A Century since the Bolshevik Crackdown of August 1918

Tracing the Russian Counterrevolution

CrimethInc.

30th August 2018

Contents

Following up on our book about the Bolshevik seizure of power, *The Russian Counterrevolution,* we look back a hundred years to observe the anniversary of the first time that the Bolsheviks used the Russian military to crush protests from the workers and peasants who had helped to put them in power. If we don't want tomorrow's revolutions to turn out the same way, it's up to us to learn from the past.

August 2018 marks the 100-year anniversary of a bloody milestone in the evolution of the Bolshevik counterrevolution: the suppression of the rebellions in Nizhny Novgorod and Penza. Both of these were protest movements spurred by the Red Army's policy of "requisitioning" food and other materials they deemed necessary from the common people. The protests and subsequent mass executions carried out by the Bolsheviks took place in a context of growing clashes that saw the Russian Revolution shift into the Russian Civil War. It was the first time the Bolsheviks used mass executions and terror not just against their political opponents, but against the peasants and workers as a class. This terror came to characterize their relationship with peasants and workers over the following years.

Bolshevik apologists justify their actions by citing the extreme violence on all sides, as the White Army sought to reimpose the brutal tsarist regime. Some even go so far as to claim that the peasants who were protesting in the Penza region were White agents. A hundred years after their murders, we have to examine these claims. In order to do so, we must begin by studying what the Bolshevik strategy—their obsession with controlling state power—had done to the Revolution after ten months.

War Communism

The peasant protests were sparked by "requisitioning," a central part of the policy of "war communism" adopted by the Bolsheviks in June 1918, just two months earlier. "War communism" was a cruel euphemism for wholesale theft by bureaucrats and commissars of everything the peasants had. In theory, the Red Army and Bolshevik commissars were allowed to take the "surplus," but there were no mechanisms for accountability, and many Bolsheviks had no experience with farming and no idea what constituted a surplus and what constituted the food supply of peasant families. Essentially, party members were given absolute power and impunity to enrich themselves at the cost of the peasants.

What's more, ignoring the pleas of his erstwhile comrades, Lenin signed a peace treaty with the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires in March 1918, ceding them what had been the breadbasket of the Russian Empire in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics. This almost guaranteed a famine in Moscow, Petrograd, and other cities, forcing the Bolsheviks to squeeze the countryside to the east even harder. To stomp out dissent and cement his hold on power, Lenin effectively pitted the cities against the countryside, putting the former in acute danger of starvation and forcing the latter to accept total subjugation even worse than what had occurred under the tsarist regime.

To fan the flames and motivate the Red Army to requisition pitilessly, Lenin and his party apparatus spread the myth of the kulak, the wealthy peasant who acted as a rural capitalist, exploited landless laborers, and condemned city residents to starvation. In reality, peasants in a wide range of different circumstances were punished under war communism. A tiny minority of peasants

had amassed lands and wealth after the end of serfdom, but the Bolsheviks systematically labeled landless, impoverished peasants "kulaks" to justify arresting and executing them. Lenin himself was largely ignorant of peasant life—he was financed by his wealthy mother throughout his first decades of activism, even in Siberian exile, where he spent the time translating, swimming, and hunting. In his writings, he used the "kulak" as a politically expedient scapegoat.

Unlike the anarchists and the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries (Left SRs), the Bolsheviks did not effectively support land redistribution in the countryside, so peasants of all stripes had cause to protest against their rule. And when the "requisitioning" began, these protests only spread. The peasants of Penza and elsewhere had a realistic understanding of their own interests. In just a few years of war communism, millions of peasants starved to death as a direct result of Bolshevik policies. By the time war communism ended and the New Economic Policy was inaugurated in 1923, bringing capitalism back to Russia, the peasants had been effectively crushed as a social force; this is one of the reasons Stalin was able to reorganize them in state "collectives," essentially a plantation system with forced labor not so different from the ones that provided the basis for value extraction in the American and British models of capitalism.

The peasants were right to protest against war communism from the beginning. In hindsight, we can see that the policy was justifiable neither as an end nor as a means.

The Revolt

On August 5, 1918, protests against the requisitioning gained momentum among peasants in the Penza region. This movement quickly spread to neighboring areas. Penza had also been a theater of the Pugachev Rebellion in the 18th century, a multicultural peasant and indigenous uprising against serfdom and Russian imperialism. It was a region with a history of standing up to oppression.

Accounts vary as to the nature of the movement. The Bolsheviks referred to it as a revolt, whereas many other sources merely refer to protests. There were certainly armed peasant revolts against Bolshevik power over the following months. It's likely that the events of August 1918 constituted nothing more than a rowdy protest movement, but that after the Bolshevik response of mass murder and terror, the peasants got a look at the true face of the new state and realized that if they wanted to change things, mere protest wouldn't suffice.

In any case, the chairman of the Penza soviet, Kurayev, wasn't particularly concerned about this revolt. He thought that the Bolsheviks should respond with propaganda, not armed force. Lenin disagreed. By August 8, just three days later, Bolshevik troops had crushed the protest movement in Penza. Not content with simply regaining control, Lenin sent a telegram on August 9 to Nizhny Novgorod, perhaps the largest city in which protests had broken out. Claiming that the protests were a clear sign of a "White Guard" conspiracy, and thus denying any agency or claims to survival of the peasants themselves, Lenin wrote:

> "Your first response must be to establish a dictatorial troika (i.e., you, Markin, and one other person) and introduce mass terror, shooting or deporting the hundreds of prostitutes who are causing all the soldiers to drink, all the ex-officers, etc. There is not a moment to lose; you must act resolutely, with massive reprisals. Immediate execution for anyone caught in possession of a firearm. Massive deportations of Mensheviks and other suspect elements."

On August 11, three days after the protest movement had been suppressed, Lenin sent a telegram to the Central Executive Committee of the Penza soviet:

> "Comrades! The kulak uprising in your five districts must be crushed without pity. The interests of the whole revolution demand such actions, for the final struggle with the kulaks has now begun. You must make an example of these people.
>
> 1. Hang (I mean hang publicly, so that people see it) at least 100 kulaks, rich bastards, and known bloodsuckers.
> 2. Publish their names.
> 3. Seize all their grain.
> 4. Single out the hostages per my instructions in yesterday's telegram.
>
> Do all this so that for miles around people see it all, understand it, tremble, and tell themselves that we are killing the bloodthirsty kulaks and that we will continue to do so. Reply saying you have received and carried out these instructions. Yours, Lenin.
>
> P.S. Find tougher people."

Only on August 18, after these instructions went out, did an actual armed uprising break out in the Penza oblast, in the town of Chembar. The uprising was led by Left SRs. It was also crushed.

The White Threat

Communist apologists today justify Bolshevik mass murder on the grounds that imposing "discipline" on the masses was necessary in the face of the far worse White threat. It is true that from early on, the White Army executed anarchist and Bolshevik prisoners and massacred villagers suspected of supporting the revolution. However, the claim that White violence forced the Bolsheviks' hand is an excuse for a Bolshevik strategy that had already been in progress for a long time. Bolshevik political repression against their opponents dates to the very first months of the Soviet government. Already in April 1918, the Bolsheviks attacked 26 anarchist offices and social centers in Moscow, killing dozens and arresting hundreds, in response to anarchist propaganda critical of Bolshevik power. They also carried out raids and arrests in Petrograd and numerous cities in the interior, such as Vologda, where anarchists had growing support from peasants and railroad workers.

What's more, the White threat cannot justify Bolshevik repression in Penza in August 1918 because at that time, there was not really a White Army to speak of. In June of 1918, the White Army only numbered less than 9000 troops, and they were based over 1000 kilometers away, having fled to Kuban after losing nearly every battle. Even their supreme commander, Kornilov, had been killed. In August, they were in disarray and on the defensive, rearranging their chain of command and desperately trying to recruit more troops. Until the end of 1918, when Great Britain, France, and the United States began providing significant material support to the White Army and General Denikin began an offensive in the Caucasus after having gained the support of numerous cossack fighters, the chief threats to Bolshevik power came from the Left. Lenin speaks of a "White Guard" organizing the protest movement, but as he well knew, it was the Left

SRs, the enemies of the White Army, who were most active among the peasants in the Penza region.

Another major force on the field was the Czechoslovak Legion, which contained as many as 60,000 veteran fighters who had been recruited during World War I to fight against the Austro-Hungarian Empire (occupier of Czechoslovakia). Caught in Ukraine when the October Revolution broke out, they stayed on the front to stop multiple German advances, while negotiating with Soviet authorities for safe passage to the port city of Vladivostok, so they could be transferred back to Europe and continue fighting on the Western Front.

In May 1918, three months after they had been granted permission to ship out from Vladivostok, the Legion was spread all across the Trans-Siberian railroad. None of them had been evacuated, as Soviet authorities had obstructed the process and requisitioned the Legion's weapons. A dispute broke out when trains taking Hungarian POWs to be repatriated were given priority—Hungary being one of the countries occupying Czechoslovakia, and, as an ally of Imperial Germany, one of the countries with which Lenin had signed a peace treaty. The repatriation of Triple Alliance troops and the stonewalling of the Czechoslovak Legion's return to the war via Vladivostok substantiated their suspicion that Lenin was still working on behalf of Imperial Germany, the same accusation made by the Left SRs when they quit the government in March 1918.

Lenin ordered the arrest of the Legion, at which point they rebelled and took over the railroad, constituting an autonomous armed force in Siberia. Only several months later did the Czechoslovak Legion join the White Army, though they consistently supported the democratic factions of the Whites (the ones in favor of the Constituent Assembly) and occasionally opposed the tsarist faction. Their chief political goal was to achieve independence for Czechoslovakia, which led them to follow the directions of the Entente powers and support the Whites.

The Czechoslovak Legion was one of the most effective fighting units to oppose the Bolsheviks; they seized nearly every city in Siberia at some point in 1918. Yet the conflict with them was provoked almost entirely by Bolshevik policies. It was either Lenin's paranoid distrust of autonomous forces or his secret collusion with Germany that caused him to order the arrest of the legionaries, which is what sparked their rebellion in the first place. The rebellion was spontaneous, going against the orders of Legion leadership and the plans of the Entente to ship them back to Western Europe. Lenin's use of repression as a first resort helped the White Army to recruit, furnishing them with their most potent force in the first year of the Civil War; this, in turn, encouraged the Entente powers to intensify their interventions in the Russian hinterland.

In any case, the Legion did not get any closer to the Penza uprising than Samara, about 400 km away—at that moment, they were focused eastward on Vladivostok, not attempting to break through to Penza.

Neither the White Army nor the Czechoslovak Legion posed a threat anywhere near Penza at the time of the peasant protests, as Lenin well knew. His claims of a "White Guard" conspiracy represent demagogic manipulation designed to cover up the fact that the demonstrators in Penza were common people protesting Bolshevik authority.

The Left SRs

The presence of Left SRs in Penza *after* the peasant rebellion had already begun makes perfect sense in context. They were a socialist party that had long championed land reform, retained

strong support among the peasants, and had recently been suppressed in Moscow after an unsuccessful uprising.

Whereas the chief objective of the Bolsheviks was to seize power, the SRs had some basic principles they stuck to, although this probably made them less effective as a political party. It could be said that they had maintained a principled opposition to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the disastrous peace treaty with Imperial Germany. When it was signed in March, they quit the Soviet government; in July, Cheka units in Moscow controlled by Left SRs assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach and tried to take over government and telegraph buildings. They hoped their action would sabotage the peace with Germany, and that in the process they could replace the Bolsheviks at the head of the Soviet government. Their revolt was not designed to suppress the Soviets, but to set the revolution back on what in their minds was the right course.

Of course, the SRs were just another political party trying to control the revolution. No one should romanticize them. Their suppression simply illustrates that the Bolsheviks were more adroit at power plays: they did not hold back from using any tactics to stay in power, nor did they remain loyal to principles that were not politically expedient. If the SRs had come out of the revolution on top, it probably would have been as a result of using tactics similar to those of the Bolsheviks.

In any case, as far as the Penza uprising is concerned, the involvement of Left SRs confirms the falsity of Bolshevik claims. Far from being White sympathizers, the only organized element among the Penza peasants were Left SRs, who had always stood on a platform of agrarian reform for greater peasant autonomy. They were committed opponents of the Whites.

The Red Army

It is also possible that the Left SRs decided to rebel in July 1918 because the preceding month, the Bolsheviks had solidified their control over the Red Army by bringing back an aristocratic hierarchy (led overwhelmingly by ex-tsarist officers), ending any vestige of self-organization, and appointing political commissars as well as a vast network of spies and snitches to ensure political obedience.

For nearly a year already, the Bolsheviks had taken action against revolutionary elements in the military. Foremost among these was the Dvinsk Regiment. To tell their story, we have to go back to 1917.

The Dvinsk Regiment was comprised of tens of thousands of soldiers on the Eastern Front who had engaged in mass disobedience against the war. Alongside the guerrilla resistance in Ukraine, this provided one of the principal examples of the kind of revolutionary warfare with which anarchists proposed to topple both the Russian Empire (whether under the tsar or Kerensky) and the imperial states on the other side of the battle lines.

Cossacks refused to execute the resisters; instead, thousands were imprisoned. The prisoners were released in September 1917 after major public protests. At this point, they constituted a revolutionary regiment. The Bolsheviks tried to take control of the regiment, but instead, the regiment elected Grachov, an anarchist, as its leader. In the October Revolution, which saw fierce fighting in Moscow, the Dvinsk Regiment was at the front of the fiercest clashes, seizing City Hall, the Hotel Metropole, and the Kremlin.

Grachov was critical of the authoritarian direction of the Bolsheviks. He began carrying out a plan to arm the workers on nonpartisan grounds, sending weapons and munitions to factory committees. At the end of November, the Bolsheviks summoned him to Nizhny Novgorod, supposedly to discuss military matters. Away from the rest of the regiment and the anarchist bastion in Moscow, he was shot to death inside the military commissariat. The Bolsheviks claimed it was an accident. Subsequently, Lenin and Trotsky disbanded the Dvinsk Regiment and all the other revolutionary units that had taken part in the fighting in the October Revolution.

Over time, it became clear to the Bolsheviks that eliminating individual figures would not be enough. In June 1918, the Bolsheviks were preparing to introduce war communism. They would need a military fully under their control, capable of carrying out any atrocity—much like the tsarist army that had upheld the old system. So they abolished worker control, canceled the election of officers, re-instituted saluting, drastically increased the pay and privileges for the officers, imposed top-down discipline, carried out a massive recruitment of old tsarist officers, and fully integrated the Cheka—the political police—with the military. By the end of the Russian Civil War, 83% of Red Army officers had served under the tsar.

While the Bolsheviks convinced many tsarist officers to serve in the Red Army by blackmail, holding their families hostage, others served voluntarily, realizing that tsarism was dead and the Bolsheviks were to become the new defenders of privilege. *After 1917, the surest way to hold onto their privileges was by becoming Communists.*

The revolution did not need tsarist officers to succeed. All the prominent leaders of the anarchist formations in the Civil War—Maria Nikiforova, Nestor Makhno, Fyodor Shchuss, Olga Taratuta, Anatoli Zhelezniakov, Novoselov, Lubkov—were chosen by their comrades according to their abilities. They were workers or peasants, but they were among the most effective on the battlefield, frequently defeating White armies that fielded several times more troops. Trotsky repeatedly called Zhelezniakov and Makhno to the front when the White Army was gaining ground against the Red Army.

Considering the authoritarian changes to the Red Army, it is not surprising that in August 1918, the Bolsheviks sought a military solution to the peasant protests. In June, Lenin and Trotsky had decided to make the basis of their power a hierarchical military and a policy of forced requisitioning and mass starvation. This established them as the enemy of the peasants and the workers, provoking a conflict they could only win through force of arms.

Conclusions

If we are to be charitable and believe that Lenin was a sincere revolutionary, we can only conclude that the problem was his Jacobin theory of revolution—in which it was necessary to seize the state in order to impose the revolution through mass terror. Unless we take the view of many of his contemporaries, who believed that he was simply a power-hungry dictator, the only explanation for his actions is that, conflating the success of the revolution with the seizure of state power, he was willing to put principles aside in order to do whatever was necessary to increase the power of the Soviet government. Yet the more power his government amassed, the more enemies he made and the more violence was necessary to preserve his position.

Lenin made an alliance with Imperial Germany as a political expedient to free up the Russian army for domestic deployment against the supporters of the Constituent Assembly, but it caused

the Left SRs to rebel. The Bolsheviks had to crack down on anarchists in April 2018 because anarchist propaganda and criticisms of the Bolshevik government were mobilizing increasing numbers of supporters, but this caused anarchists to redouble their efforts. After the Bolsheviks gave Ukraine away to Germany, they needed war communism in order to feed the cities without giving concessions to the peasants. But war communism provoked more peasant protests. To stop the protests, Lenin crushed them with military force, and this catalyzed actual popular uprisings against the communist state.

An iatrogenic condition is an illness caused by medical treatment. As the song goes, "I know an old lady who swallowed a fly…"

At the end of August 1918, SR Fanny Kaplan carried out the first attempt on Lenin's life. Immediately thereafter, the Bolsheviks instituted the policy they called Red Terror. They claimed that the Terror was necessary to defend the revolution from a White conspiracy—but in reality, the White Army had not yet begun any effective offensive. The immediate causes of the Terror were the criticisms, protests, and attacks that the Bolsheviks were facing from anarchists, SRs, and the ordinary workers and peasants whose interests Lenin claimed to represent.

The purpose of the Terror was to defend the Bolsheviks from the Revolution. The authoritarian political character of their project becomes clear from a statement in the Bolshevik press: "Anyone who dares spread the slightest rumor against the Soviet regime will be immediately arrested and sent to the concentration camps." This was a reference to the gulag system, already established after just ten months of Bolshevik authority, part of the apparatus of Bolshevik repression that would eventually claim millions of lives.

Today, one hundred years after the Bolsheviks turned their newly consolidated military might against protesting peasants, we can reflect on the folly of their strategy, and any similar belief that the state has revolutionary potential as a tool for liberating the masses. The state can only preserve its existence by controlling and repressing the masses. By very nature, it is a counter-revolutionary instrument.

The Bolshevik party contained many sincere revolutionaries, but they surrendered their free will to the dictates of a hierarchical party. In obeying their leaders, in believing in the revolutionary potential of the state, they became torturers, censors, jailers, and executioners. Those who refused, those who opted for more peaceful approaches or for tactics based in solidarity, were pushed out of the way. Only the bloodiest and most ruthless could rise in the party ranks, egged on by Lenin himself. Just ten months after seizing power, the Bolsheviks already had a functioning system of hit men, secret police, and concentration camps for revolutionaries who refused to accept their authority, and they were ready to use mass murder against the peasants and workers who did not bow down before them.

From there, it only got worse.

Bibliography

- Paul Avrich, "Russian Anarchism and the Civil War," *The Russian Review.* Vol.27 No.3: 296–306. July 1968.
- Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists.* Oakland: AK Press, 2006.

- Nick Heath, "Bolshevik Repression against Anarchists in Vologda," *libcom.org* October 15 2017
- Nadezhda Krupskaya, "Illyich Moves to Moscow, His First Months of Work in Moscow" *Reminiscences of Lenin.* International Publishers, 1970.
- George Leggett. The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Lenin, "Telegram to the Penza Gubernia Executive Committee of the Soviets" in J. Brooks and G. Chernyavskiy, *Lenin and the Making of the Soviet State: A Brief History with Documents* (2007). Bedford/St Martin's: Boston and New York, p.77
- James Ryan. *Lenin's Terror: The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence.* London: Routledge, 2012.
- Voline, *The Unknown Revolution, 1917–1921.* New York: Free Life Editions, 1974.
- Nicolas Werth, Karel Bartosek, Jean-Louis Panne, Jean-Louis Margolin, Andrzej Paczkowski, Stephane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Additional Reading

- 1921–1953: A Chronology of Russian Anarchism
- Ilyich Moves to Moscow, His First Months of Work in Moscow, from Krupskaya's "Reminiscences of Lenin"
- Bolshevik repression against anarchists in Vologda
- April 2018: One Hundred Year Anniversary of the Beginning of Bolshevik Terror
- Lenin Orders the Massacre of Sex Workers, 1918

CrimethInc.
A Century since the Bolshevik Crackdown of August 1918
Tracing the Russian Counterrevolution
30th August 2018

Retrieved on 9th September 2020 from https://crimethinc.com/2018/08/30/a-century-since-the-bolshevik-crackdown-of-august-1918-tracing-the-russian-counterrevolution

theanarchistlibrary.org