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The Degeneration of the Russian Revolution

The Date Question

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Workers' rule is democratic or does not exist

I am discussing the date of an event, which by any account is well in the past. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Yet a key issue remains. The working class is different from any other would-be ruling class. The traditional capitalist class does not need to directly manage the state; it only needs to maintain its stocks and bonds, its forms of private ownership, regardless of whether the state is democratic or totalitarian. But the workers do not have stocks or bonds; they must rule collectively over an interconnected industrial economy. The capitalists do not need to plan their overall economy, because it follows the self-organization of the marketplace, the “invisible hand” which balances supply and demand through the booms and busts of the business cycle. But the collectivist economy of the workers must be planned, and planned democratically, to deliberately serve the needs of the great mass of people. A state minority can substitute for the capitalists, but not for the working class. The working class must rule directly, democratically, and consciously, or it does not rule at all.

The Bolsheviks thought that they could stand in for the working class (which is not at all the same as a political minority thinking that it has good ideas of which it hopes to persuade the workers). Trotsky thought that the totalitarian bureaucracy could stand in for the party. The dissident Trotskyists criticize Trotsky and his orthodox followers for not seeing that this cannot be, a bureaucracy cannot “represent” the class it oppresses and exploits. But then they claim that the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky was able to “represent” the workers in power, and even that Stalin’s bureaucracy was able to “represent” the workers (maintain a “workers’ state,” the “dictatorship of the proletariat”) until 1929, or 1936, or 1939—years, decades, after the workers had lost all power. It is only by the complete rejection of all such elitism and substitutionalism that a revolutionary movement can succeed.

How did the Russian revolution go from an extreme popular democracy to the horrors of Stalin’s totalitarian state capitalism? The Russian revolution of 1917 involved vast numbers of people. It included almost all the working class of the cities, most of the peasants, and the mostly-peasant ranks of the military (swollen by the needs of World War I). The working people created delegated representational councils (soviets), along with factory committees, unions, regimental councils, peasant village councils, and cooperatives. There was an enormous growth of left-wing parties and organizations with their newspapers, leaflets, and public speakers, who competed with each other, and allied with each other, in a great popular democracy. These parties themselves had a lively internal life, with competing internal caucuses and semi-autonomous locals; this was true of the Bolshevik Party, whose internal life was far from later “centralism,” whatever Lenin wanted. The overthrow of the semi-feudal monarchy was done by the people in February, without organization by the parties. The overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government was done in October by an alliance of the Bolsheviks, the Left Social Revolutionaries (peasant populists), and anarchists. The two parties created a coalition government, which was generally supported by the anarchists.

Yet by the time of World War II, the Soviet Union was ruled by a meglomaniacal dictator, using a single legal party, with a prison gulag of slave labor camps. The state was structurally similar to Nazi Germany and had killed around twenty million people. HOW did the society get from one condition to the other? And WHEN did it change from one to the other?

These questions have been debated by various Trotskyists. This is especially true of the dissident Trotskyists who rejected Trotsky’s belief that Stalin’s regime was some sort of “workers’ state;” instead they believed (correctly, I think) that the ruling bureaucracy became an exploiting class. Anarchists and anti-statist Marxists have shown less interest in these topics. However, I believe that there is value for us libertarian socialists to discuss the topic, as I

will try to show. It raises the question of the relationship between Leninism and Stalinism. It involves the historical issue of the way the Russian anarchists related to the Bolsheviks.

For Trotskyists these topics are an issue because they want to show that Leninism was pro-workers's democracy. Therefore it is a problem for them how this good Leninism ended up in the evils of Stalin's rule. Anarchists and anti-statist Marxists do not have this problem, because we analyze Lenin's program as authoritarian from the start. This leads some to conclude, along with conservatives, that the October revolution was nothing more than a minority coup by the Bolsheviks, and that, therefore, Stalin was an inevitable outcome.

I do not wish to deny the authoritarian aspects of Lenin's politics. We need only to read his most libertarian works, such as *State and Revolution* or *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Fight It*, to see how his vision of socialism was based on the state monopoly capitalism of wartime Prussia, for example. Also, Lenin held an assumption that his party alone (or just he himself) knew the "scientific" Truth and alone embodied "proletarian consciousness," ideas which could justify its one-party rule. (For Lenin's authoritarianism, see, e.g., Brinton, 2004; Draper, 1987; Mattick, 2007; Taber, 1988; and especially, Farber, 1990.)

However, Lenin was different from, say, Mao Tse-Tung. Mao had the model of Stalin's Soviet Union as something to aim for. Lenin had to make things up as he went along. Had he known that his actions would result in something like Stalinist totalitarianism, he would have been horrified. At the end of his life he was appalled by the bureaucratization of the Russian state. He tried to change it, although his proposed methods would have been inadequate (demote Stalin, reorganize the bureaucracy, bring rank-and-file workers into the government). Possibly if the early Stalin had known what his actions would create, even he would have been horrified.

proletarian. (The U.S. ISO and Solidarity were also influenced by Shachtman's tradition.) He referred to "the counterrevolution of the Stalinist bureaucracy—roughly in the period between 1933 and 1936..." (1962; p. 62). This was the beginning period of the Great Purge Trials, which were to kill millions of people. However, what is significant to Shachtman was the transformation of the bureaucracy. At the beginning of this period, Russian officials were a mixture of promoted workers and left-over bourgeois (and Czarist) specialists. At the end of the purges, these officials had been killed or imprisoned, and a wholly new layer had been created, which owed its existence to Stalin's rule. This included the purging of the Communist Party. Not only were old oppositionists purged, even if they had capitulated years ago, but almost all of Stalin's supporters were purged! Just about anyone who had any connection or knowledge of the 1917 revolution, no matter how corrupt they had become, was purged. A whole new party was created, representing a whole new layer of society, a new ruling class.

The same period (but a little later) is seen as the final, counter-revolutionary, turning point by Walter Daum of the U.S. League for the Revolutionary Party (Daum, 1990). He prefers to call the system, "statified capitalism." However, he points to the end of the period of the purges, 1939, as the culmination of the bureaucratic counterrevolution. Shachtman and he are probably right that the purges resulted in the solidification of the new ruling class.

Daum argues that revolutionaries should not give up on a workers' institution until the last possible moment—and therefore the Soviet Union should be regarded as a "degenerated workers' state" up to 1939. The argument has a logical fallacy: the point when one should decide that the Soviet Union is not proletarian but capitalist is not necessarily the point when it actually turned from being proletarian to capitalist. The first is a subjective decision, the second is an objective fact.

the working class, a “degenerated workers’ state,” because industry was still nationalized. Orthodox Trotskyists continue to hold this opinion about the Soviet Union to this day, as well as similar views about China, Cuba, etc.

The unorthodox Trotskyist view of the “date”

Dissident Trotskyists reject this orthodox view. They brush over the fact that Lenin and Trotsky had instituted a one-party police state by the early 1920s. Instead they pick some later turning point in the history of the Soviet Union.

For example, there is Tony Cliff’s analysis of the Soviet Union as “bureaucratic state capitalist” (Cliff, 1970). Cliff is the theorist of the British Socialist Workers’ Party and its International Socialist Tendency, of which the U.S. International Socialist Organization has the essentially same politics. He declared that the 1929 inauguration of the first Five Year Plan meant the transformation of the Russian bureaucracy into a collective ruling class. Up to this point, there was still the widespread internal market of the N.E.P. period. But Stalin had defeated all possible oppositions within the party, including the “rightists” who supported the N.E.P. Now he began a vast program of nationalization of industry, of expanding the slave-labor penal colonies, and of forcibly collectivizing agriculture. The result was a terrific level of mass misery as the standard of living for workers and peasants was cut down, a big expansion of industrial production occurred, and agriculture was almost destroyed. This was, I agree, a turning point in the development of the Soviet Union, when state capitalism was definitely inaugurated—that is, when the bureaucratic state became the direct agent of capital accumulation.

A later turning point is focused on by Max Shachtman, who held that the Soviet Union did not become state capitalist but “bureaucratic collectivist,” a new type of society, neither capitalist nor

Early stages of repression

The October (or “Bolshevik”) revolution broke out in 1917. It would be a fallacy to regard it as a minority coup. It had the support of the big majority of workers and peasants, who had seized the factories and the landed estates. It was carried out by a united front of far-left groupings. At first it had a lively popular democracy of varying political trends. By the end of 1918, this had changed. Political repression, justified or not, had vastly increased. The Bolsheviks (now the Communists) ruled alone. The Cheka had been created as a political police force which could arrest, imprison, and kill without supervision. The factory councils were abolished. And the Civil War had broken out, which was also a war of foreign invasion. With that, the regime turned toward War Communism: extreme centralization of the economy and forced requisitioning of foodstuffs from the peasants.

This repression did not mean that the Soviet Union was totalitarian yet. Opposition parties and groups existed and were able to inconsistently organize and publish their press. There was a range of groups which supported the Communist side in the Civil War, regarding them as a step forward from Czarism, or at least a lesser evil to the counterrevolutionary, proto-fascist, White armies. This was true of almost all the anarchists. It was also true of the Left Mensheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries. The anarchist Makhno’s peasant army in the Ukraine made alliances with the Red Army to fight against the Whites.

Within the ruling Communist Party, opposition groups developed, from 1918 to 1921: the Left Communists, the Workers’ Opposition, the Democratic Centralists, the Workers’ Truth, and the Workers’ Group. These fought for the revolutionary democratic-libertarian ideals under which the revolution had been made.

It could be argued that the anarchists, say, were mistaken to be part of the October revolution and then to support the Red side of the Civil War, instead of condemning both sides. With the benefit

of hindsight, we know that the Communists ended up producing Stalinism, which was as bad, or even worse, than anything a White victory would have produced. Perhaps. But this assumes that the undemocratic, totalitarian, outcome was inevitable, and that, even if the anarchists had been better organized, it could not have been avoided. We do not know this.

I tend to regard 1921 as the fundamental turning point, when it can be definitively said that the working class had lost political power and was not going to get it back without a new revolution. At that time the Civil War was essentially over. Revolutions had broken out elsewhere in Europe (in Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe), as the Leninists had predicted, but these were all defeated. The European Social Democrats had played a key role in defeating the workers' revolutions and thereby isolating the Russian revolution in an impoverished, war-destroyed, country; the rise of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union is at least partially the fault of these self-described "democratic socialists"!

The Communists found themselves in a situation which they had not expected. The European revolution was defeated, yet they still held power in Russia. They had predicted that the defeat of the European revolutions would lead to their defeat in Russia. This did not seem to be happening. Actually it was happening, but in the form of an internal counterrevolution, rather than a counterrevolution from outside.

At the time, the economy was in shambles and there was widespread starvation. The Mensheviks, grew in size and influence. There was a wave of strikes in the big cities and peasant uprisings (not White forces) in the countryside. A rebellion at the Kronstadt naval base, influenced by anarchists, demanded a return to soviet democracy and greater freedom for the peasants and workers.

Under these conditions, decisions had to be made. Leading Communists proposed legalizing opposition socialist parties and groups which would abide by soviet procedures (Mensheviks, Left SRs,

anarchists). They suggested even forming a coalition government with them. However, this was the road not taken.

Instead, the Communists definitively outlawed all other parties and the anarchists, and any opposition newspapers. They banned all factions (caucuses) within the one legal party. They crushed the Kronstadt rebels and massacred the prisoners they took. They wiped out the Ukrainian anarchists. They ended War Communism and replaced it with a revival of the market for the peasants in particular, the New Economic Policy; but there was no attempt to encourage worker-run cooperatives (another part of the road not taken).

Whereas earlier repressions might have been justifiable as temporary expedients due to war or economic collapse, the validity of one-party rule was now official doctrine. Farber reviews the stages of Lenin's thinking on soviet democracy, concluding that we can "distinguish between Lenin's flawed conception of democracy, which he by and large upheld until at least the Spring of 1918, and the clearly anti-democratic perspective that, with his associates, he began to adopt shortly before and especially during the course of the Civil War. As we have seen, these anti-democratic views and practices fully crystallized in the period 1921–1923...." (Farber, 1990; p. 211)

Lenin died in 1923, leaving Stalin as the central figure in the state and party. While Lenin lived, Leon Trotsky had been one of the strongest supporters of the one-party police state, as can be seen in his response to Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (see Draper, 1987). But Trotsky now recoiled from the bureaucratic monstrosity he had helped to create. He began a career of opposition to the Stalinist state, which only ended with his murder by an agent of Stalin's. However, it is striking how easily Trotsky and his co-thinkers were routed by Stalin, who already had state power.

Programatically, Trotsky's opposition was limited, in that he still supported one-party rule until the mid 1930s. And until he died, he continued to argue that Stalin's regime was somehow the rule of