), the central executive bodies of soviets of workers’ and soldiers’, and of peasants’ deputies (129), zemstvo (rural self-government) and municipal unions (118), the Army and the Navy (117), the Peasant Union (100), and soviets of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies (100). Many other occupational, governmental, religious, and non-Russian national organizations and institutions were also invited to send their representatives. On 13 August the total number of delegates surpassed 2500. Representation was not universal, proportional, or equal. The special representation of non-Russian national groups (58), for instance, did not reflect the fact that the non-Russians were a majority in the population of the former empire. The peasants, who were the largest social group, did not get the most seats.32 Those, who were members of the invited organizations and had already voted in the universal local elections, had double representation through the organizations and through the self-government bodies. Some soviets were represented directly and through their central executive committees. The cooperative organizations, which were economic rather than political in their tasks, received the second-largest quota. The SR Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov, the Minister of Agriculture at the time, noted later that the distribution of seats, which did not correspond to the size or importance of different organizations, had only one goal—to keep the balance between ‘labour’ and ‘bourgeois’ parties to allow Kerenski to continue playing the arbiter between the left and the right.33

The composition was certainly pluralistic, and ahead of the Conference it became clear that it would become an institution of dissensus. Socialist parties and groups, labour organizations, and others who described themselves as the ‘democracy’, had multiple opportunities to exchange at numerous conferences and congresses. On 7–9 August, shortly before the State Conference, socialists came together for the Conference of Democratic Organizations on Defence. Its goal was to replace the 1915 non-socialist programme of patriotic mobilization34 with a ‘democratic’ one. At the Conference of Democratic Organizations on Defence, Chkheidze urged all potent ‘democratic’ organizations to join the war effort, while the Menshevik Boris Osipovich Bogdanov argued that a military defeat would be the defeat of the Revolution. The anticipated unification, however, did not happen. The Bolsheviks read a protest declaration against the ‘imperialist policy’ of the Provisional Government, which did not seek immediate peace, and staged a walkout.35

The disagreements among socialists continued over the next days. On 10 August the VTsIK, then predominantly moderate socialist, discussed the State Conference. Even though its Presidium expected the counterrevolutionary forces to use it for attacking the Revolution, it stressed that the ‘revolutionary democracy’ had to make its programme public there, proving that it was ‘the unified national program’. It turned out, however,

---

34See Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation*.
that only the Mensheviks of defencist orientation, like Bogdanov, supported the participation in the Conference as part of the struggle against ‘bourgeoisie’. The Bolsheviks claimed that it would become the starting point of the counterrevolution, while SR and Menshevik-Internationalist representatives called the Conference unnecessary and pointless. The VTsIK nevertheless resolved that as the leader of all ‘revolutionary democracy’ it had to participate in the State Conference and defend the ‘democracy’s’ approach to saving ‘the Motherland’ there. Some of those who feared that the Conference would support counterrevolution agreed to participate when Nikitin reaffirmed that no resolutions would be adopted there. On 11 August some 400 representatives of the ‘democracy’, including the VTsIK, cooperatives, trade unions, peasant soviets, and other organizations, agreed on a joint platform at the State Conference, directed against the ‘internationalists-Bolsheviks’ and the right of the four Dumas.

Indeed, the non-socialists of the four Dumas participated in the development of an alternative platform. The primacy belonged to the KD Party, which developed their non-socialist programme in July. By early August several prominent KDs, including Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov, Fedor Fedorovich Kokoshkin, and Andrei Ivanovich Shingarev, dismissed any possibility of consensus and expected the Provisional Government to choose between the socialist and non-socialist programmes. The KDs opposed the 8 July declaration of the Provisional Government and managed to find broader support for their own programme at the Moscow Conference of Public Figures on 8–10 August. The latter was convened on the initiative of business elites, such as Pavel Pavlovich Riabushinskii and KD politicians. It united over 400 people, including the representatives of the Provisional Committee of the State Duma, the KD Party, the centre-right Union of 17 October, zemstvos, business elites, institutions of higher education, clergy, cooperative societies, the Peasant Union, landowners, engineers, officers, lawyers, and other groups. Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko, the Chairman of the Fourth Duma, presided at the Conference of Public Figures and headed the standing Council it created.

The Moscow Conference of Public Figures adopted a resolution proposed by Miliukov. It spoke of the dangers to the Resolution, but saw them in the general disorder which threatened the ‘downfall of the Motherland’. The resolution stressed the lack of discipline in the Army and the absence of authority across the country. In both cases it blamed the new organizations, such as soviets and different committees. It also held ‘individual groups’, guided by their selfish interests under ‘the slogan of class struggle’, responsible for undermining the industry; it accused ‘the nationalities of the Russian state’ of demands which exceeded their ‘real needs’ and of secessionism at the moment of ‘grave danger’ to the ‘shared Motherland’. The resolution urged the Provisional Government to stop ‘serving utopias’ and abandon its incorrect policies: military discipline had to be reinstated; the rule of ‘collegial institutions’, that is soviets and different committees, had to end; the

36 Delo naroda, 11 August 1917: 2.
37 Rech’, 12 August 1917: 3; Sovremennoe slovo, 12 August 1917: 1.
38 Delo naroda, 15 August 1917: 2.
demands of individual nationalities had to stop threatening the country’s integrity; finally, any decisions on the state system and social reforms had to be postponed until the Constituent Assembly. The resolution branded this programme non-partisan and all-national.41

In the context of the two opposing programmes, both claiming to be all-national, there were fierce debates in the press. Vechernee vremia accused the left of narrow-minded partisanship and of inciting the population against the ‘bourgeoisie’.42 Moskovskie vedomosti disbelieved that conciliation between the two ‘camps’ was possible and dismissed the State Conference as another political rally.43 Rech’ also left no room for compromise between the two approaches to the country’s future.44 The non-socialist forces, however, were not uniform. There were splits in the Trade and Industrial Group, as Alexandr Aleksandrovich Bublikov, a railway engineer and a deputy of the Fourth Duma, rejected the harsh stance of Riabushinski and the Group’s majority.45

The Bolsheviks used the postponement of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly (which was welcomed by liberals)46 and the consolidation of non-socialists in their own political campaign.47 They argued that the ‘capitalists’ were afraid of the anticipated predominance of the left in the Constituent Assembly and convened the State Conference to ‘bury’ it.48 They also accused the SRs and the Mensheviks of supporting the Conference, which they called a counterrevolutionary ‘plot against the Revolution, against the people’.49 The Bolsheviks left no room for compromise and called for struggle against the ‘counterrevolution headed by the Provisional Government’.50

Many local soviets in Moscow and elsewhere supported the boycott of the Conference.51 Forty-one trade unions organized a strike of some 400,000 workers on the day of the Conference’s opening, despite the fact that the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies voted against it.52 Some workers were motivated by the worsening economic conditions, such as unemployment due to the shortages of fuel and raw materials. Others responded to the anti-soviet and anti-committee programme of the Moscow Conference of Public Figures.53 Some organizations voiced a nationalist critique of the State Conference, claiming that the ‘bourgeoisie’ was ‘bogged down in its narrow class interests’ and would not save the country from the crisis of war and imperialism.54 The Mensheviks accused the Bolsheviks of splitting revolutionary democracy with the strike.55 Some Bolsheviks nevertheless attended the Conference, where they hoped to deliver a protest declaration, which they ultimately did not do.56

41 Rech’, 12 August 1917: 3.
42 Vechernee vremia, 12 August 1917: 1.
43 Moskovskie vedomosti, 12 August 1917: 1.
44 Rech’, 10 August 1917: 1; 12 August 1917: 1, 3.
45 Delo naroda, 12 August 1917: 3.
46 Sovremennoe slovo, 11 August 1917: 1.
47 Sotsial-demokrat, 9 August 1917: 1; 10 August 1917: 1.
49 Sotsial-demokrat, 11 August 1917: 3.
50 Sotsial-demokrat, 12 August 1917: 1.
51 Rech’, 12 August 1917: 3; Sovremennoe slovo, 12 August 1917: 1.
52 Delo naroda, 12 August 1917: 3; 13 August 1917: 1; Narodnoe slovo, 13 August 1917: 2; Sotsial-demokrat, 11 August 1917: 1; Vechernee vremia, 12 August 1917: 2.
53 Delo naroda, 15 August 1917: 2.
54 Smith, Russia in Revolution, p. 138.
55 Vpered!, 13 August 1917: 2.
The press showed little enthusiasm about the State Conference. Even those who hoped that it could unite ‘all living forces of the country’ behind a coalitional government of defence acknowledged that it would play a negative role if no agreement was reached.57 A liberal commentator argued that even if the latter were the case, the Conference would provide the floor to those groups which remained voiceless, revealing to the Provisional Government ‘genuine Russia’ outside of the confines of parties and soviets.58

Class, nationality, and other differences

The debates continued at the State Conference itself. Class and nationality categories proved especially strong when the difference was articulated, giving the fissures a social dimension. The alleged representatives of the respective class and nationality groups exchanged accusations and contributed to the fissures, making the slogans of unity bare.

In the context of the anticipated riots, which did not happen,59 the State Conference opened in the Bolshoi Theatre under tight security.60 The auditorium was decorated with red cloth, the colour of the Revolution. The participants were seated in the stalls, the circles, and on the stage, behind the presidium of Kerenskii and other Members of the Provisional Government. The right side of the stalls was given to the State Dumas; the representatives of the central executive committees of soviets and trade unions were seated on the left. On the stage, the front row behind the presidium featured the famous radical thinkers and revolutionaries of the older generation, including Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin and Ekaterina Konstantinovna Breshko-Breshkovskia. The representatives of non-Russian nationalities were also seated on the stage but in the rear (Figure 1). Russian and foreign press, as well as the representatives of the Allied governments, were also present.61

In his opening speech Kerenskii highlighted the economic crisis, political fragmentation, and military defeats as the dangers to the Russian state. He greeted the ‘citizens of the Russian [rossiiskogo] state’, but mainly used the more ‘ethnicized’ version of the term Russian (russkii). Although both terms were used interchangeably in 1917, the nation was singular to Kerenskii. He called for creating ‘a free nation from the dispersed masses’, which in the context of the war demanded self-sacrifice, ‘love for the Motherland’, and giving up particularistic, that is, ‘personal, group, and class interests’. For Kerenskii, the non-Russian groups were not separate communities but ‘the nationalities of the Russian [russkogo] state’, and he condemned secessionism and partisanship. Kerenskii stressed the need for a strong ‘unifying’ authority for preventing the disintegration of the state and a civil war. Lambasting ‘anarchy’ and ‘Bolshevism’, which eroded the Army, he defended the re-established death penalty. At the same time, Kerenskii reaffirmed that ‘salvation’ would only come with the Constituent Assembly.62

57 Edinstvo, 12 August 1917: 1; Sovremennoe slovo, 10 August 1917: 1.
58 Sovremennoe slovo, 13 August 1917: 1.
59 Rech’, 13 August 1917: 3.
60 Rech’, 13 August 1917: 1.
Nationalism and etatism were highlighted in most speeches, delivered by more than 80 delegates. Most of them argued that the unity of all classes, nationalities, and other groups and solid statehood was necessary for securing group aspirations and freedom. Most also agreed that in the context of the war, private, group, and local interests had to be subordinate to the interests of the state and the whole people.63 Non-socialists

Figure 1. The State Conference in Moscow, 12–15 August 1917. GTsMSIR 6095/188.

Figure 2. Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov (left) and Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin (right) at the State Conference in Moscow, 12–15 August 1917. GTsMSIR 3013/19.

Nationalism and etatism were highlighted in most speeches, delivered by more than 80 delegates. Most of them argued that the unity of all classes, nationalities, and other groups and solid statehood was necessary for securing group aspirations and freedom. Most also agreed that in the context of the war, private, group, and local interests had to be subordinate to the interests of the state and the whole people.63 Non-socialists

63Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 17, 49, 59–60, 94, 97.
individual socialists denounced ‘internationalism’, with one delegate calling it ‘the non-love for the Motherland’. Kropotkin (Figure 2) urged to ‘break with Zimmerwald’, the anti-war socialist movement, and to protect the Motherland and the Revolution. In their joint declaration, delivered by Chkheidze on 14 August, revolutionary organizations pledged to unite for saving the country and the revolution and reaffirmed the defencist approach to the war. Kerenskii’s opening speech did not evoke enthusiasm among the left or the liberals and the right. Rech mentioned its ‘unclear tones’ and argued that it could not change the position of the different groups. Another newspaper concluded that since Kerenskii did not promise to revoke the death penalty and did not mention the soviets, his speech did not appeal to the left. At the same time, the lack of a decision on the abolition of the elected committees and the appointed commissars in the Army and the retention of the SRs Chernov and Nikolai Dmitrievich Avksent’ev, whom the right did not trust, as members of the Provisional Government did not bring confidence from the right. Even Narodnoe slovo of the most moderate Labour People’s Socialist Party, which claimed that Kerenskii spoke as ‘the true popular leader’, acknowledged that his speech had a few disputable lines. Reporting on the first day of the Conference, the SR Delo naroda dismissed the frequently mentioned notion of the ‘living forces’, suggesting that it could not unite generals, soldiers, workers, peasants, businessmen, and industrialists.

The meetings of the different groups on 13 August, a day specifically reserved for this, reaffirmed the scepticism about the understanding between the ‘bourgeois circles’ and the ‘revolutionary democracy’. The plenary debates, which started on 14 August and prolonged to 15 August due to a large number of speakers, unmasked sharp disagreements on how the responsibilities and sacrifices were to be allocated. Many speakers articulated differences and divergence of interests in terms of class and nationality, while some also appealed to other dimensions of diversity. The speeches were occasionally interrupted by shouts of disapproval and laughter, while the applause was often confined to the different sides of the auditorium. One commentator claimed that these reactions were more important than the speeches since they revealed the sharp divide.

The main opposition between the ‘revolutionary democracy’ and the ‘bourgeoisie’ or the ‘propertied elements’ (tsenzye elementy) was generally understood in terms of class. The suggestions of Sergei Nikolaevich Prokopovich, the non-partisan Minister of Trade and Industry, to the capitalists to ‘give up excessive profits’ and to the workers to ‘give up unnecessary rest’ did not lead to a compromise.

Several non-socialists argued that the class selfishness of workers and peasants was the main reason for the economic crisis and anarchy. Nikolai Ivanovich Astrov, a KD municipal activist, who spoke on behalf of the non-socialist minority among the

---

64Pokrovskii and lakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 68–70.
65Pokrovskii and lakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 229.
66Pokrovskii and lakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 77–8.
68Vechernee vremia, 14 August 1917: 1.
69Narodnoe slovo, 13 August 1917: 1.
70Delo naroda, 15 August 1917: 2.
72Pokrovskii and lakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 32.
representatives of self-government bodies, pointed to the unregulated increase in wages and the falling productivity as the consequences of the ‘unaccountable’ forces’ actions, implying soviets and other workers’ organizations.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 142–3.} Nikolai Nikolaevich Kutler, a KD speaker for the Trade and Industrial Group, also stressed that the unregulated increase in wages was a major reason for the crisis and listed other concessions to the workers, such as the shortening of the working day, as part of the problem.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 258.} Riabushinskii argued that the working class started to live much better.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 253.}

Criticizing the class-based approach to society, some non-socialists decried the exclusion of those who were branded as ‘bourgeois’ from management in local self-government, transport, and industry despite their qualification.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 160.} One liberal commentator claimed that it was the false idea that the Revolution was done by the proletariat that resulted in the hatred for the ‘bourgeoisie’, without even understanding what it was and putting all non-manual labourers and those who could speak in a literary manner into this category.\footnote{Rech’, 17 August 1917: 2.}

At the same time, many seemed to have internalized the socialists’ class discourse and even their view of social development. Kutler, for instance, spoke of the ‘trade and industrial class’ with identifiable interests, such as the opposition to excessive taxation. The declaration of the deputies of the Fourth Duma, which was not supported by its left members, adjured the Government to prevent ‘class struggle’.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 164, 259.} A representative of a regional trade and industrial group reminded the Conference that Russia had only recently entered the capitalist stage of development and, since it was not possible to leap over stages, it needed capital. Relying on a similar Marxist understanding of history, the economist Ivan Khristoforovich Ozerov argued that Russia was not developed enough for socialism and opposed immediate social reforms, which was met with laughter on the left.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 248–9, 271.}

The right socialist Grigorii Alekseevich Aleksinskii, who spoke on behalf of the Second Duma deputies, also maintained that Russia was too backward for socialism and in need of being saved from the ‘dream’ of it. His conclusion was that the toiling and propertied classes needed to make mutual concessions. Such a position was explicated by Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov, one of the most influential early Marxist authors in Russia and at the time also a right socialist. He stressed that Russia was going through a capitalist revolution, denouncing radical socialists’ slogan of ‘all power to the soviets’, but asserted that this stage demanded social reforms. At the same time, he maintained that such a revolution was not possible without the ‘bourgeoisie’ since there could be no capitalism without ‘capitalists’. His solution was also an agreement between different classes.\footnote{Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, 
Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 57, 236–8.}

Such a view, however, was not common for the socialists. Iraklii Georgievich Tsereteli, a prominent Georgian Menshevik, asserted that the propertied elements could count on participating in ruling Russia only in coalition with the left and calling for their taxation,
did not view their potential opposition to the Government as a major problem. Delo naroda rejected the understanding of the Revolution as bourgeois, claiming that it was carried out by workers and soldiers, equating the latter to peasants. Vadim Viktorovich Rudnev, the SR Mayor of Moscow, nevertheless supported mutual concessions, including ‘self-limitation’ of the toiling classes, but contended that the people had to be reassured that no new ‘chains’ were being prepared for them.

Vasiliy Gavrilovich Chirkin, who spoke on behalf of trade unions, reminded that class struggle was central for history and accused some entrepreneurs of sabotage. The Menshevik Viktor Petrovich Grinevich, another representative of trade unions, defended the right of the ‘working class’ to struggle for the redistribution of national wealth, arguing that it did not contradict the country’s interests. Speaking of low productivity, he blamed the industrialists who made excessive wartime profits but did not use them for developing production. David Borisovich Riazanov, one of the few Bolsheviks at the Conference, who spoke on behalf of ‘workers-internationalists’, condemned the notion of the workers’ greed and, together with Grinevich, explained low productivity with the increase in unskilled labour due to the war.

Similar albeit shorter debates concerned the land question. Non-socialist speakers rejected immediate agrarian reforms, but socialists insisted on the provisional resolution of the land question ahead of the Constituent Assembly. Georgii Dmitrievich Kuchin (Oranskii), the Menshevik delegate of Army and front committees, stressed the connection of the soldiers, most of them of peasant background, to politics, cautioning against any cutbacks in the land reform. Grigorii Evseevich Zinov’ev, one of the Bolshevik leaders, who was then in hiding, reproached the position of moderate socialists in a Bolshevik newspaper, claiming that their declaration at the Conference betrayed the slogan of transferring the land to the peasants.

Class reconciliation did not happen. Speaking after Breshko-Breshkovskaia, who went as far as calling ‘capitalists and big and small traders’ the ‘internal enemies of Russia’, Bublikov dismissed class struggle as a Western phenomenon and called for a true coalition for the benefit of the Motherland. He and Tsereteli even shook hands, which became a highlight of the Conference. Yet mutual accusation continued, while political commentators largely remained sceptical. Riazanov claimed that he would not believe in the concessions from the side of the trade and industrial class ‘even if citizen Ribushinskii kissed com[rade] Tsereteli’. While Plehanov’s Edinstvo celebrated the handshake, Moskovskie vedomosti warned its readers that they should not be deceived by this purely decorative gesture, as hatred continued to reign behind the closed doors. Narodnoe slovo also remained sceptical, claiming that other non-socialists did not share Bublikov’s position.

81 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 126–7.
82 Delo naroda, 18 August 1917: 1.
83 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p.139.
85 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 168, 216, 221, 273.
86 Zinov’ev, God Revoliutsii, pp. 111–12.
87 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 228.
88 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 269.
89 Socialists used the term ‘citizen’ ironically to distinguish their opponents from ‘comrades.’
90 Edinstvo, 17 August 1917: 1; Moskovskie vedomosti, 17 August 1917: 1; Narodnoe slovo, 17 August 1917: 1.
Difference was also articulated in terms of nationality. In his opening speech, Kerenskii denounced the lack of support from ‘some peoples’ for the Russian people, claiming that the latter fought against autocracy for everybody’s rights. Acknowledging that the ‘alien [inordonye]’ nationalities projected their mistrust and hatred of the old regime onto the Russian people, he nevertheless reaffirmed the claim of the Provisional Government to Russia’s territory and future and promised to keep the demands of the non-Russians in check. Kerenskii referred to the possible secession of Finland as a threat to the Russian state, vowing to prevent it with the authority of ‘the whole people, the whole nation’. Speaking about the Ukrainians, Kerenskii implied the possibility of their betrayal of Russia, evoking the ‘thirty pieces of silver’ from the Bible.91

Kerenskii’s accusation against the Finns and suspicion towards the Ukrainians resembled the discourse of the KDs. *Rech*’ saw a direct connection between the decision of the Finnish Social Democrats to reconvene the Parliament and the German offensive on Riga. The newspaper also mentioned using the ‘Finnish’ methods in the Ukrainian case, pointing to the alleged ‘Germanophiles’ in the Ukrainian Central Rada.92 *Delo naroda* also bemoaned the split between the Finnish Social Democrats and the Russian Revolution.93 The Mensheviks, however, expressed their opposition to a violent resolution of the Finnish and Ukrainian questions on 13 August.94 National groups were furious with Kerenskii’s words about the ‘thirty pieces of silver’,95 and the relations between the Provisional Government and the Central Rada were strained even further.96

The declaration, which was delivered by Chkheidze on 14 August on behalf of the central executive committees of soviets, cooperatives, provision committees, soldiers’ organizations, and several other organizations and supported by other left-leaning groups during the Conference, also opposed secessionism. Although it reaffirmed most of the autonomist slogans, it left the final resolution of the nationality question to the Constituent Assembly. At the same time, it called for some immediate steps, such as making all languages legally equal, allowing their use in education, self-government, and official communication, and creating a ‘Council on National Affairs’ under the Provisional Government. Such an institution, which would include representatives of all Russia’s nationalities, was supposed to outline the forms of resolving the nationality question ahead of the Constituent Assembly.97

Most non-Russian speakers also did not advocate secession and supported the continued building of a composite political community, explicitly supporting the declaration of the ‘democracy’, delivered by Chkheidze, and agreeing to postpone the full implementation of the right to national self-determination until the Constituent Assembly.98 A joint declaration of twelve national socialist parties and groups largely repeated the declaration of the ‘democracy’. It stressed that continuing the Revolution was the only possible way for the peoples of Russia to achieve autonomous national life but lamented that too little was done for the unification of the ‘democracies’ of different nationalities.

---

91Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, *Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie*, pp. 11–12.
93*Delo naroda*, 15 August 1917: 1.
95*Vechernee vremia*, 14 August 1917: 1.
97Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, *Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie*, pp. 84–85.
Reminding the Provisional Government that Russia was ‘a state of nationalities, a colourful mosaic of diverse national regions’, it called for genuine all-national, that is, all-Russian, mobilization instead of accusations and suspicions. Stressing the importance of the non-Russians, the declaration also reminded the Government that the ‘non-Russian nationalities’ comprised ‘a half of the population of the Russian state’.99

Ants Piip, a lawyer and a prominent Estonian politician, called Kerenskii’s stance on non-Russian nationalities ‘not kind’ and ‘unjust’. Piip argued that the struggle for ethno-national rights was not destructive but was in fact ‘the only correct principle of state-building’. He urged the Government to start resolving the nationality question and restructuring the state on federative principles ahead of the Constituent Assembly, making autonomous regions like Estonia ‘equal members of the tight-knit family of the Russian [rossiiskikh] peoples’. Apart from using non-Russian languages, for Piip, this also meant extending the competence of regional bodies, like the Estonian Land Council, and forming ethno-national detachments in the Army. He stressed that through the participation in the country’s war effort, the revolutionary peoples of Russia earned the right to be treated as equals by the Russian ‘democracy’. Iosif Konstantinovich Machavariani of the Georgian liberal National Democratic Party rejected Kerenskii’s paternalistic claim that the Russian people were the liberator of other nationalities, stressing that other nationalities supported it in its struggle. One non-Russian delegate suggested establishing a Ministry of National Affairs.100

Mykolas Januškevičius (Nikolai Osipovich Ianushkevich), a member of the Fourth Duma, who represented the Lithuanian nationality at the Conference, also supported the declaration of the ‘democracy’, but left the matter of secession open. Januškevičius defended the right of the Lithuanian people to resolve their destiny at the ‘Constituent Assembly of Lithuania’ and to have its own representatives at the future world peace congress.101

Russian non-socialist deputies welcomed and amplified Kerenskii’s aggressive stance towards non-Russian nationalities. The KD Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov read the declaration of the First Duma, which approved of ‘the firm and decisive statement of the Minister-President on the issue of separatist manifestations in the state’. Although the declaration did not oppose the establishment of autonomies by the Constituent Assembly, it stressed that ‘in the current tragic moment the attempts to dismember our Fatherland should be condemned as conscious or unconscious assistance to the enemy’.102 General Aleksei Maksimovich Kaledin, who spoke on behalf of the Council of the Union of Cossack Hosts, demanded that all separatism be stopped. Vasilii Vital’evich Shul’gin, a right member of several Dumas and of the Provisional Committee of the State Duma, criticized the Government’s permissive policy towards Ukraine and rejected the very idea of Ukrainian autonomy. He also opposed the suggestions of an ethno-national reorganization of the Russian Army. The declaration of the Fourth Duma repeated the KD programme, insisting that the aspirations of nationalities should not threaten ‘the state unity of Russia’, although it did not oppose national cultural self-determination.103

---

99Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 197–8.
101Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 193.
102Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 49.
103Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 76, 110–111, 165.
Several delegates articulated differences in terms of other categories. Ivan Stepanovich Prokhanov, the leader of the All-Russian Union of Evangelical Christians, called for religious renewal, a reform of the state Orthodox Church, and the separation of church and state. Alimardan-bek Alekper ogly Topchibashev, a member of the First Duma, spoke on behalf of the Muslims from the perspective of the right to national self-determination, supporting the postponement of its implementation until the Constituent Assembly. Poliksenia Nestorovna Shishkina-Iavein, a prominent suffragist and one of the few female delegates at the Conference, declared on behalf of the All-Russian League of Women’s Equality that the organized women postponed their demands until the Constituent Assembly. The socialist Cossack Afanasii Grigor’evich Nagaev engaged in polemics with Kaledin and other officers on the position of the Cossackdom. Claiming that the ‘toiling’ Cossacks were not represented by the Council of the Union of Cossack Hosts, ‘a social estate-based caste organization’, Nagaev claimed that the ‘toiling’ Cossacks were against their separation from the rest of the Russian people.  

Organization of a post-imperial community

Even though the notion of Russian all-national unity predominated during the debates, thanks to the absence of radical socialists from the Conference, non-socialists and moderate socialists came up with opposite takes on the organization of the Russian nation and also disagreed about the relations between the country and the Revolution.

Rodzianko maintained that the driving idea of the Revolution was ensuring victory against Germany and creating a powerful Russia. Vasilii Alekseevich Maklakov, a KD deputy of the Fourth Duma, stressed that it was Russia and not the Revolution which needed to be saved. Socialists, however, disagreed. Tsereteli contended that only the organized popular masses, only the Revolution could save Russia since it was the ‘soul’ of the country. Delo naroda denounced the opposition of the country and the Revolution, put forward by the ‘bourgeoisie’, as counterrevolution.

Non-socialists favoured a top-down approach to the organization of the Army and the country in general. Kornilov, who was extremely popular among non-socialists (Figure 3), criticized the revolutionary reforms in the Army and called for order in the rear. Kaledin defended discipline and opposed revolutionary organizations in the Army and in the rear. Calling for the Government’s independence from party and class organizations, like many other non-socialists, he went as far as proposing to abolish all soviets and committees, with the exception of economic bodies in the Army. Kaledin also proposed to cut back soldiers’ rights and grant full authority to command, and to use labour conscription as a solution to the economic crisis. His speech was met with applause from the right and shouts from the left. Another non-socialist speaker blamed the numerous committees and soviets for the economic chaos and the lack of justice. Mikhail Vasil’evich Alekseev, a general, took a more compromising position by suggesting that the revolutionary organizations were to be abandoned only for some time, which evoked laughter and shouts on the left.

104Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 70–72, 98, 185–7, 288–91.
106Delo naroda, 16 August 1917: 1.
Alekseev nevertheless supported the death penalty, which prompted somebody to shout ‘executioner’. Shul’gin also insisted that elected bodies could not be used during wartime. S. I. Skarzhinskii of the All-Russian Union of the Recipients of the Order of Saint George called for dictatorship, claiming that Russia needed strong leadership by a ‘supreme leader’ at the front and in the rear.\textsuperscript{107}

Not all non-socialists, however, advocated dictatorship. Aleksandr Ivanovich Guchkov, the Chairman of the Third Duma and the first War and Navy Minister of the Provisional Government, bemoaned the non-participation of the State Duma in ruling Russia, even though he lambasted the dependency of the Government on ‘revolutionary democracy’. The speakers of the Trade and Industrial Group combined the rejection of ‘self-proclaimed organizations’ with a free-market approach. Riabushinskii claimed that Russia was ruled by ‘an unrealizable dream, ignorance, and demagogy’,

\textsuperscript{107}Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, \textit{Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie}, pp. 61–5, 73, 75–6, 108–9, 150–151, 161–3, 205–6.
but at the same time protested against a state grain monopoly. Kutler opposed state distribution of fuel, raw materials, and provisions, as well as state control over industry, and suggested revising the fixed prices on bread. He also opposed labour conscription and excessive taxation. At the same time, Kutler was against the meddling of workers and employees with management and supported state regulation of wages.  

Socialists defended a bottom-up approach to state-building and nation-building. The declaration, which was delivered by Chkheidze and backed by the organizations, which Kaledin sought to abolish (Figure 4), argued that the soviets did not seek state authority but organized, disciplined, and directed the masses. It asserted that the crisis in the army was a legacy of the old regime and that only self-organization could save the country, calling the attempts to destroy revolutionary organizations treason against the Revolution and the Motherland. The declaration urged the Provisional Government to suppress anarchy and counterrevolution.

Tsereteli explicated this approach further in his speech. He argued that since the people were not fully organized and did not have a body that unequivocally manifested the popular opinion, the Constituent Assembly, Russia needed the existing network of organizations, uniting the people, and called the proposals to destroy them criminally. He asserted that the Government could only be strong if it relied on the ‘living forces’, among which the ‘organized democracy’ was the main one. Tsereteli concluded that the soviets, which were the ‘organized democracy’, were the bodies of political organization of classes and had to be preserved until the results of the

---

Figure 4. The Group of the Petrograd Soviet at the State Conference in Moscow, August 12–15, 1917. Nikolai Semenovich Chkheidze is in the middle. GTsMSIR 11880/210.

---

109 Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 77–9.
Revolution were secured. Several delegates from workers’ organizations reaffirmed such a position, claiming that their organizations also helped manage production. The proponents of bottom-up self-organization through soviets and committees also supported increased state control, such as fixed prices for some goods and the establishment of state monopolies.110

Miliukov engaged in direct polemics with Tsereteli, asserting that the Revolution was victorious thanks to the State Duma, evoking laughter on the left and applause on the right. He then claimed that ‘democratic’ organizations could not save the Revolution from their own mistakes and rejected the idea that the general will of the people was represented in the random partisan organizations. Miliukov explained that the disorganized masses submitted to these organizations due to the allure of their promises. Attempting to reclaim the idea of democracy from the left, he argued that these organizations did not have a monopoly on democracy since Russia did not consist solely of socialists.111

In his second speech, Tsereteli added that the left intended to reinstate discipline in the military through democratic organizations. Several delegates from the Army and the Navy defended this approach. Kuchin insisted that the committees helped normalize the relations between soldiers and officers. Another delegate argued that the committees fought Bolshevism in the Army, preserving it from disintegration. The delegates of the front delivered a declaration, in which they insisted that the bodies of soldiers’ self-organization were indispensable for making the Army effective and called for cooperation between the committees, the command, and the commissars of the Provisional Government. The declaration also admitted that sometimes coercion was necessary.112 The joint declaration of the ‘democracy’ also did not insist on the abolition of death penalty, despite the demands of the Left SRs and the Mensheviks-Internationalists.113

Proponents and opponents of soviets and committees promoted other forms of bottom-up self-organization. Rudnev spoke of the newly elected local self-government bodies, which united all classes, parties, and nationalities, as the foundation for democracy (narodopravstvo). Rudnev did not see any contradictions between self-government bodies and soviets since the latter allegedly recognized the former’s authority. The majority of municipal representatives agreed that soviets, cooperatives, and trade unions played a key role in state-building. At the same time, they opposed the institution of commissars of the Provisional Government since Russia was too expansive and diverse to be ruled from the centre. A large group of zemstvo representatives supported the soviets but viewed the reformed zemstvo self-government as the foundation of new Russia. Aleksandr Moiseevich Berkengeim, who spoke on behalf of cooperatives, called zemstvo the bearer of the public spirit before the Revolution but did not oppose the soviets. The declaration of the Fourth Duma supported self-government bodies and demanded that they replace all self-proclaimed organizations.114

Most of the non-Russian delegates advocated a federative approach to state-building, in which national self-determination was to become the main principle and which would involve the autonomy of nationalities and regions. Topchibashev claimed that the

110Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 119, 121–3, 275, 277, 293.
111Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 128–9.
113Delo naroda, 15 August 1917: 2.
114Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 138–40, 144–5, 163–7, 297.
Muslims would demand a ‘federative system for the peripheries’ at the Constituent Assembly, while Piip called for the immediate implementation of federative principles. Kropotkin also spoke in favour of decentralization and a federative republic but rejected nationality as its organizing principle. Rech rejected federalism as understood by the ‘revolutionary democracy’, arguing that it would ‘turn Russia into a union of states rather than a federation.

In his closing speech, Kerenskii argued that despite the lack of any official results, the Conference was important since the ‘citizens of the Russian [rossiiskii] state of all classes, parties, and nationalities gathered and openly expressed to each other’ their opinions on what the state needed, while the Provisional Government ‘got the opportunity to kind of take a snapshot of the country’s political mood’.117

Most of the commentators, however, were sceptical about the results of the Conference. The liberal press claimed that neither the ‘miracle of patriotic unification’ nor the catastrophic explosion happened. It acknowledged the Conference as a major organizing event for the two camps, socialist and non-socialist, but concluded that no common language was possible. One liberal commentator compared the conference to a court since its participants did not try to work out a common programme but instead performed the role of prosecutors. He also claimed that it helped define the core disagreement on the matter of the inclusiveness of the Russian Revolution, if it was for the whole population or only for the working masses, and accused the left of dividing the country and bringing about the possibility of a civil war.118 The right press celebrated the patriotism of the non-socialists and their alleged readiness for an agreement; the left press declared a victory of the ‘democracy’ and accused the right of an uncompromising position.119

Theatre metaphors were abundant: Rech called the clashes between soldiers and generals, and between the Fourth Duma and the ‘revolutionary democracy’ a ‘political drama on stage’. Moskovskie vedomosti spoke of a ‘pompous theatrical show’.120 The Bolshevik Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin later called the Conference a ‘historical comedy of the first rank’ and stressed its incapacity to resolve the issue of nation-building. ‘The Conference spoke on behalf of the “nation.” In fact, the nation’s foundation, the proletariat and the poorest peasants, were excluded from it.’121

Conclusion

The Provisional Government’s attempt to resolve the crisis of post-imperial sovereignty by building a broad popular consensus at the State Conference in Moscow, ahead of the Constituent Assembly, failed. Major parties and groups either approached the Conference with caution or rejected it. Political divisions intensified already during the preparation for the State Conference. At the Conference itself enmity and mutual accusations, formulated in terms of class and nationality, challenged the idea of all-national mobilization, although most participants called for unity. The potential for

---

115Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, pp. 187, 189, 231–2.
117Pokrovskii and Iakovlev, Gosudarstvennoe soveshchanie, p. 301.
118Rech, 16 August 1917: 1; 17 August 1917: 2; Sovremennoe slovo, 16 August 1917: 1; 17 August 1917: 1.
119Delo naroda, 17 August 1917: 1; Moskovskie vedomosti, 17 August 1917: 1; Narodnoe slovo, 17 August 1917: 1.
120Moskovskie vedomosti, 15 August 1917: 1; Rech, 15 August 1917: 2.
121Bukharin, Ot krusheniia tsarizma, pp. 95–6.
compromise was further reduced by the opposite approaches to the building of a post-imperial community, through top-down coercion or through bottom-up self-organization.

Following the Conference, the Bolshevik press denounced Kerenskii as a dictator and suggested that after the bourgeoisie was done with him, it would install Kornilov as a dictator. According to *Sotsial-demokrat*, Kornilov’s victory would destroy the soviets, and called the proletariat to repel the attack and fight for its own dictatorship, one which would give bread to the hungry transfer the land to the peasants, and end the war.122 Later the same month the Kornilov Affair indeed took place. Kerenskii turned to the soviets for support. The Bolsheviks and other radical socialists benefited from the situation the most, as they got a major boost to their popularity.123 Two further attempts to build a non-radical consensus through parliamentarism, the All-Russian Democratic Conference in September and the Provisional Council of the Russian Republic in October, also failed,124 and the Bolshevik–Left SR coup on 25–26 October 1917 overthrew the Provisional Government. The much-feared Civil War also gained momentum.

**Funding**

The research for this article was done as part of the project ‘ENTPAR: Entangled Parliamentarisms: Constitutional Practices in Russia, Ukraine, China and Mongolia, 1905–2005’, which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 755504).

**Notes on contributor**


**ORCID**

*Ivan Sablin* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6706-4223

---

122 *Sotsial-demokrat*, 17 August 1917: 1.