

Russia 1917: why not anarchism?

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1975

Russia in 1917 was a hybrid society. Whilst there were free peasant farmers out-side European Russia the majority of its peasants represented the serfs partially emancipated in 1861¹. These latter were not independent farmers who might be expected to have developed rapidly to at least a petty bourgeois level of consciousness, but were rather on a medieval plane of consciousness – traditionalist, parochial and xenophobic – and continued to live and work within the confines of the traditional Russian commune or mir. This latter, from which the slavophiles expected the salvation not only of Russia but of the whole world, was not the germ cell of the future socialist commonwealth but rather absolutism's latest and most efficient device for controlling the countryside². The terms of the 1861 emancipation made the villages rather than the individual peasants the owners of the land and the villages rather than the individual the responsible agent for the payment of taxes to the government and the of redemption dues to the now completely functionless nobility. Nor had the peasantry received all the land; the settlement had given them too little to live on at a time of rising population and to pay their taxes and redemption dues the peasants had to work on the estates of the nobility and the few capitalist famers.

Industrialisation in Russia did not have the revolutionising effect on the countryside that theories of modernisation usually attribute to it. The surplus needed for capital investment was not obtained by the exchange of consumer and light industrial goods for the products of the countryside but rather the grain surplus was extracted through the system of taxes and redemption payments which forced peasants to continue to work noble estates and sell some of their own product for money. The grain was then sold abroad (even in times of famine) to provide the equipment needed for heavy industry. Thus the effect was an intensification of the feudal/absolutist exploitation of the peasantry rather than an encounter with a new type of society that would

¹ Most of the free peasants other than special ethnic groups represented the descendants of serfs who had emigrated eastwards to escape the pressure of the state and nobility.

² It is worth quoting Bakunin's letter of 1866 to Herzan on the character of the Great-Russian commune (and hence the peasantry composing it) "Why has this commune, from which you expect such wonders in the future, failed to bring about, in the course of ten centuries of its existence, anything but heinous slavery? The odious putridity and the complete injustice of patriarchal habits, the absence of freedom for the individual in the face of the mir, the stifling pressure which the mir exercises, killing every possibility of personal initiative, depriving its members not only of juridical rights but of single justice in its decisions... the ruthless severity of its attitudes towards every weak and poor member, its systematic oppression of those members who display the slightest independence, and its readiness to sell out truth and justice for a pail of vodka." (Quoted in Lampert *Studies in Rebellion*. p. 147)

foster individualist and non-traditional attitudes. A partial consequence of this – and of the antiquated system of land tenure and redistribution – was the continuing low level of agricultural technique. When it was seen that this threatened the programme of modernisation and capital accumulation deemed necessary for defence reasons, the government changed its agricultural policies but it was too late and the war and revolution re-established the mir stronger (and more reactionary) than ever.

Since industrialisation had only taken place in isolated areas and there was no unified capitalist market – commodity production for domestic use being predominantly still in the hands of artisans – the social relations of the majority of the Russians had remained unchanged. It is no surprise then that it was in Petrograd with its industrial barracks of proletarianised former peasants that the revolutionary impetus was centred. The change in social relationships can be seen in terms of the alteration of a world-view. The peasants in Russia in 1917, or for that matter in 1560, could only be described as xenophobic and ethnocentric. It was the workers, whose peasant world-view had been transformed by urbanisation and proletarianisation, who were capable of attempting a revolution but whether they were capable of succeeding is another question entirely.

Quite evidently Russia was far from a society described by Marx as one where “...the concentration of the means of production and the socialisation of the tools of labour has reached the point where they can no longer be contained within their capitalist shell. The shell bursts...”³. The explosion occurred in Russia certainly, but not as the result of the internal contradictions of capitalism. Russian society may have limped along to a complete social and economic stagnation punctuated by peasant revolts; Stolypin’s “wager on the strong” may have succeeded in abolishing rural backwardness after several decades; but what Russia could not do was play the great power in a world increasingly dominated by the capitalist West. Technology, efficiency and organisation inevitably triumphed over asiatic backwardness and aristocratic decadence.

The 1917 Revolution catapulted Russia out of the middle ages into the twentieth century. Psychologically the Russian peasant had remained medieval, i.e. parochial and xenophobic; the outside world (including capitalism) was seen as both evil and undesirable because it challenged their security, a security not material but rather intimately bound up with the ideological legitimations of the tsarist regime. Neither the revolutionaries who wanted to liberate the peasants nor the liberals who wanted to ameliorate their conditions ever really struck a sympathetic chord in the peasant mind. The former they turned over to the police; the latter were suspect as jews and foreigners. As late as 1920 Red Cross workers and volunteers were attacked and some killed while attempting to distribute food to starving peasants.⁴

Good and evil were quite clear-cut: the Tsar was good as was the Church and all official authority; Jews, Germans, intellectuals, an city people were all bad both because they were alien and because they represented change and changed tradition. Tradition was the basis

³ Berkman quoted in Maximoff *The Guillotine at Work*. p. 670

⁴ In 1921 after Kronstadt and the state of the New Economic Policy, Victor Serge and some friend who were at loss to know what to do found a large estate north of Petrograd near Lake Lagada of several hundred acres with a landlords residence. The estate had been abandoned because the peasants would not agree to run it collectively; they demanded it be shared out amongst them. Two chairmen of the short-lived commune had been murdered there in 8 months. The village boycotted Serge’s group when they came there. Everything they had was stolen and the peasants refused to sell anything to the “jews” and “antichrists”. The blockade was broken when one of the group, a tolstoyan doctor, wearing a gold cross on his breast, went to the village and bought eggs from one of the villagers, saying “we are Christians too little sister”. After that they were accepted. (*Serge Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. p. 149).

of Russian authority; overtime legitimacy had become synonymous with it. From the Tsar to the village, patriarchy stood as the basis of all authority. In between Russian society was a complex web of rank and class clearly defined and determined from birth. One's rank in society carried with it a set of expectations, world-view, self-image and ideology. Change of any description in this society challenged this intricate and, by 1917, fragile balance of social relationships. Russian society was total; liberalism was synonymous with revolution.

Tsarism could not have been changed; it had to be overthrown. It was too much of a liberal institution to become liberal anyway. Its rationale was tradition, absolutism and repression; after hundreds of years of ruthless oppression one couldn't lift the lid even lightly or it would explode – which was eventually bound to happen anyway. Just as Vorster cannot as this stage liberalise South Africa without facilitating revolution, tsarist Russia too was paralysed. It was doomed, whilst its institutions and authority were crumbling visibly, to cling to its belief in these as being God-given.

Along with the Tsars, the world of the peasantry was crumbling too. A disastrous economic crisis coupled with the war made it impossible for them to continue their traditional way of life. The mass conscriptions and desertions were creating an enormous rural crisis. While many were moving to the cities because of the famine in the countryside many more were returning to their native villages because there was no food in the towns. They had no understanding of or wish to comprehend what was going on. A couple of issues, however, stood out clearly as the sentiments of the peasantry: land reform, food, an end to the war, and a desire for society to be reorganised as to allow the peasant farmer to return to his village and live unhindered by “politics”.

Anarchist was the anti-thesis of the whole world-view of the peasantry. the basis of a libertarian society is a complete lack of oppression, total self-awareness, lack of xenophobia and break with patriarchy and religion. It can only function with fully free and responsible individuals who are morally accountable for their actions. none of these elements were present in the world-view of the peasants in 1917. contrary to a popular belief in the anarchic tendencies of the peasantry they were not libertarian. Outbursts against authority are meaningless unless there is an analysis behind the political action that negates the legitimacy of the power it is rebelling against. Burning down the landlord's castle may seem to be a step in the right direction but only if the aim behind the action is to abolish private property. If the aim of the outburst is merely to transfer ownership of land the libertarian and social ... (glued line missing here) because it could not be easily divided among private individuals. Wolf⁵ seems to think that the fact that such explosions against authority occur confirms the anarchy innate in the peasantry. What is more likely is that these outbursts confirm the impotence of the peasant to change his circumstances, all he can perceive are his short-term interests. When the peasant has no land all he wants is land; when he has land he wants to keep it. His outbursts are more an expression of desperation and frustration than a revolutionary manifestation against authority or the state. A distrust of government is not necessarily anarchistic; the John Birch society wants to limit government as much as possible, probably though much the same motivations as the peasants, it is rather an awareness of the individual and communal needs of society and a confidence that they can be met by the people themselves that is anarchism.

The limitations of the Russians are well expressed by Gorky: “The character of the Russian people, moulded both by resistance to despotism and submission to it, engenders an ‘anti-

⁵ In Shanin Peasants and Peasant Society. p. 272

authoritarian complex', that is to say a potent element of spontaneous anarchism which has generated periodic explosions throughout history"⁶. This "chaotist" trend within the Russian peasantry that is frequently equated with anarchism has historically been the full extent of Russian peasant revolutions. The peasantry after enduring such monstrous oppression eventually rebelled without any comprehensive political theory or any real rise in their own level of consciousness: they attacked the local land lord but never questioned the institution of tsarism as a whole.

The belief that the Russian people were capable of the massive leap in consciousness from the middle ages to libertarian socialism was an illusion that all anarchists shared but what ground was their to it? This would have been an enormous feat; after centuries of servile oppression by tsarism and Russian orthodox Christianity one could not expect the Russian people to be capable of approaching political liberty in an intelligent and creative way. What was happening in Petrograd was seen as largely irrelevant by the peasants once they had got their land, indeed it was irrelevant to them until the breakdown of the tax and market mechanism for extracting grant to feed the cities forced the Bolsheviks to send armed detachments to requisition food. Freedom and individuality were irrelevant to the peasant who derived his security and socioeconomic status from membership in a patriarchal village community presided over by a council of elders, individualism was not part of the peasant world view except in the obvious sense that each was out for what he could get in the existing framework For the workers and soldiers who were really politically conscious it had been a major transformation to step out of their peasant role into one with a far more definite image of themselves as individuals and as citizens.

The anarchists believed they were appealing to a people crying out for liberty and self expression. If this was so why was it that the Bolsheviks succeeded and not the anarchists? If one compares what they Bolsheviks were prepared to offer with what the anarchists could offer one can see what bolshevism was a logical response to the situation. Had the Bolsheviks not gained power (and it was touch and go for a while in 1917) then another "total" answer would have succeeded. The measures that needed to be taken for the survival of Russia in 1917 could only be carried out by a power that was efficient to the point of ruthlessness and absolutely confident in the correctness of its actions. What bolshevism was offering was very attractive. They were prepared to take control of the situation which is something the anarchists would never do even though the situation plainly called out for someone to do so. They were going to carry out long awaited changes: land reform; withdrawal from the war; marriage reform; modernisation of the economy; improvements in public health and education etc.⁷ They were prepared to take Russia out of the middle ages into the twentieth century; this they did and this is exactly what was needed.

Bolshevism looked like a doctrine that had all the answers. The Bolsheviks inspired confidence. From the outset Lenin convinced the workers he would look after their interests; he believed it and so did they; who was the Patriarch now? The tight organisations of the Bolsheviks enabled the leadership to be in contact with what was happening in the factories and garrisons and have a plan of strategy that worked out for taking command in any situation this was the purpose of its military organisation and factory branches; in practice up to October 1917 they tended to

⁶ Quoted in Serge Memoirs of a Revolutionary. P. 121

⁷ The degree to which reform was needed may be illustrated by Luacharsky's remark to Goldman that some teachers still favoured prison for mental defectives. See Living My Life. P. 758

push the party leaders forward. June and July 1917 showed this quite clearly. Not only were the Bolsheviks not directing the upsurge of radicalism among the workers and soldiers in Petrograd, they too were being forced into pursuing a much more radical stance because of pressure from below. The military organisation and the Petrograd central committee were being pushed further and further to the left merely to keep up with the soldiers and workers. The Bolsheviks survived the purges that followed the June and July days but the anarchists did not. The failure of such an armed and militant mass of people to overthrow the government must have confirmed to Lenin the need for central organisation to turn the spontaneous outburst into a revolution. The masses were plainly not yet self-directed; no social revolution had occurred which could make them capable of concretely visualising and achieving their class aims,

But why should anything have changed? How much had the Bolsheviks themselves achieved a new consciousness? The Marxist attempts to challenge accepted conditioning were largely made on the fringes of the Bolsheviks by individuals such as Gorky, Lunacharsky and Balabanoff. On issues such as the role of women there were forward-thinking members such as Kollontai who had a more astute grasp of the problems of a social revolution yet on the whole such problems were pushed into pigeon holes for future reference. Lenin's own views on such matters as free love are classic: who indeed "would drink water from a dirty glass soiled with many lips?"⁸. The Bolsheviks' minds were a product of historical development, of the values of western bourgeois respectability overlaying those of Russian patriarchal autocracy; not surprisingly they abolished one form of government to set up another more efficient but no less tyrannical than tsarism. Their goals were clear cut and traditional: they would alter the economic basis of society and modernise Russia, that was what was needed. As Lenin said to Berkman, "it is impossible to speak of liberty as this stage of economic development"⁹ > He should have added "psychological development" which would have been more to the point.

Bolshevism was an authoritarian voluntaristic doctrine. A strong belief that leadership and will were capable of overcoming the results of centuries of tsarism was a fundamental tenet. Marriage and the family were never challenged to the extent that their survival was imperilled. Despite legal equalisation of the sexes there was little improvement in the status of women. The attitude of male communists may be gauged from the following quotation: "it is not surprising that increasing numbers of communists are refusing to marry party comrades, and prefer to marry women outside the party who will remain at home and manage the household... if they married communists they would go about in rags and see their children die"¹⁰. The Bolsheviks were and remained blind to the paradox of their situation; they did not see that in overthrowing the old society and constructing the new that the way in which they built the new society was in a sense predetermined by the old. Insofar as they considered this they could only see it in terms of objective economic conditions and not in terms of personality and conditioning.

In many ways the anarchists had a deeper understanding of what was happening and saw that an all-embracing revolution was essential for any real change. They realised that a total social and political reorganisation could not come from above but for real change it had to come from the

⁸ See his letter to Klara Zetlin in T. Deutscher *Not by Politics Alone*. Pp 222-3

⁹ Avrich (ed) *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*. p. 130. Bukharin also made this point. "Proletarian compulsion in all its forms, beginning with summary execution and ending with compulsory labour is, however paradoxical it might seem, a method of reworking the human material of the capitalist epoch into communist humanity" See Berkman in *Anarchy 2*

¹⁰ Fuelop-Miller *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*. p. 217. (Quoted from an unnamed Bolshevik.)

people without coercion and direction from above. It was obvious to them that there was no point in banning religion; if the peasants or workers had not transcended a religious world-view for themselves then one could not force them to. Either they would refuse or substitute for religion a secular dogma providing the same feelings of security¹¹. The anarchist critique of the Bolsheviks was perceptive and astute but it offered no real alternative. Most anarchists, and particularly the anarchist-communists, were ideologically committed to the idea that when the revolution came the masses would spontaneously seize power and organise revolutionary communes and factory committees. Yet just as the end of the world never came for the millenarians the masses never abolished the state for the anarchists and the latter were left without any role in the revolution.

Although most anarchists were precarious allies of the Bolsheviks up to October both parties were aware of the irreconcilable antagonism between them. After the Bolsheviks seized power in October it was obvious they would not tolerate any threat to their power. The anarchists responded to this in quite diverse ways: many considered the plea for unity in the face of counter revolution justified and cooperated with the bolsheviks until 1921 or else as did Shatov and Roschin, submerged themselves in the Bolshevik party because they considered being part of a bad revolution better than inaction. The syndicalists kept on organising under their unions were banned and they were arrested and exiled; some individualists and anarcho-communists joined the left social-revolutionaries in underground revolutionary terrorist activities and either fled or were eventually shot. Although most of them had a theoretical awareness of what would happen if the Bolsheviks succeeded, they were still stunned by the cheka raids, the mass arrests of anarchists, the military ... (one pasted line missing here) ... the protest they watched themselves and the revolution being destroyed. They were limited by the belief, so aptly put by Bakunin, that "social change does not depend on a gradual maturation of objective historical facts" but that on the contrary men shape their own destiny, every man already possessed "the impulse for liberty, the passion for equality, the holy instinct for revolt"¹². Their role as anarchist intellectuals was, as Voline put it, to be "radio transmitters disseminating libertarian ideas to be rejected or put into practice by autonomous workers, councils and peasant communes"¹³.

When these autonomous communes failed to arise on any large scale the anarchists were helpless. They did not see why these organisations did not just spring up as they certainly had no intention of organising them themselves. Overemphasizing the power of an idea, they believed that one merely had to want freedom and independence in order to achieve it. It was a naïve analysis of human nature and did not account for the fact that spontaneous outbursts never succeeded in revolution.

In the above criticism one is speaking mainly of the individualists and the anarchist-communists. The distinction between the two becomes blurred in terms with how in touch with reality they were. Anarcho-individualists such as Brovoi and the Gorodin brothers seem to have

¹¹ "Only a few versts from Moscow in Ivar government region a woman found a bit of wood with possessed the peculiar property of shining all night. She immediately imagined this chip to be a sign of God, nay God itself, she prayed to the wood and as the news spread other peasants began to worship the new God. On receiving information of this from the priest the Government finally sent 300 soldiers, who attacked the village with a machine gun in an attempt to deprive the peasants of this piece of wood. But the peasants armed themselves, repulsed the attack and captured the gun, and it cost the authorities a great deal of trouble before they finally got possession of this peculiar 'God'. It now adorns a glass case in a museum in North Russia". Feuler-Miller, *Op. cit.*, p.218. Museums of atheism could hardly have any impact on this sort of peasantry – particularly since they would never see a museum.

¹² Quoted in Avrich *The Russian Anarchists*. Pp. 21–2

¹³ Voline *Nineteen Seventeen*. p. 16.

had a rather mystical view of the revolution. They felt that there was in Russia a throbbing mass ready to overthrow all authority and build a free society. They were influenced by western thought – Stirner and Tucker – but retained a populist faith in the masses who they considered to be innately free and consequently to desire anarchy. Not surprisingly (and although their rhetoric was completely removed reality and could not have been further removed from the concerns of the masses) they were anti-intellectuals.

Whilst sharing the apocalyptic rhetoric of the individualists the anarcho-communists had real links with the working class. Centered in the Vyborg district they were a leading influence on the workers in that area and at Kronstadt. Unlike the individualists they were aware of the necessity of organisation and of direct links with the working class and consequently could compete with the Bolsheviks on a more realistic level. There were also, of course, “chaotist” elements amongst them such as the “black bands” that would attack bourgeois houses at night, yet overall they were closer to rank and file bolsheviks and workers than were the Bolshevik leaders.

The syndicalists too had real links with industry and a comprehensive organisational prescription for revolution. Their principle drawback was that they were too western. Voline, Maximoff and Shapiro had all lived abroad and been influenced by either French syndicalism or by the IWW but as a revolutionary doctrine syndicalism could only appear to the small proletarian sector of Russian society within which Bolshevism was already quite well entrenched (although the leadership of the trade unions was mainly Menshevik). Thus the syndicalists success in gaining seven unions was impressive in itself but irrelevant to the great issues of the revolution. The anarcho-communists criticised the syndicalists as western elitists. They argued that the latter, by their concentration on the numerically insignificant proletariat and neglect of the peasants, vagabonds and marginal workers, divided rather than united the revolutionary elements.

The main problem with the anarchists as a whole was that they were relating not to the revolution as it was in reality but rather to the idealist form it assumed in their own minds¹⁴. They were sure that the Russian people were capable of libertarian socialism and they believed that the revolution was a popular attempt in this direction. Thus when the desired outcome failed to materialise they blamed the Bolsheviks rather than trying to discover why bolshevism rather than anarchism succeeded. there were of course quite good organisational reasons for the Bolsheviks gaining power than the anarchists smashing it. When Voline arrived in Russia in mid-1917 he was amazed to see Petrograd covered in Bolshevik propaganda and not one anarchist poster in sight¹⁵, yet for all that the relinquishing of revolutionary freedom by the people to the Bolsheviks demonstrates more than the inadequacies of the anarchists.

Why would a people who had fought heroically in a revolution for freedom and had overthrown tsarism give in so easily to yet another authoritarian government? Why did the Petrograd workers only produce a stifled protest when Trotsky massacred their “little brothers” in Kronstadt for their demands? Why would the Red Army, whilst refusing to fire on Kronstadt, allow themselves to be severely disciplined while non-political garrisons massacred the erstwhile

¹⁴ The problem with the anarchists was that they tended to see the revolution as a unified phenomenon: a massive and popular libertarian upsurge. Despite their considerable talent for ideological self-deception the Bolshevik leaders did not and if they had they could not possibly have seized and held power. In his 1916 article “The results of the discussion on self-determination” Lenin polemicized against the idea that there would ever be a “pure” social revolution and stressed that without the participation of petty bourgeois and “backward” workers mass struggle and revolution (i.e the seizure of power) were impossible.

¹⁵ Voline Nineteen Seventeen, p. 14.

revolutionary heroes of “red” Kronstadt?¹⁶ Soldiers were shot by the Red Army for surrendering to Kronstad.¹⁷ Why? The workers were aware they had legitimate claims and that the small gains made by the revolution – factory committees, legal unions, the right to strike, freedom of speech, autonomous soviets etc. – were being negated by the Bolsheviks in the name of the workers’ state. Surely the Cheka must have demonstrated a reversion to the old ways of despotism and terror just as the reinstatement of army officers and military discipline must have been familiar to any who had experienced tsarist military despotism.

The complete reversion to despotism is indicative of more than incidental historical factors; it points the justice of those earlier commentators who saw in the Russian “soul” a chaoticist tendency and an inability to produce anything new without external authority and control. A faith in leadership, lack of confidence, insecurity and inability to take responsibility for initiating new departures were deeply ingrained in the Russian character as a consequence of centuries of patriarchal and autocratic oppression. Solzhenitsyn expresses the situation quite well in his account of how when in Yaroslavl in 1921 representatives of a trade union attempted to persuade workers of the necessity of a union to protect their rights against the administration, the workers were apathetic but when the party representative spoke and rebuked them for their laziness and demanded overtime without pay and other such sacrifices for the revolution they were elated.¹⁸

Solzhenitsyn says that “we spent ourselves in one unrestricted outburst in 1917 and then we hurried to submit. We submitted with pleasure!”¹⁹ but it was not so much masochism as a conditioned incapacity to handle freedom. Of course all the examples of submission to the will of the Party can be explained by various specific and isolated determining factors, for example, the massive propaganda campaign against Kronstadt and the massive violence the Bolsheviks were prepared to use against their opponents, but there are too many such incidents not to point to something deeply rooted in the character of the Russian people.

The reality of the situation in 1917 was that there was not a deep cry for liberty from within all men for if there had been the workers would not so quickly have handed over their newly won liberty to the Bolsheviks. What the situation in 1917 really called for was the gratification of immediate and pressing material needs. In such a complex situation of internal turmoil, external war and economic breakdown, the workers and peasantry had neither the skill, initiative or confidence to meet the demands of the situation. The Bolsheviks did.

Before October when the tide of radicalism was running high and Lenin was writing *State and Revolution*, the former Bolshevik Goldenberg had charged that Lenin was proposing himself as candidate for the long vacant throne of Bakunin. After October when the problem was no longer to secure power but to hold onto it, and when the Bolsheviks had either to reintroduce order and stability or go under, Lenin quite easily abandoned his anarchist image (which had never deceived the anarchists) and centralised power and authority to meet the overwhelming problems facing both the survival of his government and of Russian society as a whole. The point here is that Lenin was a pragmatist, he consistently responded to the demands of the situation, not directing them or setting the pace insofar as his actions were directed towards retaining power for the Bolsheviks. Opposition had to be crushed if they were to retain power and the workers would

¹⁶ Ida Mett *The Kronstadt Commune*. p. 22.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 14

¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn *Gulag Archipelago*. p. 13

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 14.

not have allowed such despotism as the Check to rule had they not also felt it to be their right at the time.

For the anarchists responsibility lay with the workers and peasants. Power had to be won over by them and then destroyed. Anarchism failed because the call for total freedom was far from the more pressing concerns moving the majority of the workers and peasants, but the fundamental error of the anarchists was that they did not see that this had to be so. Libertarian society was an impossibility in Russia in 1917. Whilst the anarchists correctly perceived that bolshevism meant authoritarianism and there was no freedom under any state they lacked the perception to see that we are all products of our historical and cultural background and that unless there can develop a movement that challenges the totality of the old society (as Spanish anarchism might be thought to have done) revolutions can only continue the old society in the shell of the new.

Yet even if the anarchists had perceived this they would still have been trapped into inaction. They could not support leninism without jettisoning anarchism and so they had to oppose the Bolsheviks with the tragic result of absolute elimination. Their valiant attempts to expose bolshevism fell on deaf ears because there was no alternative to offer. The Russian people were not equipped or prepared to assume control of their own lives and it was not so hard to surrender something so abstract as liberty for psychological security and the fulfilment of material needs.

The burden of the argument above is that the specific character of the Russian peasantry precluded a libertarian solution in 1917. The deficiencies of the anarchists – quantitative, qualitative and organisational – were also important but these are susceptible of a similar analysis. (Russian peasants and Russian anarchists were after all both products of Russian history). In order to give such an analysis we have broken with the peculiarly Russian and anarchist conception of all men everywhere and at all times being equally capable of freedom and have proceeded from the viewpoint that what people are capable of is a function of their total history. For dealing with questions of classes and peoples this means that the socio-economic structure of a society, its history and culture are the determinants of mass consciousness and that this consciousness can only be changed by the impact of ideas external to the society or by the unification and generalisation of individual oppositional viewpoints arising from the specific life histories of individuals (which may well differ within the society). Both of these processes of consciousness change will be slow except in periods of rapid socio-economic-political change which disrupt traditional patterns of thought. It seems to us that one of the many failings of Russian anarchism was that it was anti-enlightenment and anti-intellectual. For this reason it did not constitute a challenge to the popular mentality and hence could not form a component of a development towards a libertarian and socialist consciousness. By identifying... (pasted line missing)... development of a genuine revolutionary consciousness. At most they encouraged chaotist tendencies.

In this Russian anarchism contrasts sharply with Spanish anarchism. Spanish anarchism was the enlightenment on Spanish soil despite the fact that it was purest Bakuninism and hence had other tendencies as well. Spanish anarchism stood for literacy, science and popular education; it looked forward to the modern world and was not adverse to spelling out its social program and organising to implement it. Spanish anarchism was at worst insurrectional but never chaotist. The Spaniards revolted for an idea; they did not rebel through accumulated resentment and oppression.

The Spanish peasant also differed from the Russian peasant. At the time that Russia was making the transition from feudalism to an Asiatic absolutism, Spain was already an insipid bourgeois

society. Its economy was ruined in the price revolution caused by the discovery of gold in Spanish America but this also gave its people a very different history to the Russian one. It is impossible to give a detailed analysis here but several facts relevant to an analysis of Spanish anarchism – which is usually dismissed as a peasant phenomenon – should be mentioned. Firstly certain rural and fishing communities had maintained cooperative economics since the middle ages. (The Russian mir held land in common but was a private economy.) Secondly even in rural Spain anarchism seems to have been based on towns – although villages also had resident propagandists and on occasions were totally anarchist. Thirdly, and probably as a result of continuous propaganda, rural anarchism transformed the countryside in a collectivist direction in 1936 wherever it was powerful. This was a very different thing from what happened in 1917 in Russia.

There were also differences between the Russian and Spanish proletariats. In part these stemmed from their formation from different peasantries but in part also from the effect of anarchist propaganda and organisation. For anarchist writers the high point of the Russian revolution is often the formation of the factory committees and the seizure of the factories from below in 1917–18. What should be noted here is that as well as being the form of industrial organisation closest to the revolutionary workers the factory committee was also the most primitive one. One suspects that in many cases the seizure of the factory by the workers corresponded to the seizure of land by the peasants in being the end point of their action rather than the first stage in a social reorganisation. Certainly one hears little of inter-factory or industry organisation from below except among the syndicalists. The factory committees either didn't think of it or were leaving it to the state. Here again one has a striking contrast with Spain where the unions seized industries through their local committees. The problem in Spain was the avoidance of autonomist, i.e capitalist, tendencies in industries rather than in individual plants and this was much more susceptible of a solution by the revolutionary organs involved.

We hope that anarchists will reflect on these difference and come to see firstly, the necessity of comprehensive organisational²⁰ and constructive propaganda work, and secondly, the complete falsity of the received anarchist doctrine that 1917 was a libertarian revolution aborted by the authoritarians.

²⁰ Not of course that we are partisans of the leninist view – later adopted by Makhno and others in exile – that organisation overcomes all material obstacles.

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