

April 2018: 100 Years since the Bolshevik Terror

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It's April 1918. On the 12th, the Cheka unleashes a ferocious assault on 26 anarchist locales in Moscow, killing dozens and arresting 500. The political situation this repressive operation goes down in is extremely important.

The second revolution occurred only half a year ago. Since then, the Bolshevik party has achieved the bureaucratic control of the soviets through four layers of committees and councils, each one more removed than the last from the power and participation of the working class and peasants. The supreme council, the Sovnarkom, is led by Lenin himself, and his power is legitimated by delegates elected by delegates elected by delegates. Among this new class of professional politicians, the Bolsheviks predominate, even though they do not constitute a majority in the population of the country.

Since imposing bureaucratic control, the new State has made a series of unpopular decisions. Among them, the creation of the Cheka, a secret police force modeled in large part on the Tsarist Okhrana and led by a tsarist aristocrat turned Bolshevik: Felix Dzerzhinsky. Another is their suppression of the Constituent Assembly after they failed to win a majority in the elections. And most disastrously of all, in March 1918, they sign a humiliating peace with the Axis Powers, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, paying massive reparations and betraying several nations historically oppressed by tsarist Russia, such as the Poles and Ukrainians. Without any input and in total denial of their right to self-determination, Lenin gifts these territories to the German imperialists.

All those resources and the cessation of hostilities on the Eastern Front permits Germany to carry on with the mass slaughter of the First World War until the end of the year. The principal victim: the working class and its internationalist movements. There are more consequences: from then on, the movements of national liberation in Poland and Ukraine adopt a decidedly right-wing character. In Ukraine, this leads to pogroms that result in the deaths of thousands of Jews, and in Poland the result is a far-right government that suppresses workers' movements. What's more, the influx of German settlers into these territories creates a direct precedent for the Nazi concept of *lebensraum*, the land that the German people supposedly needs for its vital expansion. This is a concept that will bear its rotten fruit a couple decades later, during the historically key alliance between Hitler and Stalin.

Nearer at hand, the peace treaty that Lenin signs with the imperialists provokes more direct consequences. No one is in favor. There are even many protests from within the Bolshevik party. Besides the liberal and right-wing parties, who want to continue the damned war, the most popular proposal is the one put forward by SRs, anarchists, and also many Bolsheviks, for “neither war nor peace.” According to this proposal, Russia would abandon the imperialist war, breaking its alliance with the democratic states (France, the UK). It would transform the tsarist army into a revolutionary army, organized to pursue guerrilla warfare should the Germany state continue its advances, also fomenting internationalist solidarity among the rank and file of the German army, sparking mutinies that could set off a revolution in central Europe.

The rejection of this proposal costs the Bolsheviks a good deal of support among the lower classes. The Socialist Revolutionaries, until that moment their ally, abandon the government, accusing the Bolsheviks of being German agents. Another bit of evidence for their accusation: after the February Revolution (1917), the German secret services smuggled Lenin from his exile in Switzerland to Russia, in the hope that he might help destabilize the enemy state. There is widespread speculation that, with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Lenin is clearing his debt to the German imperialists.

In a context of popular rage against the betrayal and the growing authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks, the anarchist organizations—tiny on the eve of the February Revolution but since then ever more influential among the exploited classes—are carrying out an indefatigable propaganda against the new regime. In the face of economic chaos, they propose the direct control of the economy by the workers and peasants, the occupation of factories and the redistribution of the land. They favor the direct exchange of farm goods and city products, organized by the soviets and not by bureaucrats. They propose the abolition of the political parties and of the bureaucratic control of the soviets, as well as the decentralization or federation of the soviet system. They propose the abolition of the aristocratic organization of the military in favor of an egalitarian, revolutionary army, with the direct election of all officers. And in Ukraine, they have already organized such an army, constituted entirely by peasants and workers, subordinated to the political decisions of the soviets, tied to the territory they defend and with a greater gender equality than any other army that exists in the Western world. And this army is accomplishing that which the Bolsheviks could not: they are beating the German imperialists who are invading the territory offered up by Lenin, halting the advance of imperialism and spreading the revolution.

In other words, the anarchists have another vision for the revolution, they are starting to put it in practice, and they have proven themselves capable of defending it. What’s more, the anarchists of Ukraine have begun coordinating with those in the principal cities – Petrograd and Moscow. The anarchists in Siberia, who a year from now will carry out an effective guerrilla war against the White Army, are also starting to coordinate with the rest of the country. It is in this moment that the Bolsheviks attack.

In Moscow, where the anarchists have become strong, the Cheka begins their operation. In just one day, the 12th of April, they raid 26 anarchist buildings, murdering dozens and arresting 500. To justify their aggression, they utilize language belonging to the bourgeoisie. They accuse the anarchists of being “bandits” and “criminals” for having expropriated bourgeois houses, despite these having been put to revolutionary use as social centers and collective homes. The Bolsheviks demonstrate their tendency to seek out alliances with the privileged classes: on the day of the raids, the wealthy homeowners come along with the Cheka to recover their properties and abuse the arrested revolutionaries.

The operation quickly extends to Petrograd with more assaults and detentions. The Cheka begins to practice executions without trial. In this first anti-anarchist operation, they will murder a total of 800 revolutionaries.

Around this time, just half a year after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks organize the Gulag system that will end up devouring millions of lives, the vast majority of them peasants and workers.

Together with the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the April operation is the occurrence that reveals the counterrevolutionary nature of the Bolshevik party, those who will end up being the butchers, the executioners of the revolution. Their authoritarianism becomes clear as day that June, when they begin the systematic rehabilitation and recruitment of Tsarist officers, turning the Red Army into an elitist and imperialist institution. This tendency to seek the complicity of the ruling classes is realized at a global level a couple years later when Lenin concludes economic deals with the main capitalist powers.

Lenin himself will recognize the counterrevolutionary role of his party during the dark days of the Kronstadt Rebellion, when Trotsky and Tukachevsky suppress that revolutionary revolt against the Bolshevik dictatorship. According to Victor Serge, Lenin said, "This is Thermidor. But we shall not let ourselves be guillotined. We'll be our own Thermidor." Thermidor is a reference to the triumph of the reaction in the French Revolution, marked by the arrest and execution of Robespierre and the other Jacobins (who were a principal reference for the Bolsheviks and an inspiration for their putschist strategy, which breaks with Marxist doctrine).

Lenin minced no words in arguing that the Bolsheviks would have to constitute the counterrevolution. They were ready to commit any atrocity against the peasants and workers. Their number one priority was to hold on to power, whatever the cost. That counterrevolutionary authoritarianism was visible in the bureaucratization of the soviets, obvious in the treaty with the imperialist powers, and undeniable in their bloody repression of their allies from the October Revolution, the anarchists.

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