



RUSSIA: How The Revolution Was lost

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N200

Published by **Iva Valley Books**

2nd Floor, Labour House

Central Area-Abuja.

07037163465

Iva Valley Books

2ND FLOOR, LABOUR HOUSE, NLC

BUILDING, CENTRAL AREA , ABUJA

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Russia – How the Revolution was Lost

Chris Harman

First published in *International Socialism* 30, Autumn 1967.

1. The Two Revolutions

The period between the two revolutions of February and October 1917 was moulded by two concurrent processes. The first occurred in the towns, and was a very rapid growth of working-class consciousness. By the July days, the industrial workers at least seem to have arrived at an understanding of the different interests of the classes in the revolution. In the countryside, a different form of class differentiation took place. This was not between a propertied class and a class that could not even aspire to individual ownership of property. Rather it was between two property-owning classes. On the one hand the landowners, on the other the peasants. The latter were not socialist in intention. Their aim was to seize the estates of the landowners, but to divide these upon an individualistic basis. In this movement even Kulaks, wealthy farmers, could participate.

The revolution could not have taken place without the simultaneous occurrence of these two processes. What tied them together was not however an identity of ultimate aim. Rather it was the fact that for contingent historical reasons the industrial bourgeoisie could not break politically with the large landowners. Its inability to do this pushed the peasantry (which effectively included the army) and the workers into the same camp:

“In order to realise the soviet state, there was required the drawing together and mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historic species: a peasant war – that is a movement characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development – and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signalling its decline.” [\[1\]](#)

The urban insurrection could not have succeeded but for the sympathy of the largely peasant army. Nor could the peasants have waged a successful struggle unless led and welded together by a centralised, external force. In Russia of 1917 the only possible such force was the

organised working class. It was this possibility of drawing the peasantry behind it at the crucial moment that made it possible for the workers to hold power in the towns.

The bourgeoisie and its land-owning allies were expropriated. But the classes which participated in this expropriation shared no simple long-term common interest. In the towns was a class whose very existence depended upon collective activity. In the countryside a class whose members would only unite even amongst themselves momentarily to seize the land, but would then till it individually. Once the act of seizure and defence of that seizure was over, only external inducements could bind them to any State.

The revolution, then, was really a dictatorship of the workers over other classes in the towns – in the major towns the rule of the majority in Soviets – and a dictatorship of the towns over the country. In the first period of the division of the estates this dictatorship could rely upon peasant support, indeed, was defended by peasant bayonets. But what was to happen afterwards?

This question had preoccupied the Russian socialists themselves long before the revolution. The realisation that a socialist revolution in Russia would be hopelessly lost in the peasant mass was one reason why all the Marxists in Russia (including Lenin, but excluding Trotsky and at first Parvus) had seen the forthcoming revolution as a bourgeois one. When Parvus and Trotsky first suggested that the revolution might produce a socialist government, Lenin wrote

“This cannot be, because such a revolutionary dictatorship can only have stability ... based on the great majority of the people. The Russian proletariat constitutes now a minority of the Russian population.”

He maintained this view right up to 1917. When he did come to accept and fight for the possibility of a socialist outcome for the revolution, it was because he saw it as one stage in a world-wide revolution that would give the minority working class in Russia protection against foreign intervention and aid to reconcile the peasantry to its rule. Eight months before the October revolution he wrote to Swiss workers that “the Russian proletariat cannot by its own forces victoriously complete the socialist revolution.” Four months after the revolution (on 7 March

1918) he repeated, “The absolute truth is that without a revolution in Germany we shall perish.”

2. The Civil War

The first years of Soviet rule seemed to bear out the perspective of world revolution. The period 1918-19 was characterised by social upheavals unseen since 1948. In Germany and Austria military defeat was followed by the destruction of the monarchy. Everywhere there was talk of Soviets. In Hungary and Bavaria Soviet Governments actually took power – although only briefly. In Italy the factories were occupied. Yet the heritage of fifty years of gradual development was not to be erased so rapidly. The old Social-Democratic and trade-union leaders moved into the gap left by the discredited bourgeois parties. The Communist. Left on the other hand still lacked the organisation to respond to this. It acted when there was no mass support; when there was mass support it failed to act.

Even so the stabilisation of Europe after 1919 was at best precarious. In every European country, the social structure received severe threats within the subsequent fifteen years. And the experience of both the Communist Parties and the working class had put them into a far better position to understand what was happening.

The Russian Bolsheviks did, not however, intend to wait upon the revolution abroad. The defence of the Soviet Republic and incitement to revolution abroad seemed inseparable. For the time being anyway, the tasks at hand in Russia were determined, not by the Bolshevik leaders, but by the international imperialist powers. These had begun a “crusade” against the Soviet Republic. White and foreign armies had to be driven back before any other questions could be considered. In order to do this, every resource available had to be utilised.

By a mixture of popular support, revolutionary ardour, and, at times, it seemed, pure will, the counter-revolutionary forces were driven out (although in the Soviet Far East they continued to operate until 1924). But the price paid was enormous.

This cannot be counted in merely material terms. But in these alone it was great. What suffered above all was industrial and

agricultural production. In 1920, the production of pig iron was only 3 per cent of the pre-war figure; of hemp 10 per cent; flax, 25 per cent; cotton, 11 per cent; beets, 15 per cent. This implied privation, hardship, famine. But much more. The dislocation of industrial production was also the dislocation of the working class. It was reduced to 43 per cent of its former numbers. The others were returned to their villages or dead on the battlefield. In purely quantitative terms, the class that had led the revolution, the class whose democratic processes had constituted the living core of Soviet power, was halved in importance. In real terms the situation was even worse. What remained was not even half of that class, forced into collective action by the very nature of its life situation. Industrial output was only 18 per cent of the pre-war figure, labour productivity was only one third of what it had been. To keep alive, workers could not rely on what their collective product would buy. Many resorted to direct barter of their products – or even parts of their machines – with peasants for food. Not only was the leading class of the revolution decimated, but the ties linking its members together were fast disintegrating. The very personnel in the factories were not those who had constituted the core of the revolutionary movement of 1917. The most militant workers had quite naturally fought most at the front, and suffered most casualties. Those that survived were needed not only in the factories, but as cadres in the army, or as commissars to keep the administrators operating the State machine. Raw peasants from the countryside, without socialist traditions or aspirations, took their place.

But what was to be the fate of the revolution if the class that made it ceased to exist in any meaningful sense? This was not a problem that the Bolshevik leaders could have foreseen. They had always said that isolation of the revolution would result in its destruction by foreign armies and domestic counter-revolution. What confronted them now was the success of counterrevolution from abroad in destroying the class that had led the revolution while leaving intact the State apparatus built up by it. The revolutionary power had survived; but radical changes were being produced in its internal composition.

3. Soviet Power to Bolshevik Dictatorship

The revolutionary institutions of 1917 – above all, the Soviets – were organically connected with the class that had led the revolution.

Between the aspirations and intentions of their members and those of the workers who elected them, there could be no gap. While the mass were Menshevik, the Soviets were Menshevik; when the mass began to follow the Bolsheviks, so did the Soviets. The Bolshevik party was merely the body of coordinated class-conscious militants who could frame policies and suggest causes of action alongside other such bodies, in the Soviets as in the factories themselves. Their coherent views and self-discipline meant that they could act to implement policies effectively – but only if the mass of workers would follow them.

Even consistent opponents of the Bolsheviks recognised this. Their leading Menshevik critic wrote:

“Understand please, that before us after all is a victorious uprising of the proletariat – almost the entire proletariat supports Lenin and expects its social liberation from the uprising ...” [\[2\]](#)

Until the Civil War was well under way, this democratic dialectic of party and class could continue. The Bolsheviks held power as the majority party in the Soviets. But other parties continued to exist there too. The Mensheviks continued to operate legally and compete with the Bolsheviks for support until June 1918.

The decimation of the working class changed all this. Of necessity the Soviet institutions took on a life independently of the class they had arisen from. Those workers and peasants who fought the Civil War could not govern themselves collectively from their places in the factories. The socialist workers spread over the length and breadth of the war zones had to be organised and coordinated by a centralised governmental apparatus independent of their direct control – at least temporarily.

It seemed to the Bolsheviks that such a structure could not be held together unless it contained within it only those who wholeheartedly supported the revolution – that is, only the Bolsheviks. The Right Social Revolutionaries were instigators of the counter-revolution. The Left Social Revolutionaries were willing to resort to terror when they disagreed with government policy. As for the Mensheviks, their policy was one of support of the Bolsheviks against the counter-revolution, with the demand that the latter hand over power to the Constituent

Assembly (one of the chief demands of the counter-revolution). In practice this meant that the party contained both supporters and opponents of the Soviet power. Many of its members went over to the side of the Whites (e.g. Menshevik organisations in the Volga area were sympathetic to the counter-revolutionary Samara government, and one member of the Menshevik central committee, Ivan Maisky – later Stalin’s ambassador – joined it). [3] The response of the Bolsheviks was to allow the party’s members their freedom (at least, most of the time), but to prevent them acting as an effective political force – e.g. they were allowed no press after June 1918 except for 3 months in the following year.

In all this the Bolsheviks had no choice. They could not give up power just because the class they represented had dissolved itself while fighting to defend that power. Nor could they tolerate the propagation of ideas that undermined the basis of its power – precisely because the working class itself no longer existed as an agency collectively organised so as to be able to determine its own interests.

Of necessity the Soviet State of 1917 had been replaced by the single-party State of 1920 onwards. The Soviets that remained were increasingly just a front for Bolshevik power (although other parties, e.g. the Mensheviks, continued to operate in them as late as 1920). In 1919, for instance, there were no elections to the Moscow Soviet for over 18 months. [4]

4. Kronstadt and the NEP

Paradoxically, the end of the Civil War did not alleviate this situation, but in many ways aggravated it. For with the end of the immediate threat of counter-revolution, the cord that had bound together the two revolutionary processes – workers’ power in the towns and peasant uprisings in the country – was cut. Having gained control over the land, the peasants lost interest in the collectivist revolutionary ideals of October. They were motivated by individual aspirations arising out of their individualistic form of work. Each sought to maximise his own standard of living through his activities on his own plot of land. Indeed, the only thing which could now unite peasants into a coherent group was opposition to the taxes and forcible collections of grain carried out in order to feed the urban populations.

The high point of this opposition came a week before the tenth party Congress. An uprising of sailors broke out in the Kronstadt fortress, which guarded the approaches to Petrograd. Many people since have treated what happened next as the first break between the Bolshevik regime and its socialist intentions. The fact that the Kronstadt sailors were one of the main drives of the 1917 revolution has often been used as an argument for this. Yet at the time no one in the Bolshevik Party – not even the workers’ opposition which claimed to represent the antipathy of many workers to the regime – had any doubts as to what it was necessary to do. The reason was simple. Kronstadt in 1920 was not Kronstadt of 1917. The class composition of its sailors had changed. The best socialist elements had long ago gone off to fight in the army in the front line. They were replaced in the main by peasants whose devotion to the revolution was that of their class. This was reflected in the demands of the uprising: Soviets without Bolsheviks and a free market in agriculture. The Bolshevik leaders could not accede to such demands. It would have meant liquidation of the socialist aims of the revolution without struggle. For all its faults, it was precisely the Bolshevik party that had alone whole-heartedly supported Soviet power, while the other parties, even the socialist parties, had vacillated between it and the Whites. It was to the Bolsheviks that all the best militants had been attracted. Soviets without Bolsheviks could only mean Soviets without the party which had consistently sought to express the socialist, collectivist aims of the working class in the revolution. What was expressed in Kronstadt was the fundamental divergence of interest, in the long run, between the two classes that had made the revolution. The suppression of the uprising should be seen not as an attack on the socialist content of the revolution, but as a desperate attempt, using force, to prevent the developing peasant opposition to its collectivist ends from destroying it. [5]

Yet the fact that Kronstadt could occur was an omen. For it questioned the whole leading role of the working class in the revolution. This was being maintained not by the superior economic mode that the working class represented, not by its higher labour productivity, but by physical force. And this force was not being wielded directly by the armed workers, but by a party tied to the working class only indirectly, by its ideas, not directly as in the days of

1917.

Such a policy was necessary. But there was little in it that socialists could have supported in any other situation. Instead of being “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority,” the revolution in Russia had reached the stage where it involved the exploitation of the country by the towns, maintained through naked physical force. It was clear to all groups in the Bolshevik party that this meant the revolution must remain in danger of being overthrown by peasant insurrections.

There seemed to be only one course open. This was to accept many of the peasant demands, while maintaining a strong, centralised socialist State apparatus. This the New Economic Policy (NEP) attempted to do. Its aim was to reconcile peasants to the regime and to encourage economic development by giving a limited range of freedom to private commodity production. The State and the State-owned industries were to operate as just one element in an economy governed by the needs of peasant production and the play of market forces.

5.The Party, the State and the working class 1921-8

In the period of the NEP the claim of Russia to be in any way “socialist” could no longer be justified either by the relationship of the working class to the State it had originally created or by the nature of internal economic relations. The workers did not exercise power and the economy was not planned. But the State, the “body of armed men” that controlled and policed society was in the hands of a party that was motivated by socialist intentions. The direction of its policies, it seemed, would be socialist.

Yet the situation was more complex than this. First, the State institutions that dominated Russian society were far from identical with the militant socialist party of 1917. Those who had been in the Bolshevik Party at the time of the February revolution were committed socialists who had taken enormous risks in resisting Tsarist oppression to express their ideals. Even four years of civil war and isolation from the working masses could not easily destroy their socialist aspirations. But in 1919 these constituted only a tenth of the party, by 1922 a fortieth. In the revolution and Civil War, the party had undergone a

continuous process of growth. In part this reflected the tendency of all militant workers and convinced socialists to join in. But it was also a result of other tendencies. Once the working class itself had been decimated, the party had had to take it upon itself to control all Soviet-run areas. This it could only do by increasing its own size. Further, once it was clear who was winning the Civil War, many individuals with little or no socialist convictions attempted to enter the party. The party itself was thus far from being a homogeneous socialist force. At best, only its leading elements and most militant members could be said to be really part of the socialist tradition.

This internal dilution of the party was paralleled by a corresponding phenomenon in the State apparatus itself. In order to maintain control over Russian society, the Bolshevik party had been forced to use thousands of members of the old Tsarist bureaucracy in order to maintain a functioning governmental machine. In theory the Bolsheviks were to direct the work of these in a socialist direction. In practice, old habits and methods of work, pre-revolutionary attitudes towards the masses in particular, often prevailed. Lenin was acutely aware of the implications of this:

“What we lack is clear enough,” he said at the March 1922 Party Congress. “The ruling stratum of the communists is lacking in culture. Let us look at Moscow. This mass of bureaucrats – who is leading whom? The 4,700 responsible communists, the mass of bureaucrats, or the other way round? I do not believe you can honestly say the communists are leading this mass. To put it honestly, they are not the leaders but the led.”

At the end of 1922, he described the State apparatus as “borrowed from Tsarism and hardly touched by the Soviet world ... a bourgeois and Tsarist mechanism.” [6] In the 1920 controversy over the role of the trade unions he argued

“Ours is not actually a workers’ state, but a workers’ and peasants’ State ... But that is not all. Our party programme shows that ours is a workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions.” [7]

The real situation was even worse than this. It was not just the case that the old Bolsheviks were in a situation where the combined

strength of hostile class forces and bureaucratic inertness made their socialist aspirations difficult to realise. These aspirations themselves could not remain forever uncorrupted by the hostile environment. The exigencies of building a disciplined army out of an often indifferent peasant mass had inculcated into many of the best party members authoritarian habits. Under the NEP the situation was different, but still far from the democratic interaction of leaders and led that constitutes the essence of socialist democracy. Now many party members found themselves having to control society by coming to terms with the small trader, the petty capitalist, the *kulak*. They had to represent the interests of the workers' State as against these elements – but not as in the past through direct physical confrontation. There had to be limited co-operation with them. Many party members seemed more influenced by this immediate and very tangible relationship with petty bourgeois elements than by their intangible ties with a weak and demoralised working class.

Above all the influence of the old bureaucracy in which its members were immersed penetrated the party. Its isolation from class forces outside itself that would sustain its rule meant that the party had to exert over itself an iron discipline. Thus at the Tenth Party Congress, although it was presumed that discussion would continue within the party [8], the establishment of formal factions was “temporarily” banned. But this demand for inner cohesion easily degenerated into an acceptance of bureaucratic modes of control within the party. There had been complaints about these by opposition elements in the party as early as April 1920. By 1922 even Lenin could write that “we have a bureaucracy not only in the Soviet institutions, but in the institutions of the party.”

The erosion of inner-party democracy is best shown by the fate of successive oppositions to the central leadership. In 1917 and 1918 free discussion within the party, with the right of different groups to organise around platforms, was taken for granted. Lenin himself was in a minority in the party on at least two occasions (at the time of his **April Theses** and nearly a year later during the Brest Litovsk negotiations). In November 1917 it was possible for those Bolsheviks who disagreed with the party taking power alone, to resign from the government so as to force its hand without disciplinary action being

taken against them. Divisions within the party over the question of the advance on Warsaw and over the role of the trade unions were discussed quite openly in the party press. As late as 1921 the **Programme of the Workers' Opposition** was printed in a quarter of a million copies by the Party itself, and two members of the opposition elected to the Central Committee. In 1923 when the Left Opposition developed, it was still possible for it to express its views in **Pravda**, although there were ten articles defending the leadership to every one opposing it.

Yet throughout this period the possibilities of any opposition acting effectively were diminished. After the tenth Party Congress the Workers' Opposition was banned. By 1923 the opposition **Platform of the 46** wrote that "the secretarial hierarchy of the Party to an ever greater extent recruits the membership of conferences and congresses." [9] Even a supporter of the leadership and editor of **Pravda**, Bukharin, depicted the typical functioning of the party as completely undemocratic:

"... the secretaries of the nuclei are usually appointed by the district committees, and note that the districts do not even try to have their candidates accepted by these nuclei, but content themselves with appointing these or those comrades. As a rule, putting the matter to a vote takes place according to a method that is taken for granted. The meeting is asked: 'Who is against?' and in as much as one fears more or less to speak up against, the appointed candidate finds himself elected ... [10]

The real extent of bureaucratisation was fully revealed when the "triumvirate" that had taken over the leadership of the Party during the illness of Lenin split. Towards the end of 1925 Zinoviev, Kamenev and Krupskaya moved into opposition to the party centre, now controlled by Stalin. Zinoviev was head of the party in Leningrad. As such he controlled the administrative machine of the northern capital and several influential newspapers. At the fourteenth Party Congress every delegate from Leningrad supported his opposition to the centre. Yet within weeks of the defeat of his opposition, all sections of the Party in Leningrad, with the exception of a few hundred inveterate oppositionists, were voting resolutions supporting Stalin's policies. All

that was required to accomplish this was the removal from office of the heads of the City Party administration. Who controlled the bureaucracy controlled the Party. When Zinoviev controlled it, it was oppositional. Now that Stalin had added the city to the nation-wide apparatus he controlled, it became an adherent of his policies. With a change of leaders a Zinovievist monolith was transformed into a Stalinist monolith.

This rise of bureaucracy in the Soviet apparatus and the Party began as a result of the decimation of the working class in the civil war. But it continued even when industry began to recover and the working class began to grow with NEP. Economic recovery rather than raising the position of the working class within the “workers’ state” depressed it.

In purely material terms the concessions made to the peasant in the NEP worsened the (relative) position of the worker.

“Everywhere acclaimed under war communism as the eponymous hero of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he was in danger of becoming the step-child of the NEP. In the economic crisis of 1923 neither the defenders of the official policy nor those who contested it in the name of the development of industry found it necessary to treat the grievances or the interests of the industrial worker as a matter of major concern.” [\[11\]](#)

But it was not only vis-a-vis the peasant that the status of the worker fell; it also fell compared with that of the directors and managers of industry. Whereas in 1922, 65 per cent of managing personnel were officially classified as workers, and 35 per cent as non-workers, a year later these figures were almost reversed, only 36 per cent being workers and 64 per cent non-workers. [\[12\]](#) The “red industrialists” began to emerge as a privileged group, with high salaries, and through “one-man management” in the factories, able to hire and fire at will. At the same time widespread unemployment became endemic to the Soviet economy, rising to a level of one and a quarter millions in 1923-4.

6. The divisions in the party 1921-29

Men make history, but in circumstances not of their own making. In the process they change both those circumstances and themselves. The Bolshevik Party was no more immune to this reality than any other group in history has been. In attempting to hold together the fabric of Russian society in the chaos of civil war, counter-revolution and famine, their socialist intentions were a factor determining the course of history; but the social forces they had to work with to do this could not leave the Party members themselves unchanged. Holding the Russia of the NEP together meant mediating between different social classes so as to prevent disruptive clashes. The revolution could only survive if the Party and State satisfied the needs of different, often antagonistic, classes. Arrangements had to be made to satisfy the individualistic aspirations of the peasants, as well as the collectivist democratic aims of socialism. In the process, the Party, which had been lifted above the different social classes, had to reflect within its own structure their differences. The pressures of the different classes on the Party caused different sections of the Party to define their socialist aspirations in terms of the interests of different classes. The one class with the capacity for exercising genuinely socialist pressures – the working class – was the weakest, the most disorganised, the least able to exert such pressures.

7. The Left Opposition

There can be no doubt that in terms of its ideas, the Left Opposition was the faction in the Party that adhered most closely to the revolutionary socialist tradition of Bolshevism. It refused to redefine socialism to mean either a slowly developing peasant economy or accumulation for the sake of accumulation. It retained the view of workers' democracy as central to socialism. It refused to subordinate the world revolution to the demands of the chauvinistic and reactionary slogan of building "socialism in one country."

Yet the Left Opposition could not be said to be in any direct sense the "proletarian" faction within the Party. For in the Russia of the twenties, the working class was the class that less than any other exerted pressure upon the Party. After the civil war, it was rebuilt in conditions which made its ability to fight for its own ends weak. Unemployment was high; the most militant workers had either died in

the civil war or been lifted into the bureaucracy; much of the class was composed of peasants fresh from the countryside. Its typical attitude was not one of support for the opposition, but rather apathy towards political discussions, which made it easily manipulable from above – at least most of the time. The Left Opposition was in the situation, common to socialists, of having a socialist programme for working-class action when the workers themselves were too tired and dispirited to fight.

But it was not only the apathy of the workers that created difficulties for the opposition. It was also its own recognition of economic realities. Its argument emphasised that the objective lack of resources would make life hard whatever policies were followed. It stressed both the need to develop industry internally and the necessity for the revolution to spread as a means to doing this. But in the short term, it could offer little to the workers, even if a correct socialist policy was followed. When Trotsky and Preobrazhensky began to demand increased planning, they emphasised that this could not be done without squeezing the peasants and without the workers making sacrifices. The unified opposition of “Trotskyists” and “Zinovievists” in 1926 demanded as first priority certain improvements for the workers. But it was also realistic enough to denounce as utopian promises made to the workers by Stalin that far exceeded its own demands.

There is no space here to discuss the various platforms produced by the Left Opposition. But in outline they had three interlinked central planks.

1. – The revolution could only make progress in a socialist direction if the economic weight of the towns as against the country, of industry as against agriculture, was increased. This demanded planning of industry and a policy of deliberately discriminating against the wealthy peasant in taxation policy. If this did not happen the latter would accumulate sufficient economic power to subordinate the State to his interests, thus producing a *Thermidor*, internal counter-revolution.
2. – This industrial development had to be accompanied by increased workers’ democracy, so as to end bureaucratic tendencies in the Party and State.
3. – These first two policies could maintain Russia as a citadel of

the revolution, but they could not produce that material and cultural level that is the prerequisite of socialism. This demanded the extension of the revolution abroad.

In purely economic terms, there was nothing impossible in this programme. Indeed its demand for planning of industrialisation and a squeezing of the peasant was eventually carried out – although in a manner which contradicted the intentions of the Opposition. But those who controlled the Party from 1923 onwards did not see the wisdom of it. Only a severe economic crisis in 1928 forced them to plan and industrialise. For five years before this they persecuted the Left and expelled its leaders. The second plank in the programme they never implemented. As for the third plank, this had been Bolshevik orthodoxy in 1923 [13], only to be rejected by the Party leaders for good in 1925.

It was not economics that prevented the Party accepting this programme. It was rather the balance of social forces developing within the Party itself. The programme demanded a break with a tempo of production determined by the economic pressure of the peasantry. Two sorts of social forces had developed within the Party that opposed this.

8. The “Right” and the “Centre”

The first was the simplest. This was made up of those elements who did not see concessions to the peasant as being detrimental to socialist construction. They consciously wanted the Party to adjust its programme to the needs of the peasant. But this was not just a theoretical platform. It expressed the interest of all those in the Party and Soviet institutions who found cooperation with the peasants, including the *Kulaks* and capitalist farmers, and NEPmen, congenial. They found their theoretical expression in Bukharin, with his injunction to the peasants to “enrich themselves”.

The second drew its strength as much from social forces within the Party as outside. Its ostensible concern was to maintain social cohesion. As such it resisted the social tensions likely to be engendered, were there to be conscious effort to subordinate the country to the town, but did not go as far in its pro-peasant pronouncements as the Right. In the main, it was constituted by elements within the Party apparatus itself, whose whole orientation

was to maintain Party cohesion through bureaucratic means. Its leader was the chief of the Party apparatus, Stalin.

To the Left Opposition at the time, the faction of Stalin seemed like a centrist group that oscillated between the traditions of the Party (embodied in the Left programme) and the Right. In 1928 when Stalin suddenly adopted the first plank of the opposition's own programme, turning on the Right as viciously as he had only months before attacked the Left, and beginning industrialisation and the complete expropriation of the peasantry (so-called "collectivisation"), this interpretation received a rude shock. Stalin clearly had a social basis of his own. He could survive when neither the proletariat nor the peasantry exercised power.

If the Left Opposition was the result of groups motivated by the socialist and working-class traditions of the Party attempting to embody these in realistic policies, and the Right opposition a result of accommodation to peasant pressures on the Party, the successful Stalinist faction was based upon the Party bureaucracy itself. This had begun life as a subordinate element within the social structure created by the revolution. It merely fulfilled certain elementary functions for the workers' Party. With the decimation of the working class in the civil war, the Party was left standing above the class. In this situation the role of maintaining the cohesion of the Party and State became central. Increasingly in the State and then in the Party, this was provided by bureaucratic methods of control – often exercised by ex-Tsarist bureaucrats. The Party apparatus increasingly exercised real power within the Party – appointing functionaries at all levels, choosing delegates to conferences. But if it was the Party and not the class that controlled the State and industry, then it was the Party apparatus that increasingly inherited the gains the workers had made in the revolution.

The first result of this in terms of policies was a bureaucratic inertness. The bureaucrats of the apparatus offered a negative resistance to policies which might disturb their position. They began to act as a repressive force against any group that might challenge their position. Hence their opposition to the programmes of the Left and their refusal to permit any real discussion of them. While the bureaucracy reacted in this negative way to threats of social disturbance, it quite naturally allied itself with the Right and Bukharin.

This concealed its increasing existence as a social entity in its own right, with its own relationship to the means of production. Its repression of opposition in the Party seemed to be an attempt to impose a pro-peasant policy on the Party from above, not to be a part of its own struggle to remove any opposition to its own power in State and industry. Even after its proclamation of socialism in one country, its failures abroad seemed to flow more from bureaucratic inertia and the pro-peasant policies at home than from a conscious counter-revolutionary role.

Yet throughout this period the bureaucracy was developing from being a class in itself to being a class for itself. At the time of the inauguration of the NEP, it was objectively the case that power in the Party and State lay in the hands of a small group of functionaries. But these were by no means a cohesive ruling class. They were far from being aware of sharing a common intent. The policies they implemented were shaped by elements in the Party still strongly influenced by the traditions of revolutionary socialism. If at home objective conditions made workers' democracy non-existent, at least there was the possibility of those motivated by the Party's traditions bringing about its restoration given industrial recovery at home and revolution abroad. Certainly on a world scale the Party continued to play its revolutionary role. In its advice to foreign parties it made mistakes – and no doubt some of these flowed from its own bureaucratisation – but it did not commit crimes by subordinating them to its own national interests. Underlying the factional struggles of the twenties is the process by which this social grouping shook off the heritage of the revolution to become a self-conscious class in its own right.

9. Counter-Revolution

It is often said that the rise of Stalinism in Russian cannot be called “counter-revolution” because it was a gradual process (e.g. Trotsky said that such a view involved “winding back the film of reformism”). But this is to misconstrue the Marxist method. It is not the case that the transition from one sort of society to another always involves a single sudden change. This is the case for the transition from a capitalist State to a workers' State, because the working class cannot exercise its power except all at once, collectively, by a clash with the ruling class in which, as a culmination of long years of struggle, the

latter's forces are defeated. But in the transition from feudalism to capitalism there are many cases in which there is not one sudden clash, but a whole series of different intensities and at different levels, as the decisive economic class (the bourgeoisie) forces political concessions in its favour. The counter-revolution in Russia proceeded along the second path rather than the first. The bureaucracy did not have to seize power from the workers all at once. The decimation of the working class left power in its hands at all levels of Russian society. Its members controlled industry and the police and the army. It did not even have to wrest control of the State apparatus to bring it into line with its economic power, as the bourgeoisie did quite successfully in several countries without a sudden confrontation. It merely had to bring a political and industrial structure that it already controlled into line with its own interests. This happened not "gradually," but by a succession of qualitative changes by which the mode of operation of the Party was brought into line with the demands of the central bureaucracy. Each of these qualitative changes could only be brought about by a direct confrontation with those elements in the Party which, for whatever reason, still adhered to the revolutionary socialist tradition.

The first (and most important) such confrontation was that with the Left Opposition in 1923. Although the Opposition was by no means decisively and unambiguously opposed to what was happening to the Party (e.g. its leader, Trotsky had made some of the most outrageously substitutionist statements during the trade-union debate of 1920; its first public statement (the **Platform of the 46**) was accepted by its signatories only with numerous reservations and amendments), the bureaucracy reacted to it with unprecedented hostility. In order to protect its power the ruling group in the Party resorted to methods of argument unheard of before in the Bolshevik party. Systematic denigration of opponents replaced rational argument. The control of the secretariat of the Party over appointments began to be used for the first time openly to remove sympathisers of the opposition from their posts (e.g. the majority of the Komsomol Central Committee were dismissed and sent to the provinces after some of them had replied to attacks on Trotsky). To justify such procedures the ruling faction invented two new ideological entities, which it counterposed to one another. On the one hand it inaugurated a cult of "Leninism" (despite

the protests of Lenin's widow). It attempted to elevate Lenin to a semi-divine status by mummifying his dead body in the manner of the Egyptian pharaohs. On the other, it invented "Trotskyism" as a tendency opposed to Leninism, justifying this with odd quotations from Lenin of ten or even twenty years before, while ignoring Lenin's last statement (his "Testament") that referred to Trotsky as "the most able member of the Central Committee" and suggested the removal of Stalin. The leaders of the Party perpetrated these distortions and falsifications consciously in order to fight off any threat to their control of the Party (Zinoviev, at the time the leading member of the "triumvirate" later admitted this). In doing so, one section of the Party was showing that it had come to see its own power as more important than the socialist tradition of free inner-Party discussion. By reducing theory to a mere adjunct of its own ambitions, the Party bureaucracy was beginning to assert its identity as against other social groups.

The second major confrontation began in a different way. It was not at first a clash between members of the Party with socialist aspirations and the increasingly powerful bureaucracy itself. It began as a clash between the ostensible leader of the Party (at the time, Zinoviev) and the Party apparatus that really controlled. In Leningrad Zinoviev controlled a section of the bureaucracy to a considerable extent independently of the rest of the apparatus. Although its mode of operation was in no way different from that prevailing throughout the rest of the country, its very independence was an obstacle to the central bureaucracy. It represented a possible source of policies and activities that might disturb the overall rule of the bureaucracy. For this reason it had to be brought within the ambit of the central apparatus. In the process Zinoviev was forced from his leading position in the party. Having lost this, he began to turn once more to the historical traditions of Bolshevism and to the policies of the Left (although he never lost fully his desire to be part of the ruling bloc, continually wavering for the next ten years between the Left and the apparatus). With the fall of Zinoviev, power lay in the hands of Stalin, who with his unrestrained use of bureaucratic methods of control of the Party, his disregard for theory, his hostility to the traditions of the revolution in which his own role had been a minor one, his willingness to resort to any means to dispose of those who had actually led the revolution, above all epitomised the growing self-consciousness of the apparatus. All these

qualities he exhibited to their full extent in the struggle against the new opposition. Meetings were packed, speakers shouted down, prominent oppositionists likely to find themselves assigned to minor positions in remote areas, former Tsarist officers utilised as *agents provocateur* to discredit oppositional groups. Eventually, in 1928, he began to imitate the Tsars directly and deport revolutionaries to Siberia. In the long run, even this was not to be enough. He was to do what even the Romanoffs had been unable to do: systematically murder those who had constituted the revolutionary Party of 1917.

By 1928 the Stalinist faction had completely consolidated its control in the Party and State. When Bukharin and the Right wing split from it, horrified by what they had helped to create, they found themselves with even less strength than the Left Oppositions had. But the Party was not in control of the whole of Russian society. The towns where real power lay were still surrounded by the sea of peasant production. The bureaucracy had usurped the gains of the working class in the revolution, but so far the peasantry remained unaffected. A mass refusal of the peasants to sell their grain in 1928 brought this home sharply to the bureaucracy.

What followed was the assertion of the power of the towns over the countryside that the Left Opposition had been demanding for years. This led certain oppositionists (Preobrazhensky, Radek) to make their peace with Stalin. Yet this policy was in its spirit the opposite of that of the Left. They had argued the need to subordinate peasant production to worker-owned industry in the towns. But industry in the towns was no longer worker-owned. It was under the control of the bureaucracy that held the State. Assertion of the domination of the town over the country was now the assertion not of the working class over the peasantry, but of the bureaucracy over the last part of society lying outside its control. It imposed this dominance with all the ferocity ruling classes have always used. Not only Kulaks, but all grades of peasants, whole villages of peasants, suffered. The "Left" turn of 1928 finally liquidated the revolution of 1917 in town and country.

There can be no doubt that by 1928 a new class had taken power in Russia. It did not have to engage in direct military conflict with the workers to gain power, because direct workers' power had not existed since 1918. But it did have to purge the Party that was left in power of

all those who retained links, however tenuous, with the socialist tradition. When a reinvigorated working class confronted it again, whether in Berlin or Budapest, or in Russia itself (e.g. Novo-Cherkassk in 1962), it used the tanks it had not needed in 1928.

The Left Opposition was far from clear about what it was fighting. Trotsky, to his dying day, believed that that State apparatus that was to hunt him down and murder him was a “degenerated workers’ one”. Yet it was that Opposition alone which fought day by day against the Stalinist apparatus’s destruction of the revolution at home and prevention of revolution abroad. [\[14\]](#) For a whole historical period it alone resisted the distorting effects on the socialist movement of Stalinism and Social Democracy. Its own theories about Russia made this task more difficult, but it still carried it out. That is why today any genuinely revolutionary movement must place itself in that tradition.

Notes

1. Trotsky, **The Russian Revolution**, p.72.
2. Martov to Axelrod, 19 November 1917, quoted in Israel Getzler, **Martov**, Cambridge, 1967.
3. Israel Getzler, **op. cit.**, p.183.
4. **Ibid.**, p.199.
5. See Trotsky, **Hue and Cry over Kronstadt**.
6. Quoted in Max Shachtman, **The Struggle for the New Course**, New York, 1943, p.150.
7. Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol.32, p.24.
8. See Lenin's response to Riazanov's demand that the habit of different groups within the Party putting forward "platforms" be prohibited: "We cannot deprive the Party and the members of the central committee of the right to appeal to the Party in the event of disagreement on fundamental issues. I cannot imagine how we can do such a thing!" Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol.32, p.261.
9. Appendix to E.H. Carr, **The Interregnum**, p.369.
10. Quoted in Shachtman, **op. cit.**, p.172.
11. E.H. Carr, **op. cit.**, p.39.
12. **Ibid.**
13. Cf. Stalin, **Lenin and Leninism**, Russian ed. 1924, p40: "Can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained without the joint efforts of the proletariats of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible." (Cited by Trotsky, **The Third International after Lenin**, p.36.)
14. We do not deal here with the earlier oppositions, e.g. the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. Although these arose as a response to the early bureaucratisation and degeneration of the revolution, they were also partly a utopian reaction against objective reality as such (i.e. the real strength of the peasants and the real weakness of the working class). What survived and mattered in the Workers' Opposition eventually became part of the Left Opposition, while its leaders, Kollontai and Shlyapnik, capitulated to Stalin.