

# The Government's Policy on the National Question

*January 31, 1919*

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A year ago, and even before the October Revolution, Russia, as a state, presented a picture of disintegration. Side by side with the old "boundless Russian Empire" there were a whole series of new small "states" all pulling in different directions—such was the picture.

The October Revolution and the Brest Peace deepened and furthered the process of disintegration. People no longer spoke of Russia, but of Great Russia. The bourgeois governments formed in the border regions were imbued with hostility towards the socialist Soviet Government in the centre and declared war on it.

Parallel with this, there was undoubtedly a very strong urge on the part of the workers' and peasants' Soviets in the border regions for unity with the centre. But this urge was swamped, and later suppressed, by the counter-trend of the foreign imperialists who had begun to interfere in our internal affairs.

The Austro-German imperialists took the lead in this and skilfully exploited the disintegration of the old Russia, plentifully supplying the border governments with all they needed for their fight against the centre, occupying the border regions in certain parts, and generally contributing to the complete disintegration of Russia. The Entente imperialists had no wish to lag behind the Austro-Germans and adopted a similar course.

The enemies of the Bolshevik Party of course (of course!) laid the blame for the disintegration on the Soviet Government. But it will be easily understood that the Soviet Government could not, and had no wish to, counteract the inevitable process of temporary disintegration. The Soviet Government realized that the unity of Russia, forcibly maintained with imperialist bayonets, was bound to break down with the downfall of Russian imperialism. The Soviet Government could not maintain unity with the methods used by Russian imperialism without being false to its own nature. The Soviet Government was aware that not any sort of unity was needed for socialism, but only fraternal unity, and that such unity could come only in the shape of a voluntary union of the labouring classes of the nationalities of Russia, or not at all....

The rout of Austro-German imperialism changed the whole picture. On the one hand, there developed in the border regions which had experienced the horrors of occupation a powerful gravitation towards the Russian proletariat and its forms of state structure which overwhelmed the separatist efforts of the border governments. On the other, there was no longer that foreign armed force (Austro-German imperialism) which had prevented the labouring masses of the occupied regions from manifesting their own political complexion. The mighty revolutionary upsurge which followed in the occupied regions, and the formation of a number of worker and peasant national republics, left no doubt regarding the political aspirations of the occupied regions. To the requests for recognition made by the Soviet national governments, the Soviet Government of Russia replied by unreservedly recognizing the full independence of the newly-formed Soviet republics. In acting thus the Soviet

Government was adhering to its old and tried policy, which rejects all coercion against nationalities and demands full freedom of development for their labouring masses. The Soviet Government realized that only on a basis of mutual confidence could mutual understanding arise, and that only on a basis of mutual understanding could a firm and indestructible union of the peoples be built.

Again the enemies of the Soviet Government did not fail to accuse it of making "another attempt" to dismember Russia. The more reactionary of them, realizing how powerfully the border regions were gravitating to the centre, proclaimed a "new" slogan: re-establishment of "Greater Russia"—by fire and sword, by the overthrow of the Soviet Government, of course. The Krasnovs and Denikins, the Kolchaks and Chaikovskys, who only yesterday had been trying to break Russia up into a number of separate counter-revolutionary hotbeds, now suddenly conceived the "idea" of an "all-Russian state." The agents of British and French capital, whose political instinct cannot be denied, and who only yesterday were gambling on the disintegration of Russia, now changed their play so abruptly that they formed not one, but two "all-Russian" governments simultaneously (in Siberia and in the South). All this speaks convincingly of the irrepressible gravitation of the border regions to the centre, which the home and foreign counter-revolutionaries are now trying to exploit.

It need scarcely be said that, after the year and a half of revolutionary work of the labouring masses of the nationalities of Russia, the counter-revolutionary appetites of the would-be restorers of the "old Russia" (together with the old regime, of course) are doomed to disappointment. But the more utopian the plans of our counter-revolutionaries, the more realistic is seen to be the Soviet Government's policy, which is entirely based upon the mutual and fraternal confidence of the peoples of Russia. What is more, in the present state of international affairs, this policy is the only realistic and the only revolutionary one.

This is eloquently attested, for example, by the recent declaration of the Congress of Soviets of the Byelorussian Republic <sup>1</sup> establishing a federal connection with the Russian Soviet Republic. The fact is that the Byelorussian Soviet Republic, whose independence was recently recognized, has now, at its Congress of Soviets, voluntarily proclaimed its union with the Russian Republic. In its declaration of February 3, the Byelorussian Congress of Soviets affirms that "only a free and voluntary union of the working people of all the now independent Soviet Republics can ensure the triumph of the workers and peasants in their struggle against the capitalist world."

"A voluntary union of the working people of all the independent Soviet Republics." . . . This is precisely the course the Soviet Government has consistently advocated for uniting the peoples, and which is now yielding its beneficent fruits.

The Byelorussian Congress of Soviets decided, furthermore, to unite with the Lithuanian Republic, and recognized the necessity for a federal tie between the two republics and the Russian Soviet Republic. Telegraphic dispatches state that the Soviet Government of Lithuania holds the same view, and, it appears, a conference of the Lithuanian Communist Party, the most influential of all the Lithuanian parties, approves the attitude of the Soviet Government of Lithuania. There is every reason to hope that the Congress of Soviets of Lithuania <sup>2</sup> now being convened will follow the same course.

This is one more confirmation of the correctness of the Soviet Government's policy on the national question.

Thus, from the breakdown of the old imperialist unity, through independent Soviet republics, the peoples of Russia are coming to a new, voluntary and fraternal unity.

This path is unquestionably not of the easiest, but it is the only one that leads to a firm and indestructible socialist union of the labouring masses of the nationalities of Russia.

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1. The First Byelorussian Congress of Soviets, which opened on February 2, 1919, in Minsk and was attended by 230 delegates, proclaimed Byelorussia an independent Soviet Socialist Republic, adopted the Constitution of the Byelorussian S.S.R. and elected a Central Executive Committee. Recognition of the independence of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee was announced by the latter's Chairman, Y. M. Sverdlov, who took part in the work of the congress.

2. The First Congress of Soviets of Lithuania, which met in Vilna from February 18 to 20, 1919, and was attended by 220 delegates, examined, among other matters, the report of the Lithuanian Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government, the question of union with Byelorussia. The congress recognized the necessity for the union of the Lithuanian and Byelorussian Soviet Republics and their federation with the Russian Soviet Republic and declared in its resolution: "Keenly conscious of our inseparable bond with all the Soviet Socialist Republics, the congress instructs the Workers' and Peasants' Government of the Socialist Soviet Republic of Lithuania and Byelorussia to inaugurate negotiations forthwith with the workers' and peasants' governments of the R.S.F.S.R., Latvia, the Ukraine and Estland with a view to constituting all these republics into a single R.S.F.S.R."

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