

Alexandra Kollontai: When Lenin proclaimed Soviet power

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Alexandra Kollontai speaks at International Congress of Communist Women in Moscow.

Alexandra Kollontai was a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and one of the organizers of the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917. She was a leading Marxist theorist on women's liberation and sexual emancipation. Kollontai was also the first woman in history to hold a cabinet-level position as Commissar for Social Welfare in the first Soviet government.

If I were asked what was the greatest, the most memorable moment of my life, I would answer without any hesitation: it was when Soviet power was proclaimed.

Nothing could compare to the pride and joy that filled us as we heard pronounced from the tribune of the Second Congress of Soviets at Smolny the simple and impressive words of the historic resolution:

“All power has passed to the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies!”

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was unforgettable at that moment! He proclaimed the famous first decrees of Soviet power — the Decree on Peace and the Decree on Land. His penetrating, energetic and thoughtful gaze was fixed on the future — he saw that which we could not yet see: these decrees translated into reality, the future which we still had to attain.

It was amazing and unforgettable, this inspired concentration of Vladimir Ilyich as he stood on the platform of the presidium of the first Soviet legislative assembly as the Bolsheviks, in the first few hours after taking power, began socialist construction, the construction of a new world.

Vladimir Ilyich arrived at Smolny on the night of October 25 (November 7 on the modern calendar). He arrived from Lesnoye where, on the instructions of the party,

he had been hiding from Kerensky's bloodhounds.

The following day, Lenin set off openly to attend the conference of the Petrograd Soviet.

Some comrades tried to restrain Lenin, to prevent him from taking the risk of appearing openly in the Soviet. Those who lived through these moments will never forget this tense anxiety on Lenin's behalf.

But the days of underground life were over. Lenin refused to listen to the words of precaution. He did not even try to persuade us otherwise, but hurried into the White Hall, where the Soviet was in conference.

Lenin understood better than we did the mood of the proletarian masses in the towns and villages, the mood of the soldiers at the front. He knew that they were waiting for him, waiting for his decisive speech.

And there was Lenin, at the door of the conference hall.

A whisper of voices rippled through the room: "Lenin!" For a long time, the enthusiastic applause of the deputies prevented him from speaking.

Lenin made an extraordinarily powerful speech that literally electrified the will of the Soviet's deputies.

On coming out of the conference hall, Lenin turned to us with gentle irony:

"You see how the deputies responded. And still you were uncertain." And he shook his head reproachfully, glancing sideways at his zealous bodyguards, his eyes gleaming. Lenin had taken direct leadership of the uprising into his own hands.

I remember the room at Smolny whose windows looked out onto the river Neva. It was a dark October evening, and a blustery wind blew fitfully from the river. An

electric bulb shed its dim light over a small square table, around which were gathered the members of the Central Committee elected at the Sixth Party Congress. Someone brought a few glasses of hot tea.

Lenin was here, among us, and we were cheerful and certain of our victory. Lenin was calm, resolute. His instructions, his movements, had that clarity and force that one finds in a very experienced captain guiding his ship through a storm. And this storm was like no other — the storm of the great socialist revolution. ...

Soon afterwards we heard the volley fired by the Aurora.

It was my happiness and great honor to work with Lenin in the first Soviet government as People's Commissar for State Welfare.

During the first weeks of its existence, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) met at Smolny, on the second floor, in the corner room known as "Lenin's study."

The conditions in which the Sovnarkom held its meetings were extremely Spartan, even more than Spartan, so that it was difficult to work. Lenin's table was pushed up against the wall, and an electric bulb hung just above it. We, the members of the Sovnarkom, sat around Vladimir Ilyich, some of us behind him. Nearer to the windows stood the table of N. P. Gorbunov, the Sovnarkom secretary who took the minutes of the meetings. Every time Lenin gave the floor to someone, or made a comment to Gorbunov, he had to turn round. Yet no one thought of moving the table into a more convenient position. Everyone was busy with important matters, and no one had time to think of his own convenience!

Let me give one example that vividly illustrates the lifestyle of the Sovnarkom members, and of Lenin himself, in those hectic days.

The incident I am about to describe occurred shortly after the closing session of the

Second Congress of Soviets. Some Swedish comrades from Stockholm had sent Vladimir Ilyich and myself (I had worked in Sweden during my political exile) some Dutch cheeses in memory of times past. This present could not have been better timed. I remember how, once, after a fierce political debate with Socialist-Revolutionaries at a meeting, I suddenly felt faint.

"Are you ill, Comrade Kollontai?" asked one of the Red Guards, holding me up.

"No," I answered. "I am just hungry."

The Red Guard immediately offered me a ruble "to buy a bit of bread," and when I refused, he found out my address, brought the bread himself and left without leaving his name.

Thus, I confess that I was happy to be able to offer some cheese to Vladimir Ilyich. The head of government was as undernourished as we were.

Just before a Sovnarkom meeting, I showed the round, red Dutch cheeses to Vladimir Ilyich. He was immediately concerned that we should have our share.

"They must be divided up among you all. And don't forget Gorbunov. Will you see to it, please."

Lenin went into his study, and I spread out a newspaper on the table in the adjoining room, found a knife and began to cut up the cheese to give the comrades for supper.

However, my presence was required at the Sovnarkom meeting. I went, leaving the knife and the cheese on the table. As was often the case in those days, the meeting went on until late at night, and I forgot about the cheese. When I returned, the cheese was no longer there. The knife and the newspaper were still on the table, but no cheese, not even a crumb. ... The guard at the door had changed many times during the day. The portions of cheese had been taken by the guards on duty as part

of their rations, and it was not surprising that in the course of the day it had been distributed among their comrades.

I went into Lenin's study where he and Gorbunov were checking the minutes. (This was standard practice with Lenin, and every day we learned from him to be most thorough and accurate in our work.)

"What has happened?" asked Lenin. I told him, and he burst out laughing.

"Well, was the cheese good?" he asked with a frank smile. "You didn't taste it? That's a pity. However, it doesn't really matter: if we don't eat it, others will."

Lenin's eyes shone with a warm, gentle smile, an unforgettable expression which seemed to say: Well, if the People's Commissars didn't get any cheese for supper, at least the soldiers or the workers did — and quite right too!

And Lenin went back to the minutes, to the current business of the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars.

The great man continued his enormous task of creating the first Soviet state in the world, a task that constitutes an immortal page in the history of mankind.

Source: [Marxists Internet Archive](https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/soviet-power/index.htm)

