

Review: The Bolsheviks in Power

Anarcho

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The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd, Alexander Rabinowitch, Indiana University Press, 2007, ISBN: 0-253-34943-5

This is an important book. It describes in great detail the evolution of the Bolshevik regime over the first year of its existence. It recounts how during that time it went from a relatively popular government to, in effect, a party dictatorship (the revisions of the party ideology to incorporate the reality of the regime came shortly after this period). It makes good use of the archives which the fall of Stalinism has made available to scholars across the world.

Rabinowitch continues his account of the Revolution started in **Prelude to Revolution** (about the July Days revolt in 1917) and **The Bolsheviks Come to Power** (about the October Revolution). These works helped expose the myth that the Bolshevik Party actually operated on a “democratic centralist” basis. In reality, it was relatively democratic and decentralized, with a similar method of operation. Nor was it, at least at the base, an organisation of professional revolutionaries – it had open and mass character. All this is a striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model so beloved by Leninist parties to this day.

It is a useful destroyer of the false notion that the October 1917 was simply a coup by an unpopular minority. By the time the Bolsheviks seized power, as Rabinowitch (and others) show, they did have popular support in working class areas (particularly in Petrograd Moscow). If the term does not seem too contradictory, the Bolshevik revolution can be classed as a popular coup – the Bolsheviks, using their Petrograd soviet majority as their basis, did conspire to seize power by presenting the second all-Russian Congress of Soviets with a *fait-accompli*. This was much against Lenin’s will, who preferred not to tie Bolshevik assumption of power to a specific event (and a very public and obvious one at that). Unsurprisingly, Rabinowitch starts his book was a discussion of the activities of the Bolshevik moderates (who, at this time included Zinoviev) in trying to forge some kind of joint, all Soviet party, government.

So while the Bolshevik aim was always party power, initially this was framed within a government elected by and accountable to the national congress of democratically elected soviets. This framework, if not a solely Bolshevik government, was a relatively common position in radical circles at the time. Indeed, without the support of the Left-SRs for such a system the Bolsheviks would not have had a majority at the Second Congress! In addition, the Bolsheviks framed the new regime as provisional, with the results of elections to the Constituent Assembly determining the final regime. This position, initially, was a long term position for Russian Social Democrats

and Social Revolutionaries and one the Bolsheviks supported throughout 1917, until such time as the election results came in.

As Rabinowitch shows, this pattern of supporting institutions until such time as they could not be utilised to secure Bolshevik power repeated itself in 1918. This can be seen from the postponing of elections to the Petrograd soviet until such time as it was gerrymandered to ensure their majority. Before the election, the Bolshevik 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.” The Bolsheviks “contrived a majority” in the new Soviet long before gaining 127 of the 260 factory delegates and even here, the result “was highly suspect, even on the shop floor.” (pp. 248–2)

Unsurprisingly, the same contempt was expressed at the fifth All-Russian Soviet Congress in July 1918 when the Bolshevik gerrymandered it to maintain their majority. They ensured their majority in the congress and, so a Bolshevik government, by gerrymandering it has they had the Petrograd soviet. Thus “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-SRs expected a majority but did not include “roughly 399 Bolshevik 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 30 delegates. This ensured “the Bolshevik’s successful fabrication of a large majority in the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets.” (p. 396, p. 288, p. 442 and p. 308)

This provoked the Left-SR assassination of the German ambassador, which Rabinowitch proves beyond doubt, was not an attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks. Of course, Lenin proclaimed it so, using it to destroy his rivals. With the destruction of the Left-SRs, the Bolsheviks severed their links to the countryside, with devastating impacts on the revolution itself. In fact, the Left-SRs were the only influential political party which could have ensured a democratic socialist regime (anarchist influence was nowhere near as great). Their ideas were genuinely socialist, unlike the Bolsheviks, and tailored to a revolution in a predominantly peasant country. Hopefully Rabinowitch’s book will provoke further research into them.

So within six weeks of the start of the civil war, all opposition parties were banned from the soviets. It should be stressed that at this stage the civil war was Bolsheviks against the SRs, who used the (easily avoidable and Bolshevik provoked) rebellion by the Czech Legion to create a government based on the Constituent Assembly (the democratic counter-revolution). The Whites forces were marginal, and Kolchak’s coup against the SRs occurred in November 1918. In terms of allied intervention, Rabinowitch correctly notes that it numbers were “relatively small.” In fact, British intervention was a mere 170 marines who landed in Murmansk in early March, until and additional 600 were added in the beginning of June. August was the real beginning of Allied intervention, although “their forces were puny.” (p. 319)

Rabinowitch’s account is primarily how the Bolsheviks responded to developments after they seized power, including significant losses of support. In this he covers a substantial amount of ground and does so in an accessible and well-written manner. It is predominantly a “political”

account, in that it concentrates on the ins-and-outs of the Bolshevik regime rather than on what was going on in the workplaces, neighbourhoods and barracks. These are not ignored, of course, and his accounts of popular rebellions during the period are excellent. I think anarchists will be particularly interested in these.

He discusses the Menshevik inspired, but independent, Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates (EAD). *“The emergence of the EAD”, he notes, “was also stimulated by 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.”* (p. 224) To counter the EAD, the Bolsheviks and Left-SRs organised non-party conferences which, in itself, provides evidence that the soviets **had** become as distant from the masses as the opposition argued. District soviets *“were deeply concerned about their increasing isolation ... At the end of March ... they resolved to convene successive nonparty workers’ conferences ... in part to undercut the EAD by strengthening ties between district soviets and workers ... Amid unmistakable signs of the widening rift between Bolshevik-dominated political institutions and ordinary factory workers.”* (p. 232)

As an aside, it should be mentioned that Lenin pointed to the use of similar conferences in 1920 in **“Left-Wing Communism”** as an example of the techniques used by the Bolsheviks to better communicate with the masses. The obvious implications of this admission did not impact on his praise for the uniquely democratic nature of the soviets, but then his defence for party rule in that pamphlet did not impact either!

Anarchists should be not too surprised that the turning of popular organisations into parts of a state soon resulted in their growing isolation from the masses. The state, with its centralised structures, is simply not designed for mass participation – and this does doubly for the highly centralised Leninist state. The EAD, argues Rabinowitch, was an expression of the *“growing disenchantment of Petrograd workers with economic conditions and the evolving structure and operation of Soviet political institutions.”* (p. 231) Zinoviev, back in the Bolshevik mainstream, considered *“that existing Bolshevik-Left SR controlled soviets had become isolated from their consistencies ... In Zinoviev’s view, nonparty workers’ conferences ... composed of workers elected directly in factories and red Army units could provide a means of rebuilding grass-roots support for Bolshevik-dominated Soviet power.”* (p. 232) And Leninists to this day assert that this is the most democratic state the world has known!

The rise of the EAD and the isolation of the state and party from the masses were combined with a *“free-fall of party membership.”* (p. 397) These factors were also reflected in the rise of state repression, including the rise of the Cheka. Early May saw Red Guards shoot protesting women in Kolpino, after which they fired on a meeting called to protest this repression. This was no isolated event, as *“violent incidents against hungry workers and their family demanding bread occurred with increasing regularity.”* (p. 230) The EAD tried to control the demands for a general strike, finally calling one for the beginning of July. However, it was far too late and the state acted quickly to repress it:

“Factories were admonished that if they participated in the general strike they would face immediate shutdown, and individual strikers were threatened with fines or loss of work. Agitators and members of strike committees were subject to immediate arrest ... Beginning on 1 July, printing plants suspected of opposition sympathies were sealed, the offices of hostile trade unions were raided, martial law on lines in the Petrograd rail hub was declared, and armed patrols with authority to

prevent work stoppages were formed and put on twenty-four hour duty at key points around the city.” (p. 254)

Rabinowitch describes this as *“the brutal suppression of the EAD’s general strike.”* (p. 259). He also recounts a revolt by sailors at the end of September, demanding a *“return to government by liberated, democratic soviets — that is, 1917-type soviets.”* (p. 352) As such, his book adds valuable material on working class position to Bolshevik rule and helps show that even in the face of difficult economic circumstances workers could, and did, take collective action. As this action was **against** the Bolsheviks, it was repressed so creating the “declassing” and “atomisation” later used to rationalise and justify Bolshevik authoritarianism.

It is the little details that stick in the mind. Like, for example, the fact that the cholera outbreak which finally happened in the spring 1918 was delayed because the harsh winter meant that the piles of rubbish and dead bodies were frozen and hidden in the snow. Or the fact that the abolition of the death penalty did not deter Trotsky having the popular Captain Aleksei Shchastny executed on extremely dubious grounds after an equally dubious trial. In fact, Trotsky *“single-handedly organised an investigation, sham trial, and death sentence on the spurious charge of attempting to overthrow”* the regime. (p. 243) Rabinowitch recounts the red terror promoted by the Bolsheviks against the bourgeoisie in the wake of Lenin’s assassination ending up targeting doctors as well as pro-Bolshevik intellectuals. Terror is indiscriminate, and is never socialist in nature. Then there is the account of the celebrations for the first anniversary of “soviet power” with which the book ends, which were centrally planned! Nothing like state mandated fun and frolics to create a sense of woe for those who think revolution is more than changing who the boss is!

There are other interesting bits of information. For example, the Kronstadt soviet was first disbanded by the Bolsheviks on July 9th, 1918, in the wake of the Left-SR “revolt.” As in 1921, the Left-SR and Maximalist-SR controlled soviet was replaced by a Bolshevik revolutionary committee (p. 302). In a strange parallel to the Stalinist role in the Spanish Revolution, the Bolsheviks turned **their** attack on the Left-SR controlled Pages School into the Left-SR occupying the school as part of their plot to overthrow “Soviet Power” (in the May Days, when the Communists portrayed their assault on the CNT controlled telephone exchange into an anarchist attack on it). Rabinowitch also puts the creation of the Cheka in a new light, as an attempt by the Bolsheviks to create a new state police force outside of Left-SR influence (the Bolsheviks were rightly concerned that the Left-SRs would introduce moderation and a respect for the rights of the accused into it). He also notes that its first headquarters was at Gorokhovaia 2, which under the Tsar housed his notorious security service, the Okhrana. The more things change...

While Rabinowitch has enriched our understanding of the Bolshevik regime in his excellent books, there are a few areas which could be improved. His early books on 1917 indicated the important role the anarchists played in radicalising the revolution, often forcing the Bolsheviks to move leftwards to retain influence. In this book they disappear. What happened to them? What impact did the Cheka raids in April 1918, which Rabinowitch sadly fails to mention, play in any decline in influence? Then there is no discussion of vanguardism and how its privileged role for the party impacted on Bolshevik actions. Surely the various activities the Bolsheviks used to retain power, which Rabinowitch documents so well, did not spring from nowhere? And more accounts and discussion of working class protest would have been better.

Still, these are minor points. Rabinowitch's book, like his early works, enriches our understanding of the Russian Revolution. It adds to the growing mountain of evidence which proves that a social revolution which hands power to a Leninist power is doomed to utter failure.

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