

From Lenin to Stalin

An Introduction

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August 9, 2020

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In October, 1917 the Russian working class made history. The embryonic forms of workers' democracy in the Soviets gave a landslide mandate to the Bolshevik Party, under a platform of "Peace, Bread and Land." Acting swiftly and in conjunction with other revolutionaries, including many anarchists, the Bolsheviks captured the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg and dismissed the government. The Bolsheviks had also taken up the slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" in conjunction with the anarchist movement. Theoretically, this is what they set about to do.

The whole world was shaken by the events in Russia, unleashing a tide of inspirational class struggle that swept the globe. Suddenly, the prospect that workers could run the world themselves became very real. Within months however, the new taste of freedom began to turn sour. Armed with the excuse of the civil war the Bolsheviks outlawed other revolutionary left groups, banned their newspapers, suppressed strikes and labour leaders were being rounded up and thrown in jail. Workers and peasants began to complain of the privileges their new communist leaders had while the masses went hungry.

Anarchists throughout this period had a complicated relationship with the new regime. As documents like the 'Soviet of Workers, Soldiers and Peasants Deputies' by the anarcho-syndicalist G.P Maximoff show, most anarchists were dedicated to defending the newfound workers' democracy through the Soviets. However, they were not prepared to sacrifice the hard won gains of the revolution at the altar of the Bolshevik party. Instead, they largely set about constructive projects like the factory committees and the revolutionary movement for 'free soviets' in Ukraine.

As the civil war raged on, conditions became more dire. The Bolsheviks resorted to all sorts of backwards methods to retain their hold on power. Not just suppression of freedom for the workers, but including former Monarchist commanders into their military, gerrymandering Soviet elections, appointing political commissars in the factories, one man management and a new production system based on American industrial capitalist methods. On top of the suppression of the urban proletariat, the mishandling of relations with the peasantry was an error of monumental proportions. The Cheka and other disciplinary organisations were created for the purposes of grain acquisition, often at gunpoint. Workers and peasants often tried to get around this by direct forms of trade. As Kropotkin expressed in his letters to Lenin, the government's interference was only making things worse. The net result of this was the explosion of a rebellion in the naval base of Kronstadt.

The sailors took up arms in support of a wave of strikes that had broken out in the city, where the hated Cheka arrested labour leaders. The sailors arrested their Bolshevik leaders and issued a list of 14 demands. The famous revolutionary sailors called for a return to the principles of the revolution. In what would prove to be possibly the most tragic moment of the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik leadership lied through the press and to their own party. The Bolshevik leadership invented a plot involving counter-revolutionary forces from abroad, and refused to share the real programme of the sailors. Even today, it's rare to find a Marxist historian who will provide the full list and details, for it embarrasses the notion that the Bolsheviks were truly a party for 'socialism from below'. Selected units of the Red Army were sent in to crush the rebellion, and thousands of revolutionaries were slaughtered.

This moment proved crushing even for many Bolsheviks themselves. Many resigned from the party. The rank hypocrisy of the party had become evident even to its most strident supporters. As Victor Serge recounts;

“The Kronstadt sailors, fighting without competent officers (one of their number, to be sure, was an ex-officer named Kozlovski, but he played an unimportant role and had no authority), made poor use of their artillery. Some escaped to Finland; some fought a savage defensive battle, from fort to fort and street to street, and died shouting. ‘Long live the World Revolution!’ Some even died with the cry: ‘Long Live the Communist International!’ Several hundred were taken into Petrograd and turned over to the Cheka, which months later – criminally, stupidly – was still shooting little groups of them. These prisoners belonged body and soul to the revolution; they had given expression to the sufferings and will of the Russian people; and there was the NEP to show that they had been right! Furthermore, they had been taken prisoner in a civil war, and by a government which for a long while had been promising an amnesty to those of its adversaries who were willing to become its supporters.”

For the Bolsheviks, working class control and democracy had been supportable so long as it fit the party programme. By setting themselves above and outside the Russian working class the party and its new bureaucracy had quickly come to represent its own interests. The foundations had been laid for the new totalitarian state.

Often today’s apologists use the excuse that the Soviets and factory committees could not be democratic given the decimation of the working class during the civil war. While it is certainly true that the destruction wrought-large had a huge impact on the nature of the regime and its potentials, it is untrue that the working class in Russia had been destroyed or stopped having revolutionary aspirations. The Russian working class was not “de-proletarianised”, and sources such as Piriani’s book prove that in scrupulous detail.

Many modern socialists claim the legacy of the Bolshevik Leon Trotsky, citing his struggle against Stalin and the last gasp of the ‘Left Opposition’ within the party, which was expelled in 1927. To anarchists this seems like an ironic claim to the democratic legacy. Trotsky crushed the Kronstadt rebellion, betrayed the military alliance with the Left Socialist and Anarchists Insurrectional Army in the Ukraine, and actively worked to undermine the earlier democratic movement of the Workers Opposition in the Bolshevik Party. The following quote is Trotsky’s attitude towards the Workers Opposition, and it speaks volumes of his attitude towards the working class:

“They place the right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship, even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain dictatorship, regardless of the temporary wavering even in the class.... The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of democracy.”

For anarchists, we do not believe that there is a line in the sand drawn with Lenin and Trotsky on one side, and Stalin on the other. The totalitarian regime that solidified under Stalin had its basis in the regime developed under the earlier leadership of Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolsheviks.

As the Italian revolutionary anarchist Errico Malatesta wrote to Luigi Fabbri:

“In reality, what we have is the dictatorship of one party, or rather, of one party’s leaders: a genuine dictatorship, with its decrees, its penal sanctions, its henchmen and,

above all, its armed forces which are at present also deployed in the defense of the revolution against its external enemies, but which will tomorrow be used to impose the dictators' will upon the workers, to apply a brake on revolution, to consolidate the new interests in the process of emerging and protect a new privileged class against the masses.

General Bonaparte was another one who helped defend the French Revolution against the European reaction, but in defending it, he strangled the life out of it. Lenin, Trotsky and their comrades are assuredly sincere revolutionaries (...) and they will not be turning traitors-but they are preparing the governmental structures which those who will come after them will utilize to exploit the Revolution and do it to death. They will be the first victims of their methods and I am afraid that the Revolution will go under with them."

Today's socialists do a disservice to the ideal of socialism by justifying the crushing of revolutionary workers by the Bolshevik party. For those who really believe in socialism, workers' democracy is the path forward, not something to be permitted when it meets the criteria of a self proclaimed vanguard.

Recommended Reading

The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920–24, Simon Piriani, 2008.

An excellent, highly detailed and researched book drawing on minutes of party committees and factory organisations that details the destruction of working class democracy in the Soviet Union. This book completely undermines the narrative that the counter-revolution began under Stalin.

Bloodstained: 100 Years of Leninist Counter-Revolution, anthology, 2017.

A collection of seminal essays from important participants and theorists reflecting on the tragedy of the Russian Revolution. Available as an e-book from AK Press for \$2.

Means and Ends: The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power, Anarchpac, 2019.

A contemporary article on the material reasons anarchists do not advocate building a 'workers state.'

Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution, Rod Jones, 1984.

A detailed study of the Russian Factory Committees, the alternatives they attempted to provide and their suppression by the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, Maurice Brinton, 1970.

This infamous pamphlet traces the timeline of decisions made by the Bolshevik party in undermining the democratic aspirations and control of the working class.

The State and Revolution; Theory and Practice, Iain McKay, 2018.

McKay's fantastic essay comparing the theoretical work of Lenin in State and Revolution with the practice of the Bolsheviks in action.

The Trotskyist School of Falsification, Iain McKay, 2020.

McKay reviews Serge's *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* in order to examine and debunk

popular lies about Trotsky, lest anyone think Trotsky represented some kind of democratic alternative to Stalin.

Kronstadt '21, Victor Serge, extract from Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 1951.

While Serge continued to support the Bolsheviks, the evidence speaks for itself.

Resolution of the General Meeting of the Crews of the Ships of the Line, Kronstadt, 1921.

The 14 point list of demands of the Kronstadt Insurgents.

'The soviet of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies', G.P Maximoff, 1917

A December 1917 article laying out the attitude of anarchists towards the Soviets, which in turn undermines the bizarre Marxist claim that anarchists were somehow against soviet democracy.

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