

Introduction to “The Unknown Revolution”

Anarcho

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But in the People's State of Marx there will be, we are told, no privileged class at all. All will be equal... At least this is what is promised ... but there will be a government and, note this well, an extremely complex government. This government will not content itself with administering and governing the masses politically... It will also administer the masses economically, concentrating in the hands of the State the production and division of wealth... There will be a new class, a new hierarchy ... and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge, and an immense ignorant majority. And then, woe unto the mass of ignorant ones!

—Michael Bakunin¹

The Unknown Revolution is a classic anarchist account of the Russian Revolution, and its title gave the libertarian movement a new way of describing history from below.² Its author, Voline (1882–1945), was well placed to both describe and analyse these world-shaking events, being a Russian anarchist who took an active part in the revolution once he returned from exile in 1917.³ Active in radical circles from the earliest years of the twentieth century, he participated in the 1905 near revolution as a member of the populist Social Revolutionary Party, before becoming an anarchist after fleeing the bloody repression of a Tsarist regime fighting for its very existence.⁴

You have in your hands a book written by both an active participant in events (when not, of course, imprisoned by the Bolsheviks) and someone knowledgeable about anarchism.⁵ It provides an eyewitness account of the defining period of the twentieth century and seeks to draw appropriate conclusions to help revolutionaries avoid its errors. As Voline puts it in the “Preface”:

A fundamental problem has been bequeathed to us by the revolutions of 1789 and 1917. Opposed to a large extent to oppression, animated by a powerful breath of liberty, and proclaiming liberty as their essential purpose, why did these revolutions go down under a new dictatorship, exercised by a new dominating and privileged

¹ Michael Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 318–19.

² Sadly, it is necessary to explain what we mean by “libertarian,” as this term has been appropriated by the free-market capitalist right. Socialist use of libertarian dates from 1857 when it was first used as a synonym for anarchist by communist-anarchist Joseph Déjacque in an Open Letter to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and in the following year as the title for his paper *Le Libéraire, Journal du Mouvement Social*. This usage became more commonplace in the 1880s, and by the end of the nineteenth century libertarian was used as an alternative for anarchist internationally. The American right knowingly stole the term in the 1950s. See my “160 Years of Libertarian,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 71 (Fall 2017).

³ See the “Appendix: A Bibliographical Sketch” for a short history of Voline’s book. For a good account of the book and its author, see Paul Avrich, “V.M. Eikhenbaum (Voline): The Man and His Book,” in *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴ See the “Appendix: Russian Revolutionary Parties” for a discussion of the ideas and differences between the populist Social Revolutionary Party and the Russian Marxist factions (namely, the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks).

⁵ Excellent anarchist eyewitness accounts and analyses of the Russian Revolution include: Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London/Zagreb: Active Distribution/Sto Citas, 2017); Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth* (London/Zagreb: Active Distribution/Sto Citas, 2017); Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, *To Remain Silent Is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia*, ed. Andrew Zonneveld (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority!, 2013); Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Books, 1970), chapter 52; Emma Goldman et al., *Anarchist Encounters: Russia in Revolution*, ed. A. W. Zurbrugg (London: Anarres Editions, 2017); G.P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia* (Chicago: Alexander Berkman Fund, 1940). An overview of the Russian anarchist movement can be found in Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2005).

group, in a new slavery for the mass of the people involved? What will be the conditions which will permit a revolution to avoid this sad end? Will this end, for a long time still, be a sort of historical inevitability, or is it due to passing factors, or simply to errors and faults that can be avoided from now on? And in the latter case, what will be the means of eliminating the danger which already threatens the revolutions to come? Is it permissible to hope to avert or surmount it?

This is the aim of the work, and to achieve this goal Voline discusses what has been hidden from the usual accounts of the Russian Revolution. As such, *The Unknown Revolution* is an example of history from below, from the perspective of the working classes and our struggle for freedom from class society. However, like any work it can hardly cover every aspect of the revolution nor can it discuss work that appeared after its publication. Here we will attempt to uncover more of the *Unknown Revolution* and seek to show where subsequent research has confirmed Voline's classic. Along the way we will seek to address some of the many distortions and myths inflicted on those seeking to understand the failures of Bolshevism by those seeking to defend it—but who will only, if they are listened to, repeat history rather than learn from it.⁶

Marxism and Anarchism before 1917

Before discussing the events of 1917 and after, we need to present some theoretical background. Neither Bolsheviks nor anarchists took part in the revolution without having some idea of what to do. Both were long-standing movements that had clashed over how best to fight for socialism and, equally important, what a socialist society would be like in its immediate post-revolution features. For while there was agreement over the end goal—a stateless, communist society—there was much disagreement on how to get there.

While the first person to self-proclaim as an anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, had critiqued the socialists of his time (namely, “utopian socialists” like Charles Fourier and Jacobin socialists like Louis Blanc), the defining clash between libertarian and authoritarian socialism took place between Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx in the International Working Men's Association. Between approximately 1868 and 1873, these two great thinkers opposed each other both in terms of tactics for the labour movement and for social revolution.⁷

Given how Bakunin's ideas—like anarchism in general—are usually systematically distorted by Marxist accounts, some space is needed to discuss both thinkers. As Lenin draws on the writings of Marx and Engels against anarchism in his *The State and Revolution*, this is no academic task—particularly as the issues and solutions raised are relevant to what happened during the Russian

⁶ It may—and will—be objected that other things were said by Lenin and Trotsky. This is true, just as it is true that the same can be applied to Stalin, as well, but few do so. Rather than being “selective,” it is case of seeking the ideas and actions of the Bolsheviks that helped determine the outcome of the revolution. It is far more relevant to look at reality than repeat rhetoric, however fine it may be.

⁷ It is necessary to stress that Bakunin did not “invent” revolutionary anarchism. Doubtless he contributed immensely to its development, but Bakunin gained influence by championing tendencies that already existed within the European labour movement at the time. These tendencies, which built upon the rich theoretical contributions of Proudhon by applying them to the labour movement, existed before Bakunin joined the International and would have come into conflict with Marx anyway, but the Russian rebel deepened them and gave them a distinctive social revolutionary stamp.

Revolution. In short, ideas matter—particularly the ideas of a ruling party seeking to implement them.

In contrast to Marx, who sought to organise working-class political parties that would run for election (“political action”), Bakunin advocated what would later be termed a syndicalist strategy.⁸ While Marxists “believe it necessary to organise the workers’ forces in order to seize the political power of the State,” anarchists “organise for the purpose of destroying it” by “the development and organisation of the non-political or anti-political power of the working classes.” Bakunin saw this in terms of creating new organs of working-class power in opposition to the state, organised “from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, starting with the associations, then going on to the communes, the region, the nations, and, finally, culminating in a great international and universal federation.” In other words, a system of workers’ councils or unions creating “a real force” that “knows what to do and is therefore capable of guiding the revolution in the direction marked out by the aspirations of the people: a serious international organisation of workers’ associations of all lands capable of replacing this departing world of *states*.” To Marx’s argument that workers should send their representatives to parliament and municipal councils, Bakunin realised this would mean the “new worker deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, living and soaking up all the bourgeois ideas and acquiring their habits, will cease being workers” and “become converted into bourgeois, even more bourgeois-like than the bourgeois themselves... Because men do not make positions; positions, contrariwise, make men.”⁹

Likewise, their views of revolutionary transformation differed. While Marx would use state power to nationalise property, Bakunin argued instead that after a successful revolt “workers’ associations would then take possession of all the tools of production as well as all buildings and capital, arming and organising themselves into regional sections made up of groups based on streets and neighbourhood boundaries. The federally organised sections would then associate themselves to form a federated commune.” The communes themselves would federate and “organise the common defence and propaganda against the enemies of the Revolution, and develop practical revolutionary solidarity with its friends in all lands.”¹⁰ So it must be stressed—particularly given Lenin’s argument in *The State and Revolution*—that Bakunin’s opposition to Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” was *not* based on an unawareness that a revolution needed to be organised and defended. Likewise, it is a Marxist myth that anarchists think an anarchist society will be created overnight.¹¹

All this is reflected in Voline’s book, with its excellent discussion of the anarchist alternatives to Bolshevik state-building and the role of vanguard elements (Book II, Part I, Chapter 1). In this and his analysis of the state, he follows the path laid by Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin—particularly the latter, as he effectively paraphrases Kropotkin’s arguments:

[W]hat means can the State provide to abolish this [capitalist and landlord] monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? ...

⁸ The notion that syndicalism by advocating class struggle is influenced by Marxism cannot be sustained once an awareness of Bakunin’s actual ideas is gained, as I summarise in “Another View: Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism,” *Anarchist Studies* vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 2012).

⁹ Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 262–3, 270, 174, 171–72.

¹⁰ Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 179–80.

¹¹ These and other Marxist myths about anarchism are debunked in my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2012), section H.2.

[W]hat advantages could the State provide for abolishing these same [capitalist and landlord] privileges? Could its governmental machine, developed for the creation and upholding of these privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in *their* unions, *their* federations, completely outside the State?¹²

The state and its characteristic features did not arise by chance but rather evolved to secure minority rule. Thus, the bourgeoisie “worked to establish its authority in the place of the authority of the royalty and nobility which it demolished systematically. To this end the bourgeois struggled bitterly, cruelly if need be, in order to establish a powerful, centralised State, which absorbed everything and secured their property ... along with their full freedom to exploit.” The state “cannot take this or that form at will,” for it “is necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian—or it ceases to be the State.” So “the existence of a power placed above society, but also of a *territorial concentration* and a *concentration of many functions in the life of societies in the hands of a few*” inevitably resulted in a structure that would be “literally inundated by thousands” of issues, which, in turn, take “thousands of functionaries in the capital—most of them corruptible—to read, classify, evaluate all these, to pronounce on the smallest detail,” while “the flood [of issues] always rose!” Marxism would “kill all freedom by concentrating production into the hands of functionaries of the State,” and so “as long as the statist socialists do not abandon their dream of socialising the instruments of labour in the hands of a centralised State, the inevitable result of their attempts at State Capitalism and the socialist State will be the failure of their dreams and military dictatorship.”¹³

Anarchists, in contrast, aim “to find new forms of organisation for the social functions that the State apportioned between its functionaries” based on “independent Communes for the *territorial* groupings, and vast federations of trade unions for groupings *by social functions*,” both “interwoven and providing support to each [other] to meet the needs of society,” including “mutual protection against aggression, mutual aid, territorial defence.” The new world would be created while fighting the old one for, as with Bakunin, Kropotkin advocated “an economic-revolutionary struggle,” namely, the “direct struggle of the workers unions against the capitalism of the bosses” and opposed involvement “in an electoral, political, and Parliamentary movement,” where the workers’ forces “could only wither and be destroyed.”¹⁴

The rise of Marxist social democracy proved the validity of this critique, with the party constantly plagued by “opportunism” and “revisionism”—that is, the arguments of those members who wished the party’s rhetoric to match it increasingly reformist practice. This came to a head in 1914 when almost all the social democratic parties supported their states in the imperialist conflict that was the First World War.

This confirmation of Bakunin’s warnings is the context for Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, a work much praised by Leninists to this day, which is easy to understand, for like Marx’s *The Civil War in France* it is one of the most libertarian works of mainstream Marxism. Yet its account of anarchism is simply a joke as it completely distorts the *real* differences between libertarian and authoritarian socialism, a distortion that Voline clearly felt the need to rebut—particularly as *The*

¹² Peter Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy* (Chico/Oakland/Edinburgh/Baltimore: AK Press, 2018), 164.

¹³ Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, 191, 226–27, 234, 269, 211, 191.

¹⁴ Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, 169, 164, 165, 130.

State and Revolution also presents a far more appealing picture than the grim reality of Lenin's regime.¹⁵

Let us now compare the reality to the rhetoric.

The Russian Revolution: Rhetoric and Reality

Voline's book is a combination of eyewitness account, political analysis, and discussion of alternatives. He seeks to present a wide overview of the revolution and the roots of its failure in Marxist ideology. However, he concentrates on two main events—the Makhnovist movement and Kronstadt rebellion. Here we seek to provide details of others to flesh out Voline's account and show its continued relevance.

Given the sweep of the revolution, it is impossible to cover all aspects of it. There is a need to be selective and concentrate on key issues. For Voline, it was clear that combating the notion that Leninism produced a "successful" revolution was the focus, along with showing that there was an alternative. Indeed, most of Book II contrasts anarchism to Marxism in order to help revolutionaries today avoid the mistakes made in Russia.¹⁶ This is still a pressing need, for the fact that the Bolsheviks seized power and remained there seems of the utmost importance to many so-called revolutionaries now as then and provides the basis for claims that it was a successful revolution and an example that should be followed.

Needless to say, we focus primarily on the events after October when the rhetoric of the party met reality. Events and ideas that predate the October Revolution are discussed when they help to clarify subsequent developments—for, as Voline suggests, Marxist prejudices and dogmas played their role in how the revolution degenerated. Unsurprisingly, Marxist accounts are usually good on the summer of 1917 but less so on both the February Revolution and popular movements post-October. This is understandable, given that the former saw the Bolsheviks *oppose* the street protests and strikes that led to the abdication of the Tsar, while the latter were *against* the so-called "workers' state." It is between these events, when the unknown revolution started, that today's Leninists are happiest in recounting history from below. They are less keen to explore how the Bolshevik state undermined that unknown revolution, and most accounts of the revolution are little more than hagiology praising the party leadership and its willingness to make the "hard" decisions required to "save" the revolution.

For, as Voline stressed, Stalin did not "fall from the moon," and the roots of the Stalinist nightmare can be traced back to the dreams of Lenin in 1917, and even further, including the works of Marx and Engels.¹⁷ After all, long before the revolution, Lenin had argued that within the party it was a case of "the transformation of the power of ideas into the power of authority, the subordination of lower Party bodies to higher ones." "Bureaucracy *versus* democracy," Lenin stressed, "is in fact centralism *versus* autonomism; it is the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-

¹⁵ See my "The State and Revolution: Theory and Practice," *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counter-revolution*, ed. Friends of Aron Baron (Chico/Oakland/Edinburgh/Baltimore: AK Press, 2017).

¹⁶ There are, of course, more libertarian forms of Marxism—such as council communism—but mainstream Marxism (whether reformist or revolutionary) has always been statist and centralised. It must also be noted that at the time most of this mainstream opposed Bolshevism in the name of (representative) democracy, such as Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), written in 1918, and Julius Martov, *The State and Socialist Revolution* (London: Carl Slienger, 1977), written 1919–1923.

¹⁷ See my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section H for an exploration of this immense subject.

Democracy as opposed to the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy. The latter strives to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible ... upholds autonomism and 'democracy,' carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism. The former strives to proceed from the top downward."¹⁸ Such visions of centralised organisation were the model for the revolutionary state, and once in power the Bolsheviks did not disappoint: "for the leadership, the principle of maximum centralisation of authority served more than expedience. It consistently resurfaced as the image of a peacetime political system as well."¹⁹ Sadly, they singularly failed to comprehend how this perspective when applied in practice simply produced an ever growing alienation of the masses from "their" party and state, along with an ever expanding bureaucracy.

As would be expected from someone who was imprisoned and nearly shot by the regime, saw his comrades murdered, and experienced the hopes of the revolution being crushed by party dictatorship, Voline is harsh on Lenin, Trotsky and Marxism in general. There is a tendency in the book to focus on the role of Bolshevik ideology, almost to the point of ignoring other factors. This led Maurice Brinton to suggest his account was "an over-simplified analysis of the fate of the revolution."²⁰ Yet this in itself seems simplistic, given the negative impact of Bolshevik ideology in, say, the economic crisis and, as Brinton himself proved, the elimination of workers' economic power.

Given this, even with exaggerations, Voline's focus on Marxist ideology is important. As Marxist accounts of the rise of Stalinism—starting with Trotsky—focus purely on what they call "objective circumstances" (civil war, economic crisis, isolation, etc.), Voline's account was a necessary corrective. Yet both factors need to be considered and the interaction of reality and ideology understood. Once that is done it becomes clear that Voline is closer to the truth, even with his at times overwrought rhetoric—it is as if the Bolsheviks were providing a case study in how *not* to conduct a revolution.

Lenin's *State and Revolution*

Before discussing the reality of the new regime, we should sketch the rhetoric. For it is the rhetoric of 1917 that is still used by Leninists today to convince people to join their parties and seek to repeat the Bolshevik seizure of power. This is understandable, for if you consider the degeneration of the revolution into Stalinism as being the product purely of "objective circumstances"—such as civil war, economic crisis, isolation through the failure of revolutions in the West, the economic backwardness of Russia, declassing of the proletariat, amongst others²¹—and unrelated to Bolshevik ideology, then there are *no lessons to be learnt from it*—other

¹⁸ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), 367, 396–97.

¹⁹ Thomas F. Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia: Ideology and Industrial Organisation 1917–1921* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 91.

²⁰ "The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control: The State and Counter-Revolution," in *For Workers' Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton*, ed. David Goodway (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 296.

²¹ This is in spite of Lenin arguing that every revolution was an "incredibly complicated and painful process" that involved civil war (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 26 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964], 118–19). It "will never be possible to build socialism at a time when everything is running smoothly and tranquilly," instead it would "be everywhere built at a time of disruption," not least because civil war was inherently "devastating" (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 27 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965], 520, 517, 264). So, according to its defenders, Bolshevism failed in the face of "objective circumstances" they also consider inevitable.

than the hope the revolution takes place in a more advanced country, is not isolated, is not subject to a lengthy civil war nor foreign intervention.

So what were the promises of 1917?

Lenin uses Marx's writings on the Paris Commune to argue for a new kind of state. He quotes Marx on how "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes," that the commune's council "was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time," with "the suppression of the standing army, and its replacement by the armed people." The Commune, Lenin summarised, "replaced the smashed state machine 'only' by fuller democracy: abolition of the standing army; all officials to be elected and subject to recall" and "was ceasing to be a state since it had to suppress, not the majority of the population, but a minority (the exploiters). It had smashed the bourgeois state machine. In place of a special coercive force the population itself came on the scene. All this was a departure from the state in the proper sense of the word." For the state is "a power which arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it" and "consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command." The public power "'does not directly coincide' with the armed population, with its 'self-acting armed organisation.'"²²

This new regime would be "an immense expansion of democracy, which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people" that "imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force." Yet, the "more democratic the 'state' which consists of the armed workers, and which is 'no longer a state in the proper sense of the word,' the more rapidly *every form* of state begins to wither away." A republic of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies would be the form of this new state, "a centralised organisation of force" that would "oppose conscious, democratic, proletarian centralism to bourgeois, military, bureaucratic centralism."²³

While the political structures created by capitalism would be smashed, the economic ones had to be used as the "economic foundation" for socialism. Indeed, "the *postal service* [is] an example of the socialist economic system." It is currently "a business organised on the lines of state-*capitalist* monopoly... But the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Once we have overthrown the capitalists ... we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism, freed from the 'parasite,' a mechanism which can very well be set going by the united workers themselves." This "is a concrete, practical task which can immediately be fulfilled in relation to all trusts, a task whose fulfilment will rid the working people of exploitation." The Bolshevik's "immediate aim" was to "organise the whole economy on the lines of the postal service" and "on the basis of what capitalism has already created" with "the establishment of workers' control

²² V.I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution," *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Princeton University, 1975), 336–37, 339, 357, 316. It must be noted that some Marxists argue—rightly, in my opinion (see *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section H.3.10)—that Lenin distorted Marx's position on seizing political power by ignoring the many comments by him and Engels on capturing the existing state and using it to introduce socialism after smashing its bureaucracy, as discussed by Binay Sarker and Adam Buick, *Marxism-Leninism—Poles Apart* (Memari: Avenel Press, 2012).

²³ Lenin, "The State and Revolution," 373, 348, 383, 328, 348.

over the capitalists ... exercised not by a state of bureaucrats, but by a state of armed workers.”²⁴
And so:

*All citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state... All citizens become employees and workers of a single countrywide state “syndicate.” All that is required is that they should work equally, do their proper share of work, and get equal pay; the accounting and control necessary for this have been simplified by capitalism to the utmost and reduced to the extraordinarily simple operations ... of supervising and recording, knowledge of the four rules of arithmetic, and issuing appropriate receipts... The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labour and pay.*²⁵

So socialism would be an extension of democracy but also highly centralised. It would turn everyone into employees (wageworkers) of the state based on the economic institutions of capitalism. The problems with this are clear from an anarchist perspective, which is a class analysis based on the historic and current role of state. Lenin, like Marxists in general, viewed centralism, a key characteristic of the state, as neutral, as easily utilised by the working class as by minority classes like the bourgeoisie. Anarchists, in contrast, recognised that a centralised, top-down social organisation did not evolve by accident but was structured that way to secure minority rule and so could not be used to achieve socialism, for recreating that structure would also recreate a minority class around it. New functions needed new organs.

The anarchist analysis was confirmed after October, as we will now show.

The Soviets

Voline’s account of the centralising nature of Bolshevism (Book II, Part III, Chapter 1) is very much to the point. Given that Lenin had consistently stressed the need for the *Bolsheviks* to seize power and the centralised nature of that new power, the anarchists’ 1917 warning that the soviets would be marginalised proved prescient. Yet Voline gives no account of “soviet power” and its onslaught on the soviets. We will correct this omission now.²⁶

The Bolshevik’s marginalisation of the soviets started immediately after the October Revolution in 1917, when they created a government superior to the soviets in the shape of the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) above the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) elected by the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Given that Lenin had argued for the fusing of executive and legislative powers in the hands of the soviets, his promises did not last the night. Four days later the Sovnarkom unilaterally gave itself legislative power, making clear the party’s pre-eminence over the soviets.²⁷

So the highest organ of soviet power was turned into little more than a rubber stamp for a Bolshevik executive, aided by the activities of its Bolshevik dominated presidium that was converted “into the de facto centre of power within VTsIK.” It “began to award representations to groups and factions which supported the government. With the VTsIK becoming ever larger and more

²⁴ Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 345–46, 380.

²⁵ Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 383.

²⁶ See the “Appendix: The Structure of the Soviet State” for a short account of the Bolshevik regime’s various bodies.

²⁷ Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 253.

unwieldy by the day, the presidium began to expand its activities” and was used “to circumvent general meetings.” The Bolsheviks were able “to increase the power of the presidium, postpone regular sessions, and present VTsIK with policies which had already been implemented by the Sovnarkom. Even in the presidium itself very few people determined policy.”²⁸ This reflected a similar process elsewhere, as “[e]ffective power in the local soviets relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.”²⁹

As Bolsheviks lost influence post-October, workers started to vote for non-Bolshevik parties and “in many places the Bolsheviks felt constrained to dissolve Soviets or prevent re-elections where Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had gained majorities.”³⁰ Indeed, for all the provincial soviet elections in the spring and summer of 1918 for which data is available, there was an “impressive success of the Menshevik-SR block,” followed by “the Bolshevik practice of disbanding soviets that came under Menshevik-SR control.” The “subsequent wave of anti-Bolshevik uprisings” were repressed by force.³¹ The Mensheviks and Right SRs were both banned, even though the former’s official policy was for peaceful change by winning soviet elections and to expel any member who took part in armed conflict against the Bolsheviks.³²

As well as forcibly disbanding elected soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities, the Bolsheviks also took to packing soviets to ensure their majority. For example, in Petrograd the Bolsheviks faced “demands from below for the immediate re-election” of the soviet, but before the election in June 1918 the existing Bolshevik-controlled soviet confirmed new regulations “to help offset possible weaknesses” in their “electoral strength in factories.” The “most significant change in the makeup of the new soviet was that numerically decisive representation was given to agencies in which the Bolsheviks had overwhelming strength, among them the Petrograd Trade Union Council, individual trade unions, factory committees in closed enterprises, district soviets, and district non-party workers’ conferences.” This ensured that “[o]nly 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance.” Clearly, the Bolsheviks had “contrived a majority” in the new Soviet long before gaining 127 of the 260 factory delegates. Then there is “the nagging question of how many Bolshevik deputies from factories were elected instead of the opposition because of press restrictions, voter intimidation, vote fraud, or the short duration of the campaign.” The SR and Menshevik press, for example, were reopened “only a couple of days before the start of voting.” Moreover, “Factory Committees from closed factories could and did elect soviet deputies (the so-called dead souls), one deputy for

²⁸ Charles Duval, “Yakov M. Sverdlov and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK),” *Soviet Studies* vol. 31, no. 1 (January 1979): 7–8, 18.

²⁹ Carmen Sirianni, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience* (London: Verso / NLB, 1982), 204. Also see Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power: A Study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918–21* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 166; Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917–1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 83, 100.

³⁰ Israel Getzler, *Martov: A Political Biography of a Russian Social Democrat* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 179. Also see Duval, “Yakov M. Sverdlov,” 13–14; Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism 1918–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 366–67; Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State: The First Phase, 1917–1922* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 191; S.A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 201.

³¹ Vladimir N. Brovkin, *The Mensheviks after October: Socialist Opposition and the Rise of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 159.

³² Getzler, *Martov*, 182–83; Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*, 193, 355.

each factory with more than one thousand workers at the time of shutdown,” while the electoral assemblies for unemployed workers “were organised through Bolshevik-dominated trade union election commissions.” Overall, then, the Bolshevik election victory “was highly suspect, even on the shop floor.”³³

This was also the case at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets held in early July 1918, where “electoral fraud gave the Bolsheviks a huge majority of congress delegates.” In reality, “the number of legitimately elected Left-SR delegates was roughly equal to that of the Bolsheviks.” The Left SR expected a majority but did not count on the “roughly 399 Bolsheviks delegates whose right to be seated was challenged by the Left SR minority in the congress’s credentials commission.” Without these dubious delegates, the Left SRs and SR Maximalists would have outnumbered the Bolsheviks by around thirty delegates. This ensured “the Bolshevik’s successful fabrication of a large majority in the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets.”³⁴ This gerrymandering deprived the Left SRs of their democratic majority, and as a result they assassinated the German ambassador in the hope of provoking a “revolutionary war” with Germany. This, in turn, allowed the Bolsheviks to outlaw them for organising an “uprising” against “soviet power.”

By July 1918, the Bolshevik regime was a de facto party dictatorship—a fact soon reflected in party ideology.³⁵ Anarchist-turned-Bolshevik Victor Serge recounted that when he arrived in Petrograd in January 1919 he read an article by Zinoviev, a leading Bolshevik, on the monopoly of power by the Bolshevik Party.³⁶ He then joined the party and spent some time seeking to convince anarchists of this necessity for party dictatorship.³⁷ At the Second Congress of the Communist International held in 1920—when “the counter-revolution was defeated”³⁸—Zinoviev introduced the discussion of the role of the party with these words:

Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class ... the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.³⁹

³³ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 248–52. Also see Brovkin, *The Mensheviks After October*, 240.

³⁴ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 396, 288, 442, 308. Also see Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London/New York: Longman, 1996), 176. It must be stressed that this gerrymandering ignores the over-representation of workers as compared to peasants, with the former having five times as many representatives as the latter. As such, the Left SRs had much more popular support across the country than these figures suggest due to their influence within the peasantry. In contrast, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had little rural support or influence.

³⁵ Opposition parties were sometimes tolerated—usually when the White threat was highest, as they could be counted on to help the regime. However, when the White threat decreased and workers’ protest against the regime returned, these parties were again suppressed. The final suppression, along with the banning of factions within the party, occurred *after* the end of the civil war.

³⁶ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review Books, 2012), 81.

³⁷ See my “The Worst of the Anarchists,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 61 (Winter 2014).

³⁸ In the words of attendee anarchist-turned-Bolshevik Alfred Rosmer, *Lenin’s Moscow* (London: Bookmarks, 1971), 101. He also adds that Wrangel “could be ignored,” which in part explains the Bolsheviks turning on the Makhnovists in 1920, ironically ensuring Wrangel a space to renew the civil war.

³⁹ *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress of the Communist International, 1920*, vol. 1 (New York: Pathfinder, 1991), 151–52. Also see a similar extract from a Zinoviev

Lenin made similar comments in the work *Left-Wing Communism*, written for that Congress,⁴⁰ while Trotsky, as we will see, made identical comments and arguments.

Trotsky was rewriting history when he claimed in the mid-1930s that “[i]n the beginning, the party had wished and hoped to preserve freedom of political struggle within the framework of the Soviets” but that the civil war “introduced stern amendments into this calculation,” for rather than being “regarded not as a principle, but as an episodic act of self-defence,” the opposite is the case—party dictatorship was held up as a principle. So while Trotsky was right to state that “on all sides the masses were pushed away gradually from actual participation in the leadership of the country,” he was utterly wrong to imply that this process happened *after* the end of the civil war rather than before its start and that the Bolsheviks did not ideologically justify it.⁴¹

Finally, we must note the attitude of the Bolsheviks to the soviets in 1905, as this throws light on post-October developments. As Trotsky recounted, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were “frightened at first by such an innovation as a non-partisan representation of the embattled masses, and could find nothing better to do than to present the Soviet with an ultimatum: immediately adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband.”⁴² The Bolsheviks were convinced that “only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.”⁴³ In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers’ interests because they were elected by the workers!⁴⁴

In 1905, the St. Petersburg soviet ignored the vanguard yet the implications of this perspective became clear in 1918. Yet Bolshevik activities in 1905 and 1918 did not spring from nowhere, for both have obvious roots in Lenin’s argument in *What is to be Done?* (written in 1902) that “*there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers,” as it must “be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness.” The “theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.” This meant “there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course” and so “to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology.”⁴⁵

article quoted by Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils 1905–1921* (New York: Random House, 1974), 239–40.

⁴⁰ Lenin, *The Lenin Anthology*, 567–68, 571–73.

⁴¹ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (London: Faber, 1937), 96, 90.

⁴² Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, vol. 1 (London: Panther History, 1969), 106.

⁴³ quoted by Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 77.

⁴⁴ In contrast, anarchists viewed the soviets as embryos of the new social order; see Peter Kropotkin, “L’Action directe et la Grève générale en Russie,” *Les Temps Nouveaux* 2 December 1905. Likewise, unlike the Bolsheviks who came to this conclusion in 1917, anarchists argued the revolution had to move further than a mere political change into a social revolution; see Peter Kropotkin “The Revolution in Russia,” “The Russian Revolution and Anarchism” and “Enough of Illusions,” in *Direct Struggle against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology*, ed. Iain McKay ([Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Lenin, *The Lenin Anthology*, 24, 28–29.

This places the party in a privileged position as regards the class and, worse, turns class consciousness into a question of the degree to which the workers concur with the party. As Voline indicated, this cannot but help prejudice the party against autonomous working-class self-activity and instil an authoritarian perspective that, once in power, had totalitarian results. Unsurprisingly, while the party is mentioned only in passing (and even then ambiguously) in Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, in other writings during 1917 he was very clear that his party "can and *must* take state power into their own hands" and the "Bolsheviks must assume power."⁴⁶ The soviets were simply seen as the best means to that end.

Significantly, in 1907 Lenin had argued that "Social-Democratic Party organisations [i.e., the Bolsheviks] may, in case of necessity, participate in inter-party Soviets" ("on strict Party lines") and "utilise" such organs "for the purpose of developing the Social-Democratic movement." He then noted that the party "must bear in mind that if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous."⁴⁷ As, indeed, they did post-October, even if they formally continued to exist.

The Factory Committees

As well as undermining political democracy, the new regime also systematically destroyed economic democracy. During 1917, workers started to form factory committees and these tended to move from supervising the bosses to increasingly managing the workplace (a move often driven by necessity as bosses fled the country). Strangely, given the role anarchists played in this movement (exercising an influence much greater than their numbers would suggest), Voline mentions the issue of workers' control only in passing. He rightly contrasts the Bolshevik position in 1917 of workers' supervision to the anarchist one of workers' self-management (Book II, Part II, Chapter 3) but does not go into details.⁴⁸

It must be stressed that unlike anarchists who had argued for workers self-management of production since Proudhon's *What is Property?* written in 1840,⁴⁹ the Bolshevik Party "had no position on the question of workers' control prior to 1917." The factory committees "launched the slogan of workers' control of production quite independently of the Bolshevik party. It was not until May that the party began to take it up." However, Lenin used "the term [workers' control] in a very different sense from that of the factory committees," and his proposals were "thoroughly statist and centralist in character, whereas the practice of the factory committees was essentially local and autonomous." While those Bolsheviks "connected with the factory committees assigned responsibility for workers' control of production chiefly to the committees" this "never became official Bolshevik party policy." In fact, "the Bolsheviks never deviated before or after October from a commitment to a statist, centralised solution to economic disorder. The disagreement between" the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks "was not about state control in the abstract, but what

⁴⁶ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, 19.

⁴⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 12 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), 143–44.

⁴⁸ "In English [workers' control] conveys a much stronger sense of labour direction and management than it does in Russian. (Its literal meaning is much closer to 'supervision' than 'command')." (William Rosenberg, "Workers and Workers' Control in the Russian Revolution," *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians* vol. 5, no. 1 [Spring 1978]: 89).

⁴⁹ *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology*, ed. Iain McKay (Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 119.

kind of state should co-ordinate control of the economy: a bourgeois state or a workers' state?" They "did not disagree radically in the specific measures which they advocated for control of the economy." Lenin "never developed a conception of workers' self-management. Even after October, workers' control remained for him fundamentally a matter of 'inspection' and 'accounting' ... rather than as being necessary to the transformation of the process of production by the direct producers. For Lenin, the transformation of capitalist relations of production was achieved at central state level, rather than at enterprise level. Progress to socialism was guaranteed by the character of the state and achieved through policies by the central state—not by the degree of power exercised by workers on the shop floor."⁵⁰

Unsurprisingly, once in power the Bolsheviks sought to implement their traditional perspectives on "socialism." During the first months of Soviet power the factory committee leaders "sought to bring their model into being," but "the party leadership overruled them. The result was to vest both managerial *and* control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them."⁵¹ This does not mean that lip service was not paid to the aspirations belatedly championed in the summer of 1917, as Lenin issued a "Draft Decree on Workers' Control" in November of that year, but as Maurice Brinton notes:

These excellent, and often quoted, provisions in fact only listed and legalised what had already been achieved and implemented in many places by the working class in the course of the struggles of the previous months. They were to be followed by three further provisions, of ominous import. It is amazing that these are not better known. In practice they were soon to nullify the positive features of the previous provisions. They stipulated (point 5) that "the decisions of the elected delegates of the workers and employees were legally binding upon the owners of enterprises" but that they could be "*annulled by trade unions and congresses*" (our emphasis). This was exactly the fate that was to befall the decisions of the elected delegates of the workers and employees: the trade unions proved to be the main medium through which the Bolsheviks sought to break the autonomous power of the Factory Committees.

The Draft Decree also stressed (point 6) that "in all enterprises of state importance" all delegates elected to exercise workers' control were to be "answerable to the State for the maintenance of the strictest order and discipline and for the protection of property." Enterprises "of importance to the State" were defined (point 7)—and this has a familiar tone for all revolutionaries—as "*all enterprises working for defence purposes, or in any way connected with the production of articles necessary for the existence of the masses of the population*" (our emphasis). In other words practically any enterprise could be declared by the new Russian State as "of importance to the State." The delegates from such an enterprise (elected to exercise workers' control) were now made answerable to a higher authority. Moreover if the trade unions (already fairly bureaucratized) could "annul" the decisions of rank-and-file delegates, what real power in production had the rank and file? The Decree on Workers' Control was soon proved, in practice, not to be worth the paper it was written on.⁵²

⁵⁰ S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories 1917–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 153, 154, 159, 153, 154, 228.

⁵¹ Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 38.

⁵² Brinton, *For Workers' Power*, 318.

The following month saw the Bolsheviks, as Lenin had promised, start to build from the top-down their system of unified administration based on the Tsarist system of central bodies that governed and regulated certain industries during the war. The Supreme Economic Council (*Vesenka*) was set up and “was widely acknowledged by the Bolsheviks as a move towards ‘statisation’ (*ogosudarstvleniye*) of economic authority.” *Vesenka* began “to build, from the top, its ‘unified administration’ of particular industries. The pattern is informative,” as it “gradually took over” the Tsarist state agencies such as the *Glakvi* “and converted them ... into administrative organs subject to [its] direction and control.” The Bolsheviks, Brinton summarises, “clearly opted” for the taking over of “the institutions of bourgeois economic power and use[d] them to their own ends.” This system “necessarily implies the perpetuation of hierarchical relations within production itself, and therefore the perpetuation of class society.”⁵³ It was a similar process within the workplace, with Lenin, in April 1918, demanding “[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.”⁵⁴ In short, *capitalist* social relations were imposed within a state-capitalist bureaucracy.⁵⁵

While Brinton’s work is still the best account of Bolshevik attitudes on workers’ control, its (negative) impact on the revolution and alternatives to that perspective, he downplays the fact that those most active in the factory committees were usually Bolsheviks. As one Russian anarchist suggested, while “the Russian proletariat was, as a whole, entirely ignorant of the ideas of Revolutionary Syndicalism,” the “labour movement of Russia went along the road of decentralisation. It chose spontaneously the course of a unique Revolutionary Syndicalism,” so even though “dominated by the Bolsheviks, the Factory Committees of that period were carrying out the Anarchist idea. The latter, of course, suffered in clarity and purity when carried out by the Bolsheviks within the Factory Committees; had the Anarchists been in the majority, they would have endeavoured to displace from the work of the committees the element of centralisation and state principles.” Ultimately, the “Bolsheviks subordinated the Factory Committees, which were federalistic and anarchistic by their nature, to the centralised trade unions” and “proceeded to strip the Factory Committees of all their functions” bar “the policing role imposed upon them by the Bolsheviks.”⁵⁶ Given that the factory committees were headed by people who shared the same prejudices as regards centralisation and statist socialism as Lenin, this meant they did not have the theoretical power to challenge—or even successfully question—the mainstream Bolshevik position and the dangers it held for genuine socialism.

That the Bolshevik onslaught on economic democracy was driven in large part by its vision of socialism can be seen from early 1920. Discussing how the civil war had ended, Lenin argued that the “whole attention of the Communist Party and the Soviet government is centred on peaceful

⁵³ Brinton, *For Workers’ Power*, 323, 335, 324.

⁵⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 316.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that one-man management was first applied on the railways and the “result of replacing workers’ committees with one-man rule ... was not directiveness, but distance, and increasing inability to make decisions appropriate to local conditions. Despite coercion, orders on the railroads were often ignored as unworkable.” It got so bad that “a number of local Bolshevik officials ... began in the fall of 1918 to call for the restoration of workers’ control, not for ideological reasons, but because workers themselves knew best how to run the line efficiently, and might obey their own central committee’s directives if they were not being constantly countermanded” (William G. Rosenberg, “Workers’ Control on the Railroads and Some Suggestions Concerning Social Aspects of Labour Politics in the Russian Revolution,” *The Journal of Modern History* vol. 49, no. 2 [June 1977]: D1208–9)

⁵⁶ Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work*, 364, 351, 366–67.

economic development, on problems of the dictatorship and of one-man management... When we tackled them for the first time in 1918, there was no civil war and no experience to speak of." So it was "not only experience ... but something more profound" that has "induced us now, as it did two years ago, to concentrate all our attention on labour discipline."⁵⁷ Social relationships *within* production were considered unimportant for the real issue was nationalisation:

The domination of the proletariat consists in the fact that the landowners and capitalists have been deprived of their property... The victorious proletariat has abolished property, has completely annulled it—and therein lies its domination as a class. The prime thing is the question of property. As soon as the question of property was settled practically, the domination of the class was assured.⁵⁸

This perspective could not help but place economic power into the hands of state officials and replaced private capitalism with state capitalism.

So as the soviets were marginalised, gerrymandered and packed, a parallel movement was occurring in the workplace. Yet this—unlike the undermining of the soviets—was in line with the vision of socialism Lenin explicitly expounded in 1917. Bolshevik "socialism" was built on the institutions created under capitalism and could do nothing but help worsen the economic crisis and add to the emerging bureaucracy of the new state, as we will now sketch.

The State Machine

Lenin had promised a semi-state in which the bureaucracy would be small and quickly become smaller. Yet the bureaucracy "grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between 'people' and 'officials,' which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about 'bureaucratic excesses,' lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder."⁵⁹ Within working-class circles there was "the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees, and soviets" were "no longer representative, democratically run working-class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies. There was ample reason for this concern." Hence the "growing disenchantment of Petrograd workers with economic conditions and the evolving structure and operation of Soviet political institutions."⁶⁰

The growth in state bureaucracy started immediately with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, particularly as the state's functions grew to include economic decisions as well as political ones:

The old state's political apparatus was "smashed," but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity. After the transfer of government to Moscow in March 1918 it continued to expand... As the functions of the state expanded so did the bureaucracy, and by August 1918 nearly a third of Moscow's working population were employed in offices. The great increase in the

⁵⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 503–4.

⁵⁸ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, 456.

⁵⁹ Anweiler, *The Soviets*, 242.

⁶⁰ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 224, 231.

number of employees ... took place in early to mid-1918 and, thereafter, despite many campaigns to reduce their number, they remained a steady proportion of the falling population.⁶¹

The apparatus of the *Vesenka*, for example, grew from 6,000 in September 1918 to 26,000 by January 1921—including local economic councils, there were 234,000 functionaries.⁶² By the end of 1920 there were 5,800,000 officials of all kinds, five times the number of industrial workers.⁶³

Given that the Bolshevik vision of socialism was inherently centralised and statist, it was inevitable that a “bureaucratic machine is created that is appalling in its parasitism, inefficacy, and corruption.”⁶⁴ The *glavki* system “did not know the true number of enterprises in their branch” of industry and was “unable to cope with th[e] enormous tasks” given to it. The “shortcomings of the central administrations and *glavki* increased together with the number of enterprises under their control.”⁶⁵ Worse:

The most evident shortcoming ... was that it did not ensure central allocation of resources and central distribution of output, in accordance with any priority ranking ... materials were provided to factories in arbitrary proportions: in some places they accumulated, whereas in others there was a shortage. Moreover, the length of the procedure needed to release the products increased scarcity at given moments, since products remained stored until the centre issued a purchase order on behalf of a centrally defined customer. Unused stock coexisted with acute scarcity. The centre was unable to determine the correct proportions among necessary materials and eventually to enforce implementation of the orders for their total quantity. The gap between theory and practice was significant.⁶⁶

The “centre’s information was sketchy at best” and it “was deluged with work of an ad hoc character.” “Demands for fuel and supplies piled up,” while “orders from central organs disrupted local production plans,” for the centre “drew up plans for developing or reorganising the economy of a region, either in ignorance, or against the will, of the local authorities.”⁶⁷ All of which confirms anarchist accounts:

In Kharkoff I saw the demonstration of the inefficiency of the centralised bureaucratic machine. In a large factory warehouse there lay huge stacks of agricultural machinery. Moscow had ordered them made “within two weeks, in pain of punishment for sabotage.” They were made, and six months already had passed without the “central authorities” making any effort to distribute the machines to the peasantry... It was one of the countless examples of the manner in which the Moscow system “worked,” or, rather, did not work.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Richard Sakwa, “The Commune State in Moscow in 1918,” *Slavic Review* 46, no. 3–4 (Autumn–Winter, 1987): 437–38.

⁶² Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 154.

⁶³ Tony Cliff, *Trotsky: The Sword of the Revolution 1917–1923* (London: Bookmarks, 1990), 191.

⁶⁴ Alexander Berkman, “The Russian Tragedy,” in *To Remain Silent Is Impossible*, 96.

⁶⁵ Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 232–33, 250.

⁶⁶ Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 233.

⁶⁷ Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 58–59, 61–62, 68–69.

⁶⁸ Emma Goldman, “The Crushing of the Russian Revolution,” in *To Remain Silent is Impossible*, 40. Goldman also recounted how food was “lying at side stations and rotting away” (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, 109) Malle

Voline's account of his visit to an oil refinery (Book II, Part III, Chapter 5) and Bolshevik opposition to attempts in Kronstadt to socialise housing (Book III, Part I, Chapter 4) shows in microcosm the overall Bolshevik perspective and how it hindered the local initiative needed to solve the problems the revolution faced. Sadly, "the failure of *glavkism* did not bring about a reconsideration of the problems of economic organisation... On the contrary, the ideology of centralisation was reinforced."⁶⁹

More: given that Bolshevik ideology—inspired by orthodox Marxism and its call "to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State"⁷⁰—undermined the factory committees, Lenin simply handed the economy and so economic power to the emerging bureaucracy, just as he handed society and so social power to that same body.⁷¹

So "in the soviets and in economic management the embryo of centralised and bureaucratic state forms had already emerged by mid-1918."⁷²

The new state machine was not limited to the political and economic, it extended to the military. On 20 December 1917, the Council of People's Commissars decreed the formation of a political police force, the Cheka. Significantly, its first headquarters were at Gorokhovaia 2, which under the Tsar housed his notorious security service, the Okhrana.⁷³ The Cheka quickly became a key and infamous instrument of state repression. In addition, in March 1918, Trotsky eliminated the soldier's committees and elected officers, stating that "the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree."⁷⁴ In May, the Bolsheviks appointed a general commissar of the Baltic Fleet, disbanding its elected central committee. This was part of a general "emasculatation and subsequent destruction of its grass-roots democracy of base committees."⁷⁵

If, as Lenin argued in 1917, the state is "a power which arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it" and "consists of special bodies of armed

confirms the "inefficiency of central [food] distribution" and how it "entailed waste" (*The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 424–25)

⁶⁹ Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 275.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 490.

⁷¹ We should also note that, as a centralised body, the Bolshevik Party itself also had its own bureaucracy, a bureaucracy Lenin had to fight throughout 1917. As Trotsky summarised the "habits peculiar to a political machine were already forming in the underground. The young revolutionary bureaucrat was already emerging as a type," and in 1917 "a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines," which saw Bolshevik Party cadres "inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown. What, then, could be expected of these cadres when they became an all-powerful state bureaucracy?" (*Stalin*, 101, 298) However, it must be stressed that the Bolshevik Party was not in practice the completely centralised machine of Stalinist and Trotskyist myths. Substantial local autonomy coexisted with bureaucratic and centralised tendencies, with the latter finally crushing the former during the civil war and helping to ensure the degeneration of the revolution; see my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section H.5.12, for discussion.

⁷² Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 96–97.

⁷³ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 85.

⁷⁴ *How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 1 (London: New Park Publications, 1979), 47.

⁷⁵ Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 190–91.

men” separate from the people,⁷⁶ then by early 1918 the so-called workers’ state had become a state in the normal sense of the word. As anarchists had predicted:

And, in fact, what do we find throughout history? The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class: a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class. And finally, when all the other classes have exhausted themselves, the State then becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class and then falls—or, if you will, rises—to the position of a machine. But in any case it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the State that there should be some privileged class devoted to its preservation.⁷⁷

Trotskyists usually follow Trotsky’s self-serving 1930s account of the rise of the bureaucracy in which he lamented how the “demobilisation of the Red Army of five million [in 1921] played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war.” For some reason he failed to mention who had introduced that regime in the army in the first place, although he felt able to state, without shame, given that he was the one to abolish it in early 1918, that the “commanding staff needs democratic control. The organisers of the Red Army were aware of this from the beginning, and considered it necessary to prepare for such a measure as the election of commanding staff.”⁷⁸ As shown, this account is simply false—the rise of bureaucracy predated the formation of the Red Army, never mind its demobilisation in 1921, and Bolshevik policies like one-man management had been imposed from April 1918 onward. So when, in 1935, Trotsky argued that it was in 1928 that the “bureaucracy succeeded ... in breaking up ... the Soviets ... which were left in name only” and “power passed from the masses ... to a centralised bureaucracy,” he was out by a mere ten years.⁷⁹

All this shows how right Voline was—echoing the arguments of Bakunin and Kropotkin—to stress the contradiction between statism and revolution, that statism creates a privileged caste and reduces the masses to a passive role in what should be *their* revolution. (Book II, Part III, Chapter 2). However, the rise of this new class, the state-party bureaucracy, was not unchallenged. These special bodies of armed men were utilised to secure the power of a new ruling class against those it claimed to represent, the Russian workers and peasants. We now turn to this popular opposition.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 316.

⁷⁷ Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 318.

⁷⁸ Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 90, 211. Compare to Trotsky in 1920: “every class prefers to have in its service those of its members who ... have passed through the military school ... when a former regimental commissary returns to his trade union, he becomes not a bad organiser” (*Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963], 173)

⁷⁹ “Introduction to the Second English Edition,” in *Terrorism and Communism*, xliv.

⁸⁰ This is not to suggest that the Bolsheviks were happy with all the bureaucrats they had created. Far from it, as can be seen from their many words attacking the phenomenon. The problem was that they had no idea what produced it nor any idea how to solve it. Failing to understand that their own prejudices in favour of centralisation and nationalisation were the root causes, their solutions were more of the same—the evils of bureaucracy would be solved by more centralisation, so producing more bureaucracy. Bodies created to combat bureaucracy themselves became bureaucratized. These police methods could not overcome a governmental machine and the vested interests it produced.

Working-Class Protest and Rebellion

Space precludes an extensive account for working-class resistance to the emerging new class, so here we present a sketch.⁸¹ This protest took many forms, from strikes in one or two workplaces up to waves of general strikes. In response, the party utilised martial law, lockouts, denial of rations, arrest of “ringleaders,” selective rehiring, shootings and so forth. Unsurprisingly, this mass collective struggle is ignored or downplayed in Leninist accounts of the revolution, for, first, it is an embarrassment that the so-called proletarian state repressed workers, and, second, it is very much at odds with their attempts to defend the Bolsheviks in terms of an “exhausted” or “disappeared” working class necessitating party dictatorship.

Working-class disillusionment with the Bolsheviks appeared quickly, in part due to the Bolsheviks’ inability to solve the economic crisis, which they had suggested in 1917 they easily could, but which their policies made worse. So in “the first half of 1918, some 100,000 to 150,000 workers across Russia took part in strikes, food riots and other protests, roughly on a par with labour unrest on the eve of the February Revolution.”⁸² Troops were used to break the protests and strikes in Petrograd⁸³ and elsewhere—for example, in Tula, in June 1918, the regime declared “martial law and arrested the protestors. Strikes followed and were suppressed by violence.” In Sormovo, 5,000 workers went on strike after a Menshevik-SR paper was closed. Violence was “used to break the strike.”⁸⁴

Similar waves of protest and strikes took place the following year with 1919, seeing a “new outbreak of strikes in March” across Russia, with the “pattern of repression ... repeated.” One strike culminated in the “closing of the factory, the firing of a number of workers, and the supervised re-election of its factory committee.” In Astrakhan, a mass meeting of 10,000 workers was fired on by Red Army troops, killing 2,000 (another 2,000 were taken prisoner and subsequently executed).⁸⁵ Petrograd saw numerous strikes, including one in March of fifteen factories involving roughly 35,000 workers, resulting in the promise of increased rations. When these did not materialise, the strikes were launched anew. When protesting strikers at the Putilov factory “were fired upon by Cheka troops,” more workplaces came out. The strikers were ordered to return to work or “the sailors and soldiers would be brought in,” which they were. More strikes broke out in July and September, involving around 25,000 workers, and the Cheka was again sent in.⁸⁶ As Vladimir Brovkin argues in his account of the strikes and protests of 1919:

Data on one strike in one city may be dismissed as incidental. When, however, evidence is available from various sources on simultaneous independent strikes in different cities an overall picture begins to emerge. All strikes developed along a similar timetable: February, brewing discontent; March and April, peak of strikes; May, slackening in strikes; and June and July, a new wave of strikes... Workers’ unrest took

⁸¹ See my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section H.6.3 for more details.

⁸² Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*, 201.

⁸³ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 229–30, 231, 246–47, 254, 259; William G. Rosenberg, “Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power,” in *The Workers Revolution in Russia: The View from Below*, ed. Daniel H. Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123–27.

⁸⁴ Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 105.

⁸⁵ Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 109.

⁸⁶ Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd 1917–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 250–54.

place in Russia's biggest and most important industrial centres... Strikes affected the largest industries, primarily those involving metal: metallurgical, locomotive, and armaments plants... In some cities ... textile and other workers were active protesters as well. In at least five cities ... the protests resembled general strikes.⁸⁷

There were similar waves of strikes and protests in 1920. In fact, strike action "remained endemic in the first nine months of 1920." Soviet figures report a total of 146 strikes, involving 135,442 workers for the twenty-six provinces covered. In Petrograd province, there were 73 strikes with 85,642 participants. "This is a high figure indeed, since at this time ... there were 109,100 workers" in the province. Overall, "the geographical extent of the February–March strike wave is impressive" and the "harsh discipline that went with labour militarisation led to an increase in industrial unrest in 1920."⁸⁸

Saratov, for example, saw a wave of factory occupations break out in June, and mill workers went out in July, while in August strikes and walkouts occurred in its mills and other factories and these "prompted a spate of arrests and repression." In September, railroad workers went out on strike, with arrests making "the situation worse, forcing the administration to accept the workers' demands."⁸⁹ Likewise, the "largest strike in Moscow in the summer of 1920" was by tram workers over the equalisation of rations. It began on 12 August, when one tram depot went on strike, quickly followed by others, while workers "in other industries joined in too." The tram workers "stayed out a further two days before being driven back by arrests and threats of mass sackings." In the textile manufacturing towns around Moscow "there were large-scale strikes" in November 1920, with a thousand workers striking for four days in one district, and a strike of five hundred mill workers saw three thousand workers from another mill joining in.⁹⁰

Strikes continued and "[b]y the beginning of 1921 a revolutionary situation with workers in the vanguard had emerged in Soviet Russia," with "the simultaneous outbreak of strikes in Petrograd and Moscow and in other industrial regions." In February and March, "industrial unrest broke out in a nation-wide wave of discontent or *volynka*. General strikes, or very widespread unrest" hit all but one of the country's major industrial regions and "workers' protest consisted not just of strikes but also of factory occupations, 'Italian strikes,'⁹¹ demonstrations, mass meetings, the beating up of communists and so on." Rather than admit it was a mass strike, the Bolsheviks "usually employed the word *volynka*, which means only a 'go-slow.'"⁹²

As an example, a strike wave in Ekaterinoslavl (in Ukraine) in May, 1921 started in the railway workshops and became "quickly politicised," with the strike committee raising a "series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels." The strike "spread to the other workshops" and on 1 June the main large Ekaterinoslavl factories joined the strike. Trains and telegraph were used to spread the strike, and soon an area up to fifty

⁸⁷ "Workers' Unrest and the Bolsheviks' Response in 1919," *Slavic Review* 49, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 370.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Aves, *Workers against Lenin: Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 69, 70, 80.

⁸⁹ Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War*, 375.

⁹⁰ Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920–24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 32, 43.

⁹¹ These were strikes in which workers occupied their workplaces and kept the machines running to waste fuel; Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 115.

⁹² Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 3, 109–12. Also see Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 111; Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), 37–38.

miles around the town was affected. The strike was finally ended by the Cheka, using mass arrests and shootings. Unsurprisingly, the local communists called the revolt a “little Kronstadt.”⁹³

Repression “did not prevent strikes and other forms of protest by workers becoming endemic in 1919 and 1920,” while in early 1921 the Communist Party “faced what amounted to a revolutionary situation. Industrial unrest was only one aspect of a more general crisis that encompassed the Kronstadt revolt and the peasant rising in Tambov and Western Siberia.” This “industrial unrest represented a serious political threat to the Soviet regime.” For from “Ekaterinburg to Moscow, from Petrograd to Ekaterinoslavl, workers took to the streets, often in support of political slogans that called for the end of Communist Party rule.” Unsurprisingly, “soldiers in many of the strike areas showed themselves to be unreliable [but] the regime was able to muster enough forces to master the situation. Soldiers could be replaced by Chekists, officer cadets and other special units where Party members predominated.”⁹⁴

There was substantial collective action throughout the civil war, but it was directed *against* the Bolshevik regime. This shows that attempts by the defenders of Bolshevism to proclaim that the working class had “disintegrated” and been reduced “to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917” have little foundation.⁹⁵ For “if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?”⁹⁶

True, the number of workers in the cities did decline significantly, but “a sizeable core of veteran urban proletarians remained ... they did not all disappear.” In fact, “it was the loss of young activists rather than of all skilled and class-conscious urban workers that caused the level of Bolshevik support to decline during the Civil War. Older workers had tended to support the Menshevik Party in 1917.” Given this, “it appears that the Bolshevik Party made deurbanisation and declassing the scapegoats for its political difficulties when the party’s own policies and its unwillingness to accept changing proletarian attitudes were also to blame.” It should also be noted that the notion of declassing to rationalise the party’s misfortunes was used long before the civil war: “This was the same argument used to explain the Bolsheviks’ lack of success among workers in the early months of 1917—that the cadres of conscious proletarians were diluted by nonproletarian elements.”⁹⁷

It must be stressed that the notion of a “declassed” proletariat was first raised by Lenin in response to this mass working-class protest. “As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore,” Lenin “began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated,” workers “had become ‘declassed.’” However, there “is little evidence to suggest that the demands that workers made at the end of 1920,” when Lenin first formulated this excuse, “represented a fundamental change in aspirations since 1917.”⁹⁸ So while the “working class had decreased in size and changed in composition,” the “protest movement from late 1920 made clear

⁹³ Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 171–73.

⁹⁴ Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 187, 155, 186.

⁹⁵ John Rees, “In Defence of October,” *International Socialism* 52 (Autumn 1991): 65.

⁹⁶ Ida Mett, “The Kronstadt Commune,” in *Bloodstained*, 202.

⁹⁷ Diane P. Koenker, “Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War,” in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War*, ed. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), 96, 95, 100, 84. Also see Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, 348.

⁹⁸ Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 18, 90–91.

that it was not a negligible force and that in an inchoate way it retained a vision of socialism which was not identified entirely with Bolshevik power.” Thus, Lenin’s argument “on the declassing of the proletariat was more a way of avoiding this unpleasant truth than a real reflection of what remained, in Moscow at least, a substantial physical and ideological force.”⁹⁹

Given these waves of proletarian unrest, the next usually more powerful than the last, there was a social base for a collective response to the problems of the revolution as anarchists argue—but the Bolsheviks could not base themselves on it because it was directed against them and their pretensions to know better than the workers what their interests really were. An “atomised” class does not need martial law to tame its general strikes. In such circumstances, it is easy to see how the state became increasingly independent from the working class—it had to in order to maintain Bolshevik rule over the workers. This empowered the already emerging bureaucracy and so paved the way for Stalinism.

Given this repression of workers by the so-called workers’ state, it is ironic to read one Leninist argue that the rise of Stalinism was achieved “by administrative terror, not by the more normal means of counter-revolutionary seizure of power... No wider use of force was necessary, no martial law, no curfew or street battles.”¹⁰⁰ He forgets that all these had been used against striking and protesting workers by Lenin and Trotsky, and if there was “atomisation of the working class” this had been achieved in 1921 by their methods of martial law, curfews and so on.¹⁰¹

Ultimately, Lenin was right to argue that “it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence.” If the working class is being suppressed by “the vanguard of the oppressed” then there is “no freedom and no democracy” for the working class and it cannot be “the ruling class.” The party and its state is.¹⁰²

Alternatives

The standard response to these points is that we have failed to discuss the Russian Civil War, the White Armies and imperialist intervention. There is a reason for this—all of the (negative) developments that latter-day Leninists from Trotsky onward blame on the civil war started before it. The path to state-capitalist party dictatorship was well trod before the Czech Legion rebelled in May 1918—and the repression did not end with the final defeat of the Whites in November 1920.

So from “the first days of Bolshevik power there was only a weak correlation between the extent of ‘peace’ and the mildness or severity of Bolshevik rule, between the intensity of the war and the intensity of proto-war communist measures... Considered in ideological terms there was little to distinguish the ‘breathing space’ (April–May 1918) from the war communism that

⁹⁹ Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 261.

¹⁰⁰ Rees, “In Defence of October,” 69.

¹⁰¹ Of the 17,000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. Similarly, of the 40,913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44 per cent had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84 per cent were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. (George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981], 178).

¹⁰² Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 373. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky argued that the proletariat was the ruling class under Stalin for the “anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.” (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933–34* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 2003], 125).

followed.” Unsurprisingly, then, “the breathing space of the first months of 1920 after the victories over Kolchak and Denikin ... saw their intensification and the militarisation of labour” and, in fact, “no serious attempt was made to review the aptness of war communist policies.” Ideology “constantly impinged on the choices made at various points of the civil war,” so “Bolshevik authoritarianism cannot be ascribed simply to the Tsarist legacy or to adverse circumstances.”¹⁰³

Bolshevik ideology played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution—as can be seen in the structures favoured and how socialism was envisioned. These interacted, for a perspective favouring centralised, top-down organisations creates such structures and these, in turn, shape the views and actions of those placed into power within these hierarchies. The party’s “mentality was more than just a mentality: after the seizure of power, it almost immediately became a part of the *real social situation*. ... If it is true that people’s real social existence determines their consciousness, it is from that moment illusory to expect the Bolshevik Party to act in any other fashion than according to its real social situation.”¹⁰⁴ It acted as every ruling class has because it had become a new master class.

To secure its rule, the party had to build a state machine separate from the masses, so it did. Its vision of socialism and its privileged role for the party played their part. Yet a political master class without an economic base is weak and, unsurprisingly, the party quickly merged with the bureaucracy. The conflicts between Trotskyism and Stalinism represented a conflict between the wings of the bureaucracy—the latter embracing its true nature, while the former denied it and were imprisoned, driven into exile or murdered as a result, suffering the fate it had inflicted on oppositional groupings outside the party while it had been in power.¹⁰⁵

The invocation of the civil war as the rationale for Bolshevik authoritarianism rings hollow, particularly as anarchists were not as naive as Lenin suggested in *The State and Revolution*. The libertarian critique of the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat” has nothing to do with failing to see the necessity of defending a revolution. Likewise, regardless of Lenin’s lecturing, anarchists had seen long before 1917 that federations of working-class organisations would be the framework of a free society. Again, notwithstanding Lenin’s assertion in 1917, anarchists do not believe in “overnight” revolutions. Anarchist “impatience with the Bolshevik regime”—as Emma Goldman argued—is not down to a “belief that a revolution *à la Bakunin* would have brought more constructive results, if not immediate anarchism. Yet as a matter of fact the Russian Revolution had been *à la Bakunin*, but it had since been transformed *à la Karl Marx*. That seemed to be the real trouble. I had not been naive enough to expect anarchism to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the old. But I did hope that the masses, who had made the Revolution, would also have the chance to direct its course.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Bolshevism simply confirmed anarchist predictions:

The anarchists consider ... that to hand over to the State all the main sources of economical life—the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on—as also the management of all the main branches of industry, in addition to all the functions already accumulated in its hands ... would mean to create a new instrument of

¹⁰³ Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 24, 27, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy,” in *Bloodstained*, 287–88.

¹⁰⁵ “Outraged by the Opposition, they [the Stalinists] saw it as treason against them; which in a sense it was, since the Opposition itself belonged to the ruling bureaucracy.” (Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 263)

¹⁰⁶ Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2, 826.

tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism. True progress lies in the direction of decentralisation, both *territorial* and *functional*, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, in lieu of the present hierarchy from the centre to the periphery.¹⁰⁷

The question is whether this is armchair theorising or whether there were libertarian alternatives to Leninism. The answer is yes, there were libertarian alternatives.

As noted, soviet democracy did not die a natural death, the soviets were systematically marginalised—disbanded, if need be—by the Bolsheviks in favour of party power. For example, after the civil war “non-party workers were willing and able to participate in political processes, but, in the Moscow soviet and elsewhere, were pushed out of them by the Bolsheviks.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, as the substantial working-class protest already sketched shows, there was substantial collective action upon which soviet democracy could have been based before, during and after the civil war.

Economically, anarchists argued that workers’ unions or federations of factory committees should manage production and it should be noted that rates of “output and productivity began to climb steadily after” January 1918: “In some factories, production doubled or tripled in the early months of 1918,” and “[m]any of the reports explicitly credited the factory committees for these increases.” In Petrograd, they ensured “industry did not completely collapse” and fuel was “rationally and equitably” shared, while in the Urals the economy “was maintained throughout the winter and spring of 1918 on the basis of workers’ self-management.” They “achieved a notable degree of organisation and coordination,” thereby “helping to maintain production and the exchange of scarce resources.”¹⁰⁹ There is “evidence that until late 1919, some factory committees performed managerial tasks successfully. In some regions factories were still active thanks to their workers’ initiatives in securing raw materials.”¹¹⁰ While this may be dismissed as speculation based on a few examples, we cannot avoid recognising that turning the economy over to the bureaucracy coincided with the deepening of the economic crisis.

Alternatives existed, and Voline discusses two in detail—the Kronstadt uprising of 1921 and the Makhnovist movement of 1918–1921.¹¹¹ Here we supplement his account by addressing some of the attacks Leninists subject these movements to. We will also cover Bolshevik oppositional tendencies and compare these to the libertarian ones to better evaluate both and see which ones were genuinely utopian.

Sadly, the defenders of Bolshevism habitually selectively quote, distort the facts and slander those movements that presented an alternative—not least the Makhnovists and Kronstadt. While

¹⁰⁷ Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle against Capital*, 165. In 1920, Kropotkin said to Emma Goldman that the Bolsheviks had “created a bureaucracy and officialdom which surpasses even that of the old regime... All those people were living off the masses. They were parasites on the social body... It was not the fault of any particular individuals: rather it was the State they had created, which discredits every revolutionary ideal, stifles all initiative, and sets a premium on incompetence and waste.” (Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 113)

¹⁰⁸ Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Sirianni, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy*, 109, 113, 115, 129.

¹¹⁰ Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism*, 101.

¹¹¹ As well as providing key selections from the works of numerous anarchists, Daniel Guérin, *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005) also includes texts on and by both the Makhnovist movement and the Kronstadt rebels.

we cover some of the most important myths here, we cannot cover everything. Another issue is the ideological blindness of Bolshevism. For example, Trotskyist John G. Wright argued the following in his defence of the Bolshevik crushing of Kronstadt:

The supposition that the soldiers and sailors could venture upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of “free soviets” is absurd in itself. It is doubly absurd in the view of the fact [!] that the rest of the Kronstadt garrison consisted of backward and passive people who could not be used in the civil war. These people could have been moved to an insurrection only by profound economic needs and interests. These were the needs and interests of the fathers and brothers of these sailors and soldiers, that is, of peasants as traders in food products and raw materials.¹¹² In other words the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeoisie’s reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps.¹¹³

Ignoring his dismissal of working-class people who—even after years of revolution—apparently cannot exceed a trade union consciousness nor act in their *own* interests, Wright fails to recognise the obvious: that there were more than “two camps.” As well as urban and rural workers (proletarians and peasants), there was also the state with *its* interests. Moreover, there was also the ideology of the ruling party that had long argued for the necessity of party dictatorship and the dangers of working-class democracy. The notion of two classes or two camps is absurd in the face of the actual facts—the new class of bureaucrats and commissars needs to be factored in to fully understand the situation and the alternatives to it.

That these alternatives share many of the features proclaimed by the Bolsheviks in 1917 makes the orthodox Leninist position strange, to say the least. Here we seek to address some of the distortions and show why genuine socialists should embrace these alternatives, which remained true to the spirit of 1917, unlike the various oppositions within the Bolshevik Party.

The Makhnovist Movement

Voline was active in the Makhnovist movement, and while the bulk of his account (Book III, Part II) consists of extracts from fellow anarchist Peter Arshinov’s earlier account, he adds useful additional commentary indicating its importance; here we have a mass movement, operating

¹¹² According to Trotsky, even acting in the interests of their relatives was beyond them: “They themselves did not clearly understand that what their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade.” (V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, *Kronstadt* [New York: Monad Press, 1986], 92). This is the standard Trotskyist work on the rebellion and gathers all the related articles by Lenin and Trotsky, as well as articles by their faithful followers. The Kronstadt “rebels proclaimed that ‘Kronstadt is not asking for freedom of trade but for genuine power to the Soviets.’ The Petrograd strikers were also demanding the reopening of the markets and the abolition of the road blocks set up by the militia. But they too were stating that freedom of trade by itself would not solve their problems” (Ida Mett, “The Kronstadt Commune,” in *Bloodstained*, 197–98). Indeed, striking workers in both Moscow and Petrograd raised the demand for “free trade” amongst others (Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 36, 42).

¹¹³ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt* 111–12. It must be stressed that economic demands number four of the fifteen raised (items 8, 9, 11, 15), and so the focus of the uprising was political rights. Significantly, the Petrograd Bolshevik leaders had quickly granted item 8—the removal of roadblock troops—to placate striking workers in Petrograd. (Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 49, 75) Unlike the Bolshevik New Economic Policy, items 11 and 15, while demanding artisan and peasant “freedom of action,” also explicitly opposed the employment of hired labour. Which means that if anyone was defending the interests of the kulaks, it was Lenin and Trotsky.

in the same (arguably worse) “objective circumstances” as the Bolshevik regime but producing remarkably different outcomes.¹¹⁴

While the Bolsheviks systematically destroyed soviet, economic and military democracy, repressed the freedom of association, speech and assembly of the working classes and ideologically justified party dictatorship, the Makhnovists did the opposite. They encouraged soviet, economic and military self-management, as well as ensuring freedoms for workers and peasants. Indeed, they came into conflict with the Bolsheviks twice in 1919 precisely because they had the gall to involve the working masses in the fate of the revolution. Their importance is summarised by the Makhnovists’ response to a Bolshevik commander’s proclamation banning a conference called to do precisely that:

Have you the right, you alone, to label as counter-revolutionaries upwards of one million workers who have, with their horny hands, cast off the shackles of slavery and henceforth look to themselves for the reshaping of their lives as they see fit... If you be a genuine revolutionary, you must help them in their struggle against the oppressors and in the building of a new and free life. Can it be that laws laid down by a handful of individuals, describing themselves as revolutionaries, can afford them the right to declare outside of the law an entire people more revolutionary than themselves? ... Is there some law according to which a revolutionary is alleged to have the right to enforce the harshest punishment against the revolutionary mass on whose behalf he fights, and this because that same mass has secured for itself the benefits that the revolutionary promised them ... freedom and equality? Can that mass remain silent when the “revolutionary” strips it of the freedom which it has just won? ... What interests should the revolutionary defend? Those of the party? Or those of the people at the cost of whose blood the revolution has been set in motion?¹¹⁵

The strange thing is that the Makhnovists were seeking to keep to the ideals that Leninists say they subscribe to. Yet their hatred of the movement knows few bounds and their attacks little more than inventions parroted from previous inaccurate Leninist attacks or, when footnotes are used, selective quoting of the most shameful kind.¹¹⁶ All this rather than admit the facts; all this rather than admit the elemental truth articulated by Makhno, as quoted by Voline:

Conquer or die—such is the dilemma which faces the Ukrainian peasants and workers at this historic moment... But we will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of the past years, that of putting our fate into the hands of new masters. We will con-

¹¹⁴ Peter Arshinov, *The History of the Makhnovist Movement* (London: Freedom Press, 2005). See also Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917–1921* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004); Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982); Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918–1921: An Aspect of the Ukrainian Revolution* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976). Makhno’s memoirs are now available in English in three volumes, although these cover only March 1917 to the end of 1918; *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine* (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2007), *Under the Blows of the Counterrevolution* (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2009) and *The Ukrainian Revolution* (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2011).

¹¹⁵ Quoted by Skirda, *Nestor Makhno*, 94–95.

¹¹⁶ See, as an example, Rees, “In Defence of October,” 57–60. For my reply to another such attack, see “On the Bolshevik Myth,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 47 (Summer 2007).

quer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives according to our own will and our own conception of the truth.

Ultimately, for all its failings and faults, the Makhnovist movement shows that the libertarian ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin were a viable alternative to Marxist notions of revolution. So it is understandable that Marxists seek to discredit it by any means available.

Anti-Semitic Kulaks?

The main line of attack on the Makhnovists by Leninists is expressed by Victor Serge in 1920 when he was a loyal functionary, namely that the Makhnovists “speculated on the spirit of small land-ownership of the peasants, on their nationalism, even on anti-Semitism, all of which had dreadful consequences.”[118] These claims are often supplemented by other charges, such as the Makhnovists being “kulaks” (wealthy peasants who hired labour), joining the Whites and being anti-working-class. All these claims are easy to refute. We will start by quoting Serge from 1938 when he had reclaimed his independence somewhat:

Makhno’s Black Army was often accused of anti-Semitism. There were anti-Semitic excesses carried out by all parties in Ukraine, but not where the Blacks were truly masters of their movements, as Soviet authors were forced to recognise. In communist publications they denounced this as a movement of well-off peasants. This is not true. Conscientious research carried out under the aegis of the Historical Commission of the Communist Party of the USSR established that poor and middle peasants formed the majority of Makhno’s troops.¹¹⁷

The charge of anti-Semitism is refuted in some detail by both Arshinov and Voline (the latter of Jewish origin, like many of the troops and anarchists involved with the Makhnovists) and serious research has always confirmed their conclusions.¹¹⁸ The only people today who repeat the charge in the face of this evidence are orthodox Trotskyists who also ignore the documented fact that Red Army troops carried out pogroms.¹¹⁹

As for the claim it was a movement of “kulaks,” this seem to forget that there had been a revolution in the countryside that had equalised wealth considerably¹²⁰ and that “the Makhnovist movement could hardly have lasted four years supported by, at most, 20 per cent of the popula-

¹¹⁷ Serge, *Anarchists Never Surrender*, 223.

¹¹⁸ Paul Avrich, “Nestor Makhno: The Man and the Myth,” in *Anarchist Portraits*, 122–23; Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, 168–74.

¹¹⁹ Of course, this was in spite of the official Bolshevik position opposing all forms of anti-Semitism. As with the Red Army, while it is possible that a few troops fighting under the Makhnovist banner (or claiming to) carried out pogroms on Jews, this was in opposition to Makhnovist policy (a policy ruthlessly applied). That the Trotskyists do not apply the same perspective to the Makhnovists is typical of their double standards. However, this is speculation, as no evidence has been forthcoming on Makhnovist pogroms, unlike Red Army ones.

¹²⁰ Overall, the “redistribution of the land, the stock, and inventory in the years 1917–1920 resulted in considerable social levelling and an aggregate downward shift among the peasantry.” (Sirianni, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy*, 177); “Peasants’ economic conditions in the region of the Makhno movement were greatly improved at the expense of the estates of the landlords, the church, monasteries, and the richest peasants.” (Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 214)

tion.”¹²¹ This is confirmed by Trotsky himself who once opined that “Makhnovism has not been liquidated with the liquidation of Makhno: it has its roots in the ignorant masses.”¹²² As one historian notes, “Makhno and his associates brought sociopolitical issues into the daily life of the people, who in turn supported his efforts, hoping to expedite the expropriation of large estates because they feared that ‘the revolution would be destroyed, and we would again remain without land.’”¹²³ In terms of specific policies, a Makhnovist organised congress passed the following resolution:

[I]n the interests of socialism and the struggle against the bourgeoisie, all land should be transferred to the hands of the toiling peasants. According to the principle that “the land belongs to nobody” and can be used only by those who care about it, who cultivate it, the land should be transferred to the toiling peasantry of Ukraine for their use without pay according to the norm of equal distribution.¹²⁴

It should also be stressed that those who attack the Makhnovists as “kulaks” usually fail to mention that Bolshevik land policy was a complete disaster and caused endless conflict with *all* the peasantry (indeed, the “poorer the areas, the more dissatisfied were the peasants with the Bolshevik decrees”¹²⁵). This, in turn, worsened the food supply problems for the towns. You would think avoiding such a complete failure would have been something in the Makhnovists’ favour, particularly when the Bolsheviks finally introduced a land policy similar to that of the Makhnovists in early 1920.

In terms of working with the Whites, no such thing ever occurred. As Serge acknowledged, there were “strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Party” against Makhno “which went so far as to accuse him of signing pacts with the Whites at the very moment when he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against them.”¹²⁶ Indeed, the Makhnovists played the key role in the defeat of both Denikin and Wrangel.

The conflict between the Bolsheviks and the Makhnovists was driven by politics—the driving necessity of the former to maintain its monopoly on power and the latter seeking to promote popular self-government whenever they could. This conflict in turn resulted in the counter-revolution taking advantage of the situation. For example:

Once Trotsky’s Red Army had crushed Iudenich and Kolchak and driven Deniken’s forces back upon their bases in the Crimea and the Kuban, it turned upon Makhno’s partisan forces with a vengeance ... in mid-January 1920, after a typhus epidemic had decimated his forces, a re-established Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party declared Makhno an outlaw. Yet the Bolsheviks could not free themselves

¹²¹ Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, 119. Skirda presents some statistics on captured Makhnovist troops in 1921, which show that 208 out of 265 had no land or just the minimum needed to support a household. (*Nestor Makhno*, 310)

¹²² *How the Revolution Armed: The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 2 (London: New Park Publications, 1979), 302.

¹²³ Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 71.

¹²⁴ Quoted by Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 155.

¹²⁵ Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 156.

¹²⁶ Serge, *Memoirs*, 143.

from Makhno's grasp so easily, and it became one of the supreme ironies of the Russian Civil War that his attacks against the rear of the Red Army made it possible for the resurrected White armies ... to return briefly to the southern Ukraine in 1920.¹²⁷

If anyone was "objectively" pro-White, it was the Bolsheviks and their refusal to allow the Makhnovists the right to apply their own ideas, a right they had won by fighting and defeating the Whites.

Nor let us forget the circumstances in which these Bolshevik betrayals took place. The country was, as Leninists constantly remind us, in a state of economic collapse. Indeed, the defenders of Bolshevism habitually blame the anti-working-class and dictatorial actions and policies of the Bolsheviks on the chaos caused by the civil war. Yet here are the Bolsheviks prolonging this very civil war by turning on their allies after the defeat of the Whites. Resources that could have been used to aid the economic rebuilding of Russia and Ukraine along with the talents and energy of the Makhnovists were either destroyed or wasted in pointless conflict.

Should we be surprised? Bolshevik politics and ideology played a key role in all these decisions. They were *not* driven by terrible objective circumstances (indeed, they made those circumstances worse). They were driven by an ideology that by that time was committed to party dictatorship.

"Hatred of the City and the City Workers"?

For Trotsky, the "anarchist ideas of Makhno (the ignoring of the State, non-recognition of the central power) corresponded to the spirit of this kulak cavalry as nothing else could. I should add that the hatred of the city and the city worker on the part of the followers of Makhno was complemented by a militant anti-Semitism."¹²⁸ We have debunked the assertions of anti-Semitism and the kulak nature of the movement, here we address the issue of "hatred" of city workers.

It is true that the Makhnovists were predominantly a peasant movement, although it must be remembered that Makhno's home, Gulyai Polye, is often described as a village in spite of boasting around twenty-five thousand inhabitants in 1917. There was industrial production in the region and, for example, Makhno was both a wage-worker on a farm and in a foundry in his youth. Indeed, once returned home from prison in 1917, he organised a peasants' union and was asked for help by unionised metal workers during a (successful) strike in 1917.¹²⁹ More, as communist-anarchists, Makhno and his comrades recognised that a successful revolution required the co-operation of both peasants and proletarians—particularly in a country predominantly peasant in nature.¹³⁰ As such, the Makhnovist programme included ideas tailored to both groups of toilers as summed up by the slogan sewn onto their black flags: "*The Land to the Peasants, the Factories to the Workers.*" As their draft declaration put it:

[H]aving scrupulously examined the idea and the results of state take-over (nationalisation) of the means and instruments of worker production (the mines, communications, workshops, factories, etc.) as well as of the workers' organisations themselves (trades unions, factory and workshop committees, cooperatives, etc.), we can

¹²⁷ W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 327.

¹²⁸ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 80.

¹²⁹ Makhno, *The Russian Revolution in Ukraine*, 34–39.

¹³⁰ A good selection of articles written by Makhno in exile is collected in *The Struggle against the State and other Essays* (Edinburgh/San Francisco: AK Press, 1996).

announce with certainty that there is one genuine and fair solution to the workers' question: the transfer of all the means, instruments and materials of labour, production and transportation, not to the complete disposal of the state—this new boss and exploiter which uses wage-slavery and is no less oppressive of the workers than private entrepreneurs—but to the workers' organisations and unions in natural and free association with one another and in liaison with peasant organisations through the good offices of their economic soviets.

It is our conviction that only such a resolution of the labour issue will release the energy and activity of the worker masses, give a fresh boost to repair of the devastated industrial economy, render exploitation and oppression impossible ... only the workers, with the help of their free organisations and unions, will be able to secure their release from the yoke of State and Capital (private and state alike), take over the working of mineral and coal reserves, get workshops and factories back into operation, establish equitable exchanges of products between different regions, towns and countryside, get rail traffic moving again, in short, breathe life back into the moribund shell of our economic organisation.¹³¹

They also applied these ideas in practice. As Voline recounts, when the Makhnovists entered a city or town they immediately announced to the population that the army did not intend to exercise political authority. The workers and peasants were invited to a congress and urged to manage their own affairs by setting up free soviets that would carry out the will of their constituents. Economically, peasants were urged to expropriate the holdings of the landlords and the state (including all livestock and goods), while all factories, plants, mines, and other means of production were to become property of all the workers under control of their trade unions. Political parties were granted full freedom to organise and publish—with the one caveat that they could not seek to create their own revolutionary authority.

This is in stark contrast to the actions of the Bolsheviks who when entering a town or city imposed a *revkom* or “revolutionary committee.” If a soviet was created, it was packed with Bolsheviks, and thus completely subservient to the leadership of the ruling party. Other parties were generally repressed or at best heavily policed. Economically, they imposed “one-man management” and expected the workers to obey the orders issued from a distant bureaucracy. Given this, it would be wise to show how Trotsky's love of the city worker was expressed at the time to better compare it to the alleged “hatred” of the Makhnovists:

The only solution of economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power—an almost inexhaustible reservoir—and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation, and utilisation... the course we have adopted is unquestionably the right one.¹³²

[T]he road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State... Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant

¹³¹ Skirda, *Nestor Makhno*, 375–76.

¹³² Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 135–36. Why principle? Perhaps because Marx and Engels had demanded “[e]stablishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture” in the “Communist Manifesto” along with calls to “centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State”? (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 490).

flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction... No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour.¹³³

It would consequently be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers, and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered... I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully.¹³⁴

[T]he State and the trade unions ... acquire new rights of some kind over the worker. The worker does not merely bargain with the Soviet State: no, he is subordinated to the Soviet State, under its orders in every direction—for it is *his* State.¹³⁵

Ignoring the question of the vast and powerful state machine (bureaucracy) this would need, an obvious question is: Was it “his” state? Did workers run this “most ruthless form of State” to which they were “subordinated”? No:

We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its strong revolutionary organisation that the party has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this “substitution” of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all... The dictatorship of the proletariat, in its very essence, signifies the immediate supremacy of the revolutionary vanguard, which relies upon the heavy masses, and, where necessary, obliges the backward tail to dress by the head.¹³⁶

Unsurprisingly, the massive state machine required to order the subordinated worker around (and to repress them if they objected) quickly acquired class interests of its own, as anarchists had long predicted.

¹³³ Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 169–70.

¹³⁴ Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 162–63. It should go without saying that “the collective will of the workers” was a euphemism for the rule (dictatorship) of the party.

¹³⁵ Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 168.

¹³⁶ Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 109–10.

As an example of the lack of a Makhnovist programme for urban areas, one Leninist gave the example of Makhno's advice to railway workers in Aleksandrovsk "who had not been paid for many weeks" that they should "simply charge passengers a fair price and so generate their own wages." He states that this "advice aimed at reproducing the petit-bourgeois patterns of the countryside."¹³⁷ Trotsky, in contrast, simply "plac[ed] the railwaymen and the personnel of the repair workshops under martial law" and "summarily ousted" the leaders of the railwaymen's trade union when they objected." The Central Administrative Body of Railways (Tsektran) he created was run by him "along strictly military and bureaucratic lines." In other words, he applied his ideas on the "militarisation of labour" in full.¹³⁸ It also failed in its own terms, for a few months after Trotsky imposed this there was a "disastrous collapse of the railway network in the winter of 1920-1."¹³⁹

What better signifies "hatred" of the city worker? The state-capitalist social relations imposed on the workers by the Bolshevik Party dictatorship or the self-managed ones within freely elected soviets recommended to the workers by Makhno? If the Makhnovist position that workers had to organise themselves to run their own workplaces was anti-proletarian, does that mean genuine proletarian policies were those pursued by the Bolsheviks? Namely, "dictatorial" one-man management, militarisation of labour, repression of strikes?¹⁴⁰

Only an ideologue could suggest that Makhno's advice (and it was advice, not a decree imposed from above as was Trotsky's) can be considered worse. Indeed, by being based on workers' self-management it was infinitely more socialist than the militarisation of labour of Bolshevism. It seems paradoxical, to say the least, to proclaim that the Makhnovists had no working-class support or programme, while at the same time defending the rule of a party that would have been kicked out if workers had had genuine soviet democracy.

Those who accuse the Makhnovists in this way fail to understand the nature of anarchism. Anarchism argues that it is up to working-class people to organise their own activities. This meant that, ultimately, it was up to the railway workers *themselves* (in association with other workers) to organise their own work and industry. Rather than being imposed by a few leaders, *real* socialism can only come from below, built by working people through their own efforts and their own class organisations. Anarchists can suggest ideas and solutions, but ultimately it is up to workers (and peasants) to organise their own affairs. Thus, rather than being condemned, the Makhnovist position should be praised, as it was made in a spirit of equality and encouraged workers' self-management and self-activity.

Finally, we should comment on the issue of political parties in the Makhnovist free soviet system. It is sometimes suggested that "Makhno held elections, but no parties were allowed to participate in them."¹⁴¹ Such claims simply show an ignorance of both the Makhnovists and the soviet system in Bolshevik Russia and Ukraine. In terms of the former, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and Left SRs were elected to Makhnovist organised congresses and soviets.¹⁴² In terms of the

¹³⁷ Rees, "In Defence of October," 59.

¹³⁸ Brinton, *For Workers' Power*, 361.

¹³⁹ Aves, *Workers against Lenin*, 102.

¹⁴⁰ Also, the Bolshevik state used its control of issuing wages (whether in kind or in money) to control workers, with the withdrawal of rations a key means—along with the Cheka, army and lockouts—to break strikes.

¹⁴¹ Rees, "In Defence of October," 60.

¹⁴² Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, 111, 124. Skirda presents minutes of the Second Regional Congress in 1919, which record anarchist, Left SR and Bolshevik delegates speaking. (*Nestor Makhno*, 363-68) Voline quotes from the Makhnovists reply to Dybenko's attempt to ban the third regional congress in April 1919: "The

latter, the soviet system favoured by the Bolsheviks allowed various parties voting representation in soviet executive committees, members appointed by the parties and not elected from the soviet assembly. In addition, voting was conducted by party lists, which meant so-called delegates could be anyone. Thus, early 1920 saw a chemical factory elect left Menshevik Julius Martov as its “delegate” to the Moscow soviet, defeating that equally well-known chemical worker Vladimir Lenin by seventy-six votes to eight.¹⁴³ Unsurprisingly, Russian anarcho-syndicalists also opposed “party lists” as these resulted in “political chatterboxes gaining entry” to soviets and “turning [them] into a talking-shop.”¹⁴⁴

In short, members of political parties could be and were elected to Makhnovist organised congresses and could be and were elected to organs created by those congresses. They gained their mandate from convincing those they worked with to elect them rather than, say, being appointed via the party leadership or as part of a party list. Like the Kronstadt rebels, the Makhnovists argued for all power to the soviets and not to parties. This did not mean banning parties but rather ensuring their proper place and that their presence represented actual popular support for the delegate.

Ultimately, Leninist attacks on the Makhnovists are no more substantial than the response of Monty Python’s King Arthur to the searing anarcho-syndicalist critique of monarchy in *The Holy Grail*: “Bloody peasants!”

The Lessons of the Makhnovist Movement

As Voline shows, the Makhnovist movement is of note simply because while fighting a terrible civil war and facing imperialist intervention, it did not forget its ideas and aims. Indeed, it applied them to a degree that has few parallels in the history of revolutions. Strangely, given Leninists’ willingness to ignore, rationalise and defend the many deviations by the Bolsheviks from what their followers say were their core values, they are far less willing to do so for the Makhnovists. Then every failure to apply their principles completely is denounced and proclaimed a reason to reject the movement out of hand. The contrast could not be more striking.

It should go without saying that no anarchist suggests that the Makhnovist movement was perfect. Far from it—as would be expected in a life-and-death struggle against Red and White tyranny, mistakes were made, injustices occurred, atrocities were committed, and principles were violated.¹⁴⁵ Anarchists no more hold the Makhnovists to an impossible standard than we do the Bolsheviks. The issue is whether the movement was protecting working-class autonomy and freedoms or destroying them, whether it was clearing the way for future socialist development or leading the revolution into a new class system.¹⁴⁶ On this criterion, the Makhnovists show

Revolutionary Military Council ... holds itself above the pressure and influence of all parties and only recognises the people who elected it. Its duty is to accomplish what the people have instructed it to do, and to create no obstacles to any Left Socialist party in the propagation of ideas. Consequently, if one day the Bolshevik idea succeeds among the workers, the Revolutionary Military Council ... will necessarily be replaced by another organisation, ‘more revolutionary’ and more Bolshevik.”

¹⁴³ Getzler, *Martov*, 202.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted by Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 190.

¹⁴⁵ This applies to individuals involved in the movement itself. We will not comment on Voline’s claims that Makhno was an alcoholic and that some of his commanders were rapists, beyond noting that these are unsubstantiated claims, denied by others active in the movement, and that his wife and other women were insurgents and were unlikely to have tolerated such abuse (see Skirda, *Nestor Makhno*, 302, 305–6).

¹⁴⁶ Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 23–24; Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*, 275–78.

that there were alternatives available and that ideology—Bolshevik ideology—was an important factor in the rise of Stalinism.

Finally, it would be remiss not to comment upon the Russian anarchist movement. If Ukraine showed the potential of an anarchism well-understood and well-organised, Russia showed the opposite. There the movement was divided and disorganised, essentially built during the summer of 1917 and without long-term links with the labour movement. These features hindered the spread of anarchist influence in 1917, and while it did grow, as Voline indicates, it did not reach its full potential before the Bolsheviks repressed it. So as well as showing the importance of politics—libertarian versus authoritarian—on the outcome of the revolution, the Makhnovists show the importance of a well-organised, labour-orientated anarchist movement.¹⁴⁷

The Kronstadt Uprising

The Kronstadt uprising of early 1921 was a key moment in the revolution.¹⁴⁸ While the revolution had been pushed in an authoritarian direction since early 1918, the crushing of this revolt for soviet democracy marked the end of the revolution—this was the point when the new class secured its final victory over the Unknown Revolution. More, it was the final straw for many libertarians who had come to Russia with the hope of aiding the revolution—not least, Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman.

The revolt is covered well by Voline (Book III, Part I).¹⁴⁹ Here we sketch some of the latter-day attacks on the rebels that Voline’s account does not cover. It is important to stress that the revolt broke out in solidarity with a general strike in Petrograd. This is often downplayed in Leninist accounts of the uprising, while Trotsky argued that from “the class point of view” it is “extremely important to contrast the behaviour of Kronstadt to that of Petrograd in those critical days” for the “uprising did not attract the Petrograd workers. It repelled them. The stratification proceeded along class lines. The workers immediately felt that the Kronstadt mutineers stood on the opposite side of the barricades—and they supported the Soviet power. The political isolation of Kronstadt was the cause of its internal uncertainty and its military defeat.”¹⁵⁰ This is easy to refute:

He omits the most important reason for the seeming indifference of the workers of Petrograd. It is of importance, therefore, to point out that the campaign of slander, lies and calumny against the sailors began on the 2nd March, 1921... In addition, Petrograd was put under martial law... Under these iron-clad rules it was physically impossible for the workers of Petrograd to ally themselves with Kronstadt, especially as not one word of the manifestoes issued by the sailors in their paper was permitted

¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that while both Makhno and Voline agreed on the need for a well-organised anarchist movement, they differed on how best create it. In exile during the 1920s Voline favoured a “synthesis” organisation of all anarchist tendencies, while Makhno (along with Arshinov) argued for a “Platform” based on libertarian communism. Space excludes discussion of the differences, but most of the relevant documents were gathered by fellow exile G.P. Maximoff in *Constructive Anarchism: The Debate on the Platform* (Sydney, AU: Monty Miller Press, 1988). Also see my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section J.3, for more details on anarchist organisations and their role.

¹⁴⁸ Good accounts of the rebellion can be found in Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* and Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*.

¹⁴⁹ Other libertarian works on Kronstadt include Ida Mett, “The Kronstadt Commune” (in *Bloodstained*); Berkman, “The Kronstadt Rebellion,” (in *To Remain Silent Is Impossible*); Goldman, “Trotsky Protests Too Much,” (in *To Remain Silent is Impossible*); Ante Ciliga, “The Kronstadt Revolt,” *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly* 8 (October 1989).

¹⁵⁰ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 90–91.

to penetrate to the workers in Petrograd. In other words, Leon Trotsky deliberately falsifies the facts.¹⁵¹

The lies include claims that the revolt was a White plot organised by a Tsarist general (who had been appointed by Trotsky!). We will not bother with these, as no evidence has ever been presented by the Bolsheviks or their latter-day defenders to support these claims.¹⁵² Here we concentrate on the key Leninist positions that have hardly moved since Trotsky was first forced to address the issue in the 1930s. First, that the revolt had to be crushed due to the danger of the counter-revolution and, second, that the rebel sailors of 1921 were not the heroic sailors of 1917.

Kronstadt in 1917 and 1921

So what of the sailors in 1921? Had they been there since 1917? The short answer is yes.

Academic Evan Mawdsley argues that “it seems reasonable to challenge the previous interpretation” that there had been a “marked change in the composition of the men in the fleet ... particularly ... at the Kronstadt Naval Base.” “The composition of the DOT [Active Detachment],” he concludes, “had not fundamentally changed, and anarchistic young peasants did not predominate there. The available data suggests that the main difficulty was not ... that the experienced sailors were being demobilised. Rather, they were not being demobilised rapidly enough.” The “relevant point is length of service, and available information indicates that as many as three-quarters of the DOT ratings—the Kronstadt mutineers—had served in the fleet at least since the World War.” The “majority of men seem to have been veterans of 1917,” and “for the DOT as a whole on 1 January 1921, 23.5% could have been drafted before 1911, 52% from 1911 to 1918 and 24.5% after 1918.” More specifically, in terms of the two battleships whose sailors played the leading role in 1921 revolt, the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol (both renowned since 1917 for their revolutionary zeal), he shows that “at the time of the uprising” of the 2,028 sailors, 20.2% were recruited into the navy before 1914, 59% joined in the years 1914–16, 14% in 1917 and 6.8% in the years 1918–21. So 93.2% of the sailors who launched the revolt in 1921 had been there in 1917.¹⁵³

Israel Getzler in his excellent account of Kronstadt between 1917 and 1921 investigated this issue and presented identical conclusions. It is “certainly the case” that the “activists of the 1921 uprising had been participants of the 1917 revolutions” including the “1,900 veteran sailors of the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol who spearheaded it. It was certainly true of a majority of the Revolutionary Committee and of the intellectuals... Likewise, at least three-quarters of the 10,000 to 12,000 sailors—the mainstay of the uprising—were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution.” He also quotes a Bolshevik who visited Kronstadt a few months before the uprising, who, while concerned that “sooner or later Kronstadt’s veteran sailors, who

¹⁵¹ Goldman, “Trotsky Protests Too Much,” 241–42. She presents a vivid eyewitness account of the repression in Petrograd in *Living My Life* (872–87) as does Alexander Berkman in *The Bolshevik Myth* (246–57).

¹⁵² Paul Avrich in his research on the uprising in the 1960s unearthed a “Memorandum” by a White group, but concluded it played no part in the revolt. The uprising was spontaneous and “caught the emigres off balance.” (*Kronstadt 1921*, 111–12, 126–27, 212) We mention this because some Trotskyists refer to it without, apparently, being able to understand it. It should also be noted that the Cheka at the time found no evidence of a conspiracy. (Israel Getzler, “The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents,” *Revolutionary Russia* vol. 15, no. 1 [June 2002], 25).

¹⁵³ Evan Mawdsley, “The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt Mutiny,” *Soviet Studies* 24, no. 4 (April 1973): 508–10.

were steeled in revolutionary fire and had acquired a clear revolutionary world-view, would be replaced by inexperienced, freshly mobilised young sailors,” had concluded that “in Kronstadt the red sailor still predominates.”¹⁵⁴

Likewise, Fedotoff-White notes that “a good many” of the rebels “had had ample experience in organisational and political work since 1917. A number had long-standing associations with Anarchists and the Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left.” In addition, the cruiser *Rossiia* had joined in the decision to re-elect the Kronstadt soviet and its “crew consisted mostly of old seamen.”¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the majority of the revolutionary committee were veterans of the Kronstadt soviet and the October Revolution: “Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants in the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising.”¹⁵⁶

If we ignore all this evidence—as Leninists are wont to¹⁵⁷—we can still query the logic of Trotsky’s assertions. Writing in 1937, he argued that Kronstadt had “been completely emptied of proletarian elements” as “[a]ll the sailors” belonging to the ships’ crews “had become commissars, commanders, chairmen of local soviets.” So Kronstadt was “denuded of all revolutionary forces” by “the winter of 1919” although he acknowledged that “a certain number of qualified workers and technicians” remained to “take care of the machinery,” but these were “politically unreliable,” as proven by the fact they had not been selected to fight in the civil war. As evidence, he mentions that he had wired a “request at the end of 1919, or in 1920, to ‘send a group of Kronstadt sailors to this or that point’” and they had answered “No one left to send.”¹⁵⁸

It is hard to know what to make of this nonsense, as surely Trotsky would have thought it unwise for the Communist commissar at Kronstadt to leave his fortress and its ships totally unmanned? Likewise, did he not know that troops left to defend Petrograd needed a high level of technical knowledge and experience to operate the battleships and defences at Kronstadt? This meant that “[o]ne reason for the remarkable survival in Kronstadt of these veteran sailors, albeit in greatly diminished numbers, was precisely the difficulty of training, in wartime conditions, a new generation competent in the sophisticated technical skills required of Russia’s ultra-modern battleships, and, indeed, in the fleet generally.” This did not mean no one left, just that significant numbers had to remain through necessity. Moreover, “by the end of 1919 thousands of veteran sailors, who had served on many fronts of the civil war and in the administrative network of the expanding Soviet state, had returned to the Baltic Fleet and to Kronstadt, most by way of remobilisation.”¹⁵⁹ Thus the idea that the sailors left and did not come back is not valid.

¹⁵⁴ Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, 207–8, 226, 207.

¹⁵⁵ Dmitri Fedotoff-White, *The Growth of the Red Army* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 155, 138.

¹⁵⁶ Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 91. Avrich did not address the issue of personal service in his book but noted in a review of Getzler’s work that “Getzler draws attention to the continuity in institutions, ideology, and personnel linking 1921 with 1917. In doing so he demolishes the allegation of Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders that the majority of veteran Red sailors had, in the course of the Civil War, been replaced by politically retarded peasant recruits... He shows, on the contrary, that no significant change had taken place in the fleet’s political and social composition, that at least three-quarters of the sailors on active duty in 1921 had been drafted before 1918” (*Soviet Studies* 36: 1 [January 1984], 139–40).

¹⁵⁷ As an example, while selectively and misleadingly quoting from Getzler’s work to bolster his defence of Bolshevism, Rees fails to mention the statistical information provided in it—unsurprisingly, because the data completely destroys his argument. (“In Defence of October,” 61–64),

¹⁵⁸ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 87, 90, 81.

¹⁵⁹ Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, 208, 197–98.

The available evidence shows that most of the sailors of 1921 had been there since 1917. This is also reflected in the politics raised during the uprising. Kronstadt in 1917 was *never* dominated by the Bolsheviks. A “radical populist coalition of Maximalists and Left SRs held sway, albeit precariously, *within* Kronstadt and its Soviet,” even if “*externally* Kronstadt was a loyal stronghold of the Bolshevik regime.” At the time of the October Revolution, the majority of the soviet were Left SRs and SR Maximalists, and while the Bolshevik representation increased to 46 per cent in January 1918, it fell back to 29 per cent in April (compared to 21 per cent and 22 per cent for the Left and Maximalist SRs). Anarchists had a significant influence at the grassroots, as well as a few delegates in the soviet—indeed, the Kronstadt soviet voted to denounce the Bolshevik attack on the anarchists in April 1918.¹⁶⁰

The politics of Kronstadt in 1917–1918 were radical populist, for the Maximalists occupied “a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR’s and the anarchists while sharing elements of both.” They “preached a doctrine of total revolution” and called for a “‘toilers’ soviet republic’ founded on freely elected soviets, with a minimum of central state authority. Politically, this was identical with the objective of the Kronstadters [in 1921], and ‘Power to the soviets but not the parties’ had originally been a Maximalist rallying-cry.” Economically, the parallels “are no less striking.” They demanded that “all the land be turned over to the peasants.” For industry they rejected the Bolshevik theory and practice of “workers’ control” over bourgeois administrators in favour of the “social organisation of production and its systematic direction by representatives of the toiling people.” They opposed nationalisation and centralised state management in favour of socialisation and workers’ self-management of production. Indeed, “[o]n nearly every important point the Kronstadt program, as set forth in the rebel *Izvestiia*, coincided with that of the Maximalists.”¹⁶¹

So we should not be surprised that Kronstadt’s soviet was first disbanded by the Bolsheviks on July 9, 1918, in the wake of the Left SR “revolt.” As in March 1921, the Left SR and Maximalist SR controlled soviet was replaced by a Bolshevik revolutionary committee.¹⁶²

The statistical information we have presented was unavailable when anarchists wrote their accounts of the uprising. All they could go on were the facts of the uprising itself and the demands of the rebels. Based on these, it is little wonder they stressed the continuity between the Red Kronstadters of 1917 and the rebels of 1921—not least because, as Emma Goldman notes, the sailors “did in 1921 what they had done in 1917. They immediately made common cause with the workers [on strike in Petograd]. The part of the sailors in 1917 was hailed as the red pride and glory of the Revolution. Their identical part in 1921 was denounced to the whole world as counter-revolutionary treason” by the Bolsheviks. Little wonder that from when she arrived in Russia in January 1920 “until Kronstadt was ‘liquidated’ the sailors of the Baltic fleet were held up [by all] as the glorious example of valour and unflinching courage.”¹⁶³ As the evidence shows, those who did so—including leading Communist Party members, it must be stressed—were right. The Kronstadt rebels included many of those who took part in the 1917 revolution.

¹⁶⁰ Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, 179–86. Populist influence in 1917–18 is confirmed by Trotsky (Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 86)

¹⁶¹ Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 171–72. For a good introduction to the politics of the Left SRs, see Ronald I. Kowalski’s “‘Fellow travellers’ or revolutionary dreamers? The left social revolutionaries after 1917,” *Revolutionary Russia* vol. 11, no. 2 (December 1998).

¹⁶² Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 302.

¹⁶³ Goldman, “Trotsky Protests Too Much,” 237, 235.

Still this line of defence by Leninists does have a political impact—rather than discussing what the uprising meant for the revolution, we have substituted a trawl through the archives of the Soviet state.

Ultimately, this line of defence is both meaningless and insulting.

Meaningless, for what if the rebels were recent recruits rather than the seasoned sailors they actually were? They rose in solidarity with striking workers and raised a political and economic programme reflective of the aspirations of 1917, a programme that showed a clear awareness of the problems facing the revolution and a clear solution that rejected wage-labour (whether private or state) in favour of working-class self-activity. That, surely, should be enough? Particularly given that no Trotskyist asks how long workers have been employed in a firm or for evidence on when their ancestors left the countryside before supporting their strikes.

Insulting, for it assumes working people—whether proletarian or peasant—cannot learn from experience and draw their own conclusions as to what is in their interests. After all, the sailors in 1905 and 1917 had been “new recruits” at one stage, but they gained political experience and class consciousness. Ironically, during 1917, “Menshevik critics were fond of carping that most Bolshevik newcomers were young lads fresh from the villages and wanting in long experience of industrial life and political activity.”¹⁶⁴ And, indeed, it was usually these industrial “raw recruits” of 1917 (as in 1905) who helped organise soviets, strikes and demonstrations, as well as formulating demands and raising slogans that were to the left of the Bolsheviks, ensuring that “the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen.”¹⁶⁵ Does this process somehow stop just because the Bolsheviks are in power?

“A Tragic Necessity”?

While some Trotskyists to this day play the statistics game, either by assertion or by invention, others take a more sophisticated approach. This is logical, for the first Leninist defence for crushing Kronstadt makes the second meaningless—if there were a danger of White attack then surely it makes not a jot of difference whether the rebels were veterans of 1917 or not? It is to this defence of the Bolsheviks that we now turn, as summarised by Trotsky’s final words on its repression being “a tragic necessity”¹⁶⁶

Were the Whites a threat? The Kronstadt revolt broke out months after the end of the civil war in western Russia, when Wrangel fled from the Crimea in November 1920. The Bolsheviks were so unafraid of White invasion that by early 1921 they had demobilised half the Red Army (some 2,500,000 men).¹⁶⁷ Wrangel’s forces were “dispersed and their morale sagging” and it would have

¹⁶⁴ Robert Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution: A Study of Organisational Change* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 44. The “bulk [of new party members in 1917] were green recruits from among the most impatient and dissatisfied elements in the factories and garrison who knew little, if anything, about Marxism” (Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991], 231).

¹⁶⁵ Trotsky, *Stalin*, 305.

¹⁶⁶ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 98.

¹⁶⁷ It should be noted that troops were still being used in workplaces to intimidate workers and for roadblocks to stop “speculation” in food, but in practice simply stopped peasants from bringing foodstuffs to the city—this did not stop the Bolsheviks justifying seizing food from the peasants because they would not provide it to cities. The Kronstadt sailors demanded the end of both practices (items 8 and 10).

taken “months ... merely to mobilise his men and transport them from the Mediterranean to the Baltic.” A second front in the south “would have meant almost certain disaster.” Indeed, in a call issued by the Bolshevik Petrograd Defence Committee on 5 March, they asked the rebels: “Haven’t you heard what happened to Wrangel’s men, who are dying like flies, in their thousands of hunger and disease?” The call goes on to add: “This is the fate that awaits you, unless you surrender within 24 hours.” The French government, while feeding Wrangel’s troops on humanitarian grounds, urged him “to disband,” while the United States, Britain and France refused to interfere.¹⁶⁸

Lenin himself argued on 16 March that “the enemies” around the Bolshevik state were “no longer able to wage their war of intervention” and so were launching a press campaign around the revolt “with the prime object of disrupting the negotiations for a trade agreement with Britain, and the forthcoming trade agreement with America.”¹⁶⁹

There was no immediate military threat from the Whites or the imperialists. There were various peasant uprisings and mass strikes, but as these were driven by Bolshevik dictatorship they can hardly be used to justify it. Which leaves the question of what would have happened if Kronstadt’s demand for soviet democracy had been granted. Victor Serge gives the sophisticated Leninist response:

After many hesitations, and with unutterable anguish, my Communist friends and I finally declared ourselves on the side of the Party. This is why. Kronstadt has right on its side. Kronstadt was the beginning of a fresh, liberating revolution for popular democracy... However, the country was exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there were no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses. The working-class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. The Party, swollen by the influx of power-seekers, inspired little confidence... Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions, and inspiration; at its back there were only masses of starving and desperate men.

The popular counter-revolution translated the demand for freely-elected soviets into one for “Soviets without Communists.” If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the emigres, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian.¹⁷⁰

Some modern-day Leninists follow this line of reasoning and want us to believe that the Bolsheviks were defending the remaining gains of the revolution. What gains, exactly? The only gains that remained were Bolshevik power and nationalised industry—both of which excluded the real gains of the Russian Revolution, namely soviet democracy, the right to independent unions and to strike, freedom of assembly, association and speech for working people, the beginnings of workers’ self-management of production and so on. Indeed, both “gains” were the basis for the Stalinist bureaucracy’s power.

¹⁶⁸ Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 13, 219, 146, 105, 117–19.

¹⁶⁹ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 52. Berkman quotes from the Communist radio on how the revolt was organised to undermine trade talks with the imperialist powers. (“The Kronstadt Rebellion,” 146–47)

¹⁷⁰ Serge, *Memoirs*, 150–51. Trotsky makes a similar argument on soviet democracy but he generalises it to all revolutions. (Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, 90)

Thus, the core problem with Serge's account is the notion that the Bolshevik dictatorship was not "anti-proletarian." This is hard to square with the reality of the regime—unless we are talking of *idealised* proletarians "sympathising instinctively with the party and carrying out the menial tasks required by the revolution"—as Serge put in it 1920—rather than *real* ones.¹⁷¹ Yes, the country was "exhausted," but that was, in part, because of the struggles workers had to wage against the regime and the state repression they were met with. Likewise, production was at a standstill in part due to the bureaucratic regime the Bolsheviks were defending. Indeed, it took the Kronstadt revolt to move away from what was later termed "war communism," but was then just called "communism," and the economy revived quickly under the New Economic Policy.¹⁷² So the potential was there—the revolt saw precisely the renewal of activity and hope within both the town and the naval base that Serge proclaimed did not exist in Russia.

Could Kronstadt's demand for soviet democracy have indirectly produced counter-revolution? Perhaps, for no revolution can be guaranteed to succeed. However, what is certain is that the revolution had been defeated in 1921 and the degeneration became worse. The regime did not self-reform—could not self-reform given the policy of its leadership. The repression of Kronstadt meant the repression of the only political and economic programme that could have saved the revolution—for a "revolutionary" regime that oversaw the suppression of the soviet democracy and the elimination of workers from the management of industry already signified the death of the revolution.

The notion that the Bolsheviks could have encouraged some kind of proletarian "democracy" while maintaining party dictatorship is the logical conclusion of Serge's position. Yet this hope was utopian as can be seen from the fate of the "non-Party workers' and peasants' conferences" along with Soviet Congresses that Lenin pointed to in his 1920 diatribe against left-wing communism. Ignoring the awkward fact that *if* the congresses of soviets were "*democratic* institutions, the like of which even the best democratic republics of the bourgeois have never known" then the Bolsheviks would have no need to "support, develop and extend" non-Party conferences "to be able to observe the temper of the masses, come closer to them, meet their requirements, promote the best among them to state posts,"¹⁷³ how the Bolsheviks met "their requirements" is extremely significant—they disbanded them, just as they had with soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities in 1918. This was because "[d]uring the disturbances" of late 1920, "they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies" and they "were discontinued soon afterward."¹⁷⁴ So even advisory forums were too much for the party, for they gave the masses a limited collective voice.

Benevolent dictatorships do not exist—even if the word "proletarian" is invoked. To support the regime whose policies helped create the circumstances invoked to rationalise this decision

¹⁷¹ Victor Serge, *Revolution in Danger: Writings from Russia, 1919–1921* (London: Redwords, 1997), 6. Writing to French anarchists, he generalised to all revolutions the necessity of "the dictatorship of a party," for militants "cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often unaware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past" (103, 92).

¹⁷² It must be stressed that the NEP did not, as Serge asserted, mean that "[a]ll the economic demands of Kronstadt were being satisfied." (*Memoirs*, 152) The Kronstadt demands opposed wage-labour in agriculture, unlike the NEP, which allowed it.

¹⁷³ Lenin, *The Lenin Anthology*, 573.

¹⁷⁴ Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 203. Interestingly, a workers' commission set up after a strike wave in March 1921 was disbanded under martial law in Saratov after it called—like Kronstadt—for new elections to the soviets and unions along with freedom of speech, press and assembly. (Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War*, 388–89)

is hardly convincing. Even less convincing is the notion that a party dictatorship marked by a massive and growing bureaucracy could reform itself, yet this is Serge's position. As the rise of Stalin showed, this was far more utopian than the hopes of the Kronstadt sailors.

The Lessons of the Kronstadt Revolt

The events of early 1921 cast a stark light on the nature of Bolshevism. Here we have a movement demanding what was promised in 1917 and being answered by bullets and cannons. Faced with a choice between soviet democracy and party power, the party—as it had since early 1918—preferred the latter and destroyed the former to secure it.

The idea of a dictatorship of the party *was* Bolshevism at the time and had been for a number of years. For example, the leading German Communist Karl Radek argued in an article written on 1 April 1921 that he was “convinced that in the light of the events at Kronstadt, the Communist elements which have so far not understood the role of the Party during the revolution, will at last learn the true value of these explanations.” For “the full benefit of this lesson” is that “even when that uprising bases itself on working-class discontent” it must “be realised that, if the Communist Party can only triumph when it has the support of the mass of workers, there will nevertheless arise situations in the West where it will have to, for a certain period, keep power using solely the forces of the vanguard.” He quoted an earlier article of his from 1919:

And the mass ... may well hesitate in the days of great difficulties, defeats, and it may even despair of victory and long to capitulate. The proletarian revolution does not bring with it an immediate relief of poverty, and in certain circumstances, it may even temporarily worsen the situation of the proletariat. The adversaries of the proletarian will take advantage of this opportunity to demand the government of the workers themselves; it is for this reason that it will be necessary to have a centralised Communist Party, powerful, armed with the means of the proletarian government and determined to conserve power for a certain time, even only as the Party of the revolutionary minority, while waiting for the conditions of the struggle to improve and for the morale of the masses to rise ... there can arise situations where the revolutionary minority of the working class must shoulder the full weight of the struggle and where the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be maintained, provisionally at least, as the dictatorship of the Communist Party.

The party's “firm decision to retain power by all possible means” is “the greatest lesson of the Kronstadt events, the international lesson.” Radek, needless to say, is just repeating the Bolshevik position in words with more than usual clarity, while “provisionally”—unsurprisingly—came to be measured in decades and was only ended by mass revolt.¹⁷⁵

The lesson of Kronstadt for Bolshevism was the confirmation that soviet democracy and revolution were incompatible, that party dictatorship was an essential requirement for a “successful” revolution. Lenin did not stress this aspect of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in 1917, limiting himself to talk of the “organised control over the insignificant capitalist minority” and “over the

¹⁷⁵ Karl Radek, “The Kronstadt Uprising,” accessed October 23, 2018, www.marxists.org. Originally published in French, “Cronstadt,” *Bulletin communiste*, 2 Annee, no. 19 (12 Mai 1921), 321–5; translated by Ed Maltby.

workers who have been thoroughly corrupted by capitalism.”¹⁷⁶ Sadly, he did not find the space to indicate that the word “corrupted” meant how much the workers disagreed with the party. A more circular justification for elite rule would be hard to find.

That Bolshevik authoritarianism predates the civil war indicates the flaw in another Leninist argument about the degeneration of the revolution, namely, isolation. If, we are informed, a revolution had been successful elsewhere—specifically, in Germany—then the Soviet regime could have drawn upon the resources of an advanced industrial power with a large proletariat. This would have meant the promises of October could have been saved.¹⁷⁷

Yet this is unconvincing for numerous reasons. First, as indicated, the promises of October had been undermined *from the start*. Second, any revolution in Germany would have almost certainly been dominated by mainstream Marxism and also built the same centralised, hierarchical, top-down structures favoured in Russia.¹⁷⁸ As such, it too would have produced a new state bureaucracy (along with the bureaucracies of the centralised social democratic party and trade unions). Third, the revolution in Germany saw an economic collapse of relatively the same size as in Russia. If, as the defenders of the Bolsheviks argue, the economic crisis meant retreat in Russia then it would surely have meant the same in Germany.¹⁷⁹ Fourth, the Bolsheviks had concluded that *any* revolution needed to follow the same path—namely centralised state capitalism and party dictatorship—and informed the world’s revolutionaries of these necessities. This is why Radek was peddling this Bolshevik orthodoxy in Germany in 1919, while the Hungarian Revolution saw the short-lived Communist Government of Béla Kun apply this perspective when it voided the election of anarchists and syndicalists to the Budapest Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies in April that year.¹⁸⁰ If, as Trotsky and his followers had hoped, the German revolution had succeeded in 1923 (or earlier), then the Russian bureaucracy would not have been weakened but simply joined by a German one.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 383.

¹⁷⁷ Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, xliii; Chris Harman, *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 1974), 11–12.

¹⁷⁸ There were Marxists who had come to libertarian conclusions from the experience of the war, namely, the council communists. While initially dominating the newly formed German Communist Party, they were quickly displaced by orthodox Leninists, not least because of Lenin’s opposition, as expressed in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*—for a reply, see Herman Gorter, *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* (London: Wildcat, 1989). However, these—along with the fast growing anarcho-syndicalist union, the FAU—were a minority within the labour movement. See Serge Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils* (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1978) and D.A. Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1978).

¹⁷⁹ See my *An Anarchist FAQ*, vol. 2, section H.6.1, 814. I also discuss in my introduction to *Direct Struggle against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* how anarchists had long recognised that a revolution would face economic crisis and factored this into the libertarian theory of revolution. (57–8) Significantly, leading Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin reached this position in 1920 and while this “may appear to have been an obvious point, but it apparently came as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks. It directly opposed the prevailing Social Democratic assumption that the transition to socialism would be relatively painless.” (Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* [London: Oxford University Press, 1980], 89)

¹⁸⁰ Rudolf L. Tokés, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic: The Origins and Role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the Revolutions of 1918–1919* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), 151–52.

¹⁸¹ As Trotsky said to his English readers in 1935, his argument from 1920 “will turn out to be not without its use.” (*Terrorism and Communism*, xlvii). Rosmer was also of the opinion that both Trotsky’s *Terrorism and Communism* and Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism* had “lost none of their value” and could “still be profitably read today.” (*Lenin’s Moscow*, 69)

Actions speak louder than words. Yet it will still be argued that the Bolsheviks were only reacting to events and were violating their real, genuine core values—and their modern-day adherents would never dream of doing likewise, even if their eagerness in defending the crushing of Kronstadt suggests otherwise. It exposes those “socialists” who proclaim their opposition to Stalinism by arguing that socialism has to be democratic to be socialist: that they make an exception when the right people—Lenin and Trotsky—are the dictators suggests that not only do they not have a grasp of what socialism is, they would likewise destroy the revolution in the name of “saving” it—or at least their own power, which they equate with the revolution.

Bolshevik Oppositions

While ignoring or dismissing—when not slandering—working-class (whether proletarian or peasant) opposition to the Bolshevik regime, Marxists point to oppositional movements within the party as alternatives. As Voline mentions some of these in passing, it would be useful to sketch their positions and indicate their limitations. We concentrate on three here: the Left Communists of 1917–1918, the Workers’ Opposition of 1920–1921 and the Left Opposition of the 1920s. All show the same privileging of the party over the class. All would have produced a new class system.

Voline mentions in passing meeting Nikolai Bukharin during the negotiations over peace with Germany in 1918. At the time, he was a leading member of the Left Communists in the Bolshevik Party, opposed to many of Lenin’s policies beyond just the peace of Brest-Litovsk. These focused on how to build socialism, correctly objecting to Lenin’s calls in early 1918 to copy the “state capitalism” of Imperial Germany and arguing for a socialism built by workers’ organisations.¹⁸² Lenin reacted sharply to criticism and defended his position, not least by noting he had given his “‘high’ appreciation of state capitalism ... *before* the Bolsheviks seized power” in his *State and Revolution*, so it was “significant that [his opponents] did *not* emphasise *this*” aspect of his 1917 ideas.¹⁸³ Unsurprisingly, modern-day Leninists do not emphasise that element of Lenin’s ideas either.

While the Left Communists’ opposition to the state-capitalist aspects of mainstream Bolshevism is of note, they “did not comprehend that their conception of central planning was incompatible with the devolution of authority to the shop floor that they aspired to.”¹⁸⁴ Likewise, politically they still prioritised the role and rule of the party. As one leading member put it, the Left Communists were “the most passionate proponents of soviet power, but ... only so far as this power does not degenerate ... in a petty-bourgeois direction.”¹⁸⁵ The party played the key role for it was the only true bastion of the interests of the proletariat, and so “is in every case and everywhere superior to the soviets... The soviets represent labouring democracy in general; and its interest, and in particular the interests of the petty bourgeois peasantry, do not always coincide with the interests of the proletariat.”¹⁸⁶ In short, the party had predominance over the soviets and an ideological perspective that allowed the party to ignore soviet democracy:

¹⁸² Brinton, *For Workers’ Power*, 337–44; Sirianni, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy*, 142–50.

¹⁸³ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, 341, 354.

¹⁸⁴ Ronald I. Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict: The Left Communist Opposition of 1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 186.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict*, 135.

¹⁸⁶ Quoted by Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 182.

Ultimately, the only criterion that they appeared able to offer was to define “proletarian” in terms of adherence to their own policy prescriptions and “nonproletarian” by non-adherence to them. In consequence, all who dared to oppose them could be accused either of being non-proletarian, or at the very least of suffering from some form of “false consciousness”—and in the interests of building socialism must recant or be purged from the party. Rather ironically, beneath the surface of their fine rhetoric in defence of the soviets, and of the party as “a forum for all of proletarian democracy,” there lay a political philosophy that was arguably as authoritarian as that of which they accused Lenin and his faction.¹⁸⁷

Ultimately, it is hard not to conclude that the “ideological preconceptions of the Left Communists would have spawned a centralised, bureaucratic system, not an emancipated society in which power was diffused to the workers.”¹⁸⁸ After all, as Voline noted, Bukharin came back into the fold and he “continued to eulogise the party’s dictatorship, sometimes quite unabashedly” during and after the civil war, for the “Bolsheviks no longer bothered to disclaim that ... the dictatorship of the proletariat was the ‘dictatorship of the party’” and “class immaturity was not a peculiarity of the Russian proletariat, but a characteristic of proletarian revolutions in general.”¹⁸⁹

The next oppositional current within the Bolshevik Party, the Workers’ Opposition, is mentioned in passing by Voline but is probably the best known of the various civil war era oppositions in the party due to many works by Alexandra Kollontai being translated into English, not least the group’s manifesto. Voline, however, is wrong to suggest Lenin wrote *Left-Wing Communism* explicitly against the Workers’ Opposition, his focus was directed to communist movements elsewhere—in Britain, Holland, Germany and Italy. It is true, though, that subsequently the German and Dutch council communists did seek to work with the Workers’ Opposition, and British anti-parliamentarian communists did publish Kollontai’s manifesto.

Kollontai along with Alexander Shlyapnikov championed the cause of the Workers’ Opposition within the party and its congresses, unsuccessfully as they, along with all factions, were banned at the Tenth Party Congress in early 1921. Their arguments are of interest, recognising the key question of whether “we [shall] achieve Communism through the workers or over their heads, by the hands of Soviet officials?” They answered by arguing for the former and “*see[ing] in the unions the managers and creators of the communist economy.*” They proposed “a system of self-activity for the masses,” for “the building of Communism can and must be the work of the toiling masses themselves.” Yet, as with the Left Communists, these positive ideas are undermined by the typically Marxist centralised institutional framework in which industrial unions “elect the central body directing the whole economic life of the republic.”¹⁹⁰

However, while seeking an increase in *economic* freedom for the masses, a close reading of Kollontai’s text shows that her group did not seek actual workers’ democracy, for the “task of the Party at its present crisis” is to “lend its ear to the healthy class call of the wide working masses,” but “correction of the activity of the Party” meant “going back to democracy, freedom

¹⁸⁷ Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict*, 136–37. Sakwa draws the same obvious conclusion. (*Soviet Communists in Power*, 182–83)

¹⁸⁸ Kowalski, *Soviet Communists in Power*, 188.

¹⁸⁹ Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 145, 142.

¹⁹⁰ Alexandra Kollontai, *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), 174, 182, 200, 199, 176.

of opinion, and criticism inside the Party.” The struggle was “for establishing democracy in the party, and for the elimination of all bureaucracy,”¹⁹¹ rather than questioning party dictatorship:

Nor did they in any form criticise the domination of the communist minority over the majority of the proletariat. The fundamental weakness of the case of the Workers’ Opposition was that, while demanding more freedom of initiative for the workers, it was quite content to leave untouched the state of affairs in which a few hundred thousand imposed their will on many millions. “And since when have we been enemies of *komitetchina* [manipulation and control by communist party committees], I should like to know?” Shlyapnikov asked at the Tenth Party Congress. He went on to explain that the trade union congress in which, as he and his followers proposed, all control of industry should be vested would “of course” be composed of delegates nominated and elected “through the party cells, as we always do.” But he argued that the local trade union cells would ensure the election of men qualified by experience and ability in place of those who are “imposed on us at present” by the centre. Kollontai and her supporters had no wish to disturb the communist party’s monopoly of political power.¹⁹²

Unsurprisingly, Kollontai boasted at the Tenth Party Congress on 13 March 1921 that it was members of the Workers’ Opposition who had been “the first” to volunteer to attack Kronstadt and so “fulfil our duty in the name of Communism and the international workers’ revolution.”¹⁹³ Yet if the “*whole essence of bureaucracy*” is that “[s]ome third person decides your fate,”¹⁹⁴ then this position hardly combated bureaucratisation. However, even this limited expansion of workers’ self-activity was too much for Lenin, who (incorrectly) denounced it as a “syndicalist deviation.”

So, to varying degrees, the pre-1921 oppositions did recognise problems were developing but their solutions were primarily economic in nature and fatally handicapped due to the leading role they gave to the party and an unawareness of the part centralisation played in the creation of the bureaucracy they denounced but whose roots they did not comprehend. This is to be expected, for these were *Bolshevik* oppositions.

What of the post-1921 oppositions? Space precludes discussion of the Workers’ Truth and Workers’ Group splits from the party, other than that these seem to forsake party dictatorship and were the first groups of party members to be repressed by the state in a way similar to oppositional groups outside the party.¹⁹⁵ Instead, we will end with the Left Opposition of 1923–1928, the favoured opposition of most Leninists who tend to dismiss the previous groups.

The common perspective on the Left Opposition in Leninist circles is that it reflected the principles of 1917, that it showed—to use the words of Chris Harman, a leading member of a British Leninist party—that “there was always an alternative to Stalinism” based on “returning to genuine workers’ democracy and consciously linking the fate of Russia to the fate of world revolution.” The “historical merit of the Left Opposition” was that it “framed a policy along these lines”

¹⁹¹ Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 172, 197.

¹⁹² Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*, 294. Also see Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 182–83.

¹⁹³ Quoted by Getzler, “The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921,” 256. Also see Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, 183.

¹⁹⁴ Kollontai, *Selected Writings*, 192.

¹⁹⁵ Paul Avrich, “Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers’ Group,” *Russian Review* 43, no. 1 (January, 1984); Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (London: Ink Links Ltd, 1979), 277–78; Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 126–28, 195–98, 203–4, 214–15, 237–38.

and “did link the question of the expansion of industry with that of working-class democracy and internationalism.”¹⁹⁶

In reality, the Left Opposition did not support working-class democracy at all and instead denounced the “growing replacement of the party by its own apparatus [that] is promoted by a ‘theory’ of Stalin’s which denies the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, throughout the 1920s Trotsky defended the necessity of party dictatorship time and time again.¹⁹⁸

Yet if disagreements cannot be expressed in soviet elections, then they will reappear within the ruling party itself in the shape of factions. Yet if democracy in the soviets was counter-revolutionary, how can it be revolutionary within the party? Particularly a party subject to an influx of opportunists seeking power, influence and privileges. Hence the ending of factions within the party and rule by the leadership—which, of course, cannot halt the corruption. By 1923, Trotsky starts to see this—and urges a purge of the party to cleanse it so that “workers’ democracy” (within the party) can be revived, which would mean that the bureaucracy could once again be subject to the party. Would this have worked? It had not in 1921 when Lenin “proclaimed a purge of the Party, aimed at those revolutionaries who had come in from other parties—i.e., those who were not saturated with the Bolshevik mentality.” This “meant the establishment within the Party of a dictatorship of the old Bolsheviks, and the direction of disciplinary measures, not against the unprincipled careerists and conformist latecomers, but against those sections with a critical outlook.”¹⁹⁹

Economically, the Left Opposition did not even have the merit of the Left Communists or Workers’ Opposition in raising economic reforms. It argued that “nationalisation of the means of production was a decisive step toward the socialist reconstruction of that whole social system which is founded upon the exploitation of man by man” and that the “appropriation of surplus value by a workers’ state is not, of course, exploitation.” However, it also acknowledged that “we have a workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions” and a “swollen and privileged administrative apparatus devours a very considerable part of our surplus value” while “all the data testify that the growth of wages is lagging behind the growth of the productivity of labour.”²⁰⁰

So an economic regime marked by one-man management by state-appointed bosses under a party dictatorship could somehow be without exploitation, even though someone other than the workers controlled both their labour and how its product (and any surplus) was used? It is hardly surprising that the new master class sought its own benefit; what *is* surprising is that the Left Opposition could not see the reality of state capitalism. Rather, it focused its attention on the living standards of the working class and paid no attention to the relations of production in the workplace, raising no proposals nor demands about establishing workers’ control of industry.

¹⁹⁶ Harman, *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe*, 19.

¹⁹⁷ “Platform of the Opposition,” *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926–27)* (New York: Pathfinder, 2003), 395.

¹⁹⁸ Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 2 (London: New Park Publications, 1974), 255; *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 158; Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25)* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), 78–79; Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926–27)*, 75–76, 439, 441; *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York: Monad Press, 2002), 251.

¹⁹⁹ Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 157–58.

²⁰⁰ “Platform of the Opposition,” 347–48, 350.

Given its self-proclaimed role as defender of Leninist orthodoxy and its social position, perhaps that is not so surprising after all.

The limitations of this perspective should be clear—benevolent dictatorships do not exist, and we would expect appeals to a ruling bureaucracy to be less exploitative and oppressive would fall on deaf ears. Still, its believers refused to let reality impact on their faith, and, as Ante Ciliga recounted, even in the prison camps in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that ‘freedom of party’ would be ‘the end of the revolution.’ ‘Freedom to choose one’s party—that is Menshevism,’ was the Trotskyists’ final verdict.”²⁰¹ Their leader likewise continued to argue this into the late 1930s:

The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities—the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we cannot jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution... Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the “dictatorship” of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.²⁰²

As with Kollantai, the term “workers’ democracy” was used by Trotsky to mean *only* internal party democracy: “Workers’ democracy means the liberty of frank discussion of the most important questions of party life by all members, and the election of all leading party functionaries and commissions.”²⁰³ As for the workers, as Trotsky explained over a decade later, the so-called workers’ state was needed to repress them:

The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves ... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, 280. Ciliga has two interesting chapters (“And Now?” and “Lenin, Also”) on the various factions within the Trotskyists in the camps and his own political evolution toward recognising the obvious: that the bureaucracy was the ruling class of a state capitalist regime, which had its roots in Lenin’s ideas and actions.

²⁰² Leon Trotsky, *Writings 1936–37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 513–14.

²⁰³ Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25)*, 460.

²⁰⁴ Leon Trotsky, “The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism,” in *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 59. As Lenin put it at a Cheka conference in 1920: “Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves” (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 42 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969], 170)

Of course, everyone is, *by definition*, “backward” compared to the vanguard and such a regime cannot exist without a state in “the proper sense of the word,” a centralised, top-down structure by which a minority (in this case, the party leaders) rule the many (as always, the working class). As “vacillation” is expressed by elections, we have the logical basis for party dictatorship. Needless to say, here Trotsky is simply repeating what he had argued while in power:

The “workers’ opposition” puts forward dangerous slogans which fetishise the principles of democracy. Elections from within the working class were put above the party, as if the party had no right to defend its dictatorship even when this dictatorship was temporarily at odds with the passing feelings of workers’ democracy... It is essential to have a sense of—so to speak—the revolutionary-historical primacy of the party, which is obliged to hold on to its dictatorship, despite the temporary waverings of the masses ... even of the workers.²⁰⁵

We have come a long way from Lenin’s assertion that the “working people need the state *only* to suppress the resistance of the exploiters, and *only* the proletariat can direct this suppression, can carry it out.”²⁰⁶ In reality, the structure of the state—even a so-called “proletarian” one—ensured that would never come to pass, for it has its own class interests.

To conclude: all the Bolshevik alternatives are of note by what they share—namely, a dominant role for the party and a corresponding unconcern with working-class freedom and democracy. We need to remember that the only alternative raised by Leninists was formulated within the context of party rule: and Leninists like to proclaim anarchism utopian. Harman, like most Trotskyists, seems ignorant of his own political tradition, not least when this leading Trotskyist asserted that it was only *after* “Lenin’s illness and subsequent death” that the “principles of October were abandoned one by one.”[209]

Conclusions

No single book can hope to cover all aspects of a seismic event like the Russian Revolution nor can an introduction. However, both can give pointers to key events and key areas for further research.

The differences Voline sketches between libertarian and authoritarian socialism remain true. The authoritarian socialist, while paying lip service to a very similar vision of revolution, ultimately argues that the libertarian approach is noble but utopian and doomed to failure as, by necessity (to quote Lenin from December 1920), “the Party, shall we say, absorbs the vanguard of the proletariat, and this vanguard exercises the dictatorship of the proletariat” for “in all capitalist countries” the proletariat “is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts” that the dictatorship “can be exercised only by a vanguard.” The lesson of the revolution was clear: “the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”²⁰⁷ If

²⁰⁵ Quoted by Alec Nove, “Trotsky, Collectivization and the Five-Year Plan,” in *Socialism, Economics and Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 100. Trotsky also added: “Formally speaking this [the creation of factory committees] is indeed the clearest line of workers’ democracy. But we are against it. Why? For a basic reason, to preserve the party’s dictatorship, and for subordinate reasons: management would be inefficient” (100).

²⁰⁶ Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” 327; emphasis added.

²⁰⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 32 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 20–21.

this is the case, the libertarian replies, then the authoritarians' so-called workers' state is also doomed, for authoritarian methods will simply replace one minority-class state by another, just as despotic and remote from the people and just as unwilling to "wither away" as its capitalist predecessor. Both logic and the evidence of history show this.

Voline recounts the differences between libertarian and authoritarian socialism well, presenting both the theory and practice in a clear manner even if he only concentrates on two events, albeit two key ones, along with somewhat sweeping overviews. These may not convince the eager Leninist who knows the rhetoric of 1917 far better than the grim reality of 1918 onward and who has read the many apologetics and rationales used to justify the latter's divergence from the former. It may, however, start the process of undermining these illusions and open a wider, bottom-up, *libertarian* perspective.

Few become members of a Leninist party (at least, when it is not in power!) seeking to create a state-capitalist party dictatorship. They genuinely—at least initially—seek to liberate society from the evils of class, to see the emancipation of the working class. That the Russian Revolution started this process cannot be denied but recognition that the politics of the Bolsheviks ended it will be. Voline will help that recognition of reality and show that there is an alternative that embodies the initial hopes and desires of every rebel: *anarchism*.

Simply put, every Leninist will have what could be called their personal Kronstadt—the time when they have to choose between their socialist aspirations and defending Bolshevism. Then we hope that the class criteria Voline stresses will be central in their thoughts. Emma Goldman put it well:

There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviki to silence criticism.

It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been *locked out* and that the Bolshevik State—even as the bourgeois industrial master—uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.²⁰⁸

The problem is that Leninists seem unable to recognise that there *was* a master class in Soviet Russia. That their vision of socialism cannot be easily distinguished from state capitalism and that their centralised "soviet" power could so easily become party dictatorship, show the poverty and limitations of their politics. Worse, given the apologetics indulged in by the various defenders of the Bolsheviks, the ritualistic invoking of "objective circumstances" and the downplaying of ideological influences on the degeneration of the revolution, we cannot help but conclude that given the chance they would do exactly the same as their heroes Lenin and Trotsky—with exactly the same sorry results.

As in 1917, the issue still remains that which Voline so well explained: the State *or* Revolution.

²⁰⁸ Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 25.

Appendix: Voline Meets Trotsky in April 1917

Daniel Guérin reprinted an extract from the unpublished conclusion of The Unknown Revolution in his essential anthology of anarchist texts, No Gods, No Masters (Ni Dieu Ni Maitre) and we include this autographical sketch here.²⁰⁹ This translation first appeared in News from Nowhere (Canada, 1973) before being reprinted in The Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review 2 (1977).

In April 1917 I met Trotsky again. (We had known each other in Russia, and, later in France from which we were both expelled in 1916.) We met in a print shop which specialised in printing the various publications of the Russian left. He was then editor of a daily Marxist paper *Novy Mir* (New World). As for me, I had been entrusted with editing the last numbers of *Golos Truda* (Voice of Labour), the weekly organ of the anarcho-syndicalist Union of Russian Workers, shortly before it was moved to Russia. I used to spend one night a week at the print shop while the paper was being prepared. That is how I happened to meet Trotsky on my first night there.

Naturally we spoke about the Revolution. Both of us were preparing to leave America in the near future to return home.

In the course of our conversation I said to Trotsky: "Truly I am absolutely sure that you, the Marxists of the left, will end up by seizing power in Russia. That is inevitable, because the Soviets, having been restored, will surely enter into conflict with the bourgeois government. The government will not be able to destroy them because all the workers of the country, both industrial workers and peasants, and also most of the army, will naturally put themselves on the side of the Soviets against the bourgeoisie and the government. And once the Soviets have the support of the people and the army, they will triumph in the struggle. And once they have won it will be you, the Marxists, who will inevitably be carried into power. Because the workers are seeking the revolution in its most advanced form. The syndicalists and anarchists are too weak in Russia to attract the attention of the workers rapidly by their ideas. So the masses will put their confidence in you and you will become 'the masters of the country.' And then, look out anarchists! The conflict between you and us is unavoidable. You will begin to persecute us as soon as your power is consolidated. And you will finish by shooting us like partridges..."

"...Come, come, comrade," replied Trotsky. "You have a stubborn and incorrigible imagination. Do you think we are really divided? A mere question of method, which is quite secondary. Like us you are revolutionaries. Like you we are anarchists in the final analysis. The only difference is that you would like to establish your anarchism immediately without a preparatory transition, while we, the Marxists, do not believe it possible to 'leap' in one bound into the libertarian millennium. We anticipate a transitory epoch in the course of which the ground for an anarchist society will be cleared and ploughed with the help of the anti-bourgeois political powers: the dictatorship of the proletariat exercised by the proletarian party in power. In the end, it involves only a 'shade' of difference, nothing more. On the whole we are very close to one another. We are friends in arms. Remember now: we have a common enemy to fight. How can we think of fighting among

²⁰⁹ Daniel Guérin, *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 476–77.

ourselves? Moreover, I have no doubt that you will be quickly convinced of the necessity of a temporary proletarian socialist dictatorship. I don't see any real reason for a war between you and us. We will surely march hand in hand. And then, even if we don't agree, you are all wrong in supposing that we, the socialists, will use brutal force against the anarchists! Life itself and the judgement of the masses will resolve the problem and will put us in agreement. No! Can you really admit for a single instant such an absurdity: socialists in power shooting anarchists? Come, come, what do you take us for? Anyhow, we are socialists, comrade Voline! We are not your enemies..."

In December 1919, seriously ill, I was arrested by the Bolshevik military authorities in the Makhnovist region of the Ukraine. Considering me an important militant, the authorities advised Trotsky of my arrest by a special telegram and asked for his instructions concerning me. The reply, also by telegram, arrived quickly, clearly, laconically: "SHOOT HIM IMMEDIATELY—TROTSKY." I was not shot, thanks to a set of circumstances particularly fortunate and entirely fortuitous.

Appendix: A Bibliographical Sketch

The Unknown Revolution was first published in France as *La Révolution Inconnue* in 1947, two years after Voline's death, and republished in 1969. It appeared in English in the 1950s, when an abridged version was published in two volumes in 1954 and 1955 by the Libertarian Book Club (New York City) and by Freedom Press (London). Translated by Holley Cantine, *Nineteen-Seventeen: The Russian Revolution* (1954) included Voline's preface and Book II (without subsections and some renamed and merged chapters), while *The Unknown Revolution: Kronstadt 1921, Ukraine 1918–21* (1955) included Book III. It was finally published in full in America by Red and Black / Solidarity in 1974, with the missing sections translated by Fredy Perlman. It was reprinted by Black Rose books in 1975 (and again in 1990). This edition is a reprint of this last complete version.

Appendix: Russian Revolutionary Parties

The various Socialist Parties active during the Russian Revolution can be split into two broad groupings: Marxist and Populist.

The Marxists were grouped in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), modelled on the German Social Democratic Party, whose main theoretician was Karl Kautsky. The immediate aim of the RSDLP was to create a bourgeois republic in order to build capitalism in Russia, arguing like other Marxists that socialism could only be based upon a developed capitalist economy. At its Second Conference in 1903, the party split into two factions ostensibly over minor issues of party organisation.²¹⁰ Those who were in the minority in a crucial vote on the question of party membership came to be called Mensheviks (from the Russian word for minority), while

²¹⁰ These were the two main factions in Russian Marxism, but they were many others (including "Economism," "Liquidators," "Recallism," "God-builders," "Ultimatism" and "Machism") as discussed in Grigori Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party: A Popular Outline* (London: New Park Publications, 1973). This work is notable for an appendix containing a statement issued in March 1923 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party ("To the Workers of the USSR") that summarised the lessons gained from the Russian Revolution, namely, that "the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat." Vacillations are expressed by

the other faction become known as the Bolsheviks (from the Russian word for majority). The factions became independent parties in 1912, when a Bolsheviks only party conference in Prague formally expelled the Mensheviks and created the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) or RSDLP(b), unofficially referred to as the Bolshevik Party. In 1918, the RSDLP(b) became the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) due to the fact most Social Democratic Parties had supported their ruling class during the First World War, not least the German party.

The leading member of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Lenin, who, in 1917, won his party over his to the idea of pushing the bourgeois revolution toward a social revolution (a position previously only advocated by anarchists during the near revolution of 1905). The leading member of the Mensheviks was Julius Martov, who persuaded his party to adopt a left-wing position in 1918 after its disastrous participation in the Provisional Government during 1917 (not least, supporting its pursuit of the war effort). With the victory of Martov's Menshevik-Internationalists, the party accepted the October Revolution and opposed attempts to violently overthrow the Bolshevik regime, while working as the legal opposition to Bolshevik authoritarianism.

The Populists were grouped into the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) and had an agrarian socialist position. The party had a substantial peasant support and rejected the Marxist notion that Russia had to go through a capitalist stage before socialism was possible. Instead, the populists argued that the peasant commune (*Mir*) could be the basis of a socialist transformation. Like both wings of the RSDLP before 1917, their political aim was the creation of a republic based on a democratically elected constituent assembly that would be the means to achieve land reform and wider social transformation.

After the February Revolution of 1917, the SRs shared power with liberal parties and Mensheviks within the Russian Provisional Government. However, many members opposed this policy in favour of a social revolution based on the soviets, opposition to the war and immediate land reform. With the October Revolution, the party split and those who supported the Bolshevik revolution formed the Left SRs, led by Maria Spiridonova. The anti-Bolshevik faction became known as the Right SRs.

The Left SRs worked with the Bolsheviks, entering into a coalition government with them as a minority partner in December 1917, before resigning their governmental positions in March 1918 in protest at the signing and ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (although they objected to numerous other Bolshevik policies, not least those directed against the peasants). Finally, there was the smaller grouping of SR Maximalists who were politically between the Left SRs and the anarchists.

November 1917 saw the SRs gain 380 representatives in the constituent assembly against 168 Bolsheviks, leading the Bolsheviks to disband the assembly after its first sitting in January 1918.²¹¹ This went against the Bolshevik's long-standing support for the constituent assembly and their own demands during 1917 that one be called. Lenin justified this action by pointing to the soviets

workers' democracy, so this was rejected: "The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party" (213, 214).

²¹¹ A partial but indicative count of votes covering fifty-four of seventy-nine constituencies published in 1918 reported that the SRs received 58 per cent of the vote (16.5 million) and the Bolsheviks 25 per cent (9.2 million). Lenin summarised that the "petty-bourgeois democratic" parties (SRs, Mensheviks, etc.) received 62 per cent, the landlord and capitalist parties, 13 per cent (4.6 million), and the "Party of the Proletariat," 25 per cent (V.I. Lenin, "The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," in *Collected Works*, vol. 30 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965], 253–55).

as being a more democratic form of state and that the election to the constituent assembly took place on “the basis of the election lists of the parties existing prior to the proletarian-peasant revolution under the rule of the bourgeoisie” (i.e., before the SR split, meaning voters could not express support for the Left SRs).²¹² Considering this a betrayal of both the long-standing aims of the revolution and democratic norms, the Right SRs took advantage of the revolt of the Czech Legion in late May 1918 to form the democratic counter-revolution based around the Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly (Komuch) in Samara. Aligning themselves with Tsarist generals, they were quickly marginalised and replaced by the Whites who aimed at a restoration of the former autocratic regime. By early 1919, the civil war was primarily between the Bolshevik state and the Whites, with most SRs and Mensheviks supporting the former as the lesser evil.

Appendix: The Structure of the Soviet State

The soviets (Russian for councils) were created in 1905 as delegates elected from workplaces to co-ordinate strikes, subject to specific mandates and recall.²¹³ These were reformed in 1917 and included delegates from military units along with appointees from political parties being included on their executive committees. The first national soviet congress took place in June 1917, with delegates elected from local soviets then electing a Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), which made decisions between congresses.

The Bolsheviks organised an insurrection to coincide with the second national congress in November 1918 (October, in the Old Style calendar), which was ratified by a small majority of attendees (basically, the Bolsheviks and Left SRs delegates). As well as re-electing a new VTsIK, the congress also elected a sixteen-member Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), with Lenin as its chairman. This was an executive body above the soviet congress’s executive, which functioned as a government. Avoiding bourgeois terms like cabinet, minister, and ministry, the new regime had instead council, commissars, and a people’s commissariat.

The All-Russian Congress met quarterly until the Sixth All-Russian Congress in November 1918, then it was called only in December 1919, 1920 and 1921 (when it was formally agreed that it would meet annually in the future). The Congress was formed of representatives of urban soviets (one deputy per twenty-five thousand voters) and provincial soviets (one deputy for every 125 thousand inhabitants), thereby building in a one to five weighting of the proletariat against the peasantry (only members of these two classes had a vote, all other social classes being denied a ballot). The VTsIK was originally intended to remain in permanent session, but its meetings gradually declined in frequency until, in 1921, it was limited to meeting three times a year. The VTsIK also had a presidium, in theory a small committee elected to manage its procedural matters. Local soviets were expected to execute the decisions of the Sovnarkom.²¹⁴

²¹² V.I. Lenin, “Theses on the Constituent Assembly,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 26 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 379–83.

²¹³ Anarchists had been arguing for elections, mandates and recall since Proudhon at the start of the 1848 revolution (*Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology*, ed. Iain McKay [Oakland: AK Press, 2011], 273, 279, 379), a position Bakunin echoed in 1868 with his call for “the federated Alliance of all labour associations” to “constitute the Commune” (Daniel Guérin, *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 181).

²¹⁴ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution: 1917–1923*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1966), 220–21.

While in theory the VTsIK was the supreme organ of power between the sovereign national congresses, it was quickly relegated to a mere rubber stamp for Sovnarkom decrees. It must be stressed that in Bolshevik circles this was considered perfectly fine and not an unfortunate side effect of the civil war (indeed, it existed from the first day of the October Revolution). As Lenin recounted in 1920:

The mere presentation of the question—“dictatorship of the party *or* dictatorship of the class; dictatorship (party) of the leaders, *or* dictatorship (party) of the masses?”—testifies to most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking... To go so far, in this connection, as to contrast, *in general*, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid... In Russia today ... the dictatorship is exercised by the proletariat organised in the Soviets; the proletariat is guided by the Communist Party of Bolsheviks... The Party, which holds annual congresses ... is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the Congress, while the current work in Moscow has to be carried on by still smaller bodies, known as the Organising Bureau and the Political Bureau, which are elected at plenary meetings of the Central Committee, five members of the Central Committee to each bureau. This, it would appear, is a full-fledged “oligarchy.” No important political or organisational question is decided by any state institution in our republic without the guidance of the Party’s Central Committee... Such is the general mechanism of the proletarian state power viewed “from above,” from the standpoint of the practical implementation of the dictatorship. We hope that the reader will understand why the Russian Bolshevik who has known this mechanism for twenty-five years and has seen it develop out of small, illegal and underground circles, cannot help regarding all this talk about “from above” *or* “from below,” about the dictatorship of leaders *or* the dictatorship of the masses, etc., as ridiculous and childish nonsense.²¹⁵

Lenin, unlike anarchists, did not bother to view this state power “from below,” from the perspective of the working class in whose name it claimed to rule. As Voline’s work shows, there are fundamental differences—at least for the masses—in a regime organised from the bottom up and that subject to rule from above by a few—even if those few talk of ultrademocratic soviets alongside a party dictatorship.

[118] Victor Serge, *Anarchists Never Surrender: Essays, Polemics, and Correspondence on Anarchism, 1908–1938* (Oakland: PM Press, 2015), 169.

[209] Harman, *Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe*, 14.

²¹⁵ V.I. Lenin, “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder,” *The Lenin Anthology* (New York: Princeton University, 1975), 568–73.

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Anarcho
Introduction to “The Unknown Revolution”
June 25, 2020

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This is my introduction to the 2019 PM Press edition of *The Unknown Revolution* by Voline. It is a classic anarchist analysis of why the Russian Revolution failed by an active participant, seeking to ensure future revolutions do not make the same mistakes. The book is available, so please consider buying it from the publisher.

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