

Anarchist library  
Anti-Copyright



## Beyond Kronstadt; the Bolsheviks in power

Mark Kosman

Mark Kosman

Beyond Kronstadt; the Bolsheviks in power

This article tries to go beyond the usual Kronstadt debate between Trotskyists and anarchists on why the Russian revolution failed.

It includes sections on: workers' control, soviet democracy, the Red Terror, the 1921 workers' revolt and 'Stalinism'.

Rosenberg, McAuley, Rabinowitch, Malle, Smith and Rigby have significant sympathies with the Bolsheviks. Medvedev, Fitzpatrick, Sirianni, Avruch, Sakwa, Remington, Aves and Service are more critical. Leggett, Figes and Shkliarevsky are right-wing.

[en.anarchistlibraries.net](http://en.anarchistlibraries.net)



## Contents

1917 . . . . .	6
Workers' control before the civil war . . . . .	7
The demise of the factory committees . . . . .	10
Trotskyists and workers' control . . . . .	11
Lenin debates the Left Communists . . . . .	13
Soviet democracy before the civil war . . . . .	15
The summer of 1918 . . . . .	17
Soviet democracy during the civil war . . . . .	21
The Red Terror . . . . .	23
'War Communism' . . . . .	25
1921: Workers' revolt and Kronstadt . . . . .	28
The descent into 'Stalinism' . . . . .	30
Trotskyists and the Bolsheviks in power . . . . .	34

have survived a capitalist restoration, whereas 'Stalinism' totally destroyed it.

The only real problem with this argument is that it marginalises the role of the working class by emphasising the choices the Bolshevik leaders could have made. These choices were limited, in part, by the limitations of the whole Bolshevik approach; for instance even the Workers' Opposition joined the suppression of Kronstadt.

Trotskyists could use such examples to defend Lenin on the grounds that even his critics agreed with him on the need for repression. However it seems better to use them to reveal more fundamental limitations in the whole ideology and practice of 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary socialism, whether anarchist or Marxist. This politics was always constrained by the requirement to develop the productive forces. As Goodey shows, the factory committees were just as keen on this 'productivism' as Lenin and simply making this sort of socialism more democratic, as Farber and Sirianni suggest, is insufficient as an alternative. On the other hand revolutionary Russia would have had to develop industrial production, an ideal communist society was obviously not an immediate possibility.

In the end perhaps the most interesting aspect of this whole issue is why so many Marxists who claim to believe in workers' self-emancipation defend a politics that effectively denies it. One reason is that neither anarchists nor libertarian communists have succeeded in fully developing a critique that could lead to a practical alternative to the top down approach of the Bolsheviks. Without revolution in the West the Russian revolution was doomed to fail. But unless the revolutionary left can develop a coherent self-emancipatory politics that fully dissociates itself from its horrific degeneration the working class will, rightly, continue to reject our ideas. I hope to discuss such a politics in future writing. (See the article: 'Is Revolution Back on the Agenda' libcom.org)<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> My selective use of recent social history does not do full justice to this work and this should be read directly to get a better idea of the period.

national revolution. Yet for the Bolsheviks to suppress the Russian working class — on behalf of a world working class that has no say in this policy — contradicts any concept of proletarian self-emancipation. Workers will never be inspired by a Marxism that offers the possibility of state subjugation in a ‘holding operation’ until the whole world has had a revolution. This argument also assumes that Lenin’s internationalism could have remained intact while the revolution degenerated all around him. But future writing will show that his internationalism was compromised not long after October.

Some Trotskyists do have criticisms of a number of Bolshevik policies, such as the post-war restrictions on soviet democracy. However none of them are willing to stray too far from Trotsky’s own reservations which he only really voiced when he had lost power. Their lack of appreciation of what might be valuable in the Bolshevik tradition is shown by the fact that no Trotskyist organisation today allows the range of views that coexisted in the Bolshevik party even during the civil war. Besides, considering the extent of the repression resorted to by Lenin’s regime, the priority is not to criticise individual policies but to try and work out how revolutionaries could have avoided getting into this appalling situation in the first place.

If the Bolsheviks had respected workers’ democracy they may well have lost power. Nevertheless this would have been a gamble, like the October revolution, that they would have been right to take, one that in itself would have restored some of the party’s popularity. It would also have had more chance of success than Trotsky’s bureaucratic attempts to prevent Stalin’s dictatorship. Even if the gamble had failed, the outcome could not have been worse than ‘Stalinism’, which not only slaughtered millions, but did so in the name of communism and so stifled the prospects for revolution world-wide for the rest of the century. Furthermore some of the revolutionary consciousness of the Russian working class might

An understanding of the Russian revolution is vital for any understanding of why the left failed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet most discussion amongst revolutionaries never goes beyond the usual argument about the Kronstadt rebellion.

The left’s present crisis has forced rethinking in some circles but many of us continue to cope with isolation by clinging onto our respective traditions. Anarchists and libertarian communists emphasise the Bolsheviks’ authoritarian policies, blaming them for the revolution’s failure, while underestimating the difficulties of constructing a new society in an isolated country devastated by civil war. In contrast Trotskyists blame these material conditions exclusively for the revolution’s degeneration, dismissing most left-wing criticisms of the Bolsheviks as giving comfort to the right.

However it seems self-evident that there were ideological and material factors in the revolution’s degeneration and any serious evaluation of the issue should take account of both. Unfortunately on the rare occasions when this dispute might have developed further, such as when Maurice Brinton debated Chris Goodey in *Critique*, the discussion was never continued.

This is especially unfortunate because, since the 1980s, there has been an ever growing literature on the social history of the period; with work such as S.A.Smith’s book on the factory committees or William Rosenberg and Jonathan Aves’ writing on the strike waves of 1918 and 1921. Though many social historians have some sympathy with the Bolsheviks, much of their work has been overlooked by the left. Nevertheless an ex-member of the International Socialists, Sam Farber, has used some of this material to provide an interesting, if flawed, critique of the Bolsheviks in *Before Stalinism; The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*. This book complements Carmen Sirianni’s earlier work, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy; The Soviet Experience*, by analysing not only the economic but also the political dimensions of Bolshevik rule.

This article is a further attempt to return to this social history to help develop a revolutionary politics that can break from the

tragedies of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism. It will show that Bolshevik policies were problematic from the start. In 1917 Lenin argued that, as private capitalism could not develop Russia, a revolutionary state would have to use 'state capitalism' to build the prerequisites for the transition to communism. This approach was always likely to come into conflict with the working class. Then, as the revolution failed to spread outside Russia, the Bolsheviks imposed even more external discipline on workers, effectively abandoning Marx's insistence on "the self-emancipation of the working class".

This concept of "self-emancipation" implies that the working class can only create communism by freely making and defending the revolution themselves. So the action of workers taking day-to-day control of every aspect of society is itself the essence of the revolutionary process. Considerable compromises with the ideals of self-emancipation were inevitable in the crippling conditions of the Russian revolution, but the extent of such compromises is the extent to which any proletarian revolution is defeated. This article will show that the 'compromises' made by the Bolshevik leadership were so opposed to workers' self-emancipation that the main responsibility of contemporary revolutionaries should be to supersede rather than emulate their political theories. Those who defend the crimes of capitalism have no right to criticise Bolshevik policies but revolutionaries have a duty to do so.

## 1917

The collapse of Tsarist autocracy during the First World War led to an explosion of new popular institutions from cooperatives to cultural organisations. By October 1917 there were 900 workers' councils or soviets, controlling everything from housing to hospitals. There were also more than 2,000 elected factory committees which were even more powerful because they had been compelled to supervise the factory owners and production.

it was crippled by objective factors such as economic backwardness, isolation and civil war. Nevertheless they are wrong to advocate a rigid determinism, minimising ideological factors. This is especially the case when at every stage of the bureaucratisation of the regime there were vocal critics within the Bolshevik party itself who proposed alternative policies that might have slowed this process.

Even if the appalling conditions of the civil war justified their policies then, they cannot excuse the repression both before and after the war. Of course Trotskyists could argue that the civil war and economic collapse started in 1917 so Lenin's attitudes were justified from the beginning. But soviet democracy withstood the crises of 1917 and then expanded sufficiently to make a revolution in October. So it must have had the potential to survive the threats of 1918 better than it did, especially as it was supposedly holding state power.

The civil war also cannot be used to excuse the Bolshevik leaders' lack of regret about their use of repression. For instance, although Lenin described the NEP as a 'defeat', at no stage did he describe the suppression of soviet democracy and workers' control in such language. Indeed the Bolsheviks even called their civil war policies "communist" although they were obviously the antithesis of genuine communism.

It is easy to criticise with the benefit of hindsight. However there is something very disturbing about the fact that Trotskyists still claim that the Bolsheviks were acting as communists after 1918 when they were clearly acting more as agents of the degeneration of the revolution. Material conditions did limit everything at this time but this includes Lenin and Trotsky's ideas so their applicability eighty years later is surely also severely limited.

Effectively many Trotskyists are arguing that, if it is necessary, Marx's insistence on "self-emancipation" and a democratic workers' republic can be postponed provided people like Lenin and Trotsky run the 'workers' state' and raise the red flag for inter-

stopped defending this unprecedented barbarism as some sort of ‘workers’ state’.<sup>46</sup>

## Trotskyists and the Bolsheviks in power

This article raises numerous theoretical questions about the precise nature of the degeneration of the Russian revolution. However the surprising lack of knowledge of even the best contemporary revolutionaries makes it necessary to emphasise basic historical arguments rather than theory. Hopefully such basic history might now help lay the basis for analysis and debate that is based on the empirical realities of the time rather than prejudice.

Two major themes should be clear. The first, usually emphasised by Trotskyists, is the extent of the economic and social crisis throughout this period, making any attempts at workers’ democracy difficult in the extreme. The second, promoted by anarchists and libertarians, is the total failure of the Bolshevik leadership to encourage workers’ democracy to the greatest extent that was practical in these circumstances. Failure to do this permitted workers to lose power faster than they might otherwise have done and it created a situation in which repression deprived the Soviet working class of any ability to resist the development of ‘Stalinism’.

Trotskyists are right to say that a major cause of the degeneration of the revolution was its inability to spread which meant that

---

<sup>46</sup> Fitzpatrick, 120; *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1932*, 260; ...1932–33, 142; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 175; Getty, *Soviet Studies* v38, 25–30. Serge said that Bolshevism may have contained the germs of Stalinism but it contained “a mass of other germs”. However in 1921 he identified those ‘Stalinist’ germs by saying: “the central error of the present Russian regime is its establishment of a whole bureaucratic-state mechanism to administer production, instead of (as in syndicalism) leaving this to the workers organised by industry. And its major misfortune is that it has fought against every individual initiative, every opposition, every criticism — however fraternal and revolutionary — every infusion of liberty, by methods of centralised discipline and military repression.” Cotterill, 14.

The Bolshevik party was dwarfed by these bodies and was often overtaken by the rapid radicalisation of workers. However, unlike the reformist Mensheviks or the peasant oriented Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), it had not joined the repressive Provisional Government; a regime that had totally discredited itself by its failure to maintain living standards, authorise land seizures or provide peace. The openness and flexibility of the Bolshevik party allowed it to express workers’ desire for a government of all the soviet parties. On 25 October it organised the overthrow of the Provisional Government and set up a Soviet government headed by Lenin.<sup>1</sup>

## Workers’ control before the civil war

Once in power the overriding concern of the Bolshevik leadership was the revival of industry to overcome a largely feudal crisis-ridden society. To this end they proposed to nationalise the largest monopolies, initially leaving the rest of industry under capitalist ownership combined with both government and workers’ control. This was consistent with Lenin’s arguments before October that “socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly *which is made to serve the interests of the whole people* and has to that extent *ceased to be capitalist monopoly*.”

He later said, “we recognise only one road — changes from below; we wanted the workers themselves, from below, to draw up the new, basic economic principles.” But, like the Second International he came from, Lenin never developed a consistent theory of workers’ self-management, tending to only advocate “inspection”, “accounting and control” by workers of the decisions of others.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> S.A.Smith in H.Shukman, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of the Russian Revolution*; Goodey, *Critique*, n3; R.Suny in D.Kaiser, *The Workers’ Revolution in Russia*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works* (henceforth *LCW*) v25, 361–4; v26, 467–8; S.A.Smith, *Red Petrograd*, 228. See *Radical Chains* no.3 on Lenin’s views before October.

So on the first day of the new government Lenin asked the ex-Menshevik Larin to begin negotiating with capitalists to set up state-capitalist trusts. He also met with the mainly Bolshevik leaders of the Petrograd Central Council of Factory Committees (PCCFC) to discuss their proposal for a central Supreme Economic Council (SEC) to coordinate the economy. Lenin was interested in their proposal but he declined to make it official and instead drafted a decree which stressed issues of local workers' supervision that the Petrograd factory committees probably already took for granted. This decree did state that the committees' decisions would be binding on the employers but it also said they could be annulled by the trade unions.<sup>3</sup>

By November Lenin's document had developed into an official decree whereby the factory committees were now subject to the All-Russian Council of Worker's Control (ARCWC). This body was dominated by representatives from the soviets, cooperatives and the trade union council. It consequently produced instructions that subordinated the committees to the unions and stated that the employers, not the committees, controlled production.

The committee leaders accepted this official decree but they ignored the ARCWC. They then issued quite different instructions which called for the committees' decisions to be binding on management and for the committees to unite into a hierarchy of federations to coordinate the economy. These instructions had considerable support amongst both workers and Bolsheviks. However Lenin never made them official and by December his government had set up its own version of an SEC. This body had a minority of committee representatives, no real accountability to the committees and it was always overshadowed by the Commissariats.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> C.Sirianni, *Workers' Control...*, (henceforth Sirianni), 150–1, 116, and *Economic and Industrial Democracy* v6n1 (henceforth Sirianni, *Economic*), 65; *LCW* v26, 264–5.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 209–14, 259; Sirianni, 100–1, 116–20; T.Remington, *Building Socialism in Soviet Russia*, 38–45; Remington in D.Koenker, *Party, State and Society in*

The Bolshevik leadership also stifled democracy within the party and Lenin never seems to have considered lifting the faction ban. Many oppositionist Bolsheviks therefore left, or were expelled, and some joined organisations such as the Workers' Truth or Workers' Group. Discontent in the form of absenteeism and slow-working was still very common and after around 500 strikes in 1922 some of these oppositionists intervened in the large strike wave of 1923. This led to their arrest and the first significant imprisonments of Bolshevik oppositionists. In contrast the Left Opposition looked to Trotsky, even though, in the 1920s, he could not bring himself to criticise the faction ban, let alone the one-party state. Indeed, as Ernest Mandel said, he “led the way in formulating the condemnations” of groups like the Workers' Group.<sup>45</sup>

By 1927 unemployment exceeded two million and the peasants' reluctance to sell grain was jeopardising ambitious plans for industrialisation. The regime responded to this crisis by returning to the spirit of 'War Communism', with attacks on the 'kulaks', compulsory labour and terror. Over the next decade perhaps ten million people died, including many old Bolsheviks.

Trotsky's exclusion from power enabled him to make severe criticisms of Stalin's leadership. But in exile in 1932 he was still claiming that the achievements of Soviet industrialisation meant that “socialism as a system for the first time demonstrated its title to historic victory”. He argued that the Opposition “may have temporarily to support” Stalin and as late as 1933 he even wrote to the Politburo advocating “agreement” and “full cooperation” with them if the Opposition returned to the party leadership. Indeed, no matter how critical he became of the Soviet Union, Trotsky never

---

<sup>45</sup> Service, *The Bolshevik Party...*, 165 and *International Socialism*, n55, 79; W.Chase, *Workers, Soviets...*, 258–9, 222; Aves, 184; Siegelbaum, 104–8, 130–6; E.Mandel, *Trotsky as Alternative*, 37; T.Cliff, *Trotsky* v3, 17, 56, 154. Avrich says the GPU made a bungled attempt to execute the Workers Group leader in 1922. *Russian Review* v43, 16.

Before his death in 1924 Lenin did become genuinely worried about bureaucratisation. However, although his regime was less brutal than Stalin's, it still had no democratic mandate to rule from the working class. Many contemporary Trotskyists follow Lenin in arguing that the civil war had been so destructive that the Russian proletariat had "ceased to exist as a proletariat" so such a mandate was no longer an issue. Yet, even if the proletariat had disappeared, the idea of staying in power without a working class contradicts any principle of workers' self-emancipation. Moreover social historians have shown that the proletariat did survive the civil war, albeit in reduced numbers from 3.5 to 1.5 million.

Diane Koenker shows that, although Moscow's population halved in the war, only a third of those that left were workers. S.A.Smith says a proletarian core remained in all the industrial centres during the civil war, then, after the war, many workers returned to the cities. While Aves says that the evidence suggests that it was long-standing workers that took the initiative in the 1921 strikes. So it appears that Koenker is right to conclude that the government made 'deurbanisation' and 'declassing' the "scape-goats for its political difficulties".<sup>44</sup>

---

*and Power in Revolutionary Russia*, 181; Fox, *Soviet Studies* v44n6, 1053–8; Service v3, 245–6; Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 221. L.Schapiro says Lenin briefly considered the "legalisation" of the Mensheviks in 1922 but soon abandoned the idea. *The Origins of the Communist Autocracy*, 208.

<sup>44</sup> Smith in Shukman, 25; Siegelbaum and Chase, *Modern Encyclopaedia of Russian and Soviet History* v55, 59–64; Koenker, 91–100; Aves, 48–51, 91, 125–6, 148; N.Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* v2, ch.13. Many new workers were spouses and children of long-standing urban workers and, although many of the most politicised workers had left Moscow's factories, when they joined the Red Army they were often still stationed in the city. Then from 1922–23 to 1925–26 the number of wage earners increased by 50%. McAuley (244–5) argues that by calling oppositionist workers 'backward elements' the Bolsheviks were just resorting to the same accusations that the SRs and Mensheviks had levelled at their supporters in 1917. Rassweiler, *The Journal of Social History* v17, 149–50; P.Bellis, *Marxism and the USSR*, 79.

These differences over workers' control took place in the context of a deepening of the economic crisis that had provoked the revolution in the first place. Putilov workers appear to have gone on strike from as early as December and the new authorities soon turned to the idea of increasing discipline. They attempted to prohibit alcohol and an indication of Lenin's thinking, only nine weeks after October, can be found in a draft article in which he wrote:

*not a single rogue (including those who shirk their work) to be allowed to be at liberty, but kept in prison, or serve his sentence of compulsory labour of the hardest kind... [In order to] clean the land of Russia of all vermin... In one place half a score of rich, a dozen rogues, half a dozen workers who shirk their work (in the manner of rowdies, the manner in which many compositors in Petrograd, particularly in the Party printing shops, shirk their work) will be put in prison... In a fourth place, one out of every ten idlers will be shot on the spot."*

With the war ending, the Bolsheviks now found themselves presiding over the collapse of much of Petrograd's war related industry. There was a major crime wave and in January 1918 a severe cut in the bread ration led to a mass exodus from Petrograd to find food. Meanwhile the policy of retaining capitalist owners in the factories encouraged conflicts that only exacerbated this crisis. Owners increasingly refused to submit to workers' control. They sabotaged production or fled so forcing the committees to take over a number of factories and insist on their nationalisation. Yet, unable to take responsibility for every factory, the new government strongly opposed these actions and made repeated attempts to outlaw unauthorised takeovers. By the spring only sixteen Petrograd companies had been formally nationalised.<sup>5</sup>

---

*the Russian Civil War*, 213–5, 228.

<sup>5</sup> G.Shkliarevsky, *Labour in the Russian Revolution*, 150; S.White, *Russia Goes Dry*, 17; *LCW* v42, 53, 503; Smith, 239; Sirianni, 123. R. Service says these print workers were Mensheviks who threatened strikes against press restrictions. *Lenin, a Political Life* v2, 301–2.

## The demise of the factory committees

The factory committees had set up the Red Guards and had been the first workers' organisations to support Bolshevik policies in 1917. Involved in the day-to-day running of the factories they also had more experience at managing industry, and, as S.A. Smith says, the committee leaders were "the most vocal section of the party pressing for a system of central economic planning". Nevertheless the unions soon persuaded Lenin that the committees suffered from too much localism and should be subordinated to themselves.<sup>6</sup>

There certainly were cases of localism, of committees selling factory stock or hoarding resources. But the PCCFC tried hard to counter these tendencies. It distributed materials and fuel and set up organisations for technical advice. There were similar councils in fifty other cities and a national congress had elected an All-Russian Centre as early as October. Furthermore the committees were not reluctant to impose work discipline and a number even used armed guards to enforce order. All their official instructions specified the retention of technical specialists and some managed to double or treble production levels to those of 1916 and beyond. Indeed it was primarily due to PCCFC efforts that Petrograd's industry did not totally collapse that winter.<sup>7</sup>

The PCCFC did have major problems coping with the crisis but so too did the Commissariats and the SEC. These bodies had little knowledge of the local situation and often gave orders that contradicted each other, so encouraging factories to ignore the centre. In

<sup>6</sup> Sirianni, *Economic*, 79–80; Smith, 203–4, 226, 256–9; Smith in Kaiser, 71; S.Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 94–5; Sirianni, 130–3. Shkliarevsky (117–19, 172–5) claims that Lenin had only supported the committees because he needed an ally in the first weeks of the new regime. This might explain his lack of support for them once the Bolsheviks gained the allegiance of the trade union congress in January. G.Swain, *Sbornik*, n12.

<sup>7</sup> Sirianni, *Economic*, 72–77; Sirianni, 109–15; Smith in Shukman, 23; Smith, 247, 260; Malle, 101. Factory committees even called for labour conscription.

Trotsky argued that the Bolshevik party was "obliged to maintain its dictatorship ... regardless of the temporary vacillations even in the working class." While Lenin said: "we do not promise any freedom, or any democracy". He rejected the recommendations of a Cheka report calling for the legalisation of some of the socialist opposition, and his government responded to the nationwide resurgence of Mensheviks, SRs and anarchists by arresting thousands, including soviet deputies and former Bolsheviks. That year the authorities sentenced over 3,000 workers to forced labour for breaches of work discipline and the Red Army invaded Georgia in the face of much working class hostility.<sup>42</sup>

In 1922 Lenin recommended that "the application of the death sentence should be extended (commutable to deportation)... to all forms of activity by the Mensheviks, SRs and so on", and that: "The courts must not ban terror ... but must ... legalise it as a principle." He expelled 150 intellectuals from the country and party leaders banned the import of books they considered 'idealistic' or 'anti-scientific'. The authorities censored plays and sheet music and by 1924 there were even attempts to forbid the public performance of the foxtrot. Whatever Trotsky's attitude was to this he certainly advocated art "censorship" at this time.<sup>43</sup>

*Russia...* (268–72) Figs says requisitioning continued despite "clear signals" of the famine. Meanwhile the Cheka was still ordering beatings of oppositionists. Albats, 98.

<sup>42</sup> *LCW* v32, 494–5; v45, 84; Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, 508–9; Sakwa, 245–6; Farber, 134–5, 197; Hatch, *Soviet Studies* v39, 560, 570; Siegelbaum, 77, 84, and in *Slavic Review* v51, 712–4; Sakwa in J.Cooper, *Soviet History*, 47; R.Debo, *Survival and Consolidation*, 178–9, 358–63; G.Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 205. Lenin said, an offensive by the bourgeoisie "is never ruled out. Until the final issue is decided, this awful state of war will continue. And we say: 'A la guerre comme a la guerre; we do not promise any freedom, or any democracy'. We tell the peasants quite openly that they must choose between the rule of the bourgeoisie or the rule of the Bolsheviks." He was hesitant to invade Georgia but his Central Committee supported preparations for war and he never argued for withdrawal.

<sup>43</sup> *LCW* v33, 358; v42, 419; v45, 555; Cliff, *Trotsky* v2, 25; C.Read, *Culture*

that the mutineers had any ties to the Whites during the rebellion itself and it appears that no foreign power even attempted to take military advantage of the situation. Moreover Lenin himself said, “there they do not want either the White Guards or our government”. So the Bolshevik regime’s need to suppress any rebellion calling for democracy was at least as much a factor in its attitude to the sailors as the threat of intervention from abroad.<sup>40</sup>

## The descent into ‘Stalinism’

‘War Communist’ policies had led to administrative disintegration and a widespread reliance on the black market and corruption. Yet Lenin was still signing orders militarising industries in February 1921 and Siegelbaum says: “ ‘statism’ ... reached its post-1917 height just when the military threat ... was receding. Not until the party was confronted with a major revolt (*in 1921*) ... was the leadership persuaded that this was not the way to proceed.” The introduction of the New Economic Policy could not prevent scores of strikes that summer but it did stop them spreading. From then on market forces, rather than the government, could be blamed for workers’ plight.

The appalling famine of 1921–22 killed 3–6 million people and made any revival of workers’ democracy difficult in the extreme. Nevertheless the Bolshevik dictatorship had exacerbated the death toll by failing to halt grain requisitioning in time and by delaying calls for international aid. Indeed, although the civil war was over, their use of repression became more systematic than ever.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Avrich, 94–5, 118–22, 217; McAuley, 389; *LCW* v32, 184, 228. Avrich says that, even if the rebels had received considerable aid, “sooner or later they were bound to succumb”. There was anti-Semitism in both Kronstadt and Petrograd but it was no worse than that in the Red Army and Trotsky received hundreds of reports of his soldiers attacking Jews. Figes, 196.

<sup>41</sup> Gluckstein, 47; Siegelbaum, 37, 89; Malle, 501–6; T.Friedgut, *Iuzovka and Revolution* v2, 429–33; Edmondson, *Soviet Studies* v29, 507ff.; Lih, 254. In *Peasant*

other words the government’s attempts to centralise actually led to localism.<sup>8</sup>

In January the trade union congress endorsed the ARCWC instructions and called for industrial reconstruction based on foreign investment and Taylorism. The leading Bolshevik Zinoviev explicitly rejected the right to strike and asked the congress to “proclaim the trade unions state organisations”. The Bolshevik union leader Ryazanov also called on the factory committees to choose “suicide” and a week later the party leadership persuaded the last factory committee conference to dissolve the committees into the unions.<sup>9</sup>

Although the committee leaders accepted this absorption into the unions they still did not want to be subordinated to them and their conference proposed that the committees themselves should elect union boards. It reaffirmed their more radical workers’ control proposals and demanded the complete nationalisation of industry. However at this time the government was more concerned with trying to set up joint trusts with capitalists and a number of Bolsheviks were even favourable to some reprivatisation of the banks. Indeed it seems to have required considerable opposition from both metalworkers and the large Left Communist faction in the Bolshevik party to end negotiations with the metal industry owners in April.<sup>10</sup>

## Trotskyists and workers’ control

The Bolshevik leadership’s attitude to the factory committees and self-management is the classic example of thinking limited

<sup>8</sup> Sirianni, *Economic*, 72–3; Sirianni, 118–20; **W.Rosenberg**, *Slavic Review* v44n2, 227 (also in Kaiser).

<sup>9</sup> Smith, 218–21; Sirianni, 125–7.

<sup>10</sup> Sirianni, *Economic*, 65; Smith, 222–5, 239–40; **M.McAuley**, *Bread and Justice; State and Society in Petrograd 1917–22*, 216; Sirianni, 151–3; **R.Pipes**, *The Russian Revolution*, 676–7; Malle, 56–7, 159; E.Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* v2, 90n, 253.

by the Marxism of the Second International. Yet no contemporary Trotskyists have any real doubts about their initial state-capitalist programme and most simply denigrate the committees as localist. In *Critique* no.3 Goodey does accept that the committees wanted to build a centralised economic apparatus. But he also argues that, if there was an embryonic bureaucracy in 1917, the committees were very much part of it. He points out that the committee leaders often successfully resisted re-election, that many supported centralisation during the civil war and that some became supporters of Stalin. In other words the isolation of the revolution encouraged bureaucratic tendencies at every level and these should not be blamed on the Bolshevik leaders.

These are powerful arguments. On the other hand they do not excuse the fact that all the plans of the Bolshevik leadership were considerably less democratic than those of the committees or that the leadership failed to insist on democracy in the committees. The attitudes of the committees did degenerate but so too did the attitudes of officials in every part of the new state, including Lenin and Trotsky. Goodey fails to recognise that their views were as restricted by historical conditions as those of the committee leaders.

The committees also did use quite severe discipline. But at least this had an element of self-discipline unlike that imposed by the state. Furthermore the committees had the potential to try to create a system of self-management that would have slowed the process of degeneration. As the Bolshevik Tsyperovich said in 1927: “there are still more than a few old factory committee men who think, in essence, that the committees ... contained within themselves enough for a further development along their original lines.”<sup>11</sup>

Other Trotskyists imply that it was right to bypass the factory committees because the soviets were more representative of the whole population. Not only does this approach underestimate the rapid decline of soviet democracy itself, it suggests that alienation

<sup>11</sup> Goodey, 30–45 (and *Critique* n4 and 5); Smith, 203–8, 305; McAuley, 218.

The Bolsheviks tried to contain the protests with martial law, the purging of activists from the factories, mass arrests and several shootings. However sailors at the offshore Kronstadt naval base were able to continue demanding political reforms such as the freeing of socialist prisoners, new elections to the soviets and freedom to every left socialist party including the Bolsheviks. The majority of Kronstadt’s Bolsheviks supported these demands but the party leadership made no serious attempts to negotiate and quickly moved to suppress the rebellion. They had to order some of their soldiers to attack the well-fortified base at gunpoint and it appears that hundreds of captured rebels were later killed.<sup>38</sup>

Trotskyists usually justify the Bolshevik’s actions on the grounds that the heroic sailors of 1917 had been replaced by newly recruited peasants, easily influenced by counter-revolutionary ideas. But Evan Mawdsley and Israel Getzler cite Soviet research which shows that three-quarters of all the sailors in Kronstadt in 1921 had probably been there since World War One. It also clearly demonstrates that 90% of the sailors on the two main battleships were drafted before 1918<sup>39</sup>

White exiles had tried to help the mutineers and the main leader of the rebellion, Petrichenko, did join the Whites for a period after the mutiny was suppressed. Still, there is no convincing evidence

<sup>38</sup> McAuley, 407–9; Aves, 62, 72, 114–29, 139–54, 165–82; Farber, 125, 188–9; Sakwa, 241–7; Brovkin, 392–9; Avrich, 6, 47, 71–87, 135–44, 154, 181, 207, 215–20. Workers also demanded the removal of armed squads from the factories. The Petrograd soviet did propose a visit to Kronstadt but this was after the regime had executed 45 unarmed mutineers at Oranienbaum and had demanded they ‘surrender unconditionally’. Avrich says the sailors’ slogan was never “soviets without communists” but: “All power to the Soviets and not to the Parties”. He also says that “the historian can sympathise with the rebels and still concede that the Bolsheviks were justified and Serge did choose the Bolsheviks over the rebels. On the other hand Serge later wrote that “it would have been easy to avoid the worst: it was necessary only to accept the mediation offered by the anarchists”. D.Cotterill, *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*, 164, 171.

<sup>39</sup> I.Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–21*, 207–8; Mawdsley, *Soviet Studies* v24, 509; Farber, 192–3.

banded the Ukrainian central committee, expelled a number of oppositionists and banned all factions in the party.<sup>36</sup>

## 1921: Workers' revolt and Kronstadt

After mass desertions earlier in the war it was the return of many peasants to the Red Army that helped clinch its victory over the Whites. Yet once this threat was over with the end of the fighting in November 1920, discontent erupted throughout the country. There were 118 peasant revolts in February 1921 alone. Unrest in the Red Army was comparable to that in the Imperial Army in 1917 and the Cheka had to put down a number of mutinies.

Zinoviev is reported to have said that 90% of the union rank-and-file opposed the government and severe food shortages provoked a huge wave of demonstrations and strikes throughout the country. These protests were mainly initiated by workers rather than opposition activists. Their demands included free elections, the reconvening of the Constituent Assembly and an end to commissar privilege. Despite his sympathies with the Bolsheviks, Lewis Siegelbaum writes that “it would appear that workers' hostility towards Communist authority was as intense as it had been four years earlier with respect to the Tsarist regime.”<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Farber, 84–6, 30; Sirianni, 232–3; Aves, 57, 66–7, 178, 167–9; Siegelbaum, 36, 82; Fitzpatrick, 101. Serge witnessed the rigging of an election to ensure Lenin's victory in the trade union debate. Lenin said they should “keep quiet” on state/union “coalescence” because it was happening anyway, and, although he advocated strike funds during the NEP, most strikes occurred without union sanction. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 123, 115; *LCW* v32, 26–7, 61; Hatch in Fitzpatrick, *Russia in the Era of the NEP*, 64–5.

<sup>37</sup> Figes, *Past and Present*, n129, 199; P. Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 14, 20; Hagen in Fitzpatrick, *Russia in the era of the NEP*, 161; Farber, 88; Siegelbaum, 77. Service says there were already secret shops for Bolshevik officials, and over 4,000 soldiers were executed in 1921. *New Statesman*, Jan. 27, '95, 22–3; Volkogonov, *Trotsky...*, 181.

from the means of production could have been significantly reduced by allowing workers to occasionally take part in national planning. Yet people would still have suffered the same relations at work as they do under capitalism. Certainly you cannot build communism in one country. However it should be obvious to Marxists that capitalists can hold considerable power, whether or not there is formal democracy, by owning the means of production but workers can only do so if they democratically control production.

## Lenin debates the Left Communists

The Brest-Litovsk peace treaty ceded three quarters of the Soviet state's iron and coal to Germany and, by the spring of 1918, half of Petrograd's work force was unemployed. A debate then developed on how to survive this crisis while waiting for revolution in the West. Lenin argued that “we must ‘suspend’ our offensive” on capital because the priority was to organise production in the enterprises they had already expropriated. He began campaigning for ‘one-man management’ at work, claiming that there is “absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.” He also wrote that: “We must learn to combine the ‘public meeting’ democracy of the working people — turbulent, surging, overflowing its banks like a spring flood — with *iron* discipline while at work, with *unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person.”<sup>12</sup>

None of the Left Communist leaders, such as Bukharin, Preobrazhenski, Radek, Bela Kun or Osinsky, had supported the factory committees but their approach was not dissimilar. Osinsky argued that Lenin's programme of combining “capitalists and semi-bureaucratic centralisation” with “obligatory labour” would lead to “bureaucratic centralisation, the rule of various commissars, the

---

<sup>12</sup> *LCW* v27, 245–6, 253, 267–71. Lenin was still defending local nationalisations in January but had clearly changed his mind by the spring.

deprivation of local soviets of their independence, and in practice the rejection of the type of ‘commune state’ administered from below.” Having chaired the SEC, Osinsky appreciated the depth of the economic crisis but he still advocated an alternative system of economic democracy based on the economic councils.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately Lenin dismissed his arguments. In *‘Left Wing’ Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality* he wrote that: “While the revolution in Germany is still slow in ‘coming forth’, our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare *no effort* in copying it and not to shrink from adopting *dictatorial* methods to hasten the copying of it.”

In March the Bolsheviks resolved to adopt “mercilessly resolute, and draconian measures” to heighten discipline and Lenin said “punishment [for breaches of labour discipline] should go to the length of imprisonment”. The authorities appointed Commissars to run a number of factories and they introduced “dictatorial” powers to try to contain the crisis on the railways. Preobrazhenski responded by warning that “the dictatorship of individuals will be extended from ...the economy to the Russian Communist Party”, and by May some Left Communists were indeed expelled.<sup>14</sup>

It took the threat of capitalists transferring enterprises to German ownership under the terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, as well as widespread workers’ unrest, to finally compel the government to announce the nationalisation of all large-scale industries in June. However nationalisation often led to factory committees being restricted to their original monitoring role and, once the civil war was

of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the state ... which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction”.

Having militarised the rail union, Trotsky then proposed that every union should become completely subordinated to the state. At first Lenin supported him, but around 80% of the Petrograd work force took strike action that year and the union leaders soon persuaded Lenin that Trotsky’s overt totalitarianism was inadvisable. So Lenin now opposed him using the argument that the unions needed a measure of autonomy so they could protect workers from their “workers’ state with a bureaucratic twist”. He then organised the defeat of Trotsky’s faction at the 1921 party congress, a blow from which the Red Army leader never fully recovered.<sup>35</sup>

Lenin’s surprising support for union autonomy never went beyond rhetoric. His government forcibly purged any independent unions, such as the printers’, bakers’ or women’s unions, and when the 1921 trade union congress voted for union autonomy he had the decision reversed and the congress leaders demoted. Furthermore, although the unions, the SEC and the Moscow party all put up considerable resistance to ‘one-man management’, Lenin continued to oppose collegial administration, saying that they should “struggle against the remnants of [*this*] notorious democratism ... all this old harmful rubbish.”

Lenin and his supporters were even more hostile to Alexandra Kollontai and the Workers Opposition who proposed that the unions should elect the various economic organs. The party leadership imposed their own people on the metalworkers’ union, dis-

<sup>13</sup> R.Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism* v1, 100; Sirianni, 146–9.

<sup>14</sup> R.McNeal, *Resolutions and Decisions of the CPSU* v2, 48; *LCW* v27, 300, 338–40; v42, 86; Smith, 247–5; Malle, 112; *Critique* pamphlet n1, ‘Theses of the Left Communists’, 5; R.Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict*, 21. Shkliarevsky (188) cites Lenin saying: “Entrepreneurs should be entrusted with creating the norms of labour discipline”.

<sup>35</sup> Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 28–9, 169–70, 137 and *Terrorism and Communism*, 143, 162–3; *LCW* v33, 58; Tsuji, *Revolutionary Russia* v2n1, 67–8, 59; Service, 153; Brovkin, 287–99; Aves, 81, 33, 69; S.Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (‘94), 100; M.Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*, 61–4. Trotsky also said “the working class ... must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers” and compulsory labour “is the basis of socialism”. At least 82 railworkers were shot that year.

from responding with what Lenin at one point called, “merciless arrests”. There were also shootings and when a strike coincided with an army mutiny in the strategically important town of Astrakhan perhaps as many as 2,000 people were killed in street clashes.<sup>33</sup>

Such events were a product of civil war conditions but ‘War Communist’ measures like the militarisation of labour were also intensified for post-war reconstruction. Indeed Bukharin admitted that they had “conceived War Communism ...not as being related to the war”, and he wrote that: “proletarian compulsion in all its forms, from executions to compulsory labour, constitutes, as paradoxical as this may sound, a method of the formation of a new communist humanity.” This text has since been published with Lenin’s notes and against this sentence the Bolshevik leader has simply written the word “precisely”. At one point Lenin did say that there “is not yet anything communist in our economic system”. However on several other occasions he described their policies towards the peasantry as “communist” and in 1919 he stated that: “the organisation of the communist activity of the proletariat and the entire policy of the Communists have now acquired a final, lasting form.”<sup>34</sup>

Trotsky also said that they had hoped “to develop these methods of regimentation directly into a system of planned economy... In other words, from ‘military communism’ it hoped gradually, but without destroying the system, to arrive at genuine communism.” Lenin later convinced him that they had been wrong to assume they could run the economy on “communist lines” at this time. But, in 1920, Trotsky wrote that the “militarisation of labour ... represents the inevitable method of organisation and disciplining of labour-power during the period of transition from capitalism to socialism”, and that “the road to Socialism lies through a period

<sup>33</sup> McAuley, 239–52; Aves, 69, 41–55; Sakwa, 94–5; R.Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin*, 66; Brovkin, 67–95.

<sup>34</sup> Aves, 5, 37; L.Szamuely, *First Models of the Socialist Economic System* p108n; Bukharin, *The Economics of the Transition Period*, 160, 221; *LCW* v30, 143–4, 286; v27, 439; v33, 58–64, 421–2.

under way in December, it was decided to appoint all management from above.<sup>15</sup>

## Soviet democracy before the civil war

In contrast to their attitude to self-management the Bolshevik leadership did claim a commitment to soviet democracy. Their dissolution of the Constituent Assembly can be justified as a defence of this democracy and their coalition with the Left SRs had nationwide support. Nevertheless in his study of one of Petrograd’s local soviets Alexander Rabinowitch points out that the breakdown of democratic practices ... began almost at once after October.” At a higher level the central government only submitted a fraction of its decrees to the Central Executive Committee of the national soviet. Eighty per cent of senior bureaucrats had been officials before the revolution and T.H.Rigby says that “the structural changes were scarcely greater than those sometimes accompanying changes of government in Western parliamentary systems.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite some opposition, the authorities began absorbing the workers’ militias into the Red Army from January 1918. Lenin removed the stipulation that enlistment should be voluntary and, with the failure to hold back the German army, Trotsky was soon

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, 236; D.Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers...* v2, 378. Lenin angrily rejected proposals that workers in nationalised industries should elect the majority of their management boards even though they would still be subject to the SEC. Consequently the June congress of economic councils decided that only a third of management was to be elected by workers and the rest by the economic councils or the SEC. The SEC could permit the regional unions to nominate a third of management but union leaders were becoming increasingly dependent on the new regime for funding and jobs and the trade union council even opposed workers meeting during work hours. Smith, 241; Sirianni, 123–9, 155–7, 213–7, 225–7; Malle, 115–7.

<sup>16</sup> Rabinowitch in Koenker, 153, 138; Sirianni, 204; T.Rigby, *Lenin’s Government*, 51, 62.

trying to disband the soldiers' committees and end their right to elect officers.

Meanwhile the desperate economic crisis led to a significant fall in support for the Bolsheviks that winter. Party membership temporarily plunged by 70% and the subsequent increase in support for the Mensheviks and SRs led to members of these parties being driven out of some soviets. This may have been justified for the SRs but, although the Mensheviks were very hostile to the new regime, the majority of them had always kept to non-violent opposition. Indeed the Bolsheviks had some difficulty finding justifications to ban their papers and tried to do so merely on the grounds that they had reported about conflicts between workers and the government.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly Menshevik and SR activists now argued that the soviets were no longer representative and by March they had set up an 'Assembly of Factory Representatives' in Petrograd. Its delegates blamed the economic crisis on everything from the factory committees to the government and even on the whole "experiment of soviet socialism". Ryazanov quipped that the situation seemed to be the direct opposite of that a year earlier and Bolshevik representation in the Kronstadt soviet fell from 46 to 29%. The party also lost every recorded election held in the provincial capitals that spring and the anti-Bolshevik historian Vladimir Brovkin shows that local Bolsheviks resorted to arrests, shootings and the forcible disbanding of many of the newly elected soviets.<sup>18</sup>

The first concerted action of the political police, the Cheka, took place at this time when they raided anarchist centres throughout Russia. In Moscow they raided 26 centres, leaving 12 Cheka agents and 40 anarchists dead in the process. These anarchists had

---

<sup>17</sup> McAuley, 91–4, 62; Adelman, *Russian History* v9, 93; P.Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 43; R.Wade, *Red Guards and Workers' Militia...*, 318–29; Shukman, 186.

<sup>18</sup> Farber, *Before Stalinism...*, 22–3, 194–5; Remington, 101–5; McAuley, 94; V.Brovkin, *The Mensheviks after October* (henceforth **Brovkin**, *Mensheviks*), ch.5;

three successful alliances with him against the Whites. In these areas only 'working people' could stand for soviet elections, not Bolsheviks or SRs, but there were no restrictions on their press provided they did not advocate an armed uprising. However in the summer of 1919 the Bolsheviks executed several of Makhno's officers and tried to ban the Makhnovist peasant congresses. From then on the two sides fought fiercely whenever the White threat diminished. Both sides shot prisoners but Makhno's army tended to restrict executions to those in authority whereas the Bolsheviks shot many rank-and-file Makhnovists.<sup>31</sup>

## 'War Communism'

As the war intensified, many workers left the factories to search for food and industrial production collapsed. Lenin had been advocating "universal labour conscription" since before the revolution and in 1919 the militarisation of labour was widely used to cope with this desperate situation, with all citizens becoming liable for compulsory labour duty by 1920. Both Lenin and Trotsky advocated the use of "concentration camps" to deal with absenteeism and, in Moscow alone, the authorities executed 47 people for 'labour desertion'.<sup>32</sup>

To support the war against the Whites many workers worked day and night just for food but, when rations became intolerable, strikes often broke out. They occurred in all the major cities and compulsory labour and repression were important issues in a number of disputes. The stoppages in Petrograd in 1919 involved at least half the work force but Mary McAuley says they "posed no real threat to Bolshevik rule". This did not prevent the authorities

---

<sup>31</sup> Farber, 123; Service, 43; M.Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 151–2, 175–7, 212–19; M.Malet, *Nestor Makhno...*, 32, 39, 100, 129, 136.

<sup>32</sup> Sakwa, 62–90; *LCW* v26, 65, 467–8; v42, 170; J.Bunyan, *The Origin of Forced Labour in the Soviet State*, 88, 127, 166. Dzerzhinsky even recommended "concentration camps" for "lateness". Pipes, 834.

interests ... was shot... we could not emerge from the old society without resorting to compulsion as far as the backward section of the proletariat was concerned.”

Estimates of the numbers executed include 50,000 and 140,000 and George Leggett lists many unsubstantiated accusations of torture. Victor Serge later claimed that “during the civil war there was perfect order behind the front itself... There was nothing to prevent the functioning of regular courts.” But most of those killed never had a trial and one Cheka member recalled that “our Red detachments would ‘clean up’ villages exactly the way the Whites did. What was left of the inhabitants, old men, women, children, were machine-gunned for having given assistance to the enemy.”<sup>30</sup>

The Bolshevik leadership sometimes clearly encouraged brutality. For instance, as the Whites threatened Petrograd, Lenin asked Trotsky: “Is it impossible to mobilise another 2,000 Petrograd workers plus 10,000 members of the bourgeoisie, set up cannons behind them, shoot a few hundred of them and obtain a real mass impact on Yudenich?” Trotsky thankfully disregarded this but the Bolsheviks did use terror against whole groups of people such as the Cossacks or the Tambov peasants. The Tambov rebellion of 1920–21 was extremely brutal and the Red Army crushed the uprising with the burning of villages and mass executions. One government order demanded that peasants should be shot simply for “giving shelter to members of a ‘bandit’s’ family”.

The Terror encouraged many anarchists to join Nestor Makhno’s peasant movement in the Ukraine. This movement was much more popular than the Bolsheviks in some areas so the Red Army made

---

<sup>30</sup> Farber, 117–19; *LCW* v35, 349; v30, 510; Leggett, 465, 198, 184, 328–33, 349; E.Poretzky, *Our Own People*, 214. In the first months repression was relatively mild and many prisons had education facilities. However concentration camps were set up from July 1918 and mortality reached 30% in those in the north. Leggett says they were sometimes cleared by mass executions. The death penalty was formally abolished in 1920 but it was evaded by the local chekas and revoked by the summer. M.Jakobson, *The Origins of the Gulag*, 37, 23–4, 40.

been armed and could have posed some physical threat. On the other hand the leading Cheka official, Peters, has written that: “In Moscow in general at that time there was a peaceful mood, and the Moscow military commissariat even issued arms to the anarchist headquarters”. So the raids certainly had a political motive and in May the authorities closed down several anarchist periodicals.<sup>19</sup>

## The summer of 1918

All the restrictions on workers’ democracy described so far occurred *before* the full scale civil war. From May the Soviet government did have to deal with the first major clashes of that conflict but the war did not get going in earnest until October. Moreover the extent to which the Bolsheviks had lost popular support even before the first anniversary of October is striking.

Many Bolshevik workers left their factories to work or fight for the new state. However the fact that many of the remaining workers appear to have stayed away from its first May Day celebrations must have worried the new authorities. Against the party’s wishes Petrograd’s local soviets now set up several “non-party” workers’ conferences. At these meetings the delegates had many criticisms of the government’s handling of the economic crisis as well as its requisitioning of grain from the peasants. Some also made demands for a more broad based government and the reconvening of the Constituent Assembly.

The killing of at least one worker at a demonstration for bread then led to several factory meetings making similar demands and

---

*LCW* v27, 126, 133, 272. Shkliarevsky (154) says Red Guards opened fire to disperse workers in Tula in January 1918 and Brovkin that 28 were shot that spring in the Urals.

<sup>19</sup> P.Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 183–9; R.Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power, a Study of Moscow...*, 171. Serge later wrote that counter-revolutionaries had infiltrated these centres, but the Cheka did not justify the raids in these terms at the time.

taking strike action. This in turn led to arrests that helped provoke a wave of demonstrations, meetings and eighteen strikes, mainly against repressive acts such as shootings and censorship. Most of those involved in this agitation were metalworkers who had been major supporters of the Bolsheviks in October but had been severely affected by unemployment.<sup>20</sup>

Hunger was a major cause of this discontent. The Soviet state had lost a quarter of its arable land to Germany and this, combined with transport difficulties, led to a situation in which during some months only 6% of the grain allocated to Petrograd and Moscow was delivered. Emergency measures were certainly needed if the cities were not to starve but Lenin's approach was disastrous. He blamed the crisis on grain hoarding by the better-off peasants, the kulaks. "Merciless war" was declared on them and the compulsory requisitioning of peasants' produce began in May.

This rapidly turned into indiscriminate pillaging which discouraged planting and helped provoke over a hundred large scale peasant revolts that year alone. These armed uprisings involved all the peasantry, not just the kulaks, and Lenin's furious response to one revolt in Penza was to instruct local Bolsheviks to carry out "ruthless mass terror" and to: "Hang no fewer than a hundred well-known kulaks, rich bags and bloodsuckers (and be sure that the hanging takes place in full view of the people)."<sup>21</sup>

The Menshevik leadership expelled members who actively supported such armed revolts. However they remained neutral in the first clashes of the civil war and in June the national Soviet excluded all its Menshevik delegates and called on the local soviets to

---

<sup>20</sup> Rosenberg, 230–8; McAuley, 99–108; Shkliarevsky, 155; J.Von Gelderen, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 88–91.

<sup>21</sup> R.Medvedev, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 156–9; O.Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War*, 197–8, 253–7, 335; Sirianni, 177–9, 189; *LCW* v36, 489, 695n; Farber, 46; R.Service, *Lenin, a Political Life* v3, 43. In *State within a State* (97) E.Albats cites Cheka documents authorising "concentration camps" for Mensheviks as early as spring 1918.

the provinces it appears that the same person frequently became chair of the party, soviet and Cheka, and, despite his unease, a personality cult soon began to develop around Lenin.

High-ranking party members in the Democratic Centralist group and union based Workers' Opposition had many criticisms of this situation. They argued for elections, not appointments, to posts and the Military Opposition called for less harsh discipline in the army. Trotsky's order to have "every" deserter on the Southern Front "shot" was never fully implemented but he advocated executions for people who merely harboured deserters. Indeed Lenin admitted that Red Army discipline was more "strict" than that of "the former government".<sup>29</sup>

## The Red Terror

The Red Terror was partly a reaction to the greater horrors of the anti-Bolshevik terror in which 23,000 Reds were killed in Finland and 100,000 Jews were murdered in the Ukraine. Nevertheless Lenin repeatedly advocated terror even before the attempt on his life in September 1918. For example during one anti-Bolshevik revolt he told the authorities to organise "mass terror, *shoot and deport the hundreds* of prostitutes who are making drunkards of the soldiers."

Such attitudes enabled the Cheka to acquire widespread powers with virtually no external controls. By the end of the war its head, Dzerzhinsky, was able to say that "the prisons are packed chiefly with workers and peasants instead of the bourgeoisie", and one of his chief lieutenants, Latsis, wrote that: "there is no sphere of life exempt from Cheka coverage." Lenin himself said that "during the war — anybody who placed his own interest above the common

---

<sup>29</sup> McAuley, 135–9; D.Gluckstein, *The Tragedy of Bukharin*, 38; N.Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, ch.13; Farber, 173; B.Pearce, *How the Revolution was Armed* v1, 487–8; *LCW* v33, 70–1.

soon closed this publication down again and the repeated arrests of leaders and outright bans in some towns made organised existence extremely difficult. This repression continued even when the Mensheviks recruited for the Red Army from the autumn of 1919.<sup>27</sup>

The authorities treated the anarchists and SRs in a similar way and Richard Sakwa says “there is mass evidence to support accusations of electoral malpractice.” Non-Bolshevik representation at the national Soviet congress fell to only 3% but Lenin was not particularly disturbed that many workers could no longer elect the representatives of their choice. He openly said: ‘Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position because it is the party that has won ... the position of vanguard of the entire ... proletariat. This party had won that position even before the revolution of 1905.’ He also said, “all claptrap about democracy must be scrapped”, and in *‘Left-Wing’ Communism – An Infantile Disorder*, he dismissed concerns about substitutionism, “about the dictatorship of leaders or the dictatorship of the masses” as “ridiculous and childish nonsense”.<sup>28</sup>

Lenin’s reluctance to allow real soviet democracy is not surprising considering that, despite all the repression, non-Bolshevik candidates still managed to win a third of the seats elected in Petrograd factories in 1920. However the result of his policies was now a dictatorship over the proletariat rather than one of the proletariat. In

---

<sup>27</sup> Brovkin, *Mensheviks*, ch.9; Farber, 99, 124–5; J.Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 37, 18–20, 56, 72; V.Broido, *Lenin and the Mensheviks*, 39; Brovkin, 63–6, 119, 167, 284–7; McAuley, 137–8. The Central Committee exhorted Bolsheviks to “imprison and sometimes even to shoot hundreds of traitors among the Kadets, the politically neutral, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who act (some with arms, some conspiring, others agitating against mobilisation, like the printers and the railwaymen among the Mensheviks) against the Soviet Government, i.e. for *Denikin*.” Leggett, 319.

<sup>28</sup> Sakwa, 178; Farber, 27; *LCW* v29, 535; v30, 506; v31, 175–6, 40–1, 49. In 1919 anarchists threw a bomb at the Moscow Bolshevik leadership in revenge for continued arrests. The attack was disavowed by most anarchist leaders but it provoked further repression. Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*.

do likewise. Meanwhile the mood in the factories finally persuaded the Petrograd soviet to hold the elections that it should have held in March. During the election campaign Commissar Volodarskii was assassinated and, although the Petrograd authorities ignored Lenin’s call for “mass terror”, they did declare martial law and forbid meetings.<sup>22</sup>

The election results in the factories gave the Bolsheviks around 50% of the vote, which, combined with significant support in the Red Army, still gave them a democratic majority in Petrograd. Nevertheless they had needed to resort to lay-offs, lockouts and widespread arrests to contain that summer’s protests, and Assemblies of Factory Representatives had continued to spread to other regions. The Assemblies made preparations for a national congress and called a general strike for 2 July. Consequently the newly elected Petrograd soviet decided to ban the movement. Machine guns were placed at strategic points in both Petrograd and Moscow, and the Moscow Assembly, which had apparently attracted 4,000 workers, had its delegates arrested.

The outcome was that, although a few strikes and protests continued that summer, the response to the Assemblies’ general strike call was very limited and the movement soon collapsed. Yet repression was not the only factor in this collapse. Workers’ indifference was also important and the Assemblies appear to have been unable to provide an alternative to Bolshevik policies. On the other hand, in contrast to the view that the civil war simply created problems for the Bolsheviks, it could be argued that the threat from the

---

<sup>22</sup> I.Getzler, *Martov*, 181; Farber, 124, 27; *LCW* v35, 336; McAuley, 103–7, 381; Rosenberg, 236. Some Trotskyists claim the Menshevik leader Martov told rail workers they should be “friendly to the Czechs and hostile to the Bolsheviks”, but the only source for this is a Right Menshevik who was “in the process of working his passage to Bolshevik favour” at the time. D.Footman, *The Russian Civil War*, 101.

Whites consolidated support for the government and saved it from even more damaging workers' unrest.<sup>23</sup>

These were not the only problems the Bolsheviks faced that summer. Their representation in county soviets fell from 66 to 45%. They responded by disbanding several soviets, violently suppressing protest strikes and artificially inflating their party's representation at the Soviet Congress.

Unable to alter Soviet policy democratically, the Bolsheviks' recent allies, the Left SRs, then resorted to assassinating the German ambassador on 6 July in an attempt to restart the war. The commander of the Bolshevik forces later said "there were few military formations on which the Bolshevik Party could rely" and that "the mass of the Moscow workers maintained a neutral position too." So it was only because the Left SRs had made no plans to overthrow the government that the Bolsheviks were able to rapidly suppress them the next day. They now had no hesitation in excluding many Left SRs from the soviets and banning their papers. Scores of other socialist publications had already been closed down and non-Bolshevik newspapers soon disappeared from Soviet Russia.<sup>24</sup>

The root cause of this split with the Left SRs was their opposition to government policy towards the peasants. Their reluctance to hand over grain, especially when the Bolsheviks had so few goods to give in exchange, made some requisitioning inevitable. However requisitioning was often ineffective and counter-productive, turning the majority of the population against the new state. Possible

<sup>23</sup> D.Mandel, 356, 381, 406; Sakwa, 72; Rosenberg, 236–8; Smith, 250.

<sup>24</sup> Medvedev, 148; Brovkin, *Slavic Review* v44n3, 244–9; Rabinowitch, *Russian Review* v54, 426; G.Leggett, *The Cheka...*, 74–82; V.Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War* (henceforth **Brovkin**); Brovkin, *Mensheviks*, 123–4; P.Kenez in Shukman, 154. The Left SRs told Dzerzhinsky "you can retain power". L.Hafner says that actions such as hostage taking and the mutiny of an Eastern Front commander only occurred after the Bolsheviks began to repress them by, for instance, arresting the Left SR delegates at the Soviet Congress. And the author of the telegram usually quoted to claim that the Left SRs thought they had taken power was not a Left SR at all. *Russian Review* v50, 329–42.

alternatives could have included the greater use of a tax-in-kind, higher grain prices, limited free trade or local soviets doing any necessary requisitioning. Such policies would have been very difficult to implement but they would have needed no more effort than that required to impose state requisitioning and could have reduced the need for external coercion.<sup>25</sup>

## Soviet democracy during the civil war

During the civil war the Whites were helped by fourteen Allied armies. However none of these armies fought in the main battles and both sides spent much of their time fighting national minorities and peasant insurgents. For example it appears that in June 1919 the Red Army's rear was engulfed by peasant uprisings against conscription.

Throughout the war some eight million lives were lost. Disease, malnutrition and constant insecurity, combined with widespread illiteracy, made democratic participation difficult in the extreme. All the same, many Bolshevik policies discouraged any participation that may have been practical.<sup>26</sup>

After their expulsion from the soviets the Menshevik leadership had difficulty preventing some provincial members from supporting anti-Bolshevik revolts. But by the autumn they had regained control of their party and the Bolsheviks reinstated Mensheviks in a number of soviets and legalised their paper. Nevertheless they

<sup>25</sup> Malle, 373–5, 498–9; Farber, 48; Sirianni, 189–197; Medvedev, 183–4; L.Lih, *Bread and Authority...*, 147, 168, 187; L.Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions*, 43–5. In 1920 Lenin appears to have rejected proposals from both Trotsky and the Congress of Economic Councils to reduce requisitioning. This and the fact that local Bolsheviks argued the local soviets could do any requisitioning and that the NEP was introduced in conditions even worse than those of 1918 all indicate that alternatives were possible. Nove in T.Brotherstone, *Trotsky Reappraisal*, 193.

<sup>26</sup> Figs, *Past and Present*, n129, 182.