

Beware the Bolsheviks

80th anniversary of the Russian Revolution

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IN 1922, after seeing the product of the Russian revolution first hand, the anarchist Emma Goldman described how "Soviet Russia had become the modern socialist Lourdes". Eighty years after the revolution in Russia a reflection on that period has more than just historical value. Many left wing organisations still hold up this era as the model for future revolution. In order to challenge this Bolshevik conception of organisation and revolution we look at what the consequences of this model were.

The Bolsheviks organised as a vanguard party, which intended to lead the revolution. This structure led to particular outcomes and a look at the 'hidden' history of the Russian Revolution illustrates this. Lenin, in his book 'State and Revolution', talks of a society where every cook shall govern.

But in reality the Party, in its capacity of leader of the revolution, was governing. By November 9th 1917 a soviet (committee of elected workers' delegates) in the Peoples Commissariat of Posts & Telegraphs had already been abolished by decree. Even earlier than this, the revolution having barely liberated the workers from virtual slavery, Bolshevik leaders were telling workers that "the best way to support Soviet Government is to carry on with one's job".

Lenin, in March 1918, wrote (Collected Works, Vol. 27 page 270) that the Party relates to workers by leading "them along the true path of labour discipline, along the task of coordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings about the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the will of the Soviet leader, of the dictator during the work". So much for every cook governing.

These are not just isolated incidents. The Party soon began to institutionalise its dominance, for instance factory committees, instead of being allowed to form federations across the industries, had to report to undemocratic bodies which were hand picked by the Party. It is in this context that Daniel Guerin argued that "In fact the power of the soviets only lasted a few months, from October 1917 to the spring of 1918."

How did the Bolsheviks go about 'securing' the revolution? Trotsky, as leader of the Red Army, reintroduced regular army discipline, not only including executions for desertion but also all the petty regulations like saluting that gave officers special positions. He abolished election of officers, writing "the elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree".

The White Terror was responded to with collective punishments, categorical punishments, torture, hostage taking and random punishments. These were not just directed at known 'Whites' but also at their friends and families. On 3rd September 1918, the Bolshevik newspaper 'Ivestia' announced that over 500 hostages had been shot by the Petrograd Cheka, not because they had committed a crime but because they were unlucky enough to come from the wrong background.

Some will argue that this terror was legitimised by the White Terror. But by April of 1918 the terror was to be used against political groups that supported the revolution but opposed Bolshevik rule. Over two days in April 1918, 40 anarchists were killed or wounded and around 500 put in prison in a series of attacks in Moscow and Petrograd.

All the major anarchist publications were banned in May 1918. This despite the fact that anarchists had fought for the revolution in October, four anarchists being on the Military Revolutionary Committee which co-ordinated the rising. Over the next four years, hundreds then thousands of anarchists were to be arrested, jailed, tortured, exiled and executed. Other pro-revolution left parties suffered a similar fate and by 1919 so did workers who acted independently against the regime.

Bolshevik modes of organisation have particular outcomes, the centralisation of power. This sort of organisation means that 'Stalin didn't fall from the moon' but was the inheritor of this undemocratic organisation. This is in opposition to 'Socialism from Below' and the motto of the First International, "the emancipation of the toilers must be the work of the toilers themselves" and not the work of some 'vanguard' party.

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