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Looking Back on the Putilov and Astrakhan Strikes, One Hundred Years Later
12th March 2019

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1919: When the Bolsheviks Turned on the Workers

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One hundred years ago in Russia, thousands of workers were on strike in the city of Astrakhan and at the Putilov factory in Petrograd, the capital of the revolution. Strikes at the Putilov factory had been one of the principal sparks that set off the February Revolution in 1917, ending the tsarist regime. Now, the bosses were party bureaucrats, and the workers were striking against a socialist government. How would the dictatorship of the proletariat respond?

Bolshevik Realism

In March 1919, the Bolsheviks had uncontested power over the Russian state, but the revolution was slipping from their grasp. As self-styled pragmatists and realists, they believed that revolution had to be dictated from above by experts. Who can better understand the needs of the peasants and the proper means for communalizing the land and sharing the harvest than a revolutionary bureaucrat in an office in the city? And who knows more about the plight of the factory workers than a party official who worked in a factory once and now spends all his time going to committee meetings and interpreting the dictates of the Fathers of the Proletariat, men like Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Sokolnikov, and Zinoviev who never worked in a factory or toiled in the fields in their lives?[1] And who better

[1] Of the seven members of the first Politburo—Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev, Sokolnikov, Zinoviev, and Bubnov—all but Zinoviev had received elite educations and become professional activists immediately after their education. Stalin was the only one of the seven who came from a less-than-middle class background. His father was a well-to-do shoemaker who owned his own workshop, though he lost his fortunes and became an abusive alcoholic. Young Stalin was able to receive an elite religious education thanks to his mother's social connections. His first job was as a meteorologist; he later worked briefly at a storehouse in order to organize strike actions there.

Lenin and Sokolnikov were from families of professional white-collar workers; Bubnov was from a mercantile family; Kamenev was the son of a relatively well-paid worker in the railroad industry. Trotsky and

to protect the interests of the soldiers than the political commissar who stands at the back of the line during an offensive, pistol in hand, ready to shoot anyone who does not charge into enemy fire?[2]

Bolshevik realism made it clear that the only way to execute a *real* revolution was to take over the state, make it even stronger, and use it to stamp out all their enemies—who were, by definition, counterrevolutionaries. But the counterrevolutionaries must have had secret schools in every town and village, because by 1919 more and more people were joining their ranks, especially peasants, workers, and soldiers.

Zinoviev were the children of landowning peasants, or kulaks—the very people they identified as the class enemy in the countryside in order to justify the murder of millions, both actual kulaks and poor peasants who opposed Bolshevik policies.

Most anarchists do not believe that a person's class background determines their beliefs and attitudes, nor that it grants or denies them legitimacy as a human being. We recognize that how we grow up affects our perspective, but we tend to place more importance on how someone chooses to live their life. A few anarchists, like Kropotkin, came from elite backgrounds, whereas many more, such as Emma Goldman and Nestor Makhno, came from working-class or peasant backgrounds.

It is nonetheless significant that practically every single anarchist who was influential in the course of the Russian Revolution or who was chosen to lead a major detachment in the Civil War was a worker or a peasant. This exemplifies the slogan of the First International, "the liberation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves." (The only exception was Volin, who came from a white-collar background.) It is also significant that, while the Bolsheviks recruited heavily among industrial workers, their entire Politburo was 0% working class.

Given both Marx and Lenin's systematic use of their adversaries' class identity—real or perceived—to delegitimize them or even justify murdering them, the fact that neither Marx nor Lenin nor the rest of the Communist leadership were working class is hypocritical to say the least.

[2] On the "blocking units" that did this, see Volkogonov, Dmitri (1996), Shukman, Harold, ed., *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary,* London: HarperCollins, p.180.

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The "dictatorship of the proletariat" would have to kill a whole lot of proletarians. Not everyone could make it to the Promised Land.

Enemies, Enemies Everywhere

The dastardly anarchists had corrupted the age-old revolutionary slogan, *the liberation of the workers is the task of the political commissars—get back to work, it's under control.* They had replaced it with a dangerous revisionist lie—*"the liberation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves"*—and more and more people had come to believe this lie. In April 1918, the Bolsheviks unleashed a terror against the anarchists, who were becoming especially strong in Moscow. In September, they instituted a general Red Terror against all their former allies, killing over 10,000 in the first two months and implementing the gulag system.

They also had to turn their guns against the peasants, who were in open rebellion against the policy of "war communism" by which the Red Army and party bureaucrats could steal whatever food, livestock, and supplies from the peasants they saw fit.[3] Evidently, the uneducated peasants didn't have the vocabulary to understand that this theft was a "requisitioning," that their starvation was a form of "communism," and that it was being supervised by incorruptible men who had their best interests at heart. In August 1918, Lenin directed the Cheka and the Red Army to carry out mass executions in Penza and Nizhniy Novgorod to put an end to the protests. But dissent only spread, and the peasants gave up on protesting in order to arm themselves and fight back. Many formed "Green Armies," localized peasant detachments that often fought against both the White and the Red Armies.

[3] Brovkin, Vladimir (Autumn 1990), "Workers' Unrest and the Bolsheviks' Response in 1919", Slavic Review, 49 (3): 350–73

There was also a shortage of realism in the Red Army. Arguably, the most effective fighting units in the war against the tsarists and the capitalists of the White Army were the localized, volunteer detachments that elected and recalled their own officers; granted no special privileges to officers; defined their goals, general strategies, and organizational principles in assemblies; relied on the goodwill of local soviets to supply them; and were intimately familiar with the terrain they operated on. Such detachments included Marusya's Free Combat Druzhina, the Revolutionary Insurgent Army, the Dvinsk Regiment, and the Anarchist Federation of the Altai. Few other detachments were able to inflict critical defeats on tsarist forces even when they were overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned.[4] The fact that the combatants fought for a cause they believed in, were led by strategists elected on account of their abilities, and were wholeheartedly supported by the local peasants and workers enabled them to use the terrain to their advantage, fight more bravely than their opponents, innovate creative and intelligent strategies in response to developing circumstances, and transition between guerrilla and conventional warfare in a way that confounded the enemy. Such groups were instrumental in defeating General Denikin, Admiral Kolchak, and Baron Wrangel, ending the three major White offensives—not to mention capturing Moscow at the beginning of the October Revolution.

But all of these groups suffered a fatal defect. These fighters often prioritized listening to local peasants and workers and their own common soldiers over the wise dictates of the Fathers of the Proletariat emanating from the capital. Even worse, sometimes they *did* hear those dictates, yet *still* disobeyed them. And when the Party leaders, in their infinite wisdom, decided that it was necessary to massacre peasants

[4] Alexandre Skirda, trans. Paul Sharkey, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's Cossack*. Oakland: AK Press, 2003

capitalism" have long pointed out that the Communists were able to bring capitalism to the countries where the capitalist class had largely failed—they did capitalism better than the capitalists. But this naïve complaint misses out on the fact that a strong State, and thus a strong Revolution, requires a robust economy producing huge amounts of surplus value that can be reinvested as the Fathers of the Proletariat see fit.

Alongside all these exciting developments, the workers eventually got housing and healthcare, if they worked hard and kept their mouths shut. Provided, of course, that they weren't among the millions of victims of the systematic famines designed to break the peasantry.

And that's why these are such important days to remember.

On this, the one-hundred-year anniversary of the massacres of striking workers in Astrakhan and Petrograd, workers would do well to remember who has their best interests at heart, and keep in mind that obedience is freedom. To celebrate the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution, which continues to shine as a beacon to oppressed people everywhere, workers should obey their elected union representatives, prisoners should heed their guards, soldiers should obey the command to fire, and the people should await the directives of the government. Anything else would be anarchy.

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the means of production."[17] He also showed how the Soviet Union inherited and furthered the Russian imperialism of the earlier tsarist regime—though that's a topic for a future essay.

A realist knows that the best counterargument to all these sentimental complaints is the indisputable fact that, in the end, the Bolshevik strategy triumphed. They eliminated all their enemies. The idealists were dead—and therefore wrong. What better positive evidence can we find for the correctness of the Bolshevik position?

The End of Resistance to Bolshevik Realism

Things immediately got better. The workers no longer had to toil for the enrichment of the capitalist class. Now they reaped the fruit of their own labors. (Except, of course, for all the workers in the free-market enterprises permitted under the NEP, and the millions of peasants who quite literally had to give away the fruits and the grains they grew.) To make things simpler, all the social wealth they reaped was kept in a trust managed by the intellectual workers. The intellectual workers worked a lot harder and required more compensation, better food, and bigger houses—but they also made sure that most of that wealth went to fielding an army of 11 million (shy by just a million of being the largest army in world history). And a damn fine opera. And one of the most extensive secret police apparatuses ever seen, too, to make sure the people stayed *safe*.

During Stalin's Five Year Plans, the Soviet economy grew faster than the contemporary democratic economies and steered clear of the Depression that was ravishing much of the rest of the world. Idealistic anarchist critiques of "state

[17] Robin D.G. Kelley and Jesse Benjamin, "Introduction," in Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*. London: Verso, 2018. p.lvi

or workers for the sake of the revolution, the detachments led by those very peasants and workers simply weren't up to the task.

In order to increase the efficiency of the Red Army, the wise masters of the Bolshevik Party decided to take lessons from the great militarists of history, starting with the Tsarist army. By June 1918, they had abolished all the anti-realist policies that revolutionaries had wrongheadedly introduced into the Red Army: they discontinued the election of officers by the soldiers who would serve under them, reinstituted aristocratic privileges and pay grades for officers, recruited former Tsarist officers accustomed to those privileges, and brought in political commissars to spy on the soldiers and root out any incorrect thinking. After all, rebellious idealist soldiers had toppled one regime in 1917—and without a sufficient dose of realism, they might well topple another.

The Bolsheviks had also learned from imperialist armies throughout history that sent soldiers from one end of the empire to fight rebels at the other end of the empire. This was a sentimental kindness on the part of the Bolsheviks. Psychologically, it was much easier for Korean-speaking soldiers to avoid fraternizing with Ukrainian peasants and workers near Kharkiv—and on occasion to massacre them—and for Ukrainian-speaking soldiers to avoid fraternizing with Korean peasants and workers near Vladivostok (and occasionally to massacre them, too). This strategic practice also helped keep soldiers from getting lost. A Red Army soldier from Ukraine, fighting counterrevolutionaries in Irkutsk, would be hard-pressed to obtain support from locals or find his way home without leave. That ensured that he would know to stay with his regiment rather than deserting in a fit of anti-realism. And if he did get lost, a blond, round-eyed Ukrainian would be easy to find among the locals, who could return him to the proper authorities. Good organization: this is how a successful revolution is waged!

Yet the soldiers of the Red Army weren't educated enough to understand. A million desertions took place in a single year. Many Red Army detachments took their weapons and joined the peasants who were forming independent Green Armies. Later, huge groups would join Makhno, who was naïvely defeating the Whites without installing a dictatorship of his own. So the Bolsheviks had to be cleverer than their tsarist and imperialist mentors. They shot tens of thousands of deserters, but this age-old tactic wasn't enough. In a burst of inspired realism, they improvised a new tactic: taking the family members of soldiers hostage, and executing the family members if deserters did not turn themselves in to be shot.[5]

While so many of the Red Army's bullets were ending up in the bodies of Red Army soldiers or in the uneducated brains of anti-realist peasants, too few were being fired at the White Army—and the White Army was growing, threatening the revolution on every side. The Red Army was slowly pushing back the Northern Russian Expedition of British and US troops on the Northern Dvina front, but intense fighting over the winter had failed to dislodge General Denikin from the Donbass area of eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, a French expeditionary force had landed in Odessa, the White Army had cemented its hold on the Caucasus, and at the beginning of March, Admiral Kolchak had begun a general offensive on the eastern front, quickly capturing Ufa and continuing to gain ground.

The anarchist Black Army held the line in southern Ukraine, but their clever Bolshevik allies were starving them of weapons and ammunition, hoping the White Army would finish them off. This was an effective economization of resources on the part of the Fathers of the Proletariat. They would not have to spend time debating anarchists or making propaganda against them if the anarchists were all dead, and it was much easier to

[5] Beryl Williams, *The Russian Revolution 1917–1921*. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 1987.

bureaucracy that was now completely controlled by Party leadership.

Of course, as we have already shown, the Communist Party's "extraordinary measures" preceded the Russian Civil War; they may have been the primary cause of the opposition and outrage that fueled the multiple and conflicting factions that fought in the Civil War.

In 1921, with the Civil War all but over and Bolshevik dominance indisputable, Lenin and his followers could do away with "war communism." There followed more excuses about exceptional circumstances, delaying yet again the repartition of the pie in the sky that supposedly awaited the workers in paradise. The result was the New Economic Policy (NEP), which Lenin himself described as "a free market and capitalism, both subject to state control" together with state enterprises operating "on a profit basis."[16] Anarchists may have been among the first to level the accusation of "state capitalism," but Lenin accepted the label as an objective fact.

In conclusion, the Bolsheviks seesawed from November 1917 to the NEP in 1921, changing their economic policy multiple times. Throughout these changes, they entrusted control over the workplace to capitalist bosses with symbolic worker oversight, to Party lackeys, to bureaucratic supreme committees, and to *nepmen,* the economic opportunists of the NEP era. It seems the only people the Bolsheviks were not willing to trust were the workers themselves.

Anti-colonial Marxist Walter Rodney, who was sympathetic to Stalin and wholly supportive of Lenin, nonetheless acknowledged that "The state, not the workers, effectively controlled

[16] V.I. Lenin, "The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions under the New Economic Policy", LCW, 33, p. 184., Decision Of The C.C., R.C.P.(B.), January 12, 1922. Published in Pravda No. 12, January 17, 1922. *Lenin's Collected Works,* 2nd English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, first printed 1965, Volume 33, pp.186–196.

ing them with symbolic worker representatives completely subordinate to a director appointed by the Party.

The Communists did all of this while paying lip service to their slogan and key campaign promise of 1917, "All Power to the Soviets." They eventually got around the contradiction of simultaneously promoting and suppressing the soviets by declaring that councils of representatives of representatives, and even those of representatives of representatives of representatives, were also "soviets." In fact, the committee furthest removed from any actual soviet of real-life peasants, workers, and soldiers was the "Supreme Soviet." Since the Bolsheviks tightly controlled all these higher, more bureaucratic organs of government, which they had decided should also be called "soviets," they could say "All Power to the Soviets" with a straight face—because now all they were saying was, "All Power to Us!"

This ingenious trick was very similar to the one used by the Founding Fathers of the United States, when an assortment of wealthy merchants and slave-owners established a government "of the People, by the People, and for the People." Slave-owners qualified as people; slaves did not.

The Bolsheviks crushed the factory councils first, though they did not wait long to sink their teeth into the unions and drain them of their independence. It is noteworthy that they moved against the unions preemptively, preventing a possible threat to totalitarian rule even before the unions had offered any sign of resistance. At the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in January 1918, the Bolsheviks successfully defended their position that the trade unions should be subordinated to the Soviet government, in the face of opposition by Mensheviks and anarchists, who argued that the unions should remain independent.

The Bolsheviks were able to dominate the unions using the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. By 1919, under the pretext of the extraordinary measures required by the Civil War, the Central Council had been fully incorporated into the

present themselves as the alternative to the confused tsarists and liberals of the White Army than it was to debate the anarchists, with their insidious lies about people being capable of liberating themselves.

The stratagem of denying resources to the Black Army was to backfire in summer 1919. After Denikin broke through the lines, he advanced so far against a helpless Trotsky that he threatened Moscow, and only a resounding success by anarchists at the Battle of Peregenovka in September 1919 cut off White supply lines, ultimately forcing Denikin to retreat. But after all, that was why the Bolsheviks had allies: it was easier not to put all the people they wanted to kill on their "enemies" list all at once, in hopes that they would first kill each other in ways that would be advantageous to the Bolsheviks.

Worker Resistance to the Soviet State

Let's rewind to early 1919, when, facing so much resistance, the Bolsheviks needed more allies. They had legalized the Mensheviks after a few months of the Terror, and gotten the various anarchist detachments to focus their energies on fighting the Whites, but they still needed more support. After half a year of killing and imprisoning members of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (SRs), the Bolsheviks legalized the SRs; to be fair, the previous year, the SRs had tried killing and imprisoning the Bolsheviks, after the Bolsheviks had tried to monopolize all the instruments that would allow them to kill and imprison people. The Bolsheviks had won those monopolies now, but a revolution can't defend itself if too many of the participants are dead or in prison. They still needed help getting the common people in line working for and fighting for the Bolsheviks. The SRs had been good propagandists and considerably more popular than the Bolsheviks. Besides, it was easier to keep the SRs under their thumb when they were

out in the open, with public offices in Moscow, than when they were operating underground.

The SRs decided to trust the Bolsheviks, hoping that they could regain control of the soviets or win over other revolutionary forces. But once they came out of hiding, the Cheka began periodically arresting the SR leadership, accusing them of conspiracy, and hustling them off to the gulags. The organization never regained the strength to oppose the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, the legalization of the SRs and Mensheviks had reduced the number of enemies the Communists had to fight, and set more forces to work putting out propaganda in favor of the revolution.

The Bolsheviks still had plenty of problems. If it wasn't bad enough that so many peasants and soldiers were rebelling, the factory workers also began to rebel. In the city of Astrakhan, the workers went on strike. Even worse, many Red Army soldiers joined them, and similar strikes began to spread in the cities of Orel, Tver, Tula, and Ivanovo. Then strikes broke out at the giant Putilov factory in Petrograd, the capital of the revolution.

The Putilov factory had built rolling stock and other products for the railways, before branching out into artillery and armaments for the military. Later, they would also manufacture the tractors that would become essential to the industrialization of Russian agriculture, after Lenin ordained the transition from war communism to the "state capitalism" of the New Economic Policy. A strike at this factory was especially embarrassing for the Bolsheviks, because the Putilov factory had been one of the origin points of the revolution. The revolution of February 1917 had sprung from four groups: rebellious military units at the front, women protesting government food rationing, sailors stationed at Kronstadt and Petrograd, and striking workers at the Putilov factory. Strikes at the Putilov factory had also been one of the sparks that caused the 1905 Revolution.

organization by the workers themselves, but the Communist authorities refused to grant this demand. Their preferred slogan, *rabochi control,* did not denote anything beyond a nominal supervision of factory organization by workers. Under the system implemented by the Bolsheviks, workers participated in workplace decision-making together with the bosses, who could be the pre-Revolution capitalist owners or agents of the Party and the State, depending on Soviet policy at the moment.

All final decisions were made by the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy (the *Vesenkha*), an unelected, bureaucratic body established in December 1917 by decree of the *Sovnarkom* and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. All of these bureaucratic bodies were controlled at all times by the Bolsheviks, meaning that no worker could have a final say in workplace decisions without becoming a full-time party operative and climbing to the very highest ranks of the bureaucracy.

Already in March 1918, an assembly of factory councils in Petrograd denounced the autocratic nature of Bolshevik rule and the Bolshevik attempt to dissolve those factory councils not under Party control.[15] Such autocracy only increased when the Bolsheviks finally went ahead with the nationalization of the economy in the summer of 1918, increasing Party control and running the factories with the help of "experts" recruited from the old regime.

Though there was initially an ambiguous continuum between the economically oriented factory councils and the politically oriented town or village councils, the Communist Party quickly homogenized and bureaucratized the territorial soviets, starting with codes governing elections to the soviets in March 1918 and finishing by the time of the Soviet Constitution of 1922. Even more quickly, they got rid of the councils comprising all workers in a factory or other workplace, replac-

[15] Carlos Taibo, *Soviets, Consejos de Fábrica, Comunas Rurales.* Calumnia: Mallorca, 2017. p.58

solidarity between soviets and workers' councils across the country beginning already in 1917, and the fact of material support by peasants *and* urban workers for the anarchist detachments fighting against the White Army in the anarchist zones of Ukraine and Siberia, where idealist revolutionaries allowed workers and peasants to organize themselves. The simple fact that the factory councils were trying to coordinate at a countrywide level at the end of 1917 shows that they were in the process of developing what one might reasonably call a universal, proletarian, revolutionary consciousness; it was the Bolsheviks themselves who cut that process short.

From the Bolshevik perspective, what was most dangerous about factory council consciousness was that it might *not* lead to the particular kind of working-class consciousness that the Bolsheviks desperately needed to stay in power. Self-organized factories would support revolutionary armies of workers and peasants, but they probably would not support the Red Army in suppressing workers and peasants, nor would they support Lenin's highly unpopular cession of Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics to imperial Germany.

The councils were dangerous for another reason as well. Not only were they an organ of workers' autonomy and self-organization that rendered any political party obsolete, they also tended to erode party discipline. Workers within the councils who were affiliated to the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, or any other party tended to act in accord with their common interests as factory workers rather than maintaining party interests.[13]

As Paul Avrich pointed out,[14] the Bolsheviks made use of a nuanced distinction between two very different versions of workers' control. *Upravleniye* meant direct control and self-

[13] Mário Machaquiero, *A revolução soviética, hoje. Ensaio de releitura da revolução de 1917*. Oporto: Afrontamento, 2008. p.144.

[14] Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*. Oakland: AK Press, 2006. p.147

The Bolsheviks had already dealt with the Dvinsk Regiment—heroes of the revolution and a symbol of the refusal of soldiers to fight in an imperialist war—by assassinating their commander, Grachov, and disbanding the regiment. They had managed to do this quietly and out of the public eye. Later, in 1921, they would explain that in the course of the revolution, the Kronstadt sailors had somehow gone from being the staunchest defenders of revolution to become petty bourgeois individualists infiltrated by White agents. No one really believed Trotsky when he said this, but it didn't matter.[6] What was really at stake was not truth, but power; the Bolsheviks had already crushed all their other enemies, and they resolved questions about the politics of the Kronstadt sailors not by presenting facts, but by slaughtering them, as well.

But the crushing of Kronstadt was still two years in the future. In March 1919, the Bolsheviks still had plenty of enemies, and everyone was watching. The Putilov workers had some simple demands: increased food rations, as they were starving to death; freedom of the press; an end to the Red Terror; and the elimination of privileges for Communist Party members.[7] What would the Bolsheviks do? Was it possible to have a revolution without starving the workers, shutting down critical

[6] Even before Stalin, the Bolsheviks spread lies not so much to convince people of them as to force them to repeat the lies. This was an effective loyalty test: anyone who insisted on speaking the truth was clearly a dangerous counterrevolutionary, whereas those who called starving peasants "kulaks" or denounced principled revolutionary sailors as "White agents" had accepted Communist realism.

[7] "We, the workmen of the Putilov works and the wharf, declare before the laboring classes of Russia and the world, that the Bolshevik government has betrayed the high ideals of the October revolution, and thus betrayed and deceived the workmen and peasants of Russia; that the Bolshevik government, acting in our name, is not the authority of the proletariat and peasantry, but the authority of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, self-governing with the aid of the Extraordinary Commissions [Chekas], Communists, and police.

newspapers, disappearing revolutionaries of other tendencies, and elevating Party members as a new aristocracy?

The Bolshevik Response

What a silly question! The Bolsheviks were realists, and their strategy relied on making the revolution by gaining control of the State. The State *was* the Revolution, as long as it was a Bolshevik State. They couldn't make the State stronger without eliminating their rivals, squeezing the workers and peasants for every last drop of sweat and blood, and divvying up the wealth among themselves. Who in their right mind would become a Bolshevik unless that meant obtaining a bigger paycheck, guaranteed food rations, and a chance to move up in the world? The Communist Party needed realists. The idealists would starve. Those who were willing to say that the State was Revolution and obedience was freedom earned a chance to contribute their talents to building the new apparatus.

As for the suckers who remained workers rather than becoming Party officials, the Bolsheviks knew that the role of workers was to work. Workers who did not work were like

"We protest against the compulsion of workmen to remain at factories and works, and attempts to deprive them of all elementary rights: freedom of the press, speech, meetings, and inviolability of person.

"We demand:

1. Immediate transfer of authority to freely elected Workers' and Peasants' soviets. Immediate re-establishment of freedom of elections at factories and plants, barracks, ships, railways, everywhere.

2. Transfer of entire management to the released workers of the trade unions.

3. Transfer of food supply to workers' and peasants' cooperative societies.

4. General arming of workers and peasants.

5. Immediate release of members of the original revolutionary peasants' party of Left Socialist Revolutionaries.

6. Immediate release of Maria Spiridonova [a Left SR leader]."

> out in a perfectly ordinary manner… Every man in his place. The best way to support the Soviet Government these days is to carry on with one's job."
>
> -Bolshevik spokesmen at the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, October 26 [Old Style calendar], 1917 (quoted in Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control 1917–1921*)

> "It is absolutely essential that all the authority in the factories should be concentrated in the hands of management… Under these circumstances any direct intervention by the trade unions in the management of enterprises must be regarded as positively harmful and impermissible."
>
> -Lenin speaking at the Eleventh Congress in 1922

Referring again to the Trotskyist account, "The Bolsheviks now called upon the trade unions to render a special service to the nascent Soviet state and to discipline the factory committees. The unions came out firmly against the attempt of the factory committees to form a national organization of their own. They prevented the convocation of a planned all-Russian congress of factory committees and demanded total subordination on the part of the committees." At the end of 1917, the Bolsheviks forced the factory committees to incorporate themselves within the trade unions, in an attempt to curtail their autonomy.

From the moment they were in power, the Bolsheviks treated workers' councils as a threat. Why? Many Leninists, as well as the aforementioned Trotskyist, claimed that the councils were only conscious of their interests at the level of individual factories; they could not take into account the interests of the entire economy or the entire working class. This is contradicted, though, by the many examples of

the unions to support the pre-October Kerensky government. According to a Trotskyist account, "As they were preparing for the seizure of power, Lenin and his followers tried to approach the trade unions from a new angle and to define their role in the Soviet system." Promising them greater power, the Bolsheviks hoped to win union support for their project of seizing control of the State—or at least acquiescence to it.

According to two other pro-Leninist scholars, Lenin "essentially abandoned the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets'" when he "convinced the party that the time was right to seize state power."[11] This is a fairly literal admission of fact. If the soviets were to have all the power, the Party could have none.

In November 1917, immediately after taking power, the Bolsheviks decreed that the factory committees must *not* participate in the direction of the companies, nor take on any responsibility in their functioning; instead, each committee was subordinated to a "Regional Council of Workers' Control" which answered to the "All-Russian Council of Workers' Control. The composition of these higher bodies was decided by the Party, with the trade unions receiving the majority of the seats.[12]

> "The Revolution has been victorious. All power has passed to the Soviets… Strikes and demonstrations are harmful in Petrograd. We ask you to put an end to all strikes on economic and political issues, to resume work and to carry it

[11] Robin D.G. Kelley and Jesse Benjamin, "Introduction," in Walter Rodney, *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World.* London: Verso, 2018.

[12] Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control 1917–1921.* 1970. p.65

"Once power had passed into the hands of the proletariat, the practice of the Factory Committees of acting as if they owned the factories became anti-proletarian." -A.M. Pankratova, *Fabzavkomy Rossil v borbe za sotsialisticheskuyu fabriku* (Russian Factory Committees in the struggle for the socialist factory). Moscow, 1923

broken machines. As any realist can tell you, when a machine breaks the only thing to do is take it out back and put a bullet in its brain.

Between March 12 and March 14, the Cheka cracked down in Astrakhan. They executed between 2000 and 4000 striking workers and Red Army deserters. Some they killed by firing squad, others by drowning them—tying stones around their necks and throwing them in the river. They had learned the latter technique from Lenin's heroes, the Jacobins—enlightened bourgeois revolutionaries who massacred tens of thousands of peasants who weren't educated enough to know that the commons were a thing of the past and land privatization was the way of the future.[8]

The Bolsheviks also killed a smaller number of members of the bourgeoisie, between 600 and 1000. The smartest of the bourgeoisie had already joined the Communist Party, recognizing it as the best way to profit in the new situation. But the stuffier bourgeois conservatives were staunchly opposed to the Bolsheviks, the anarchists, and the aristocrats, as well, though they weren't against allying with the aristocrats. Any political system in which they could not do whatever they wanted to whomever they wanted, they called "tyranny."

The bourgeois conservatives would also have crushed the striking workers, perhaps with hunger instead of bullets, if they had been in charge. Despite this, the Bolsheviks claimed that the striking workers had to be agents of the bourgeois order. Curiously, when anarchists had expropriated the bourgeoisie in Moscow in April, 1918, the Bolsheviks had called the anarchists "bandits" and returned the property to the bourgeois. Now, they killed bourgeois dissidents as well as striking workers—but they reserved the vast majority of the bullets for the workers.

[8] Piotr Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution.* Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989. p.454–458

Two days later, on March 16, the Cheka stormed the Putilov factory. They arrested 900 workers and executed 200 of them without a trial. These were *pedagogical* killings meant to "teach them a lesson," educating the workers by executing their peers. The workers did not understand yet, but they would have to learn: workers were meant to work. If they had to starve, it was for the good of the proletariat.

The workers did not learn this lesson right away. At first, state repression only intensified worker opposition. According to intercepted Bolshevik cables, 60,000 workers were on strike in Petrograd alone in June 1919, three months after all the executions at the Putilov factory.[9] The poor Bolsheviks had no choice but to kill even more workers and expand their gulag system to the point that it could reeducate not just thousands, but millions.

Many later Marxists unfairly blamed Josef Stalin for the USSR turning into a massive machinery of murder, but we can see the origins of that macabre evolution right here in the need of the Bolshevik authorities to kill workers in the name of workers. The entirety of the Party apparatus, from Lenin all the way down, dedicated itself to liquidating all opposition; and the entirety of this monstrous venture was ordained from the moment that the Communists decided that they were the conscious vanguard of the proletariat, that economic egalitarianism could be achieved through political elitism, and that liberatory ends justified authoritarian means.

[9] Document no. 54, "Summary of a Report on the Internal Situation in Russia," in *A Collection of Reports on Bolshevism in Russia,* abridged ed. Parliamentary Paper: Russia no. 1 [London: HMSO, 1919], p.60

The Economic Policy of the Communist Party

Other revolutionary currents had conflicting ideas regarding the demands of workers and their instruments of self-organization. Some favored the factory councils that spontaneously arose around the February Revolution. Others favored the workers' unions that had grown immensely in the course of 1917. Only the Bolsheviks had a realist position, changing their relationship with these structures according to which way the wind blew. As documented by Carlos Taibo,[10] the Bolsheviks alternated between promoting the soviets and unions, attempting to capture them within larger bureaucratic structures controlled by the Party, eroding their powers, and suppressing them outright. Their approach varied wildly according to whether they believed that they could use these organizations to prop up their own power or feared, instead, that these organizations threatened Bolshevik supremacy. All power to the Party was their only consistent principle.

Throughout 1917, the Bolsheviks gained immense popularity by making all the right propaganda. They promised to redistribute the land directly to the peasants, to end the war without allowing imperialist Germany to annex territory, and to give the workers control of their workplaces. We have already seen how they broke the first two promises. As for their promise to the workers, they pitted different workers' organizations against each another as they steadily strengthened their bureaucratic control.

In 1917, factory councils had sprung up in hundreds of factories throughout Russia, while membership in trade unions grew from tens of thousands to 1.5 million. At first, the Mensheviks dominated the unions and used their influence to get

[10] Carlos Taibo, *Soviets, Consejos de Fábrica, Comunas Rurales.* Calumnia: Mallorca, 2017