

Academician V. A. Steklov, "Introduction," *Free Association for the Development and Dissemination of the Positive Sciences* (1917), 11-14.

[at meetings on April 9 in Petrograd and May 11 in Moscow]

Citizens!

We are living through difficult times.

In the heartland of Europe and in part of Asia blood is flowing in waves. The bloody conflagration has reached all of Europe and already leapt over the Atlantic Ocean.

But the great democracies of the world, in whose number Russia has just entered, and with which the old democracy of North America recently united, are leading this unprecedented war not to seize alien lands for their own advantages, not to enslave the nations populating those lands, but just to liberate them from any despotism and to establish firm peace on earth.

These high aims must be attained, whatever happens.

In this union of democracies against autocracy and militarism, the situation of Russian democracy is the gravest, for it has just now revived from the dead, truly "trampling down death by death" [Easter liturgy allusion].

We are forced to do battle on two fronts.

An external enemy stands before us, steeled by iron discipline, proceeding obediently for the time being behind its lord, Wilhelm II.

If the Frenchman and republican Thierre and his soldiers settled accounts so brutally with their blood brothers the Paris Communards in 1871, it is not hard to understand how Wilhelm, the Prussian and apostle of monarchism, if only he were to win, would deal with the bearers of democratic ideas, ideas which are at the same time the grave of monarchism when brought to life.

Clearly, achieving military liberation and firm peace on earth is possible only by decisive victory over the central monarchies, acting in full agreement with our allies. We are obligated to fulfill this first task, grave but unavoidable in present conditions, if we want to retain both honor and freedom.

But at the same time, we must also carry on the struggle with another no less frightful enemy skillfully nurtured by the tsarism that has just been overthrown, an enemy which is lodged among us: ignorance and prejudice.

One disaster—the darkness [also "multitudes"] of power above—has collapsed, but another disaster created by it—the power of darkness [multitudes] below—has remained and may turn toward whatever temporary freedoms have been acquired, for ignorance leads simultaneously both to anarchy and to despotism, to the two extreme limits of absence of any freedom.

And this internal enemy does not wait, it acts and will even bring greater harm than the military might of the external enemy.

The merciless struggle with ignorance and its manifestations represents a second, no less grave task of primary importance.

Unfortunately, the means do not exist for quick treatment of this calamity.

The work of enlightenment is by its very nature always long and will bring visible fruits only after years and even decades. Understandably, our newly organized scientific-educational enterprise [FADDPS] cannot yield results now which are immediately and directly applicable to the needs of the present moment.

That is why voices are sometimes heard summoning all men of science [sic: *deiateli nauki*; not gendered in this sense in Russian] to forget all their stubborn obligations, to leave science, to direct all their efforts in another domain: in the domain of political and practical activity, serving the pressing needs of the present, extremely accountable moment.

Honor and respect to those scholars who find within themselves and truly possess sufficient experience, habits, and strengths for such matters, who in these difficult moments can serve the fatherland with real utility on this stage.

I should say, however, that in the majority of cases the real scholar, in keeping with his mental makeup and his true nature, always remains only a scholar and, with rare exceptions, a poor politician and seldom a useful practitioner.

No matter what they say, people of science, with few exceptions, I repeat, cannot, and I would add, should not renounce their immediate and high calling, for by taking up matters unsuited to them, they can often bring more harm than good.

To set aside, if only for a time, the work to which they have dedicated their entire lives, without the option of working with indubitable utility in other domains, means simply to put down one's hands in impotence, to manifest weakness and distractedness and thereby bring only new ruin and confusion.

On the contrary, quiet and rigorous fulfillment of their immediate obligations, clearly recognizing all the surrounding dangers, itself brings calmness and courage to the broader layers of society, it balances out the unstable elements, it unites the disconnected.

Such creative work is especially useful and timely in the domain of enlightenment [education], in the struggle with the irreconcilable enemy of freedom: ignorance.

In this fashion such work in the educational domain has high value, if not directly, then indirectly, even for the needs of the present moment.

The cannons will fall silent, and the internal enemy will remain among us and may even extinguish all the grand dreams about a new life of liberty.

There are more than a few examples of this in history.

It is enough to take as an example the words uttered on the holiday of exiles in London regarding the 1871 Paris Commune: "We will study, we will become enlightened [or less grandly: better ourselves]: ignorance was our downfall."

A bitter and tardy recognition.

We might also subsequently find ourselves in this lamentable situation, and doubtless will do so, if we do not tackle the problem of education with all possible energy and as soon as possible.

There is always danger in delay.

We cannot wait, unless we want our internal enemy—ignorance—to seize us unawares and distracted.

That is why we men of science and thought have gathered here, we regard it as necessary to begin our educational work now, without delay, according to our strengths and abilities, so that once we have won decisive victory over our internal enemy, a victory that must be achieved at all costs by our nation with the help of its army and its workers, to have at least a bit of soil prepared for the further resolute and rational strengthening and development of the freedoms that have just been won, something that is possible only in the light of Science and Education.