Explorations in the Russian Revolution

An Anarchist Interpretation

Ron Tabor

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Part I – On the occasion of its 100th anniversary

Introduction

Two thousand seventeen is the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The revolution was one of the most significant events of the 20th century, a cosmic explosion whose influence, both for good and for bad, was felt throughout the world at the time and for the rest of the century, and which we are still feeling today. It was also one of the seminal chapters in the long story of the struggle of humanity to free itself from brutal socio-economic systems, hierarchical social arrangements that subject the vast majority of people to lives of poverty and oppression in the interests of maintaining the wealth and power of tiny elites. Although the Russian Revolution occurred in a society that had only recently entered its period of capitalist development, while today we suffer under the injustices of a much more mature system, the revolution still has a lot to teach us.

The Russian Revolution has bequeathed a mixed legacy, especially for the left. Precisely what this legacy is depends on one's outlook, particularly, how one views the revolution's ultimate outcome. For some authoritarian revolutionaries, such as Stalinists, Maoists, and Castroists/Guevarists, the revolution, whose climax was the October Revolution and the triumph of the Bolshevik Party in the ensuing civil war, was a great victory, resulting in the establishment of socialism/communism. Even though the Soviet Union no longer exists, it remains, for those with share this viewpoint, a beacon for future revolutionaries and a model to be emulated. Even for Trotskyists, who consider the Soviet Union and the East European "socialist" regimes to have been either "degenerated" or "deformed workers states" and who believe that those that remain, in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, still are "workers states," the legacy of the Russian Revolution remains overwhelmingly positive, since they view Lenin, the Bolshevik Party, and the October Revolution as ideals that deserve to be emulated despite the problematic results. In contrast, for libertarians and anti-authoritarians, the outcome of the Russian Revolution was a disaster, or as anarchist Alexander Berkman put it, a tragedy. At the end of the civil war (roughly the middle of 1921), this tragedy involved: (1) the consolidation of a brutal, dishonest, and corrupt one-party dictatorship that was to evolve into one of the vilest regimes the world has ever seen; (2) the smothering of the tremendous libertarian potential that had burst into flames during various stages of the revolution, both before the seizure of state power by the Bolsheviks and afterward, in the mass popular resistance to the consolidation of Bolshevik rule; (3) the slaughter of millions of workers, soldiers, and peasants, along with tens of thousands of revolutionary fighters of all classes; (4) the transformation of the soviets, factory committees, and other organizations of popular democracy into the bureaucratic apparatus of the "Soviet" state; and (5) the besmirching of the name and the corruption of the ideal of revolutionary socialism for decades afterward.

Crucial to evaluating the Russian Revolution as a whole is an accurate understanding of the nature of the October Revolution, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks under the slogan, "All Power to the Soviets." At the moment it occurred, the insurrection appeared to represent the triumph of the popular forces. But rather than representing the victory of the people, the uprising heralded the beginning of the end, the onset of a long and bloody denouement that led to the tragic conclusion.

This article will (I hope) be the first of several pieces devoted to the Russian Revolution. The series is not intended to be a complete history. Nor is it meant as an elaborate analysis of the revolution and a detailed critique of the theory and practice of the Bolshevik Party. Instead, it is offered as a collection of essays devoted to exploring various facets of the event that have been of concern to me over the years. Hopefully, they will be of interest to potential readers, especially radicals and revolutionaries who share a similar goal as mine, the establishment of truly democratic, egalitarian, and cooperative societies, revolutionary democratic social arrangements that have been variously described as "revolutionary socialism", "libertarian socialism", or "anarchism." (Note: I use these terms interchangeably throughout the discussion.)

A personal note

I have been intrigued (if not obsessed) by the Russian Revolution since I was a teenager. My parents had been sympathizers of the Communist Party for many years and remained, in their different ways, supporters of the "socialist countries" up to and even after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989–1991. I was especially an admirer of Lenin and avidly read his works. I was greatly impressed with the strategy and tactics he utilized in leading the Bolshevik Party during 1917, climaxing in its seizure of state power in October. I believed that, in doing so, he and the rest of the Bolsheviks had carried out a true proletarian revolution and that this insurrection had led to the establishment of an actual "dictatorship of the proletariat," based on the soviets and the factory committees that the workers, soldiers, and peasants had created during and after the initial uprising in February. I also accepted that the Bolsheviks' goal was to spark a world revolution that would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism and then communism.

Even as I read more, particularly about the aftermath of the October Insurrection, e.g., the establishment of the Cheka (the government's secret police), the negotiations over and the eventual signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the civil war (characterized by a wholesale assault on the peasants) that followed, I continued to accept that the Bolshevik strategy was the only correct one to achieve the revolutionary goal. Specifically, I justified the Bolsheviks' brutal tactics as (unfortunately) necessary to hold on to state power and to defend the revolution in the context of economic crisis, internal counterrevolution, and imperialist invasion, until "backward" Russia could be rescued by successful revolutions in Europe, particularly in Germany. The Bolsheviks were, I felt, the only political force in Russia both truly committed to the idea of a revolutionary working class government based on the soviets and organizationally capable of defending what the Bolsheviks considered the "conquests of October." Even though I came to recognize that the outcome of the revolution and the civil war was not a "soviet democracy" but a one-party dictatorship that had gutted the soviets of their democratic content and had turned them into an enormous apparatus of administration and control, I believed that the Bolsheviks had no choice

but to act as they did, and that this was the only feasible alternative to the victory of the (internal and external) counterrevolutionary forces.

Yet, as my investigations continued, I began to see the events in a much different light. Based on my reading, especially the writings of the anarchist participants, eyewitnesses, and historians of the revolution and civil war, I began to recognize that the Bolshevik dictatorship did not represent the victory of the revolution but its death. I eventually understood that, in their concern to seize state power and to hold onto it at all costs, no matter how brutal and dishonest their tactics, no matter how much they had alienated the Russian (and non-Russian) workers and peasants, the Bolsheviks had crushed the actual revolution, that is, the millions of mobilized workers, peasants, and members of oppressed nationalities and religious minorities; the vast complex of democratic organizations of self-management they had created during and after the February Revolution; and their hopes and dreams of a better world after so many centuries of Tsarist tyranny. In other words, I came to believe that the Bolsheviks had crushed the revolution as completely and as thoroughly as (or even better than) the explicitly counterrevolutionary forces could ever have done.

This understanding raised several questions in my mind. What motivated the Bolsheviks? What was it that impelled them, people who had dedicated their lives to the liberation of the working class and all of humanity, to utilize the strategy and the tactics they did, that led them to carry out acts that, viewed with any degree of objectivity, cannot rationally be justified on any basis even vaguely grounded in a sense of humanity, let alone the libertarian ideals of socialism? Were the Bolsheviks truly compelled to act as they did? Were there no other alternatives? What does it mean to "win" when victory destroys the very thing one claims to be, and believes oneself to be, fighting for? What, in fact, were the Bolsheviks fighting for? Was it worth fighting to hold on to power no matter what the cost, both in terms of lives lost, certainly, but also in terms of the sacrifice of honesty, integrity, and a sense of humanity. Might it not have been better to remain loyal to revolutionary socialist ideals and go down to defeat, but, while doing so, at least leave an unsullied memory, such as that of the Paris Commune?

After further study and consideration, I came to the conclusion that the answers to these questions lay in the political and mental outlook of the Bolshevik Party. At the risk of simplifying, I would summarize this ideology/psychology as consisting of the following ten, logically interconnected, tenets:

1. Marxism embodies the (scientifically determined) Truth; all other outlooks/ideologies are false and hence counterrevolutionary.

2. Marxism represents the True (Essential/ontologically grounded) consciousness of the working class; all other viewpoints represent "false consciousness", that is, ways of thinking that reflect the influence of bourgeois classes on the workers.

3. Only the Bolsheviks (and especially its leader, V.I. Lenin) truly understand Marxism; the programs of all other political tendencies, including other individuals and groups that call themselves Marxist, are bourgeois, that is, pro-capitalist.

4. The Bolshevik Party is therefore the embodiment of the True consciousness of the working class.

5. Socialism (and hence the liberation of humanity) can only be achieved through the conquest of state power and the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat."

6. To achieve socialism therefore requires the establishment of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.

7. The answers to all political questions, even those concerning strategy and tactics, can be discerned theoretically, by the application of Marxism to concrete circumstances through the "unity of theory and practice."

8. Political debate with non-Bolshevik political parties and tendencies has, at best, an instrumental value. It is good only insofar as it enables the Bolsheviks to seize state power and consolidate their ideological and organizational hegemony/control over the working class.

9. Once state power has been seized, democracy in the soviets, factory committees, and other mass organizations, that is, free discussion and debate among rival (even pro-socialist) organizations and tendencies, is not an essential feature of the proletarian dictatorship. Such pluralism is, at bottom, a luxury that can and must be sacrificed if necessary to maintain the Bolsheviks' control of the state.

10. Given the high stakes involved (the liberation of humanity), the establishment and maintenance of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party justifies the use of any means, including (as we know) arbitrary arrest, torture, and imprisonment; internment in labor camps; deportation to internal and external exile; executions, including mass shootings of (alleged) counterrevolutionaries, deserters, and all others who resist; lies and slander.

(A small digression: I know there are people, both Marxists and anarchists, who accept that the logic entailed in my list of Bolshevik tenets — that is, the logic that connects the Bolsheviks' actions to their ideology — applies to Leninism/Bolshevism but do not believe that it holds for Marxism. In contrast, I consider that it was the same logic that motivated Marx and Engels' campaign against Michael Bakunin and his followers in the First International and that led to their use of comparable [although much less brutal] tactics, that is, an attempt to seize organizational control of the International, not through honest discussion and debate, but through the use of bureaucratic maneuvers and dishonest rhetoric. For those who wish to pursue this question, I highly recommend consulting Wolfgang Eckhardt's masterful and thorough study, *The First Socialist Schism*, recently published (2016) by PM Press.)

The conclusion I outlined above is developed in two of my books: (1) A Look at Leninism, published in 1988, and (2) The Tyranny of Theory, published in 2013. Although I have since moved on to other intellectual concerns, the Russian Revolution still haunts me, and I continue to ponder various issues related to that astounding event. The articles that follow are my attempts to come to grips with them.

Part II – Historical and Political Background, the February Revolution and the Soviets

To properly understand the Russian Revolution, it is useful to know at least a little about the society in which it occurred.

Imperial Russia

At the turn of the 20th century, Russian society was a sprawling empire covering thousands of square miles and ruling over millions of people and a multitude of subject nationalities, ethnic groups, and religious minorities.

Straddling Europe and Asia, the Russian state was a brutal autocracy ruled by an absolute monarch, the Tsar, who governed through a vast bureaucracy, an enormous army, and a huge police apparatus, all of which were staffed by members of a hierarchically organized landed aristocracy. At the time of the revolution, the vast majority of the population consisted of extremely poor peasants who farmed tiny plots of land with primitive tools and were organized in village communes (mir or obshchina). Only recently freed from servile status (serfdom), the peasants were saddled with a heavy burden of taxes and "redemption payments." These payments were monies the peasants owed, according to the terms of their "liberation" in 1861, to the Russian state, which had compensated the landlords for the land taken from them and distributed to the peasants. (These landlords, of course, had mercilessly exploited the peasants for centuries.)

Aside from a narrow but increasingly influential stratum of intellectuals, the *intelligentsia*, and a small middle class of which the *intelligentsia* was a part, there was also a small but growing class of capitalists – industrialists, merchants, and bankers — many of foreign origin, who owned the industrial, financial, and commercial enterprises in the still-small but rapidly expanding capitalist economy. Not least was a class, also growing, of workers, most of whom had only recently arrived from the countryside. Ruthlessly exploited — poorly paid, compelled to work long hours, brutalized by their supervisors, and crammed into squalid housing — they were concentrated in a few cities and worked in enterprises ranging from tiny workshops to enormous industrial complexes employing tens of thousands. Because of this concentration, both geographic and economic, the workers had potential leverage far beyond their relatively small numbers. In the face of a rapidly industrializing Europe to the west and a comparably dynamic Japan to the east, the Russian state was attempting to modernize economically while retaining as much of its archaic social and political structure as it could. The result was a society waiting to explode. And explode it did, first in a revolution in 1905, which the autocracy was able to contain and eventually defeat by a combination of (mostly) false promises of reform and brutal repression, and then, on a much greater scale, in 1917.

Beyond the social strains already mentioned, the immediate cause of the explosion in 1917 was World War I, an inter-imperialist conflict that the Russian Empire entered as part of the Triple

Entente (Great Britain, France, and Russia), whose forces were later augmented by those of Italy, Japan, the United States, and other countries. Facing the most advanced military machine in the world, that of Germany, along with the armed forces of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, stood the decrepit Russian army, overwhelmingly manned by millions of poor and illiterate peasant conscripts (and some workers), at the bottom, and an incompetent and corrupt officer corps, at the top. Like all members of the lower classes in the Russian Empire, the rank and file soldiers were abused by their superiors, wretchedly fed, clothed, and housed, and poorly armed; many men were sent into combat without rifles. Often ordered into battles they were almost guaranteed to lose, the soldiers were slaughtered by the millions. (Nobody knows for sure, but estimates are 1.7 million killed, 4.9 million wounded, and 2.5 million POW's or missing, out of 12 million mobilized, for a horrifying casualty ratio of 76.3%) In stark contrast, the officers lived in luxury, well housed, well clothed, well fed, and liberally supplied with carnal pleasures (alcohol and prostitutes).

Meanwhile, the rest of the country, under the strains of mobilizing for the war effort, entered into an increasingly severe economic crisis, characterized by rampant inflation, the breakdown of the transportation system, and shortages of raw materials, spare parts, heating fuel, and food. The economy ground virtually to a halt, and the lower classes, particularly in the urban areas, faced starvation. Beginning in July and escalating through December 1916, workers in the cities went out on strike, while at the front, soldiers deserted by the thousands. The weak-willed Tsar, Nicholas II, manipulated by his wife, Alexandra, who was, in turn, mesmerized by her spiritual consort, the corrupt *starets* (holy man) Gregory Rasputin, was incapable of addressing the mounting crisis or even of admitting that it existed. Even long-time supporters of the regime, including members of the royal family, began to conspire to oust the Tsar in order to sustain the war effort and save the country from an impending revolution. After two and a half years of slaughter at the front, political paralysis at the top, economic collapse, and threats of a palace coup, the people revolted.

Outline of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution, which began in mid-February (according to the old-style Julian calendar then in use in Russia, which was 13 days behind the western, Gregorian, calendar), went through a number of discrete stages: (1) the February Revolution, a spontaneous mass uprising in which the Tsar was overthrown and a provisional government established; (2) an interregnum characterized by "dual power," under which de facto sovereignty was shared by the official Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet (workers and soldiers council) and parallel arrangements around the country; (3) the October Revolution, in which the Bolshevik Party, riding a wave of peasant insurrections, seized control of the state; (4) another interregnum during which the Bolsheviks began the process of consolidating their rule; (5) the first phase of a civil war, beginning in July 1918, during which the Bolshevik regime launched an all-out offensive against the peasantry, built the "Red" Army, and battled an array of military forces that included "White" counterrevolutionaries, imperialist invaders, and "Green" and "Black" (anarchist) peasant guerrillas; (6) the conclusion of the civil war, from March through August 1921, during which the Bolsheviks completed the suppression of opposition political organizations and crushed all

resistance on the part of the workers, soldiers, sailors to the consolidation of the Bolshevik/Communist dictatorship.

The February Revolution

The February Revolution was the culmination of a wave of strikes that began in July 1916 and increased in intensity through the end of the year and into 1917. On January 9, 142,000 workers struck to commemorate the 12th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday," (January 9, 1905, when the Tsar's troops fired on peacefully demonstrating workers led by the priest [and police agent] Father Gapon, killing over 100 people and wounding hundreds more; the massacre set off the revolution of that year). On February 14, 84,000 workers went out on strike, summoned by the Mensheviks (the moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party [RSDLP] — see below), to honor the convocation of the Duma, the country's largely advisory legislature. Four days later, after being locked out by management for demanding higher wages, the workers at the giant (30,000 employees) Putilov Metal Workers called on workers in other factories to strike in sympathy. By February 22, 100,000 workers were out on strike. The movement took a giant step forward when, on February 23, International Women's Day, women workers, many employed in the city's textiles factories, struck and went into the streets, demanding bread and carrying banners: "Down with the Autocracy"; "Down with the War." The demonstrations mounted in size and built in intensity over several days. By February 25, 250,000 workers were out and virtually all of the city's factories were shut down. After a unit of Tsarist troops, called out to suppress the incipient insurrection, fired on the crowd, killing and wounding a number of people, the demonstrations erupted into riots, assaults on policemen, police stations, and the courts. Demonstrators invaded the city's arsenal, seized weapons, and distributed them to their comrades. Eventually, in response to direct entreaties, particularly from the women, individual soldiers and eventually entire units mutinied, refusing to fire on the people and, instead, arresting and even shooting their officers.

As the movement in the streets built toward its climax, liberal and moderate socialist members of the Duma, which the Tsar had suspended ("prorogued"), moved to assume leadership of the revolt. On February 27, they set up a Temporary Committee of the Duma and a Military Commission, which managed to establish their authority over the rebelling soldiers. On the same day, leading Mensheviks called for a meeting that evening to organize a soviet of workers' deputies. At that gathering, a provisional executive committee was chosen and calls for the election of delegates from the factories and the barracks went out. On the following day, a plenary session of the soviet (soon to be called the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies) was convened at the Tauride Palace (the site of meetings of the Duma Committee and the Military Commission), where, among other things, they selected a permanent executive committee.

The leaders of the soviet worked closely with the members of the Duma Committee and its Military Commission to establish and consolidate their power. Preventing the Tsar from reaching the capital by re-routing his train, they forced Nicholas to abdicate on March 3, convinced his brother, Grand Duke Michael, to refuse the throne, thus essentially abolishing the monarchy, and established a provisional government under the leadership of Prince George Lvov. The government was provisional (that is, temporary) in that it was charged with organizing elections to,

and the eventual convocation of, a constituent assembly, which would write a constitution for the country, call elections, and establish an official government.

Following the lead of the capital, similar uprisings occurred in other cities, in military installations (most notably, the Kronstadt naval fortress located 20 miles west of Petrograd on an island at the mouth of the Neva River), and eventually even in small towns, throughout the country, during which workers, soldiers, and peasants established soviets and other democratic organizations, such as committees of soldiers in the barracks and at the front. Eventually, the soviets regularized their structure and procedures: workers in the factories, sailors on their ships and in their naval bases, soldiers in the barracks, and peasants in the villages, elected delegates according to defined ratios, such delegates being subject to immediate recall by those who elected them. In turn, the soviets chose smaller executive committees, which selected even smaller bodies ("permanent bureaus") to manage their day-to-day affairs.

In addition to forming soviets, which were organized on a regional basis, the mobilized people formed other types of popular organizations. These included factory committees, through which workers in the factories watched over, in what they called *kontrol*, the foremen and other supervisory staff of the factory, but did not, at least initially, attempt to direct production. Cooperatives of many kinds were also formed, both among producers (often artisans and those operating small workshops) and among consumers. Throughout this process, large numbers of women began, for the first time, to participate in the political life of the country. On the periphery of the empire, members of oppressed nationalities declared and began to exercise their rights to speak, write, publish, and be educated in their own languages; they also demanded autonomy and in some cases outright independence. In the same vein, persecuted religious minorities, among them Catholics, Lutherans, Old Believers, Muslims, and Jews, asserted their rights to worship as they pleased.

In the aftermath of the February Revolution, Russia, from having been one of the most oppressive societies in the world, became one of the freest, especially considering the wartime restrictions of even the most democratic of the western capitalist countries. Workers, soldiers, peasants, intellectuals and other members of the middle class, and all political organizations, had full rights to read what they wished, to speak their minds, to publish their thoughts, and to organize.

"Dual Power"

The nature of the revolution (particularly, the fact that the army had "gone over to the people" and the establishment of the soviets) led to a unique situation in Petrograd and throughout the country. While a provisional government had been established, it had limited power. Virtually all authority, as far as the masses of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants were concerned, rested with the soviets, particularly the Petrograd Soviet, to which the rest of the country looked for leadership. Most important, the Provisional Government did not have full control over the army. According to Order No. 1, promulgated by the soviet on March 1 at the behest of the soldiers, the government was required to have its military directives countersigned by the executive committee of the soviet. Also, under the order, soldiers were urged to form committees in the barracks that would have control over their weapons and to elect delegates to the soviet. They were no longer required to salute officers when off duty, while officers were required to use the polite (rather than the familiar) form of address when speaking to them. Not least, the Provisional

Government was prohibited from disciplining the troops of the Petrograd garrison by sending them to the front. (The soldiers insisted on Order No. 1 because they feared retribution from the Provisional Government — and even more important, from their own officers — because of their "mutinous" actions during the uprising. The Provisional Government agreed to the order because it believed it was necessary to regain and maintain control over the troops, and simultaneously, to broaden their base of support.)

Although the soviets, particularly the Petrograd Soviet, had de facto power, they did not exercise it. This was because the leadership of the soviets was dominated by members of the largest of the socialist political parties, which, once the Tsar had been overthrown and the monarchy abolished, opposed the further development of the revolution. These were the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries

The Mensheviks represented the moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, founded in 1898, and since 1903, divided into two factions, which in 1912 had become two distinct parties. Committed to the mechanical and reformist Marxism of the Second International, the Mensheviks believed that Russia, which they considered to have only recently emerged from "feudalism," had to undergo a long period of capitalist development before the socialist revolution was to be "on the agenda." During this epoch, the industrial working class or proletariat would grow to become the majority of the population, while the peasants, whom the Mensheviks feared and viewed as instinctively counterrevolutionary, would be eliminated and replaced by capitalist farmers. As a result, the Mensheviks helped to establish, supported, and, increasingly over time, took positions in the Provisional Government, while attempting to prevent the further radicalization of the revolution. They also wished to continue the war effort, despite the slaughter at the front. Thus, while the Mensheviks saw themselves as socialists, they effectively acted as pro-capitalist liberals.

The Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR's), formed in 1903, were descendants of the Russian Populists of the late 19th century. The SR's, fervent believers in the unique historic role of Russia, believed that the country would follow its own, special path to socialism, different from that of Western Europe. This view was based on the fact that the Russian peasants, whom the SR's romanticized, were organized in the village communes. These were essentially councils of the male residents of the villages who met periodically to discuss and make decisions about village affairs, including and most importantly, the periodic assignment of land allotments to each family living in the village. While the SR's were not theoretically bound to a mechanical two-stage conception of the revolution (capitalism now, socialism later), their fervent Russian patriotism and their commitment to the Entente powers, particularly France (as the land of the French Revolution), led the majority of them to pursue essentially the same reformist strategy as the Mensheviks and to favor continuing the war.

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The Bolshevik Party

The dominant organized force in opposition to the Provisional Government was the Bolshevik Party, once the left-wing faction of the RSDLP, and since 1912, a distinct party. More than the Mensheviks and the SR's, the Bolsheviks were largely the creation of one man, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, aka Lenin. While the Bolsheviks were broadly committed to the same Marxian Social Democratic conception of socialism as the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks differed from the Mensheviks in several important respects.

The first of these was organizational. The Mensheviks, looking to the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe, particularly Germany, as models, sought to create a mass working class political party, which would, once Russia had achieved capitalist democracy via the "bourgeois democratic revolution," elect candidates to parliament and constitute the leadership of trade unions that would eventually, they thought, embrace millions of workers. At some point, far in the future, they hoped to lead the workers to power, as peacefully as possible. Even under the repressive conditions of the Tsarist autocracy, the Mensheviks advocated and built their organization as a miniature version of the mass social democratic party they envisioned: membership was relatively loosely defined and the party would be open to a variety of internal political tendencies, as long as they were in agreement with the general outlines of the Social Democratic program.

In contrast, the Bolsheviks looked to the "underground" conspiratorial organizations of the left wing of the Russian Populists, those who had carried out terrorist attacks on the Tsar and other officials of the autocracy, as an organizational model. As elaborated in Lenin's books, *What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, party membership was defined narrowly, specifically, as open only to those willing to participate in the party's illegal conspiratorial apparatus and to follow the directives of the party's leadership. The other side of this was an extreme centralization. Although the party's leaders were to be democratically elected at, and party policy democratically determined by, periodic party congresses, in between such congresses, the party membership was to be subject to what was essentially the dictatorial control of the central committee. Party members, in other words, were conceived of as being "professional revolutionaries" who willingly subjected themselves to "iron discipline." While this model (which came to be known as "democratic centralism") was at first justified as necessary because of the repressive nature of the Tsarist state, it eventually became, somewhat modified, a defining characteristic of Bolshevism, that is, the Bolshevik faction, the Bolshevik (later, Communist) Party, and, after 1919, the international Communist movement.

A second difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks was their respective attitudes towards the peasantry. This difference was primarily a question of strategy and tactics, not of theory and fundamental program. In terms of theory, both factions/parties shared the deep distrust of and hostility to the peasants that is virtually a defining characteristic of Marxism. This flowed, in part, from the Marxian conception of socialism as the collective (nation-wide) ownership of the means of production, including and especially the land, and the belief that socialism could only be established through a highly centralized state, which they called the "dictatorship of the proletariat." To all Marxists, the road to socialism, as described in the *Communist Manifesto* and

elsewhere, lies through the "centralization of the means of production in the hands of the state." Marxists also believed that the peasants would always be fervently attached to their individual plots of land, the soil they and their ancestors had farmed for centuries, and would use all their power to resist its seizure by the state, any state, even a "socialist" one. At best, Marxists felt that the peasants could be convinced of the benefits of collective and mechanized production only through a decades-long educational process. Finally, it flowed from the Marxian conviction that the logic of capitalist development would eventually lead to the destruction of the peasantry altogether, that is, the elimination of peasant farming and its replacement by a much more efficient large-scale industrial agriculture employing wage labor. Putting this all together, for Marxists, once capitalism was established, the peasants would inevitably constitute an economically and socially retrograde and a politically reactionary force.

However, where the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks disagreed was over what attitude to take toward the peasantry in the immediate struggle to overthrow Tsarism. For their part, the Mensheviks were so fearful of the peasants (whom they saw as illiterate, bigoted, and violent savages consumed with a blind hatred of all landowners and intellectuals) that they sought to ally with the capitalist class (the "bourgeoisie") and the liberal politicians who represented it in the political sphere. In the Mensheviks' view, then, the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia was to be led by the capitalists and supported by the working class (as led by the Menshevik Party), with the peasants playing as little role as possible (in fact, to be kept under control by the landowners and the state until the "agrarian question" would be "resolved" as legally and as peacefully as possible).

In contrast, the Bolsheviks looked to the peasants as potential allies (temporary and unreliable allies, to be sure) in the struggle to overthrow Tsarism. They recognized that a mass, elemental uprising (similar to the rebellions that had convulsed Tsarist Russia every 50-to-100 years for centuries), in which the peasants would seize the landowners' land, burn their estates, and repudiate the "redemption payments," would destroy one of the main social props of the Tsarist system and clear the way for the further development of the revolution. As the other side of this, the Bolsheviks believed that the capitalist class was too small, too weak, and too tied up with and dependent on the autocracy to be a reliable ally in the fight to overthrow the Tsarist system. Thus, while both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks (until late-April 1917) saw the Russian Revolution as a "bourgeois-democratic" one, their precise conceptions of that revolution differed profoundly.

A third area of difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks was in their attitude toward state power. Consistent with their formalistic conception of Marxism, the Mensheviks believed that the bourgeois revolution in Russia meant, by definition, that the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, would seize state power and establish a "bourgeois-democratic" government. Meanwhile, the working class, under the (presumed) leadership of the Mensheviks, would serve as a prop to capitalist rule, defending the resulting "revolutionary" government against the forces of the counter-revolution while working to ensure that the regime would be as democratic and as "progressive" as possible. This explains why the Mensheviks helped establish the Provisional Government and launched the soviet in February 1917, and it foretells the political role the party played in the months that followed.

As opposed to the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks saw as their main strategic aim the seizure of state power by themselves, albeit in an alliance, which they believed would be temporary, with a party representing the interests of the peasants. The result would be what Lenin called the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry." Thus, even though,

according to their own theoretical conception, the Russian Revolution was to be a "bourgeois-democratic" one, the Bolsheviks sought political power for their own, presumably, proletarian, party. Or, at least this is how Lenin saw the revolution. Whether the rest of the Bolsheviks fully understood this is not clear. This position, most extensively outlined in Lenin's book, "*Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*", written and published in 1905, remained the fundamental strategic conception of the Bolshevik Party until late April 1917.

There are several things that are crucial to understand about this outlook: (1) As mentioned, even though the Bolsheviks considered the Russian revolution to be "bourgeois democratic," the strategic goal of the party during this revolution was the seizure of state power by *their* party, a party that, in their eyes, represented the proletariat, in an alliance with a party that represented the peasants; (2) the precise relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the presumed peasant party was not clearly sketched out, although it is reasonable to assume that, consistent with Marxist theory, the Bolsheviks believed that they, as representatives of the proletariat, in their eyes the only consistently revolutionary class, would play the leading role in the alliance; (3) what would happen after the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship" was established and the "bourgeois democratic tasks" of the revolution, particularly the overthrow of the autocracy and the resolution of the land question, were carried out, was left open, at least posing the possibility that, under certain circumstances, such as the outbreak of revolution in Europe, the revolution might go beyond the "bourgeois democratic" stage and enter into the "socialist" stage; (4) nowhere in *Two Tactics* (or anywhere else in Lenin's voluminous writings, as far as I am aware) is there any discussion of how the two parties which claim to represent the interests of the workers and the peasants, respectively, would be controlled by or held accountable to the masses of people who constituted those classes. In Lenin's view, popular social classes, such as the proletariat and the peasantry, are simply "represented" by political parties, who supposedly promote their interests, but do not in any way control those organizations. Thus, in this conception, the Bolshevik Party represents the proletariat simply because it claims, on the basis of its Marxist program, to do so.

An additional point needs to be made here. To Lenin, the question of power was not only a political one (e.g., which party represents which class, what is the precise relationship between those parties) but also an organizational one. Lenin, both as a man and as a politician, was first and foremost interested in power, and to him, a fundamental aspect, if not *the* fundamental aspect, of power, as a relationship between leaders and led, party and class, was organizational, specifically, the existence of a political apparatus to facilitate and ultimately secure that leadership/power. As an integral part of this, Lenin was a centralist; he generally wanted the apparatus (or apparatuses) he organized and led to be as centralized as possible, and he worked tirelessly to achieve this. The importance of centralized organizational control to Lenin's politics and methods is readily apparent from the time of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, which resulted in the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, to the Bolsheviks' seizure of state power in October 1917, and throughout the rest of his career. In the factional struggle within the RSDLP, for example, Lenin always strove to seize direct control of as much of the party apparatus and resources—editorial boards of publications, central and local committees, armed squads, monies, personnel, etc.—as possible. And he pursued the same course when he seized control of the Russian state.

This emphasis on centralized organizational control flowed directly from key tenets (some explicit, some implicit) of Lenin's theoretical outlook (to paraphrase what I wrote in the first article in this series):

1. There is one, and only one, Truth.
2. That Truth is theoretically discernible.
3. Marxism is the (scientifically-demonstrated) theoretical embodiment of that Truth.
4. Those who interpret Marxism correctly have a privileged access to that Truth.
5. Marxism represents the true and historically appropriate consciousness of the working class, or proletariat, which is historically destined to lead humanity to its liberation through the world-wide socialist revolution.
6. The political and organizational embodiment of this "revolutionary proletarian consciousness" is a "vanguard" party, a centralized and hierarchical apparatus made up of "hardened" professional revolutionaries bound together by "iron discipline" under the leadership of theoretically-trained revolutionary Marxists.
7. Such an apparatus is the only guarantee that the pressures of daily life and struggle under Tsarism and capitalist conditions of production generally would not lead the majority of the workers to succumb to "false," that is, trade union or reformist, consciousness.
8. The only organization (faction or party) fitting that description in Russia is the Bolshevik faction/party, conceived, created, and led by Lenin himself.
9. He (Lenin) is the only person capable of devising the correct Marxist program, strategy, tactics, and organizational methods to lead the revolutionary struggle in Russia (and, after 1914, the world).

(Points 1 – 5 have their roots in the Marxism of Marx and Engels. Points 6 – 9 are Lenin's contributions.)

To sum this up, throughout his political life, and certainly from the time of the publication of *What Is To Be Done?* in 1902, Lenin evinced and articulated profound distrust of the spontaneous actions and thinking of the mass of workers. In *What Is To Be Done?* , Lenin explicitly argues that the workers, left to their own devices, are capable of raising themselves only to the level of trade union (that is, reformist) consciousness, and that revolutionary consciousness (meaning, Marxism, specifically, *his* version of Marxism) had to be brought to the working class "from the outside." Thus, the revolutionary party, organized along Bolshevik lines and led by theoretically-armed Marxists, was the essential element in guaranteeing the construction of a truly revolutionary working class movement, carrying out a successful proletarian revolution, and thereby liberating humanity.

The Bolsheviks from the February Revolution to the Party's April Conference

When Lenin returned to Russia on April 3, 1917, after 10 years of exile in Western Europe, the Bolshevik Party was following a conciliatory policy, essentially one of "critical support," toward the Provisional Government. This was the doing of senior party leaders Kamenev, Stalin, and

Muranov, who, when they had arrived in Petrograd from exile some time earlier, had deposed less senior cadres, Molotov, Shliapnikov, and Zalutsky, who had been articulating a more militant line. However, Lenin shocked all those who heard him speak, both at the Finland railroad station, where he had arrived, and at various meetings at other locales over the next few days. To paraphrase parts of his famous "April Theses," written at the time, Lenin denounced the Provisional Government as "bourgeois" and urged no support for it; he condemned the war as "predatory" and "imperialist," and called for "revolutionary defeatism" rather than the "revolutionary defensism" being pursued by the SR's and Mensheviks; he asserted that Russia was "passing from the first stage of the revolution, which, due to the insufficient class consciousness and organization of the proletariat, had placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, to the second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry"; and he called for a "republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Laborers', and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom."

In short, Lenin proposed to point the Bolsheviks in the direction of using the soviets as a springboard for the seizure of state power by the party, as the (supposed) leader of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry, and of utilizing the soviets as the institutional basis of his proposed state. He also called for the nationalization of the land, whose local use would be put at the disposal of local soviets of peasants' and agricultural laborers' deputies, and for the unification of the banks under the control of the soviets of workers' deputies. He wrote, "It is not our immediate task to 'introduce' socialism but only to bring social production and distribution at once under the control of the soviets of workers' deputies."

At a Bolshevik Party gathering, "The 7th All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP (B)," (the "April Conference"), held on April 24–29, Lenin, facing considerable initial opposition, managed to win over the party to his daring revolutionary policy. In effect, Lenin was proposing that the Bolshevik Party seize state power as the first step in a world-wide socialist revolution. He also stressed that, at least for the present, it was the job of the Bolsheviks, not to advocate the immediate overthrow of the Provisional Government, but to "patiently explain" to the masses of people the necessity of pursuing the course he proposed, with the goal of winning a majority in the soviets. Appropriately, the Bolsheviks' main agitational slogans during this period were: "Peace, Land, and Bread" and "All Power to the Soviets."

While this policy may be seen, as it was at the time, as a radical break with the Bolsheviks' past positions (and with the orthodox Marxism of the Second International), there was at least one crucial continuity. What remained central was Lenin's insistence that the Bolsheviks' strategic goal during the Russian Revolution was the seizure of state power by their party.

The Ambiguity of the Soviets

A certain mythology or mystique has grown up around the soviets since the Russian Revolution. This mystique has been promoted particularly by Trotskyists, who have been anxious to establish the democratic credentials of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in supposed contrast to the bureaucratic and dictatorial tendencies of Stalin and the later Communist Party. According to this view, the soviets were spontaneous creations of the working class, forms of "self-organization" that were uniquely suited to provide an institutional basis for the self-emancipation and self-rule of the proletariat.

The reality, however, is more complicated.

In the first place, the soviets did not always arise out of the spontaneous actions of rank and file workers. In his book, *The Unknown Revolution*, the anarchist Voline (Eichenbaum) insists that the idea of a soviet, as a committee to organize and lead strikes, first arose in meetings between him and politically-minded workers in his apartment in St. Petersburg (the capital's name until the outbreak of World War I) in January 1905 and that one was actually established and functioned for a time until it was later broken up by the Tsarist police. According to bourgeois historians, the first soviet on record was formed in Ivanovo-Voznosensk in May of 1905 during a general strike of textile workers, when the strike committee changed its name to *soviet* and began to take on broader, more political, functions. However, the soviet that was to achieve the most notoriety during the 1905 revolution, the one formed in October also in St. Petersburg, was explicitly organized by a coalition of Mensheviks, SR's, and liberals, with the idea of directing the general strike that was then in progress. Consistent with this, the soviet's first chairman, the lawyer, Georgy Khrustalev-Nosar, was affiliated with the Mensheviks. The man who replaced him after he was arrested was Leon Trotsky (then going under the name Yanovsky), who was also affiliated with the Mensheviks at the time. (He was shortly to assume a position independent of both factions.)

We have also seen that during the February Revolution in 1917, the Petrograd soviet was called into existence by leaders of the Mensheviks with the purpose of simultaneously mobilizing the workers behind the Provisional Government while increasing the Mensheviks' and SR's' leverage over that government. Elsewhere, such as at the naval base at Kronstadt, revolutionary committees composed of militants from the various socialist organizations organized elections and convened the soviets, and I suspect that this was the case throughout the country.

In the second place, from an anarchist and libertarian socialist point of view, the soviets were by no means ideal. Specifically, they were hierarchical organizations. It is certainly true that they were nowhere nearly as hierarchical as were the organs of the Tsarist state or even the organizational structures of the socialist parties, but they were not models of libertarian organization either. They generally consisted of three layers.

At the bottom were the delegates elected by the rank and file workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants, along with huge numbers of observers who came and went, observing and participating in the proceedings for varying periods of time. Above them were members of the soviets' executive committees, who were usually not elected at all but were chosen by the various socialist parties and groups to represent them (according to an agreed-upon quota) on the committees. Moreover, these EC's often comprised large numbers of people, at times, as many as 100. As a result, the EC's selected still smaller committees ("permanent bureaus"), often comprising a mere handful of individuals, which carried on the day-to-day work of the soviets. For their part, the sessions of the soviets have been described by various observers as virtually permanent and extremely chaotic mass meetings, essentially rallies attended by large numbers (as many as several thousand) of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants who flowed in and out over time, during which they were harangued by, and applauded or jeered at, orators representing the various socialist organizations, and voted on, by voice vote or by a show of hands, various motions and resolutions put to them. The meetings of the soviet were not, in other words, sessions of calm, carefully deliberating bodies operating according to democratic rules of procedure.

Beyond this, there was usually a vast economic, social, and cultural gap between the rank and file delegates and observers, on the one hand, and the soviet leaders, on the other. As I've already

mentioned, the overwhelming majority of the peasants and the soldiers (who were mostly peasants in uniform) were illiterate. And, while a minority of the workers, usually those who were skilled and who had lived for some time in the cities, were literate, the majority, more recent arrivals from the countryside, were not. Meanwhile, at the top, the members of the executive committees and the bureaus were overwhelmingly members of the *intelligentsia*— lawyers, journalists, university professors, engineers, physicians, functionaries of the socialist parties—whose origins were in a variety social strata but who were all characterized by the fact that they had been well educated in the Russian language (and in many cases, several European languages) and worked with their minds, not with their hands. To make matters worse, workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors, on the one hand, and *intelligenty*, on the other, were starkly differentiated in terms of dress, mannerisms, and speech.

The soviets, in other words, were ambiguous social phenomena. While they might, under certain conditions, become vehicles for the self-emancipation of the masses of people and instruments of democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian self-rule, they might, under other circumstances, become instruments of the continued domination of the lower classes by an elite. To put this somewhat differently, the soviets, taken together, constituted an enormous political and organizational apparatus that might lend itself to the liberation of the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants via the elimination of social classes (the division between rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited), but might also become the vehicle of a new form of political, social, and economic domination.

It is my contention that when Lenin thought of and proposed the soviets as the basis for a "state of the workers and poor peasants", a "dictatorship of the revolutionary democracy," under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, he was thinking of them, not as politically deliberating, policy-proposing, and decision-making bodies, but instead as a nation-wide (and centralized) organizational structure, as, in fact, an alternative state bureaucracy (leaner, cheaper, and more efficient than the Tsarist bureaucracy), an administrative apparatus that would be staffed by workers and poor peasants, as opposed to Tsarist bureaucrats, and therefore less tied to the old order. To put this somewhat differently, when Lenin discusses the soviets, he never conceives of them as arenas in which the mass of workers, soldiers and sailors, and peasants discuss political ideas and propose, debate, and decide on the policy recommendations offered by different political currents, tendencies, and organizations.

Instead, he always speaks of them in administrative terms. In short, in Lenin's conception, the soviets are not politically deliberative bodies. The determination of policy is reserved for the party, the embodiment of the revolutionary proletarian consciousness of the workers. This is clear in *The State and Revolution* (which many readers, including some anarchists, naively interpret as a libertarian document), where Lenin describes as the key task of the soviets the "strictest accounting and control," ostensibly, of pro-Tsarist and/or pro-capitalist elements of the population, including peasants and ideologically "backward" workers. But it does not take a particularly libertarian imagination to see that, to Lenin, a man who was, during his entire life, keenly focused on (and obsessed with) the seizure, retention, and exercise of state power and the use of centralized and hierarchical organizational means to secure that, the soviet apparatus is meant to serve as the vehicle for the "strictest" regimentation of the workers and peasants, and all other members of society.

This is confirmed by Lenin's writings of the time, among them, "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It," published at the end of September 1917, in which he makes specific pro-

posals about how to address the deepening economic crisis engulfing the country. Virtually all of the measures he advocates involve the forcible centralization of the economy under the control of the state, among them: the compulsory nationalization of the banks; the compulsory organization of all industrial enterprises above a small size into a single syndicate; the compulsory unionization of the population; the compulsory organization of the population into consumers' societies; and, not least, the introduction of labor conscription, all of this, supposedly, under the control of the workers and the poor majority of peasants.

In sum, I would argue, in Lenin's conception, the soviets were to act as the extension of the apparatus—hierarchical, centralized, and based on "iron discipline"—of the Bolshevik Party, in order to establish the Bolsheviks' direct organizational control over the entire economy and the entire population of Russia. Not surprisingly, after the Bolsheviks came to power, this is what they became.

In addition to the Mensheviks, SR's, and Bolsheviks, there were other left-wing tendencies active in the Russian Revolution. These included: Left SR's, who, beginning in late June-early July, formed a faction within the SR's and emerged as a distinct party at the time of the October Revolution; SR-Maximalists; and a variety of anarchist tendencies, organizations, and collectives. While they did not figure as prominent forces in the Petrograd soviet, they often played crucial roles on the ground, among the workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants, and in key locales, such as at the Kronstadt naval fortress and in the Ukraine. These groups will figure in future articles in this series.

Part III – The October Insurrection: Workers Revolution, Bolshevik Coup, or…?

On the eve and in the early morning hours of October 25, 1917, the Bolshevik Party, leading armed uprisings in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities in the Russian Empire, deposed the Provisional Government and proclaimed the establishment of a "workers' and peasants' government." This government was to be based upon the soviets and the other mass organizations of the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants that were established during and after the February Revolution. In the Bolsheviks' view, the insurrections established the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia, which would, they hoped, spark similar revolutions elsewhere and eventually lead to the overthrow of the international capitalist system and the establishment of socialism/communism around the world.

Since then, historians and others interested in the topic have engaged in a debate over the precise nature of the October Revolution. On one side, many mainstream historians, such as Robert Vincent Daniels, in his book Red October, and Richard Pipes, in his History of the Russian Revolution, describe the October overturn as a "Bolshevik coup." On the other side, an array of Marxists, including Leon Trotsky, in his History of the Russian Revolution, describe the event as a workers (or proletarian) revolution that was supported by the peasants. In my view, both positions, while accurate in some ways, ultimately mischaracterize what actually happened. To see why, it is first necessary to address a methodological issue.

This issue involves the nature and limitations of our categories, the ideas and concepts we use to analyze the world in which we live. While we require categories in order to think, we need to realize that they can end up as intellectual traps that blind us to, rather than elucidate, reality. After all, such categories are abstractions, and abstractions, by definition, leave things– often, crucial things — out. I believe this is especially the case when we look at history, whose "grittiness" often resists easy categorization.

To make this more specific, we ought to recognize the limitations of the terms we use to characterize revolutions. For example, while the French Revolution is often described as "bourgeois" (if anything, the prototypical bourgeois revolution), the revolution was neither led by the bourgeoisie nor did that class provide the muscle in the streets of the cities and in the roads and lanes of the countryside that powered the revolutionary process. In fact, the bourgeoisie, in the sense of a class of capitalist manufacturers and industrialists, hardly existed in France at that time. Instead, the revolution was propelled and led by an ever-changing coalition of different social groupings and layers of French society, among them: aristocrats; bankers; merchants, large and small; a stratum of lawyers, doctors, and journalists; peasants; and small artisans and day laborers (the so-called "sans culottes"). While many, perhaps even most, of these sectors might be considered to have been "bourgeois" (if we use the term somewhat broadly), the French Revolution is considered to have been "bourgeois" mostly because of its program (that is, the establishment of political and civic equality — summed up in the slogan "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity") and

its results, the fact that it cleared the way for the untrammeled development of capitalist society and the eventual economic, social, political, and cultural domination of the capitalist class.

Keeping these considerations in mind, when we seek to describe and characterize a given coup, rebellion, or revolution, we need to consider various questsions before coming up with a final answer. Among these are: (1) which social strata or classes participated in the revolt; (2) which strata or classes provided the muscle for the revolt, e.g., by demonstrating, striking, launching uprisings, carrying out guerrilla warfare, etc.; (3) which group or party, if any, led the revolt; (4) what was the official program of that group or party; (5) what was the actual program of that group or party; (6) which social strata supported the revolt and why; (7) what was the outcome of the revolt, specifically; (a.) which group, party, or social stratum wound up governing the society in which the revolt occurred; (b.) was that society radically transformed; and if it was; (c) how.

Using these questions as a kind of rubric, I propose to address first the issue of whether the October Insurrection can aptly be characterized as a Bolshevik coup or whether it should instead be considered a revolution.

If we think of a coup (technically, a "coup d'etat", from the French, "blow of state"), what usually comes to mind is a relatively rapid change in the political leadership of a country, that is, the deposition of one government and the establishment of another, via the actions of a small group of conspirators, usually or often military officers. In most cases, the resulting government is a military dictatorship or some other type of authoritarian regime. In addition, during such a revolt, the majority of the people of the country in which the coup occurs remain relatively quiescent, and the social system of the country is unaltered.

Looked at narrowly, there were certainly aspects of the Bolshevik seizure of power that might accurately be described as coup-like. For example, in Petrograd, the uprising was largely a military operation, carried out by workers' militias ("Red Guards") and revolutionary units of the Russian army and navy under the de facto leadership of the Bolshevik Party. The party acted in the name and under the banner of the Petrograd soviet, in which it had, roughly a month earlier, become the majority party and whose Executive Committee and other leading bodies, including its Military Revolutionary Committee, it had taken over. Among other actions, the Red Guards and revolutionary units occupied key intersections, bridges, railway stations, and the postal and telegraph offices, took command of the military installations, arsenals, and fortresses, seized the prisons (and released the prisoners), invaded and occupied the several palaces of the Tsar, including the one in which the Provisional Government sat, and arrested some (but not all) of the government's ministers. Resistance was minimal, mostly from officer trainees (cadets) and students. There was limited fighting and little blood was shed. Similar and coordinated actions occurred in Moscow and in other cities and towns in Russia, although in Moscow, the fighting lasted for about a week and resulted in more casualties.

The coup-like characteristics of the revolt are readily apparent. First, the number of people who actively participated in the insurrections was quite small. Second, the uprisings, on the whole, were well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed; there was very little independent, spontaneous activity. Third, during the uprising, the majority of the urban population, including workers and soldiers, were quiescent and were not actively involved in the revolt. (In the rural areas, the situation was different, a point I will get to below.) Fourth, the ultimate outcome of the insurrection was the establishment of not merely an authoritarian state, but a totalitarian one, under the (very) tight control of a single party, the Bolshevik, renamed, in March 1918, the Communist Party. All of this was in stark contrast to the February Revolution, which, as we saw,

was a spontaneous (and angry) uprising of an enormous number of people and involved mass strikes, huge demonstrations, violent confrontations between the people and the armed forces of Tsar (and between different military units), the sacking of police stations and arsenals, chaos in the streets, and far more bloodshed than occurred in October. So, to this extent, it is accurate to describe the October Revolution as a coup, and specifically, insofar as the eventual result was to enable the Bolshevik Party to establish its own control of the state, a Bolshevik coup.

However, if we look at the October event in a broader context, we can see that such a description is limited and distorting. Most obviously, the October Revolution eventually led to the radical economic, social, political, and cultural transformation of Russian society, something that has been considered, and ought to be considered, a social revolution. (Exactly what kind of social revolution it was is a different question.) In addition, the use of the term "coup" to describe the insurrection on the part of mainstream historians is meant to imply that the October Revolution was not a popular event, that is, that it was not supported by — indeed, that it was carried out against the wishes of — the majority of the people in the Russian Empire. As far as I have been able to determine, this is not the case. I have seen little reason to doubt that, whatever happened afterward, at least at the time of the insurrection itself and for several months afterward, the revolution was supported by a majority of the people of Russia.

This is suggested by several facts:

1. The Bolsheviks, who had for months made no secret of their goal of overthrowing the Provisional Government and replacing it with one based on the soviets, won majorities in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and in many other cities and towns around the country well before the October Insurrection.

2. These local majorities were confirmed at the meeting of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets, which met on October 25, the morrow of the uprising. The majority of the delegates at the congress were members or supporters of the Bolsheviks, and the congress both endorsed the uprising and approved Bolshevik-sponsored resolutions on the immediate tasks of the "soviet government."

3. When, on the day after the insurrection, the deposed prime minister of the Provisional Government ordered troops under the command of the Tsarist general, P.N. Krasnov to advance on Petrograd to arrest the Bolsheviks and the other participants in the soviets, disband the soviets, and crush the revolutionary government, the workers, soldiers, and sailors of Petrograd mobilized to defend the city and its revolutionary institutions and smashed the counterrevolutionary offensive.

4. No substantial sector of the popular classes (workers and peasants) rose up or took any other significant action to defend the Provisional Government.

5. When, in January 1918, the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly (for which the Bolsheviks had organized elections and which they had allowed to convene), this act, too, evoked no response from the broad layers of the population.

6. More generally, after the All-Russia soviet congress approved a Bolshevik-sponsored resolution endorsing the peasants' seizure of the land, there is every reason to believe that, at least at that time, the vast majority of the peasants, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the people of the country, supported the Bolshevik-led government and, by implication, the insurrections that had established it.

The popular response to the October Insurrection and the establishment of the soviet government is well explained by what had occurred during the nearly eight months since the February

Revolution: in a nutshell, the utter refusal or inability of the Provisional Government to address the burning issues facing the country, on the one hand; and the deft strategy and tactics pursued by the Bolshevik Party during that period, on the other. Specifically, the Provisional Government did nothing to end Russia's participation in the war, stop the deterioration of the economy, resolve the "land question," or arrange for elections to the Constituent Assembly. Instead, aside from given long, often histrionic speeches, the government ministers spent much of the spring (secretly) promising the Allies that Russia would honor the imperialist commitments embodied in the secret treaties Russia had agreed to before the war (though claiming only to be "defending the revolution"), while preparing for a massive offensive along the entire Eastern Front. Such an offensive was indeed launched in June, but after a few days of advances, the Russian armies were stopped, then completely routed by the armies of the Central Powers, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives, an international embarrassment, and popular outrage. Among other things, this anger provoked, in early July, mass armed demonstrations of workers, soldiers, and sailors that nearly overthrew the Provisional Government, the so-called "July Days".

These semi-insurrectional mobilizations frightened much of the population and led to public outcry against the Bolsheviks, especially after a rumor was circulated that the party had been receiving money from the Germans and were therefore "German agents." (As far as I know, whether the Bolsheviks were receiving money from the German government, and if so, how much and for how long, and whether any other organizations were also recipients of German largesse is still a topic of debate among historians; nothing has been definitively proven one way or the other. It is also doubtful, even had the Bolsheviks been receiving German money, that this would have made any material difference in the outcome of events. The Bolsheviks had substantial sources of funds at their disposal. Equally important, those who believe that German funds in any way influenced the policies and actions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks do not understand anything about either Lenin or the party he created and led.)

In the short-run, the July Days led to a weakening of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary forces (among other things, the party was outlawed and its publications suppressed, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders were arrested, and Lenin went into hiding; also, two insurrectionary regiments were broken up and their men sent to the front). But by late August, the fortunes of the Bolsheviks had recovered. This was the result of a plot instigated by the prime minister of the Provisional Government, the lawyer and former Duma deputy, Alexander Kerensky (who was close to, but not actually a member of, the Socialist Revolutionaries). He and the Supreme Commander of the army, Lavr Kornilov, connived for the latter to march on the capital at the head of troops under his command, disperse the soviets, arrest the Bolshevik and other left-wing leaders, and restore "law and order." While Kerensky was under the impression that Kornilov intended to bolster Kerensky's position, Kornilov had other plans, viz., not only to disperse the soviets but also to overthrow Kerensky and the entire Provisional Government and to establish a military dictatorship. When Kerensky realized Kornilov's intentions, he called on the soviet leaders, including the Bolsheviks (Trotsky and other arrested leaders were released from prison), to defend the city, the soviets, and the Provisional Government itself. Under the call of defending the revolution against the counterrevolution, the left-wing parties and organizations mobilized the workers and revolutionary soldiers to confront Kornilov's men on the outskirts of the city. When they explained to Kornilov's troops their commander's counterrevolutionary intentions (and also that there was no orgy of rape and pillaging in the city, as Kornilov contended), the soldiers refused to fight and the coup attempt collapsed.

One result of all this was the complete and utter discrediting of not only Kerensky and the entire Provisional Government but also the reformist socialist parties (the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries) that supported it and participated in it. These parties saw their support among the workers and peasants plunge, and after new elections to the Petrograd soviet, the number of their delegates in the body reflected this. The obverse of this was an upwelling of popular support for the Bolsheviks, who were now seen as the only significant left-wing opposition to the Provisional Government, the only true defenders of the revolution, and the only significant political force appearing to offer a solution to the economic, social, and political crisis facing the country. By mid-September, the Bolsheviks had become the majority party in the Petrograd soviet and in soviets around the country.

While there were other political tendencies that stood in radical opposition to the Provisional Government, such as the Menshevik-Internationalists, the Socialist-Revolutionary Maximalists, and various types of anarchists, they tended to act as small groups and individuals and were thus too small and too poorly organized to compete directly with the Bolshevik Party. However, they did play a significant role "on the ground" throughout the revolution, that is, in the barracks, factories, and streets [e.g., in the February Revolution and during the July Days], and in the local soviets, particularly the one at the Kronstadt naval fortress. Moreover, for much of the March-October period, they tended to act in a de facto bloc with the Bolsheviks, and most of them participated in and otherwise supported the October uprisings. A left-wing faction within the Socialist Revolutionary Party began to develop in late June/early July, but the split was not consummated until the October Revolution, so the emerging party, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, did not have a public presence until after the insurrection. In this situation, it was the Bolshevik Party that became the main beneficiary of the mass radicalization and groundswell of popular support that made possible and legitimated their seizure of power.

As these events played out in Petrograd and in other cities, equally dramatic developments were taking place in the countryside. The disintegration of the Russian army that had begun even before the February Revolution continued through the ensuing months and reached incendiary proportions in the late summer and early fall. Millions of armed soldiers, heavily influenced by the Bolsheviks' "defeatist" propaganda, abandoned their posts and headed home to their native villages, where they led the other peasants in mass uprisings, ousting and slaughtering the landlords, burning down their estates, seizing the land, and dividing it among themselves. It was this soldier/peasant agrarian revolution that completed the liquidation of the Tsarist army, left the Provisional Government with few armed forces at its disposal, and ultimately made possible the Bolshevik seizure of power. Thus, the October Revolution had two distinct yet complementary facets: Bolshevik-led workers', sailors', and soldiers' uprisings in the cities and peasant insurrections in the countryside.

With this as background, we can now return to the question of the precise nature of the October Revolution. As I see it, a strong case can be made for the claim that, while the insurrection had coup-like characteristics, it was, in fact, a working class revolution that was supported by the mass of the peasantry. First, workers, along with revolutionary sailors and soldiers, carried out the armed uprisings in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities in Russia. Second, these actions occurred against the background of the revolutionary peasant movement just described. Third, the uprisings in the countryside and the Bolshevik seizure of power in the cities were supported, as registered by votes in the local soviets and at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, by the majority of workers and peasants in the country. Fourth, the insurrections resulted in the

establishment of the soviets, which were seen by the people as their own revolutionary organs, as the official governmental authority in Russia. Fifth, the urban insurrections, and in some sense, the October Revolution as a whole, were led by a political organization that claimed to be, and saw itself as (by dint of its ideology, program, and class composition), a revolutionary workers party, specifically, the "vanguard of the proletariat."

Yet, there are considerable reasons to hesitate to accept such a conclusion without caveats. Among them is the question: how politically conscious were those who participated in and/or otherwise supported the Bolsheviks' seizure of power? After all, the vast majority of the peasants and a significant percentage of the workers in Russia were illiterate, while many of those who were counted as literate were barely so. And in a country with poorly developed means of communications, in which news traveled extremely slowly, how much did they, the peasants in particular, really understand about what was happening in Russia in October 1917? Moreover, according to various accounts, the mass base of the Bolshevik Party at the time of the October Revolution consisted largely of a volatile layer of young male workers relatively recently arrived from the countryside and still retaining ties to their native villages. (The more fully "proletarianized" workers, that is, those with more experience in the factories and cities, along with the skilled workers, tended to support the Mensheviks.) So, of those workers and peasants who participated in and supported the insurrection, was their support based on a knowledgeable and informed understanding of what they were supporting, that is, who the Bolsheviks were and what they proposed to do? Or, was their support for the insurrection based on varying degrees of ignorance and a combination of enthusiasm, hope, and desperation in a political conjuncture in which the Tsarist, liberal, and reformist socialist parties had been discredited, while the only significant political force that seemed to offer a solution to the worsening crisis, along with the determination to implement it, was the Bolshevik Party?

To put the question more colloquially, there are grounds to question whether the workers and peasants who participated in and supported the October Revolution knew what they were getting into. Among other things, did they understand what the real program and goals of the Bolshevik Party were, that is, what the Bolsheviks, underneath the slogans and propaganda, actually intended to do? Let's look at this more closely.

For much of 1917, the Bolsheviks' main agitational slogan (that is, the catch-words they addressed to the broadest, least politically-educated layers of the population) was, "Peace, Land, and Bread." In other words, the Bolsheviks promised to withdraw Russia from the war, distribute the land to the peasants, and turn the economy around so that the workers and peasants would no longer face starvation. I think it is safe to presume that many of the people who voted for the Bolsheviks in the soviets and supported the October Insurrection did so because this is what they thought the Bolsheviks would deliver. Unfortunately, as things turned out, this is not what they got.

As far as "Peace" was concerned, although the Bolsheviks signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers in March 1918, thus pulling Russia out of the World War, in early July, the country was plunged into an even more brutal civil war that lasted over three years, resulted in millions of deaths, caused a famine that killed millions more, and led to the devastation of the country. Although the Bolsheviks do not bear sole responsibility for the conflict, their acts certainly contributed to its outbreak, while their policies and actions made it longer, more vicious, and bloodier than it might otherwise have been.

As for "Land," although the Bolshevik-led government approved the peasants' seizure and division of the land, it did not grant them title to it. Legally, the land was nationalized, that is, turned into the property of the state "in the name of the whole people," while allowing the peasants to occupy and farm it. Yet, in the Bolsheviks' conception, this was intended as a temporary state of affairs. The party's program had long called for the land in Russia to be nationalized, while encouraging the peasants to join state and collective farms to learn the benefits of cooperation, the large-scale use of farm machinery, and modern agrarian methods to improve productivity. In fact, throughout most of their history as a faction and a party, the Bolsheviks had opposed the call for the peasants to seize the land and divide it among themselves; this was the program of Socialist Revolutionaries. In other words, at the time of the October Insurrection, the Bolsheviks appropriated much of the SR agrarian program as a tactical maneuver to win the support of the peasants, support they assumed would be temporary. In fact, Lenin explicitly admitted this. The fact that the land was actually owned by the state became the legal justification for the Bolshevik policy of "forced requisitions" of the peasants' grain that began in July 1918 and effectively launched the civil war. Eleven years later, the same legal sleight-of-hand was used to legitimize the forced collectivization of agriculture, the herding of the peasants onto collective farms at gunpoint that led to another (de facto) civil war in the countryside, the execution and exile of huge numbers of peasant families, the destruction of millions of farm animals, and yet another famine. Estimates of the number of people who died in that cataclysmic event range up to 20 million. So, the peasants did not, ultimately, get the land. When they voted to approve the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, did they have any inkling that these developments lay down the road?

Finally, as should be obvious after the above, the Russian people did not get "Bread." Instead, they got mass starvation and the destruction of the country's economy. When they voted for and otherwise supported the Bolsheviks, is this what they intended? And would they have voted for them had they known what the actual outcome of the Bolsheviks' policies would be?

Similar questions can be raised about the soviets. As I discussed in my last article, in the aftermath of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks raised the call, "All Power to the Soviets." At this point, the thrust of their strategy was to "patiently explain" to the workers and soldiers that as a government of the capitalists, the Provisional Government would never accede to the people's demands and solve the problems facing the country. Instead, what was required, the Bolsheviks insisted, was for all power to be placed in the hands of the soviets, which meant the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the establishment of the soviets as the government/state of the country.

But as I also discussed, the soviets were an ambiguous phenomenon. First, they were not the purely spontaneous creations of the mass of workers, soldiers, and peasants, as they have often been portrayed in radical literature. Instead, at least in Petrograd and likely in other cities, the soviets were established at the instigation of the leaders of the reformist socialist parties; these politicians were the ones who called for elections to the bodies and set the dates for their convocations. Second, the soviets were at least semi-hierarchical in nature; they involved discrete layers (rank and file observers, elected delegates, executive committees, with various subcommittees at the top). Third, the executive committees, along with their subcommittees, tended to be composed of and dominated by the members of the (educated) intelligentsia. Given all this, while the soviets might, under certain circumstances, provide the basis for building a truly libertarian,

worker- and peasant-run society, they might also offer the means to construct a new, supposedly revolutionary but actually capitalist, state.

For their part, the Bolsheviks had a distinctly hierarchical (and, at bottom, coercive) conception of the revolutionary state they aimed to build. The Bolsheviks' proposed solution to Russia's economic crisis involved, among other measures, the nationalization of the banks, the compulsory organization of all businesses above a certain size into a single syndicate, the compulsory unionization of the population, the compulsory organization of the population in consumer cooperatives, and compulsory labor. While the Bolshevik Party called for the resulting economic apparatus to be brought under the control of the soviets, when Bolshevik leaders, such as Lenin, talked about the soviets' role, they generally described it as enforcing the "strictest accounting and control." They never described (and in my view, never envisioned) the soviets as self-determining political bodies, that is, structures through which the workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants collectively and democratically discussed the situation facing the country, debated the various proposals being proposed to address it, and made the ultimate decisions among them. From the Bolsheviks' standpoint, those decisions were to be the prerogative of the Bolshevik Party, as the embodiment, by dint of its correct grasp of Marxism, of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class.

So, when the workers and peasants participated in, voted for, and otherwise supported the October Insurrection, did they clearly understand what the Bolsheviks aimed to do? Did they understand what the Bolsheviks' conception of the soviets was and what they intended to do with them? Were they aware of — and if they were, did they understand — the differing conceptions of the soviets offered by the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and the more libertarian currents involved in the soviets and on the ground, such as the anarchists, on the other?

It is worth mentioning in this context a dispute that arose among the Bolshevik leaders, particularly Lenin and Trotsky, in the period immediately preceding the October Insurrection. In late September/early October, Lenin, who was still in hiding, became impatient and increasingly worried that if the Bolsheviks delayed too long, they might miss the most propitious moment to seize power. (Was he concerned that the movement of popular sentiment toward the Bolsheviks might prove to be temporary?) As a result, he wanted the party to seize power as soon as possible and in its own name. However, Trotsky, who had recently become chairman of the Petrograd soviet (and who had, by virtue of that, the soviet apparatus under his control), wanted to wait until the convening of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets to carry out the insurrection. Moreover, he wanted to do so in the name of the soviets, not in the name of the party. Ultimately, as we know, it was Trotsky's proposal that won the day and was successfully carried out.

Now, to Lenin and Trotsky and the other Bolsheviks who knew about this, this was seen as a minor tactical difference; either way, they figured, the result would have been the same. Moreover, they believed that their seizure of power was the only way to ensure the continued existence of the soviets. But the dispute raises some intriguing questions. If the Bolshevik Party had attempted to carry out the insurrection in its own name and not in the name of the soviets, would the level of popular participation and support have been as much as it was? Or, to put it the other way around, might the level of popular participation and support been significantly less than it was. (Trotsky's proposal suggests that he thought it would be.) And, if so, might the insurrection, for that very reason, have failed? This raises still other questions? Did those workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants who participated in, voted for, and otherwise supported the October Insurrection see it as giving power to the soviets or did they see it as giving power to the Bolshevik Party? Did they

see any distinction between the two propositions? Did they realize that Lenin had indicated, even before the uprising, that the Bolsheviks were willing to seize and hold onto power by themselves, that is, without the support of any of the other parties represented in the soviets? Or did the people believe, as the Bolsheviks did, that the Bolsheviks' seizure of power was the only way to establish the full power of the soviets?

It is, unfortunately, impossible to answer these questions. Yet, their very plausibility reflects the fundamental ambiguity of the October Revolution. Moreover, they are crucial to understanding what happened in its aftermath. I believe a good case could be made for the claim that the October Revolution was carried out under false pretenses. I think there are valid reasons to believe that the workers and peasants who participated in and otherwise supported the October Revolution thought that when they fought to grant sole power to the soviets, they envisioned the soviets as continuing to exist as multi-party, multi-tendency bodies, not being turned into facets of a new state apparatus under the control of a single party. (This was certainly the case with the libertarian left-wing groups and individuals, such as the Socialist-Revolutionary Maximalists and the various shades of anarchists, who participated in and otherwise supported the October uprisings but who wound up being among the Bolsheviks' first victims.)

I would also like to believe, and think there is good reason to believe, that the workers, peasants, sailors, and soldiers who participated in and supported the October Revolution, or at least the most politically astute among them, saw themselves as fighting to establish their own power to directly and democratically manage the affairs of the country. Along with maintaining the soviets as democratic, pluralistic bodies, this would have required the overcoming of the soviets' semi-hierarchical nature, which, to varying degrees, had enabled members of the intelligentsia to dominate them. But instead of their own direct and democratic rule, what the people got was a one-party dictatorship. To the Bolsheviks, there was no contradiction here. Since they, as the "vanguard of the proletariat" and the only correct interpreters of Marxism, embodied the true consciousness of the working class, the seizure and consolidation of state power under their control meant, by definition, the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." But many workers and peasants may not have seen it that way.

It is worth noting in this regard the make-up of the soviet at the Kronstadt naval fortress at the time of the October Revolution. The sailors and workers at Kronstadt were among the most politically conscious and revolutionary sectors of the Russian population, before, during, and after 1917. Trotsky periodically referred to them as the "pride and joy" of the revolution. Yet, according to Israel Getzler in his book, Kronstadt 1917–1921, while the Bolsheviks were the largest single party in the Kronstadt soviet in late October, 1917, their delegation made up only one third of the total number of delegates. In other words, the Bolsheviks did not represent the majority, but instead constituted a minority of the Kronstadt soviet at the time of the October Insurrection. I suspect that this represents, in miniature, the actual balance of forces that obtained among the revolutionary workers, sailors, and soldiers in Petrograd and in other cities throughout Russia at the time of the insurrection.

In conclusion, it seems, on balance, most reasonable to consider the October Revolution to have been an ambiguous phenomenon, a historically unique combination of workers' and peasants' revolution and Bolshevik coup. On the one hand, based on the fact that the insurrection was carried out by plebian classes and that it was led by a party that claimed to represent the working class, the October Insurrection might be considered to have been a workers revolution that was supported by the peasants. On the other hand, contrary to the claims of the Bolsheviks and

their apologists at the time and since, the uprising did not put the working class in power, nor did it establish a socialist society or one moving in that direction. Most important, the October Revolution did not establish the direct and democratic rule of the workers and peasants. Instead, it put into power a political party that, while claiming to lead and to represent the working class, was actually led by radical members of the intelligentsia, who proceeded to carry out their own (de facto, anti-proletarian) program: the establishment of a state capitalist society under their rule. Once in power, the Bolsheviks, using the soviets, the factory committees, the trade unions, and other popular organizations as their starting point, built a new, extremely centralized, state apparatus that would eventually enable them to consolidate their totalitarian control over the workers, the peasants, and all of Russian society.

As it turned out, the wave of popular support and enthusiasm that made the October Revolution possible and lifted the Bolsheviks into power was, for a variety of reasons, to prove temporary. When it ebbed, and the Bolsheviks lost their majorities in the soviets around the country five-and-a-half months later, it was too late. Having gotten their hands on the poHeading 4wer of the state, the Bolsheviks (now calling themselves Communists) were not about to let it go. How and why this happened will be the subject of my next article.

Part IV – Lenin's Vision of the Bolshevik State

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in Russia and seized state power on October 25, 1917, they established what they variously called a "Workers' and Peasants' Government", a "Government of the Workers and Poor Peasants", and a "Government of the Workers and Laboring Peasants." In theoretical terms, they considered it to be the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat."

Revolutionary Marxists of various kinds consider the early Bolshevik regime to have been a "workers' democracy" which, had it not had to contend with the counterrevolutionary and imperialist forces arrayed against it and had proletarian revolutions broken out in Europe as the Bolsheviks predicted, would have led Russia to become a truly democratic socialist society. This assessment is based, to a considerable degree, on their interpretation of Lenin's conception of the state the Bolsheviks aimed to establish, as laid out in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, and in other writings written in the summer and fall of 1917.

It is my contention, however, that, even had events evolved as Lenin and the other Bolsheviks expected, the outcome would not have been a democratic workers' government but instead a bureaucratic, authoritarian, even totalitarian, regime similar to the one that actually emerged. This is because I believe that Lenin's conception of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is itself bureaucratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian. To see this, it will be necessary to look closely at *The State and Revolution* and at the other works in which Lenin laid out his plan. However, to make sense of them, we first need to look at the theoretical background in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that served as Lenin's point of departure and on which he based his own conception.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat – Marx' and Engels' View

As many people know, both the term and the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" were coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The notion was central to their revolutionary program and strategy, and clearly differentiated their views from those of other socialist thinkers, particularly, the anarchists.

Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat evolved over time. However, two major phases can be identified, divided by the Paris Commune of 1871. In the first period (from late 1847 to early 1871), while Marx and Engels insisted that the proletariat/working class should seize political power, they left vague the actions the workers needed to take vis a vis the existing, capitalist, state; specifically, they left open the idea that the workers might be able to take over the capitalist state and use it for their own purposes. In the aftermath of the Commune, however, their views on this and related questions became much more defined. (This pertained to the countries of continental Europe. Marx and Engels continued to believe that in England

and the United States, where, in their view, there were no militarist cliques and the state bureaucracies were small, the workers might be able to come to power peacefully, through the electoral process). So important was the Commune to the development of their position that Marx and Engels saw fit to make a correction to *The Communist Manifesto*, written 25 years before. In what Lenin described as the "last preface to the new German edition of the Manifesto, dated June 24, 1872", Marx and Engels wrote: "…One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes'…." (*The State and Revolution*, Lenin, *Collected Works*, *Volume 25*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 414.) The words in single quotation marks are from Marx's book on the Commune, *The Civil War in France*. (Note: In the interests of convenience, throughout this article, I have eliminated the emphases, printed in italics, that Marx, Engels, and Lenin often utilized in their writings.)

In what follows, I will present and analyze what I consider to be Marx' and Engels' mature, post-Commune, position, since this is the one on which Lenin based his own conception.

Marx and Engels believed that the fundamental strategic task of the working class in any given country is to seize state power, smash the capitalist state (particularly its bureaucratic and military apparatuses), and replace it with a state of its own, what they called the "revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat." Although Marx and Engels did not describe this proletarian state in great detail, they did make their overall notion of it clear. At the risk of simplification, I will list its central characteristics:

1. The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable; it is the logical and necessary outcome of the class struggle under capitalism (and all history). Or, as Marx wrote: "… the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat…." (Marx, letter to Weydemeyer, *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 411.)

2. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a state. Although four years after the Paris Commune, Engels proposed, in a private letter to August Bebel, the leader of German Social Democrats, that was only made public in 1911 (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 440.), that he, Marx, and their followers refer to the post-revolutionary state as a "community", Marx and Engels publicly remained loyal to their previous terminology: the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is (and has to be) a state.

3. The principal tasks of this dictatorship are to suppress the capitalists (and, where they still exist, the other oppressing classes), nationalize the means of production, and proceed to construct the class-less and state-less communist society.

4. The dictatorship of the proletariat is centralized, based on the nationalization of the means of production. Under it, the workers are to move toward the establishment of a planned economy (although Marx and Engels never clarified their views about who is to do the planning and according to what principles such planning is to occur).

5. The dictatorship of the proletariat is democratic. It represents, in Marx' and Engels' various phrases, a "state of the armed workers", the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", and the "establishment of democracy." Its establishment means to "win the battle of democracy." (*The Communist Manifesto*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 402.) Because of

this, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not a state "in the proper sense of the term." All previous states were instruments of tiny minorities which ruled over, oppressed, and exploited the vast majority. In contrast, the dictatorship of the proletariat is an instrument of the vast majority, who will use it to suppress the former ruling minority and to establish the conditions for the emergence of communism.

6. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not only democratic in this general sense; it also entails democratic decision-making by the workers themselves.

7. Marx and Engels based their mature conception of the proletarian dictatorship on the experience of the Paris Commune. The Commune was established in the aftermath of the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and in the context of the political and economic disarray the conflict brought in its wake. Facing starvation, in March 1871 the workers and other plebian elements of Paris, led by the Central Committee of the National Guard, rose up, seized control of the city, and ruled it for over two months (March 18-May 28). Eventually, the city was invaded by the French army, and in extremely brutal fighting, the Commune was overthrown and the Communards massacred. (One recent estimate is that 10,000 were killed: *La Commune de 1871,* by Jacques Rougerie, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2014). While it lasted, the Commune consisted of municipal councilors elected by universal (male) suffrage from the various wards of Paris. It was a working, not a parliamentary, body, handling both legislative and executive tasks, thus eliminating a professional state bureaucracy. All its members were workers or what Marx called "acknowledged representatives of the working class." Various "commissions" were established to manage the affairs of the city. All officials, including the councilors and the judicial and educational functionaries, were paid no more than an average worker's salary; they were all elected, responsible, and subject to immediate recall. The Commune passed decrees abolishing the standing army and the police. All male residents of Paris were required to join the National Guard, thus establishing a workers' militia. The Commune took other radical steps, such as the complete separation of church and state, the abolition of the death penalty, the establishment of a 10-hour workday, and the abolition of night work for bakers.

8. Seen in the context of this history, the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" to describe the proletarian state has a somewhat metaphoric and essentialist character. Since, according to Marxist theory, all states are, at bottom (that is, in their essence), dictatorships of one class to rule over others, the state the workers establish is (essentially) a dictatorship. Thus, Marx and Engels' use of the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" did not mean that, in their view, the proletarian state was to be a dictatorship of one party or one person.

9. According to Marx' and Engels' projection, in the first stage of communist society, the workers (and everybody else, who, because of the nationalization of the means of production, have become workers) are to be paid according to the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." In other words, all members of society are to receive salaries that are proportionate to how much they produce. This principle (basically, piece-work) is a carryover from and a legacy of capitalist society; it is a form of what Marx and Engels called "bourgeois right." (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The State and*

Revolution, op. cit., p. 465.) Although on a formal level, the principle represents equality and, hence, justice, on a more concrete level, it is unfair and unjust, since people's abilities and needs differ. Moreover, according to Marx and Engels, for as long as the workers need to enforce this principle, they require a state to do so.

10. Eventually, as the collective and planned economy becomes increasingly productive, as relative scarcity and the division between mental and manual labor are overcome, and as the habits of collective and cooperative life become ingrained in the population, society moves toward the establishment of full communism. This class-less and state-less society will be based on the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

11. As this occurs, the proletarian state "withers away." The state is not dismantled or abolished, it dies of its own accord.

Critical Remarks on Marx' and Engels' Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

From an anarchist point of view, there are serious problems with Marx' and Engels' perspective. The most obvious one is this: Marxists insist that the only way to abolish the state (in general) is by smashing the existing (capitalist) state and replacing it with a new, proletarian, one. Moreover, this new state is to be extremely centralized and powerful, since it will be based on the nationalization of the entirety of society's means of production and on the fact that, as a revolutionary dictatorship, it will not be bound by any legal norms. Once established and the old ruling classes eliminated, this revolutionary dictatorship will, according to Marx' and Engels' theory, eventually "wither away." Those of us who do not subscribe to the Marxist variant of Hegelian dialectics might be permitted to be skeptical. And, so it seems to me, the results of history bear out this skepticism. The outcomes of all Marxist-led revolutions have not been the elimination of the state, one of the proclaimed goals of Marxists, but the establishment of monstrous state-dominated regimes that attempted not only to manage all the economic, social, and political affairs of society but also to control the thought processes of each and every one of their citizens. To begin to grasp why and how this happened, it is worth looking at Marx' and Engels' notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat in more detail.

First, Marx' and Engels' attempt to appropriate the legacy of the Paris Commune is questionable, on several grounds.

1. The uprising that created the Commune was not carried out by the "proletariat", in the Marxist sense of the term. Such a proletariat, that is, an army of mostly unskilled laborers employed in large industrial establishments, hardly existed in France at the time and was not to exist on any significant scale for at least two decades. Instead, the vast majority of Parisian workers were skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers working in small workshops, work crews, or as individual artisans. Moreover, in carrying out the insurrection, such workers were joined by other lower-class elements, including small businesspersons. Among the leaders of the Commune were intellectuals of a variety of ideological persua-

sions, including radical republicans, reformist and revolutionary socialists, and different types of anarchists; very few, if any, of these figures were Marxists.

2. The Commune did not, in fact, smash the bourgeois state (although, judging from its own structure, it is reasonable to assume that it would have if it could have). During the course of the war, the French government had abandoned Paris and established itself first in Bordeaux, in the southwest of the country, and then in Versailles, the residence of the French monarchs from the time of Louis XIV, located about 20 miles northwest of Paris. The government continued to rule the part of the country that was not under occupation by the Prussian army through the centralized bureaucratic apparatus that remained intact. Most important, the government retained full control of the army, which would eventually, under the watchful eyes of the Prussian army that surrounded most of Paris, invade the city and overthrow the Commune.

3. The Commune did not nationalize the means of production. It had no power outside of Paris, and even within the city, it left economic establishments in the hands of their owners. The closest it came to nationalizing property was to authorize workers in enterprises that had been abandoned by their owners to take over and run them cooperatively.

4. The political vision of the Commune, to the degree that it had time to elaborate one, was decidedly decentralist, specifically, a network of regional and local communes, down to the level of the villages, each of which was to have maximum local autonomy. This reflected the fact that key leaders of the Commune were followers of the mutualist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and other anarchists, who advocated this type of decentralized social structure. In contrast, Marx and Engels were militant centralists, reflecting their view that the logic of capitalist development was to concentrate and centralize the means of production in ever fewer hands and eventually under the control of the state. In their writings on the Commune, Marx and Engels fudged this crucial issue. Although they admitted that, in the Communards' sketch of their plan for the political structure of the country, "very few" tasks were to be left to the central government, they simply asserted that this was consistent with centralism because "national unity was not to be broken." (Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 427.)

5. All this suggests that, despite Marx' and Engels' claims, the Commune was not quite the model of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", as they conceived it.

Second, the notion that the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (or, in fact, any other event in history) is inevitable is absurd. It reflects an archaic conception of science that, in light of the development of quantum mechanics, modern genetics, and other scientific developments, can no longer be reasonably sustained. It is also (as I discuss in my book, *The Tyranny of Theory, A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism*) one of the main sources of the authoritarianism and totalitarianism that characterizes Marxist ideology and the Marxist movement as a whole.

Third, the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a state that embodies the direct and democratic rule of the entire working class is a contradiction in terms. As a centralized apparatus, particularly one that is as centralized as the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Marx'

and Engels' conception, the state can only be controlled by a minority. The state represents — indeed, is the very embodiment of – the existence of a political division of labor in society, that between a minority which rules and a majority which is ruled. As a result, to the degree that the proletarian dictatorship is a state is the degree to which it does not and cannot embody the rule of the entire working class; and to the degree that it does embody the rule of the entire working class is the degree to which it is not a state. Thus, a "dictatorship of the proletariat" that is a state can, at best, represent the rule of a minority of the working class, or more likely, a party that claims to represent the working class – supported, perhaps, by a layer of the working class — over the majority of that class.

Fourth, even if we (temporarily) disregard this point, Marx' and Engels' notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat rests on a problematic conception of democracy. In fact, it rests on two contradictory conceptions of democracy that are never made explicit and are never clearly separated. On the one hand, Marx and Engels appear to accept what is perhaps the most basic notion of the term, that is, that all members of a given society have an equal right to control the political and other processes of that society. On the other hand, Marx and Engels seem to argue that, by virtue of its historic destiny (the notion that the working class is ordained, by the dynamics of capitalism and, more broadly, by the laws of history, to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat), the working class is the historic embodiment of social progress, and therefore the very establishment of working-class rule, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, necessarily establishes democracy. The contradiction between these two conceptions is blurred by the fact that, in Marx' and Engels' view, the dynamics of capitalism will eventually turn the vast majority of people of a given society into proletarians, members of the working class. As this process develops, the two notions of democracy will tend to converge, thus eliminating, or appearing to eliminate, the contradiction between them. In other words, as the working class becomes the overwhelming majority of society, establishing the "dictatorship of the proletariat" means the "establishment of democracy" in the traditional sense of the term.

But this raises several questions: What happens in countries in which the majority of the people are not workers? Does the establishment of the dictatorship of proletariat in those societies still represent "establishing (or winning the battle of) democracy"? Does the working class in such countries have the right, by virtue of its historic destiny, to establish its dictatorship over the rest (the majority) of the population, even if that majority does not want to be ruled by the proletariat? Also, is the establishment of such a dictatorship justified on the grounds that it represent a "higher form" of democracy than the conception of democracy as "one person one vote"? At the time Marx and Engels wrote, the proletariat was a small minority of the world's population, concentrated mostly in the countries of northwestern Europe, in fact, mostly in one, Great Britain. The majority of the world's population were then peasants, that is, small farmers. (It has only been relatively recently that the majority of the global population has become proletarian, even in a very broad sense of the term.) Yet, Marx and Engels called for an international socialist revolution. Does this entail the establishment of the international rule of the proletarian minority over the peasants and other members of the non-proletarian majority? And is this to be justified by the Marxian claim that Marxism is scientific, that the establishment of international communism is inevitable, and that the working class is the historical embodiment of social progress? Marx and Engels believed that the peasants are incapable of leading themselves and must inevitably come under the tutelage of an urban class, either the capitalists or the workers. In his writings on the Commune, Marx wrote that "The Communal Constitution would have

brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secured to them, in the town working men, the natural trustees of their interests." (*The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 431.) Elsewhere, Marx and Engels argued that the workers, once in power, would lead the peasants toward socialism by demonstrating the economic advantages of modern agriculture, based on the latest agronomic techniques and machine technology, that socialism, with its large-scale collective means of production, would make possible. But what if the peasants do not wish to come under the "intellectual lead" of the workers and/or otherwise be "led" toward socialism, or at least not toward the form of socialism advocated by Marxists, specifically, one in which all property would be owned and controlled by the state?

Fifth, Marx' and Engels' phraseology concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat is extremely vague and ambiguous, at times even contradictory. This ambiguity centers on two interrelated issues: First, is the "dictatorship of the proletariat" a state or isn't it? On the one hand, Marx and Engels insisted throughout their political careers that the workers have to seize political power and take control over or establish a state. (This was one of the main points of contention in their disputes with Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and other anarchists that ultimately led to a split in and the eventual demise of the First International and continued beyond that.) On the other hand, Marx and Engels claimed that this state is not a state in the "proper sense of the term"; it is a state that is in the process of becoming a non-state, a state that is "withering away." Second, when, precisely, does the "dictatorship of the proletariat" start to "wither away" and how long does such "withering" take? Some of Marx' and Engels' formulations imply that the process begins immediately upon the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship and proceeds rather rapidly. Elsewhere, their phrasing implies that they believe the state will linger on for a considerable period of time. In one place, Engels suggests that it will take an indefinite period, requiring a "generation reared in new, free social conditions", before the state will completely disappear. (Preface, dated March 18, 1891, to the third edition of *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 453.) In fact, in Engels' book, *Herr Duhring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Duhring)*, such ambiguities seem to occur in the very same passage:

> "The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions, and abolishes also the state as state."

But:

> "The first act by which the state really comes forward as the representative of the whole of society – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – is also its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies down of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not 'abolished'. It withers away." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 395–6)

This kind of vague, ambiguous, and contradictory terminology can be found throughout Marx' and Engels' writings; it is, in fact, a crucial, though unacknowledged, characteristic of their thinking. For example, they insisted that "social being determines social consciousness"; but they also

contended that consciousness is not merely a passive reflex of social development but reacts back upon that process. Similarly, they argued that while the economic base determines the superstructure, the superstructure reacts upon the base; as Engels once put it, the economic base determines the superstructure (and hence the evolution of the entire society) only in the "last analysis." On a more philosophical level, Marx and Engels imply that history is simultaneously contingent, and therefore open and unpredictable, and determined, and therefore predictable. On these and other questions, Marx and Engels want to "have their cake and eat it, too", or to put it differently, to walk on both sides of the street at the same time.

All this reflects the Hegelian background and substratum of Marx' and Engels' world view. The essence of Hegel's philosophical project was to synthesize freedom and necessity. And, in fact, Marx and Engels claimed to have done the same thing, but on a materialist and therefore scientific basis, in contrast to Hegel's avowed idealism. Engels, quoting Hegel's dictum, described freedom as the "recognition (or appreciation) of necessity." At the least, these vague, ambiguous, and contradictory concepts reflect Marx' and Engels' intellectual sloppiness and irresponsibility (some might call it dishonesty). But such ambiguities serve a crucial purpose, one that has been revealed throughout the history of Marxism. The libertarian-sounding phrases serve as ideological cover for a profoundly authoritarian, even totalitarian, content, specifically, Marx' and Engels' claim that their conception of socialism is scientific; that their views represent the "true" consciousness of the proletariat, and therefore that all other conceptions of socialism represent mere ideologies — "false" or "petit bourgeois" consciousness — and are therefore wrong. Beyond serving as ideological cover, Marx' and Engels' vague, ambiguous, and contradictory phraseology also enables Marxists to refuse to accept responsibility for both Marxian theory and the historical results of Marxists' practice. When critics point to the many examples of Marx' and Engels' determinist terminology (for example, their frequent use of the terms "inevitably", "inexorably", and "necessarily"), Marxist apologists can always point to the (far fewer) phrases that imply the opposite. Likewise, when critics argue that Marxism must take responsibility for the horrors that have been wrought by Marxists, the apologists generally place the blame elsewhere, usually on "objective conditions."

Most relevant to our discussion, Marx' and Engels' ambiguous formulations concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat lead to the paradox that while Marxists insist that they are militant opponents of the state (after all, one of their proclaimed long-term goals is to eliminate it entirely), in the short and medium run, they advocate building up the state, both under capitalism, and even more so, after the proletarian revolution. In this way, Marx' and Engels' claim that, after the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, the state will automatically "wither away" serves to obscure what is a profoundly statist theory and practice. While in theory, Marxists are against the state and call for its elimination, in practice, they are militantly pro-state. This is not conscious deception. Marxists truly believe that the more thoroughly they build up the state, and the sooner that state eliminates the capitalists and the other oppressing class, takes over all property, and crushes all resistance, the sooner the state will disappear. (We're still waiting.)

Sixth, the determinist character of Marxist theory is revealed in Marx' and Engels' insistence that, during what they called the first stage of communism ("socialism"), the workers will be paid according to the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." But, one might ask: Who says so? How do Marx and Engels know this? Who and/or what decides that this is what will happen? Is this, too, inevitable? Yet, if the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", if it really means the "establishment of democracy",

why can't the workers decide, collectively and democratically, how they will be paid, or, better said, according to what principle they will pay themselves? Why are they obligated to be paid according to what Marx and Engels explicitly claim is a bourgeois principle? Moreover, why do they need a state to enforce this? And who is to control this state and enforce this principle? From the standpoint of Marxism, the basis for Marx's assertions on these (and on other) questions is that all this is the expression of the "laws" of history as they will be expressed in the transition from capitalism to socialism, with socialism bearing the scars of its origins. Consequently, in this view, even after the socialist revolution, even after the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", the "establishment of democracy", winning "the battle of democracy"), history is still determined. In other words, social development is still governed by historical laws that guarantee that, regardless of the workers' consciousness or desires, they will continue to be paid according to bourgeois norms, norms that will be enforced by a state. In this conception, even after the socialist revolution, which one would think (and hope) should be an act of consummate freedom, the workers are not free; they are governed by – indeed, are the mindless playthings of — historical necessity. It seems that only at the very end of this long, historically-ordained process are the workers to be free. In this conception, then, freedom is determined. But how can freedom be the result of determinism? In a world that is determined, there is not, cannot be, and never will be, true freedom. Is it any wonder that when people who hold to such views come to power and seize control of a state, moreover, a state that controls all of society's means of production, what they will build will not be a free society, but instead a totalitarian nightmare? (You don't understand comrade, it's dialectical.)

Finally, to return to my initial point, why on Earth would a state, a revolutionary dictatorship that owns and controls all of society's means of production, "wither away"? Even at their most minimal, states are ramified organizational apparatuses that are staffed by real people. Isn't it possible, even rather probable, that, once in power, the people who occupy positions in the state would struggle to hold onto these positions and seek to concentrate even more power in their hands? Wouldn't this be even more likely the more centralized, and hence the more powerful, the state apparatus is? And isn't this what happened in Russia in the aftermath of the October Revolution?

With all this as background, we can now proceed to an examination of Lenin's views.

Lenin's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

V. I. Lenin, the founder and leader of the Bolshevik Party, saw himself, and always tried to present himself, as the faithful follower of Marx and Engels. In fact, where he differed from other Marxists, he insisted that he, and only he, was the true interpreter of Marxism and that everyone else was a "renegade", in fact, a promoter of "petty bourgeois ideology." This was certainly the case with his conception of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Lenin's views on this and related questions were most concisely expressed in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution.* This work was written during July and early-August of 1917, while Lenin was in hiding after the semi-insurrectional July Days and the government repression that followed it; it was published in early 1918, after the Bolsheviks had seized power. Lenin's concern in writing *The State and Revolution* was to establish the Marxist *bona fides* of the Bolshevik strategy of overthrowing the Provisional Government, smashing the existing (Tsarist/bourgeois) state, and building a new, proletarian,

state based on the soviets. In other words, Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution* to demonstrate that the Bolshevik-led revolution was to be a true proletarian socialist revolution and, in fact, the fulfillment of Marxism.

Consistent with this, *The State and Revolution* has two interrelated polemical thrusts. The most important was to debunk the Mensheviks' claim, which they based on Marx' and Engels' early, and vague, formulations on the state, that their policy of supporting and taking positions in the Provisional Government was the correct interpretation of the Marxian strategy. The other was to differentiate the Bolsheviks' views from those of the anarchists, who demanded the immediate abolition of the state.

In its outlines, the conception Lenin lays out in *The State and Revolution* and in his other writings of the period is consistent with the position advanced by Marx and Engels in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. However, he does elaborate on Marx' and Engels' views and extends them to what I see as their logical conclusions. Here is my attempt at a summary:

1. Lenin insisted that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the fundamental concept of Marxism: "A Marxist is solely someone who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.)

2. Lenin noted that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the dictatorship of a "single class."

3. Lenin proposed that, in the context of the conditions prevailing in Russia at the time (1917), the soviet, rather than the commune, should be the fundamental organizational form of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia, specifically, that the national network of soviets constitute the basic structure of the Bolshevik state.

4. Like Marx and Engels, Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would do away with a standing army and a separate police force, both of which would be replaced by the "armed workers."

5. Lenin claimed that after the workers smash the old bureaucratic machine, they need to construct a new "bureaucratic machinery", which will, he believed, make possible the gradual abolition of all bureaucracy. By way of explanation, Lenin wrote, "We are not utopians, we do not 'dream' of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination.... No, we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now, with people who cannot dispense with subordination, control, and 'foremen' and accountants. This subordination, however, must be to the armed vanguard of all the exploited and working people, i.e., to the proletariat." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 425–6.)

6. Lenin's model for how he proposes to organize the Russian economy under the dictatorship of the proletariat was the German postal service, which he described as a "business organized along the lines of a state capitalist monopoly." "To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service so that all technicians, foremen and accountants, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than a workman's wage, all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat – this is our immediate aim." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 426–7.) Elsewhere, he writes: "[T]he vital and burning question of present-day politics" is "the expropriation of the capitalists, the conversion of all citizens

into workers and other employees of one huge 'syndicate' – the whole state –and the complete subordination of the entire work of this syndicate to a genuinely democratic state, the state of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 470.)

7. Lenin contended that one of the main purposes of this "bureaucratic machinery" would be the establishment of the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods. This, in turn, would require the centralized and compulsory organization of all economic life in Russia. Lenin believed that the combined political, economic, and organizational structure of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would be the embodiment of the "most consistent democratic centralism and, moreover, proletarian centralism." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 429–430.)

8. Lenin claimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat" would be based on "iron discipline."

9. Lenin recognized that the state that continues to exist during the first phase of communism (socialism) and that enforces "bourgeois right" in the distribution of consumer goods is, in fact, a bourgeois state. "Of course, bourgeois right in regard to the distribution of consumer goods inevitably presupposes the existence of the bourgeois state, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the observance of the standards of right. "It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie!" (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 471.) In other words, the "dictatorship of the proletariat", in Lenin's conception, is a bourgeois state, although one controlled by the armed workers.

10. Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat and the bureaucratic machinery through which it manages the economy can be controlled from below by the workers and peasants, not only through the soviets, but also through the other mass democratic organizations, such as the trade unions, and through periodic conferences of the employees of the various enterprises where they worked. Such rank and file control would also be made effective by the fact that all functionaries would be paid no more than an average worker's salary and be subject to immediate recall.

11. Lenin believed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would last for the "entire historical period which separates capitalism from 'classless society', from communism." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 413.) This period will be one of "unprecedentedly violent class struggle in unprecedentedly acute forms." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.) Consistent with this, Lenin admits that the "withering away" of the state "will obviously be a lengthy process." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 457.)

12. Finally, Lenin argued that the Russian working class, even though it represented only a tiny minority of the population of the country, could and had to seize power and establish its revolutionary dictatorship, as the first stage of an international socialist revolution. In his conception, the workers in Russia, where political conditions were ripe, would start the revolution, which would, as political conditions matured elsewhere, shortly be followed by revolutions in Germany and other countries of Western Europe.

Critical Remarks on Lenin's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

First, although the soviets have often been touted by Marxists as an intrinsically democratic and proletarian structure, this is not quite the case. As I discussed in earlier articles, the soviets were not the purely spontaneous creations of the workers, soldiers, and peasants; they were also, at the least, semi-hierarchical in structure. While, under certain circumstances, they might have served as the basis for a truly worker- and peasant-run society, they might also, under other circumstances, have served as the basis for the establishment of the rule of revolutionary intellectuals and bureaucrats over the workers, peasants, and other members of society. A great deal depended on whether the soviets retained the fluid and highly de-centralized structure they had in the period between the February Revolution and the October Insurrection or whether they were centralized and thus turned into an organizational apparatus under the control of the Bolshevik Party. And, as we have seen, the Bolsheviks were fervent advocates of centralization.

Second, although Marx and Engels insisted that the working class, in the aftermath of a successful proletarian revolution, needed to establish a state, they did not, to my knowledge, ever explicitly state that the workers should create a new "bureaucratic machinery." However, in light of Marx' and Engels' discussions of the continued existence of the state after the workers' insurrection and, in particular, their insistence that the workers need a state to enforce the "bourgeois right" of being paid according to one's work, this was, I believe, a reasonable deduction on Lenin's part.

Third, Lenin's conviction that one of the main tasks of the "bureaucratic machinery" that the workers, upon their seizure of power, needed to set up was to establish the strictest "accounting and control" of the economy, was also a logical deduction of Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Marx' and Engels' view, one of the advantages of socialism, as they conceived it, was that under such a system, the economy could be planned. Specifically, establishing a centrally-planned economy was the main way that society, under the rule of the working class, would eliminate the "anarchy of production" that was characteristic of capitalism and which was one of the chief causes of the periodic, and extremely destructive, crises that plagued the system. In fact, Lenin had a fairly specific conception of what this "bureaucratic machinery" would look like. In his pamphlet, *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, which was written after *The State and Revolution* but before the October Insurrection, Lenin laid out his main ideas. These included a series of compulsory measures directed not only against the capitalists and the bankers, such as the nationalization of the banks and the compulsory formation of industrial syndicates which were to be united in one national syndicate, but also against all other classes, including the peasants and workers. Among these latter measures were: the compulsory unionization of all members of society; the compulsory organization of all members of society into consumer cooperatives; the insistence that all members of society be subject to compulsory labor, or what Lenin called "universal labor conscription." (*The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, in Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 25*, op. cit., p. 359.) The result would be the formation of a nation-wide administrative/bureaucratic apparatus that, in Lenin's view, would be under the direct control of the soviets and the other mass democratic organizations of the workers and the peasants.

The need to establish the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods, "down to the last pood (36.11 lbs.) of grain", was a constant refrain of Lenin's in the period leading up to and after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. But imagine what this means! Russia at that time was (and still is today) an enormous country, by far, the largest in the world. From north to south, it covers five distinct geographic belts (for those who are interested: tundra, taiga, forest, steppe, and desert) and, at the time of the revolution, 11 time zones. (In contrast, the continental United States has four.) To establish the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods (down to the last pood of grain) in a country as large as this would require a bureaucratic apparatus of enormous proportions, far larger than the Tsarist state bureaucracy Lenin pledged to smash, one staffed by tens of thousands of people who would have to handle (fill out and sign) enormous quantities of paper forms. Lenin argued that, under the control of the soviets, the job of ensuring the "strictest accounting and control" could be reduced to such simple tasks that even an ordinary worker could perform them. But in this he was either delusional or dishonest. As he well knew, many workers (and a majority of the peasants) were neither literate nor numerate, and many of those who were literate and numerate were barely so. Also, establishing and maintaining the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and sale of goods would require, not part-time workers, splitting their time between their regular jobs and their soviet tasks (and subject to immediate recall), as Lenin described, but full-time state officials (that is, bureaucrats), many if not most of whom, at least in the early stages of the revolutionary regime, would be former Tsarist office-holders or members of the intelligentsia. (Of course, after some period of time, during which the new government would educate the population, such officials might well be recruited from among the workers and even the peasants, but eventually, such individuals would become, in their life-style and their social attitudes, not workers at the bench or peasants tilling their fields, but full-time bureaucrats. In fact, such a "proletarian" and "peasant" bureaucracy did emerge in Russia. It was to provide the mass base for Stalin and his regime.) And, I would argue, this would be the case even if proletarian revolutions did break out in Western Europe and were both able and willing to provide substantial economic aid to economically underdeveloped Russia. Moreover, establishing the "strictest accounting and control" would require not merely keeping track of all economic products (down to the last pood of grain), but also keeping tabs on all the human beings involved in the production, distribution, and sale of these products. It would thus be a logical, and short, step to the establishment of internal passports, workbooks, and other measures designed to restrict the independent movement of the population, including the workers and peasants themselves.

Fourth, Lenin believed that for the revolution to succeed, the workers would require "iron discipline." In the immediate aftermath of the October seizure of power, Lenin praised the workers for the unity, solidarity, and discipline they had displayed in carrying out the revolution. Like his insistence on the need to establish the "strictest accounting and control," this was a theme Lenin kept returning to in the months after October. And it, too, was a reasonable deduction from the writings of Marx and Engels. One of the chief reasons why Marx and Engels considered the proletariat to be the only consistently revolutionary class, the only class capable of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism, is that they believed that the working class, in contrast to the peasants and other non-proletarian classes, would be trained in collective action and disciplined by the capitalist production process itself, which they saw as moving toward the formation of ever-larger industrial establishments employing ever-larger armies of workers. Such "proletar-

ian discipline" would be instilled, for example, by the requirement that the workers be at their work stations, and begin and end work, at precise times and by the need to subordinate their labor to the "iron" rhythms of assembly lines and other production mechanisms. Yet, discipline is a double-edged concept. To be more precise, self-discipline (or voluntary discipline) is one thing; discipline that is externally imposed is quite another. What might start out as self-discipline, can, under certain circumstances, morph into something else, namely, the tyranny of those at the top of a political and economic hierarchy over those beneath them, and especially over those at the bottom.

Fifth, Lenin's belief that the transition from capitalism to the classless society of communism would take an entire historical period, which he elsewhere described as an "epoch of wars and revolutions", implies that, in his view, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Russia and in other countries, would last for a long period of time, indeed, for an entire historical epoch. If so, then the dictatorship, based on the new "bureaucratic machinery", that the armed workers are to create and control, would not be the temporary, almost fleeting, phenomenon that seems to be implied by some of Marx' and Engels' (and even Lenin's) vague and ambiguous formulations – a state that is "not a state in the proper sense of the term", a state that is in the process of "withering away" – but a long-standing, bureaucratic state apparatus, a kind of mass, hierarchical, combat organization, that, Lenin believed, the proletariat would wield in its fateful struggle against the capitalists and the other oppressing classes. Can anyone but a confirmed (and dogmatically-blinded) Leninist serious believe that such a militaristic apparatus, based on "democratic centralism", "iron discipline", and strict subordination, could actually be controlled by the broad layers of the workers, that is, by the working class as a whole? Isn't it much more likely to be controlled by those who sit at the top of this enormous, nation-wide, "bureaucratic machinery", specifically, in the case of Russia, the Bolshevik Party, and in fact, by the leaders of the party? And isn't it possible, even likely, that if political and economic developments did not proceed as envisioned by the Bolshevik leaders, this apparatus would be used not only against the capitalists, the landlords, and their allies and hangers-on, but also against those members of the oppressed classes, the peasants and even the working class itself, who do not agree to subordinate themselves to the "iron discipline" of the leaders, who do not agree to obediently follow the policies, decrees, and orders of the supposedly "proletarian" leadership?

Finally, Lenin's insistence that the Russian workers had to seize power in Russia, a semi-medieval society whose capitalist economy was still in its infancy, represented a substantial departure from what was then Marxist orthodoxy, specifically, the conception adopted by the Second (or "Socialist") International under Engels' intellectual leadership. This position was that the proletarian revolution would and had to occur first in the advanced capitalist countries in which the economic, social, and political conditions were ripe for the establishment of socialist society. These conditions were, first, the existence of modern industry based on the most advanced technology, in which the process of the concentration and centralization of capital was highly advanced, and in which the trusts and the state had already introduced elements of economic planning. Only in such economies would it be feasible to nationalize the means of production and move to a centrally planned economy. Only this, in turn, would make possible the rapid development of the means of production that would eventually eliminate relative scarcity, the material basis for the competitive, dog-eat-dog, social relations that characterize capitalism. And only this would make possible overcoming the divisions between mental and manual labor and between town and country, and thus lay the basis for a planned, cooperative, communist so-

ciety. The second condition necessary for the establishment of socialism was implied by the first, specifically, the existence of an industrial working class that would constitute the majority, or close to a majority, of society, and which would be disciplined by working cooperatively in large industrial enterprises and politically educated and steeled in the class struggle that would lead up to the proletarian socialist revolution. Eventually, on a state-by-state basis, the international capitalist system would be overthrown and communism established on a world scale. This orthodox perspective suggests that the workers in countries in which capitalism is not fully developed should not attempt to carry out socialist revolutions but should instead seek to support bourgeois revolutions in which the capitalist class would seize power, establish bourgeois states, and create the conditions for the freest and fullest development of capitalism. Only after a considerable period of time, during which capitalist production would create the economic prerequisites for establishing socialism, should the workers in these countries attempt to carry out socialist revolutions and seize power for themselves. (This was the perspective of the Mensheviks.)

Lenin's strategy was a radical (it would probably be more accurate to say "revolutionary") break with this perspective. (In fact, Lenin's approach, in broad outline, was first raised by Leon Trotsky and Parvus [Alexander Helphand], at the time of the 1905 revolution, under the term "the permanent revolution.") Lenin based his new perspective on his analysis of the capitalism of his day, as laid out in his pamphlet, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1916. Without going into details, it is sufficient to say that Lenin believed that, beginning with (and as exemplified by) World War I, the capitalist system had entered into a profound, systemic, international crisis. Such a crisis would make possible, not gradual, state-by-state proletarian revolutions, but more or less simultaneous revolutions in a number of countries and eventually on a world scale. In this context and because of the unique political circumstances in Russia, Lenin saw the Russian workers as leading the way politically, seizing state power and establishing their dictatorship, and seeking to hold on until proletarian revolutions broke out in Germany and in other advanced capitalist countries, eventually leading to a truly international revolutionary transformation of society.

Yet, in putting forth this daring strategy, Lenin was proposing, in fact, to establish, even if only temporarily, a revolutionary dictatorship of a small minority of the population of Russia over the rest of the Russian people. This undemocratic situation was to be mitigated by Lenin's belief that the proletarian dictatorship would be able to count on the at-least passive support of the majority of the peasants, who constituted over 80% of Russia's population. Yet, Lenin knew that this support, already tenuous, would be temporary, because he recognized that the peasants, deeply attached to the land that they and their families had farmed for generations, were likely to be militant opponents of the Bolsheviks' (and in fact all Marxists') conception of socialism – the complete and total ownership and control of the economy, down to the "last pood of grain", by the state. (Although in 1917, Lenin did promise not to expropriate the small peasants, in light of the long-standing Marxist commitment to the complete centralization of the means of production in the hands of the state, the peasants might have had good reasons to be suspicious.) To make matters worse, the Russian working class did not even constitute a majority of the population in the cities.* So, right from the beginning, even under the most ideal circumstances, that is, the entire working class united behind the Bolshevik strategy (which was never in fact the case), establishing the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia meant constructing a dictatorship of a tiny minority over the majority of the urban population and the even larger majority of the peasants, in other words, over the vast majority of the people of the country. This was to be

justified by the Marxist proposition that the proletariat is the only consistently revolutionary class, that it is a class that is destined, by its position within capitalist society and by the "laws of motion" of that system, to overthrow capitalism and establish international socialism. In Lenin's view, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, even in circumstances in which it did not constitute the majority of the population, meant, by definition, the "establishment of democracy."

(*Some statistics: In 1917, the population of Russia was 182 million, 85% of whom lived in rural areas. The total number of workers employed in industry and mining was 3.4 million. The population of Petrograd, the capital and the country's largest city, was 2.4 million, of whom roughly 400,000 were industrial workers. Source: S. A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917- 1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.)

Conclusion

It has been my purpose that show that Lenin's conception of the state the Bolsheviks intended to establish once they had seized state power does not represent the libertarian proletarian vision that it has often been claimed to be. It is not a state in the process of "withering away." It is not a state that is "no longer a state in the proper sense of the term." It is not a vision of a flexible, decentralized, truly democratic political arrangement that might have enabled the Russian workers, peasants, and people of Russia to cooperatively manage the economy and all of society. Instead, basing himself on Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, particularly their insistence that this required the centralization of all the means of production in the hands of the state, and his belief in the scientific nature — and hence, certainty — of Marxism, Lenin envisioned building a massive, nation-wide bureaucratic apparatus. This "bureaucratic machinery", built around the soviets and other popular organizations and supposedly controlled from below, would be organized on militaristic principles — "strict subordination" and "iron discipline" — with the workers as shock troops, and would manage a completely centralized state-owned economy: all citizens reduced to employees of one national syndicate, organized along the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. With this apparatus as an organizational extension of the Bolshevik Party and based on the principle of "democratic centralism", Lenin aimed to establish the "strictest accounting and control" over the entire Russian economy and also, as the logical implication of his conception, to impose "iron discipline" over the entire population of the country. This was a vision of a mass, and highly disciplined, proletarian army, with Lenin, the only correct interpreter of Marxism and hence the embodiment of true "proletarian consciousness", as commander-in-chief. Even under the best of circumstances, this would have been a blueprint for a bureaucratic nightmare: a state capitalist monstrosity presenting itself as "proletarian." In the concrete circumstances of Russia at the time, that is, over three years of war; a collapsing economy (factories idle, people fleeing the cities, millions on the road trying to survive as best they could); the breakdown of social life (an explosion of crime, rampant vigilantism, an orgy of alcoholism); and looming famine – Lenin's vision was a recipe for disaster.

Part V – The Bolsheviks, Victor Serge, and the Myth of the Commune-State

A. Introduction

There is a view held among some sections of the left that when the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia on October 25, 1917, they established and attempted to maintain a "commune-state." The term "commune-state" is a reference to the quasi-state structure the plebian rebels of Paris set up when, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, they seized control of the city and held it from March 18 to May 28, 1871.

As I discussed in the previous article, the Paris Commune was the occasion for a major revision of Marx's and Engels' conception of the state the workers were to establish in the aftermath of a proletarian revolution, what they called the "dictatorship of the proletariat." For 23 years, they had insisted to their followers, to other socialists, and, in effect, to the entire working class that the chief strategic goals of the workers in the socialist revolution were: (1) to seize control of the existing (capitalist) state; and (2) to centralize the means of production in the hands of that state. This position was the chief bone of contention between Marx and Engels, on the one hand, and anarchist theorists, such as Proudhon and Bakunin, on the other. (The anarchists warned that Marx's and Engels' strategy would result in the establishment of an authoritarian society, what they called "state socialism.") In the wake of the Paris Commune, however, Marx and Engels revised their views. They declared that instead of seizing control of the existing state, the workers had to smash it, particularly its bureaucratic and military apparatuses. In its place, they had to build a new (semi-) state that would be modeled on the Paris Commune. Such a state, which would immediately begin to "wither away," would no longer be a state "in the proper sense of the term."

This was the conception on which Lenin claimed to base the state the Bolsheviks would establish in Russia in the event of their seizure of power. He raised the idea, and the term "commune-state", in his "April Theses," presented to the Bolshevik Party shortly after his return to Russia on April 3, 1917, and significantly elaborated it in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, written in the summer of 1917 (but not published until early 1918). In the context of Russia in 1917, Lenin's proposal meant basing the revolutionary state on the mass democratic organizations, such as the soviets, factory committees, and raion (local district) committees, which had emerged in the aftermath of the February Revolution. These organizations, taken together, were referred to at the time as the "revolutionary democracy." It has been argued, and believed by some groups on the left, that the Bolsheviks intended to, and did, maintain these organizations in their revolutionary-democratic form after they seized power on October 25, 1917; or, to put this differently, that the Bolsheviks planned to utilize these organizations as the institutional framework within which they would facilitate an on-going discussion among the workers and poor peasants over the policies, strategy, and tactics of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia.

This claim is a myth, a fantasy that completely obscures: (1) the kind of state Lenin and his allies in the Bolshevik Party intended to establish in the event of their seizure of state power in Russia; and (2) the nature of the regime the Bolsheviks actually established when they did take power.

B. Victor Serge

One of the first promoters of this myth was the revolutionary and writer, Victor Serge. (I say "revolutionary and writer," as opposed to "revolutionary writer," because Serge was as much a revolutionary as he was a writer.) Because of his role in the promotion of the idea that the early Bolshevik regime was a "commune-state" and his overall effort to justify the Bolshevik strategy in libertarian terms, it is worth looking at some length at Serge's life and political views. To this day, the fact that Victor Serge, an erstwhile anarchist, joined the Bolshevik Party and defended the early Bolshevik regime, is still used by apologists of that regime, and of Leninism and Trotskyism generally, to justify their position.

Serge was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich to left-wing Russian exiles in Brussels in 1890. On his own at the age of 15, Serge was active in the youth group of the Belgian Workers Party, but soon became discontented with the party's reformist and pro-imperialist politics and got involved in the anarchist movement. After moving to Paris, he associated with a group of "individualist" anarchists, the "Bonnot Gang," who engaged in robbing banks as their chosen form of political activity. Although Serge's participation seems mostly or even entirely to have been writing propaganda for them under the pseudonym of Le Retif ("The Ungovernable" or "The Rebel"), he was arrested when they were. Refusing to testify against them, he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to five years in solitary confinement in 1912. Released in 1917, Serge went to Spain, where he participated in preparations for (an ultimately abortive) anarcho-syndicalist uprising in Barcelona. Determined to get to Russia after the February Revolution, he left Spain but was interned for 15 months in France. Eventually, Serge made it to Russia in January 1919, in the midst of the Civil War, and soon joined the Communist Party. After the founding of the Comintern (the "Communist" or "Third International") in March 1919, Serge worked for that organization, primarily as an editor and translator, under the leadership of Gregory Zinoviev.

At this time, Serge chose as one of his main tasks attempting to convince anarchists in Russia and abroad to support and, if possible, participate in the Bolshevik project, up to and including joining the Communist Party. To this end, he wrote three pamphlets that were published by the libertarian press in France. (In 1997, they were translated into English and compiled into a single volume under the title, *Revolution in Danger, Writings from Russia, 1919–1921*, by Ian Birchall [Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2011]). During the uprising of the sailors and workers at the Kronstadt naval fortress at the mouth of the Neva River just west of Petrograd in March 1921, Serge, along with Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman (both recently deported from the United States because of their anti-war activities), and other anarchists, offered to negotiate between the rebels and the Bolsheviks. But since the Kronstadters' main demand was for free elections to the soviets, which would have required granting full rights to the political parties the Bolsheviks had suppressed during the Civil War and would most likely have led to the Bolsheviks' ouster, there was no basis for compromise.

Determined to defend their hold on state power, the Bolsheviks crushed the uprising, mercilessly slaughtering the Kronstadters, and continued to execute them, in batches, in the weeks and months after the revolt. Despite his sympathies for the rebels, Serge took the side of the Bolsheviks. Overall, while Serge supported the regime, he was critical of the bureaucratic and repressive policies of the Bolshevik state and attempted to intervene on behalf of anarchists, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and other dissidents whom the Bolsheviks had imprisoned.

Demoralized by the evolution of the Bolshevik government, Serge in 1922 requested to be sent to Germany, where he worked as an agent of the Comintern. He also wrote periodic reports on the tumultuous events in that country (since published as *Witness to the German Revolution*), where he remained until November 1923. Although he was critical of the analyses, policies, and methods of the Comintern under Zinoviev's leadership, he did not make this public. After spending some time in Vienna, Serge returned to Russia/the Soviet Union in 1926. Already sympathetic to the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky (in his *Notebooks*, he claimed to have joined it secretly in 1923), Serge publicly affiliated with the Joint Opposition, a political bloc led by Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Leo Kamenev, which was attempting to resist Josef Stalin's consolidation of power. Along with other oppositionists, Serge was expelled from the party in 1928 and briefly imprisoned. Attempting to keep in touch with those other expelled oppositionists who had refused to recant and support Stalin, Serge and his family were spied on and harassed by the secret police (then the GPU). During this period, he concentrated on his writing. Rearrested in 1933, Serge was exiled to Orenburg, Siberia, where he lived in dire conditions. Protests by writers in Europe, particularly in France, led to Serge's release in 1936, after which he and his family wound up first in Belgium and then in France. There, Serge engaged in correspondence with Trotsky, but political differences soon led to a political and personal break between the two men.

Specifically, Serge objected to Trotsky's decision to found a Fourth International, which he believed would inevitably be sterile in a period in which the working class was suffering so many defeats. Serge was also critical of the policies and methods of the national sections of the International, whose politics and methods he considered to be scholastic and sectarian. Serge particularly disagreed with Trotsky's strategy for Spain, especially his attempts to split the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista) and what Serge saw as unjust attacks on the POUM's leaders and its supporters outside of Spain, whom Serge considered to be comrades. Beyond this, Serge attempted to set the record straight on the Kronstadt uprising. He defended the rebels as well-intentioned but misguided revolutionary militants, as against Trotsky's contention that the sailors were pampered ("dandified") replacements of the original Kronstadt revolutionaries (the "pride and joy" of the revolution, as Trotsky had called them), most of whom had died defending the Bolshevik government during the Civil War. (According to Israel Getzler, in his book, *Kronstadt 1917- 1921*, 80% of the sailors who revolted in March 1921 had been at Kronstadt in 1917.) Trotsky also insisted that their insurrection, whatever the rebels' declared intentions, would have paved the way for the victory of the counterrevolution.

In March 1941, Serge and his son, Vlady, managed to get out of France, departing by boat from Marseille. (Serge's wife, Liuba, suffered a nervous breakdown in the early 30s and was confined to an asylum in Aix-en-Provence, where she remained until her death in 1982.) After being interned by Vichy government officials in Martinique, a stay in the Dominican Republic, and a brief imprisonment in Cuba, Serge and Vlady arrived in Mexico in September 1941, about a year after Trotsky had been assassinated by a Stalinist agent there. They were soon joined by Serge's companion, Laurette Sejeurne, and his daughter, Jeannine. In Mexico, Serge, along with

other anti-Stalinist socialist exiles, formed a group, Socialism and Freedom, which sought to reconstruct an internationalist workers' movement that would transcend the differences among anarchists, socialists, and communists. Serge also befriended Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, with whom he collaborated on a biography of Trotsky. Living in difficult circumstances, suffering from poor health, and unable to get his work published, Serge was assaulted by Stalinist thugs, threatened with assassination, and vilified as a "Trotskyite counterrevolutionary" and a "Nazi fifth-columnist" by the influential Stalinist milieu in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere. He died of a heart attack in 1947.

During the course of his eventful life, Serge wrote voluminously — novels, poetry, essays, reportage, political pamphlets, a memoir, and historical studies. Overall, his work is characterized by great artistic verisimilitude, a lyrical appreciation of nature, a deep empathy for the people he met, and a passion for the causes he championed.

In the articles he wrote during 1919–1921, Serge attempted to portray the on-the-ground reality of the areas under Bolshevik/Communist control, particularly Petrograd, during Russia's Civil War. He described the horrific conditions under which the workers and communists lived: the near-collapse of the economy; the severe shortages of food, housing, and heating fuel; the seething but passive hostility of the non-proletarian classes; the ever-present threat of counterrevolutionary plots; and the imminent danger of conquest by the counterrevolutionary White and imperialist forces. In this context, Serge emphasized the heroism, idealism, and discipline of the members of the Communist Party as they fulfilled their party tasks, which included carrying out house-to-house searches for illegal weapons. Serge admitted that the Communist government was a dictatorship of a small minority. (At one point, he describes Petrograd as being run by 6,000 Communists who were backed by 60–80,000 workers, all of whom constituted one-eighth of the population of the city.) He also conceded that the regime was utilizing brutal and arbitrary methods, such as the arrest and subsequent execution of innocent people as hostages, and forced labor, which demoralized some party militants. However, he insisted that these measures were necessary to save the revolution. "The success of a revolution requires the implacable severity of a Dzerzhinsky (the head of the Cheka, the Bolsheviks' secret police – RT)." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 102.) In any case, Serge insisted, they were less severe and resulted in fewer deaths than the atrocities committed by the counterrevolutionaries.

Serge also described, rather triumphantly, how news of the October Revolution had inspired him to undertake the political journey from anarchism to communism. He praised IWW veteran Bill Shatov and other anarchists who, while remaining anarchists, had embraced the Bolshevik cause and thrown themselves into the struggle. In the same vein, Serge was dismissive, even derisive, of those anarchists who refused to follow this course: "In order to preserve their purity of principle, they abandoned the attempt to control events and turned down historic responsibilities." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 52) As justification of this attitude, Serge argued that the party and the workers who supported it were doing the work of History (Serge capitalized the word), in a struggle that would ultimately lead to the liberation of humanity. Echoing Lenin's conception of an "epoch of wars and revolutions," Serge proffers his own vision:

> "From the point of view of those making it, it is a rough and dangerous task, sometimes a dirty task for which you have to wear knee-length boots and roll up your sleeves, not fearing things that will make you sick. The earth has to be cleansed of

> the decay of the old world. Filth has to be carried away by the spadeful, and in that filth there is plenty of blood." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 127.)

Of particular note is Serge's articulation (and endorsement) of the elitist assumptions that underlay the Bolsheviks' strategy:

> "The apathetic and hostile inhabitants (of Petrograd – RT), even if ten times more numerous than the Communist proletariat, scarcely count because they represent the past, for they have no ideal. We – the Reds – despite hunger, mistakes, and even crimes – we are on our way to the city of the future." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 81.)

In the third and last of these pamphlets, Serge sought to lay out a more elaborate, theoretical defense of the revolution. His aim was to convince anarchists and other libertarian socialists that, in light of the "new reality in history," they needed to overcome their qualms ("revise our ideas") about the centralist, authoritarian, and even immoral (Serge's word) methods of the Bolsheviks and support the regime. His premises are four:

1. "The Russian Revolution is opening up a new epoch. It is only the first episode of the great revolution which is going to transform the civilized world." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 124.)
2. "Such as it is, the social revolution in Russia – and everywhere it has begun – is in large part the work of Bolshevism." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 124.)
3. History is "irreversible… one cannot go against the stream." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 80.) Thus:
4. "Bolshevism is no more than the (inevitable) result of the action of laws which govern the development of any revolution (so that no room is left for alternative methods)." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 142.)

With this as his starting point, Serge discusses the key "lessons of the revolution," all of which, he insists, must be accepted or rejected as a package:

> "Now it seems to me that we anarchists must either accept or reject as a whole the set of conditions necessary for the social revolution: dictatorship of the proletariat, principle of soviets, revolutionary terror, defence of the revolution, strong organizations. (Serge writes that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is to be exercised by the "most advanced minority of the proletariat." [*Revolution in Danger*, p. 128.])
>
> "Nothing can be subtracted from the whole without the edifice collapsing. That is how the revolution is. It is a fact. It is not how we dreamed of it, nor what we wanted it to be. Here it is. Are you against it – or with it? The question is posed in this brutal fashion." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 133.)

In this discussion, Serge implies, but does not explicitly state, that the soviets continued to exist in their pre-October form:

> "The soviets in Russia were formed spontaneously during the first days of the February revolution. Elsewhere they may be formed in a different manner. But it nonetheless remains true that, from the very first hours of the social war, councils freely formed by the representatives of the revolutionary workers will be the only bodies to have the moral and material authority necessary to manage production and take the responsibility for action." (*Revolution in Danger*, pp. 129–130.)

The other side of Serge's literary effort was a detailed critique of the ideas, methods, and actions of the anarchists in Russia. His conclusions are three-fold: (1) Bolsheviks and anarchists agree on the ultimate aims of the revolution; (2) however, only the Bolsheviks' methods, in contrast to the disorganized, utopian, ineffectual, and often "disastrous" efforts of the anarchists, are capable of achieving victory; (3) anarchists have a crucial role to play within the revolution, opposing the regime's excesses and centralizing tendencies and working to ensure that the revolution does, after all, result in the creation of a free society and not in the establishment of "state socialism."

Despite the seeming honesty of Serge's presentation, there is evidence that the positive, even laudatory, picture of the Bolshevik regime that he paints did not represent his true assessment and feelings. One such indication was related by the Italian anarcho-syndicalist, Armando Borghi.

Borghi represented the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) at the founding conference of the "Red" International of Labor Unions in July 1920 (to which the USI did not ultimately affiliate). Having met Serge in Paris in 1912, Borghi arranged to see him in Petrograd. Out of fear of the Cheka, Serge took elaborate measures to make sure Borghi visited him unaccompanied. (When Borghi and a Spanish comrade first appeared at his apartment, Serge pretended not to know them. Later, he telephoned Borghi and insisted he come alone). Here is Borghi's summary of what Serge said to him when they met:

> "(H)e (Serge — RT) went through a rosary: The Soviets have been swallowed up by the Communist Party. The leaders use them as a means of spying. Any dissent is a betrayal, and every betrayal has to be met with some 'elimination.' In the factories, the discipline is ruthless. Trotsky is a perfect tyrant. There is neither communism here, nor socialism, nor anti-communism, but Prussian military discipline…. He (Serge) had remained an anarchist, but what would have been the use committing suicide by working in an opposition that would be worth less than nothing? No one would have understood. No one would have followed. No one would have known. He would have only been taken for a spy…. This was the horrible logic of totalitarianism." (From *Anarchist Encounters, Russia in Revolution*, ed. by AW Zurbrugg, Annares Editions, an imprint of The Merlin Press, London, 2017, p. 85.)

Another hint of Serge's private views comes from the account of the anarchist Gaston Leval of when he and a comrade met Serge in the summer of 1921:

> "Everything that Victor Serge told us 'in confidence' (being convinced that, given our friendship, we would not betray him) contradicted what was affirmed, or what one might infer, from his writings.
>
> "As for the Cheka – the mother of the GPU, the grandmother of the NKVD, and the great-grandmother of the NVD – he declared: it is an institution which at first

> rendered great services but it has become very inconvenient; it is now so strong that no one knows how to get rid of it. About the Communist Party: more and more it is invaded by revolutionary opportunists (parvenus), it no longer exercises the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is on top of the proletariat. On trade unions: It's very simple! One day I received official forms with an order to fill them in. I get forms all the time – and throw them in the wastepaper basket. As for new forms, the same: they get the same treatment. So, I received the forms a third time, and with a final warning: if I did not return them properly filled in, my *payok* and that of my family would be stopped. The *payok* is the monthly food ration which the state provides for us. I would do anything not to lose that. I filled in the forms and sent them off. At the end of the month dues are deducted from my salary, and there you are, I have joined up! Every month, the same dues – that's the only contact I have with my trade union." (*Anarchist Encounters*, p. 91.)

In private Serge explicitly admitted that his public portrayal and assessment of the Bolshevik government were not honest:

> "[A] number of those who knew Serge during the early years of the revolution – the anarchists Gaston Leval and Mauricius, or the French Communist Marcel Brody who worked closely with Serge – testify to the fact that while his writings were solidly in support of the revolution, in private conversations with those he thought he could trust he made sharp criticisms of the Bolshevik regime. Leval quotes him as saying: 'We are obliged to lie to save what can be saved of the revolution.'" (Ian Birchall, Introduction to *Revolution in Danger*, p. 9.)

(All of this raises a bunch of questions about Victor Serge, among them: What were his real opinions about the Bolsheviks, their methods, and the Bolshevik regime as a whole? What does his ambivalent—one might say "two-faced"—stance say about his political, artistic, and personal integrity? If Serge did lie about the Bolshevik regime, why? And, what are we to make of Serge's tactical/strategic attitude toward the Russian Revolution, Bolshevism, and Marxism today, one hundred years after the events he described took place? I will return to these issues in the second part of this article.)

The picture of the Bolshevik regime during the Civil War that emerges from Serge's private admissions to Borghi and Leval is amply confirmed by the reports of Emma Goldman (in her contribution to *Anarchist Encounters* and in *My Disillusionment in Russia*), Alexander Berkman (in *The Bolshevik Myth* and *The Russian Tragedy*), and the other contributors to *Anarchist Encounters*, as well as the accounts of Voline (Vsevolod Eichenbaum) (in *The Unknown Revolution*) and Gregory Maximoff (in *The Guillotine at Work*), and since substantiated by a myriad of academic studies.

So, what happened? How did the supposedly "commune-state," based on the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" of 1917, turn into the dictatorship of a single party that was supported, at best, by a tiny minority of the people and that could maintain its rule only through the "Red Terror," that is, by vicious repression? By early 1921, vast sectors of the populations of Russia and of the other countries the Bolsheviks had conquered by the end of the Civil War – peasants in the countryside, workers in the cities, sailors at Kronstadt, and

members of the oppressed nationalities — were in revolt against the Communist regime. Even supporters of the government, such as Serge, admitted that the Communists were hated and despised by the overwhelming majority of the people, for their brutality and ruthlessness, for their dishonesty, and for their corruption.

Apologists for the Bolsheviks often claim that the dictatorial actions they took were forced on them by the objective conditions in which they found themselves in the aftermath of the October Revolution: a collapsing economy, social disintegration, imperialist invasions, and an armed counter-revolution. But this merely begs the question: why, under those circumstances, did the Bolsheviks, a political party that claimed to be fighting for the liberation of humanity, choose to seize state power and then defend their hold on that power by every and any means at their disposal, no matter how brutal, ruthless, and dishonest?

C. Theoretical Background

Let's try to put some pieces of the puzzle on the table.

1. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, they were well aware of the circumstances under which they were doing so: they knew they would be launching a civil war, which, while some Bolsheviks feared, Lenin and his allies in the party welcomed. "Not a single great revolution in history has taken place without a civil war," he wrote. (V.I. Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" *Collected Works, Volume 26*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 119.) In fact, Lenin based his revolutionary strategy on the notion that the transition from capitalism to socialism would require an entire historical era that he described as an "epoch of wars and revolution", and that this required the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship. Writing after the seizure of power, Lenin put it this way:

> "We have always known, said and emphasised that socialism cannot be "introduced", that it takes shape in the course of the most intense, the most acute class struggle – which reaches heights of frenzy and desperation – and civil war; we have always said that a long period of 'birth-pangs' lies between capitalism and socialism, that violence is always the midwife of the old society; that a special state (a special system of organised coercion of a definite class) corresponds to the transitional period between the bourgeois and the socialist society, namely the dictatorship of the proletariat. What dictatorship implies and means is a state of simmering war, a state of military measures of struggle against the enemies of the proletarian power. The Commune was a dictatorship of the proletariat, and Marx and Engels reproached it for what they considered to be one of the causes of its downfall, namely, that the Commune had not used its armed force with *sufficient* vigour to suppress the resistance of the exploiters." (Lenin, "Fear of the Collapse of the Old and the Fight for the New," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 401. Emphasis in the original.)

Relying on his analysis of what he called the "latest" or the "highest" form of capitalism ("imperialism"), Lenin believed that world capitalism was entering into a profound crisis that would inevitably lead to its overthrow and the establishment of socialism on a global scale. This was his justification for the Bolshevik Party seizing power in a country in which, in the Marxian view, the conditions for the establishment of socialism — a developed capitalist economy and a large

working class — were completely lacking. To make matters worse, this was a country in which a considerable majority (80%) of the population – the peasantry – was understood to be hostile to socialism, at least as the Bolsheviks understood the term, that is, as an economy based on the complete nationalization of property and directed by a central plan. Lenin was convinced that the Bolsheviks' conquest of state power in Russia would serve as the spark for the inevitable outbreak of proletarian revolutions in Europe, particularly in Germany. (Lenin's writings of the period are replete with claims that the revolution in Germany was inevitable, although he admitted that it was impossible to predict precisely when it would occur.)

2. As I discussed in the last article, Lenin insisted that to carry out the revolution, the workers needed their own bureaucratic apparatus, that is, a state, whose key tasks were to suppress the capitalists and the other oppressing classes and to take the initial steps towards the establishment of socialism. In the circumstances of Russia after the February Revolution, this state would be based primarily on the soviets and the other organs of the "revolutionary democracy." This structure, in turn, would administer an economy that would, to the greatest extent possible, be centralized in the hands of the state. The specific measures Lenin proposed to address the economic and social disintegration of Russia were hierarchical and authoritarian in the extreme – among them, the nationalization of the banks, the compulsory syndication of all economic enterprises above a certain size and their eventual nationalization, the compulsory membership of the entire population in consumer cooperatives, and compulsory labor. He envisioned such an apparatus as being able to direct, through the "strictest accounting and control", all economic activity in the country, down to the "last pood of grain." If we are to believe what he wrote in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin was convinced that this enormous and highly centralized political and economic structure could be kept under the control of the working class via the soviets and would not require the establishment of a professional bureaucracy. In this, Lenin, and the Bolshevik Party as a whole, were to find themselves deeply mistaken.

3. As mentioned, Lenin's conception of socialism (like that of Marx and Engels) was of an economy that was completely centralized in the hands of the state, which would, through central planning, direct the entire economic process. Contrary to the beliefs of many Marxists, the direct and immediate control of the factories, mines, railroads, and other economic enterprises by the workers employed in them had never been a feature of either the Bolshevik or, more broadly, the Marxian program. This idea had been associated with anarchists, syndicalists, and anarcho-syndicalists and had been denounced by virtually all Marxists as a "petty bourgeois" legacy of peasants', artisans', and semi-proletarians' commitment to private property. Thus, the Bolsheviks did not advocate the formation of factory committees prior to their emergence (although it is possible that Bolshevik workers participated, and perhaps played leading roles, in this process). By all accounts, the committees were formed spontaneously during and after the February Revolution, first by "defensist" workers in the war-related industries who were concerned to maintain war production during the chaos of the revolutionary events, and then by workers in other sectors. While Bolshevik workers were elected to and were active in these committees (the Bolsheviks won majorities in these organizations by June 1917, three months before they won majorities in the soviets), the Bolshevik leaders saw workers' control (which, at the time, meant mostly oversight and inspection of the capitalist directors, supervisors, and foremen, rather than direct management) of the factories as a transitional phenomenon, that is, as a stepping-stone to full state ownership and management. This was reflected in the resolution Bolshevik delegates presented to the all-Russia conference of the factory committees held in early October. (Neither

the factory committees nor the concept of workers control had been mentioned in Lenin's "April Theses"; nor were they discussed in the resolutions passed at the Bolshevik Party's Seventh All-Russian Conference held at the end of April-beginning of May.)

4. Lenin's attitude toward the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" was instrumentalist, not substantive. In his view, they were means to an end, the conquest and maintenance of state power by the Bolshevik Party. In other words, Lenin saw such organizations as: (1) organizational vehicles through which the Bolshevik Party would seize power; and (2) as the organizational and administrative basis of the Bolshevik-led state they intended to establish, that is, as organs of state power. The Bolsheviks did not see such organizations as vehicles for the "self-determination" of the working class. To the Bolsheviks, such a notion was an absurdity. Separate from the Bolshevik Party, there was not and could not be working-class "self-determination." In the Bolsheviks' conception, the soviets and the other organizations of what had been the "revolutionary democracy" were to be transformed into a centralized and hierarchical combat apparatus under the control and direction of the Bolshevik Party. In effect, they were to become the organizational structure of a proletarian army, with the Bolshevik Party acting as its general staff and officer corps.

That Lenin's conception of the soviets was instrumental or tactical, rather than substantive, is suggested by his and the other Bolsheviks' attitude to those bodies prior to 1917, specifically, when they first emerged during the 1905 revolution. Although, while in Stockholm on his way to Russia, Lenin wrote an article that expressed an openness to the St. Petersburg soviet, seeing it as a possible organizational basis for a revolutionary government, once he arrived in the capital, his attitude became distinctly hostile. According to most reports, the St. Petersburg soviet, which was organized at the time of the general strike in October 1905, was convened on the initiative of the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP (the Bolsheviks were the other faction of the party) and politically dominated by them; three of the soviet's leaders, including a young Leon Trotsky (then using a different pseudonym), were either affiliated with the Mensheviks or joined the faction shortly afterward. The Bolsheviks were particularly derisive toward the Mensheviks' view of the soviet as "non-partisan" and their concern to establish it as a vehicle for working class "self-government." Lenin and the other leaders of the Bolshevik faction counterposed to the soviet the need for an armed uprising to establish a revolutionary dictatorship, and toward this end, urged the formation and training of squads of armed workers to overthrow the Tsar and seize power. And in Moscow in December (that is, after the St. Petersburg soviet had been dissolved and its leaders arrested by the Tsarist government), the Bolsheviks led the Mensheviks and other revolutionaries in an attempt to carry out such an insurrection. Outmanned and outgunned, the insurrection was crushed by Tsarist troops.

Lenin's utilitarian attitude toward the soviets is also revealed by the policies he proposed the Bolsheviks follow during 1917. Lenin's strategy went through two distinct phases. Initially, given the weakness of the Provisional Government and the fact that the revolutionary workers, soldiers, and sailors looked to the Petrograd soviet, not the government, for leadership, Lenin argued that it would be possible for the Bolsheviks to take power peacefully, in what he called the "peaceful development of the revolution." This involved mobilizing the workers, sailors, and soldiers in mass demonstrations (often armed) to force the reformist leaders of the soviet to oust the government and assume full power themselves. Hence the Bolsheviks' key slogans during this period (mid-April through June): "Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers" and "All Power to

the Soviets." Once this had occurred, the Bolsheviks would wage a political campaign within the soviets to win a majority, and in so doing, take power themselves.

After the July Days (if not sooner), Lenin's strategy underwent a decisive shift. When the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders of the Petrograd Soviet first got wind of the revolutionary workers', soldiers', and sailors' plans for armed demonstrations under the slogan, "All Power to the Soviets," they vehemently opposed the actions and tried to prevent them from taking place. Initially, the Bolshevik central committee also opposed the actions; however, once they were underway, the committee decided that party militants should join the demonstrations and attempt to give them a peaceful character. In the aftermath of the revolt, the soviet leaders condemned the quasi-insurrection (as an attempted Bolshevik coup), supported the repression of the Bolshevik Party (along with disarming revolutionary workers and disbanding revolutionary units of the Petrograd garrison), and actively promoted the charges that the party was being funded by the Germans and that Lenin was a German agent. At this point, the Bolsheviks withdrew the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." (See "The Political Situation," and "On Slogans," Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 25*, pp. 176–178 and pp. 183 – 190, respectively.) Lenin, now in hiding, argued that in light of political developments after the July Days, the peaceful development of the revolution was no longer possible and that, instead, the Bolsheviks should aim to seize state power through an armed insurrection.

When, after the collapse of Kornilov's attempted counter-revolutionary coup in late August, the Bolsheviks won majorities in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities around the country, they revived the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." Beyond that, however, the party was divided over how to proceed. Some members of the Bolshevik leadership, led by Kamenev, proposed reviving the Bolsheviks' earlier strategy of attempting to establish a purely "soviet" government, that is, a government made up of a coalition of all the socialist parties, rather than a coalition made up of these parties and the pro-capitalist liberals. Opposed to this, Trotsky and some other members of the Bolshevik leadership proposed to organize an armed uprising through the Petrograd soviet's newly-established Military-Revolutionary Committee, which they controlled. They meant to disguise what was, in fact, the seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party as the assumption of power by the soviets, justifying it under the call to defend the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" from the threat of another counterrevolutionary attempt.

Lenin, who was still in hiding, advocated yet another approach. After briefly considering reviving his pre-July Days strategy, by mid-September, Lenin advocated the open and direct seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party through an armed insurrection. Lenin was particularly concerned that the party, by not acting decisively at that moment, might let pass an opportune time, one that might not recur, to seize power. As a result, he wrote letter after letter to the Bolshevik Central Committee, to other leading bodies, and to individual Bolsheviks insisting that they begin preparations for an uprising immediately and not wait for the convening of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, scheduled for the end of October. (So desperate was he that he threatened to resign from the central committee.)

> "The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 19.)

> "The present task must be an *armed uprising* in Petrograd and Moscow (with its region), the seizing of power and the overthrow of the government." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 20.)

Several weeks later (on October 8), Lenin spelled out precisely what he had in mind: "a simultaneous offensive on Petrograd, as sudden and as rapid as possible, which must without fail be carried out from within and without, from the working-class quarters and from Finland, from Revel, and from Kronstadt, an offensive of the *entire* navy, the concentration of a *gigantic superiority* of forces…." (Lenin, "Advice of an Onlooker," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 180.)

For their part, Trotsky and other radical Bolsheviks involved in the Petrograd soviet were concerned that an insurrection launched in the name of the Bolshevik party might fail for lack of popular support. Instead, they opted to carry it out under the cover of and in the name of the soviets, timing it to occur at the time of the convening of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets.

My point in discussing all this is to demonstrate that, from Lenin's standpoint, the strategic goal was the seizure of political power by the Bolshevik Party and the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship under the party's control. The soviets, to him, were of interest only instrumentally, that is, as a means to an end: establishing and maintaining the dictatorship of the party.

This is suggested by comments Lenin made about the soviets shortly before the insurrection.

> "All the experience of both revolutions, that of 1905 and that of 1917, and all the decisions of the Bolshevik Party, all its political declarations for many years, may be reduced to the concept that the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies is a reality only as an organ of insurrection, as an organ of revolutionary power. Apart from this, the Soviets are a meaningless plaything that can only produce apathy, indifference and disillusion among the masses…." (Lenin, "Theses for a Report at the October 8 Conference, also for a Resolution and Instructions to Those Elected to the Party Congress," *Collected Works, Volume 26,* p. 143.)

5. To repeat, Lenin saw the Bolsheviks' strategic goal in 1917 to be the seizure of state power by the Bolshevik Party, supported by the working class. This flows from his view of the relationship of political parties to social classes. In Lenin's view, all social classes are led by political parties (and all political parties are led by leaders). Here's how he put it in his pamphlet, "'Left-wing' Communism — An Infantile Disorder," written in April-May 1920:

> "It is common knowledge… that as a rule and in most cases — at least in present-day civilised countries — classes are led by political parties; that political parties, as a general rule, are run by more or less stable groups composed of the most authoritative, influential and experienced members, who are elected to the most responsible positions, and are called leaders." (Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 31*, p. 41.)

More narrowly, Lenin contended:

> "It is clear that the proletarian revolutionary movement is represented by the Bolshevik Party…." (Lenin, "The Russian Revolution and Civil War," *Collected Works*, Volume 26, p. 32.)

It follows that Lenin's notion of a successful revolution is that of a seizure of state power by one or more political parties. This is true of both the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution and the "proletarian socialist" revolution. (This is entirely consistent with the Social Democratic orthodoxy of the time, although, beneath the revolutionary rhetoric, the Social Democratic Parties in Western Europe believed they could gain power peacefully, that is, by winning majorities in parliament via elections.)

In his major strategic publication written during the 1905 revolution, "Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Russian Revolution," Lenin discussed his perspective for the revolution in Russia, which at the time he saw, as almost all Marxists did, as a "bourgeois-democratic" one. In this revolution, as he saw it, the chief strategic goal of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) was to establish the "Revolutionary Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry." In contrast to Marxist orthodoxy, then advocated by the Mensheviks, Lenin considered the Russian capitalist class to be too small, too politically weak, too entangled with foreign capital, and too dependent on the Tsarist state to be able to lead the popular classes in the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Ironically, then, in Lenin's conception, the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia would be carried out by the workers and the peasants *against* the capitalist class and the Tsarist state.

In "Two Tactics," as in all his writings of the period, Lenin left vague two questions. One was: What was the precise relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry? Although Lenin assumed that, as the only consistently revolutionary class, the proletariat would take the lead in this alliance, he did not spell out precisely what this meant. Despite this, it is clear: (1) the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" would be a dictatorship of political parties, one representing the proletariat, another representing the peasantry; (2) the dominant element in this dictatorship would be the party of the working class, the RSDLP; and (3) this dictatorship would carry out what Marxists considered to be the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution; these included overthrowing the monarchy, establishing (bourgeois) democratic rights, nationalizing the land (and thus dispossessing the landlord class), establishing an eight-hour workday, granting self-determination to the oppressed nationalities in the Russian Empire, and convening a constituent assembly.

The second question Lenin left unclear was: what would happen once these bourgeois-democratic tasks had been carried out? In some writings (such as those on the agrarian question), he suggested that once this had been done, the way would be open for the fullest and most democratic development of a capitalist society in Russia. Elsewhere, Lenin left open the possibility (depending on the international situation, specifically, successful working-class revolutions in Europe) of going beyond the bourgeois-democratic stage of the revolution and moving toward the establishment of socialism. In other words, Lenin raised the possibility that the revolutionary dictatorship that would be established during the bourgeois-democratic revolution would not cede power to a bourgeois-democratic government (that would be established by a constituent assembly) but would, instead, hold onto power and proceed toward constructing socialism. From all this, we can see clearly that, for Lenin, a successful socialist revolution was one that resulted in the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship dominated by the political party that represented the proletariat: in 1905, the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party; in 1917, the Bolshevik Party.

That Lenin's strategic goal in 1917 was the seizure of state power by the Bolshevik Party and not by the soviets is also suggested by various things he said and wrote during the period from February to October of that year:

(a) During the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which convened in Petrograd on June 3, Lenin had the opportunity to clarify his position:

> "The citizen Minister of Posts and Telegraphs (the Menshevik leader, H.G. Tsereteli — RT) has declared that there is no political party in Russia that would agree to take the entire power on itself. I answer: There is. No party can refuse to do this, all parties are contending and must contend for the power, and our party will not refuse it. *It is ready at any moment to take over the Government.*" (N.N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917: An Eyewitness Account, Volume II*, edited, abridged, and translated by Joel Carmichael, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1962, p. 380. Emphasis in the original.)

The comments by N.N. Sukhanov, who was an eyewitness, are significant:

> "In general this fragment of Lenin's speech is unusually rich in content; it comprises a complete political system that now replaced, developed, and interpreted Lenin's original schema of April. At *that* time the Bolshevik leader had enjoined his party to learn how to be in the minority, to have patience, to win over the Soviets, to get majorities in them and transfer all power to *them*. Now Lenin, without patience, without having got a majority or won over the Soviets, was demanding all power against their will, and a dictatorship for his party alone. It's possible that in the recesses of Lenin's mind there had never been any other interpretation of the April slogans, and that only now for the first time he thought it appropriate to proclaim them." (Sukhanov, pp. 380–381. Emphasis in the original.)

(b) On August 30, in his letter "To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P", Lenin wrote: "The development of this war (a revolutionary war against Kornilov — RT) alone can lead *us* to power, but we must *speak* of this as little as possible in our propaganda (remembering very well that even tomorrow events may put power into our hands, and then we shall not relinquish it"). (Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 25*, p. 289. Emphasis in original.)

The last point is crucial in that it reveals that what Lenin had in mind was a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party which, once established, the Bolsheviks would not allow, to the best of their ability, to be voted out of, or otherwise removed from, power. At one point, Lenin did suggest that he would be willing to share power with other parties, but only if those groups were in a subordinate position. In other words, he was ready to use such groups for tactical purposes, to win over their supporters and as political cover.

6. Lenin's understanding of the proletarian revolution in Russia as one involving the seizure of state power by, and the establishment of a dictatorship of, the Bolshevik Party, flows from his conception of the revolutionary party and its relation to the working class. In his pamphlet, *"What Is To Be Done?,"* generally recognized to be the founding document of the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP and, later, the Bolshevik/Communist Party, Lenin contended that the working class,

by its own efforts, that is, through its own independent struggles, is able to achieve only trade-union, or reformist, consciousness. In other words, as Lenin saw it, the day-to-day struggles of the workers under capitalism — such as for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and the right to organize trade unions — do not automatically engender socialist consciousness in the working class. In consequence, he argued, socialist consciousness had to be brought to the workers "from the outside", specifically, by socialist intellectuals. This was the key task of the revolutionary party. (In fact, Lenin generally distrusted intellectuals, whom he considered weak and indecisive, insufficiently tough or "hard." As a result, he sought to build an underground apparatus which, while perhaps led by intellectuals, would be made up of working-class, lower middle-class, and even lumpen-proletarian [criminal] elements.)

Lenin's conception of the party was the result of his attempt to connect what we can now see to be two contradictory claims — one theoretical, the other empirical — both of which he considered to be valid. On the one hand, as a committed Marxist, Lenin believed that Marxism was scientific and thus true. He was also aware that a fundamental tenet of Marxism is that the "laws of motion" of capitalism will inevitably impel the working class to carry out the socialist revolution, and that for this to happen, the working class must possess revolutionary socialist consciousness. On the other hand, when Lenin observed the actual working class in Russia and in Europe, he could see that the workers, at the time and at most times, were not in fact revolutionary; instead, they were reformist. In his attempt to square these claims, Lenin deduced that it was the specific job of Marxists, organized in a revolutionary party, to bridge the gap between theoretical truth and empirical reality. The logical implication of this view is that the revolutionary party is the ideological, political, and organizational embodiment of the conscious-ness of the proletariat. Without it, the working class is not capable of attaining or sustaining revolutionary socialist consciousness. Despite the fact that, on occasion, Lenin did praise the workers for being spontaneously revolutionary, he believed that, without the leadership of a revolutionary party, such consciousness could only be diffuse, vacillating, and temporary.

Here's how Victor Serge put it:

> "The party is in a sense the nervous system of the class. Simultaneously the consciousness and the active, physical organization of all the dispersed forces of the proletariat, which are often ignorant themselves and often remain latent or express themselves contradictorily." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 99.)

Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party has deep elitist and authoritarian (even totalitarian) implications, which become clear when we ask a few questions: What happens if/when, after the seizure of power by this party, the working class (or substantial sections of it) no longer wishes to support it? Does the working class (or sections of it) have the right to remove that party from power? Elementary notions of democracy would lead to the conclusion that the workers do indeed have that right. But if, under Lenin's conception, that party, by definition, embodies the true, revolutionary consciousness of the working class, then, also by definition, such a desire to evict the party from power can only be counterrevolutionary, and the workers who hold such a desire and act on it would be either counterrevolutionaries or, at the very least, under the influence of counterrevolutionaries. This point can be put the other way around. Does the revolutionary party, once it has seized state power, have the right, or even the obligation, to repress workers who struggle against the party's policies and (even more extreme) seek to eject it

from power? Lenin's conception of the party as the organized embodiment of the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness and, in fact, the sole guarantee of that consciousness and therefore of the proletarian nature of the state, implies that the party does indeed have the right, and even the duty, to do whatever it has to do to stay in power, even if this entails the repression of specific groups of workers and even of the entire working class.

As long as a Bolshevik-style party is out of power, as long as it is merely attempting to lead the working class via propaganda and agitation, the elitist implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party remain hidden. But once that party achieves control of the state and hence has the power to repress those who disagree with it and act against it, the stage is set for the elitist and authoritarian implications of Lenin's view to come to the fore. This is, in fact, what happened in the aftermath of the October Insurrection. Three and a half years later — that is, after the conclusion of the Civil War and the war with Poland, after the Bolsheviks had repressed the mass strikes of workers in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities, after they had drowned the sailors' revolt at Kronstadt in blood, and while they were in the process of suppressing massive peasant uprisings in various parts of the country, Trotsky was to draw just this conclusion. At the Tenth Party Congress of the Communist Party, held in March 1921, he said: "It is necessary to comprehend, so to speak, the revolutionary historical primacy of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship despite temporary, spontaneous wavering, even amongst workers." (Quoted in Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin: Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London and New York, p. 107.) (How does Trotsky know that the workers' wavering is only "temporary"? Because Marxism says so?)

As I have written elsewhere, it is my view that the elitist, authoritarian, and totalitarian implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party have their roots in Marxism, specifically, in Marxism's claims: (1) that it (and only it) embodies the Truth; (2) that it (and only it) represents the true and appropriate consciousness of the working class, even (and especially) when the working class does not have revolutionary consciousness, as Marxism defines it; and (3) that socialism can be established only by means of a state that has centralized the means of production in its hands. As long as Marxist parties do not have control over a state and therefore do not have the power to repress workers' struggles, these implications are obscured. But when such parties do gain possession of a state, the logic of the theory is that they do have the right — indeed, the obligation — to repress workers' struggles against its policies and against the states they control. This is true not only of Leninist parties but also of reformist Social Democratic parties, as revealed by the German Social Democrats' brutal repression of the Spartacist uprising in January 1919 that led to the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Leo Jogisches. Sadly, we have seen this logic play itself out all too many times since 1917.

There are additional elitist and authoritarian implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party. One is a distrust of the spontaneous actions of the workers and peasants, especially after the seizure of state power by the party. To repeat, in Lenin's view, the working class, by its own efforts (that is, spontaneously), is able to attain only trade-union, aka reformist, consciousness. But trade union or reformist consciousness is, in fact, capitalist consciousness; it is thinking that accepts the existing, capitalist, system as the framework for struggle. Thus, the spontaneous actions of the working class, that is, workers' struggles that are not under the leadership of the revolutionary party, are objectively pro-capitalist. This is even more the case with peasants. According to Marxism, the peasants' spontaneous activity, based as it is on the tilling of small plots of land, coupled with their desire to sell what surpluses they produce on the free

market in order to buy tools, clothing, and other manufactured items, can engender in them only a petty capitalist mentality. Such activity and such a mentality, left to themselves, will spontaneously generate capitalism. Thus, according to Lenin's conception, the spontaneous activity of both popular classes, proletariat and peasantry, works in the same direction, namely, toward the generation or regeneration of capitalism.

The other side of this hostility to the spontaneous activity of the workers and peasants is a strong commitment to centralism. As Lenin put it:

> "The effort to prove the necessity for centralism to the Bolsheviks who are centralists by conviction, by their programme and by the entire tactics of the party, is really like forcing an open door." (Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 116.)

Marxism itself is strongly centralist. This commitment reflects Marx's and Engels' belief that the logic of capitalist development is to concentrate and centralize capital in the hands of a few monopolists and ultimately of the state. Indeed, one of Marx's and Engels' main criticisms of capitalism is that, because it is founded on private property, it is incapable of carrying out this tendency to its logical conclusion. As a result, it is left to the socialist revolution to complete this process of centralization. Hence the Marxist conception of socialism as an economy in which all the means of production have been nationalized (that is, taken over by the state) and in which all economic activity is carried out according to a central plan. Lenin's conception of workers' consciousness and the role of the revolutionary party is thus not only consistent with the Marxian commitment to centralism but even strengthens it. This is because, in Lenin's view, a centralized party structure is the only way to guarantee the revolutionary character of the party's program and its actual practice. Lacking such centralization, the party will be subject to the pressure of the workers' spontaneous activity and to the reformist/pro-capitalist consciousness it generates. This pressure will be felt most strongly on the lower levels of the party, that is, on those members of the party who are in direct contact with the workers, including those who are workers themselves. As a result, Lenin considered the appropriate structure of the revolutionary party to be what he called "democratic centralism." Although such centralism is supposed to be democratic, the reality is that centralism gives, and is designed to give, extraordinary power to the people who sit at the party's center, that is, the party leadership. Ultimately, then, this leadership is the chief guarantor of the revolutionary character of the party, and when it is established, the revolutionary character of the (supposedly) "proletarian" state. Moreover, the instinct of the party's leadership will be to strengthen that centralism, that is, to "circle the wagons," when the party and its control of the state are threatened. The concrete practice of all "democratic centralist" parties, during 1917 and since, bears this out.

All these implications lead to yet another. This is a tendency for a Leninist-style revolutionary party, once it has gained control of a state, to use that state to attempt to direct all economic, social, political, and ideological activity (that is, thought) that is within its grasp, and conversely, to discredit (denounce, malign, and slander) any economic, social, political, and ideological activity that is spontaneous, that is, that is not (yet) under its direct control. That all becomes, by definition, "counterrevolutionary," whatever the subjective intentions of those who carry out such activity; thus, the concept: "objectively counterrevolutionary."

What holds for the revolutionary party also holds for the state. In the Bolsheviks' view, the "dictatorship of the proletariat," in all its facets, is to be as centralized as possible. Lenin was adamant about this:

> "I repeat: the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are incapable of thinking or have had no occasion to give thought to the matter that absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline of the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie." (Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder," *Collected Works, Volume 31*, op. cit., p. 24.)

D. Lenin's Goal: Dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, Not a Soviet State

To sum all this up, in order to understand what happened in Russia after the October Revolution, it is essential to recognize that when the Bolsheviks seized state power on October 25, their fundamental aim was to establish a "revolutionary dictatorship" of the Bolshevik Party, which would represent, under Russian conditions, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In the Bolsheviks' view, the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, supported by the working class and poor peasants, was, in fact, a "proletarian government." (Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 127.) Or, as Lenin put it,

> "[P]roletarian revolutionary power (or Bolshevik power – which is now one and the same thing)." (Lenin, "Advice of an Onlooker," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 179.)

Although the Bolsheviks called the regime they set up a "soviet government," this was a deception. In fact, they did not see themselves as being in any way legally bound by, or otherwise "responsible" to, the soviets. They did not recognize the soviets as having any political authority over them, authority of any kind to which they were obliged to submit. In their view, the soviets did not have the right either to control their actions or to remove them from power. From their standpoint, the soviets, along with other popular organizations, constituted simply a *state apparatus* under their control. As Lenin put it, "There is no apparatus? There is an apparatus – the Soviets and the democratic organizations." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 21.)

In fact, the Bolsheviks did not consider themselves bound by any legal or conventional moral considerations whatsoever. To them, the supreme value (law) was the health of the revolution, as they understood it. This is what it meant to establish a "revolutionary dictatorship." After the seizure of power, Lenin and Trotsky were explicit about this. In the words of Geoffrey Swain, in his *The Origins of the Russian Civil War*:

> "On 4 November Lenin and Trotsky appeared at the Soviet Executive not simply to justify one incident of arbitrary rule, in this case the closure of the 'bourgeois press', but to institutionalize arbitrary rule. They came to explain that the Soviet Executive, this soviet parliament, was not a 'bourgeois parliament' and therefore had only a very vague and general brief to oversee the government which could

> issue decrees in its own name as often as it liked. Lenin's final remark summed up his attitude: 'you call us extremists, but you are nothing other than apologists for parliamentary obstruction.'" (Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War,* Longman Publishing, New York, 1996, p. 68.)

Lenin put the main point bluntly:

> "Power is in the hands of our party, which enjoys the confidence of the broad masses." (Meeting of the All-Russia C.E.C., November 4, 1917, Speeches Concerning the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries' Questions, Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 289.)

As this reveals, once in power, the Bolshevik Party ruled by decree, using the soviet structure, at best, as a rubber stamp. The Bolshevik government, formally, the Council of People's Commissars, simply implemented the decisions of the party's Central Committee. In sum, the government established by the Bolsheviks' seizure of state power on October 25, 1917 was not, in truth, a "soviet" government; it was, and it was meant to be, a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.

Ron Tabor
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