The Most Intransigent of Bolsheviks

Gavril Miasnikov, the Workers Group and the Degeneration of the Russian Revolution

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Gavriil Il'ich Miasnikov is the name of an oft-forgotten Bolshevik. A metal worker from the Urals, Miasnikov was nothing if not an intransigent revolutionary. His life represented in many ways the best of revolutionary socialism; he helped establish both factory committees and Soviets, and was involved in the execution of the Tsar's brother, Grand Duke Michael. He was both ally and critic of Lenin and Trotsky, a fiery enemy of Zinoviev, friend to Karl Korsch, Ruth Fischer and French Anarcho-Syndicalists. He was expelled from the Bolshevik party, labelled mad, tortured, and sent into exile. Like so many other revolutionaries, Miasnikov ended his days in a Stalinist prison.

Gavril's convictions placed him in permanent opposition to the powers that be. He believed that no one had the right to decide what was right for the working class other than the workers themselves, his own party included. He was the founder of the Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party, a small opposition within the Bolsheviks that formed its own party when expelled. The Workers Group is often overshadowed by the legacy of the Workers Opposition, the Democratic Centralists, and the Left Opposition. They are perhaps little known given the groups marginal relationship to the heights of the new Soviet state, however the story of the Workers Group proves their relevance to the Russian working class in its early struggle against Communist autocracy. While other oppositions were still whispering their criticisms in party meetings, the Workers Group was in the factories calling workers to action.

Unlike the other oppositions, the Workers Group were defined by their near exclusive composition as proletarians, and their early, clear sighted opposition to the degeneration of the Communist movement. Most importantly, they looked to mobilising the workers themselves as the only force capable of challenging the degenerating situation both abroad and in Russia. By looking at Miasnikov's life, we can establish a timeline that places him as an important, if undervalued, independent figure in the history of the Communist movement. This allows us also to explore the wider revolutionary situation, painting a picture that highlights turning points and political lessons for modern revolutionaries.

A life that touched many revolutionary threads

On the 25th of February 1889, Gavril Miasnikov (alternate spelling Gavril Ilyich Myasnikov) was born in Chistopol, Russia. Little is known of Miasnikov before he turned 16 in 1905; the same year as the first rehearsal of the Russian Revolution. He was already working in a factory in the city of Perm, situated in the Urals. The Urals are a mountainous region stretching from the north to the south across western Russia. Here Miasnikov was apprenticed as a metalworker. During the 1905 uprising, he helped establish a local soviet in Motovilikha, one of the larger districts of Perm and a basis of metalworking industries. In 1906 he joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, but was promptly arrested during the Tsars crackdown and exiled to Siberia. He would remain there for seven years, spending his late teens and early twenties doing hard labour. During this period he was incredibly oppositional to the situation . Over the seven years Gavril went on hunger strike for a total of seventy-five days, he was constantly beaten for talking back to the guards, and even managed to escape three times. Each time he managed to re-join the Bolshevik underground, only to be captured and arrested again.

By 1917, Miasnikov was free from jail, at home working in the factories of Motovilikha when the February revolution broke out. Once again, he threw himself into activity and helped es-

tablish factory committees and re-establish the local Soviet, where he was elected as a delegate. From here he was sent as a delegate to the Third National Congress of Soviets, held on the 10th-18th of January 1918. Representing the Urals region, Miasnikov voted with other revolutionaries to dissolve the Constituent Assembly and to establish the Soviets as the singular political power across Russia.

It was shortly after the Third Congress that the Soviet government signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. The treaty signed over control of large swathes of territory, including the Baltic States; Poland, Estonia, Belarus,Finland, Latvia and Ukraine, to German control in order to achieve a break in the fighting. The logic was that this would allow 'breathing space' for the consolidation of Soviet power. The loss of Ukraine however, meant the most fertile region in the Russian empire fell into enemy hands, and the crushing of its newly established Soviets.

At this point Miasnikov first became recognised as an oppositionist fighter inside the Bolshevik party. During a regional Party conference in Perm, he openly spoke in opposition of the treaty (Avrich, Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin). His positions aligned with the 'Left-Communists', such as Bukharin, who argued that the Treaty was a capitulation to imperialism and would discourage world revolution. The Left-Social Revolutionary Party held a similar position; in fact they were so adamant upon it that they resigned from the newly formed Soviet Government and launched a campaign against the Bolsheviks. Prior to this, the Left-SR's had been the only party power sharing with the Bolsheviks. Anarchists by and large also supported a position of defensive revolutionary war. There were, of course, nuances amongst the various anti-Brest-Litovsk revolutionaries; some believed the Red Army should be sent to Germany to immediately help overthrow the Kaiser. Others, such as Stukov and many anarchists believed that only the people in arms could resist foreign invasion in a defensive partisan war (Avrich, Anarchists in the Russian Revolution). To these revolutionaries it was vital the workers themselves were in arms, not a standing army. It was such a position that led the anarchist Nabat in the Ukraine to encourage the partisan model of the Insurrectionary Army, which Left SRs also participated in (Avrich, Anarchists in the Russian Revolution). In some regions, such as Siberia, local Soviets even refused to acknowledge the treaty, instead declaring they were still at war! (Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin). Miasnikov himself belonged to the 'people in arms' tendency, arguing against signing the treaty in favour of partisan 'revolutionary war.'

In 1918, Miasnikov gained further notoriety. On the 12th of July he led a group of fellow workers to the apartments of the Grand Duke Michael, the Tsar's younger brother. Presenting forged "Cheka" documents, they arrested and then executed the Duke. The local President of the Perm Party branch decried the actions as vigilante, but there is evidence to suggest this was a 'secret mission' given to Gavril by Lenin himself. (Avrich, Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin) In fact, Miasnikov wrote a book on the events leading up to, and the execution of the Duke. However it remains to be translated from Russian.

There is little record of Miasnikov's actions during the Civil War period. We can only assume that he fell back into line with party discipline, and probably remained in Perm continuing with Party work in the factories. Emerging from the utter chaos of the struggle against reaction in 1920, the situation in Russia had become incredibly dire; production was devastated, masses of workers had abandoned the cities, the economy barely functioned. The Soviets had become 'hollow shells.' Not only had many ceased to meet, those that did met at far less frequent intervals. Far fewer workers participated, and many of the most politically active had died in the Civil War. Between 1917 and 1920, 7.5 million Russians died of cold, hunger and poverty, compared to the four million

who died from the fighting during the First World War. (Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin) To the majority of the Bolshevik party, such a situation meant they were faced with a dilemma; only the dictatorship of the communist party as the 'advance elements' of the class could bringing discipline to bear on the peasants, petty bourgeois and non-Bolshevik elements amongst the workers. This was seen as the only stop gap to guarantee socialism until the revolution spread to the advanced industrial countries.

At the Eighth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, held in Moscow between the 18th and 30th of March, 1918, Lenin admitted that "the Soviets…are in fact organs of government for the working people by the advance section of the proletariat, not by the working people as a whole"; this was the same congress at which Zinoviev had declared that "the dictatorship of the working class can be realised only through the dictatorship of its vanguard, the Communist Party" (Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin). This theoretical admission can be seen reflected in the shifting nature of the party base. By September 1920 out of a total of 35, 226 party members, 6441 members were part of the Red Army (only 2500 of these were active troops), 9684 were employed in government administration, 1930 were Party organisers and 1042 were Trade Union officials and accounting staff! (Pirani, The Russian Revolution in Retreat) Nearly 20,000 members out of 35,000 were not directly involved in the productive process. The material basis of the party had begun to shift towards perpetuation of its own interests, identified with the Soviet state, rather than those of the workers. Even Trotsky had identified that such tendencies existed since the very beginning of the revolution, but now the ideological degeneration of the party had begun in earnest. Not all revolutionaries had treated this as inevitable however.

In the leadup to the Ninth Party Congress in March, 1920, Miasnikov was tasked with running the Perm branch propaganda department, and had been promoted to the local Party Committee. It was at the Ninth congress Miasnikov realised the level of degeneration that had been reached within the Party itself. Over the century since the Russian revolution, theorists have pointed to many dates as the "moment of the fall" in the Bolshevik revolution, suggesting as many reasons as there are moments. For those more inclined to the ideas of self-management this is identified as early as the First Congress of Economic Councils in 1918, or the introduction of One Man Management and Taylorism (1920). To others international factors are the defining moment; such as the defeat of the March Action in Germany (21), the suppression of Kronstadt (21), the banning of factions (21) all the way to Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR in 1927.

Miasnikovs view however was unique; he identified the Ninth Congress of the Bolshevik Party in 1920 as the beginning of the end of the revolution. In his own words:

> "The offensive of the global bourgeoisie against the Russian proletariat had shifted the balance in the relations between class forces and moved it from the proletariat to the petty bourgeoisie. This is what has produced this petty bourgeois coup d'état. The decision of the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) dissolved the few Soviets of Workers' Deputies that still existed. The proletariat was demoted from its rank of dominant class; the Soviets of Deputies of Workers' and Peasants', the cornerstone of the November Revolution, the "essential nucleus of the Workers' State" (Programme of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)), were dissolved and replaced with bureaucracy." (Draft Platform for the Communist Workers International)

It was Miasnikov's understanding that the bureaucracy had seized power and established the power of the Party over that of the working class. When Gavril returned to Perm from the 9th Congress, he went to war against the party bureaucracy, denouncing the Bolsheviks flaws openly to both his branch and to his fellow workers in the factories. In Miasnikovs mind, only transparency and accountability could guarantee Soviet democracy.

Thus it was at the end of the civil war that Miasnikov really came into his own as a revolutionary. At the time alone, he demanded restoration of party democracy, which had already become significantly restricted, complete autonomy for the Soviets, and freedom of speech. Already making similar demands, but far more organised, were the Workers Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. These two groups existed as the major factions in the party. Others thought came and went, such as Peniuchkins "Soviet Party" formed in 1921, and promptly suppressed by the Cheka, the Soviet secret police. Miasnikov however refused to join any of these factions for a number of reasons. The Workers Opposition was largely based upon the union bureaucracy (Shliapnikov, Medvedev, Lutovinov), and its spokespeople were middle-class intellectuals such as Kollontai. The main platform of their opposition was that the Trade Unions should handle economic production. Lenin dismissed their ideas as 'anarcho-syndicalist deviation.' This was despite the fact that the anarcho-syndicalists opposed the Trade Unions, and were instead focused upon building the factory committees!

Representing the other main oppositionists, the Democratic Centralists, Misha Shapiro argued that the Workers Oppositions programme only took control of production from the hands of the party bureaucracy and gave it to the trade union bureaucracy (Ciliga, Lenin, Also;). It was meaningless if the workers themselves did not control production. Another Democratic Centralist, Valerian Ossinky, had warned in 1918 "if the proletariat itself does not know how to create the necessary prerequisites for the socialist organisation of labour, no one can do this for it… socialist organisation will be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all; something else will be — state capitalism." (Kommunist, No 2 April 1918) Despite these insights, the Democratic Centralists had little to offer. Their platform was based entirely around renewing democracy within the party. Ossinky himself ended his days killed in a party purge in 1938.

At the time, Miasnikovs main contention with the Workers Opposition was on the Trade Union question. His position on the unions at this stage was rather ambiguous; in an article entitled The Same, Only a Different Way (1920), he critiqued the unions as not representing the interests of all workers, rather just workers gathered in a particular industry or trade. The unions had never played a huge role in Russian social life, and now after the revolution, they now found themselves with nothing useful to do. At this point he saw no major role for them in either managing production, as the Workers Opposition suggested, nor as a 'transmission belt' to the party, or a defensive mechanism for the workers against the bureaucracy, as Lenin had considered them. Rather, he advocated maintaining the unions purely on the rather weak basis that foreign socialists would be opposed to their dissolution.

In his analysis of the practical role for trade unions, Miasnikov's position has been associated with that of German Communists in the ultra-left KAPD. Though similar on the surface, the critiques offered by the Germans were made under rather different circumstances and for rather different reasons than Miasnikovs. During the German revolution unions, much more integrated into the state and society, were largely counter-revolutionary organisations. They mobilised workers to defend Social Democracy (and thus the capitalist state), and in defense of sectoral interests rather than the proletariat as a whole. The traditional trade unions had been shaped

by the nature of their existence under capitalism, or so the argument went; the union's role was to negotiate between Capital and Labour — as such, unions and their leaders had an inherent interest in maintaining the wage-labour relationship. The KAPD's position was to therefore abstain from participating in the unions. Miasnikov, however, believed that communists should continue to participate within them so long as international capitalism had not been overcome. In the eyes of the KAPD, factory committees, formed during the revolutionary upsurge, stood in stark contrast to the unions, and they sought to organise these committees into the AAUD — essentially still a union, but based on workplaces, not trade or industry — and bring all workers across during the revolutionary struggle. Lenin was fiercely critical of this union abstentionism in his pamphlet Left-Wing Communism, aimed not only at he KAPD but the English and Italian Left-Communists and argued that communists should participate in unions rather than surrender the influence over the mass of workers to reformist leaders.

When it came to the peasant question, Miasnikov advocated a position that was somewhere between the anarchists and the Right Opposition. Similar to the anarchists, he believed that peasants should be encouraged to form their own unions and advocate for their collective interests, thus increasing their tendencies towards co-operation and solidarity (while disciplining, or preventing the emergence of rich peasants through Soviet policy). He argued that the peasants could only be won over slowly, not by forced collectivisation or by allowing them to become exceedingly rich, but by developing productive forces and slowly proving socialism could make their lives easier;

> "Our socialist revolution will destroy petty bourgeois production and ownership not by declaring socialisation, municipalisation, nationalisation, but by a conscious and consistent struggle of modern methods of production at the expense of outdated, disadvantageous methods, by the progressive introduction of socialism. This is exactly the essence of the leap from capitalist necessity to socialist freedom." (Miasnikov, Manifesto of the Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party)

At this stage Miasnikov also proposed that ultimately, production and consumption would be best managed by independent Soviets, ones that allowed full freedom of speech, assembly and election of all workers' parties.

Finally, in contrast to the Workers Opposition and the Democratic Centralists, Miasnikov didn't seek resolution to these mistakes of the party just by internal political debate. In the best tradition of revolutionaries he turned to mobilising the workers. He continued to speak openly at his factory and in the local Soviet about the problems of the party, while still maintaining loyalty to the Bolsheviks. For this, he was recalled to Petrograd in 1921 so he could be kept under the eye of the Party hierarchy. When he arrived, he found that not everything was as it appeared:

> "When I came to Petrograd, the city was in a festive mood… Petrograd industry was beginning to breathe freely etc. But this was only Potemkin villages. Upon closer examination, I began to see that…all was not well in Petrograd. Mills and factories were constantly on strike, the Communist influence was lacking and the workers had no sense of participation in government. It seemed far away and was not their own. In order to get something from it, they had to exert pressure; without pressure nothing could be gotten…" (Quoted in The Guillotine at Work, G.P Maximoff)

Miasnikov here refers to the burgeoning strike wave of early 1921. The influence of the Bolsheviks had begun to wane, and some workers instead began to look to the agitation of left Mensheviks, Left SRs and the anarchists. Lenin, previously more considered in his politics, began to conflate these groups with counter revolutionaries in order to justify their suppression (Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin). But despite repression of political opposition, the strike wave continued.

> "In Moscow, Petrograd, in the Ural region, in all factories, the workers now show keen distrust of the Communists. Non-partisan groups gather... but no sooner does a Communist approach and the groups scatter or change the topic. What does this mean? In Izhorsky Plant the workers expelled all the Communists from their meeting, including those who work in the plant! On the very eve of what was virtually a general strike in Petrograd (the one immediately prior to Kronstadt) we did not even know that this strike was about to come off although we had Communists in every department." (Miasnikov, quoted in The Guillotine at Work, G.P Maximoff)

Though these quotes could be read as someone interested in fostering rebellion against the Communist Party, it is worth remembering Miasnikovs deep devotion to the Bolsheviks at the time. He sought a way to fix the divorce between the Party and the workers, not to exaggerate it. Miasnikov further noted that the workers had nicknamed the "Communist Cells" in the factories as the "Communist sleuths." Clearly, by 1921, the level of distrust towards the Bolsheviks and their methods had already become deep. He believed that the same methods which had been used to repress the bourgeoisie in 1918–1920 were now deployed against the workers;

> "To break the international bourgeoisie , is all very well, but the trouble is that you lift your hand against the bourgeoisie and you strike the worker. Which class now supplies the greatest number of people arrested on charges of counter-revolution?" (Quoted in The Guillotine at Work, G.P Maximoff)

So instead of keeping quiet, Gavril denounced the local Party leadership for living lavishly while the workers of Petrograd went hungry! Supposedly, the Party needed to maintain an utter dictatorship in order to keep the masses fed, and yet a disproportionate amount of food found its way into the hands of the party cadre. It was Zinoviev in particular that Miasnikov had it out for, sickened by his debauchery and corruption:

> "The party rank and file are permitted to speak of the peccadillos, the very little sins; but one must keep quiet about the larger ones. Responsibility before the Central Committee? But there is Comrade Zinoviev, one of the 'boys.'" (Quoted in The Guillotine at Work, G.P Maximoff)

By Miasnikovs account, while the workers of Petrograd were going hungry, Zinoviev and the local party committee had holed themselves up in a hotel indulging in excess. They were drinking, partying, eating far more than the average worker had access to, and abusing the use of the Party owned private transport around the city. As a Communist, Miasnikov wanted the Party committee to be held accountable to the workers.

In turn, Zinoviev was enraged by Miasnikovs insubordination. In front of a conference of three party districts he told Miasnikov; "You'd better stop talking or we shall have to expel you from the party. You are either a Social-Revolutionist or a sick man." The two would have it out for each other for many years to come.

In March 1921, Miasnikov found himself very much alone. Just as he had supported the striking workers of Petrograd, he was almost alone amongst the Bolsheviks (the party membership in the Kronstadt Naval Base itself excepted) in refusing to denounce the Kronstadt rebellion. Trotsky railed that the sailors of 1921 were not the sailors of 1917, that they were spurred on by counter-revolutionary conspiracies. But as Victor Serge pointedly asked, "the party of 1921 – was it the same as that of 1918?" (Victor Serge, Memoirs). Miasnikovs position even separated him from the Workers Opposition, who mobilised to fight against the rebels.

While the Workers Opposition, alongside the other Bolsheviks, fought their own comrades and, in effect, sealed their own fate, Miasnikov wrote to newspapers across the country proclaiming that the rebellion represented the deep need for reform of the relations between the Soviets and the Party. Lenin commented that the uprising was a "flash that illuminates" (Kronstadt, Lenin), yet his only solutions were bureaucratic. Beleaguered by problems on all fronts, many revolutionaries both in Russia and abroad were sympathetic to the reasons why the Bolsheviks continued to use authoritarian methods to hold onto power – but the suppression of Kronstadt was something else. The Party press itself blatantly lied about the demands of the workers and sailors, and the leadership of the Party refused to negotiate with the rebels.

By now, the party leadership were exasperated with Miasnikov; it was proven that they could not keep his mouth shut, and so sent him back home. The leadership believed he would cause them less trouble in Perm than in Petrograd, where there was already so much rebellion. So upon his return to the Urals, Miasnikov set to work agitating his local branch in rebellion against the central authority, and agitating amongst the workers in the factories. A key demand became freedom of speech. This earnt Lenin's ire; admittedly, in the opinion of Serge, Gavril had formulated this demand in a liberal manner; he wanted freedom of speech for "everybody, from the Anarchists at one extreme to the Monarchists at the other" (Serge, Memoirs of a Revolutionary).

Miasnikov believed that the workers would not be deceived by counter-revolutionary forces should even the Whites be allowed to propagate their ideas. He was, somewhat fairly, denounced as an idealist. Lenin addressed him in a personal letter dated the 1st of August, 1921; "Freedom of press in the RSFSR surrounded by bourgeois enemies everywhere means freedom for the bourgeoise…. We do not want to commit suicide." Not even the anarchists advocated freedom of the press for the bourgeois. However, he quickly came around to acknowledging the class basis of the demand – and he still held that all revolutionary workers parties and organisations deserved freedom of the press. Gavril retorted to Lenin in a public letter: "You say that I want freedom of the press for the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, I want freedom of the press for myself, a proletarian, a member of the party for fifteen years!"

Miasnikov decided enough was enough;

> "A special type of Communist is evolving. He is forward, sensible, and what counts most, he knows how to please his superiors, which the latter like only too much. Whether this Communist has influence amongst workers is of slight concern to him. All that counts is his superiors being pleased." (Quoted in G.P Maximoff, The Guillotine at Work)

Soon after his dispute with Lenin, Miasnikov began to formally organise his opposition within the party. By this stage the Party had already banned factions. Kronstadt had taken place during a Party congress, where faced with rebellion across the country the Party had decided to submit to strict executive discipline. The paranoid clinging to power had only been exacerbated by the failure of the March Action in Germany, seen by many as the last hope for revolution abroad.

With the other factions outlawed. Gavril knew he was playing with fire. Nevertheless, he began to find allies for what would become the "Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party". The idea of the faction was that it intended to be legal, above ground and a loyal opposition internal to the party. He found friends primarily amongst former members of the Workers Opposition. There was one key difference however; they were almost exclusively the actual workers from the faction, rather than the intellectuals or union bureaucrats.

In February 1922, Miasnikov was expelled from the Bolshevik party. In fact, he was the first person to be expelled from the Party following the banning of factions. Despite their differences, Shlyapnikov was one of the only Bolsheviks to come to his defence.

Less than a week later, Shliapnikov drafted the "Appeal of the 22" of which Miasnikov was a signiator. Twenty-two oppositionists, all long-standing members of the Bolshevik Party, went above the heads of their own organisation by addressing an open letter to the executive of the Comintern. The letter attacked the strategy of the United Front, claiming that it reflected the Party's new composition "40% worker and 60% non-proletarian". They also complained that all criticisms of the oppositionists, intended to "bring the proletarian masses closer to the government [are] declared to be "anarcho-syndicalism," and its advocates are persecuted and discredited." This was in part a reference to Miasnikov himself. Further, worker spontaneity was suppressed, party members were not always allowed to elect their own leadership, and finally, workers disgusted by the careerism already evident were abandoning the Party. (Shliapnikov et al, Appeal of the 22)

Though the Comintern commission rejected the appeal, workers in Perm did not. At the factory where Miasnikov worked, a new workers committee was elected, with a majority that took an oppositionist line. They even passed a resolution in favour of the appeal of the 22. Furthermore, a section of the Bolshevik Party also issues a public denunciation of Party leadership and bureaucracy in the regime.

The Appeal of the Twenty-Two, and Miasnikovs "misdeeds" were discussed at the Party's 11th Congress, held between the 27th of March and the 2nd of April, 1922. The Twenty-Two were reprimanded, of which two were expelled from the Party. Trotsky declared that Miasnikov had "given aid to the enemy" by publishing his critiques of the Party. Following the Congress, Miasnikov was taken in by the GPU, the first Bolshevik prisoner in the Soviet Union. During the arrest an agent attempted to assassinate him, but failed. Once behind bars, Miasnikov declared an immediate hunger strike. He was released within the fortnight. (Avrich, Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin).

Following his incarceration, Miasnikov moved back to Moscow. Here he set about forming the Workers Group in earnest. A handful of workers, including Kuznetsov, who had been expelled at the eleventh Congress for signing the Appeal joined in formalising the Workers Group into an underground organisation. The attempts at above legal opposition had forced the clandestine strategy, but this did not stop Miasnikov and the new Workers Group from having influence on the life of the Bolshevik party. Their paper, "The Workers Road to Power" was primarily distributed amongst factory workers, but it also circulated amongst sections of the party. The

Workers Group held secret meetings with underground members of the Workers Opposition, led by Shlyapnikov. They were initially brought together by connections in the Metal Workers Union. While the activists from both oppositions often worked together on the shop floor, they struggled to find political agreement. Shlyapnikov chastised Miasnikov for effectively establishing a 'separate party', while Miasnikov considered the Workers Opposition too timid before the authoritarian party leadership.

They also fundamentally disagreed on the looming political question of re-organising production, central to the political programmes of both groups. As historian Barbara Allen, biographer of Shlyapnikov noted: "Myasnikov advocated soviets, the Workers' Opposition advocated unions. Shlyapnikov harshly criticised Myasnikov's plan for management through soviets, saying that, in essence, it meant the 'organisation of peasant unions'." (Barbara Allen, Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885–1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik) He worried that were the Soviets to run production, given the overwhelming peasant population in Russia, the state would fall under their class domination rather than that of the working class. These fundamental differences kept the two groups separate, although when the Workers Opposition completely collapsed many would find their way into the Workers Group. These included Mikhail Mikhailov; from the aerospace industry, A.I. Medvedev, G.V. Shokhanov and K.D. Radzivilov. (Pirani, The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920–24) Many of the Workers Oppositionists who moved over to the Workers Group did so because the Workers Group held a left-pole of attraction, while the Opposition moved rightwards to accommodate the positions of the Central Committee.

The next year, before the party's Twelfth Congress, held from April 17–25, 1923, Miasnikov had drafted the "Manifesto of the Workers' Group of the Russian Communist Party." In it the Workers Group criticised not only the bureaucracy in Russia, the degeneration of the Party, and the New Economic Policy (they called this the 'new exploitation of the proletariat'), but also the strategies and tactics of the Communist International. This was the first Part congress held after Lenin had been incapacitated by a stroke, and represented a pivotal turning point in the history of the Party.

The key to any chance of saving the Russian revolution had been the spreading of the revolutionary wave across international boundaries. Revolutionary Russia could not survive isolated. To that end, the Bolsheviks had established the Third International. Intended to bring together revolutionary socialist organisations across the globe (including some of the revolutionary syndicalists) by breaking with the reformism of the Second International, the Bolsheviks hoped that the Third would be a crucial weapon in spreading revolution.

However, as the Russian revolution became isolated, the Comintern began to rapidly impose Russian interests over those of other national sections. The Russians' revolutionary prestige only helped exacerbate their power over foreign sections. As time went on, this was opposed most stringently by the German and Italian sections, and the revolutionary syndicalist organisations like the Spanish CNT had refused to join near the outset (they instead formed their own International, the IWA). German left-communist Pfemfert warned, "if the Third International presents itself as the instrument of the central power of a particular country, then it will bear within itself the seed of death and it will be an obstacle to the world revolution." (Pfemfert, Lenin's Infantile Disorder)

So what did Gavril and the Workers Group make of the Comintern more broadly? It is hardly worth stating that he supported the organisation and its strategy. But they saw the role it came to fulfil similar to the way the Germans did; the Third International, by tying itself so tightly

to the regime in Russia, the strategies, tactics and rules of the Bolsheviks came to represent the interests of the Russian state, not the revolutionary workers of the world. Miasnikov explained;

> "The Third International, born in the torment of wars and revolutions, had in its hands all the ingredients it needed to make it the leadership of the proletariat, but, since it tied itself to the fate of the November Revolution in Russia, it became the International of the bureaucracy, whose ideals and special methods it soon adopted. It fights against the bourgeoisie and the Second International, not for a Workers' State, but for state capitalism, for a state and a bureaucratic rule with a one-party administrative system. It seeks to overthrow the bourgeoisie in order to replace it, not with the organised proletariat as a class, but with bureaucracy." (Miasnikov, Manifesto of the Workers Group)

The 'United Front' tactic, adopted in 1921, following the failure of the German Revolution, was of particular ire to Gavril. He castigated the Comintern executive for recommending that German Communists should make peace with the very same Social Democrats who had murdered Luxemburg and Liebknecht. "The tactic which must lead the insurgent proletariat to victory cannot be that of the socialist united front…The Russian proletariat has won, not by allying itself with the Social Revolutionaries, with the Populists and the Mensheviks, but by struggling against them.' He continues that 'collaboration with… enemies of the working class… is in open contradiction to the experience of the Russian revolution." This was not simply a platitude; rather, Miasnikov was pointing out that by imposing blanket rules based on the Russian experience, the Comintern was establishing dogma that would have negative consequences for the world communist movement.

> "The Comintern requires the communist parties of all countries to follow at all costs the tactic of the socialist united front, it is a dogmatic requirement which interferes with the resolution of practical tasks in accordance with the conditions of each country and undoubtedly harms the whole revolutionary movement of the proletariat." (Miasnikov, Manifesto of the Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party)

Miasnikov took particular aim at his old enemy Zinoviev; "You see comrade Zinoviev himself, who not long ago was inviting us to collaborate in the burial of the Second International, now invites us to a wedding feast with it." (Miasnikov, Manifesto of the Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party). Soon, all Comintern affiliated Parties were ordered to participate in parliament, regardless of national context. As the famous German astronomer and Marxist Anton Pannekoek pointed out, this meant that "discontented socialist groups were induced to join the Moscow International, attracted by its new opportunist parliamentarianism." (Pannekoek, Workers Councils)

Thus, in 1922, the German KAPD was rejected from the Comintern for refusing an order to merge with the KPD, the very organisation from which they had just been expelled! These ultra-left Communists refused to comply, and in line with their desperation to maintain the European revolutionary wave, established a "Communist Workers International" in 1922. However, this largely existed only on paper, with only German and Dutch Communist organisations joining (Richard Gombin, The Radical Tradition). Within a few years, the Comintern would also orchestrate the overthrow of the leadership of the Italian section from abroad. With a series of dubious

maneuvers, such as threatening to fire any party organiser paid a wage by the party, Gramsci and Comintern men were parachuted in, and the majority left-faction was effectively silenced.

The degeneration imposed upon the positions of the Comintern by the international situation had even further ramifications than mere political maneuvers and internal fighting between Communists. Anti-Imperialism took precedence over working-class revolution, in order to secure the Russians trade deals and weaken foreign military interests. When Ataturk massacred members of the Turkish Communist Party in 1921, the Soviet regime had stood by in silence. In 1922, the Soviet Government made a secret agreement with the Weimar Republic, whereby a training school for German officers was established in Russia, and several factories that produced shells and tanks for the German army. (Liebman, Leninism Under Lenin) Material circumstances had forced the Bolshevik hand; but playing both sides was an extremely dangerous game that involved sacrificing many international movements to Russian interests.

Later in 1922, with Gavril expelled from the Bolshevik Party, the Workers Group began to circulate a Platform. They demanded the expulsion of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin from the Central Committee. (Avrich, Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin) In the absence of Lenin, those who fought the hardest to silence criticism from the Workers Group were Trotsky and Zinoviev. The paranoia they stirred up resulted in Gavril being arrested, then exiled to Germany.

Nevertheless, the party could not stop copies of the Workers Groups manifesto being distributed across Russia, and even internationally. The small group began to grow; nearly 300 within only a few months, almost every member was an 'old Bolshevik' who had left the party. Nearly all of them were workers still engaged in production. The Workers Group were largely based in the factories, where they agitated and actively involved themselves in increasingly common strike waves of workers resistance. While some remnant sections of the Workers Opposition did involve themselves in the strikes, Isaac Deutscher notes that the Workers Group were the most important organisation involved in the agitation. At one point, they even won the loyalty of an entire Red Army Garrison in the Kremlin, which the government promptly moved to Smolensk (Avrich, Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin). Unlike other factions, the Workers Group built its strategy upon the realisation they could not win leadership of the Bolshevik Party, nor would doing so fix the problems Russia faced. Membership was allowed not only to workers, but dissident members of the Bolshevik Party were also allowed to 'dual card' in both organisations. Unlike the other oppositions who had been smashed, the Workers Group drew on the experience of many of its members during their period underground with the Bolsheviks in the struggle against the Tsar. A mixture of public and clandestine action allowed it to function more effectively than above ground groups, who suffered persecution at the hands of the GPU.

Dissident Yugoslavian Communist, Ciliga summarised the Workers Group and its positions thus:

> "Having put as the basis of its programme Marx's watchword for the 1st International — "The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves", the Workers Group declared war from the start on the Leninist concept of the 'dictatorship of the party' and the bureaucratic organization of production, enunciated by Lenin in the initial period of the revolution's decline. Against the Leninist line, they demanded organization of production by the masses themselves, beginning with factory collectives. Politically, the Workers Group demanded the control of power and of the party by the worker masses. These, the true political leaders of the coun-

> try, must have the right to withdraw power from any political party, even from the Communist Party, if they judged that that party was not defending their interests." (Lenin, Also; Ciliga)

While exiled in Germany, Miasnikov made contact with the KAPD, where they realised both the Workers Group and the German Left-Communists held similar positions on a number of issues. Contact was also made with the left wing of the Comintern approved KPD. He even attempted to convince Arkady Maslow of the KPD to join the Workers Groups foreign bureau. Maslow declined, however both the KAPD and the left-wing of the KPD agreed to help publish future Workers Group literature, even though it was banned in Russia.

With Miasnikov in Germany, in early 1923, N.V. Kuznetsov was elected to the leadership of the Workers Group. He held meetings with many former Workers Oppositionists attempting to win them over. From Germany, Miasnikov warned Kuznetsov that the Oppositionists they were attempting to win over should be made to understand that his former ally, Shylapiknov was weak and would, by this time, likely turn the dissident Workers Group members over to party leadership. (Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885–1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik, Barbara Allen) Kuznetsov also attempted to win over Alexandra Kollontai, but had very little luck in recruiting anyone who wasn't strictly proletarian. This was also probably reinforced by the now incredibly intense levels of surveillance by the GPU.

Within the year, a new wave of major strikes gripped the industrial centers of Russia, where the Workers Group set about agitating for political freedoms and proletarian democracy. For this, the Bolshevik Party labelled them "anti-communist" and ordered the GPU to smash them. Trotsky publicly went along with this, despite privately maintaining correspondence with some members of the Workers Group. When the GPU identified a Workers Group leader, they were either arrested or automatically dismissed from their job and expelled from the party and trade unions.

In response, workers in the factories and even rank and file in local party branches would often protest. As Simon Pirani notes, even protesting at this stage was extraordinarily brave, given how severe GPU repression had become. Labour activists, independents and those from opposition parties were often arrested and tortured. For an illustrative example, before her execution in 1921, anarchist Fanya Baron had been thrown into Butyrki prison alongside Left-SRs, Left-Mensheviks and independent activists. The prisoners had all been rounded up for their agitation within the labour movement. Prisoners were kept in solitary confinement and beaten. Women were housed with male common criminals. One particularly dire torture was the practice of stripping prisoners naked, placing them in a 'hole' outside — from which they could not climb out, then pouring cold water on them and leaving them overnight in the freezing temperatures. Ghost execution squads were another common torture technique. While the numbers of arrested labour activists may not have been astronomical, there can be no doubt that such intimidation had an effect on the limiting of working class dissent.

Yet in this context, the Workers Group sought not only to recruit, but to organise and activate the most brave and class conscious workers. They were most keen to include groups like the hundreds of Communist Party members from Moscow factories that had already been expelled for supporting and participating in strikes. These were class conscious workers thrown back into the mass by the party leadership. If the party did not organise the workers, then the Workers Group tried.

As it were, the Workers Group managed to build up a base in industry; key sites included the Russian-American instrument works, the Gosmoloko dairy, the Oktiabr' engineering factory in Bauman and the Moscow Heavy-Artillery Works. (Simon Pirani, The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920–24)
Miasnikov eventually wanted to return to Russia. Later in 1923 he contacted Zinoviev to ask if his presence in Russia would be tolerated. He received a guarantee that he would be safe, but upon arrival in Russia, he was promptly arrested by the GPU. "Iron Felix" Dzerzhinsky, head of the GPU, was there to personally oversee Miasnikovs arrest.

On the 28th of September twenty eight other members of the Workers Group were also arrested. 14 of these were expelled from the country, and the other 14 were reprimanded. Most of those expelled from the country constituted the organisation's leadership, including Kuznetsov. The GPUs final crackdown was prompted by the Workers Group call for a one day General Strike and mass protest in Moscow. They planned to lead the march brandishing a giant banner featuring Lenin's portrait, demanding a return to the radical positions of 1917.

The day after Miasnikov was taken, Shylapiknov dropped by his apartment for a casual visit and was also arrested on the spot by several GPU agents waiting to see who else would appear. (Allen, Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885–1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik) He was released a few days later, but a much darker fate awaited Miasnikov. Finding himself detained once more, he immediately declared a hunger strike. Within ten days, the GPU undermined his protest by force feeding. In a letter to comrade, Miasnikov noted "Only recently the "Pravda" characterized such treatment in Poland as a most barbarous and outrageous procedure. But that seems to refer only to the Polish bourgeoisie. When applied, however, in Tomsk it is not an outrage but the flower of proletarian communistic culture." On the thirteenth day of his hunger strike, the GPU dragged him from his bed at two in the morning. They took him straight to an insane asylum, where he was declared 'mad' for his political opposition to the regime.

> "Indeed, such proceedings are not practiced even by the Fascisti of Poland. They have not gone that far yet, but here the motto is: Whoever protests is crazy and belongs to the insane! Particularly when he is of the working class and has been a Communist for 20 years. The Fascisti do not seem ripe yet for this kind of proletarian ethics." (Quoted in Letters From Russian Prisons)

The tactic of labelling dissent would come to flourish in the Soviet Union as the regime became more authoritarian.

According to historians Paul Avrich and Simon Pirani alike, this was the crushing of the Workers Group. However, there is evidence to suggest the contrary. The Workers Group maintained a bureau in exile for a number of years, run by Kate Rumanova. In 1924, the GPU arrested a group of Red Army soldiers for meeting and discussing with members of the Workers Group, who had been banned from Moscow and outlawed. (Hebbes, The Communist Left in Russia After 1920) Hebbes also lists a number of incidents involving the Workers Group in 1924. These include a demonstration on the 7th of November in Moscow, where all participants were arrested. On December the 8th, the group published a leaflet attesting that 11 of its members, arrested without charge, had gone on hunger strike in the Urals. They demanded the reasons for arrest be made public, and a public trial. On December 27th, Workers Group members were exiled to Tschardynsk under GPU surveillance. Finally a number of Red Army soldiers were arrested by the

GPU accused of the "conspiracy" of drafting up documents that referred to the NEP as the 'New Exploitation of the Proletariat' (a Workers Group slogan) and declaring their solidarity with the persecuted Workers Group. This unit was disbanded and the dissidents moved to Smolensk.

In 1928, the Workers Group managed to hold an underground conference in Moscow. The surviving members voted on a proposal drafted by the so-called Group of Fifteen, led by Sapronov (a former member of the Democratic Centralists group). The proposal suggested that the members of the Group of Fifteen, the Workers Group, and the few remaining Workers Oppositionists unite around a common platform (which was extremely similar to all the positions of the Workers Group) and form a united Russian Communist Workers Party. The resolution was not adopted, however the conference agreed to turn the central bureau of the Workers Group into a "organising bureau for the Communist Workers Party of the USSR" (Oliver, The Bolshevik Left and Workers Power). Given that Workers Group documents from outside of Russia following this conference begin referring to the Communist Workers Parties of the USSR, we can assume this conference really did take place. Even if the number of participants was very small. Also, the Group did manage to publish the Workers Road to Power until 1930, and a number of articles that appeared in the press of both the KAPD and the Sylvia Pankhurts 'Workers Dreadnaught' in Britain.

According to Ciliga, there was also evidence of Workers Group activists in the prison in Vorkuta, a coal-mining city situated north of the Arctic Circle and possibly the coldest place in Europe. 25 individuals from the Workers Group, the Democratic Centralists, and Trotskyists united around a programme presented by the Workers Group and formed a Federation of Left Communists between 1933–37. The document Platform of the Fifteen; On the Eve of Thermidor was published internationally by Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch's group, Kommunistische Politik (Oliver, The Bolshevik Left and Workers Power).

Even if the Workers Group did continue to exist in the underground from 1923 onwards, the 'opposition' that came to play the most prominent role of resistance was that of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Formed in 1923, the Left Opposition took several years to develop a rank and file, which largely cohered out of the smashed remnants of the previous oppositions, dissident workers, then those like Trotsky who were dissatisfied in the bureaucracy. In 1926 the Left Opposition briefly joined with Kamenev and Zionviev, forming the United Opposition. In late 26, Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo alongside Kamenev, and in 1927 Trotsky, Zinoviev and 8000 other Oppositionists were expelled from the Communist Party. By 1929, Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union.

By the time the Left Opposition had cohered, the window for practical resistance to the authoritarian nature of the regime had basically closed. The Left Opposition did offer some resistance, certainly enough for the bureaucracy to purge the party following Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR in 1929. However the leadership of the Left Opposition challenged the dominant tendency in a manner largely internal to the party, which to Miasnikov, in practice amounted to near passive endorsement of the increasingly counter-revolutionary regime. Certainly, he saw no huge difference. In the introduction to The Latest Deception, he polemicised:

> "The Platform of the 83 (the Trotskyists and Zinovievists) criticise the "theory of building socialism in one country", and proposes, instead of Stalin's Five Year Plan with its 9% increase in industrial growth, its own Internationalist Five Year Plan with a target of 20% in growth. It would seem that an increase of 20% in industrial

> production is Internationalism, while an increase of 9% is 'the kind of conservatism that is typical of a petty nationalist spirit." (Miasnikov, The Latest Deception)

The Left Opposition itself was fractured, with internal debate centered around the form 'socialist accumulation' would take. Bukarhin and the so-called "Right Opposition" argued for a more steady approach, using market mechanisms to develop agricultural surplus, while the Left argued for large-scale collectivisation and mass investment in heavy industry. Stalin's "center" faction zig-zagged between the two positions, all the while solidifying the bureaucracy and its control of the 'Soviet' regime. When Stalin finally consolidated the center's control over the party and began mass forced collectivization, many communists, including a number of early Trotskyists, moved back to a position in favour of the regime. Having no clear analysis of the class nature of the Soviet Union, unlike early Left-Communists such as the Workers Group, they fell into believing that the USSR was still in some way still revolutionary.

While the Left Opposition went through its rise and fall, Miasnikov remained locked away. In 1927, he was released from the asylum-prison, conditional to refraining from political activity. Ever intransigent, he almost immediately joined anti-government protests. Supposedly, he was tipped off that he would be arrested by the GPU once again, and fled in the middle of the night, taking only a small briefcase of documents. However in his so-called ' Last Testament' (the transcript of an interview with the NKVD), Gavril suggests that the Central Bureau of the Workers Group asked him to flee the country, given that he had published a new subversive pamphlet he had written, smuggled out, and published close to the end of his incarceration. In theory, he was given the role of serving as the group's new international representative. He chained the Workers Group documents to his arm in a watertight briefcase, and swam across a river in the dead of night to cross the border. His escape led him to Persia, where he was continually harassed by police. At one point he was taken in by authorities, who handed most of the documents he rescued to the Soviet police. He did manage to retain a small number, but these were eventually stolen by a KGB raid on his apartment.

According to Malcolm Archibald, who translated Miasnikov's 'Last Testament', the destroyed documents included: "Concerning Classes in Contemporary Russia", "A Brief Critique of the Theory and Practice of the VKP(b) [AllUnion Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] and the Comintern", and "The Class Theory of the State of the USSR." There were also a number of letters of correspondence with Zinoviev, Bukharin, and a reply to a book written by Sorin on the Workers Group. Ultimately, much of the documentary history of the Workers Group was lost. Other texts, such as his autobiography, a book-length text regarding why he killed the Romanoff prince, "Liquidationism and Marxism", and "Victories and Defeats of the Russian Proletariat, or Who Betrayed October" potentially remain in the KGB archives, untranslated.

Finding his way to Turkey, Miasnikov lived in poverty for a number of years, trying to keep in contact with other Russian exiles through letters. In 1929 he managed to contact Trotsky through his son Lev Sedov, the pair by then in exile. Gavril and Trotsky met, and Trotsky lent him some money to help him get to France and back on his feet. Miasnikov presented Trotsky with a new pamphlet, "The Latest Deception", in which he laid out a theory of the USSR as being State Capitalist. He asked Trotsky to write a foreword, but Trotsky refused. After this, Trotsky would not even talk politics with Miasnikov. Truth be told, neither man had much love for the other; Trotsky had after all had not only helped crush the Workers Group but had been the chief 'prosecutor' in denouncing Miasnikov during the Parties 11th Congress (in turn Miasnikov refers

to Trotsky as "the most hardened of bureaucrats"). The only thing the pair really had in common by this point was their hatred of Stalin and their position to the Left of the Comintern.

During their period in opposition, Miasnikov and Trotsky had struck upon one similar idea; the founding of a new International to coordinate genuine revolutionary activity. In 1930, Miasnikov and the remnants of the Workers Group dreamt up a new "Communist Workers International." This was intended to unite all revolutionary Communist elements who had not succumbed to the programme of the Third. To the Workers Group and their theoretical International, the USSR would be recognised as State Capitalist, and they called for its overthrow by proletarians in 'another November.' However, in a somewhat contradictory manner, Miasnikov believed there was simultaneously the possibility of reform in the Soviet Union. This would however depend on the independent establishment of Socialism in other countries. As history would bear out however, it was Trotsky who managed to establish a new Fourth International, premised instead on his understanding of the USSR as a "degenerated workers state."

Trotsky's few spare pounds went some way towards helping Miasnikov escape Turkey. But far more help came from abroad. In Germany, a committee for his aid was established, headed by Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch. They tried to find him a home in Germany, but the government would not grant him a visa. In France however, Louise Sellier, head of the construction unions in the CGT petitioned the French government and managed to obtain him a visa.

Gavril managed to settle in Paris. Upon arrival he made contact with Proudhommeaux, the editor of the anarcho-syndicalist newspaper "L'Ouvrier Communiste." Proudhommeaux put him onto another anarchist named Zhigulev-Irinin, who organised work for him washing windows. Zhigulev-Irinin also published some of Miasnikovs writings in his paper, "The Voice of Labour." They fell out over personal matters (Gavril believed Irinin worked for the French secret service), and Gavril returned to metalworking in factories, where he became a member of the syndicalist CGTU and often participated in anarcho-syndicalist groups and events. However, he still maintained close contacts with the Communist movement. The impression is less that Miasnikov became an anarcho-syndicalist per se, as he clearly retained his Bolshevik politics, (his consistent defence of the concept of a workers state, for example) most likely he felt at home amongst a tendency focused on rank and file, industrial organising.

Now living and working in a stable location, he briefly took over the role of running the now renamed Communist Workers Party's International Bureau, however with the smashing of all opposition in Russia, the group did not last much longer. He finished the manuscript for "The Latest Deception" in 1931. The pamphlet contained a number of novel insights; besides describing the Soviet Union as a State Capitalist regime, Miasnikov argued that the working class had lost power at the 8th Congress of the Bolshevik Party in 1920. He pointed out that by the 9th, the Bolsheviks had begun heaping bureaucratic fixes upon bureaucratic fixes. The establishment of the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate was one such example. Intended to curb corruption, instead the new Inspectorate just exerted new powers over workers and peasants and developed self-serving interests. Not only that, but as many other Communists around the world had at least identified, the implementation of One Man Management was a further nail in the coffin. Miasnikov realised that this was the moment he had spiritually broken with the Bolshevik Party, though it took him years (and in fact expulsion) to break practically. Finally, he reflected that the creation of the Council of People's Commissars had been a mistake. Though at the time it did not seem threatening, establishing a body above the All-Russian Soviet Executive passed power over

the entire nation to a body that could become incredibly unaccountable during a revolutionary retreat.

Interestingly, Miasnikov and the Workers Group, perhaps under the influence of their combination with other Left Communist forces in Russia, had changed their tune on a number of issues. While they still believed Soviets should control production, they should not control distribution, which was tasked to the co-operatives. Also, the trade unions should be allocated the "functions of the states bureaucratic control apparatus, normally exercised by the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate." Furthermore, the Council of People's Commissars should be abolished, as they were "carbon copies of the cabinets of bourgeois states."

In 1934, repression struck again. This time Miasnikov was arrested by the French police and accused of 'meddling in French internal affairs.' He was ordered to leave the country, but the secretary of the CGT stepped in and managed to overturn the ruling. For the next few years he was in and out of work, variously employed as a mechanic and working in a fabric dye factory. During this time he finished a number of works about socialist transition, the Russian revolution, and a history of the labour movement in his hometown.

During the German occupation, Gavril was arrested while at work. Supposedly, he had gone to the Soviet embassy to enquire about his sons, though it's also possible he attempted to enlist in the Red Army in order to fight the fascists. Either way, this didn't come to be and he was kept under Gestapo watch — so he escaped to an unoccupied zone, where he was promptly arrested by the French police! They accused him of not leaving the country when ordered in 1941, then when realising he was legally pardoned, they accused him of terrorism. He was sent to a concentration camp in Toulouse, before managing to escape in August 1943. He hid in Paris until Liberation from the Nazi regime.

Throughout his period in France, Gavril made friends with other Communist exiles like Victor Serge and Ruth Fischer, and also re-married. The end of Miasnikov's life, however, is tragic. In 1946 he was lured back to the Soviet Union by authorities — though it is also possible that he was kidnapped. If he was lured, it may have been on the promise of seeing his ex-wife, Daia Grigor'evna, and his sons Unbeknownst to Miasnikov, they had already died while fighting for the Red Army in WWII. Following their deaths his ex-wife had a breakdown and spent time in an asylum, where she slowly recovered.

Miasnikov didn't tell his friends he was leaving France; he simply boarded a plane and flew back to Moscow. He was promptly arrested and sent to the infamous Butyrki Prison. Here, he gave a testimony that has been translated and published as the "Last Testament of the Left Communist Gavriil Miasnikov." Authorities in the Soviet Union notified Miasikovs estranged Russian wife that he had returned to the USSR, and she was told she could visit him in prison. She arrived to find he had been shot, on the 16th of November, 1946, by Soviet authorities. He was murdered the day before she arrived to see her husband.

Reflection on the Workers Group

It is undeniably admirable that the Workers Group of the Russian Communist Party consistently turned to the remaining layers of proletarians to solve the massive issues they faced. To Miasnikov and the Workers Group, the proletariat, no matter how small, remained an active force in history, capable of reshaping its social environment through action. It is likely the Work-

ers Group was most likely so keenly committed to this Marxist conception because of its class composition; thoroughly based in the working class, they were not so likely to believe the abstract assurances of revolutionary authenticity mouthed by the intellectuals and bureaucrats. In fact, much of Miasnikov's criticism throughout The Latest Deception is aimed at exactly how the bureaucracy used "criticism and self criticism" to cover itself from any meaningful democratic reform. However, it was not through a conscious development that the Workers Group was so thoroughly based in the class; it was rather the more spontaneous product of the developing resistance within the working class itself, that found its voice in leading figures like Gavril Miasnikov.

Interestingly, for a group that suffered so much persecution, the Workers Group took a long time to properly critique the Cheka/GPU. They did eventually call to "liquidate the institution for the secret repression of workers" as part of an 8 point programme in the 1931 pamphlet "The Latest Deception." The critique they offered of the GPU however was rather weak, compared to other organisations challenging the rule of the secret police. For example, the Left SR Dukhovsky, during his brief period as a high-ranking official in the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, had acknowledged the use of the Cheka was legitimate. However, he directly critiqued the Cheka's method of punishing groups of people based on abstractions like class origin. He insisted that proletarian justice still required it to address the crimes of the individual (Farber, Before Stalinism, The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy). Part of a commission that approved Cheka executions, he often voted against the will of his Bolshevik counter-parts. That the Cheka were appointed by the central government, and not by the Soviets themselves placed the repressive apparatus above the working class. The independent power invested in the Cheka can be contrasted to the Kontrrazvedka of the Insurrectional Army of the Ukraine, who served a similar role. When the actions of the Kontrrazvedka got out of hand, a civilian congress of Soviets demanded their reform and limitations of their roles, and this reform was immediately carried through (Nestor Makhno In the Russian Civil War, Michael Malet). Though this reform was at a different scale to Russia, implemented only in Left Bank Ukraine, it nonetheless suggests that while repressive institutions may have been justified and indeed, inevitable, other options still existed in terms of their structure and limitations.

At no point is today's working class served by airbrushing the repression of workers by the Bolshevik regime, either in its earlier days or during the Thermidor. Dismissing the early mistakes that were identified by militants such as Miasnikov avoids asking hard questions that future socialist experiments will undoubtedly face. In a world still ravaged by capitalist barbarity, any new socialist attempt will have to contend with at least a period of isolation and invasion. We will have to draw lessons about what is needed to hold on until the revolution spreads its international wings. It is in studying the past we seek not to criticise not only the counter-revolution that could have been, but the counter-revolution that was. The story of Gavril Miasnikov and the Workers Group is one we can draw from. It was one of the many threads of working class opposition to what became the new state capitalist regime, imposed at the point of the sword first wielded as a weapon by the working class itself, the Bolshevik Party.

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