

*The Anarchist FAQ Editorial Collective*

## **An Anarchist FAQ (15/17)**

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## **Appendix: The Russian Revolution**

This appendix of the FAQ exists to discuss in depth the Russian revolution and the impact that Leninist ideology and practice had on its outcome. Given that the only reason why Leninism is taken seriously in some parts of the revolutionary movement is the Russian Revolution, it is useful to expose what Alexander Berkman called “the Bolshevik Myth.” This means discussing certain aspects of the revolution and indicating exactly how Leninism helped destroy any libertarian potential it had. It also means analysing common, modern-day, Leninist excuses for the actions of the Bolsheviks to see if they hold water. It also means analysing in depth specific events of the revolution (such as the Kronstadt uprising of March 1921 and the libertarian influenced Makhnovist movement) to see if there was an alternative to Leninism at the time. Luckily, the answer is yes.

As will become clear from this appendix, Bolshevik actions and ideology had a decisive impact on the development and degeneration of the Revolution. With its centralised, top-down statist political vision, its (openly) state capitalist economic vision and its aim for party power, Leninism had pushed the revolution in an authoritarian direction before the Russian Civil War started (the most common Leninist explanation of what went wrong). Leninism, ironically enough, proved the anarchist critique of Marxism to be correct. Anarchists are confident that in depth analysis of the Russian Revolution will confirm the limitations of Bolshevism as a revolutionary movement and point to libertarian ideas for anyone who wants to change the world.

# What happened during the Russian Revolution?

This appendix of the FAQ is not a full history of the Russian Revolution. The scope of such a work would simply be too large. Instead, this section will concentrate on certain key issues which matter in evaluating whether the Bolshevik revolution and regime were genuinely socialist or not. This is not all. Some Leninists acknowledge that that Bolshevik policies had little to do with socialism as such were the best that were available at the time. As such, this section will look at possible alternatives to Bolshevik policies and see whether they were, in fact, inevitable.

So for those seeking a comprehensive history of the revolution will have to look elsewhere. Here, we concentrate on those issues which matter when evaluating the socialist content of the revolution and of Bolshevism. In other words, the development of working class self-activity and self-organisation, workers' resistance to their bosses (whether capitalist or "red"), the activity of opposition groups and parties and the fate of working class organisations like trade unions, factory committees and soviets. Moreover, the role of the ruling party and its ideals also need to be indicated and evaluated somewhat (see "How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?" for a fuller discussion of the role of Bolshevik ideology in the defeat of the revolution).

This means that this section is about two things, what Alexander Berkman termed "*the Bolshevik Myth*" and what Voline called "*the Unknown Revolution*" (these being the titles of their respective books on the revolution). After his experiences in Bolshevik Russia, Berkman came to the conclusion that it was "*[h]igh time the truth about the Bolsheviki were told. The whited sepulchre must unmasked, the clay feet of the fetish beguiling the international proletariat to fatal will o' wisps exposed. The Bolshevik myth must be destroyed.*" By so doing, he aimed to help the global revolutionary movement learn from the experience of the Russian revolution. Given that "*[t]o millions of the disinherited and enslaved it became a new religion, the beacon of social salvation*" it was an "*imperative to unmask the great delusion, which otherwise might lead the Western workers to the same abyss as their brothers in Russia.*" Bolshevism had "*failed, utterly and absolutely*" and so it was "*incumbent upon those who have seen though the myth to expose its true nature . . . Bolshevism is of the past. The future belongs to man and his liberty.*" [**The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 318 and p. 342]

Subsequent events proved Berkman correct. Socialism became linked to Soviet Russia and as it fell into Stalinism, the effect was to discredit socialism, even

radical change as such, in the eyes of millions. And quite rightly too, given the horrors of Stalinism. If more radicals had had the foresight of Berkman and the other anarchists, this association of socialism and revolution with tyranny would have been combated and an alternative, libertarian, form of socialism would have risen to take the challenge of combating capitalism in the name of a **genuine** socialism, rooted in the ideals of liberty, equality and solidarity.

However, in spite of the horrors of Stalinism many people seeking a radical change in society are drawn to Leninism. This is partly to do with the fact that in many countries Leninist parties have a organised presence and many radicalised people come across them first. It is also partly to do with the fact that many forms of Leninism denounce Stalinism for what it was and raise the possibility of the “genuine” Leninism of the Bolshevik party under Lenin and Trotsky. This current of Leninism is usually called “Trotskyism” and has many offshoots. For some of these parties, the differences between Trotskyism and Stalinism is pretty narrow. The closer to orthodox Trotskyism you get, the more Stalinist it appears. As Victor Serge noted of Trotsky’s “Fourth International” in the 1930s, *“in the hearts of the persecuted I encountered the same attitudes as in their persecutors [the Stalinists] . . . Trotskyism was displaying symptoms of an outlook in harmony with the very Stalinism against which it had taken its stand . . . any person in the circles of the ‘Fourth International’ who went so far as to object to [Trotsky’s] propositions was promptly expelled and denounced in the same language that the bureaucracy had employed against us in the Soviet Union.”* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 349] As we discuss in section 3 of the appendix on “Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?”, perhaps this is unsurprising given how much politically Trotsky’s “Left Opposition” had shared with Stalinism.

Other Trotskyist parties have avoided the worse excesses of orthodox Trotskyism. Parties associated with the **International Socialists**, for example portray themselves as defending what they like to term “*socialism from below*” and the democratic promise of Bolshevik as expressed during 1917 and in the early months of Bolshevik rule. While anarchists are somewhat sceptical that Leninism can be called “*socialism from below*” (see section H.3.3), we need to address the claim that the period between February 1917 to the start of the Russian civil war at the end of May 1918 shows the real nature of Bolshevism. In order to do that we need to discuss what the Russian anarchist Voline called “*The Unknown Revolution*.”

So what is the “*Unknown Revolution*”? Voline, an active participant in 1917 Russian Revolution, used that expression as the title of his classic account of the Russian revolution. He used it to refer to the rarely acknowledged independent, creative actions of the revolutionary people themselves. As Voline argued, “*it is not known how to study a revolution*” and most historians “*mistrust and ignore those developments which occur silently in the depths of the revolution . . . at best, they*



*accord them a few words in passing . . . [Yet] it is precisely these hidden facts which are important, and which throw a true light on the events under consideration and on the period.*” This section of the FAQ will try and present this “*unknown revolution*,” those movements “*which fought the Bolshevik power in the name of true liberty and of the principles of the Social Revolution which that power had scoffed at and trampled underfoot.*” [The Unknown Revolution, p. 19 and p. 437] Voline gives the Kronstadt rebellion (see the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”) and the Makhnovist movement (see the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?”) pride of place in his account. Here we discuss other movements and the Bolshevik response to them.

Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution, to a surprising extent, fall into the official form of history — a concern more with political leaders than with the actions of the masses. Indeed, the popular aspects of the revolution are often distorted to accord with a predetermined social framework of Leninism. Thus the role of the masses is stressed during the period before the Bolshevik seizure of power. Here the typical Leninist would agree, to a large extent, with summarised history of 1917 we present in section 1. They would undoubtedly disagree with the downplaying of the role of the Bolshevik party (although as we discuss in section 2, that party was far from the ideal model of the vanguard party of Leninist theory and modern Leninist practice). However, the role of the masses in the revolution would be praised, as would the Bolsheviks for supporting it.

The real difference arises once the Bolsheviks seize power in November 1917 (October, according to the Old Style calendar then used). After that, the masses simply disappear and into the void steps the leadership of the Bolshevik party. For Leninism, the “*unknown revolution*” simply stops. The sad fact is that very little is known about the dynamics of the revolution at the grassroots, particularly after October. Incredible as it may sound, very few Leninists are that interested in the realities of “workers’ power” under the Bolsheviks or the actual performance and fate of such working class institutions as soviets, factory committees and co-operatives. What is written is often little more than vague generalities that aim to justify authoritarian Bolshevik policies which either explicitly aimed to undermine such bodies or, at best, resulted in their marginalisation when implemented.

This section of the FAQ aims to make known the “*unknown revolution*” that continued under the Bolsheviks and, equally important, the Bolshevik response to it. As part of this process we need to address some of the key events of that period, such as the role of foreign intervention and the impact of the civil war. However, we do not go into these issues in depth here and instead cover them in depth in the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”. This is because most Leninists excuse Bolshevik authoritarianism on the impact of the civil war, regardless of the facts of the matter. As we discuss in the appendix

on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the ideology of Bolshevism played its role as well – something that modern day Leninists strenuously deny (again, regardless of the obvious). As we indicate in this section, the idea that Bolshevism came into conflict with the “*unknown revolution*” is simply not viable. Bolshevik ideology and practice made it inevitable that this conflict erupted, as it did **before** the start of the civil war (also see section 3 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”).

Ultimately, the reason why Leninist ideas still have influence on the socialist movement is due to the apparent success of the Russian Revolution. Many Leninist groups, mainly Trotskyists and derivatives of Trotskyism, point to “Red October” and the creation of the first ever workers state as concrete examples of the validity of their ideas. They point to Lenin’s **State and Revolution** as proving the “democratic” (even “libertarian”) nature of Leninism while, at the same time, supporting the party dictatorship he created and, moreover, rationalising the utter lack of working class freedom and power under it. We will try to indicate the falseness of such claims. As will become clear from this section, the following summation of an anonymous revolutionary is totally correct:

***“Every notion about revolution inherited from Bolshevism is false.”***

In this, they were simply repeating the conclusions of anarchists. As Kropotkin stressed in 1920:

*“It seems to me that this attempt to build a communist republic on the basis of a strongly centralised state, under the iron law of the dictatorship of one party, has ended in a terrible fiasco. Russia teaches us how not to impose communism.”*  
[Peter Kropotkin, quoted by Guerin, **Anarchism**, p. 106]

Ultimately, the experience of Bolshevism was a disaster. And as the Makhnovists in the Ukraine proved, Bolshevik ideology and practice was **not** the only option available (see the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?”). There **were** alternatives, but Bolshevik ideology simply excluded using them (we will discuss some possibilities in this various sub-sections below). In other words, Bolshevik ideology is simply not suitable for a real revolutionary movement and the problems it will face. In fact, its ideology and practice ensures that any such problems will be magnified and made worse, as the Russian revolution proves.

Sadly many socialists cannot bring themselves to acknowledge this. While recognising the evils of the Stalinist bureaucracy, these socialists deny that this degeneration of Bolshevism was inevitable and was caused by outside factors

(namely the Russian Civil War or isolation). While not denying that these factors did have an effect in the outcome of the Russian Revolution, the seeds for bureaucracy existed from the first moment of the Bolshevik insurrection. These seeds where from three sources: Bolshevik politics, the nature of the state and the post-October economic arrangements favoured and implemented by the ruling party.

As we will indicate, these three factors caused the new “workers’ state” to degenerate long before the out break of the Civil war in May of 1918. This means that the revolution was **not** defeated primarily because of isolation or the effects of the civil war. The Bolsheviks had already seriously undermined it from within **long before** the effects of isolation or civil war had a chance to take hold. The civil war which started in the summer of 1918 did take its toll in what revolutionary gains survived, not least because it allowed the Bolsheviks to portray themselves and their policies as the lessor of two evils. However, Lenin’s regime was already defending (state) capitalism against genuine socialist tendencies before the outbreak of civil war. The suppression of Kronstadt in March 1921 was simply the logical end result of a process that had started in the spring of 1918, at the latest. As such, isolation and civil war are hardly good excuses — particularly as anarchists had predicted they would affect every revolution decades previously and Leninists are meant to realise that civil war and revolution are inevitable. Also, it must be stressed that Bolshevik rule was opposed by the working class, who took collective action to resist it and the Bolsheviks justified their policies in ideological terms and **not** in terms of measures required by difficult circumstances (see the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”).

One last thing. We are sure, in chronicling the “excesses” of the Bolshevik regime, that some Leninists will say “they sound exactly like the right-wing.” Presumably, if we said that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West we would also “sound like the right-wing.” That the right-wing also points to certain **facts** of the revolution does not in any way discredit these facts. How these facts are used is what counts. The right uses the facts to discredit socialism and the revolution. Anarchists use them to argue for libertarian socialism and support the revolution while opposing the Bolshevik ideology and practice which distorted it. Similarly, unlike the right we take into account the factors which Leninists urge us to use to excuse Bolshevik authoritarianism (such as civil war, economic collapse and so on). We are simply not convinced by Leninist arguments.

Needless to say, few Leninists apply their logic to Stalinism. To attack Stalinism by describing the facts of the regime would make one sound like the “right-wing.” Does that mean socialists should defend one of the most horrific dictatorships that ever existed? If so, how does that sound to non-socialists? Surely they would conclude that socialism is about Stalinism, dictatorship, terror and so on? If not,

why not? If “sounding like the right” makes criticism of Lenin’s regime anti-revolutionary, then why does this not apply to Stalinism? Simply because Lenin and Trotsky were not at the head of the dictatorship as they were in the early 1920s? Does the individuals who are in charge override the social relations of a society? Does dictatorship and one-man management become less so when Lenin rules? The apologists for Lenin and Trotsky point to the necessity created by the civil war and isolation within international capitalism for their authoritarian policies (while ignoring the fact they started **before** the civil war, continued after it **and were justified at the time** in terms of Bolshevik ideology). Stalin could make the same claim.

Other objections may be raised. It may be claimed that we quote “bourgeois” (or even worse, **Menshevik**) sources and so our account is flawed. In reply, we have to state that you cannot judge a regime based purely on what it says about itself. As such, critical accounts are required to paint a full picture of events. Moreover, it is a sad fact that few, if any, Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution actually discuss the class and social dynamics (and struggles) of the period under Lenin and Trotsky. This means we have to utilise the sources which **do**, namely those historians who do not identify with the Bolshevik regime. And, of course, any analysis (or defence) of the Bolshevik regime will have to account for critical accounts, either by refuting them or by showing their limitations. As will become obvious in our discussion, the reason why latter day Bolsheviks talk about the class dynamics post-October in the most superficial way is that it would be hard, even impossible, to maintain that Lenin’s regime was remotely socialist or based on working class power. Simply put, from early 1918 (at the latest) conflict between the Bolsheviks and the Russian working masses was a constant feature of the regime. It is only when that conflict reached massive proportions that Leninists do not (i.e. cannot) ignore it. In such cases, as the Kronstadt rebellion proves, history is distorted in order to defend the Bolshevik state (see the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?” for details).

The fact that Leninists try to discredit anarchists by saying that we sound like the right is sad. In effect, it **blocks** any real discussion of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism (as intended, probably). This ensures that Leninism remains above critique and so no lessons can be learnt from the Russian experience. After all, if the Bolsheviks had no choice then what lessons **are** there to learn? None. And if we are to learn no lessons (bar, obviously, mimic the Bolsheviks) we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes — mistakes that are partly explained by the objective circumstances at the time and partly by Bolshevik politics. But given that most of the circumstances the Bolsheviks faced, such as civil war and isolation, are likely to reappear in any future revolution, modern-day Leninists are simply ensuring

that Karl Marx was right — history repeats itself, first time as tragedy, second time as farce.

Such a position is, of course, wonderful for the pro-Leninist. It allows them to quote Lenin and Trotsky and use the Bolsheviks as the paradigm of revolution while washing their hands of the results of that revolution. By arguing that the Bolsheviks were “*making a virtue of necessity*,” (to use the expression of Leninist Donny Gluckstein [*The Tragedy of Bukharin*, p. 41]), they are automatically absolved of proving their arguments about the “democratic” essence of Bolshevism in power. Which is useful as, logically, no such evidence could exist and, in fact, there is a whole host of evidence pointing the other way which can, by happy co-incidence, be ignored. Indeed, from this perspective there is no point even discussing the revolution at all, beyond praising the activities and ideology of the Bolsheviks while sadly noting that “fate” (to quote Leninist Tony Cliff) ensured that they could not fulfil their promises. Which, of course, almost Leninist accounts **do** boil down to. Thus, for the modern Leninist, the Bolsheviks cannot be judged on what they did nor what they said while doing it (or even after). They can only be praised for what they said and did **before** they seized power.

However, anarchists have a problem with this position. It smacks more of religion than theory. Karl Marx was right to argue that you cannot judge people by what they say, only by what they do. It is in this revolutionary spirit that this section of the FAQ analyses the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik role within it. We need to analyse what they did when they held power as well as the election manifesto. As we will indicate in this section, neither was particularly appealing.

Finally, we should note that Leninists today have various arguments to justify what the Bolsheviks did once in power. We discuss these in the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”. We also discuss in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?” the ideological roots of the counter-revolutionary role of the Bolsheviks during the revolution. That the politics of the Bolsheviks played its role in the failure of the revolution can be seen from the example of the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement which applied basic libertarian principles in the same difficult circumstances of the Russian Civil War (see “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?” on this important movement).

**1 Can you give a short summary of what happened in 1917?**

**2 How did the Bolsheviks gain mass support?**

**3 Surely the Russian Revolution proves that vanguard parties work?**

No, far from it. Looking at the history of vanguardism we are struck by its failures, not its successes. Indeed, the proponents of “*democratic centralism*” can point to only one apparent success of their model, namely the Russian Revolution. However, we are warned by Leninists that failure to use the vanguard party will inevitably condemn future revolutions to failure:

*“The proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. . . Without the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power . . . The Soviets are the only organised form of the tie between the vanguard and the class. A revolutionary content can be given this form only by the party. This is proved by the positive experience of the October Revolution and by the negative experience of other countries (Germany, Austria, finally, Spain). No one has either shown in practice or tried to explain articulately on paper how the proletariat can seize power without the political leadership of a party that knows what it wants.” [Trotsky, Stalinism and Bolshevism]*

To anarchist ears, such claims seem out of place. After all, did the Russian Revolution actually result in socialism or even a viable form of soviet democracy? Far from it. Unless you picture revolution as simply the changing of the party in power, you have to acknowledge that while the Bolshevik party **did** take power in Russian in November 1917, the net effect of this was **not** the stated goals that justified that action. Thus, if we take the term “*effective*” to mean “*an efficient means to achieve the desired goals*” then vanguardism has not been proven to be effective, quite the reverse (assuming that your desired goal is a socialist society, rather than party power). Needless to say, Trotsky blames the failure of the Russian Revolution on “*objective*” factors rather than Bolshevik policies and practice, an

argument we address in detail in “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” and will not do so here.

So while Leninists make great claims for the effectiveness of their chosen kind of party, the hard facts of history are against their positive evaluation of vanguard parties. Ironically, even the Russian Revolution disproves the claims of Leninists. The fact is that the Bolshevik party in 1917 was very far from the “*democratic centralist*” organisation which supporters of “*vanguardism*” like to claim it is. As such, its success in 1917 lies more in its divergence from the principles of “*democratic centralism*” than in their application. The subsequent degeneration of the revolution and the party is marked by the increasing **application** of those principles in the life of the party.

Thus, to refute the claims of the “*effectiveness*” and “*efficiency*” of vanguardism, we need to look at its one and only success, namely the Russian Revolution. As the Cohen-Bendit brothers argue, “*far from leading the Russian Revolution forwards, the Bolsheviks were responsible for holding back the struggle of the masses between February and October 1917, and later for turning the revolution into a bureaucratic counter-revolution — in both cases because of the party’s very nature, structure and ideology.*” Indeed, “[f]rom April to October, Lenin had to fight a constant battle to keep the Party leadership in tune with the masses.” [Obsolete Communism, p. 183 and p. 187] It was only by continually violating its own “*nature, structure and ideology*” that the Bolshevik party played an important role in the revolution. Whenever the principles of “*democratic centralism*” were applied, the Bolshevik party played the role the Cohen-Bendit brothers subscribed to it (and once in power, the party’s negative features came to the fore).

Even Leninists acknowledge that, to quote Tony Cliff, throughout the history of Bolshevism, “*a certain conservatism arose.*” Indeed, “[a]t practically all sharp turning points, Lenin had to rely on the lower strata of the party machine against the higher, or on the rank and file against the machine as a whole.” [Lenin, vol. 2, p. 135] This fact, incidentally, refutes the basic assumptions of Lenin’s party schema, namely that the broad party membership, like the working class, was subject to bourgeois influences so necessitating central leadership and control from above.

Looking at both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, we are struck by how often this “*conservatism*” arose and how often the higher bodies were behind the spontaneous actions of the masses and the party membership. Looking at the 1905 revolution, we discover a classic example of the inefficiency of “*democratic centralism.*” Facing in 1905 the rise of the soviets, councils of workers’ delegates elected to co-ordinate strikes and other forms of struggle, the Bolsheviks did not know what to do. “*The Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks,*” noted Trotsky, “*was frightened at first by such an innovation as a non-partisan representation of the embattled masses, and could find nothing better to do than to present the Soviet with an ultimatum:*

*immediately adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband. The Petersburg Soviet as a whole, including the contingent of Bolshevik workingmen as well ignored this ultimatum without batting an eyelash.*” [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 106] More than that, “[t]he party’s Central Committee published the resolution on October 27, thereby making it the binding directive for all other Bolshevik organisations.” [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] It was only the return of Lenin which stopped the Bolshevik’s open attacks against the Soviet (also see section 8 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”).

The rationale for these attacks is significant. The St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were convinced that “*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*” [quoted by Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 77] In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers’ interests because they were elected by the workers! The implications of this perspective came clear in 1918, when the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and disbanded soviets to remain in power (see section 6). That the Bolshevik’s position flowed naturally from Lenin’s arguments in **What is to be Done?** is clear. Thus the underlying logic of Lenin’s vanguardism ensured that the Bolsheviks played a negative role with regards the soviets which, combined with “democratic centralism” ensured that it was spread far and wide. Only by ignoring their own party’s principles and staying in the Soviet did rank and file Bolsheviks play a positive role in the revolution. This divergence of top and bottom would be repeated in 1917.

Given this, perhaps it is unsurprising that Leninists started to rewrite the history of the 1905 revolution. Victor Serge, a “Left Oppositionist” and anti-Stalinist asserted in the late 1920s that in 1905 the Petrograd Soviet was “*led by Trotsky and inspired by the Bolsheviks.*” [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 36]. While the former claim is correct, the latter is not. As noted, the Bolsheviks were initially opposed the soviets and systematically worked to undermine them. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky at that time was a Menshevik, not a Bolshevik. After all, how could the most revolutionary party that ever existed have messed up so badly? How could democratic centralism faired so badly in practice? Best, then, to suggest that it did not and give the Bolsheviks a role better suited to the rhetoric of Bolshevism than its reality.

Trotsky was no different. He, needless to say, denied the obvious implications of these events in 1905. While admitting that the Bolsheviks “*adjusted themselves more slowly to the sweep of the movement*” and that the Mensheviks “*were preponderant in the Soviet,*” he tries to save vanguardism by asserting that “*the general direction of the Soviet’s policy proceeded in the main along Bolshevik lines.*” So, in spite of the lack of Bolshevik influence, in spite of the slowness in adjusting to



the revolution, Bolshevism was, in fact, the leading set of ideas in the revolution! Ironically, a few pages later, he mocks the claims of Stalinists that Stalin had “*isolated the Mensheviks from the masses*” by noting that the “*figures hardly bear [the claims] out.*” [Op. Cit., p. 112 and p. 117] Shame he did not apply this criteria to his own claims.

Of course, every party makes mistakes. The question is, how did the “*most revolutionary party of all time*” fare in 1917. Surely that revolution proves the validity of vanguardism and “democratic centralism”? After all, there was a successful revolution, the Bolshevik party did seize power. However, the apparent success of 1917 was not due to the application of “democratic centralism,” quite the reverse. While the myth of 1917 is that a highly efficient, democratic centralist vanguard party ensured the overthrow of the Provisional Government in November 1917 in favour of the Soviets (or so it seemed at the time) the facts are somewhat different. Rather, the Bolshevik party throughout 1917 was a fairly loose collection of local organisations (each more than willing to ignore central commands and express their autonomy), with much internal dissent and infighting and no discipline beyond what was created by common loyalty. The “democratic centralist” party, as desired by Lenin, was only created in the course of the Civil War and the tightening of the party dictatorship. In other words, the party became more like a “democratic centralist” one as the revolution degenerated. As such, the various followers of Lenin (Stalinists, Trotskyists and their multitude of offshoots) subscribe to a myth, which probably explains their lack of success in reproducing a similar organisation since. So assuming that the Bolsheviks did play an important role in the Russian revolution, it was because it was **not** the centralised, disciplined Bolshevik party of Leninist myth. Indeed, when the party **did** operate in a vanguardist manner, failure was soon to follow.

This claim can be proven by looking at the history of the 1917 revolution. The February revolution started with a spontaneous protests and strikes. As Murray Bookchin notes, “*the Petrograd organisation of the Bolsheviks opposed the calling of strikes precisely on the eve of the revolution which was destined to overthrow the Tsar. Fortunately, the workers ignored the Bolshevik ‘directives’ and went on strike anyway. In the events which followed, no one was more surprised by the revolution than the ‘revolutionary’ parties, including the Bolsheviks.*” [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 194] Trotsky quotes one of the Bolshevik leaders at the time:

*“Absolutely no guiding initiative from the party centres was felt . . . the Petrograd Committee had been arrested and the representative of the Central Committee . . . was unable to give any directives for the coming day.”* [quoted by Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 147]

Not the best of starts. Of course rank and file Bolsheviks took part in the demonstrations, street fights and strikes and so violated the principles their party was meant to be based on. As the revolution progressed, so did the dual nature of the Bolshevik party (i.e. its practical divergence from “democratic centralism” in order to be effective and attempts to force it back into that schema which handicapped the revolution). However, during 1917, “democratic centralism” was ignored in order to ensure the the Bolsheviks played any role at all in the revolution. As one historian of the party makes clear, in 1917 and until the outbreak of the Civil War, the party operated in ways that few modern “vanguard” parties would tolerate:

*“The committees were a law unto themselves when it came to accepting orders from above. Democratic centralism, as vague a principle of internal administration as there ever has been, was commonly held at least to enjoin lower executive bodies that they should obey the behests of all higher bodies in the organisational hierarchy. But town committees in practice had the devil’s own job in imposing firm leadership . . . Insubordination was the rule of the day whenever lower party bodies thought questions of importance were at stake.*

*“Suburb committees too faced difficulties in imposing discipline. Many a party cell saw fit to thumb its nose at higher authority and to pursue policies which it felt to be more suited to local circumstances or more desirable in general. No great secret was made of this. In fact, it was openly admitted that hardly a party committee existed which did not encounter problems in enforcing its will even upon individual activists.”* [Robert Service, **The Bolshevik Party in Revolution 1917–1923**, pp. 51–2]

So while Lenin’s ideal model of a disciplined, centralised and top-down party had been expounded since 1902, the operation of the party never matched his desire. As Service notes, “a disciplined hierarchy of command stretching down from the regional committees to party cells” had “never existed in Bolshevik history.” In the heady days of the revolution, when the party was flooded by new members, the party ignored what was meant to be its guiding principles. As Service constantly stresses, Bolshevik party life in 1917 was the exact opposite of that usually considered (by both opponents and supporters of Bolshevism) as its normal mode of operation. “Anarchist attitudes to higher authority,” he argues, “were the rule of the day” and “no Bolshevik leader in his right mind could have contemplated a regular insistence upon rigid standards of hierarchical control and discipline unless he had abandoned all hope of establishing a mass socialist party.” This meant that “in the Russia of 1917 it was the easiest thing in the world for lower party bodies to rebut the demands and pleas by higher authority.” He stresses that “[s]uburb and

*town committees . . . often refused to go along with official policies . . . they also . . . sometimes took it into their heads to engage in active obstruction.*" [Op. Cit., p. 80, p. 62 p. 56 and p. 60]

This worked both ways, of course. Town committees did "*snub their nose at lower-echelon viewpoints in the time before the next election. Try as hard as they might, suburb committees and ordinary cells could meanwhile do little to rectify matters beyond telling their own representative on their town committee to speak on their behalf. Or, if this too failed, they could resort to disruptive tactics by criticising it in public and refusing it all collaboration.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 52–3] Even by early 1918, the Bolshevik party bore little resemblance to the "democratic centralist" model desired by Lenin:

*"The image of a disciplined hierarchy of party committees was therefore but a thin, artificial veneer which was used by Bolshevik leaders to cover up the cracked surface of the real picture underneath. Cells and suburb committees saw no reason to kow-tow to town committees; nor did town committees feel under compulsion to show any greater respect to their provincial and regional committees than before."* [Op. Cit., p. 74]

It is this insubordination, this local autonomy and action in spite of central orders which explains the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917. Rather than a highly centralised and disciplined body of "professional" revolutionaries, the party in 1917 saw a "*significant change . . . within the membership of the party at local level . . . From the time of the February revolution requirements for party membership had been all but suspended, and now Bolshevik ranks swelled with impetuous recruits who knew next to nothing about Marxism and who were united by little more than overwhelming impatience for revolutionary action.*" [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Prelude to Revolution**, p. 41]

This mass of new members (many of whom were peasants who had just recently joined the industrial workforce) had a radicalising effect on the party's policies and structures. As even Leninist commentators argue, it was this influx of members who allowed Lenin to gain support for his radical revision of party aims in April. However, in spite of this radicalisation of the party base, the party machine still was at odds with the desires of the party. As Trotsky acknowledged, the situation "*called for resolute confrontation of the sluggish Party machine with masses and ideas in motion.*" He stressed that "*the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen.*" Ironically, given the role Trotsky usually gave the party, he admits that "[w]ithout Lenin, no one had known what to make of the unprecedented situation." [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 301, p. 305 and p. 297]

Which is significant in itself. The Bolshevik party is usually claimed as being the most “revolutionary” that ever existed, yet here is Trotsky admitting that its leading members did not have a clue what to do. He even argued that “[e]very time the Bolshevik leaders had to act without Lenin they fell into error, usually inclining to the Right.” [Op. Cit., p. 299] This negative opinion of the Bolsheviks applied even to the “left Bolsheviks, especially the workers” whom we are informed “tried with all their force to break through this quarantine” created by the Bolshevik leaders policy “of waiting, of accommodation, and of actual retreat before the Compromisers” after the February revolution and before the arrival of Lenin. Trotsky argues that “they did not know how to refute the premise about the bourgeois character of the revolution and the danger of an isolation of the proletariat. They submitted, gritting their teeth, to the directions of their leaders.” [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 1, p. 273] It seems strange, to say the least, that without one person the whole of the party was reduced to such a level given that the aim of the “revolutionary” party was to develop the political awareness of its members.

Lenin’s arrival, according to Trotsky, allowed the influence of the more radical rank and file to defeat the conservatism of the party machine. By the end of April, Lenin had managed to win over the majority of the party leadership to his position. However, as Trotsky argues, this “April conflict between Lenin and the general staff of the party was not the only one of its kind. Throughout the whole history of Bolshevism . . . all the leaders of the party at all the most important moments stood to the **right** of Lenin.” [Op. Cit., p. 305] As such, if “democratic centralism” had worked as intended, the whole party would have been arguing for incorrect positions the bulk of its existence (assuming, of course, that Lenin was correct most of the time).

For Trotsky, “Lenin exerted influence not so much as an individual but because he embodied the influence of the class on the Party and of the Party on its machine.” [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 299] Yet, this was the machine which Lenin had forged, which embodied his vision of how a “revolutionary” party should operate and was headed by him. In other words, to argue that the party machine was behind the party membership and the membership behind the class shows the bankruptcy of Lenin’s organisational scheme. This “backwardness,” moreover, indicates an independence of the party bureaucracy from the membership and the membership from the masses. As Lenin’s constantly repeated aim was for the party to seize power (based on the dubious assumption that class power would only be expressed, indeed was identical to, party power) this independence held serious dangers, dangers which became apparent once this goal was achieved.

Trotsky asks the question “by what miracle did Lenin manage in a few short weeks to turn the Party’s course into a new channel?” Significantly, he answers as follows: “Lenin’s personal attributes and the objective situation.” [Ibid.] No mention

is made of the democratic features of the party organisation, which suggests that without Lenin the rank and file party members would not have been able to shift the weight of the party machine in their favour. Trotsky seems close to admitting this:

*“As often happens, a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines. Even the Bolshevik Party cadres, who enjoyed the benefit of exceptional revolutionary training, were definitely inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown.” [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 298]*

Thus the party machine, which embodied the principles of “democratic centralism” proved less than able to the task assigned it in practice. Without Lenin, it is doubtful that the party membership would have over come the party machine:

*“Lenin was strong not only because he understood the laws of the class struggle but also because his ear was faultlessly attuned to the stirrings of the masses in motion. He represented not so much the Party machine as the vanguard of the proletariat. He was definitely convinced that thousands from among those workers who had borne the brunt of supporting the underground Party would now support him. The masses at the moment were more revolutionary than the Party, and the Party more revolutionary than its machine. As early as March the actual attitude of the workers and soldiers had in many cases become stormily apparent, and it was widely at variance with the instructions issued by all the parties, including the Bolsheviks.” [Op. Cit., p. 299]*

Little wonder the local party groupings ignored the party machine, practising autonomy and initiative in the face of a party machine inclined to conservatism, inertia, bureaucracy and remoteness. This conflict between the party machine and the principles it was based on and the needs of the revolution and party membership was expressed continually throughout 1917:

*“In short, the success of the revolution called for action against the ‘highest circles of the party,’ who, from February to October, utterly failed to play the revolutionary role they ought to have taken in theory. The masses themselves made the revolution, with or even against the party — this much at least was clear to Trotsky the historian. But far from drawing the correct conclusion, Trotsky the theorist continued to argue that the masses are incapable of making a revolution without a leader.” [Daniel & Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, Op. Cit., p. 188]*

Looking at the development of the revolution from April onwards, we are struck by the sluggishness of the party hierarchy. At every revolutionary upsurge, the party simply was not to the task of responding to the needs of masses and the local party groupings closest to them. This can be seen in June, July and October itself. At each turn, the rank and file groupings or Lenin had to constantly violate the principles of their own party in order to be effective. The remoteness and conservatism of the party even under Lenin can be constantly seen.

For example, when discussing the cancellation by the central committee of a demonstration planned for June 10<sup>th</sup> by the Petrograd Bolsheviks, the unresponsiveness of the party hierarchy can be seen. The “*speeches by Lenin and Zinoviev [justifying their actions] by no means satisfied the Petersburg Committee. If anything, it appears that their explanations served to strengthen the feeling that at best the party leadership had acted irresponsibly and incompetently and was seriously out of touch with reality.*” Indeed, many “*blamed the Central Committee for taking so long to respond to Military Organisation appeals for a demonstration.*” [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88 and p. 92]

During the discussions in late June, 1917, on whether to take direct action against the Provisional Government there was a “*wide gulf*” between lower organs evaluations of the current situation and that of the Central Committee. [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129] Indeed, among the delegates from the Bolshevik military groups, only Lashevich (an old Bolshevik) spoke in favour of the Central Committee position and he noted that “[*f*]*requently it is impossible to make out where the Bolshevik ends and the Anarchist begins.*” [quoted by Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129]

In the July days, the breach between the local party groups and the central committee increased. As we noted in the section 1, this spontaneous uprising was opposed to by the Bolshevik leadership, in spite of the leading role of their own militants (along with anarchists) in fermenting it. While calling on their own militants to restrain the masses, the party leadership was ignored by the rank and file membership who played an active role in the event. Sickened by being asked to play the role of “*fireman*,” the party militants rejected party discipline in order to maintain their credibility with the working class. Rank and file activists, pointing to the snowballing of the movement, showed clear dissatisfaction with the Central Committee. One argued that it “*was not aware of the latest developments when it made its decision to oppose the movement into the streets.*” Ultimately, the Central Committee appeal “*for restraining the masses . . . was removed from . . . Pravda . . . and so the party’s indecision was reflected by a large blank space on page one.*” [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 150, p. 159 and P. 175] Ultimately, the indecisive nature of the leadership can be explained by the fact it did not think it could seize state power for itself. As Trotsky noted, “*the state of popular consciousness . . . made*

*impossible the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in July.*” [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 2, p. 81]

The indecision of the party hierarchy did have an effect, of course. While the anarchists at Kronstadt looked at the demonstration as the start of an uprising, the Bolsheviks there were “*wavering indecisively in the middle*” between them and the Left-Social Revolutionaries who saw it as a means of applying pressure on the government. This was because they were “*hamstrung by the indecision of the party Central Committee.*” [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 187] Little wonder so many Bolshevik party organisations developed and protected their own autonomy and ability to act!

Significantly, one of the main Bolshevik groupings which helped organise and support the July uprising, the Military Organisation, started their own paper after the Central Committee had decreed after the failed revolt that neither it, nor the Petersburg Committee, should be allowed to have one. It “*angrily insisted on what it considered its just prerogatives*” and in “*no uncertain terms it affirmed its right to publish an independent newspaper and formally protested what is referred to as ‘a system of persecution and repression of an extremely peculiar character which had begun with the election of the new Central Committee.’*” [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 227] The Central Committee backed down, undoubtedly due to the fact it could not enforce its decision.

As the Cohn-Bendit brothers argue, “*five months after the Revolution and three months before the October uprising, the masses were still governing themselves, and the Bolshevik vanguard simply had to toe the line.*” [Op. Cit., p. 186] Within that vanguard, the central committee proved to be out of touch with the rank and file, who ignored it rather than break with their fellow workers.

Even by October, the party machine still lagged behind the needs of the revolution. In fact, Lenin could only impose his view by going over the head of the Central Committee. According to Trotsky’s account, “*this time he [wa]s not satisfied with furious criticism*” of the “*ruinous Fabianism of the Petrograd leadership*” and “*by way of protest he resign[ed] from the Central Committee.*” [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 3, p. 131] Trotsky quotes Lenin as follows:

*“I am compelled to request permission to withdraw from the Central Committee, which I hereby do, and leave myself freedom of agitation in the lower ranks of the party and at the party congress.”* [quoted by Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 131]

Thus the October revolution was precipitated by a blatant violation of the principles Lenin spent his life advocating. Indeed, if someone else other than Lenin had done this we are sure that Lenin, and his numerous followers, would have dismissed it as the action of a “*petty-bourgeois intellectual*” who cannot handle

party “discipline.” This is itself significant, as is the fact that he decided to appeal to the “lower ranks” of the party. Simply put, rather than being “democratic” the party machine effectively blocked communication and control from the bottom-up. Looking at the more radical party membership, he “could only impose his view by going over the head of his Central Committee.” [Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Op. Cit.*, p. 187] He made sure to send his letter of protest to “the Petrograd and Moscow committees” and also made sure that “copies fell into the hands of the more reliable party workers of the district locals.” By early October (and “over the heads of the Central Committee”) he wrote “directly to the Petrograd and Moscow committees” calling for insurrection. He also “appealed to a Petrograd party conference to speak a firm word in favour of insurrection.” [Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 131 and p. 132]

In October, Lenin had to fight what he called “a wavering” in the “upper circles of the party” which led to a “sort of dread of the struggle for power, an inclination to replace this struggle with resolutions protests, and conferences.” [quoted by Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 132] For Trotsky, this represented “almost a direct pitting of the party against the Central Committee,” required because “it was a question of the fate of the revolution” and so “all other considerations fell away.” [Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 132–3] On October 8<sup>th</sup>, when Lenin addressed the Bolshevik delegates of the forthcoming Northern Congress of Soviets on this subject, he did so “personally” as there “was no party decision” and the “higher institutions of the party had not yet expressed themselves.” [Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 133] Ultimately, the Central Committee came round to Lenin’s position but they did so under pressure of means at odds with the principles of the party.

This divergence between the imagine and reality of the Bolsheviks explains their success. If the party had applied or had remained true to the principles of “democratic centralism” it is doubtful that it would have played an important role in the movement. As Alexander Rabinowitch argues, Bolshevik organisational unity and discipline is “vastly exaggerated” and, in fact, Bolshevik success in 1917 was down to “the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character — in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.” In 1917, he goes on, “subordinate party bodies with the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organisation were permitted considerable independence and initiative . . . Most importantly, these lower bodies were able to tailor their tactics and appeals to suit their own particular constituencies amid rapidly changing conditions. Vast numbers of new members were recruited into the party . . . The newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers . . . who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline.” For example, while the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” was “officially withdrawn by the Sixth [Party] Congress in late July, this change did



*not take hold at the local level.*” [The Bolsheviks Come to Power, p. 311, p. 312 and p. 313]

It is no exaggeration to argue that if any member of a current vanguard party acted as the Bolshevik rank and file did in 1917, they would quickly be expelled (this probably explains why no such party has been remotely successful since). However, this ferment from below was quickly undermined within the party with the start of the Civil War. It is from this period when “democratic centralism” was actually applied within the party and clarified as an organisational principle:

*“It was quite a turnabout since the anarchic days before the Civil War. The Central Committee had always advocated the virtues of obedience and co-operation; but the rank-and-filers of 1917 had cared little about such entreaties as they did about appeals made by other higher authorities. The wartime emergency now supplied an opportunity to expatiate on this theme at will.”* [Service, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91]

Service stresses that *“it appears quite remarkable how quickly the Bolsheviks, who for years had talked idly about a strict hierarchy of command inside the party, at last began to put ideas into practice.”* [Op. Cit., p. 96]

In other words, the conversion of the Bolshevik party into a fully fledged “democratic centralist” party occurred during the degeneration of the Revolution. This was both a consequence of the rising authoritarianism within the party and society as well as one of its causes. As such, it is quite ironic that the model used by modern day followers of Lenin is that of the party during the decline of the revolution, not its peak. This is not surprising. Once in power, the Bolshevik party imposed a state capitalist regime onto the Russian people. Can it be surprising that the party structure which it developed to aid this process was also based on bourgeois attitudes and organisation? Simply put, the party model advocated by Lenin may not have been very effective during a revolution but it was exceedingly effective at prompting hierarchy and authority in the post-revolutionary regime. It simply replaced the old ruling elite with another, made up of members of the radical intelligentsia and odd ex-worker or ex-peasant.

This was due to the hierarchical and top-down nature of the party Lenin had created. While the party base was largely working class, the leadership was not. Full-time revolutionaries, they were either middle-class intellectuals or (occasionally) ex-workers and (even rarer) ex-peasants who had left their class to become part of the party machine. Even the delegates at the party congresses did not truly reflect class basis of the party membership. For example, the number of delegates was still dominated by white-collar or others (59.1% to 40.9%) at the sixth party congress at the end of July 1917. [Cliff, *Lenin*, vol. 2, p. 160] So while the party

gathered more working class members in 1917, it cannot be said that this was reflected in the party leadership which remained dominated by non-working class elements. Rather than being a genuine working class organisation, the Bolshevik party was a hierarchical group headed by non-working class elements whose working class base could not effectively control them even during the revolution in 1917. It was only effective because these newly joined and radicalised working class members ignored their own party structure and its defining ideology.

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks saw their membership start to decrease. Significantly, *“the decline in numbers which occurred from early 1918 onwards”* started happening *“contrary to what is usually assumed, some months before the Central Committee’s decree in midsummer that the party should be purged of its ‘undesirable’ elements.”* These lost members reflected two things. Firstly, the general decline in the size of the industrial working class. This meant that the radicalised new elements from the countryside which had flocked to the Bolsheviks in 1917 returned home. Secondly, the lost of popular support the Bolsheviks were facing due to the realities of their regime. This can be seen from the fact that while the Bolsheviks were losing members, the Left SRS almost doubled in size to 100,000 (the Mensheviks claimed to have a similar number). Rather than non-proletarians leaving, *“[i]t is more probable by far that it was industrial workers who were leaving in droves. After all, it would have been strange if the growing unpopularity of Sovnarkom in factory milieu had been confined exclusively to non-Bolsheviks.”* Unsurprisingly, given its position in power, *“[a]s the proportion of working-class members declined, so that of entrants from the middle-class rose; the steady drift towards a party in which industrial workers no longer numerically predominated was under way.”* By late 1918 membership started to increase again but *“[m]ost newcomers were not of working-class origin . . . the proportion of Bolsheviks of working-class origin fell from 57 per cent at the year’s beginning to 48 per cent at the end.”* It should be noted that it was not specified how many were classed as having working-class origin were still employed in working-class jobs. [Robert Service, *Op. Cit.*, p. 70, pp. 70–1 and p. 90] A new ruling elite was thus born, thanks to the way vanguard parties are structured and the application of vanguardist principles which had previously been ignored.

In summary, the experience of the Russian Revolution does not, in fact, show the validity of the “vanguard” model. The Bolshevik party in 1917 played a leading role in the revolution only insofar as its members violated its own organisational principles (Lenin included). Faced with a real revolution and an influx of more radical new members, the party had to practice anarchist ideas of autonomy, local initiative and the ignoring of central orders which had no bearing to reality on the ground. When the party did try to apply the top-down and hierarchical principles of “democratic centralism” it failed to adjust to the needs of the moment. Moreover,

when these principles were finally applied they helped ensure the degeneration of the revolution. As we discussed in section H.5, this was to be expected.

## 4 Was Lenin's "State and Revolution" applied after October?

In a nutshell, no. In fact the opposite was the case. Post-October, the Bolsheviks not only failed to introduce the ideas of Lenin's **State and Revolution**, they in fact introduced the exact opposite. As one historian puts it:

*"To consider 'State and Revolution' as the basic statement of Lenin's political philosophy — which non-Communists as well as Communists usually do — is a serious error. Its argument for a utopian anarchism never actually became official policy. The Leninism of 1917 . . . came to grief in a few short years; it was the revived Leninism of 1902 which prevailed as the basis for the political development of the USSR."* [Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, pp. 51–2]

Daniels is being far too lenient with the Bolsheviks. It was not, in fact, "a few short years" before the promises of 1917 were forgotten. In some cases, it was a few short hours. In others, a few short months. However, in a sense Daniels is right. It did take until 1921 before all hope for saving the Russian Revolution finally ended. With the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion, the true nature of the regime became obvious to all with eyes to see. Moreover, the banning of factions within the party at the same time did mark a return to the pattern of "*What is to be Done?*" rather than the more fluid practice Bolshevism exhibited in, say, 1917 (see section 3). However, as we discuss in the appendix "Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?", the various Bolshevik oppositions were, in their own way, just as authoritarian as the mainstream of the party.

In order to show that this is the case, we need to summarise the main ideas contained in Lenin's work. Moreover, we need to indicate what the Bolsheviks did, in fact, do. Finally, we need to see if the various rationales justifying these actions hold water.

So what did Lenin argue for in **State and Revolution**? Writing in the mid-1930s, anarchist Camillo Berneri summarised the main ideas of that work as follows:

*"The Leninist programme of 1917 included these points: the discontinuance of the police and standing army, abolition of the professional bureaucracy, elections for all public positions and offices, revocability of all officials, equality of*

*bureaucratic wages with workers' wages, the maximum of democracy, peaceful competition among the parties within the soviets, abolition of the death penalty.*" [*The Abolition and Extinction of the State*," Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review, no. 4, p. 50]

As he noted, "[n]ot a single one of the points of this programme has been achieved." This was, of course, under Stalinism and most Leninists will concur with Berneri. However what Leninists tend not to mention is that in the 7 month period from November 1917 to May 1918 none of these points was achieved. So, as an example of what Bolshevism "really" stands for it seems strange to harp on about a work which was never implemented when the its author was in a position to do so (i.e. before the onslaught of a civil war Lenin thought was inevitable anyway!).

To see that Berneri's summary is correct, we need to quote Lenin directly. Obviously the work is a wide ranging defence of Lenin's interpretation of Marxist theory on the state. As it is an attempt to overturn decades of Marxist orthodoxy, much of the work is quotes from Marx and Engels and Lenin's attempts to enlist them for his case (we discuss this issue in section H.3.10). Equally, we need to discount the numerous straw men arguments about anarchism Lenin inflicts on his reader (see sections H.1.3, H.1.4 and H.1.5 for the truth about his claims). Here we simply list the key points as regards Lenin's arguments about his "workers' state" and how the workers would maintain control of it:

1) Using the Paris Commune as a prototype, Lenin argued for the abolition of "parliamentarianism" by turning "representative institutions from mere 'talking shops' into working bodies." This would be done by removing "the division of labour between the legislative and the executive." [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 304 and p. 306]

2) "All officials, without exception, to be elected and subject to recall **at any time**" and so "directly responsible to their constituents." "Democracy means equality." [Op. Cit., p. 302, p. 306 and p. 346]

3) The "immediate introduction of control and superintendence by **all**, so that **all** shall become 'bureaucrats' for a time and so that, therefore, **no one** can become a 'bureaucrat'." Proletarian democracy would "take immediate steps to cut bureaucracy down to the roots . . . to the complete abolition of bureaucracy" as the "essence of bureaucracy" is officials becoming transformed "into privileged persons divorced from the masses and **superior to the masses.**" [Op. Cit., p. 355 and p. 360]

4) There should be no "special bodies of armed men" standing apart from the people "since the majority of the people itself suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' is no longer necessary." Using the example of the Paris Commune, Lenin suggested this meant "abolition of the standing army." Instead there would be the "armed masses." [Op. Cit., p. 275, p. 301 and p. 339]

5) The new (workers) state would be “*the organisation of violence for the suppression of . . . the exploiting class, i.e. the bourgeoisie. The toilers need a state only to overcome the resistance of the exploiters*” who are “*an insignificant minority,*” that is “*the landlords and the capitalists.*” This would see “*an immense expansion of democracy . . . for the poor, democracy for the people*” while, simultaneously, imposing “*a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. . . their resistance must be broken by force: it is clear that where is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.*” [Op. Cit., p. 287 and pp. 337–8]

This would be implemented after the current, bourgeois, state had been smashed. This would be the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” and be “*the introduction of complete democracy for the people.*” [Op. Cit., p. 355] However, the key practical ideas on what the new “semi-state” would be are contained in these five points. He generalised these points, considering them valid not only for Russia in 1917 but in all countries. In this his followers agree. Lenin’s work is considered valid for today, in advanced countries as it was in revolutionary Russia.

Three things strike anarchist readers of Lenin’s work. Firstly, as we noted in section H.1.7, much of it is pure anarchism. Bakunin had raised the vision of a system of workers’ councils as the framework of a free socialist society in the 1860s and 1870s. Moreover, he had also argued for the election of mandated and recallable delegates as well as for using a popular militia to defend the revolution (see section H.2.1). What is not anarchist is the call for centralisation, equating the council system with a state and the toleration of a “new” officialdom. Secondly, the almost utter non-mention of the role of the party in the book is deeply significant. Given the emphasis that Lenin had always placed on the party, it’s absence is worrying. Particularly (as we indicate in section 5) he had been calling for the party to seize power all through 1917. When he does mention the party he does so in an ambiguous way which suggests that it, not the class, would be in power. As subsequent events show, this was indeed what happened in practice. And, finally, the anarchist reader is struck by the fact that every one of these key ideas were not implemented under Lenin. In fact, the opposite was done. This can be seen from looking at each point in turn.

The first point as the creation of “working bodies”, the combining of legislative and executive bodies. The first body to be created by the Bolshevik revolution was the “Council of People’s Commissars” (CPC) This was a government separate from and above the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the soviets congress. It was an executive body elected by the soviet congress, but the soviets themselves were not turned into “working bodies.” Thus the promises of Lenin’s **State and Revolution** did not last the night.

As indicated in section 5, the Bolsheviks clearly knew that the Soviets had alienated their power to this body. However, it could be argued that Lenin's promises were kept as this body simply gave itself legislative powers four days later. Sadly, this is not the case. In the Paris Commune the delegates of the people took executive power into their own hands. Lenin reversed this. His executive took legislative power from the hands of the people's delegates. In the former case, power was decentralised into the hands of the population. In the latter case, it was centralised into the hands of a few. This concentration of power into executive committees occurred at all levels of the soviet hierarchy (see section 6 for full details). Simply put, legislative and executive power was taken **from** the soviets assemblies and handed to Bolshevik dominated executive committees.

What of the next principle, namely the election and recall of all officials? This lasted slightly longer, namely around 5 months. By March of 1918, the Bolsheviks started a systematic campaign against the elective principle in the workplace, in the military and even in the soviets. In the workplace, Lenin was arguing for appointed one-man managers "*vested with dictatorial powers*" by April 1918 (see section 10). In the military, Trotsky simply decreed the end of elected officers in favour of appointed officers (see section 14). And as far as the soviets go, the Bolsheviks were refusing to hold elections because they "*feared that the opposition parties would show gains.*" When elections were held, "*Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results*" in provincial towns. Moreover, the Bolsheviks "*pack[ed] local soviets*" with representatives of organisations they controlled "*once they could not longer count on an electoral majority.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22, p. 24 and p. 33] This gerrymandering was even practised at the all-Russian soviet congress (see section 6 for full details of this Bolshevik onslaught against the soviets). So much for competition among the parties within the soviets! And as far as the right of recall went, the Bolsheviks only supported this when the workers were recalling the opponents of the Bolsheviks, not when the workers were recalling them.

In summary, in under six months the Bolsheviks had replaced election of "*all officials*" by appointment from above in many areas of life. Democracy had simply being substituted by appointed from above (see section 4 of the appendix on "How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?" "for the deeply undemocratic reasoning used to justify this top-down and autocratic system of so-called democracy). The idea that different parties could compete for votes in the soviets (or elsewhere) was similarly curtailed and finally abolished.

Then there was the elimination of bureaucracy. As we show in section 7 of the appendix on "How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?", a new bureaucratic and centralised system quickly emerged. Rather than immediately cutting the size and power of the bureaucracy, it steadily grew.

It soon became the real power in the state (and, ultimately, in the 1920s became the social base for the rise of Stalin). Moreover, with the concentration of power in the hands of the Bolshevik government, the “*essence*” of bureaucracy remained as the party leaders became “*privileged persons divorced from the masses and superior to the masses.*” They were, for example, more than happy to justify their suppression of military democracy in terms of them knowing better than the general population what was best for them (see section 4 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?” for details).

Then there is the fourth point, namely the elimination of the standing army, the suppression of “*special bodies of armed men*” by the “*armed masses.*” This promise did not last two months. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, 1917, the Council of People’s Commissars decreed the formation of a political (secret) police force, the “*Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-Revolution.*” This was more commonly known by the Russian initials of the first two terms of its official name: The Cheka. Significantly, its founding decree stated it was to “*watch the press, saboteurs, strikers, and the Socialist-Revolutionaries of the Right.*” [contained in Robert V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, p. 133]

While it was initially a small organisation, as 1918 progressed it grew in size and activity. By April 1918, it was being used to break the anarchist movement across Russia (see section 23 for details). The Cheka soon became a key instrument of Bolshevik rule, with the full support of the likes of Lenin and Trotsky. The Cheka was most definitely a “*special body of armed men*” and not the same as the “*armed workers.*” In other words, Lenin’s claims in **State and Revolution** did not last two months and in under six months the Bolshevik state had a mighty group of “*armed men*” to impose its will.

This is not all. The Bolsheviks also conducted a sweeping transformation of the military within the first six months of taking power. During 1917, the soldiers and sailors (encouraged by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries) had formed their own committees and elected officers. In March 1918, Trotsky simply abolished all this by decree and replaced it with appointed officers (usually ex-Tsarist ones). In this way, the Red Army was turned from a workers’ militia (i.e. an armed people) into a “*special body*” separate from the general population (see section 15 for further discussion on this subject).

So instead of eliminating a “*special force*” above the people, the Bolsheviks did the opposite by creating a political police force (the Cheka) and a standing army (in which elections were a set aside by decree). These were special, professional, armed forces standing apart from the people and unaccountable to them. Indeed, they were used to repress strikes and working class unrest, a topic we now turn to.

Then there is the idea of that Lenin's "workers' state" would simple be an instrument of violence directed at the exploiters. This was not how it turned out in practice. As the Bolsheviks lost popular support, they turned the violence of the "worker's state" against the workers (and, of course, the peasants). As noted above, when the Bolsheviks lost soviet elections they used force to disband them (see section 6 for further details). Faced with strikes and working class protest during this period, the Bolsheviks responded with state violence (see section 5 of the appendix on "What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?" for details). We will discuss the implications of this for Lenin's theory below. So, as regards the claim that the new ("workers") state would repress only the exploiters, the truth was that it was used to repress whoever opposed Bolshevik power, including workers and peasants.

As can be seen, after the first six months of Bolshevik rule not a single measure advocated by Lenin in **State and Revolution** existed in "revolutionary" Russia. Some of the promises were broken in quiet quickly (overnight, in one case). Most took longer. For example, the democratisation of the armed forces had been decreed in late December 1917. However, this was simply acknowledging the existing revolutionary gains of the military personnel. Similarly, the Bolsheviks passed a decree on workers' control which, again, simply acknowledged the actual gains by the grassroots (and, in fact, limited them for further development — see section 9). This cannot be taken as evidence of the democratic nature of Bolshevism as most governments faced with a revolutionary movement will acknowledge and "legalise" the facts on the ground (until such time as they can neutralise or destroy them). For example, the Provisional Government created after the February Revolution also legalised the revolutionary gains of the workers (for example, legalising the soviets, factory committees, unions, strikes and so forth). The real question is whether Bolshevism continued to encourage these revolutionary gains once it had consolidated its power. Which they did not. Indeed, it can be argued that the Bolsheviks simply managed to do what the Provisional Government it replaced had failed to do, namely destroy the various organs of popular self-management created by the revolutionary masses. So the significant fact is not that the Bolsheviks recognised the gains of the masses but that their toleration of the application of what their followers say were their real principles did not last long and was quickly ended. Moreover, when the leading Bolsheviks looked back at this abolition they did not consider it in any way in contradiction to the principles of "communism" (see section 14).

We have stressed this period for a reason. This was the period **before** the outbreak of major Civil War and thus the policies applied show the actual nature of Bolshevism, it's essence if you like. This is a significant date as most Leninists blame the failure of Lenin to live up to his promises on this even. In reality, the



civil war was **not** the reason for these betrayals — simply because it had not started yet (see section 16 on when the civil war started and its impact). Each of the promises were broken in turn months before the civil war happened. “*All Power to the Soviets*” became, very quickly, “*All Power to the Bolsheviks*.” In the words of historian Marc Ferro:

*“In a way, **The State and Revolution** even laid the foundations and sketched out the essential features of an alternative to Bolshevik power, and only the pro-Leninist tradition has used it, almost to quieten its conscience, because Lenin, once in power, ignored its conclusions. The Bolsheviks, far from causing the state to wither away, found endless reasons for justifying its enforcement.”* [October 1917, pp. 213–4]

Where does that leave Lenin’s **State and Revolution**? Well, modern-day Leninists still urge us to read it, considering it his greatest work and the best introduction to what Leninism really stands for. For example, we find Leninist Tony Cliff calling that book “*Lenin’s real testament*” while, at the same time, acknowledging that its “*message . . . which was the guide for the first victorious proletarian revolution, was violated again and again during the civil war.*” Not a very good “*guide*” or that convincing a “*message*” if it was not applicable in the very circumstances it was designed to be applied in (a bit like saying you have an excellent umbrella but it only works when it is not raining). Moreover, Cliff is factually incorrect. The Bolsheviks “*violated*” that “*guide*” before the civil war started (i.e. when “*the victories of the Czechoslovak troops over the Red Army in June 1918, that threatened the greatest danger to the Soviet republic,*” to quote Cliff). Similarly, much of the economic policies implemented by the Bolsheviks had their roots in that book and the other writings by Lenin from 1917 (see section 5 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”). [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 161 and p. 18]

Given this, what use is Lenin’s **State and Revolution**? If this really was the “*guide*” it is claimed to be, the fact that it proved totally impractical suggests it should simply be ignored. Simply put, if the side effects of a revolution (such as civil war) require it to be ripped up then modern Leninists should come clean and admit that revolution and workers’ democracy simply do not go together. This was, after all, the conclusion of Lenin and Trotsky (see section H.3.8). As such, they should not recommend Lenin’s work as an example of what Bolshevism aims for. If, however, the basic idea of workers’ democracy and freedom are valid and considered the only way of achieving socialism then we need to wonder **why** the Bolsheviks did not apply them when they had the chance, particularly when

the Makhnovists in the Ukraine did. Such an investigation would only end up by concluding the validity of anarchism, **not** Leninism.

This can be seen from the trajectory of Bolshevik ideology post-October. Simply put, it was not bothered by the breaking of the promises of **State and Revolution** and 1917 in general. As such, Cliff is just wrong to assert that while the message of **State and Revolution** was “*violated again and again*” it “*was also invoked again and again against bureaucratic degeneration.*” [Cliff, **Op. Cit.**, p. 161] Far from it. Lenin’s **State and Revolution** was rarely invoked against degeneration by the mainstream Bolshevik leadership. Indeed, they happily supported party dictatorship and one-man management. Ironically for Cliff, it was famously invoked against the state capitalist policies being implemented in early 1918. This was done by the “Left Communists” around Bukharin in their defence of workers’ self-management against Lenin’s policy! Lenin told them to reread it (along with his other 1917 works) to see that “state capitalism” was his aim all along! Not only that, he quoted from **State and Revolution**. He argued that “*accounting and control*” was required “*for the proper functioning of the first stage of communist society.*” “*And this control,*” he continued, “*must be established not only over ‘the insignificant capitalist minority, over the gentry . . . ’, but also over the workers who ‘have been thoroughly corrupted by capitalism . . . ’*” He ended by saying it was “*significant that Bukharin did **not** emphasise **this**.*” [Collected Works, vol. 27, pp. 353–4] Needless to say, the Leninists who urge us to read Lenin’s work do not emphasis that either.

As the Bolsheviks lost more and more support, the number of workers “*thoroughly corrupted by capitalism*” increased. How to identify them was easy: they did not support the party. As historian Richard summarises, a “*lack of identification with the Bolshevik party was treated as the absence of political consciousness altogether.*” [Soviet Communists in Power, p. 94] This is the logical conclusion of vanguardism, of course (see section H.5.3). However, to acknowledge that state violence was also required to “control” the working class totally undermines the argument of **State and Revolution**.

This is easy to see and to prove theoretically. For example, by 1920, Lenin was more than happy to admit that the “workers’ state” used violence against the masses. At a conference of his political police, the Cheka, Lenin argued as follows:

*“Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.”*  
[Collected Works, vol. 42, p. 170]

This was simply summarising Bolshevik practice from the start. However, in **State and Revolution** Lenin had argued for imposing “*a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists.*” In 1917 he was “*clear that where is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 337–8] So if violence is directed against the working class then, obviously, there can be “*no freedom, no democracy*” for that class. And who identifies who the “*wavering and unstable*” elements are? Only the party. Thus any expression of workers’ democracy which conflicts with the party is a candidate for “*revolutionary coercion.*” So it probably just as well that the Bolsheviks had eliminated military democracy in March, 1918.

Trotsky expands on the obvious autocratic implications of this in 1921 when he attacked the Workers’ Opposition’s ideas on economic democracy:

*“The Party . . . is . . . duty bound to retain its dictatorship, regardless of the temporary vacillations of the amorphous masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even of the working class. This awareness is essential for cohesion; without it the Party is in danger of perishing . . . At any given moment, the dictatorship does not rest on the formal principle of workers’ democracy . . . if we look upon workers’ democracy as something unconditional . . . then . . . every plant should elect its own administrative organs and so on . . . From a formal point of view this is the clearest link with workers’ democracy. But we are against it. Why? . . . Because, in the first place, we want to retain the dictatorship of the Party, and, in the second place, because we think that the [democratic] way of managing important and essential plants is bound to be incompetent and prove a failure from an economic point of view . . .”* [quoted by Jay B. Sorenson, **The Life and Death of Soviet Trade Unionism**, p. 165]

Thus the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik regime confirmed anarchist theory and predictions about state socialism. In the words of Luigi Fabbri:

*“It is fairly certain that between the capitalist regime and the socialist there will be an intervening period of struggle, during which proletariat revolutionary workers will have to work to uproot the remnants of bourgeois society . . . But if the object of this struggle and this organisation is to free the proletariat from exploitation and state rule, then the role of guide, tutor or director cannot be entrusted to a new state, which would have an interest in pointing the revolution in a completely opposite direction . . .*

*“The outcome would be that a new government — battenning on the revolution and acting throughout the more or less extended period of its ‘provisional’ powers — would lay down the bureaucratic, military and economic foundations*

*of a new and lasting state organisation, around which a compact network of interests and privileges would, naturally, be woven. Thus in a short space of time what one would have would not be the state abolished, but a state stronger and more energetic than its predecessor and which would come to exercise those functions proper to it — the ones Marx recognised as being such — ‘keeping the great majority of producers under the yoke of a numerically small exploiting minority.’*

*“This is the lesson that the history of all revolutions teaches us, from the most ancient down to the most recent; and it is confirmed . . . by the day-to-day developments of the Russian revolution . . .*

*“Certainly, [state violence] starts out being used against the old power . . . But as the new power goes on consolidating its position . . . ever more frequently and ever more severely, the mailed fist of dictatorship is turned against the proletariat itself in whose name that dictatorship was set up and is operated! . . . the actions of the present Russian government [of Lenin and Trotsky] have shown that in real terms (and it could not be otherwise) the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ means police, military, political and economic dictatorship exercised over the broad mass of the proletariat in city and country by the few leaders of the political party.*

*“The violence of the state always ends up being used AGAINST ITS SUBJECTS, of whom the vast majority are always proletarians . . . The new government will be able to expropriate the old ruling class in whole or in part, but only so as to establish a new ruling class that will hold the greater part of the proletariat in subjection.*

*“That will come to pass if those who make up the government and the bureaucratic, military and police minority that upholds it end up becoming the real owners of wealth when the property of everyone is made over exclusively to the state. In the first place, the failure of the revolution will be self evident. In the second, in spite of the illusions that many people create, the conditions of the proletariat will always be those of a subject class.” [“Anarchy and ‘Scientific’ Communism”, in **The Poverty of Statism**, pp. 13–49, Albert Meltzer (ed.), pp. 26–31]*

The standard response by most modern Leninists to arguments like this about Bolshevism is simply to downplay the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks by stressing the effects of the civil war on shaping their ideology and actions. However, this fails to address the key issue of why the reality of Bolshevism (even before the civil war) was so different to the rhetoric. Anarchists, as we discuss in “How

did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, can point to certain aspects of Bolshevik ideology and the social structures its favoured which can explain it. The problems facing the revolution simply brought to the fore the limitations and dangers inherent in Leninism and, moreover, shaping them in distinctive ways. We draw the conclusion that a future revolution, as it will face similar problems, would be wise to avoid applying Leninist ideology and the authoritarian practices it allows and, indeed, promotes by its support of centralisation, confusion of party power with class power, vanguardism and equation of state capitalism with socialism. Leninists, in contrast, can only stress the fact that the revolution was occurring in difficult circumstances and hope that “fate” is more kind to them next time — as if a revolution, as Lenin himself noted in 1917, would not occur during nor create “difficult” circumstances! Equally, they can draw no lessons (bar repeat what the Bolsheviks did in 1917 and hope for better objective circumstances!) from the Russian experience simply because they are blind to the limitations of their politics. They are thus doomed to repeat history rather than make it.

So where does this analysis of Lenin’s **State and Revolution** and the realities of Bolshevik power get us? The conclusions of dissent Marxist Samuel Farber seem appropriate here. As he puts it, “*the very fact that a Sovnarkom had been created as a separate body from the CEC [Central Executive Committee] of the soviets clearly indicates that, Lenin’s **State and Revolution** notwithstanding, the separation of at least the top bodies of the executive and the legislative wings of the government remained in effect in the new Soviet system.*” This suggests “*that **State and Revolution** did not play a decisive role as a source of policy guidelines for ‘Leninism in power.’*” After all, “*immediately after the Revolution the Bolsheviks established an executive power . . . as a clearly separate body from the leading body of the legislature . . . Therefore, some sections of the contemporary Left appear to have greatly overestimated the importance that **State and Revolution** had for Lenin’s government. I would suggest that this document . . . can be better understood as a distant, although doubtless sincere [!], socio-political vision . . . as opposed to its having been a programmatic political statement, let alone a guide to action, for the period immediately after the successful seizure of power.*” [Farber, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 20–1 and p. 38]

That is **one** way of looking at it. Another would be to draw the conclusion that a “*distant . . . socio-political vision*” drawn up to sound like a “*guide to action*” which was then immediately ignored is, at worse, little more than a deception, or, at best, a theoretical justification for seizing power in the face of orthodox Marxist dogma. Whatever the rationale for Lenin writing his book, one thing is true — it was never implemented. Strange, then, that Leninists today urge use to read it to see what “Lenin really wanted.” Particularly given that so few of its

promises were actually implemented (those that were just recognised the facts on the ground) and all of were no longer applied in less than six months after the seize of power.

The best that can be said is that Lenin did want this vision to be applied but the realities of revolutionary Russia, the objective problems facing the revolution, made its application impossible. This is the standard Leninist account of the revolution. They seem unconcerned that they have just admitted that Lenin's ideas were utterly impractical for the real problems that any revolution is most likely to face. This was the conclusion Lenin himself drew, as did the rest of the Bolshevik leadership. This can be seen from the actual practice of "Leninism in power" and the arguments it used. And yet, for some reason, Lenin's book is still recommended by modern Leninists!

## 5 Did the Bolsheviks really aim for Soviet power?

It seems a truism for modern day Leninists that the Bolsheviks stood for "soviet power." For example, they like to note that the Bolsheviks used the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*" in 1917 as evidence. However, for the Bolsheviks this slogan had a radically different meaning to what many people would consider it to mean.

As we discuss in section 25, it was the anarchists (and those close to them, like the SR-Maximalists) who first raised the idea of soviets as the means by which the masses could run society. This was during the 1905 revolution. At that time, neither the Mensheviks nor the Bolsheviks viewed the soviets as the possible framework of a socialist society. This was still the case in 1917, until Lenin returned to Russia and convinced the Bolshevik Party that the time was right to raise the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*."

However, as well as this, Lenin also advocated a somewhat different vision of what a Bolshevik revolution would result in. Thus we find Lenin in 1917 continually repeating the basic idea: "*The Bolsheviks must assume power*." The Bolsheviks "*can and must take state power into their own hands*." He raised the question of "*will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?*" and answered it: "*I have already had occasion . . . to answer this question in the affirmative*." Moreover, "*a political party . . . would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party . . . if it refused to take power when opportunity offers*." [Selected Works, vol. 2, p 328, p. 329 and p. 352]

He equated party power with popular power: "*the power of the Bolsheviks — that is, the power of the proletariat*." Moreover, he argued that Russia "*was ruled by 130,000 landowners . . . and they tell us that Russia will not be able to be governed by the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party — governing in the interest of the poor*

*and against the rich.*” He stresses that the Bolsheviks “*are not Utopians. We know that just any labourer or any cook would be incapable of taking over immediately the administration of the State.*” Therefore they “*demand that the teaching should be conducted by the class-consciousness workers and soldiers, that this should be started immediately.*” Until then, the “*conscious workers must be in control.*” [**Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?** p. 102, pp. 61–62, p. 66 and p. 68]

As such, given this clear and unambiguous position throughout 1917 by Lenin, it seems incredulous, to say the least, for Leninist Tony Cliff to assert that “[t]o start with Lenin spoke of the **proletariat**, the **class** — not the Bolshevik Party — assuming state power.” [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 161] Surely the title of one of Lenin’s most famous pre-October essays, usually translated as “*Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*”, should have given the game away? As would, surely, quoting numerous calls by Lenin for the Bolsheviks to seize power? Apparently not.

This means, of course, Lenin is admitting that the working class in Russia would **not** have power under the Bolsheviks. Rather than “the poor” governing society directly, we would have **the Bolsheviks** governing in their interests. Thus, rather than soviet power as such, the Bolsheviks aimed for “party power through the soviets” — a radically different position. And as we discuss in the next section, when soviet power clashed with party power the former was always sacrificed to ensure the latter. As we indicate in section H.1.2, this support for party power before the revolution was soon transformed into a defence for party dictatorship after the Bolsheviks had seized power. However, we should not forget, to quote one historian, that the Bolshevik leaders “*anticipated a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ and that concept was a good deal closer to a party dictatorship in Lenin’s 1917 usage than revisionist scholars sometimes suggest.*” [Sheila Fitzpatrick, “*The Legacy of the Civil War*,” pp. 385–398, **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 388]

While modern-day Leninists tend to stress the assumption of power by the soviets as the goal of the Bolshevik revolution, the Bolsheviks themselves were more honest about it. For example, Trotsky quotes Lenin at the first soviet congress stating that it was “*not true to say that no party exists which is ready to assume power; such a party exists: this is our party.*” Moreover, “[o]ur party is ready to assume power.” As the Second Congress approached, Lenin “*rebuked those who connected the uprising with the Second Congress of the Soviets.*” He protested against Trotsky’s argument that they needed a Bolshevik majority at the Second Congress, arguing (according to Trotsky) that “[w]e have to win power and not tie ourselves to the Congress. It was ridiculous and absurd to warn the enemy about the date of the rising . . . First the party must seize power, arms in hand, and then we could talk about the Congress.” [**On Lenin**, p. 71, p. 85]

Trotsky argued that *“the party could not seize power by itself, independently of the Soviets and behind its back. This would have been a mistake . . . [as the] soldiers knew their delegates in the Soviet; it was through the Soviet that they knew the party. If the uprising had taken place behind the back of the Soviet, independently of it, without its authority . . . there might have been a dangerous confusion among the troops.”* Significantly, Trotsky made no mention of the proletariat. Finally, Lenin came over to Trotsky’s position, saying *“Oh, all right, one can proceed in this fashion as well, provided we seize power.”* [Op. Cit., p. 86 and p. 89]

Trotsky made similar arguments in his **History of the Russian Revolution** and his article **Lessons of October**. Discussing the July Days of 1917, for example, Trotsky discusses whether (to quote the title of the relevant chapter) *“Could the Bolsheviks have seized the Power in July?”* and noted, in passing, the army *“was far from ready to raise an insurrection in order to give the power to the Bolshevik Party.”* As far as the workers were concerned, although *“inclining toward the Bolsheviks in its overwhelming majority, had still not broken the umbilical cord attaching it to the Compromisers”* and so the Bolsheviks could not have *“seized the helm in July.”* He then lists other parts of the country where the soviets were ready to take power. He states that in *“a majority of provinces and county seats, the situation was incomparably less favourable”* simply because the Bolsheviks were not as well supported. Later he notes that *“[m]any of the provincial soviets had already, before the July days, become organs of power.”* Thus Trotsky was only interested in whether the workers could have put the Bolsheviks in power or not rather than were the soviets able to take power themselves. Party power was the decisive criteria. [History of the Russian Revolution, vol. 2, p. 78, p. 77, p. 78, p. 81 and p. 281]

This can be seen from the October insurrection. Trotsky again admits that the *“Bolsheviks could have seized power in Petrograd at the beginning of July”* but *“they could not have held it.”* However, by September the Bolsheviks had gained majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. The second Congress of Soviets was approaching. The time was considered appropriate to think of insurrection. By in whose name and for what end? Trotsky makes it clear. *“A revolutionary party is interested in legal coverings,”* he argued and so the party could use the defending the second Congress of Soviets as the means to justify its seizure of power. He raises the question: *“Would it not have been simpler . . . to summon the insurrection directly in the name of the party?”* and answers it in the negative. *“It would be an obvious mistake,”* he argued, *“to identify the strength of the Bolshevik party with the strength of the soviets led by it. The latter was much greater than the former. However, without the former it would have been mere impotence.”* He then quotes numerous Bolshevik delegates arguing that the masses would follow the soviet, not the party. Hence the importance of seizing power in the name of the



soviets, regardless of the fact it was the Bolshevik party who would in practice hold “all power.” Trotsky quotes Lenin as asking “Who is to seize power?” “That is now of no importance,” argued Lenin. “Let the Military Revolutionary Committee take it, or ‘some other institution,’ which will declare that it will surrender the power only to the genuine representatives of the interests of the people.” Trotsky notes that “some other institution” was a “conspirative designation for the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks.” And who turned out to be the “genuine representatives of the interests of the people”? By amazing co-incidence the Bolsheviks, the members of whose Central Committee formed the first “soviet” government. [Op. Cit., vol. 3, p. 265, p. 259, p. 262, p. 263 and p. 267]

As we discuss in section H.3.11, Trotsky was simply repeating the same instrumentalist arguments he had made earlier. Clearly, the support for the soviets was purely instrumental, simply a means of securing party power. For Bolshevism, the party was the key institution of proletarian revolution:

*“The party set the soviets in motion, the soviets set in motion the workers, soldiers, and to some extent the peasantry . . . If you represent this conducting apparatus as a system of cog-wheels — a comparison which Lenin had recourse at another period on another theme — you may say that the impatient attempt to connect the party wheel directly with the gigantic wheel of the masses — omitting the medium-sized wheel of the soviets — would have given rise to the danger of breaking the teeth of the party wheel.” [Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 264]*

Thus the soviets existed to allow the party to influence the workers. What of the workers running society directly? What if the workers reject the decisions of the party? After all, **before** the revolution Lenin “more than once repeated that the masses are far to the left of the party, just as the party is to the left of the Central Committee.” [Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 258] What happens when the workers refuse to be set in motion by the party but instead set themselves in motion and reject the Bolsheviks? What then for the soviets? Looking at the logic of Trotsky’s instrumentalist perspective, in such a case we would predict that the soviets would have to be tamed (by whatever means possible) in favour of party power (the real goal). And this is what did happen. The fate of the soviets after October prove that the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, seek soviet power without doubt (see next section). And as we discuss in section 4 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the peculiar Bolshevik definition of “soviet power” allowed them to justify the elimination of from the bottom-up grassroots democracy in the military and in the workplace with top-down appointments.

Thus we have a distinctly strange meaning by the expression “*All Power to the Soviets.*” In practice, it meant that the soviets alienate its power to a Bolshevik government. This is what the Bolsheviks considered as “soviet power,” namely party power, pure and simple. As the Central Committee argued in November 1917, “*it is impossible to refuse a purely Bolshevik government without treason to the slogan of the power of the Soviets, since a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . handed power over to this government.*” [contained in Robert v. Daniels (ed.), **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, pp. 128–9] Lenin was clear, arguing mere days after the October Revolution that “*our present slogan is: No Compromise, i.e. for a homogeneous Bolshevik government.*” [quoted by Daniels, **Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 65]

In other words, “soviet power” exists when the soviets hand power over the someone else (namely the Bolshevik leaders)! The difference is important, “*for the Anarchists declared, if ‘power’ really should belong to the soviets, it could not belong to the Bolshevik party, and if it should belong to that Party, as the Bolsheviks envisaged, it could not belong to the soviets.*” [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 213]

Which means that while anarchists and Leninists both use the expression “*All Power to the Soviets*” it does not mean they mean exactly the same thing by it. In practice the Bolshevik vision simply replaced the power of the soviets with a “soviet power” above them:

*“The success of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution — that is to say, the fact that they found themselves in power and from there subordinated the whole Revolution to their Party is explained by their ability to substitute the idea of a Soviet power for the social revolution and the social emancipation of the masses. A priori, these two ideas appear as non-contradictory for it was possible to understand Soviet power as the power of the soviets, and this facilitated the substitution of the idea of Soviet power for that of the Revolution. Nevertheless, in their realisation and consequences these ideas were in violent contraction to each other. The conception of Soviet Power incarnated in the Bolshevik state, was transformed into an entirely traditional bourgeois power concentrated in a handful of individuals who subjected to their authority all that was fundamental and most powerful in the life of the people — in this particular case, the social revolution. Therefore, with the help of the ‘power of the soviets’ — in which the Bolsheviks monopolised most of the posts — they effectively attained a total power and could proclaim their dictatorship throughout the revolutionary territory . . . All was reduced to a single centre, from where all instructions emanated concerning the way of life, of thought, of action of the working masses.”* [Peter Arshinov, **The Two Octobers**]

Isolated from the masses, holding power on their behalf, the Bolshevik party could not help being influenced by the realities of their position in society and the social relationships produced by statist forms. Far from being the servants of the people, they become upon the seizing of power their masters. As we argue in section 7 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the experience of Bolshevism in power confirmed anarchist fears that the so-called “workers’ state” would quickly become a danger to the revolution, corrupting those who held power and generating a bureaucracy around the new state bodies which came into conflict with both the ruling party and the masses. Placed above the people, isolated from them by centralisation of power, the Bolsheviks pre-revolutionary aim for party power unsurprising became in practice party dictatorship.

In less than a year, by July 1918, the soviet regime was a *de facto* party dictatorship. The theoretical revisions soon followed. Lenin, for example, was proclaiming in early December 1918 that while legalising the Mensheviks the Bolsheviks would “*reserve state power for ourselves, and for ourselves alone.*” [Collected Works, vol. 28, p. 213] Victor Serge records how when he arrived in Russia in the following month he discovered “*a colourless article*” signed by Zinoviev on “*The Monopoly of Power*” which said “*Our Party rules alone . . . it will not allow anyone . . . The false democratic liberties demanded by the counter-revolution.*” [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, p. 69] Serge, like most Bolsheviks, embraced this perspective wholeheartedly. For example, when the Bolsheviks published Bakunin’s “confession” to the Tsar in 1921 (in an attempt to discredit anarchism) “*Serge seized on Bakunin’s passage concerning the need for dictatorial rule in Russia, suggesting that ‘already in 1848 Bakunin had presaged Bolshevism.’*” [Lawrence D. Orton, “introduction,” *The Confession of Mikhail Bakunin*, p. 21] At the time Bakunin wrote his “confession” he was not an anarchist. At the time Serge wrote his comments, he was a leading Bolshevik and reflecting mainstream Bolshevik ideology.

Indeed, so important was it considered by them, the Bolsheviks revised their theory of the state to include this particular lesson of their revolution (see section H.3.8 for details). As noted in section H.1.2, all the leading Bolsheviks were talking about the “*dictatorship of the party*” and continued to do so until their deaths. Such a position, incidentally, is hard to square with support for soviet power in any meaningful term (although it is easy to square with an instrumentalist position on workers’ councils as a means to party power). It was only in the mid-30s that Serge started to revise his position for this position (Trotsky still subscribed to it). By the early 1940s, he wrote that “[a]gainst the Party the anarchists were right when they inscribed on their black banners, ‘*There is no worse poison than power*’ — meaning absolute power. From now on the psychosis of power was to captive the

*great majority of the leadership, especially at the lower levels.*" [Serge, **Op. Cit.**, p. 100]

Nor can the effects of the civil war explain this shift. As we discuss in the next section, the Bolshevik assault on the soviets and their power started in the spring of 1918, months before the start of large scale civil war. And it should be stressed that the Bolsheviks were not at all bothered by the creation of party dictatorship over the soviets. Indeed, in spite of ruling over a one party state Lenin was arguing in November 1918 that "*Soviet power is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic.*" How can that be when the workers do not run society nor have a say in who rules them? When Karl Kautsky raised this issue, Lenin replied by saying he "*fails to see the class nature of the state apparatus, of the machinery of state . . . The Soviet government is the first in the world . . . to enlist the people, specifically the exploited people in the work of administration.*" [Collected Works, vol. 28, p. 247 and p. 248]

However, the key issue is not whether workers take part in the state machinery but whether they determine the policies that are being implemented, i.e. whether the masses are running their own lives. After all, as Ante Ciliga pointed out, the Stalinist GPU (secret police) "*liked to boast of the working class origin of its henchmen.*" One of his fellow prisoners retorted to such claims by pointing out they were "*wrong to believe that in the days the Tsar the gaolers were recruited from among the dukes and the executioners from among the princes!*" [The Russian Engima, pp. 255–6] Simply put, just because the state administration is made up of bureaucrats who were originally working class does not mean that the working class, as a class, manages society.

In December of that year Lenin went one further and noted that at the Sixth Soviet Congress "*the Bolsheviks had 97 per cent*" of delegates, i.e. "*practically all representatives of the workers and peasants of the whole of Russia.*" This was proof of "*how stupid and ridiculous is the bourgeois fairy-tale about the Bolsheviks only having minority support.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 355–6] Given that the workers and peasants had no real choice in who to vote for, can this result be surprising? Of course not. While the Bolsheviks had mass support a year previously, pointing to election results under a dictatorship where all other parties and groups are subject to state repression is hardly convincing evidence for current support. Needless to say, Stalin (like a host of other dictators) made similar claims on similarly dubious election results. If the Bolsheviks were sincere in their support for soviet power then they would have tried to organise genuine soviet elections. This was possible even during the civil war as the example of the Makhnovists showed.

So, in a nutshell, the Bolsheviks did not fundamentally support the goal of soviet power. Rather, they aimed to create a "soviet power," a Bolshevik power above the soviets which derived its legitimacy from them. However, if the soviets

conflicted with that power, it were the soviets which were repudiated **not** party power. Thus the result of Bolshevik ideology was the marginalisation of the soviets and their replacement by Bolshevik dictatorship. This process started before the civil war and can be traced to the nature of the state as well as the underlying assumptions of Bolshevik ideology (see “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”).

## 6 What happened to the soviets after October?

As indicated in the last question, the last thing which the Bolsheviks wanted was “*all power to the soviets.*” Rather they wanted the soviets to hand over that power to a Bolshevik government. As the people in liberal capitalist politics, the soviets were “sovereign” in name only. They were expected to delegate power to a government. Like the “sovereign people” of bourgeois republics, the soviets were much praised but in practice ignored by those with real power.

In such a situation, we would expect the soviets to play no meaningful role in the new “workers’ state.” Under such a centralised system, we would expect the soviets to become little more than a fig-leaf for party power. Unsurprisingly, this is **exactly** what they did become. As we discuss in section 7 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, anarchists are not surprised by this as the centralisation so beloved by Marxists is designed to empower the few at the centre and marginalise the many at the circumference.

The very first act of the Bolshevik revolution was for the Second Congress of Soviets to alienate its power and hand it over to the “Council of People’s Commissars.” This was the new government and was totally Bolshevik in make-up (the Left SRs later joined it, although the Bolsheviks always maintained control). Thus the first act of the revolution was the creation of a power **above** the soviets. Although derived from the soviet congress, it was not identical to it. Thus the Bolshevik “workers’ state” or “semi-state” started to have the same characteristics as the normal state (see section H.3.7 for a discussion of what marks a state).

The subsequent marginalisation of the soviets in the “soviet” state occurred from top to bottom should not, therefore be considered an accident or a surprise. The Bolshevik desire for party power within a highly centralised state could have no other effect. At the top, the Central Executive Committee (CEC or VTsIK) was quickly marginalised from power. This body was meant to be the highest organ of soviet power but, in practice, it was sidelined by the Bolshevik government. This can be seen when, just four days after seizing power, the Bolshevik Council

of People's Commissars (CPC or Sovnarkom) "*unilaterally arrogated to itself legislative power simply by promulgating a decree to this effect. This was, effectively, a Bolshevik coup d'état that made clear the government's (and party's) pre-eminence over the soviets and their executive organ. Increasingly, the Bolsheviks relied upon the appointment from above of commissars with plenipotentiary powers, and they split up and reconstituted fractious Soviets and intimidated political opponents.*" [Neil Harding, *Leninism*, p. 253] Strange actions for a party proclaiming it was acting to ensure "All power to the soviets" (as we discussed in the last section, this was always considered by Lenin as little more than a slogan to hide the fact that the party would be in power).

It is doubtful that when readers of Lenin's *State and Revolution* read his argument for combining legislative and executive powers into one body, they had this in mind! But then, as we discussed in section 4, that work was never applied in practice so we should not be too surprised by this turn of events. One thing is sure, four days after the "soviet" revolution the soviets had been replaced as the effective power in society by a handful of Bolshevik leaders. So the Bolsheviks immediately created a power **above** the soviets in the form of the CPC. Lenin's argument in *The State and Revolution* that, like the Paris Commune, the workers' state would be based on a fusion of executive and administrative functions in the hands of the workers' delegates did not last one night. In reality, the Bolshevik party was the **real** power in "soviet" Russia.

Given that the All-Russian central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK) was dominated by Bolsheviks, it comes as no surprise to discover it was used to augment this centralisation of power into the hands of the party. The VTsIK ("*charged by the October revolution with controlling the government,*" the Sovnarkom) was "*used not to control but rather extend the authority and centralising fiat of the government. That was the work of Iakov Sverdlov, the VTsIK chairman, who — in close collaboration with Lenin as chairman of the Sovnarkom — ensured that the government decrees and ordinances were by the VTsIK and that they were thus endowed with Soviet legitimacy when they were sent to provincial soviet executive committees for transmission to all local soviets . . . To achieve that, Sverdlov had to reduce the 'Soviet Parliament' to nothing more than an 'administrative branch' (as Sukhanov put it) of the Sovnarkom. Using his position as the VTsIK chairman and his tight control over its praesidium and the large, disciplined and compliant Bolshevik majority in the plenary assembly, Sverdlov isolated the opposition and rendered it impotent. So successful was he that, by early December 1917, Sukhanov had already written off the VTsIK as 'a sorry parody of a revolutionary parliament,' while for the Bolshevik, Martin Latsis-Zurabs, the VTsIL was not even a good rubberstamp. Latsis campaigned vigorously in March and April 1918 for the VTsIK's abolition: with its 'idle, long-winded talk and its incapacity for productive work' the VTsIK merely held up the*

work of government, he claimed. And he may have had a point: during the period of 1917 to 1918, the Sovnarkom issued 474 decrees, the VTsIK a mere 62.” [Israel Getzler, *Soviets as Agents of Democratisation*, p. 27]

This process was not an accident. Far from it. In fact, the Bolshevik chairman Sverdlov knew exactly what he was doing. This included modifying the way the CEC worked:

*“The structure of VTsIK itself began to change under Sverdlov. He began to use the presidium to circumvent the general meeting, which contained eloquent minority spokesmen . . . Sverdlov’s use of the presidium marked a decisive change in the status of that body within the soviet hierarchy. In mid-1917 . . . [the] plenum had directed all activities and ratified bureau decisions which had a ‘particularly important social-political character.’ The bureau . . . served as the executive organ of the VTsIK plenum . . . Only in extraordinary cases when the bureau could no be convened for technical reason could the presidium make decisions. Even then such actions remained subject to review by the plenum.”* [Charles Duval, “Yakov M. Sverdlov and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK)”, pp. 3–22, *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXXI, no. 1, January 1979, pp. 6–7]

Under the Bolsheviks, the presidium was converted “into the *de facto* centre of power within VTsIK.” It “began to award representations to groups and factions which supported the government. With the VTsIK becoming ever more unwieldy in size by the day, the presidium began to expand its activities.” The presidium was used “to circumvent general meetings.” Thus the Bolsheviks were able “to increase the power of the presidium, postpone regular sessions, and present VTsIK with policies which had already been implemented by the Sovnarkom. Even in the presidium itself very few people determined policy.” [Charles Duval, *Op. Cit.*, p.7, p. 8 and p. 18]

So, from the very outset, the VTsIK was overshadowed by the “Council of People’s Commissars” (CPC). In the first year, only 68 of 480 decrees issued by the CPC were actually submitted to the Soviet Central Executive Committee, and even fewer were actually drafted by it. The VTsIK functions “were never clearly delineated, even in the constitution, despite vigorous attempts by the Left SRs . . . that Lenin never saw this highest soviet organ as the genuine equal of his cabin and that the Bolsheviks deliberated obstructed efforts at clarification is [a] convincing” conclusion to draw. It should be stressed that this process started before the outbreak of civil war in late May, 1918. After that the All-Russian Congress of soviets, which convened every three months or so during the first year of the revolution, met annually thereafter. Its elected VTsIK “also began to meet less frequently, and at the height of the civil war in late 1918 and throughout 1919, it

*never once met in full session.*” [Carmen Sirianni, **Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy**, pp. 203–4]

The marginalisation of the soviets can be seen from the decision on whether to continue the war against Germany. As Cornelius Castoriadis notes, under Lenin “[c]ollectively, the only real instance of power is the Party, and very soon, only the summits of the Party. Immediately after the seizure of power the soviets as institutions are reduced to the status of pure window-dressing (we need only look at the fact that, already at the beginning of 1918 in the discussions leading up to the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, their role was absolutely nil).” [**The role of Bolshevik Ideology in the birth of the Bureaucracy**, p. 97] In fact, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 1918, the Soviet Executive “began a survey of 200 local soviets; by 10 March 1918 a majority (105–95) had come out in favour of a revolutionary war, although the soviets in the two capitals voted . . . to accept a separate peace.” [Geoffrey Swain, **The Origins of the Russian Civil War**, p. 128] This survey was ignored by the Bolshevik Central Committee which voted 4 against, 4 abstain and 5 for it. This took Russia out of the Great War but handed over massive areas to imperialist Germany. The controversial treaty was ratified at the Fourth Soviet Congress, unsurprisingly as the Bolshevik majority simply followed the orders of their Central Committee. It would be pointless to go over the arguments of the rights and wrongs of the decision here, the point is that the 13 members of the Bolshevik Central Committee decided the future faith of Russia in this vote. The soviets were simply ignored in spite of the fact it was possible to consult them fully. Clearly, “soviet power” meant little more than window-dressing for Bolshevik power.

Thus, at the top summits of the state, the soviets had been marginalised by the Bolsheviks from day one. Far from having “all power” their CEC had given that to a Bolshevik government. Rather than exercise real power, it’s basic aim was to control those who did exercise it. And the Bolsheviks successfully acted to undermine even this function.

If this was happening at the top, what was the situation at the grassroots? Here, too, oligarchic tendencies in the soviets increased post-October, with “[e]ffective power in the local soviets relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.” The party was “successful in gaining control of soviet executives in the cities and at **uezd** and **guberniya** levels. These executive bodies were usually able to control soviet congresses, though the party often disbanded congresses that opposed major aspects of current policies.” Local soviets “had little input into the formation of national policy” and “[e]ven at higher levels, institutional power shifted away from the soviets.” [C. Sirianni, **Op. Cit.**, p. 204 and p. 203] The soviets quickly had become rubber-stamps for the Communist government, with the Soviet Constitution of 1918 codifying the centralisation of power and top-down decision making. Local



soviets were expected to “carry out all orders of the respective higher organs of the soviet power” (i.e. to carry out the commands of the central government).

This was not all. While having popular support in October 1917, the realities of “Leninism in power” soon saw a backlash develop. The Bolsheviks started to lose popular support to opposition groups like the Mensheviks and SRs (left and right). This growing opposition was reflected in two ways. Firstly, a rise in working class protests in the form of strikes and independent organisations. Secondly, there was a rise in votes for the opposition parties in soviet elections. Faced with this, the Bolsheviks responded in three ways, delaying elections, gerrymandering or force. We will discuss each in turn.

Lenin argued in mid-April 1918 that the “socialist character of Soviet, i.e. **proletarian**, democracy” lies, in part, in because “the people themselves determine the order and time of elections.” [The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government, pp. 36–7] However, the reality in the grassroots was somewhat different. There “the government [was] continually postponed the new general elections to the Petrograd Soviet, the term of which had ended in March 1918” because it “feared that the opposition parties would show gains. This fear was well founded since in the period immediately preceding 25 January, in those Petrograd factories where the workers had decided to hold new elections, the Mensheviks, SRs, and non-affiliated candidates had won about half the seats.” [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22] In Yaroslavl, the more the Bolsheviks tried to postpone the elections, the more the idea of holding new elections became an issue itself.” When the Bolsheviks gave in and held elections in early April, the Mensheviks won 47 of the 98 seats, the Bolsheviks 38 and the SRs 13. [“The Mensheviks’ Political Comeback: The Elections to the Provincial City Soviets in Spring 1918”, **The Russian Review**, vol. 42, pp. 1–50, p. 18] The fate of the Yaroslavl soviet will be discussed shortly. As Geoffrey Swain summarises, Menshevik and SR “successes in recalling Bolshevik delegates from the soviets had forced the Bolsheviks increasingly to delay by-elections.” [The Origins of the Russian Civil War, p. 91]

As well as postponing elections and recall, the Bolsheviks also quickly turned to gerrymandering the soviets to ensure the stability of their majority in the soviets. In this they made use of certain institutional problems the soviets had had from the start. On the day which the Petrograd soviet was formed in 1917, the Bolshevik Shlyapnikov “proposed that each socialist party should have the right to two seats in the provisional executive committee of the soviet.” This was “designed, initially, to give the Bolsheviks a decent showing, for they were only a small minority of the initiating group.” It was agreed. However, the “result was that members of a dozen different parties and organisations (trades unions, co-operative movements, etc.) entered the executive committee. They called themselves ‘representatives’ (of their organisations) and, by virtue of this, they speedily eliminated from their discussions

*the committee members chosen by the general assembly although they were the true founders of the Soviet.*” This meant, for example, Bolshevik co-founders of the soviet made way for such people as Kamenev and Stalin. Thus the make-up of the soviet executive committee was decided upon by *“the leadership of each organisation, its executive officers, and not with the [soviet] assembly. The assembly had lost its right to control.”* Thus, for example, the Bolshevik central committee member Yoffe became the presidium of the soviet of district committees without being elected by anyone represented at those soviets. *“After October, the Bolsheviks were more systematic in their use of these methods, but there was a difference: there were now no truly free elections that might have put a brake to a procedure that could only benefit the Bolshevik party.”* [Marc Ferro, **October 1917**, p. 191 and p. 195]

The effects of this can be seen in Petrograd soviet elections of June 1918. In these the Bolsheviks *“lost the absolute majority in the soviet they had previously enjoyed”* but remained its largest party. However, the results of these elections were irrelevant. This was because *“under regulations prepared by the Bolsheviks and adopted by the ‘old’ Petrograd soviet, more than half of the projected 700-plus deputies in the ‘new’ soviet were to be elected by the Bolshevik-dominated district soviets, trade unions, factory committees, Red Army and naval units, and district worker conferences: thus, the Bolsheviks were assured of a solid majority even before factory voting began.”* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 45] To be specific, the number of delegates elected directly from the workplace made up a mere third of the new soviet (i.e. only 260 of the 700 plus deputies in the new soviet were elected directly from the factories): *“It was this arbitrary ‘stacking’ of the new soviet, much more than election of ‘dead souls’ from shut-down factories, unfair campaign practices, falsification of the vote, or direct repression, that gave the Bolsheviks an unfair advantage in the contest.”* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Petrograd First City District Soviet during the Civil War**, p. 140]

In other words, the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and packed soviets to remain in power, so distorting the soviet structure to ensure Bolshevik dominance. This practice seems to have been commonplace. In Saratov, as in Petrograd, *“the Bolsheviks, fearing that they would lose elections, changed the electoral rules . . . in addition to the delegates elected directly at the factories, the trade unions — but only those in favour of soviet power, in other words supporters of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs — were given representation. Similarly, the political parties supporting Soviet power automatically received twenty-five seats in the soviets. Needless to say, these rules heavily favoured the ruling parties”* as the Mensheviks and SRs *“were regarded by the Bolsheviks as being against Soviet power.”* [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 30]

A similar situation existed in Moscow. For example, the largest single union in the soviet in 1920 was that of soviet employees with 140 deputies (9% of the total), followed by the metal workers with 121 (8%). In total, the bureaucracies of the four biggest trade unions had 29.5% of delegates in the Moscow soviet. This packing of the soviet by the trade union bureaucracy existed in 1918 as well, ensuring the Bolsheviks were insulated from popular opposition and the recall of workplace delegates by their electors. Another form of gerrymandering was uniting areas of Bolshevik strength “*for electoral purposes with places where they were weak, such as the creation of a single constituency out of the Moscow food administration (MPO) and the Cheka in February 1920.*” [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 179 and p. 178]

However, this activity was mild compared to the Bolshevik response to soviet elections which did not go their way. According to one historian, by the spring of 1918 “*Menshevik newspapers and activists in the trade unions, the Soviets, and the factories had made a considerable impact on a working class which was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime, so much so that in many places the Bolsheviks felt constrained to dissolve Soviets or prevent re-elections where Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had gained majorities.*” [Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 179] This is confirmed by other sources. “*By the middle of 1918,*” notes Leonard Schapiro, “*the Mensheviks could claim with some justification that large numbers of the industrial working class were now behind them, and that for the systematic dispersal and packing of the soviets, and the mass arrests at workers’ meetings and congresses, their party could eventually have won power by its policy of constitutional opposition. In the elections to the soviets which were taking place in the spring of 1918 throughout Russia, arrests, military dispersal, even shootings followed whenever Mensheviks succeeded in winning majorities or a substantial representation.*” [**The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 191]

For example, the Mensheviks “*made something of a comeback about Saratov workers in the spring of 1918, for which the Bolsheviks expelled them from the soviet.*” [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia’s Civil War**, p. 187] Izhevsk, a town of 100,000 with an armaments industry which was the main suppliers of rifles to the Tzar’s Army, experienced a swing to the left by the time of the October revolution. The Bolsheviks and SR-Maximalists became the majority and with a vote 92 to 58 for the soviet to assume power. After a revolt by SR-Maximalist Red Guards against the Bolshevik plans for a centralised Red Army in April, 1918, the Bolsheviks became the sole power. However, in the May elections the Mensheviks and [right] SRs “*experienced a dramatic revival*” and for “*the first time since September 1917, these two parties constituted a majority in the Soviet by winning seventy of 135 seats.*” The Bolsheviks “*simply refused to acquiesce to the popular mandate of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.*” In June, the

Bolshevik leadership “*appealed to the Karzan’ Soviet . . . for assistance.*” The troops sent along with the Bolshevik dominated Red Guards “*abrogated the results of the May and June elections*” and imprisoned the SR and Menshevik soviet delegates. The summer of 1918 also saw victories for the SRs and Mensheviks in the soviet elections in Votkinsk, a steel town near Izhevsk. “*As in Izhevsk the Bolsheviks voided the elections.*” [Stephan M. Merk, “*The ‘Class-Tragedy’ of Izhevsk: Working Class Opposition to Bolshevism in 1918*”, pp. 176–90, **Russian History**, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 181 and p. 186]

However, the most in depth account of this destruction of soviet is found in the research of Vladimir Brovkin. According to him, there “*are three factors*” which emerge from the soviet election results in the spring of 1918. These are, firstly, “*the impressive success of the Menshevik-SR opposition*” in those elections in all regions in European Russia. The second “*is the Bolshevik practice of outright disbandment of the Menshevik-SR-controlled soviets. The third is the subsequent wave of anti-Bolshevik uprisings.*” In fact, “*in all provincial capitals of European Russia where elections were held on which there are data, the Mensheviks and the SRs won majorities on the city soviets in the spring of 1918.*” Brovkin stresses that the “*process of the Menshevik-SR electoral victories threatened Bolshevik power. That is why in the course of the spring and summer of 1918, the soviet assemblies were disbanded in most cities and villages. To stay in power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets. . . These steps generated a far-reaching transformation in the soviet system, which remained ‘soviet’ in name only.*” Brovkin presents accounts from numerous towns and cities. As an example, he discusses Tver’ where the “*escalation of political tensions followed the already familiar pattern*” as the “*victory of the opposition at the polls*” in April 1918 “*brought about an intensification of the Bolshevik repression. Strikes, protests, and marches in Tver’ lead to the imposition of martial law.*” [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 46, p. 47, p. 48 and p. 11] Thus Bolshevik armed force not only overthrew the election results, it also suppressed working class protest against such actions. (Brovkin’s book **The Mensheviks after October** contains the same information as his article).

This Bolshevik attack on the soviets usually started with attempts to stop new elections. For example, after a demonstration in Petrograd in favour of the Constituent Assembly was repressed by the Bolsheviks in mid-January 1918, calls for new elections to the soviet occurred in many factories. “*Despite the efforts of the Bolsheviks and the Factory Committees they controlled, the movement for new elections to the soviet spread to more than twenty factories by early February and resulted in the election of fifty delegates: thirty-six SRs, seven Mensheviks and seven non-party.*” However, the Bolsheviks “*unwillingness to recognise the elections and to seat new delegates pushed a group of Socialists to . . . lay plans for an alternative*

workers' forum . . . what was later to become the Assembly of Workers' Plenipotentiaries." [Scott Smith, *The Social-Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Civil War*, **The Bolsheviks in Russian Society**, pp. 83–104, Vladimir N. Brovkin (Ed.), pp. 85–86] This forum, like all forms of working class protest, was crushed by the Bolshevik state. By the time the elections were held, in June 1918, the civil war had started (undoubtedly favouring the Bolsheviks) and the Bolsheviks had secured their majority by packing the soviet with non-workplace "representatives."

In Tula, again in the spring of 1918, local Bolsheviks reported to the Bolshevik Central Committee that the "*Bolshevik deputies began to be recalled one after another . . . our situation became shakier with passing day. We were forced to block new elections to the soviet and even not to recognise them where they had taken place not in our favour.*" In the end, the local party leader was forced to abolish the city soviet and to vest power in the Provincial Executive Committee. This refused to convene a plenum of the city soviet for more than two months, knowing that newly elected delegates were non-Bolshevik. [Smith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 87]

In Yaroslavl', the newly elected soviet convened on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918, and when it elected a Menshevik chairman, "*the Bolshevik delegation walked out and declared the soviet dissolved. In response, workers in the city went out on strike, which the Bolsheviks answered by arresting the strike committee and threatening to dismiss the strikers and replace them with unemployed workers.*" This failed and the Bolsheviks were forced to hold new elections, which they lost. Then "*the Bolsheviks dissolved this soviet as well and places the city under martial law.*" A similar event occurred in Riazan' (again in April) and, again, the Bolsheviks "*promptly dissolved the soviet and declared a dictatorship under a Military-Revolutionary Committee.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 88–9]

The opposition parties raised such issues at the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK), to little avail. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, one "*protested that non-Bolshevik controlled soviets were being dispersed by armed force, and wanted to discuss the issue.*" The chairman "*refus[ed] to include it in the agenda because of lack of supporting material*" and such information be submitted to the presidium of the soviet. The majority (i.e. the Bolsheviks) "*supported their chairman*" and the facts were "*submitted . . . to the presidium, where they apparently remained.*" It should be noted that the "*same fate befell attempts to challenge the arrests of Moscow anarchists by the government on 12 April.*" The chairman's "*handling of the anarchist matter ended its serious discussion in the VTsIK.*" [Charles Duval, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 13–14] Given that the VTsIK was meant to be the highest soviet body between congresses, the lack of concern for Bolshevik repression against soviets and opposition groups clearly shows the Bolshevik contempt for soviet democracy.

Needless to say, this destruction of soviet democracy continued during the civil war. For example, the Bolsheviks simply rejected the voice of people and would refuse to accept an election result. Emma Goldman attended an election meeting of bakers in Moscow in March, 1920. *"It was," she said, "the most exciting gathering I had witnessed in Russia."* However the *"chosen representative, an Anarchist, had been refused his mandate by the Soviet authorities. It was the third time the workers gathered to re-elect their delegate . . . and every time they elected the same man. The Communist candidate opposing him was Semashko, the Commissar of the Department of Health . . . [who] raved against the workers for choosing a non-Communist, called anathema upon their heads, and threatened them with the Tcheka and the curtailment of their rations. But he had no effect on the audience except to emphasise their opposition to him, and to arouse antagonism against the party he represented. The workers' choice was repudiated by the authorities by the authorities and later even arrested and imprisoned."* After a hunger strike, they were released. In spite of chekists with loaded guns attending union meetings, the bakers *"would not be intimidated"* and threatened a strike unless they were permitted to elect their own candidate. This ensured the bakers' demands were met. [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. 88–9]

Unsurprisingly, *"there is a mass of evidence to support the Menshevik accusations of electoral malpractice"* during elections in May 1920. And in spite of Menshevik *"declaration of support for the Soviet regime against the Poles"* the party was *"still subject to harassment."* [Skawa, Op. Cit., p. 178]

This gerrymandering was not limited to just local soviets. The Bolsheviks used it at the fifth soviet congress as well.

First, it should be noted that in the run up to the congress, *"on 14 June 1918, they expelled Martov and his five Mensheviks together with the Socialist Revolutionaries from the Central Executive Committee, closed down their newspapers . . . and drove them underground, just on the eve of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets in which the Mensheviks were expected to make significant gains."* [Israel Getzler, *Martov*, p. 181] The rationale for this action was the claim that the Mensheviks had taken part in anti-soviet rebellions (as we discuss in section 23, this was not true). The action was opposed by the Left SRs, who correctly questioned the legality of the Bolshevik expulsion of opposition groupings. They *"branded the proposed expulsion bill illegal, since the Mensheviks and SRs had been sent to the CEC by the Congress of Soviets, and only the next congress had the right to withdraw their representation. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks had no right to pose as defenders of the soviets against the alleged SR counter-revolution when they themselves has been disbanding the peasants' soviets and creating the committees of the poor to replace them."* [Brovkin, *The Mensheviks After October*, p. 231] When the vote was taken, only the Bolsheviks supported it. Their votes were sufficient to pass it.

Given that the Mensheviks had been winning soviet elections across Russia, it is clear that this action was driven far more by political needs than the truth. This resulted in the Left Social Revolutionaries (LSRs) as the only significant party left in the run up to the fifth Congress. The LSR author (and ex-commissar for justice in the only coalition soviet government) of the only biography of LSR leader (and long standing revolutionary who suffered torture and imprisonment in her fight against Tsarism) Maria Spiridonova states that “[b]etween 900 and 100 delegates were present. Officially the LSR numbered 40 percent of the delegates. They own opinion was that their number were even higher. The Bolsheviks strove to keep their majority by all the means in their power.” He quotes Spiridonova’s address to the Congress: “You may have a majority in this congress, but you do have not a majority in the country.” [I. Steinberg, *Spiridonova*, p. 209]

Historian Geoffrey Swain indicates that the LSRs had a point:

*“Up to the very last minute the Left SRs had been confident that, as the voice of Russia’s peasant masses, they would receive a majority when the Fifth Congress of Soviets assembled . . . which would enable them to deprive Lenin of power and launch a revolutionary war against Germany. Between April and the end of June 1918 membership of their party had almost doubled, from 60,000 to 100,000, and to prevent them securing a majority at the congress Lenin was forced to rely on dubious procedures: he allowed so-called committees of poor peasants to be represented at the congress. Thus as late as 3 July 1918 returns suggested a majority for the Left SRs, but a Congress of Committees of Poor Peasants held in Petrograd the same day ‘redressed the balance in favour of the Bolsheviks,’ to quote the *Guardian*’s Philips-Price, by deciding it had the right to represent the all those districts where local soviets had not been ‘cleansed of kulak elements and had not delivered the amount of food laid down in the requisitioning lists of the Committees of Poor Peasants.’ This blatant gerrymandering ensured a Bolshevik majority at the Fifth Congress of Soviets.” [The Origins of the Russian Civil War, p. 176]*

Historian Alexander Rabinowitch confirms this gerrymandering. As he put it, by the summer of 1918 “popular disenchantment with Bolshevik rule was already well advanced, not only in rural but also in urban Russia” and the “primary beneficiaries of this nationwide grass-roots shift in public opinion were the Left SRs. During the second half of June 1918, it was an open question which of the two parties would have a majority at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . On the evening of 4 July, virtually from the moment the Fifth Congress of Soviets opened in Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre, it was clear to the Left SRs that the Bolsheviks had effectively ‘fabricated’ a sizeable majority in the congress and consequently, that there was no

hope whatever of utilising it to force a fundamental change in the government's pro-German, anti-peasant policies." While he acknowledges that an "exact breakdown of properly elected delegates may be impossible to ascertain" it was possible ("based on substantial but incomplete archival evidence") to conclude that "it is quite clear that the Bolshevik majority was artificially inflated and highly suspect." He quotes the report of one leading LSR, based on data from LSR members of the congress's Credentials Committee, saying that the Bolsheviks "conjured up" 299 voting delegates. "The Bible tells us," noted the report's author, "that God created the heavens and the earth from nothing . . . In the twentieth century the Bolsheviks are capable of no lesser miracles: out of nothing, they create legitimate credentials." ["Maria Spiridonova's 'Last Testament'", *The Russian Review*, pp. 424–46, vol. 54, July 1995, p. 426]

This gerrymandering played a key role in the subsequent events. "Deprived of their democratic majority," Swain notes, "the Left SRs resorted to terror and assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach." [Swain, *Op. Cit.*, p. 176] The LSR assassination of Mirbach and the events which followed were soon labelled by the Bolsheviks an "uprising" against "soviet power" (see section 23 for more details). Lenin "decided that the killing of Mirbach provided a fortuitous opportunity to put an end to the growing Left SR threat." [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 427] After this, the LSRs followed the Mensheviks and Right SRs and were expelled from the soviets. This in spite of the fact that the rank and file knew nothing of the plans of the central committees and that their soviet delegates had been elected by the masses. The Bolsheviks had finally eliminated the last of their more left-wing opponents (the anarchists had been dealt with in April, see section 24 for details).

As discussed in section 21, the Committees of Poor Peasants were only supported by the Bolsheviks. Indeed, the Left SRs opposed them as being utterly counter-productive and an example of Bolshevik ignorance of village life. Consequently, we can say that the "delegates" from the committees were Bolsheviks or at least Bolshevik supporters. Significantly, by early 1919 Lenin admitted the Committees were failures and ordered them disbanded. The new policy reflected Left SR arguments against the Committees. It is hard not to concur with Vladimir Brovkin that by "establishing the committees of the poor to replace the [rural] soviets . . . the Bolsheviks were trying to create some institutional leverage of their own in the countryside for use against the SRs. In this light, the Bolshevik measures against the Menshevik-led city soviets . . . and against SR-led village soviets may be seen as a two-pronged attempt to stem the tide that threatened to leave them in the minority at the Fifth Congress of Soviets." [*The Mensheviks after October*, p. 226]

Thus, by July 1918, the Bolsheviks had effectively secured a monopoly of political power in Russia. When the Bolsheviks (rightly, if hypocritically) disbanded the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, they had claimed that the soviets



(rightly) represented a superior form of democracy. Once they started losing soviet elections, they could find no better way to “secure” workers’ democracy than to destroy it by gerrymandering soviets, disbanding them and expelling opposition parties from them. All peaceful attempts to replace them had been destroyed. The soviet CEC was marginalised and without any real power. Opposition parties had been repressed, usually on little or no evidence. The power of the soviets had been replaced by a soviet power in less than a year. However, this was simply the culmination of a process which had started when the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917. Simply put, the Bolsheviks had always aimed for “all power to the party via the soviets” and once this had been achieved, the soviets could be dispensed with. Maurice Brinton simply stated the obvious when he wrote that “*when institutions such as the soviets could no longer be influenced by ordinary workers, the regime could no longer be called a soviet regime.*” [**The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. xiii] By this obvious criteria, the Bolshevik regime was no longer soviet by the spring of 1918, i.e. before the outbreak of civil war. While opposition groups were not finally driven out of the soviets until 1923 (i.e. three years **after** the end of the civil war) their presence “*does not indicate the existence of a multi-party system since they in no way threatened the dominating role of the Bolsheviks, and they had not done so from mid-1918.*” [Richard Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 168]

Tony Cliff, leader of the British Leninist party the SWP, justified the repression of the Mensheviks and SRs on the grounds that they were not prepared to accept the Soviet system and rejected the role of “*constitutional opposition.*” He tries to move forward the repression until after the outbreak of full civil war by stating that “[d]espite their strong opposition to the government, for some time, i.e. until after the armed uprising of the Czechoslovakian Legion [in late May, 1918] — the Mensheviks were not much hampered in their propaganda work.” If having papers banned every now and then, members arrested and soviets being disbanded as soon as they get a Menshevik majority is “*not much hampered*” then Cliff does seem to be giving that phrase a new meaning. Similarly, Cliff’s claim that the “*civil war undermined the operation of the local soviets*” also seems lacking based on this new research. [**Lenin: Revolution Besieged**, vol. 3, p. 163, p. 167 and p. 150]

However, the Bolshevik assault on the soviets started during the spring of 1918 (i.e. in March, April and May). That is **before** the Czech rising and the onset of full scale civil war which occurred in late May (see section 3 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” on Bolshevik repression before the Czech revolt). Nor is it true that the Mensheviks rejected constitutional methods. Though they wished to see a re-convocation of the Constituent Assembly they believed that the only way to do this was by

winning a majority of the soviets (see section 23). Clearly, attempts to blame the Civil War for the elimination of soviet power and democracy seems woefully weak given the actions of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1918. And, equally clearly, the reduction of local soviet influence cannot be fully understood without factoring in the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation (as codified in the Soviet Constitution of 1918) along with this direct repression.

The simple fact is that the soviets were marginalised and undermined after the October Revolution simply because they **did** reflect the wishes of the working class, in spite of their defects (defects the Bolsheviks exploited to consolidate their power). The problem was that the workers no longer supported Lenin. Few Leninists would support such an obvious conclusion. For example, John Rees states that “[i]n the cities the Reds enjoyed the fierce and virtually undivided loyalty of the masses throughout the civil war period.” [“In Defence of October”, pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 47] Which, of course, explains the vast number of strikes and protests directed against the Bolshevik regime and the workers’ resolutions calling its end! It also explains why the Bolsheviks, in the face of such “undivided loyalty”, had to suppress opposition parties and impose a party dictatorship!

Simply put, if the Bolsheviks did have the support Rees states they did then they had no need to repress soviet democracy and opposition parties. Such “fierce” loyalty would not have been amenable to opposition arguments. Strange, then, that the Bolsheviks continually explained working class unrest in terms of the influence of Mensheviks, Left SRs and so on during the civil war. Moreover, Rees contradicts himself by arguing that if the Kronstadt revolt had succeeded, then it would have resulted in “the fall of the Bolsheviks.” [Op. Cit., p. 63] Now, given that the Kronstadt revolt called for free soviet elections (and **not** “soviets without parties” as Rees asserts), why did the Bolsheviks not agree to them (at least in the cities)? If, as Rees argues, the Reds had the fierce loyalty of the city workers, then why did the Bolsheviks not introduce soviet democracy in the cities after the end of the Civil War? Simply because they knew that such “loyalty” did not, in fact, exist. Zinoviev, for example, declared that the Bolsheviks’ support had been reduced to 1 per cent in early 1920. [Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 188]

So much for working class “loyalty” to the Bolsheviks. And, needless to say, Rees’ comments totally ignore the election results **before** the start of the civil war which prompted the Bolsheviks to pack or disband soviets. As Bertrand Russell summarised from his experiences in Lenin’s Russia during the civil war (in 1920): “No conceivable system of free elections would give majorities to the Communists, either in the town or country.” [The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism, pp. 40–1] Thus we have a major contradiction in the pro-Leninist argument. On the one hand, they stress that the workers supported the Bolsheviks wholeheartedly

during the civil war. On the other, they argue that party dictatorship had to be imposed. If the Bolsheviks had the support they claimed they had, then they would have won soviet elections easily. They did not and so free soviet elections were not held.

This fact also explains the fate of the so-called “*non party*” conferences favoured by the Bolsheviks in late 1920. In spite of praising the soviets as “*more democratic*” than anything in the “*best democratic republics of the bourgeois world*,” Lenin also argued that non-Party conferences were also required “*to be able to watch the mood of the masses, to come closer to them, to respond to their demands.*” [**Left-Wing Communism**, p. 33 and p. 32] If the soviets were as democratic as Lenin claimed, then the Bolsheviks would have no need of “non-party” conferences. Significantly, the Bolsheviks “responded” to these conferences and “their demands” by disbanding them. This was because “[d]uring the disturbances” of late 1920, “*they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies.*” Their frequency was decreased and they “were discontinued soon afterward.” [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 203] In other words, they meet the same fate as the soviets in the spring and summer of 1918.

Perhaps we should not be too surprised by these developments. After all, as we discuss in section 8 of the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the Bolsheviks had long had a distinctly undemocratic political ideology. Their support for democratic norms were less than consistent. The one thing they **were** consistent was their hypocrisy. Thus democratic decisions were to be binding on their opponents (even if that majority had to be manipulated into being) but not upon them. Before the revolution Lenin had openly espoused a double standard of discipline. “*We will not permit*,” he argued, “*the idea of unity to tie a noose around our necks, and we shall under no circumstances permit the Mensheviks to lead us by the rope.*” [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 17] Once in power, their political perspectives had little trouble ignoring the will of the working class when it clashed with what they, as that class’s self-proclaimed vanguard, had decided what was in its best interests. As we discussed in section H.5, such a autocratic perspective is at the heart of vanguardism. If you aim for party power, it comes as no surprise that the organs used to achieve it will wither under it. Just as muscles only remain strong if you use them, so soviets can only work if it is used to run society, not nominate the handful of party leaders who do. As Kropotkin argued in 1920:

*“The idea of soviets . . . of councils of workers and peasants . . . controlling the economic and political life of the country is a great idea. All the more so, since*

*it necessarily follows that these councils should be composed of all who take part in the production of natural wealth by their own efforts.*

*“But as long as the country is governed by a party dictatorship, the workers’ and peasants’ councils evidently lose their entire significance. They are reduced to . . . [a] passive role . . . A council of workers ceases to be free and of any use when liberty of the press no longer exists . . . [and they] lose their significance when the elections are not preceded by a free electoral campaign, and when the elections are conducted under pressure of a party dictatorship . . . It means the death-knell of the new system.” [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, pp. 254–5]*

Clearly, the fate of the soviets after October shows the dangers of Bolshevism to popular self-management and autonomy. We should be try and learn the lessons from the experience rather than, as pro-Bolsheviks do, rationalise and justify the usurpation of power by the party. The most obvious lesson to learn is to oppose the creation of any power **above** the soviets. This was not lost on Russian anarchists active in the revolution. For this reason, anarcho-syndicalists resolved, in August 1918, that they “*were for the soviets but categorically against the Soviet of People’s Commissars as an organ which does not stem from the soviet structure but only interferes with its work.*” Thus they were “*for the establishment of **free soviets** of workers’ and peasants’ representatives, and the abolition of the Soviet of People’s Commissars as an organisation inimical to the interests of the working class.*” [contained in Paul Avrich, **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 118 and p. 117] This resolution was driven by the experience of the Bolshevik dominated “soviet” regime.

It is also worth quoting Rudolf Rocker at length on this issue:

*“Let no one object that the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ cannot be compared to run of the mill dictatorship because it is the dictatorship of a class. Dictatorship of a class cannot exist as such, for it ends up, in the last analysis, as being the dictatorship of a given party which arrogates to itself the right to speak for that class. Thus, the liberal bourgeoisie, in their fight against despotism, used to speak in the name of the ‘people’ . . .*

*“We already know that a revolution cannot be made with rosewater. And we know, too, that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously. On the day of victorious revolution the workers will have to impose their will on the present owners of the soil, of the subsoil and of the means of production, which cannot be done — let us be clear on this — without the workers taking the capital of society into their own hands, and, above all, without*

*their having demolished the authoritarian structure which is, and will continue to be, the fortress keeping the masses of the people under dominion. Such an action is, without doubt, an act of liberation; a proclamation of social justice; the very essence of social revolution, which has nothing in common with the utterly bourgeois principle of dictatorship.*

*“The fact that a large number of socialist parties have rallied to the idea of councils, which is the proper mark of libertarian socialist and revolutionary syndicalists, is a confession, recognition that the tack they have taken up until now has been the product of a falsification, a distortion, and that with the councils the labour movement must create for itself a single organ capable of carrying into effect the unmitigated socialism that the conscious proletariat longs for. On the other hand, it ought not to be forgotten that this abrupt conversion runs the risk of introducing many alien features into the councils concept, features, that is, with no relation to the original tasks of socialism, and which have to be eliminated because they pose a threat to the further development of the councils. These alien elements are able only to conceive things from the dictatorial viewpoint. It must be our task to face up to this risk and warn our class comrades against experiments which cannot bring the dawn of social emancipation any nearer — which indeed, to the contrary, positively postpone it.*

*“Consequently, our advice is as follows: Everything for the councils or soviets! No power above them! A slogan which at the same time will be that of the social revolutionary.” [Anarchism and Sovietism]*

The validity of this argument can be seen, for example, from the expulsion of opposition parties from the soviets in June and July 1918. This act exposes the hollowness of Bolshevik claims of their soviet system presented a form of “higher” democracy. If the Bolshevik soviet system was, as they claimed, based on instant recall then why did they, for example, have to expel the Mensheviks and Right SRs from the soviet CEC in the first place? Why did the electors not simply recall them? It was two weeks after the Czech revolt before the Bolsheviks acted, surely enough time for voters to act? Perhaps this did not happen because the CEC was not, in fact, subject to instant recall at all? Being nominated at the quarterly soviet congress, they were effectively isolated from popular control. It also means that the Bolshevik government was even more insulated from popular control and accountability. To “recall” it, electors would have to either wait for the next national soviet congress or somehow convince the CEC to call an emergency one. As an example of workers’ running society, the Bolshevik system leaves much to be desired.

Another obvious lesson to learn was the use of appointments to the soviets and their executives from other organisations. As seen above, the Bolsheviks used the “representation” of other bodies they control (such as trade unions) to pack soviet assemblies in their favour. Similarly, allowing political parties to nominate representatives in soviet executives also marginalised the soviet assemblies and those delegates actually elected in the workplaces.

This was obvious to the Russian anarchists, who argued “*for effective soviets organised on collective lines with the direct delegation of workers and peasants from every factory, workshop, village, etc., and not political chatterboxes gaining entry through party lists and turning the soviets into talking shops.*” [contained in Paul Avrich, **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 118] The Makhnovists, likewise, argued that “[o]nly labourers who are contributing work necessary to the social economy should participate in the soviets. Representatives of political organisations have no place in worker-peasant soviets, since their participation in a workers’ soviet will transform the latter into deputies of the party and can lead to the downfall of the soviet system.” [contained in Peter Arshinov’s **History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 266] As we discuss in section 15 of the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?”, Leninists sometimes distort this into a claim that the Makhnovists opposed members of political standing for election.

This use of party lists meant that soviet delegates could be anyone. For example, the leading left-wing Menshevik Martov recounts that in early 1920 Bolsheviks in a chemical factory “*put up Lenin against me as a candidate [to the Moscow soviet]. I received seventy-six votes he-eight (in an open vote).*” [quoted by Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 202] How would either of these two intellectuals actually know and reflect the concerns and interests of the workers they would be “delegates” of? If the soviets were meant to be the delegates of working people, then why should non-working class members of political parties be elected to a soviet?

However, in spite of these problems, the Russian soviets were a key means of ensuring working class participation in the revolution. As recognised by all the socialist oppositions to the Bolsheviks, from the anarchists to the Mensheviks. As one historian put it:

*“Small wonder that the principal political demand of Mensheviks, Left SRs, SR Maximalists, Kronstadt sailors and of many oppositionists . . . has been for freely elected soviets which would this be restored to their original role as agents of democratisation.”* [Israel Getzler, **Soviets as Agents of Democratisation**, p. 30]

The sad fate of the soviets after the Bolshevik seizure of power simply confirms the opinion of the left Menshevik Martov who had “*rubbed it in to the Bolsheviks . . . at the first All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions [in January 1918], that they who were now extolling the Soviets as the ‘highest forms of the socialist development of the proletariat,’ had shown little love of them in 1905 or in 1917 after the July days; they loved Soviets only when they were ‘in the hands of the Bolshevik party.’*” [Getlzer, **Martov**, p. 174] As the next few months showed, once the soviets left those hands, then the soviets themselves were destroyed. The civil war did not start this process, it just gave the latter-day supporters of Bolshevism something to use to justify these actions.

**7 How did the factory committee movement develop?**

**8 What was the Bolshevik position on “workers’ control” in 1917?**

**9 What happened to the factory committees after October?**

**10 What were the Bolshevik economic policies in 1918?**

**11 Did Bolshevik economic policies work?**

**12 Was there an alternative to Lenin’s “state capitalism” and “war communism”?**

**13 Did the Bolsheviks allow independent trade unions?**

**14 Was the Red Army really a revolutionary army?**

**15 Was the Red Army “filled with socialist consciousness”?**

**16 How did the civil war start and develop?**

**17 Was the civil war between just Reds and Whites?**

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**18 How extensive was imperialist intervention?**

**19 Did the end of the civil war change Bolshevik policies?**

**20 Can the Red Terror and the Cheka be justified?**

**21 Did Bolshevik peasant policies work?**



## What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?

The Kronstadt rebellion took place in the first weeks of March, 1921. Kronstadt was (and is) a naval fortress on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Traditionally, it has served as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet and to guard the approaches to the city of St. Petersburg (which during the first world war was re-named Petrograd, then later Leningrad, and is now St. Petersburg again) thirty-five miles away.

The Kronstadt sailors had been in the vanguard of the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917. In 1917, Trotsky called them the “*pride and glory of the Russian Revolution.*” The inhabitants of Kronstadt had been early supporters and practitioners of soviet power, forming a free commune in 1917 which was relatively independent of the authorities. In the words of Israel Getzler, an expert on Kronstadt, “*it was in its commune-like self-government that Red Kronstadt really came into its own, realising the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ship’s crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practised a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees.*” [**Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 248] In the centre of the fortress an enormous public square served as a popular forum holding as many as 30,000 persons. The Kronstadters “*proved convincingly the capacity of ordinary people to use their ‘heads, too’ in governing themselves, and managing Russia’s largest navel base and fortress.*” [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 250]

The Russian Civil War had ended in Western Russia in November 1920 with the defeat of General Wrangel in the Crimea. All across Russia popular protests were erupting in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Peasant uprisings were occurring against the Communist Party policy of grain requisitioning (a policy the Bolsheviks and their argued had been thrust upon them by the circumstances but which involved extensive, barbaric and counter-productive repression). In urban areas, a wave of spontaneous strikes occurred and in late February a near general strike broke out in Petrograd.

On February 26<sup>th</sup>, in response to these events in Petrograd, the crews of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* held an emergency meeting and agreed to send a delegation to the city to investigate and report back on the ongoing strike movement. On their turn two days later, the delegates informed their fellow sailors of the strikes (with which they had full sympathy with) and the government repression directed against them. Those present at this meeting on

the *Petropavlovsk* then approved a resolution which raised 15 demands which included free elections to the soviets, freedom of speech, press, assembly and organisation to workers, peasants, anarchists and left-socialists (see section 3 for full details). Of the 15 demands, only two were related to what Marxists like to term the “petty-bourgeoisie” (the peasantry and artisans) and these demanded “*full freedom of action*” for all peasants and artisans who did not hire labour. Like the Petrograd workers, the Kronstadt sailors demanded the equalisation of wages and the end of roadblock detachments restricting travel and the ability of workers to bring food into the city.

A mass meeting of fifteen to sixteen thousand people was held in Anchor Square on March 1<sup>st</sup> and what has become known as the *Petropavlovsk* resolution was passed after the “*fact-finding*” delegation had made its report. Only two Bolshevik officials voted against the resolution. At this meeting it was decided to send another delegation to Petrograd to explain to the strikers and the city garrison of the demands of Kronstadt and to request that non-partisan delegates be sent by the Petrograd workers to Kronstadt to learn first-hand what was happening there. This delegation of thirty members was arrested by the Bolshevik government.

As the term of office of the Kronstadt soviet was about to expire, the mass meeting also decided to call a “*Conference of Delegates*” for March 2<sup>nd</sup>. This was to discuss the manner in which the new soviet elections would be held. This conference consisted of two delegates from the ship’s crews, army units, the docks, workshops, trade unions and Soviet institutions. This meeting of 303 delegates endorsed the *Petropavlovsk* resolution and elected a five-person “*Provisional Revolutionary Committee*” (this was enlarged to 15 members two days later by another conference of delegates). This committee was charged with organising the defence of Kronstadt, a move decided upon in part by the threats of the Bolshevik officials there and the groundless rumour that the Bolsheviks had dispatched forces to attack the meeting. Red Kronstadt had turned against the Communist government and raised the slogan of the 1917 revolution “*All Power to the Soviets*”, to which was added “*and not to parties.*” They termed this revolt the “*Third Revolution*” and would complete the work of the first two Russian Revolutions in 1917 by instituting a true toilers republic based on freely elected, self-managed, soviets.

The Communist Government responded with an ultimatum on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. This asserted that the revolt had “*undoubtedly been prepared by French counterintelligence*” and that the *Petropavlovsk* resolution was a “*SR-Black Hundred*” resolution (SR stood for “*Social Revolutionaries*”, a party with a traditional peasant base and whose right-wing had sided with White forces; the “*Black Hundreds*” were a reactionary, indeed proto-fascist, force dating back to before the revolution which attacked Jews, labour militants, radicals and so on). They argued that the revolt

had been organised by an ex-Tsarist officers led by ex-General Kozlovsky (who had, ironically, been placed in the fortress as a military specialist by Trotsky). This was the official line through-out the revolt.

During the revolt, Kronstadt started to re-organise itself from the bottom up. The trade union committees were re-elected and a Council of Trade Unions formed. The Conference of Delegates met regularly to discuss issues relating to the interests of Kronstadt and the struggle against the Bolshevik government (specifically on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>). Rank and file Communists left the party in droves, expressing support for the revolt and its aim of “*all power to the soviets and not to parties.*” About 300 Communists were arrested and treated humanly in prison (in comparison, at least 780 Communists left the party in protest of the actions it was taking against Kronstadt and its general role in the revolution). Significantly, up to one-third of the delegates elected to Kronstadt’s rebel conference of March 2<sup>nd</sup> were Communists. [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 184–7 and p. 81]

The Kronstadt revolt was a non-violent one, but from the start the attitude of the authorities was not one of serious negotiation but rather one of delivering an ultimatum: either come to your senses or suffer the consequences. Indeed, the Bolsheviks issued the threat that they would shoot the rebels “*like partridges*” and took the families of the sailors hostage in Petrograd. Towards the end of the revolt Trotsky sanctioned the use of chemical warfare against the rebels and if they had not been crushed, a gas attack would have carried out. [Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, p. 146 and pp. 211–2] No real attempt was made to settle the revolt peacefully. While there was at least three to four weeks before the ice was due to melt after the March 2<sup>nd</sup> “*Conference of Delegates*” meeting which marked the real start of the revolt, the Bolsheviks started military operations at 6.45pm on March 7<sup>th</sup>.

There were possible means for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On March 5<sup>th</sup>, two days before the bombardment of Kronstadt had begun, anarchists led by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman offered themselves as intermediates to facilitate negotiations between the rebels and the government (anarchist influence had been strong in Kronstadt in 1917). [Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2, pp. 882–3] This was ignored by the Bolsheviks. Years later, the Bolshevik Victor Serge (and eye-witness to the events) acknowledged that “[e]ven when the fighting had started, it would have been easy to avoid the worst: it was only necessary to accept the mediation offered by the anarchists (notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman) who had contact with the insurgents. For reasons of prestige and through an excess of authoritarianism, the Central Committee refused this course.” [The Serge-Trotsky Papers, p. 164]

Another possible solution, namely the Petrograd Soviet suggestion of March 6<sup>th</sup> that a delegation of party and non-party members of the Soviet visit Kronstadt was not pursued by the government. The rebels, unsurprisingly enough, had reservations about the **real** status of the non-party delegates and asked that the elections to the delegation take place within the factories, with observers from Kronstadt present (in itself a very reasonable request). Nothing came of this (unsurprisingly, as such a delegation would have reported the truth that Kronstadt was a popular revolt of working people so exposing Bolshevik lies and making the planned armed attack more difficult). A delegation “*sent by Kronstadt to explain the issues to the Petrograd Soviet and people was in the prisons of the Cheka.*” [Victor Serge, **Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 127] According to Serge, “*right from the first moment, at a time when it was easy to mitigate the conflict, the Bolshevik leaders had no intention of using anything but forcible methods.*” [**Ibid.**] This is confirmed by latter research. The refusal to pursue these possible means of resolving the crisis peacefully is explained by the fact that the decision to attack Kronstadt had already been made. Basing himself on documents from the Soviet Archives, historian Israel Getzler states that “[b]y 5 March, if not earlier, the Soviet leaders had decided to crush Kronstadt. Thus, in a cable to . . . [a] member of the Council of Labour and Defence, on that day, Trotsky insisted that ‘only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd.’ On the same day, acting as chairman of the RVSR [the Revolutionary Military Council of the Army and Navy of the Republic], he ordered the reformation and mobilisation of the Seventh Army ‘to suppress the uprising in Kronstadt,’ and appointed General Mikhail Tukhachevskii as its commander charged with suppressing the uprising in Kronstadt ‘in the shortest possible time.’” [“The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents”, **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 32]

As Alexander Berkman noted, the Communist government would “*make no concessions to the proletariat, while at the same time they were offering to compromise with the capitalists of Europe and America.*” [Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 62] While happy to negotiate and compromise with foreign governments, they treated the workers and peasants of Kronstadt (like that of the rest of Russia) as the class enemy (indeed, at the time, Lenin was publicly worrying whether the revolt was a White plot to sink these negotiations!).

The revolt was isolated and received no external support. The Petrograd workers were under martial law and could little or no action to support Kronstadt (assuming they refused to believe the Bolshevik lies about the uprising). The Communist government started to attack Kronstadt on March 7<sup>th</sup>. The first assault was a failure. “*After the Gulf had swallowed its first victims,*” Paul Avrich records, “*some of the Red soldiers, including a body of Peterhof **kursanty**, began*

to defect to the insurgents. Others refused to advance, in spite of threats from the machine gunners at the rear who had orders to shoot any wavers. The commissar of the northern group reported that his troops wanted to send a delegation to Kronstadt to find out the insurgents' demands." [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 153–4] After 10 days of constant attacks the Kronstadt revolt was crushed by the Red Army. On March 17<sup>th</sup>, the final assault occurred. Again, the Bolsheviks had to force their troops to fight. On the night of 16–17 March, for example, "*the extraordinary troika of Aleksei Nikolaev had arrested over 100 so-called instigators, 74 of whom he had publicly shot.*" [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35] Once the Bolshevik forces finally entered the city of Kronstadt "*the attacking troops took revenge for their fallen comrades in an orgy of bloodletting.*" [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 211] The next day, as an irony of history, the Bolsheviks celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Commune.

The repression did not end there. According to Serge, the "*defeated sailors belonged body and sole to the Revolution; they had voiced the suffering and the will of the Russian people*" yet "[h]undreds of prisoners were taken away to Petrograd; months later they were still being shot in small batches, a senseless and criminal agony" (particularly as they were "*prisoners of war . . . and the Government had for a long time promised an amnesty to its opponents on condition that they offered their support*"). "*This protracted massacre was either supervised or permitted by Dzerzhinsky*" (the head of the Cheka). The "*responsibilities of the Bolshevik Central Committee had been simply enormous*" and "*the subsequent repression . . . needlessly barbarous.*" [*Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 131 and p. 348]

The Soviet forces suffered over 10,000 casualties storming Kronstadt. There are no reliable figures for the rebels' losses or how many were later shot by the Cheka or sent to prison camps. The figures that exist are fragmentary. Immediately after the defeat of the revolt, 4,836 Kronstadt sailors were arrested and deported to the Crimea and the Caucasus. When Lenin heard of this on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, he expressed great misgivings about it and they were finally sent to forced labour camps in the Archangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk regions. Eight thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians escaped over the ice to Finland. The crews of the *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* fought to the bitter end, as did the cadets of the mechanics school, the torpedo detachment and the communications unit. A statistical communiqué of the Special Section of the Extraordinary **Troikas** of 1<sup>st</sup> May stated that 6,528 rebels had been arrested, of whom 2,168 had been shot (33%), 1,955 had been sentenced to forced labour (of whom 1,486 received a five year sentence), and 1,272 were released. A statistical review of the revolt made in 1935–6 listed the number arrested as 10,026 and stated that it had "not been possible to establish accurately the number of the repressed." The families of the rebels were deported, with Siberia considered as "*undoubtedly the only suitable region*" for them. Significantly, one of the members of the **troika** judging

the rebels complained that they had to rely exclusively on information provided by the Special Section of the **Vecheka** as “*neither commissars nor local Communists provided any material.*” [Israel Getzler, “*The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*”, **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, pp. 35–7]

After the revolt had been put down, the Bolshevik government reorganised the fortress. While it had attacked the revolt in the name of defending “*Soviet Power*” Kronstadt’s newly appointed military commander “*abolish[ed] the [Kronstadt] soviet altogether*” and ran the fortress “*with the assistance of a revolutionary troika*” (i.e. an appointed three man committee). [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 244] Kronstadt’s newspaper was renamed **Krasnyi Kronshtadt** (from **Izvestiia**) and stated in an editorial that the “*fundamental features*” of Kronstadt’s restored “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” during its “*initial phases*” were “[r]estrictions on political liberty, terror, military centralism and discipline and the direction of all means and resources towards the creation of an offensive and defensive state apparatus.” [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 245] The victors quickly started to eliminate all traces of the revolt. Anchor square became “*Revolutionary Square*” and the rebel battleships **Petropavlovsk** and **Sevastopol** were renamed the **Marat** and the **Paris Commune**, respectively.

That, in a nutshell, was the Kronstadt revolt. Obviously we cannot cover all the details and we recommend readers to consult the books and articles we list at the end of this section for fuller accounts of the events. However, that presents the key points in the rebellion. Now we must analyse the revolt and indicate why it is so important in evaluating Bolshevism in both practice and as a revolutionary theory.

In the sections which follow, we indicate why the revolt is so important (section 1) and place it in historical context (section 2). We then present and discuss the Kronstadt demands, indicating their sources in working class rebellion and radicalism (see sections 3 and 4). We indicate the lies the Bolsheviks said about the rebellion at the time ( section 5), whether it was, in fact, a White plot ( section 6) and indicate the revolts real relationship to the Whites (section 7). We also disprove Trotskyist assertions that the sailors in 1921 were different from those in 1917 (section 8) or that their political perspectives had fundamentally changed (section 9). We indicate that state coercion and repression was the significant in why the Kronstadt revolt did not spread to the Petrograd workers (section 10). Then we discuss the possibility of White intervention during and after the revolt (section 11). We follow this with a discussion of arguments that the country was too exhausted to allow soviet democracy (section 12) or that soviet democracy would have resulted in the defeat of the revolution (section 13). In the process, we will also show the depths to which supporters of Leninism will sink to defend

their heroes (in particular, see section 14). Lastly, we discuss what the Kronstadt revolt tells us about Leninism (section 15)

As we will hope to prove, Kronstadt was a popular uprising from below by the same sailors, soldiers and workers that made the 1917 October revolution. The Bolshevik repression of the revolt **can** be justified in terms of defending the state power of the Bolsheviks but it cannot be defended in terms of socialist theory. Indeed, it indicates that Bolshevism is a flawed political theory which cannot create a socialist society but only a state capitalist regime based on party dictatorship. This is what Kronstadt shows above all else: given a choice between workers' power and party power, Bolshevism will destroy the former to ensure the latter (see section 15 in particular). In this, Kronstadt is no isolated event (as we indicate in section 2).

There are many essential resources on the revolt available. The best in depth studies of the revolt are Paul Avrich's **Kronstadt 1921** and Israel Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917–1921**. Anarchist works include Ida Mett's **The Kronstadt Uprising** (by far the best), Alexander Berkman's **The Kronstadt Rebellion** (which is a good introduction and included in his **The Russian Tragedy**), Voline's **The Unknown Revolution** has a good chapter on Kronstadt (and quotes extensively from the Kronstadters' paper *Izvestiia*) and volume two of Daniel Guerin's **No Gods, No Masters** has an excellent section on the rebellion which includes a lengthy extract from Emma Goldman's autobiography **Living my Life** on the events as well as extracts from the Kronstadters' paper. Anton Ciliga's (a libertarian socialist/Marxist) **Kronstadt Revolt** is also a good introduction to the issues relating to the uprising. Eye-witness accounts include chapters in Berkman's **The Bolshevik Myth** as well as Goldman's **My Disillusionment in Russia**. Goldman's autobiography **Living My Life** also has useful material on the events.

For the Leninist analysis, the anthology **Kronstadt** contains Lenin and Trotsky's articles on the revolt plus supplementary essays refuting anarchist accounts. This work is recommended for those seeking the official Trotskyist version of events as it contains all the relevant documents by the Bolshevik leaders. Emma Goldman's **Trotsky Protests Too Much** is a great reply to Trotsky's comments and one of his followers contained in this work. Victor Serge was another eye-witness to the Kronstadt revolt. An individualist anarchist turned Bolshevik, his **Memoirs of a Revolutionary** is worth looking at to discover why he supported what the Bolsheviks did, albeit reluctantly.

## 1 Why is the Kronstadt rebellion important?

The Kronstadt rebellion is important because, as Voline put it, it was “*the first entirely independent attempt of the people to liberate itself from all yokes and achieve the Social Revolution, an attempt made directly, resolutely, and boldly by the working masses themselves without political shepherds, without leaders or tutors. It was the first step towards the third and social revolution.*” [The Unknown Revolution, pp. 537–8]

The Kronstadt sailors, soldiers and workers in 1917 had been the one of the first groups to support the slogan “*All power to the Soviets*” as well as one of the first towns to put it into practice. The focal point of the 1921 revolt — the sailors of the warships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* — had, in 1917, been supporters of the Bolsheviks. The sailors had been considered, until those fateful days in 1921, the pride and glory of the revolution and considered by all to be thoroughly revolutionary in spirit and action. They were the staunchest supporters of the Soviet system but, as the revolt showed, they were opposed to the dictatorship of any political party.

Therefore Kronstadt is important in evaluating the honesty of Leninist claims to be in favour of soviet democracy and power. The civil war was effectively over, yet the regime showed no signs of stopping the repression against working class protest or rights. Opposing re-elections to soviets, the Bolshevik regime was repressing strikers in the name of “*soviet power*” and “*the political power of the proletariat.*” In the countryside, the Bolsheviks continued their futile, evil and counterproductive policies against the peasants (ignoring the fact that their government was meant to be at the head of a workers and peasants’ state). Occurring as it did after the end of the civil war, Kronstadt played a key role in opening the eyes of anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to the real role of Bolshevism in the revolution. Until then, they (like many others) supported the Bolsheviks, rationalising their dictatorship as a temporary measure necessitated by the civil war. Kronstadt smashed that illusion, “*broke the last thread that held me to the Bolsheviks. The wanton slaughter they had instigated spoke more eloquently against than aught else. Whatever the pretences of the past, the Bolsheviks now proved themselves the most pernicious enemies of the Revolution. I would have nothing further to do with them.*” [Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, p. 200]

The events at Kronstadt cannot be looked at in isolation, but rather as part of a general struggle of the Russian working people against “their” government. Indeed, as we indicate in the next section, this repression **after** the end of the Civil War followed the same pattern as that started **before** it. Just as the Bolsheviks had



repressed soviet democracy in Kronstadt in 1921 in favour of party dictatorship, they had done so regularly elsewhere in early 1918.

The Kronstadt revolt was a popular movement from below aiming at restoring soviet power. As Alexander Berkman notes, the “*spirit of the Conference [of delegates which elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee] was thoroughly Sovietist: Kronstadt demanded Soviets free from interference by any political party; it wanted non-partisan Soviets that should truly reflect the needs and express the will of the workers and peasants. The attitude of the delegates was antagonistic to the arbitrary rule of bureaucratic commissars, but friendly to the Communist Party as such. They were staunch adherents of the Soviet system and they were earnestly seeking to find, by means friendly and peaceful, a solution of the pressing problems*” facing the revolution. [The Russian Tragedy, p. 67] The attitude of the Bolsheviks indicated that, for them, soviet power was only useful in so far as it ensured their party’s power and if the two came into conflict then the latter must survive over the corpse of the former. Thus Berkman:

*“But the ‘triumph’ of the Bolsheviks over Kronstadt held within itself the defeat of Bolshevism. It exposes the true character of the Communist dictatorship. The Communists proved themselves willing to sacrifice Communism, to make almost any compromise with international capitalism, yet refused the just demands of their own people — demands that voiced the October slogans of the Bolsheviks themselves: Soviets elected by direct and secret ballot, according to the Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic; and freedom of speech and press for the revolutionary parties.” [Op. Cit., p. 90]*

Investigating the Kronstadt revolt forces intelligent and honest minds into a critical examination of Bolshevik theories and practices. It exploded the Bolshevik myth of the Communist State being the “Workers’ and Peasants’ Government”. It proved that the Communist Party dictatorship and the Russian Revolution are opposites, contradictory and mutually exclusive. While it may be justifiable to argue that the repression directed by the Bolsheviks against working class people **during** the civil war could be explained by the needs of the war, the same cannot be said for Kronstadt. Similarly, the Leninist justifications for their power and actions at Kronstadt have direct implications for current activity and future revolutions. As we argue in section 15, the logic of these rationales simply mean that modern day Leninists will, if in the same position, destroy soviet democracy to defend “soviet power” (i.e. the power of their party).

In effect, Kronstadt was the clash between the reality of Leninism and its image or rhetoric. It raises many important issues as regards Bolshevism and the rationale it has produced to justify certain actions. “*The Kronstadt experience,*” as

Berkman argues, “proves once more that government, the State — whatever its name or form — is ever the mortal enemy of liberty and popular self-determination. The state has no soul, no principles. It has but one aim — to secure power and hold it, at any cost. That is the political lesson of Kronstadt.” [Op. Cit., p. 89]

Kronstadt is also important in that it, like most of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, confirmed anarchist analysis and predictions. This can be seen when *Izvestiia* (the paper produced during the rebellion by the Provisional Revolutionary Committee) argued that in Kronstadt “there have been laid the foundations of the Third Revolution, which will break the last chains of the workers and lay open the new highway to socialist construction.” [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 508]

This confirmed the arguments of Russian anarchists in 1917, who had predicted that “if the ‘transfer of power to the soviets’ comes in fact to signify the seizure of political authority by a new political party with the aim of guiding reconstruction from above, ‘from the centre’” then “there is no doubt that this ‘new power’ can in no way satisfy even the most immediate needs and demands of the people, much less begin the task of ‘socialist reconstruction’ . . . Then, after a more or less prolonged interruption, the struggle will inevitably be renewed. Then will begin a third and last stage of the Great Revolution. There will begin a struggle between the living forces arising from the creative impulse of the popular masses on the spot, on the one hand, namely the local workers’ and peasants’ organisations acting directly . . . and the centralist Social Democratic power defending its existence, on the other; a struggle between authority and freedom.” [quoted by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 94]

Thus Kronstadt is a symbol of the fact that state power cannot be utilised by the working class and always becomes a force for minority rule (in this case of former workers and revolutionaries, as Bakunin predicted).

There is another reason why the study of Kronstadt is important. Since the suppression of the revolt, Leninist and Trotskyist groups have continually justified the acts of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, they have followed Lenin and Trotsky in slandering the revolt and, indeed, have continually lied about it. When Trotskyist John Wright states that the supporters of Kronstadt have “distort[ed] historical facts, monstrously exaggerat[ed] every subsidiary issue or question . . . and throw[n] a veil . . . over the *real* program and aims of the mutiny” he is, in fact, describing his and his fellow Trotskyists. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 102] Indeed, as we will prove, anarchist accounts have been validated by later research while Trotskyist assertions have been exploded time and time again. Indeed, it would be a useful task to write a companion to Trotsky’s book **The Stalin School of Falsification** about Trotsky and his followers activities in the field of re-writing history.

Similarly, when Trotsky argues that anarchists like Goldman and Berkman “do not have the slightest understanding of the criteria and methods of scientific research” and just “quote the proclamations of the insurgents like pious preachers quoting Holy Scriptures” he is, in fact, just describing himself and his followers (as we shall see, the latter just repeat his and Lenin’s assertions regardless of how silly or refuted they are). Ironically, he states that “Marx has said that it is impossible to judge either parties or peoples by what they say about themselves.” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88] As Emma Goldman argued, “[h]ow pathetic that he does not realise how much this applies to him!” [Trotsky Protests Too Much] Kronstadt shows what the Bolsheviks said about their regime was the opposite of what it really was, as show by its actions.

What will also become clear from our discussion is the way Trotskyists have doctored the academic accounts to fit their ideological account of the uprising. The reason for this will become clear. Simply put, the supporters of Bolshevism cannot help lie about the Kronstadt revolt as it so clearly exposes the **real** nature of Bolshevik ideology. Rather than support the Kronstadt call for soviet democracy, the Bolsheviks crushed the revolt, arguing that in so doing they were defending “soviet power.” Their followers have repeated these arguments.

This expression of Leninist double-think (the ability to know two contradictory facts and maintain both are true) can be explained. Once it is understood that “workers’ power” and “soviet power” actually mean **party power** then the contradictions disappear. Party power had to be maintained at all costs, including the destruction of those who desired real soviet and workers’ power (and so soviet democracy).

For example, Trotsky argued that in 1921 “the proletariat had to hold political power in its hands” yet later Trotskyists argue that the proletariat was too exhausted, atomised and decimated to do so. [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 81] Similarly, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank states that for the Bolsheviks, “the dilemma was posed in these terms: either keep the workers’ state under their leadership, or see the counterrevolution begin, in one or other political disguise, ending in a counter-revolutionary reign of terror that would leave not the slightest room for democracy.” [Op. Cit., p. 15] Of course the fact that there was “not the slightest room for democracy” under Lenin is not mentioned, nor is the fact that the “dictatorship of the party” had been a fundamental aspect of Bolshevik ideology since early 1919 and practice since mid-1918 (by the latest). Nor does Frank consider it important to note that a “reign of terror” did develop under Stalin from the terror, repression and dictatorship practised in 1921 by Lenin and Trotsky.

Most Leninists follow Frank and argue that the suppression of the rebellion was essential to defend the “gains of the revolution.” What exactly were these gains? Not soviet democracy, freedom of speech, assembly and press, trade union

freedom and so on as the Kronstadters were crushed for demanding these. No, apparently the “gains” of the revolution was a Bolshevik government pure and simple. Never mind the fact it was a one-party dictatorship, with a strong and privileged bureaucratic machine and no freedom of speech, press, association or assembly for working people. The fact that Lenin and Trotsky were in power is enough for their followers to justify the repression of Kronstadt and subscribe to the notion of a “workers’ state” which excludes workers from power.

Thus the double-think of Bolshevism is clearly seen from the Kronstadt events. The Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that Kronstadt was suppressed to defend soviet power yet argue that the Kronstadt demand for free soviet elections was “*counter-revolutionary*”, “*backward*”, “*petty-bourgeois*” and so on. How soviet power could mean anything without free elections is never explained. Similarly, they argue that it was necessary to defend the “*workers state*” by slaughtering those who called for workers to have some kind of say in how that state operated. It appears that the role of workers in a workers’ state was simply that of following orders without question (indeed, Trotsky was arguing in the 1930s that the Russian working class was still the ruling class under Stalin — “*So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.*” [The Class Nature of the Soviet State]).

How can the Bolshevik repression be justified in terms of defending workers power when the workers were powerless? How can it be defended in terms of soviet power when the soviets were rubber stamps of the government?

The logic of the Bolsheviks and their latter-day apologists and supporters is the same character as that of the U.S. Officer during the Vietnam War who explained that in order to save the village, they first had to destroy it. In order to save soviet power, Lenin and Trotsky had to destroy soviet democracy.

One last point, while the Kronstadt revolt is a key event in the Russian Revolution, one that signified its end, we must not forget that it is just one in a long series of Bolshevik attacks on the working class. As we indicated in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” (and provide an overview in the next section), the Bolshevik state had proven itself to be anti-revolutionary continually since October 1917. However, Kronstadt is important simply because it so clearly pitted soviet democracy against “soviet power” and occurred **after** the end of the civil war. As it brings the Russian Revolution to an end, it deserves to be remembered, analysed and discussed by all revolutionaries who seek to understand the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes again.

## 2 What was the context of the Kronstadt revolt?

The Kronstadt revolt cannot be understood in isolation. Indeed, to do so misses the real reason why Kronstadt is so important. Kronstadt was the end result of four years of revolution and civil war, the product of the undermining of soviet democracy by a combination of Bolshevism and war. The actions of the Bolsheviks in 1921 and their ideological justifications for their actions (justifications, of course, when they got beyond lying about the revolt — see section 5) merely reproduced in concentrated form what had been occurring ever since they had seized power.

Therefore it is necessary to present a short summary of Bolshevik activities before the events of Kronstadt (see “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for fuller details). In addition, we have to sketch the developing social stratification occurring under Lenin and the events immediate before the revolt which sparked it off (namely the strike wave in Petrograd). Once this has been done, we will soon see that Kronstadt was not an isolated event but rather an act of solidarity with the oppressed workers of Petrograd and an attempt to save the Russian Revolution from Communist dictatorship and bureaucracy.

Alexander Berkman provides an excellent overview of what had happened in Russia after the October Revolution:

*“The elective system was abolished, first in the army and navy, then in the industries. The Soviets of peasants and workers were castrated and turned into obedient Communist Committees, with the dreaded sword of the Cheka [political para-military police] ever hanging over them. The labour unions governmentalised, their proper activities suppressed, they were turned into mere transmitters of the orders of the State. Universal military service, coupled with the death penalty for conscientious objectors; enforced labour, with a vast officialdom for the apprehension and punishment of ‘deserters’; agrarian and industrial conscription of the peasantry; military Communism in the cities and the system of requisitioning in the country . . . ; the suppression of workers’ protests by the military; the crushing of peasant dissatisfaction with an iron hand. . . .” [The Russian Tragedy, p. 27]*

We discussed each of these features in more detail in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”. Here we will simply indicate that the Bolsheviks had systematically undermined the effective power of the soviets. Both locally and nationally, post-October power was centralised into the hands of the soviet executives rather than the general assemblies. At the top, power was concentrated even further with the creation of a Bolshevik government **above** the Central Executive Council elected by the (then) quarterly soviet congress. This is

not all. Faced with growing opposition to their policies, the Bolsheviks responded in two ways. Either the soviet was gerrymandered to make the workplace soviet elections irrelevant (as in, say, Petrograd) or they simply disbanded any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority (as in all provincial soviets for which records exist). So Bolshevik opposition to the soviet democracy demanded by the Kronstadt revolt had a long pedigree. It had started a few months after the Bolsheviks seizure of power in the name of the soviets.

They repressed opposition parties to maintain their position (for example, suppressing their newspapers). Similarly, the Bolsheviks attacked the anarchists in Moscow on the 11–12 of April, 1918, using armed detachments of the Cheka (the political police). The Kronstadt soviet, incidentally, condemned the action by a vote of 81 to 57 against (with 15 abstentions). [Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 186] This repression was political in nature, aiming to neutralise a potential political threat and was not the only example of political repression in this period (see the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”).

This is just a summary of what was happening in Russia in early 1918 (see section 3 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” for more details). This Bolshevik assault on the soviets occurred during the spring of 1918 (i.e. in March, April and May). That is **before** the Czech rising and the onset of full scale civil war which occurred in late May. Clearly, any attempt to blame the Civil War for the elimination of soviet power and democracy seems woefully weak given the actions of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1918. And, equally clearly, the reduction of local soviet influence cannot be fully understood without factoring in the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation (as codified in the Soviet Constitution of 1918) along with this direct repression. Indeed, the net effect of the Russian Civil War helped the Bolsheviks as it would make many dissident workers support the Bolsheviks during the war. This, however, did not stop mass resistance and strikes breaking out periodically during the war when workers and peasants could no longer put up with Bolshevik policies or the effects of the war (see section 5 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”).

Which, incidentally, answers Brian Bambery’s rhetorical question of “*why would the most militant working class in the world, within which there was a powerful cocktail of revolutionary ideas, and which had already made two revolutions (in 1905 and in February 1917), allow a handful of people to seize power behind its back in October 1917?*” [“*Leninism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*”, *Socialist Review*, no. 248, January 2001] Once the Russian workers realised that a handful of people **had** seized power they **did** protest the usurpation of their power and rights by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks repressed them. With the start of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks played their trump card — “*Us or the Whites.*” This ensured their power as the

workers had few choices but to agree. Indeed, it may explain why the Bolsheviks finally eliminated opposition parties and groups **after** the end of the Civil War and only repressed them during it. With the Whites gone, the opposition were rising in influence again and the “*White card*” could no longer be played.

Economically, the Bolshevik regime imposed a policy later called “*War Communism*” (although, as Victor Serge noted, “*any one who, like myself, went so far as to consider it purely temporary was looked upon with disdain.*” [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 115]) This regime was marked by extreme hierarchical and dictatorial tendencies. The leading lights of the Communist Party were expressing themselves on the nature of the “socialist” regime they desired. Trotsky, for example, put forward ideas for the “*militarisation of labour*” (as expounded in his infamous work **Terrorism and Communism**). Here are a few representative selections from that work:

*“The very principle of compulsory labour service is for the Communist quite unquestionable. . . . But hitherto it has always remained a mere principle. Its application has always had an accidental, impartial, episodic character. Only now, when along the whole line we have reached the question of the economic re-birth of the country, have problems of compulsory labour service arisen before us in the most concrete way possible. The only solution of economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power . . . and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation, and utilisation.”* [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 135]

*“The introduction of compulsory labour service is unthinkable without the application, to a greater or less degree, of the methods of militarisation of labour.”* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 137]

*“Why do we speak of militarisation? Of course, this is only an analogy — but an analogy very rich in content. No social organisation except the army has ever considered itself justified in subordinating citizens to itself in such a measure, and to control them by its will on all sides to such a degree, as the State of the proletarian dictatorship considers itself justified in doing, and does.”* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 141]

*“Both economic and political compulsion are only forms of the expression of the dictatorship of the working class in two closely connected regions . . . under Socialism there will not exist the apparatus of compulsion itself, namely, the State: for it will have melted away entirely into a producing and consuming commune. None the less, the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State . . . Just as a lamp,*

*before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction. . . . No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour.” [Op. Cit., pp. 169–70]*

This account was written as a policy to be followed now that the “*internal civil war is coming to an end.*” [Op. Cit., p. 132] It was not seen as a temporary policy imposed upon the Bolsheviks by the war but rather, as can be seen, as an expression of “*principle*” (perhaps because Marx and Engels had written about the “[e]stablishment of industrial armies” in the **Communist Manifesto**? [Selected Writings, p. 53]).

In the same work, Trotsky justified the elimination of soviet power and democracy by party power and dictatorship (see sections 10 and 15). Thus we have the application of state serfdom by the Bolsheviks (indeed, Trotsky was allowed to apply his ideas on the militarisation of labour to the railways).

This vision of strict centralisation and top-down military structures built upon Bolshevik policies of the first months after the October revolution. The attempts at workers’ self-management organised by many factory committees was opposed in favour of a centralised state capitalist system, with Lenin arguing for appointed managers with “*dictatorial*” powers (see Maurice Brinton’s **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control** for full details as well as “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”).

Strikes were repressed by force. In early May, 1918, a major wave of labour protest started which climaxed in early July. In Petrograd it included strikes, demonstrations and anti-Bolshevik factory meetings. Of the meetings unconnected to the Petrograd Soviet elections, “*the greatest number by far were protests against some form of Bolshevik repression: shootings, incidents of ‘terrorist activities’, and arrests.*” During the opposition organised strike of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, “*Zinoviev and others took quick counteraction . . . Any sign of sympathy for the strike was declared a criminal act. More arrests were made . . . On July 1 . . . machine guns were set up at main points throughout Petrograd and Moscow railroad junctions, and elsewhere in both cities as well. Controls were tightened in the factories. Meetings were forcefully dispersed.*” [William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, pp. 123–4 and p. 127]

In 1918, workers who took strike action “*were afraid to lose their jobs*” as “*a strike inevitably led to a closure of the factory, a dismissal of the workers, and a careful screening of those rehired to determine their political preferences.*” By 1920,



as well as these methods, workers also faced arrest by the Cheka and “*internment in a concentration camp*.” During the first six months of 1920 there were strikes in 77 percent of the medium- and large-size enterprises in Russia. As an example of the policies used to crush strikes, we can take the case of a strike by the workers of the Ryazan-Urals railroad in May 1921 (i.e. after the end of the Civil War). The authorities “*shut down the depot, brought in troops, and arrested another hundred workers*” in addition to the strikers delegates elected to demand the release of a railroad worker (whose arrest had provoked the strike). Ironically, those “*who had seized power in 1917 in the name of the politically conscious proletariat were in fact weeding out all these conscious workers*.” [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, pp. 287–8, pp. 290–1 and p. 298]

In the Red Army and Navy, anti-democratic principles were again imposed. At the end of March, 1918, Trotsky reported to the Communist Party that “*the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree*.” Soldiers did not have to fear this system of top-down appointment as “*political power is in the hands of the same working class from whose ranks the Army is recruited*” (i.e. in the hands of the Bolshevik party). There could “*be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members, and, therefore, there cannot be any grounds for fearing the **appointment** of members of the commanding staff by the organs of the Soviet Power*.” [**Work, Discipline, Order**] Of course, as any worker in struggle can tell you, they almost always come into conflict with the union’s bureaucracy (as Trotskyists themselves often point out).

In the Navy, a similar process occurred — much to the disgust and opposition of the sailors. As Paul Avruch notes, “*Bolshevik efforts to liquidate the ship committees and impose the authority of the centrally appointed commissars aroused a storm of protest in the Baltic Fleet. For the sailors, whose aversion to external authority was proverbial, any attempt to restore discipline meant a betrayal of the freedoms for which they had struggles in 1917*.” [Kronstadt 1921, p. 66] This process “*began in earnest on 14 May 1918 with the **appointment** of Ivan Flerovsky as general commissar of the Baltic Fleet and chairman of its Council of Commissars, a body which replaced the disbanded elective Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet. Flerovsky promptly appointed bridge commissars to whom all ships’ committees were subordinated . . . Naval democracy was finally destroyed on 18 January 1919 when Trotsky . . . decreed the abolition of all ships’ committees, the appointment of commissars to all ships, and the setting up of revolutionary tribunals to maintain discipline, a function previously vested in elected ‘comradely courts*.” [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 191]

In the countryside, grain requisitioning was resulting in peasant uprisings as food was taken from the peasants by force. While the armed detachments were

*“instructed to leave the peasants enough for their personal needs, it was common for the requisitioning squads to take at gun-point grain intended for personal consumption or set aside for the next sowing.”* The villagers predictably used evasive tactics and cut back on the amount of land they tilled as well as practising open resistance. Famine was a constant problem as a result. [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 9–10]

Thus Voline:

*“the Bolshevik government evidently understood the slogan ‘power to the soviets’ in a peculiar way. It applied it in reverse. Instead of giving assistance to the working masses and permitting them to conquer and enlarge their own autonomous activity, it began by taking all ‘power’ from them and treating them like subjects. It bent the factories to its will and liberated the workers from the right to make their own decisions; it took arbitrary and coercive measures, without even asking the advice of the workers’ concerned; it ignored the demands emanating from the workers’ organisations. And, in particular, it increasingly curbed, under various pretexts, the freedom of action of the Soviets and of other workers’ organisations, everywhere imposing its will arbitrarily and even by violence.”* [The Unknown Revolution, pp. 459–60]

From before the start of Civil War, the Russian people had been slowly but surely eliminated from any meaningful say in the progress of the revolution. The Bolsheviks undermined (when not abolishing) workers’ democracy, freedom and rights in the workplaces, the soviets, the unions, the army and the navy. Unsurprisingly, the lack of any real control from below heightened the corrupting effects of power. Inequality, privilege and abuses were everywhere in the ruling party and bureaucracy (*“Within the party, favouritism and corruption were rife. The Astoria Hotel, where many high officials lived, was the scene of debauchery, while ordinary citizens went without the bare necessities.”* [Paul Avrich, **Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers’ Group**]).

With the end of the Civil War in November 1920, many workers expected a change of policy. However, months passed and the same policies were followed. *“The Communist State,”* as Alexander Berkman summarised, *“showed no intention of loosening the yoke. The same policies continued, with labour militarisation still further enslaving the people, embittering them with added oppression and tyranny, and in consequence paralysing every possibility of industrial revival.”* [The Russian Tragedy, p. 61] Finally, in the middle of February, 1921, *“a rash of spontaneous factory meetings”* began in Moscow. Workers called for the immediate scrapping of War Communism. These meetings were *“succeeded by strikes and demonstrations.”* Workers took to the streets demanding *“free trade”*, higher rations and *“the*

*abolition of grain requisitions.*” Some demanded the restoration of political rights and civil liberties. Troops had to be called in to restore order. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 35–6]

Then a far more serious wave of strikes and protests swept Petrograd. The Kronstadt revolt was sparked off by these protests. Like Moscow, these “*street demonstrations were heralded by a rash of protest meetings in Petrograd’s numerous but depleted factories and shops.*” Like Moscow, speakers “*called for an end to grain requisitioning, the removal of roadblocks, the abolition of privileged rations, and permission to barter personal possessions for food.*” On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, the day after a workplace meeting, the Trubochny factory workforce downed tools and walked out the factory. Additional workers from nearby factories joined in. The crowd of 2,000 was dispersed by armed military cadets. The next day, the Trubochny workers again took to the streets and visited other workplaces, bringing them out on strike too. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 37–8]

The strikers started to organise themselves. “*As in 1918, workers from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries.*” [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 393]

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev “*proclaimed martial law*” on February 24<sup>th</sup>. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39] A curfew of 11pm was proclaimed, all meetings and gatherings (indoor and out) were banned unless approved of by the Defence Committee and all infringements would “*be dealt with according to military law.*” [Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 37]

The workers “*were ordered to return to their factories, failing which they would be denied their rations. That, however, had no impact: but in addition, a number of trade unions was disbanded, their leaders and the most die-hard strikers tossed into prison.*” [Emma Goldman, **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, p. 168]

As part of this process of repression, the Bolshevik government had to rely on the *kursanty* (Communist officer cadets) as the local garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government’s orders. Hundreds of *kursanty* were called in from neighbouring military academies to patrol the city. “*Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked . . . the curfew [was] strictly enforced.*” The Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 46–7]

The Bolsheviks also stepped up their propaganda drive. The strikers were warned not to play into the hands of the counterrevolution. As well as their normal press, popular party members were sent to agitate in the streets, factories and barracks. They also made a series of concessions such as providing extra rations. On March 1<sup>st</sup> (after the Kronstadt revolt had started) the Petrograd soviet

announced the withdrawal of all road-blocks and demobilised the Red Army soldiers assigned to labour duties in Petrograd. [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 48–9]

Thus a combination of force, propaganda and concessions was used to defeat the strike (which quickly reached a near general strike level). As Paul Arvich notes, “*there is no denying that the application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities had been indispensable in restoring order. Particularly impressive in this regard was the discipline shown by the local party organisation. Setting aside their internal disputes, the Petrograd Bolsheviks swiftly closed ranks and proceeded to carry out the unpleasant task of repression with efficiency and dispatch.*” [Op. Cit., p. 50]

This indicates the immediate context of the Kronstadt rebellion. Yet Trotskyist J. G. Wright wonders whether the Kronstadt’s paper “*lied when in the very first issue . . . it carried a sensational headline: ‘General Insurrection in Petrograd’*” and states that people “*spread . . . lies about the insurrection in Petrograd.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 109] Yes, of course a near general strike, accompanied by mass meetings and demonstrations and repressed by force and martial law, is a everyday occurrence and has nothing in common with an “*insurrection*”! If such events occurred in a state not headed by Lenin and Trotsky it is unlikely Mr. Wright would have such difficulty in recognising them for what there were. Historian V. Brovkin states the obvious when he wrote “[t]o anyone who had lived through the events of February 1917, this chain of events appeared strikingly similar. It looked as if a popular insurrection had begun.” [Brovkin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 393]

It was these labour protests and their repression which started the events in Kronstadt. While many sailors had read and listened to the complaints of their relatives in the villages and had protested on their behalf to the Soviet authorities, it took the Petrograd strikes to be the catalyst for the revolt. Moreover, they had other political reasons for protesting against the policies of the government. Navy democracy had been abolished by decree and the soviets had been turned into fig-leaves of party dictatorship.

Unsurprisingly, the crew of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* decided to act once “*the news of strikes, lockouts, mass arrests and martial law*” in Petrograd reached them. They “*held a joint emergency meeting in the face of protests and threats of their commissars . . . [and] elected a fact-finding delegation of thirty-two sailors which, on 27 February, proceeded to Petrograd and made the round of the factories . . . They found the workers whom they addressed and questioned too frightened to speak up in the presence of the hosts of Communist factory guards, trade union officials, party committee men and Chekists.*” [Gelzter, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 212]

The delegation returned the next day and reported its findings to a general meeting of the ship's crews and adopted the resolutions which were to be the basis of the revolt (see next section). The Kronstadt revolt had started.

### 3 What was the Kronstadt Programme?

It is rare for a Trotskyist to actually list the demands of the Kronstadt revolt in their entirety. For example, John Rees does not provide even a summary of the 15 point programme. He asserts that the *"sailors represented the exasperated of the peasantry with the War Communism regime"* while, rather lamely, noting that *"no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters demands."* [*In Defence of October*, pp. 3–82, *International Socialism*, no. 52, p. 63] Similarly, it is only the *"Editorial Preface"* in the Trotskyist work **Kronstadt** which presents even a summary of the demands. This summary states:

*"The resolution demanded free elections in the soviets with the participation of anarchists and Left SRs, legalisation of the socialist parties and the anarchists, abolition of the Political Departments [in the fleet] and the Special Purpose Detachments, removal of the **zagradytelnye ottyady** [Armed troops used to prevent unauthorised trade], restoration of free trade, and the freeing of political prisoners."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 5–6]

They assert in the *"Glossary"* that it *"demanded political and economic changes, many of which were soon realised with the adoption of the NEP."* [Op. Cit., p. 148] Which, ironically enough, contradicts Trotsky who claimed that it was an *"illusion"* to think *"it would have been sufficient to inform the sailors of the NEP decrees to pacify them."* Moreover, the *"insurgents did not have a conscious program, and they could not have had one because of the very nature of the petty bourgeoisie. They themselves did not clearly understand that their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade."* [Op. Cit., p. 91–2]

So we have a uprising which was peasant in nature, but whose demands did not have anything in common with other peasant revolts. It apparently demanded free trade and did not demand it. It was similar to the NEP, but the NEP decrees would not have satisfied it. It produced a platform of political and economic demands but did not, apparently, have a *"conscious program."* The contradictions abound. Why these contradictions exist will become clear after we list the 15 demands.

The full list of demands are as follows:

- “1. *Immediate new elections to the Soviets. The present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. The new elections should be by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda.*
2. *Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.*
3. *The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant organisations.*
4. *The organisation, at the latest on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.*
5. *The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organisations.*
6. *The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.*
7. *The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces. No political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In the place of the political sections various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.*
8. *The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.*
9. *The equalisation of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.*
10. *The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups. The abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.*
11. *The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.*
12. *We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.*
13. *We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.*
14. *We demand the institution of mobile workers’ control groups.*
15. *We demand that handicraft production be authorised provided it does not utilise wage labour.”* [quoted by Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Revolt**, pp. 37–8]

This is the program described by the Soviet government as a “*SR-Black Hundreds resolution*”! This is the program which Trotsky maintains was drawn up by “*a handful of reactionary peasants and soldiers.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 65 and p. 98] As can be seen, it was nothing of the kind. Indeed, this resolution is largely in the spirit of the political slogans of the Bolsheviks before they seized of power in the name of the soviets. Moreover, it reflected ideals expounded in 1917 and were formalised in the Soviet State’s 1918 constitution. In the words of Paul Avrich, “[i]n effect, the *Petropavlovsk* resolution was an appeal to the Soviet government to live up to its own constitution, a bold statement of those very rights and freedom which Lenin himself had professed in 1917. In spirit, it was a throwback to October, evoking the old Leninist watchword of ‘All power to the soviets.’” [Kronstadt 1921, pp. 75–6] Hardly an example of “*reactionary*” politics, unless the slogans of 1917 and the 1918 constitution of the U.S.S.R. are also “*reactionary.*”

While these fifteen demands are central to the revolt, looking at the paper produced by the revolt helps us understand the nature of these demands and place them in a fuller political context. “*The pages of Izvestiia,*” as Voline argued, “*give abundant proof of th[e] general enthusiasm, which re-appeared once the masses felt they had regained, in the free Soviets, the true road to emancipation and the hope of achieving the real revolution.*” [Unknown Revolution, p. 495] For example, food rations were equalised, except for the sick and to children, who received a larger one. Left-wing political parties were legalised. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee was elected by a “*Conference of Delegates*” made up of over two hundred delegates from military units and workplaces. This body elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and enlarged it (again by election) on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

The March 4<sup>th</sup> Conference of Delegates also “*decided that all workers, without exception, should be armed and put in charge of guarding the interior of the city*” and to organise re-elections for “*the administrative commissions of all the unions and also of the Council of Unions*” (which could “*become the principle organ of the workers*”). [Izvestiia quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 494]

In the article “*The Goals for Which We Fight,*” the rebels argue that “[w]ith the aid of state unions” the Communists have “*chained the workers to the machines, and transformed work into a new slavery instead of making it pleasant.*” Moreover, to the “*protests of the peasants, which have gone so far as spontaneous revolts, to the demands of the workers, compelled by the very conditions of their life to resort to strikes, they reply with mass shootings and a ferocity that the Tsarist generals might have envied.*” An “*inevitable third revolution*” was coming, shown by “*increasing*” workers’ strikes, which will be “*achieved by the labouring masses themselves.*” This would be based on “*freely elected soviets*” and the reorganisation of “*the state unions*”

into free associations of workers, peasants and intellectuals.” [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 507–8]

Thus the rebels saw clearly the real nature of nationalisation. Rather than being the basis of socialism, it simply produced more wage slavery, this time to the state (“From a slave of the capitalist the worker was transformed into a slave of state enterprises.” [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 518]). They clearly saw the need to replace wage slavery to the state (via nationalised property) with free associations of free workers and peasants. Such a transformation would come from the collective direct action and self-activity of working people, as expressed in the strikes which had so recently swept across the country.

This transformation from the bottom up was stressed elsewhere. The unions, *Izvestiia* argued, would “fulfil the great and urgent task of educating the masses for an economic and cultural renovation of the country. . . . The Soviet Socialist Republic cannot be strong unless its administration be exercised by the working class, with the help of renovated unions.” These should “become real representatives of the interests of the people.” The current unions did “nothing” to promote “economic activity of a co-operative nature” or the “cultural education” of their members due centralised system imposed by the Communist regime. This would change with “true union activity by the working class.” [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 510] A strong syndicalist perspective clearly can be seen here, urging self-managed unions to be at the forefront of transforming the economy into a free association of producers. They opposed any “socialist” system in which the peasant “has been transformed into a serf in the ‘soviet’ economy,” the worker “a simple wage-worker in the State factories” and those who protest are “thrown into the jails of the Cheka.” [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 512]

The rebels saw that soviet power cannot exist while a political party dominated the soviets. They argued that Russia was just “State Socialism with Soviets of functionaries who vote docilely what the authorities and their infallible commissars dictate to them.” Without real working class power, without “the will of the worker” expressed in their free soviets, corruption had become rampant (“Communists . . . live in ease and the commissars get fat.”). Rather than a “time of free labour in the fields, factories and workshops,” where “power” was in “the hands of the workers,” the “Communists ha[d] brought in the rule of the commissars, with all the despotism of personal power.” [*Izvestiia*, quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 519, p. 518, p. 511 and p. 518]

In opposition to this, the rebels argued that “Revolutionary Kronstadt . . . fights for the true Soviet Republic of the workers in which the producer himself will be owner of the products of his labour and can dispose of them as he wishes.” They desired “a life animated by free labour and the free development of the individual”



and so proclaimed “*All power to the Soviets and not to the parties*” and “*the power of the free soviets.*” [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 519]

As can be seen, while the 15 demands are the essence of the revolt, looking at *Izvestiia* confirms the revolutionary nature of the demands. The rebels of 1921, as in 1917, looked forward to a system of free soviets in which working people could transform their society into one based on free associations which would encourage individual freedom and be based on working class power. They looked to a combination of renewed and democratic soviets and unions to transform Russian society into a **real** socialist system rather than the system of state capitalism the Bolsheviks had imposed (see Maurice Brintin’s **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control** for details of Lenin’s commitment to building state capitalism in Russia from 1917 onwards).

Clearly, Kronstadt’s political programme was deeply socialist in nature. It opposed the new wage slavery of the workers to the state and argued for free associations of free producers. It was based on the key slogan of 1917, “*All power to the soviets*” but built upon it by adding the rider “*but not to parties.*” The sailors had learned the lesson of the October revolution, namely that if a party held power the soviets did not. The politics of the revolt were not dissimilar to those of libertarian socialists and, as we argue in section 9, identical to the dominant ideas of Kronstadt in 1917.

The question now arises, whose interests did these demands and politics represent. According to Trotskyists, it is the interests of the peasantry which motivated them. For anarchists, it is an expression of the interests of all working people (proletarian, peasant and artisan) against those who would exploit their labour and govern them (be it private capitalists or state bureaucrats). We discuss this issue in the next section.

#### 4 Did the Kronstadt rebellion reflect “*the exasperation of the peasantry*”?

This is a common argument of Trotskyists. While rarely providing the Kronstadt demands, they always assert that (to use John Rees’ words) that the sailors “*represented the exasperation of the peasantry with the War Communist regime.*” [“*In Defence of October*”, **International Socialism** no. 52, p. 63]

As for Trotsky, the ideas of the rebellion “*were deeply reactionary*” and “*reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to ‘civilian’ Petrograd, the hatred of the petty bourgeois for revolutionary discipline.*” The revolt “*represented the tendencies of the land-owning*

*peasant, the small speculator, the kulak.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 80 and p. 81]

How true is this? Even a superficial analysis of the events of the revolt and of the **Petropavlovsk** resolution (see last section) can allow the reader to dismiss Trotsky’s assertions.

Firstly, according to the definition of “*kulak*” proved by the Trotskyists’ themselves, we discover that kulak refers to “*well-to-do peasants who owned land and hired poor peasants to work it.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 146] Point 11 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly states their opposition to rural wage labour. How could Kronstadt represent “*the kulak*” when it called for the abolition of hired labour on the land? Clearly, the revolt did not represent the “*small speculator, the kulak*” as Trotsky asserted. Did it represent the land-owning peasant? We will return to this issue shortly.

Secondly, the Kronstadt revolt started after the sailors at Kronstadt sent delegates to investigate the plight of striking workers in Petrograd. Their actions were inspired by solidarity for these workers and civilians. This clearly shows that Trotsky’s assertion that the revolt “*reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to ‘civilian’ Petrograd*” to be utter and total nonsense.

As for the being “*deeply reactionary,*” the ideas that motivated the revolt clearly were not. They were the outcome of solidarity with striking workers and called for soviet democracy, free speech, assembly and organisation for workers and peasants. These express the demands of most, if not all, Marxist parties (including the Bolsheviks in 1917) before they take power. They simply repeat the demands and facts of the revolutionary period of 1917 and of the Soviet Constitution. As Anton Ciliga argues, these demands were “*impregnated with the spirit of October; and no calumny in the world can cast a doubt on the intimate connection existing between this resolution and the sentiments which guided the expropriations of 1917.*” [“*The Kronstadt Revolt*”, **The Raven**, no. 8, pp. 330–7, p. 333] If the ideas of the Kronstadt revolt are reactionary, then so is the slogan “*all power to the soviets.*”

Not that the Kronstadders had not been smeared before by their opponents. The ex-Bolshevik turned Menshevik Vladimir Voitinsky who had visited the base in May 1917 later remembered them as being “*degraded and demoralised*” and “*lack[ing] proletarian class-consciousness. It has the psychology of a Lumpenproletariat, a stratum that is a danger to a revolution rather than its support.*” They were “*material suitable for a rebellion a la Bakunin.*” [quoted by I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 253]

So did the demands represent the interests of the (non-kulak) peasantry? To do so we must see whether the demands reflected those of industrial workers or not. If the demands do, in fact, match those of striking workers and other proletarian

elements then we can easily dismiss this claim. After all, if the demands of the Kronstadt rebellion reflected those of proletarians then it is impossible to say that they simply reflected the needs of peasants (of course, Trotskyists will argue that these proletarians were also “backward” but, in effect, they are arguing that any worker who did not quietly follow Bolshevik orders was “backward” — hardly a sound definition of the term!).

We can quickly note that demands echoed those raised during the Moscow and Petrograd strikes that preceded the Kronstadt revolt. For example, Paul Avrich records that the demands raised in the February strikes included “*removal of roadblocks, permission to make foraging trips into the countryside and to trade freely with the villagers, [and] elimination of privileged rations for special categories of working men.*” The workers also “*wanted the special guards of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories*” and raised “*pleas for the restoration of political and civil rights.*” One manifesto which appeared (unsigned but bore earmarks of Menshevik origin) argued that “*the workers and peasants need freedom. They do not want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks. They want to control their own destinies.*” It urged the strikers to demand the liberation of all arrested socialists and nonparty workers, abolition of martial law, freedom of speech, press and assembly for all who labour, free elections of factory committees, trade unions, and soviets. [Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, pp. 42–3]

In the strikes of 1921, according to Lashevich (a Bolshevik Commissar) the “*basic demands are everywhere the same: free trade, free labour, freedom of movement, and so on.*” Two key demands raised in the strikes dated back to at least 1920. These were “*for free trade and an end to privilege.*” In March 1919, “*the Rechkin coach-building plant demanded equal rations for all workers*” and that one of the “*most characteristic demands of the striking workers at that time were for the free bringing-in of food.*” [Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice*, p. 299 and p. 302]

As can be seen, these demands related almost directly to points 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 of the Kronstadt demands. As Paul Avrich argues, the Kronstadt demands “*echoed the discontents not only of the Baltic Fleet but of the mass of Russians in towns and villages throughout the country. Themselves of plebeian stock, the sailors wanted relief for their peasant and worker kinfolk. Indeed, of the resolution’s 15 points, only one — the abolition of the political departments in the fleet — applied specifically to their own situation. The remainder . . . was a broadside aimed at the policies of War Communism, the justification of which, in the eyes of the sailors and of the population at large, had long since vanished.*” Avrich argues that many of the sailors had returned home on leave to see the plight of the villagers with their own eyes played a part in framing the resolution (particularly of point 11, the **only** peasant specific demand raised) but “[b]y the same token, the sailors’ inspection tour of Petrograd’s factories may account for their inclusion of the

*workingmen's chief demands — the abolition of road-blocks, of privileged rations, and of armed factory squads — in their program.*" [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 74–5] Simply put, the Kronstadt resolution *"merely reiterated long standing workers' demands."* [V. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War*, p. 395]

Which means, of course, that Ida Mett had been correct to argue that the *"Kronstadt revolution had the merit of stating things openly and clearly. But it was breaking no new ground. Its main ideas were being discussed everywhere. For having, in one way or another, put forward precisely such ideas, workers and peasants were already filling the prisons and the recently set up concentration camps."* [*The Kronstadt Uprising*, p. 39]

Nor can it be claimed that these workers were non-proletarians (as if class is determined by thought rather than social position). Rather than being those workers with the closest relations with the countryside who were protesting, the opposite was the case. By 1921 *"[a]ll who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside."* [Ida Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 36]

Thus the claims that the Kronstadt demands reflected peasant needs is mistaken. They reflected the needs of the whole working population, including the urban working class who raised these demands continually throughout the Civil War period in their strikes. Simply put, the policies of the Bolsheviks as regards food were not only evil, they did not work and were counter-productive. As many of the Russian working class recognised from the start and took strike action over again and again.

Moreover, by focusing on the *"free trade"* issue, Leninists distort the real reasons for the revolt. As Ida Mett points out, the Kronstadt rebellion did not call for *"free trade"* as the Trotskyists argue, but rather something far more important:

*"In the Kronstadt Ivestia of March 14<sup>th</sup> we find a characteristic passage on this subject. The rebels proclaimed that 'Kronstadt is not asking for freedom of trade but for genuine power to the Soviets.' The Petrograd strikers were also demanding the reopening of the markets and the abolition of the road blocks set up by the militia. But they too were stating that freedom of trade by itself would not solve their problems."* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 77]

Thus we have the Petrograd (and other) workers calling for *"free trade"* (and so, presumably, expressing their economic interests or those of their fathers and brothers) while the Kronstadt sailors were demanding first and foremost soviet power! Their programme called for the *"granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour."* This was point 11 of the 15

demands, which showed the importance it ranked in their eyes. This would have been the basis of trade between town and village, but trade between worker and peasant and not between worker and kulak. So rather than call for “free trade” in the abstract (as many of the workers were) the Kronstaders (while reflecting the needs of both workers and peasants) were calling for the free exchange of products between workers, not workers and rural capitalists (i.e. peasants who hired wage slaves). This indicates a level of political awareness, an awareness of the fact that wage labour is the essence of capitalism.

Thus Ante Ciliga:

*“People often believe that Kronstadt forced the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) — a profound error. The Kronstadt resolution pronounced in favour of the defence of the workers, not only against the bureaucratic capitalism of the State, but also against the restoration of private capitalism. This restoration was demanded — in opposition to Kronstadt — by the social democrats, who combined it with a regime of political democracy. And it was Lenin and Trotsky who to a great extent realised it (but without political democracy) in the form of the NEP. The Kronstadt resolution declared for the opposite since it declared itself against the employment of wage labour in agriculture and small industry. This resolution, and the movement underlying, sought for a revolutionary alliance of the proletarian and peasant workers with the poorest sections of the country labourers, in order that the revolution might develop towards socialism. The NEP, on the other hand, was a union of bureaucrats with the upper layers of the village against the proletariat; it was the alliance of State capitalism and private capitalism against socialism. The NEP is as much opposed to the Kronstadt demands as, for example, the revolutionary socialist programme of the vanguard of the European workers for the abolition of the Versailles system, is opposed to the abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles achieved by Hitler.” [Op. Cit., pp. 334–5]*

Point 11 did, as Ida Mett noted, *“reflected the demands of the peasants to whom the Kronstadt sailors had remained linked — as had, as a matter of fact, the whole of the Russian proletariat . . . In their great majority, the Russian workers came directly from the peasantry. This must be stressed. The Baltic sailors of 1921 were, it is true, closely linked with the peasantry. But neither more nor less than had been the sailors of 1917.”* To ignore the peasantry in a country in which the vast majority were peasants would have been insane (as the Bolsheviks proved). Mett stresses this when she argued that a *“workers and peasants’ regime that did not wish to base itself exclusively on lies and terror, had to take account of the peasantry.”* [Op. Cit., p. 40]

Given that the Russian industrial working class were also calling for free trade (and often without the political, anti-capitalist, riders Kronstadt added) it seems dishonest to claim that the sailors purely expressed the interests of the peasantry. Perhaps this explains why point 11 becomes summarised as “*restoration of free trade*” by Trotskyists. [“*Editorial Preface*”, Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 6] John Rees does not even mention any of the demands (which is amazing in a work which, in part, tries to analyse the rebellion).

Similarly, the working class nature of the resolution can be seen from who agreed to it. The resolution passed by the sailors on the battleships was ratified by a mass meeting and then a delegate meeting of workers, soldiers and sailors. In other words, by workers **and** peasants.

J.G. Wright, following his guru Trotsky without question (and using him as the sole reference for his “facts”), stated that “*the incontestable facts*” were the “*sailors composed the bulk of the insurgent forces*” and “*the garrison and the civil population remained passive.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 123] This, apparently, is evidence of the peasant nature of the revolt. Let us contest these “*incontestable facts*” (i.e. assertions by Trotsky).

The first fact we should mention is that the meeting of 1<sup>st</sup> March in Anchor Square involved “*some fifteen to sixteen thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians.*” [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 215] This represented over 30% of Kronstadt’s total population. This hardly points to a “passive” attitude on behalf of the civilians and soldiers.

The second fact is that the conference of delegates had a “*membership that fluctuated between which two and three hundred sailors, soldiers, and working men.*” This body remained in existence during the whole revolt as the equivalent of the 1917 soviet and, like that soviet, had delegates from Kronstadt’s “*factories and military units.*” It was, in effect, a “*prototype of the ‘free soviets’ for which the insurgents had risen in revolt.*” In addition, a new Trade Union Council was created, free from Communist domination. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 159 and p. 157] Trotsky expects us to believe that the soldiers and civilians who elected these delegates were “passive”? The very act of electing these delegates would have involved discussion and decision making and so active participation. It is extremely doubtful that the soldiers and civilians would have so apathetic and apolitical to not have taken an active part in the revolt.

Thirdly, the declarations by sailors, soldiers and workers printed in ***Izvestiia*** which expressed their support for the revolt and those which announced they had left the Communist Party also present evidence which clearly contests Trotsky’s and Wright’s “*incontestable facts.*” One declaration of the “*soldiers of the Red Army from the fort Krasnoarmeietz*” stated they were “*body and soul with the Revolutionary Committee.*” [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 500]

Lastly, given that the Red Army troops manned the main bastion and the outlying forts and gun emplacements at Kronstadt and that the Bolshevik troops had to take these forts by force, we can safely argue that the Red Army soldiers did not play a “passive” role during the rebellion. [Paul Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54 and pp. 205–6]

This is confirmed by later historians. Based on such facts, Paul Avrich states that the townspeople “*offered their active support*” and the Red Army troops “*soon fell into line.*” [Op. Cit., p. 159] Fedotoff-White notes that the “*local land forces of the Kronstadt garrison . . . fell in and joined the seamen.*” [The Growth of the Red Army, p. 154] Getzler notes that elections were held for the Council of Trade Unions on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of March and this was a “*Council committee consisting of representatives from all trade unions.*” He also notes that the Conference of Delegates “*had been elected by Kronstadt’s body politic at their places of work, in army units, factories, workshops and Soviet institutions.*” He adds that the revolutionary troikas (the equivalent of the commissions of the Executive Committee of the Soviet in 1917) were also “*elected by the base organisations.*” Likewise, “*the secretariats of the trade unions and the newly founded Council of Trade Unions were both elected by the entire membership of trade unions.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 238–9 and p. 240]

That is a lot of activity for “passive” people.

In other words, the *Petropavlovsk* resolution not only reflected the demands of proletarians in Petrograd, it gained the support of proletarians in Kronstadt in the fleet, the army and the civilian workforce. Thus the claim that the Kronstadt resolution purely reflected the interests of the peasantry is, yet again, refuted.

As can be seen, the Kronstadters’ (like the Petrograd workers) raised economic and political demands in 1921 just as they had four years earlier when they overthrew the Tsar. Which, again, refutes the logic of defenders of Bolshevism. For example, Wright excelled himself when he argued the following:

*“The supposition that the soldiers and sailors could venture upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of ‘free soviets’ is absurd in itself. It is doubly absurd in the view of the fact [!] that the rest of the Kronstadt garrison consisted of backward and passive people who could not be used in the civil war. These people could have been moved to an insurrection only by profound economic needs and interests. These were the needs and interests of the fathers and brothers of these sailors and soldiers, that is, of peasants as traders in food products and raw materials. In other words the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeoisie’s reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps.”* [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 111–2]

Of course, no worker or peasant could possibly reach beyond a trade union consciousness by their own efforts, as Lenin so thoughtfully argued in **What is to be Done?**. Neither could the experience of two revolutions have an impact on anyone, nor the extensive political agitation and propaganda of years of struggle. Indeed, the sailors were so backward that they had no “*profound economic needs and interests*” of their own but rather fought for their fathers and brothers interests! Indeed, according to Trotsky they did not even understand that (“*They themselves did not clearly understand that what their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 92])! And these were the sailors the Bolsheviks desired to man some of the most advanced warships in the world?

Sadly for Wright’s assertions history has proven him wrong time and time again. Working people have constantly raised political demands which were far in advance of those of the “professional” revolutionaries (a certain German and the Paris Commune springs to mind, never mind a certain Russian and the soviets). The fact that the Kronstadt sailors not only “*venture[d] upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of ‘free soviets’*” but actually **created** one (the conference of delegates) goes unmentioned. Moreover, as we prove in section 8, the majority of sailors in 1921 had been there in 1917. This was due to the fact that the sailors could not be quickly or easily replaced due to the technology required to operate Kronstadt’s defences and battleships.

Given that the “*a smaller proportion of the Kronstadt sailors were of peasant origin than was the case of the Red Army troops supporting the government,*” perhaps we will discover Trotskyists arguing that because “*ordinary Red Army soldiers . . . were reluctant and unreliable fighters against Red Kronstadt, although driven at gunpoint onto the ice and into battle*” that also proves the peasant nature of the revolt? [Sam Farber, **Op. Cit.**, p. 192; Israel Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 243] Given the quality of the previous arguments presented, it is only a matter of time before this one appears!

Indeed, Trotskyists also note this non-peasant nature of the Kronstadt demands (as indicated in the last section). Thus was have John Rees pathetically noting that “*no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters’ demands.*” [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 63] As we have indicated above, **proletarian** strikes, resolutions and activists all produced demands similar or identical to the Kronstadt demands. These facts, in themselves, indicate the truth of Trotskyist assertions on this matter. Rees mentions the strikes in passing, but fails to indicate that Kronstadt’s demands were raised after a delegation of sailors had returned from visiting Petrograd. Rather than their “*motivation*” being “*much closer to that of the peasantry*” that to the “*dissatisfaction of the urban working class*” the facts suggest the opposite (as can be seen from the demands raised). [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] The motivation for the resolution was a product of the strikes in Petrograd and it also, naturally enough,



included the dissatisfaction of the peasantry (in point 11). For the Kronstadters, it was a case of the needs of **all** the toilers and so their resolution reflected the needs and demands of both.

Unfortunately for Rees, another revolt **did** reproduce the Kronstadt demands and it was by urban workers, **not** peasants. This revolt took place in Ekaterinoslavl (in the Ukraine) in May, 1921. It started in the railway workshops and became “*quickly politicised,*” with the strike committee raising a “*series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels.*” Indeed, many of the resolutions put to the meeting almost completely coincided with the Kronstadt demands. The strike “*spread to the other workshops*” and on June 1<sup>st</sup> the main large Ekaterinoslavl factories joined the strike. The strike was spread via the use of trains and telegraph and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The strike was finally ended by the use of the Cheka, using mass arrests and shootings. Unsurprisingly, the local communists called the revolt a *little Kronstadt.*” [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, pp. 171–3]

Therefore to claim that Kronstadt solely reflected the plight or interests of the peasantry is nonsense. Nor were the **economic** demands of Kronstadt alarming to the Bolshevik authorities. After all, Zinoviev was about to grant the removal of the roadblock detachments (point 8) and the government was drafting what was to become known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) which would satisfy point 11 partially (the NEP, unlike the Kronstadters, did not end wage labour and so, ironically, represented the interests of the Kulaks!). It was the **political** demands which were the problem. They represented a clear challenge to Bolshevik power and their claims at being the “*soviet power.*”

## 5 What lies did the Bolsheviks spread about Kronstadt?

From the start, the Bolsheviks lied about the uprising. Indeed, Kronstadt provides a classic example of how Lenin and Trotsky used slander against their political opponents. Both attempted to paint the revolt as being organised and lead by the Whites. At every stage in the rebellion, they stressed that it had been organised and run by White guard elements. As Paul Avrich notes, “*every effort was made to discredit the rebels*” and that the “*chief object of Bolshevik propaganda was to show that the revolt was not a spontaneous outbreak of mass protest but a new counterrevolutionary conspiracy, following the pattern established during the Civil War. According to the Soviet press, the sailors, influenced by Mensheviks and SR’s in their ranks, had shamelessly cast their lot with the ‘White Guards,’ led by*

*a former tsarist general named Kozlovsky . . . This, in turn, was said to be part of a carefully laid plot hatched in Paris by Russian emigres in league with French counterintelligence.*” [Op. Cit., p. 88 and p. 95]

Lenin, for example, argued in a report to the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party on March 8<sup>th</sup> that “*White Guard generals were very active over there. There is ample proof of this*” and that it was “*the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 44]

The first government statement on the Kronstadt events was entitled “*The Revolt of Ex-General Kozlovsky and the Warship Petropavlovsk*” and read, in part, that the revolt was “*expected by, and undoubtedly prepared by, French counterintelligence.*” It continues by stating that on the morning of March 2 “*the group around ex-General Kozlovsky . . . had openly appeared on the scene . . . [he] and three of his officers . . . have openly assumed the role of insurgents. Under their direction . . . a number of . . . responsible individuals, have been arrested. . . Behind the SRs again stands a tsarist general.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 65–6]

Victor Serge, a French anarchist turned Bolshevik, remembered that he was first told that “*Kronstadt is in the hands of the Whites*” and that “[s]mall posters stuck on the walls in the still empty streets proclaimed that the counter-revolutionary General Kozlovsky had seized Kronstadt through conspiracy and treason.” Later the “*truth seeped through little by little, past the smokescreen put out by the Press, which was positively berserk with lies*” (indeed, he states that the Bolshevik press “*lied systematically*”). He found out that the Bolshevik’s official line was “*an atrocious lie*” and that “*the sailors had mutinied, it was a naval revolt led by the Soviet.*” However, the “*worse of it all was that we were paralysed by the official falsehoods. It had never happened before that our Party should lie to us like this. ‘It’s necessary for the benefit of the public,’ said some . . . the strike [in Petrograd] was now practically general*” (we should note that Serge, a few pages previously, mentions “*the strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Press*” about Nestor Makhno, “*which went so far as to accuse him of signing pacts with the Whites at the very moment when he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against them*” which suggests that Kronstadt was hardly the first time the Party had lied to them). [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, pp. 124–6 and p. 122] (In the interests of honesty, it should be noted that Serge himself contributed to the Bolshevik lie machine about Kronstadt. For example, in March 1922 he happily repeated the Soviet regime’s falsifications about the rebels. [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, pp. 18–9]).

Even Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky’s biographer said that the Bolsheviks “*denounced the men of Kronstadt as counter-revolutionary mutineers, led by a White general. The denunciation appears to have been groundless.*” [**The Prophet Armed**, p. 511]

Thus the claim that the Kronstadt rebellion was the work of Whites and led by a White/Tzarist General was a lie — a lie deliberately and consciously spread. This was concocted to weaken support for the rebellion in Petrograd and in the Red Army, to ensure that it did not spread. Lenin admitted as much on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March when he stated at the Tenth Party Conference that in Kronstadt “*they did not want the White Guards, and they do not want our power either.*” [quoted by Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129]

If you agree with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci that “*to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act*” then its clear that the Bolsheviks in 1921 (and for a long time previously) were not communist or revolutionary (and as the subsequent Leninist accounts of Kronstadt show, Bolshevism is still neither). In stark contrast to the Bolsheviks, the Kronstadt paper *Izvestiia* published Bolshevik leaflets, paper articles and radio broadcasts so that the inhabitants of the island could see exactly what lies the Bolsheviks were telling about them.

The Trotskyist editors of *Kronstadt* show the same contempt for their readers as the Bolsheviks showed for the truth. They include an “*Introduction*” to their work by Pierre Frank in which he argues that the Bolsheviks merely “*state that [White] generals, counterrevolutionaries, sought to manipulate the insurgents*” and that anarchists “*turn this into a claim that these generals had launched the rebellion and that ‘Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere ‘generals’ revolt.’*” [quoting Ida Mett] This apparently shows how “[a]nything having to do with the facts” gets treated by such authors. He states that Mett and others “*merely distort the Bolsheviks’ positions.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 22]

This is argued in the same work that quotes Lenin actually stating on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1921, that “*the familiar figures of White Guard generals*” were “*very quickly revealed,*” that “*White generals were very active*” there, that it was “*quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres*” and that Kronstadt was “*bound up initially*” with “*the White Guards.*” Lenin is also quoted, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, arguing that “*the Paris newspapers reported the events two weeks before they actually occurred, and a White general appeared on the scene. That is what actually happened.*” [*Op. Cit.*, pp. 44–5 and p. 48] This is stated in spite of presenting the government statement we have quoted above in which the Bolshevik government clearly argued that two Communist leaders had been arrested under Kozlovsky’s “*direction*” and he “*stands*” behind the right-SRs whose agitation had started the revolt (according to the Bolsheviks).

Nor can it be said that Ida Mett claims that the Lenin and Trotsky had said a general had “*launched*” the revolt. She quotes Moscow radio as stating that the revolt (“*just like other White Guard insurrections*”) was in fact “*the mutiny of ex-General Kozlovsky and the crew of the battle ship ‘Petropavlovsk’*” had been

organised by Entene spies, while Socialist Revolutionaries had “*prepared*” the ground and that their real master was a “*Tsarist general*” on the page **before** that quoted by Frank, so indicating who the Bolsheviks did claim had launched the revolt. [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 43] It seems strange that Frank complains that others “*distort*” the Bolsheviks position when, firstly, the person he quotes does not and, secondly, he distorts that persons’ actual position.

Mett simply acknowledging the Bolshevik lies spewed out at the time. Then she said that “*Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere ‘generals’ revolt.*” [Op. Cit., p. 43] She **then** turns to General Kozlovsky whom the Bolsheviks indicated by name as the leader of the revolt and had outlawed in the statement of March 2<sup>nd</sup> quoted above. Who was he and what part did he play? Mett sums up the evidence:

*“He was an artillery general, and had been one of the first to defect to the Bolsheviks. He seemed devoid of any capacity as a leader. At the time of the insurrection he happened to be in command of the artillery at Kronstadt. The communist commander of the fortress had defected. Kozlovsky, according to the rules prevailing in the fortress, had to replace him. He, in fact, refused, claiming that as the fortress was now under the jurisdiction of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee, the old rules no longer applied. Kozlovsky remained, it is true, in Kronstadt, but only as an artillery specialist. Moreover, after the fall of Kronstadt, in certain interviews granted to the Finnish press, Kozlovsky accused the sailors of having wasted precious time on issues other than the defence of the fortress. He explained this in terms of their reluctance to resort to bloodshed. Later, other officers of the garrison were also to accuse the sailors of military incompetence, and of complete lack of confidence in their technical advisers. Kozlovsky was the only general to have been present at Kronstadt. This was enough for the Government to make use of his name.*

*“The men of Kronstadt did, up to a point, make use of the military know how of certain officers in the fortress at the time. Some of these officers may have given the men advice out of sheer hostility to the Bolsheviks. But in their attack on Kronstadt, the Government forces were also making use of ex Tsarist officers. On the one side there were Kozlovsky, Salomianov, and Arkannihov; On the other, ex-Tsarist officers and specialists of the old regime, such as Toukhatchevsky. Kamenev, and Avrov. On neither side were these officers an independent force.”*  
[Op. Cit., p. 44]

Not that this is good enough for Trotskyists. Wright, for example, will have none of it. He quotes Alexander Berkman’s statement that there was “*a former general, Kozlovsky, in Kronstadt. It was Trotsky who had placed him there as an*

*Artillery specialist. He played no role whatever in the Kronstadt events.*” [The Russian Tragedy, p. 69]

Wright protests that this is not true and, as evidence, quotes from an interview by Kozlovsky and states that “[f]rom the lips of the counterrevolutionary general himself . . . we get the unambiguous declaration that **from the very first day**, he and his colleagues had openly associated themselves with the mutiny, had elaborated the ‘best’ plans to capture Petrograd . . . If the plan failed it was only because Kozlovsky and his colleagues were unable to convince the ‘political leaders’, i.e. his SR allies [!], that the moment was propitious for exposing their true visage and program.” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 119]

In other words, because the Provisional Revolutionary Committee **failed** to take the advice of the military specialists it proves that, in fact, they were in league! That is very impressive. We wonder if the Kronstadters **had** taken their advice then this would have proved that they were not, in fact, in league with them after all? Similarly, by failing to take over the command of the fortress Kozlovsky **must** have shown how he was leading the revolt as the Bolshevik radio said!

Every non-Leninist account agrees that Kozlovsky played no part in the revolt. Paul Avrich notes that when trouble erupted “*the Bolsheviks at once denounced him as the evil genius of the movement,*” “*outlawed*” him and seized his family as hostages. He confirms that the military specialists “*threw themselves into the task of planning military operations on behalf of the insurrection*” and that Kozlovsky had refused to succeed as the commander of the fortress after the old one had fled to the mainland (as demanded by military rules). He stresses that “*the officers remained in a purely advisory capacity throughout the rebellion. They had no share, as far as one can tell, in initiating or directing the revolt, or in framing its political program, which was alien to their way of thinking.*” Their role “*was confined to providing technical advice, just as it had been under the Bolsheviks.*” The Provisional Revolutionary Committee “*showed its distrust of the specialists by repeatedly rejecting their counsel, however sound and appropriate it might be.*” And, of course, we should mention that “[f]or all the government’s accusations that Kronstadt was a conspiracy of White Guard generals, ex-tsarist officers played a much more prominent role in the attacking force than among the defenders.” [Op. Cit., p. 99, p. 100, p. 101 and p. 203]

Indeed, Kozlovsky “*had served the Bolsheviks so loyally that on 20 October 1920 the chief commander of the Baltic Fleet . . . had awarded him a watch ‘for courage and feat of arms in the battle against Yudenich’*” [I. Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 219] This was simply officially confirming the award made on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1919, by the Petrograd Soviet “*for military feats and energetic activities during the attack of the Yudenich bands on Petrograd.*” Indeed, he was one of the first generals

who entered into service of the Bolsheviks and the Kronstadt soviet had elected him Chief-of-Staff of the fortress in the wake of the February revolution. All this did not stop the Bolsheviks claiming on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1921, that Kozlovsky was a “*supporter of Yudenich and Kolchak*”? [quoted by Israel Getzler, “*The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*”, **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 43 and p. 31]

Berkman was clearly correct. Kozlovsky took no role in the revolt. What he did do was offer his expertise to the Kronstadt rebels (just as he had to the Bolsheviks) and make plans which were rejected. If associating yourself with an event and making plans which are rejected by those involved equals a role in that event then Trotsky’s role in the Spanish revolution equalled that of Durruti’s!

Finally, it should be noted that Victor Serge reported that it “*was probably [the leading Bolshevik] Kalinin who, on his return to Petrograd [from attending the initial rebel meetings at Kronstadt], invented ‘the White General Kozlovsky.’*” [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 127] The ironic thing is, if the Kronstadt rebels **had** been following Kozlovsky and the other Bolshevik appointed “military specialists” then the defences of Kronstadt would have been strengthened considerably. However, as Kozlovsky later explained, the sailors refused to co-operate because of their congenital mistrust of officers. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 138–9]

It is hard to find a Leninist who subscribes to this particular Bolshevik lie about Kronstadt. It has, for the main, been long abandoned by those who follow those who created it, despite the fact it was the cornerstone of the official Bolshevik account of the rebellion. As the obvious falseness of the claims became more and more well-known, Trotsky and his followers turned to other arguments to slander the uprising. The most famous is the assertion that the “*Kronstadt sailors were quite a different group from the revolutionary heroes of 1917.*” [Wright, **Op. Cit.**, p. 129] We turn to this question in the section 8 and indicate that research has refuted it (and how Trotskyists have misused this research to present a drastically false picture of the facts). However, first we must discuss whether the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, a White conspiracy (the next section) and its real relationship to the Whites (section 7).

## 6 Was the Kronstadt revolt a White plot?

At the time, the Bolsheviks portrayed the Kronstadt revolt as a White plot, organised by the counter-revolution (see last section for full details). In particular, they portrayed the revolt as a conspiracy, directed by foreign spies and executed by their SR and White Guardist allies.

For example, Lenin argued on March 8<sup>th</sup> that “*White Guard generals were very active*” at Kronstadt. “*There is ample proof of this. Two weeks before the Kronstadt events, the Paris newspapers reported a mutiny at Kronstadt. It is quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 44]

Trotsky, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, made the same point, arguing that “*in a number of foreign newspapers . . . news of an uprising in Kronstadt appeared as far back as the middle of February . . . How [to] explain this? Very simply . . . The Russian counter-revolutionary organisers promised to stage a mutiny at a propitious moment, while the impatient yellow and financial press write about it as an already accomplished fact.*” [Op. Cit., p. 68]

This appears to be the greatest “evidence” for Lenin and Trotsky as regards the White-Guardist nature of the revolt. Indeed, Trotsky on the “*basis of the dispatch . . . sent a warning to Petrograd to my naval colleagues.*” [Ibid.]

However, to see the truth of these claims it is simply a case of looking at how the Bolsheviks reacted to this announcement of an uprising in Kronstadt. They did nothing. As the Trotskyist editors of a book justifying the repression note, the “*Red Army command was caught unprepared by the rebellion.*” [Op. Cit., p. 6] J.G. Wright, in his defence of Trotsky’s position (a defence recommended by Trotsky himself), acknowledged that the “*Red Army command*” was “[c]aught off guard by the mutiny.” [Op. Cit., p. 123] This clearly shows how little weight the newspaper reports were held **before** the rebellion. Of course, **during** and **after** the rebellion was a different matter and they quickly became a focal point for Bolshevik smears.

Moreover, as proof of a White plot, this evidence is pathetic. As Ida Mett argued out, the “*publication of false news about Russia was nothing exceptional. Such news was published before, during and after the Kronstadt events. . . To base an accusation on a ‘proof’ of this kind is inadmissible and immoral.*” [Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 76]

Even Trotsky admitted that “*the imperialist press . . . prints . . . a great number of fictitious reports about Russia*” but maintained that the reports on Kronstadt were examples of “*forecasts*” of “*attempts at overturns in specific centres of Soviet Russia*” (indeed, the “*journalistic agents of imperialism only ‘forecast’ that which is entrusted for execution to other agents of this very imperialism.*”). Lenin also noted, in an article entitled “*The Campaign of Lies*”, that “*the West European press [had] indulged in such an orgy of lies or engaged in the mass production of fantastic inventions about Soviet Russia in the last two weeks*” and listed some of them (such as “*Petrograd and Moscow are in the hands of the insurgents*”). [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 69, p. 50 and p. 51]

Yet this same press can be used as evidence for a White conspiracy in Kronstadt? Unsurprisingly, as Mett notes, “[i]n 1938 Trotsky himself was to drop this accusation.” [Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 76] Little wonder, given its pathetic nature — although this does not stop his loyal follower John G. Wright from asserting these reports are the “*irrefutable facts*” of the “*connection between the counterrevolution and Kronstadt.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 115] The question of **why** the counterrevolutionary plotters would give their enemies advance notice of their plans never crossed his mind.

As can be seen, at the time **no** evidence was forthcoming that the Whites organised or took part in the revolt. As Ida Mett argues:

*“If, at the time the Bolshevik Government had proofs of these alleged contacts between Kronstadt and the counter-revolutionaries why did it not try the rebels publicly? Why did it not show the working masses of Russia the ‘real’ reasons for the uprising? If this wasn’t done it was because no such proofs existed.”*  
[Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 77]

Unsurprisingly, the first soviet investigation into the revolt came to the conclusion that it was spontaneous. Iakov Agranov, a special plenipotentiary of the Secret-Operation Department of the **Vecheka** (and later to become its head), was sent the presidium of that body to Kronstadt soon after the crushing of the uprising. His mandate was “*to ascertain the role of various parties and groups in the start and development of the uprising and the ties of its organisers and inspirers with counter-revolutionary parties and organisations operating both in and outside Soviet Russia.*” He produced a report on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 1921, which expressed his considered opinion that the “*uprising was entirely spontaneous in origin and drew into its maelstrom almost the entire population and the garrison of the fortress. . . the investigation failed to show the outbreak of the mutiny was preceded by the activity of any counter-revolutionary organisation at work among the fortress’s command or that it was the work of the entente. The entire course of the movement speaks against that possibility. Had the mutiny been the work of some secret organisation which predated its outbreak, then that organisation would not have planned it for a time when the reserves of fuel and provisions were hardly sufficient for two weeks and when the thawing of the ice was still far off.*” He notes that the “*masses*” in Kronstadt “*were fully aware of the spontaneity of their movement.*” [quoted by Israel Getzler, “*The Communist Leaders’ Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*”, *Revolutionary Russia*, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 25]

Agranov’s conclusion was also that of Aleksei Nikolaev’s, who, as chairman of the Extraordinary **Troika** of the First and Second Special Section, was given



the double assignment of *“the punishment of the mutineers and the unmasking of all the organisations that prepared and led the mutiny.”* He reported on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1921, that *“in spite of all efforts we have been unable to discover the presence of any organisation and to seize any agents.”* [quoted by Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26] Ironically enough, a prominent SR leader and head of the SR Administrative Centre in Finland wrote a letter on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March that stated the revolt was *“absolutely spontaneous,”* that the *“movement began spontaneously, without any organisation and quite unexpectedly. After all, a month later, Kronstadt would have been inaccessible to the Bolsheviks and a hundred times more dangerous to them.”* [quoted by Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 25–6]

This did not stop the Bolsheviks reiterating the official line that the revolt was a White plot, with SR help (nor has it stopped their latter-day supporters repeating these lies since). For example, Bukharin was still pedalling the official lies in July 1921, stating that, as regards Kronstadt, the *“documents which have since been brought to light show clearly that the affair was instigated by purely White Guard centres.”* [contained in *In Defence of the Russian Revolution*, Al Richardson (ed.), p. 192] It is redundant to note that said “documents” were not “brought to light” then or since.

It should be noted here that the Bolsheviks were quite willing to invent “evidence” of a conspiracy. Trotsky, for example, raised, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1921, the possibility of a *“Political Trial of Kronstadters and Makhnovites.”* This show trial would be part of the *“struggle”* against *“anarchism (Kronstadt and Makhno).”* This was *“presently an important task”* and so it *“seems . . . appropriate to organise trials of Kronstadters . . . and of Makhnovites.”* The *“effect of the reports and the speeches of the prosecutor etcetera would be far more powerful than the effects of brochures and leaflets about . . . anarchism.”* [quoted by Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 39] While Trotsky’s show trial was never staged, the fact that the idea was taken seriously can be seen from the invented summaries of the testimonies of three men considered by the Bolsheviks as ringleaders of the revolt. Perhaps the fact that the three (Kozlovsky, Petrichenko, Putilin) managed to escape to Finland ensured that Trotsky’s idea was never carried out. Stalin, of course, utilised the *“powerful”* nature of such trials in the 1930s.

Decades later historian Paul Avrich **did** discover an unsigned hand written manuscript labelled *“Top Secret”* and entitled *“Memorandum on the Question of Organising an Uprising in Kronstadt.”* Trotskyist Pierre Frank considered it *“so convincing”* that he *“reproduced it in its entirety”* to prove a White Conspiracy existed behind the Kronstadt revolt. Indeed, he considers it as an *“indisputable”* revelation and that Lenin and Trotsky *“were not mistaken in their analysis of Kronstadt.”* [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26 and p. 32]

However, reading the document quickly shows that Kronstadt was not a product of a White conspiracy but rather that the White “*National Centre*” aimed to try and use a spontaneous “*uprising*” it thought was likely to “*erupt there in the coming spring*” for its own ends. The report notes that “*among the sailors, numerous and unmistakable signs of mass dissatisfaction with the existing order can be noticed.*” Indeed, the “*Memorandum*” states that “*one must not forget that even of the French Command and the Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations do not take part in the preparation and direction of the uprising, a revolt in Kronstadt will take place all the same during the coming spring, but after a brief period of success it will be doomed to failure.*” [quoted by Avrigh, *Kronstadt 1921*, p. 235 and p. 240]

As Avrigh notes, an “*underlying assumption of the Memorandum is that the revolt would not occur until after the springtime thaw, when the ice had melted and Kronstadt was immune from an invasion from the mainland.*” [*Kronstadt 1921*, pp. 106–7] Voline stated the obvious when he argued that the revolt “*broke out spontaneously*” for if it “*had been the result of a plan conceived and prepared in advance, it would certainly not have occurred at the beginning of March, the least favourable time. A few weeks later, and Kronstadt, freed of ice, would have become an almost impregnable fortress . . . The greatest opportunity of Bolshevik government was precisely the spontaneity of the movement and the absence of any premeditation, of any calculation, in the action of the sailors.*” [*The Unknown Revolution*, p. 487] As can be seen, the “*Memorandum*” also recognised this need for the ice to thaw and it was the basic assumption behind it. In other words, the revolt was spontaneous and actually undercut the assumptions behind the “*Memorandum.*”

Avrigh rejects the idea that the “*Memorandum*” explains the revolt:

*“Nothing has come to light to show that the Secret Memorandum was ever put into practice or that any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt. On the contrary, the rising bore the earmarks of spontaneity . . . there was little in the behaviour of the rebels to suggest any careful advance preparation. Had there been a prearranged plan, surely the sailors would have waited a few weeks longer for the ice to melt . . . The rebels, moreover, allowed Kalinin [a leading Communist] to return to Petrograd, though he would have made a valuable hostage. Further, no attempt was made to take the offensive . . . Significant too, is the large number of Communists who took part in the movement. . .*

*“The Sailors needed no outside encouragement to raise the banner of insurrection. . . Kronstadt was clearly ripe for a rebellion. What set it off were not the machinations of emigre conspirators and foreign intelligence agents but the wave of peasant risings throughout the country and the labour disturbances*

*in neighbouring Petorgrad. And as the revolt unfolded, it followed the pattern of earlier outbursts against the central government from 1905 through the Civil War.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 111–2]

He explicitly argues that while the National Centre had “*anticipated*” the revolt and “*laid plans to help organise it,*” they had “*no time to put these plans into effect.*” The “*eruption occurred too soon, several weeks before the basic conditions of the plot . . . could be fulfilled.*” It “*is not true,*” he stresses, “*that the emigres had engineering the rebellion.*” The revolt was “*a spontaneous and self-contained movement from beginning to end.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 126–7]

Moreover, whether the Memorandum played a part in the revolt can be seen from the reactions of the White “*National Centre*” to the uprising. Firstly, they failed to deliver aid to the rebels nor get French aid to them. Secondly, Professor Grimm, the chief agent of the National Centre in Helsingfors and General Wrangel’s official representative in Finland, stated to a colleague after the revolt had been crushed that if a new outbreak should occur then their group must not be caught unawares again. Avrigh also notes that the revolt “*caught the emigres off balance*” and that “[*n*]othing . . . had been done to implement the Secret Memorandum, and the warnings of the author were fully borne out.” [Paul Avrigh, Op. Cit., p. 212 and p. 123]

If Kronstadt was a White conspiracy then how could the organisation of the conspiracy have been caught unawares?

Clearly, the attempts of certain later-day Trotskyists to justify and prove their heroes slanders against Kronstadt are pathetic. No evidence of a White-Guardist plot existed until 1970 when Paul Avrigh produced his study of the revolt and the single document in question clearly does not support the claim that the Whites organised the revolt. Rather, the Whites aimed to use a sailors “*uprising*” to further their cause, an “*uprising*” which they predicted would occur in the spring (with or without them). The predicted revolt **did** take place, but earlier than expected and was not a product of a conspiracy. Indeed, the historian who discovered this document explicitly argues that it proves nothing and that the revolt was spontaneous in nature.

Therefore, the claim that Kronstadt was a White plot cannot be defended with anything but assertions. No evidence exists to back up such claims.

## 7 What was the real relationship of Kronstadt to the Whites?

As we proved in the last section, the Kronstadt revolt was not a White conspiracy. It was a popular revolt from below. However, some Trotskyists still try and smear the revolt by arguing that it was, in fact, really or “objectively” pro-White. We turn to this question now.

We must first stress that the Kronstadters’ rejected every offer of help from the National Centre and other obviously pro-White group (they did accept help towards the end of the rebellion from the Russian Red Cross when the food situation had become critical). Historian Israel Getzler stressed that “*the Kronstadters were extremely resentful of all gestures of sympathy and promises of help coming from the White-Guardist emigres.*” He quotes a Red Cross visitor who stated that Kronstadt “*will admit no White political party, no politician, with the exception of the Red Cross.*” [Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 235]

Avrich notes that the Kronstadter’s “*passionately hated*” the Whites and that “*both during and afterwards in exile*” they “*indignantly rejected all government accusations of collaboration with counterrevolutionary groups either at home or abroad.*” As the Communists themselves acknowledged, no outside aid ever reached the insurgents. [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 187, p. 112 and p. 123]

In other words, there was no relationship between the revolt and the Whites.

Needless to say, the Whites **were** extremely happy that Kronstadt revolted. There is no denying that. However, it would be weak politics indeed that based itself on the reactions of reactionaries to evaluate social struggles. If we did then we would have to conclude that the overthrow of Stalinism in 1989 was nothing more than a counter-revolution rather than a popular revolt against a specific form of capitalism (namely state capitalism). Indeed, many orthodox Trotskyists took this position (and supported the attempted coup organised by a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy to re-impose its dictatorship).

Indeed, the Kronstadters themselves acknowledged that the Whites were happy to support their actions (indeed, **any** actions against the Bolsheviks) but that this joy was for different reasons than theirs:

*“The . . . Kronstadt sailors and workers have wrested the tiller from the Communists’ hands and have taken over the helm . . . Comrades, keep a close eye upon the vicinity of the tiller: enemies are even now trying to creep closer. A single lapse and they will wrest the tiller from you, and the soviet ship may go down to the triumphant laughter from tsarist lackeys and henchmen of the bourgeoisie.*”

*“Comrades, right now you are rejoicing in the great, peaceful victory over the Communists’ dictatorship. Now, your enemies are celebrating too.*

*“Your grounds for such joy, and theirs, are quite contradictory.*

*“You are driven by a burning desire to restore the authentic power of the soviets, by a noble hope of seeing the worker engage in free labour and the peasant enjoy the right to dispose, on his land, of the produce of his labours. **They** dream of bringing back the tsarist knout and the privileges of the generals.*

*“Your interests are different. They are not fellow travellers with you.*

*“You needed to get rid of the Communists’ power over you in order to set about creative work and peaceable construction. Whereas they want to overthrow that power to make the workers and peasants their slaves again.*

*“You are in search of freedom. They want to shackle you as it suits them. Be vigilant! Don’t let the wolves in sheep’s clothing get near the tiller.” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, pp. 187–8]*

Of course, this is not enough for the followers of Lenin and Trotsky. John Rees, for example, quotes Paul Avrich to support his assertion that the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, pro-White. He argues as follows:

*“Paul Avrich . . . says there is ‘undeniable evidence’ that the leadership of the rebellion came to an agreement with the Whites after they had been crushed and that ‘one cannot rule out the possibility that this was the continuation of a longstanding relationship.’” [Op. Cit., p. 64]*

What Rees **fails** to mention is that Avrich **immediately** adds “[y]et a careful search has yielded no evidence to support such a belief.” He even states that “[n]othing has come to light to show that . . . any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt.” [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 111] How strange that Rees fails to quote or even mention Avrich’s conclusion to his own speculation! As for the post-revolt links between the “leadership” of the rebellion and the Whites, Avrich correctly argues that “[n]one of this proves that there were any ties between the [National] Centre and the Revolutionary Committee either before or during the revolt. It would seem, rather, that the mutual experience of bitterness and defeat, and a common determination to overthrow the Soviet regime, led them to join hands in the aftermath.” [Op. Cit., p. 129] Seeing you friends and fellow toilers murdered by dictators may affect your judgement, unsurprisingly enough.

Let us, however, assume that certain elements in the “leadership” of the revolt were, in fact, scoundrels. What does this mean when evaluating the Kronstadt revolt?

Firstly, we must point out that this “leadership” was elected by and under the control of the “conference of delegates,” which was in turn elected by and under the control of the rank-and-file sailors, soldiers and civilians. This body met regularly during the revolt “to receive and debate the reports of the Revolutionary committee and to propose measures and decrees.” [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 217] The actions of the “leadership” were not independent of the mass of the population and so, regardless of their own agendas, had to work under control from below. In other words, the revolt cannot be reduced to a discussion of whether a few of the “leadership” were “bad men” or not. Indeed, to do so just reflects the elitism of bourgeois history.

And Rees does just that and reduces the Kronstadt revolt and its “ideology” down to just one person (Petrichenko). Perhaps we can evaluate Bolshevism with this method? Or Italian Socialism. After all, influential figures in both these movements ended up making contacts and deals with extremely suspect organisations and acting in ways we (and the movements they sprang from) would oppose. Does that mean we gain an insight into their natures by mentioning Stalin’s or Mussolini’s later activities? Or evaluating their revolutionary nature from such individuals? Of course not. Indeed, Rees’s article is an attempt to argue that objective circumstances rather than Bolshevism as such lead to Stalinism. Rather than do the same for Kronstadt, he prefers to concentrate on an individual. This indicates a distinctly bourgeois perspective:

*“What passes as socialist history is often only a mirror image of bourgeois historiography, a percolation into the ranks of the working class movement of typically bourgeois methods of thinking. In the world of this type of ‘historian’ leaders of genius replace the kings and queens of the bourgeois world. . . The masses never appear independently on the historic stage, making their own history. At best they only ‘supply the steam’, enabling others to drive the locomotive, as Stalin so delicately put it . . . This tendency to identify working class history with the history of its organisations, institutions and leaders is not only inadequate — it reflects a typically bourgeois vision of mankind, divided in almost pre-ordained manner between **the few** who will manage and decide, and **the many**, the malleable mass, incapable of acting consciously on its own behalf . . . Most histories of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution rarely amount to more than this.” [“Solidarity’s Preface” to Ida Mett’s **The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 18–9]*

Secondly, the question is one of whether workers are in struggle and what they aim for and definitely **not** one of whether some of the “leaders” are fine upstanding citizens. Ironically, Trotsky indicates why. In 1934, he had argued “[a]nyone who had proposed that we not support the British miners’ strike of 1926 or the recent large-scale strikes in the United States with all available means on the ground that the leaders of the strikes were for the most part scoundrels, would have been a traitor to the British and American workers.” [“No Compromise on the Russian Question”, *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement (1934–40)*, p. 539]

The same applies to Kronstadt. Even if we assume that some of the “leadership” did have links with the National Centre (an assumption we must stress has no evidence to support it), this in no way invalidates the Kronstadt revolt. The movement was not produced by the so-called “leaders” of the revolt but rather came from below and so reflected the demands and politics of those involved. If it was proved, as KGB and other soviet sources argued, that some of the “leaders” of the Hungary uprising of 1956 had CIA links or were CIA agitators, would that make the revolution and its workers’ councils somehow invalid? Of course not. If some of the “leadership” were scoundrels, as Trotsky argued, this does not invalidate the revolt itself. The class criteria is the decisive one.

(As an aside, we must point out that Trotsky was arguing against those claiming, correctly, that to unconditionally defend the Soviet Union was to give an endorsement to Stalinism. He stated immediately after the words we have quoted above: “*Exactly the same thing applies to the USSR!*” However, there was a few obvious differences which invalidates his analogy. Firstly, the Stalinist leadership was exploiting and oppressing the workers by means of state power. Trade Union bureaucrats, for all their faults, are not mass murdering butchers at a head of a dictatorship defended by troops and secret police. Secondly, strikes are examples of proletarian direct action which can, and do, get out of control of union structures and bureaucrats. They can be the focal point of creating new forms of working class organisation and power which can end the power of the union bureaucrats and replace it with self-managed strikers assemblies and councils. The Stalinist regime was organised to repress any attempts at unseating them and was not a form of working class self-defence in even the limited form that trade unions are.)

John Rees continues by arguing that:

*“As it became clear that the revolt was isolated Petrichenko was forced to come to terms with the reality of the balance of class forces. On 13 March Petrichenko wired David Grimm, the chief of the National Centre and General Wrangel’s official representative in Finland, for help in gaining food. On 16 March Petrichenko accepted an offer of help from Baron P V Vilkin, an associate of Grimm’s whom*

*'the Bolsheviks rightly called a White agent.' None of the aid reached the garrison before it was crushed, but the tide of events was pushing the sailors into the arms of the Whites, just as the latter had always suspected it would.* [Op. Cit., p. 64]

We should note that it was due to the *"food situation in Kronstadt . . . growing desperate"* that Petrichenko contacted Grimm. [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 121] If the revolt had spread to Petrograd and the striking workers there, such requests would have been unnecessary. Rather than isolation being due to *"the reality of the balance of class forces"* it was due to the reality of coercive forces — the Bolsheviks had successfully repressed the Petrograd strikes and slandered the Kronstadt revolt (see section 10). As historian V. Brovkin notes, the *"key here is that the Communists suppressed the workers uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March. The sailors' uprising in Kronstadt, which was an outgrowth of the uprising in Petrograd, was now cut off from its larger social base and localised on a small island. From this moment on the Kronstadt sailors were on the defensive."* [**Behind the Lines during the Civil War**, pp. 396–7]

So, given that the Bolshevik dictatorship had lied to and repressed the Petrograd working class, the Kronstadters had few options left as regards aid. Rees's argument smacks of the "logic" of Right as regards the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban revolution and the Sandinistas. Isolated, each of these revolts turned to the Soviet Union for aid thus proving what the Right had always known from the start, namely their objectively Communist nature and their part in the International Communist Conspiracy. Few revolutionaries would evaluate these struggles on such a illogical and narrow basis but Rees wants us to do so with Kronstadt.

The logic of Rees arguments was used by the Stalinists later. Indeed, he would have to agree with Stalinists that the fact the Hungarian revolution of 1956 called on Western aid against the Red Army shows that it was objectively counter-revolutionary and pro-capitalist, just as the Communist Party bureaucrats had argued. The fact that during that revolt many messages of support for the rebels also preached bourgeois values would also, according to Rees's logic, damn that revolt in the eyes of all socialists. Similarly, the fact that the Polish union **Solidarity** got support from the West against the Stalinist regime does not mean that its struggle was counter-revolutionary. So the arguments used by Rees are identical to those used by Stalinists to support their repression of working class revolt in the Soviet Empire. Indeed, orthodox Trotskyists also called *"Solidarnosc"* a company union of the CIA, bankers, the Vatican and Wall Street for capitalist counterrevolution in Poland and considered the fall of the Soviet Union as a defeat for the working class and socialism, in other words, a counterrevolution.



As evidence they pointed to the joy and support each generated in Western elite circles (and ignored the popular nature of those revolts).

In reality, of course, the fact that others sought to take advantage of these (and other) situations is inevitable and irrelevant. The important thing is whether working class people were in control of the revolt and what the main objectives of it were. By this class criteria, it is clear that the Kronstadt revolt was a **revolutionary** revolt as, like Hungary 1956, the core of the revolt was working people and their councils. It was they who were in control and called the tune. That Whites tried to take advantage of it is as irrelevant to evaluating the Kronstadt revolt as the fact that Stalinists tried to take advantage of the Spanish struggle against Fascism.

Moreover, in his analysis of the “*balance of class forces*”, Rees fails to mention the class which had real power (and the related privileges) in Russia at the time — the state and party bureaucracy. The working class and peasantry were officially powerless. The only influence they exercised in the “workers’ and peasants state” was when they rebelled, forcing “their” state to make concessions or to repress them (sometimes both happened). The balance of class forces was between the workers and peasants and ruling bureaucracy. To ignore this factor means to misunderstand the problems facing the revolution and the Kronstadt revolt itself.

Lastly, we must comment upon the fact that members of Kronstadt’s revolutionary Committee took refuge in Finland along with “[s]ome 8,000 people (some sailors and the most active part of the civilian population).” [Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57] This was as the Bolsheviks had predicted on March 5<sup>th</sup> (“*At the last minute, all those generals, the Kozlovskvs, the Bourksers, and all that riff raff, the Petrichenkos, and the Tourins will flee to Finland, to the White guards*” [cited by Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50]). However, this does not indicate any “White guardist” connections. After all, where else **could** they go? Anywhere else would have been in Soviet Russia and so a Bolshevik prison and ultimately death. The fact that active participants in the revolt ended up in the only place they could end up to avoid death has no bearing to that nature of that revolt nor can it be used as “evidence” of a “white conspiracy.”

In other words, the attempts of Trotskyists to smear the Kronstadt sailors with having White links is simply false. The actions of some rebels **after** the Bolsheviks had crushed the revolt cannot be used to discredit the revolt itself. The real relationship of the revolt to the Whites is clear. It was one of hatred and opposition.

## 8 Did the rebellion involve new sailors?

The most common Trotskyist assertion to justify the repression of the Kronstadt revolt is that of Trotsky. It basically consists of arguing that the sailors in 1921 were different than those in 1917. Trotsky started this line of justification during the revolt when he stated on March 16<sup>th</sup> that the Baltic Fleet had been “*inevitably thinned out with respect to personnel*” and so a “*great many of the revolutionary sailors*” of 1917 had been “*transferred*” elsewhere. They had been “*replaced in large measure by accidental elements.*” This “*facilitated*” the work of the “*counterrevolutionary organisers*” who had “*selected*” Kronstadt. He repeated this argument in 1937 and 1938 [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 68–9, p. 79, p. 81 and p. 87]

His followers repeated his assertions. Wright argues that “*the personnel of the fortress could not possibly have remained static throughout the years between 1917 and 1921.*” He doubts that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 could have remained behind in the fortress while their comrades fought the Whites. [Op. Cit., pp. 122–3] These sailors had been replaced by peasant conscripts. John Rees, continuing this line of rationale, argued that “*the composition of the garrison had changed . . . it seems likely that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested.*” [Rees, Op. Cit., p. 61]

As can be seen, the allegation that the Kronstadt sailors were a “*grey mass*” and had changed in social composition is a common one in Trotskyist circles. What are we to make of these claims?

Firstly, we must evaluate what are the facts as regards the social composition and turnover of personnel in Kronstadt. Secondly, we must see how Trotskyists have misused these sources in order to indicate how far they will abuse the truth.

The first task is now, thanks to recent research, easy to do. Were the majority of the sailors during the uprising new recruits or veterans from 1917? The answer is that it was predominantly the latter. Academic Israel Getzler investigated this issue and demonstrated that of those serving in the Baltic fleet on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1921 at least 75.5% were drafted before 1918. Over 80% were from Great Russian areas, 10% from the Ukraine and 9% from Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. He argues that the “*veteran politicised Red sailor still predominated in Kronstadt at the end of 1920*” and presents more “*hard statistical data*” like that just quoted. He investigated the crews of the two major battleships, the ***Petropavlovsk*** and the ***Sevastopol*** (both renown since 1917 for their revolutionary zeal and revolutionary allegiance and, in Paul Avrich’s words, “*the powder kegs of the rising.*” [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 93]). His findings are conclusive, showing that of the 2,028 sailors whose years of enlistment are known, 93.9% were recruited into the navy before and during the 1917 revolution (the largest group, 1,195, joined in the years 1914–16).

Only 6.8% of the sailors were recruited in the years 1918–21 (including three who were conscripted in 1921) and they were the only ones who had not been there during the 1917 revolution. [Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, pp. 207–8] Historian Fedotoff-White indicates that the cruiser *Rossiia* had joined in the decision to re-elect the Kronstadt Soviet and its “crew consisted mostly of old seamen.” [*The Growth of the Red Army*, p. 138]

Moreover, the majority of the revolutionary committee were veterans of the Kronstadt Soviet and the October revolution. [Ida Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42] “Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants in the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising.” [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91]

Getzler stresses that it was “certainly the case” that the “activists of the 1921 uprising had been participants of the 1917 revolutions” for the “1,900 veteran sailors of the *Petropavlovsk* and the *Sevastopol* who spearheaded it. It was certainly true of a majority of the Revolutionary Committee and of the intellectuals . . . Likewise, at least three-quarters of the 10,000 to 12,000 sailors — the mainstay of the uprising — were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution.” [Op. Cit., p. 226]

Little wonder, then, that Paul Avrich argues (in a review of Getzler’s book) that “Getzler draws attention to the continuity in institutions, ideology, and personnel linking 1921 with 1917. In doing so he demolishes the allegation of Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders that the majority of veteran Red sailors had, in the course of the Civil War, been replaced by politically retarded peasant recruits from the Ukraine and Western borderlands, thereby diluting the revolutionary character of the Baltic fleet. He shows, on the contrary, that no significant change had taken place in the fleet’s political and social composition, that at least three-quarters of the sailors on active duty in 1921 had been drafted before 1918 and were drawn predominantly from Great Russian areas.” [*Soviet Studies*, vol. XXXVI, 1984, pp. 139–40]

Other research confirms Getzler’s work. Evan Mawdsley argues that “it seems reasonable to challenge the previous interpretation” that there had been a “marked change in the composition of the men in the fleet . . . particularly . . . at the Kronstadt Naval Base.” “The composition of the DOT [Active Detachment],” he concludes, “had not fundamentally changed, and anarchistic young peasants did not predominate there. The available data suggests that the main difficulty was not . . . that the experienced sailors were being demobilised. Rather, they were not being demobilised rapidly enough.” The “relevant point is length of service, and available information indicates that as many as three-quarters of the DOT ratings — the Kronstadt mutineers — had served in the fleet at least since the World War.” In a nutshell, “the majority of men seem to have been veterans of 1917.” He presents data which shows that of the “2,028 ratings aboard the DOT battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol*

at the time of the uprising, 20.2% had begun service before 1914, 59% between 1914 and 1916, 14% in 1917, and 6.8% from 1918 to 1921." For the DOT as a whole on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1921, 23.5% could have been drafted before 1911, 52% from 1911 to 1918 and 24.5% after 1918. [*The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt Mutiny*], pp. 506–521, *Soviet Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 508–10]

This is not the end of the matter. Unfortunately for Trotsky recently released documents from the Soviet Archives also refutes his case. A report by Vasili Sevei, Plenipotentiary of the Special Section of the **Vecheka**, dated March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1921, stated that a "large majority" of the sailors of Baltic Fleet "were and still are professional revolutionaries and could well form the basis for a possible third revolution." He notes that the "disease from which they suffer has been too long neglected." What is significant about this social-political profile of the "large majority" of sailors was that it was **not** written in response of the Kronstadt revolt but that it was formulated well before. As its author put it in the report, "I stated these views more than a month ago in my memorandum to comrade Krestinskii" (then secretary of the Communist Party). [quoted by Israel Getzler, "The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents", *Revolutionary Russia*, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, pp. 32–3]

In other words, some time in January, 1921, a leading member of the Cheka was of the opinion that the "large majority" of sailors in the Baltic fleet "were and still are professional revolutionaries." No mention was made of new recruits, indeed the opposite is implied as the sailors' "disease" had been "too long neglected." And the recipient of this March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1921, report? Leon Trotsky. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky did not mention this report during the crisis or any time afterward.

Needless to say, this statistical information was unavailable when anarchists and others wrote their accounts of the uprising. All they could go on were the facts of the uprising itself and the demands of the rebels. Based on these, it is little wonder that anarchists like Alexander Berkman stressed the continuity between the Red Kronstadters of 1917 and the rebels of 1921. Firstly, the rebels in 1921 took action in **solidarity** with the striking workers in Petrograd. In the words of Emma Goldman, it was "after the report of their Committee of the real state of affairs among the workers in Petrograd that the Kronstadt sailors did in 1921 what they had done in 1917. They immediately made common cause with the workers. The part of the sailors in 1917 was hailed as the red pride and glory of the Revolution. Their identical part in 1921 was denounced to the whole world as counter-revolutionary treason" by the Bolsheviks. [**Trotsky Protests Too Much**] Secondly, their demands were thoroughly in-line with the aspirations and politics of 1917 and clearly showed a socialist awareness and analysis. Thirdly, Emma Goldman spoke to some of those wounded in the attack on Kronstadt. She records how one "had realised that he had been duped by the cry of 'counter-revolution.'" There

*were no Tsarist generals in Kronstadt, no White Guardists — he found only his own comrades, sailors and soldiers who had heroically fought for the Revolution.*” [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. 199–200]

The later research has just confirmed what is obvious from an analysis of such facts, namely that the rebels in 1921 were acting in the spirit of their comrades of 1917 and this implies a significant continuity in personnel (which perhaps explains the unwillingness of Leninists to mention that the revolt was in solidarity with the strikers or the demands of the rebels). Thus the research provides empirical evidence to support the political analysis of the revolt conducted by revolutionaries like Berkman, Voline and so on.

In summary, the bulk of the sailors at the start of 1921 had been there since 1917. Even if this was not the case and we assume that a majority of the sailors at Kronstadt were recent recruits, does this invalidate the rebellion? After all, the Red sailors of 1917 were once raw recruits. They had become politicised over time by debate, discussion and struggle. So had the workers in Petrograd and elsewhere. Would Leninists have denounced strikers in 1905 or 1917 if it was discovered that most of them were recent peasant arrivals in the city? We doubt it.

Indeed, the Bolsheviks were simply repeating old Menshevik arguments. Between 1910 and 1914, the industrial workforce grew from 1,793,000 workers to 2,400,000. At the same time, the influence of the Bolsheviks grew at Menshevik expense. The Mensheviks considered this a “*consequence of the changes that were taking place in the character of urban Russia*” with peasants joining the labour force. [“*introduction*”, **The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution**, Abraham Archer (Ed.), p. 24] Somewhat ironically, given later Leninist arguments against Kronstadt, the Mensheviks argued that the Bolsheviks gained their influence from such worker-peasant industrial “*raw recruits*” and not from the genuine working class. [Orlando Figes, **A People’s Tragedy**, p. 830] As Robert Service noted in his study of the Bolshevik party during the 1917 revolution, “*Menshevik critics were fond of carping that most Bolshevik newcomers were young lads fresh from the villages and wanting in long experience of industrial life and political activity. It was not completely unknown for Bolshevik spokesmen to come close to admitting this.*” [The Bolshevik Party in Revolution, p. 44] And, of course, it was the industrial “*raw recruits*” who had taken part in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. They helped formulate demands and organise soviets, strikes and demonstrations. They helped raised slogans which were to the left of the Bolsheviks. Does this process somehow grind to a halt when these “*raw recruits*” oppose Trotsky? Of course not.

Given the political aspects of the Kronstadt demands we can safely argue that even if the rebellion had been the work of recent recruits they obviously had been

influenced by the veteran sailors who remained. They, like the peasant-workers of 1905 and 1917, would have been able to raise their own political demands and ideas while, at the same time, listening to those among them with more political experience. In other words, the assumption that the sailors could not raise revolutionary political demands if they were “raw recruits” only makes sense if we subscribe to Lenin’s dictum that the working class, by its own efforts, can only reach a trade union consciousness (i.e. that toiling people cannot liberate themselves). In other words, this Trotsky inspired sociology misses the point. Sadly, we have to address it in order to refute Leninist arguments.

Therefore, Getzler’s research refutes the claims of Trotskyists such as Chris Harman who follow Trotsky and argue that “*Kronstadt in 1921 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.*” [quoted by Sam Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 192] As can be seen, the ship crews were remarkably consistent over the period in question. It is, however, useful to discuss this question further in order to show what passes as analysis in Trotskyist circles.

Harman is, of course, following Trotsky. Writing in 1937 Trotsky argued that Kronstadt had “*been completely emptied of proletarian elements*” as “[a]ll the sailors” belonging to the ships’ crews “*had become commissars, commanders, chairmen of local soviets.*” Later, realising the stupidity of this claim, he changed it to Kronstadt being “*denuded of all revolutionary forces*” by “*the winter of 1919.*” He also acknowledged that “*a certain number of qualified workers and technicians*” remained to “*take care of the machinery*” but these were “*politically unreliable*” as proven by the fact they had not been selected to fight in the civil war. As evidence, he mentions that he had wired a “*request at the end of 1919, or in 1920, to ‘send a group of Kronstadt sailors to this or that point’*” and they had answered “*No one left to send.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 87, p. 90 and p. 81] Obviously, the Communist commander at Kronstadt had left his fortress and its ships totally unmanned! Such common sense is sadly lacking from Trotsky (as indicated above, the evidence supports the common sense analysis and not Trotsky’s claims).

Moreover, does this claim also apply to the Communist Party membership at Kronstadt? Is Trotsky **really** arguing that the Bolsheviks in Kronstadt after the winter of 1919 were not revolutionary? Given that the bulk of them had joined the CP during or after this time, we must obviously conclude that the recruiters let anyone join. Moreover, there had been a “*rigorous local purge*” of the party conducted in the autumn of 1920 by the commander of the Baltic Fleet. [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 211 and p. 205] Must we also conclude that this purge did not have revolutionary politics as a factor when determining whether a party member should be expelled or not?

Trotsky claims too much. Based on his claims we must conclude one of two possibilities. The first possibility is that the Kronstadt Communist Party was not revolutionary and was made up of politically backward individuals, careerists and so on. If that was the case in Kronstadt then it must also have been the case elsewhere in Russia and this discredits any attempt to argue that the Bolshevik party dictatorship was revolutionary. The second possibility is that it **did** have revolutionary elements. If so, then the fact that hundreds of these members left the party during the revolt and only a minority of them opposed it makes the claim that the rebellion was “*counter-revolutionary*” difficult (indeed, impossible) to maintain (of the 2,900 members of the Communist Party in Kronstadt, 784 officially resigned and 327 had been arrested). And it also makes Trotsky’s claims that Kronstadt was “*denuded*” of revolutionary elements false.

J.G. Wright, as noted above, thought that it was “*impossible*” to believe that the sailors of 1917 could leave their comrades to fight the Whites while they stayed at Kronstadt. This may have been a valid argument **if** the Soviet armed forces were democratically run. However, as we indicated in section 2, it was organised in a typically bourgeois fashion. Trotsky had abolished democratic soldiers and sailors councils and the election of officers in favour of appointed officers and hierarchical, top-down, military structures. This meant that the sailors would have stayed in Kronstadt if they had been ordered to. The fact that they had to defend Petrograd combined with the level of technical knowledge and experience required to operate the battleships and defences at Kronstadt would have meant that the 1917 sailors would have been irreplaceable and so had to remain at Kronstadt. This is what, in fact, did happen. In the words of Israel Gelzter:

*“One reason for the remarkable survival in Kronstadt of these veteran sailors, albeit in greatly diminished numbers, was precisely the difficulty of training, in war-time conditions, a new generation competent in the sophisticated technical skills required of Russia’s ultra-modern battleships, and, indeed, in the fleet generally.”* [Op. Cit., p. 208]

We should also note here that “*by the end of 1919 thousands of veteran sailors, who had served on many fronts of the civil war and in the administrative network of the expanding Soviet state, had returned to the Baltic Fleet and to Kronstadt, most by way of remobilisation.*” [Getzler, Op. Cit., pp. 197–8] Thus the idea that the sailors left and did not come back is not a valid one.

Trotsky obviously felt that this (recently refuted) argument of changing social composition of the sailors would hold more water than claims White Guards organised it. He continued this theme:

*“The best, most self-sacrificing sailors were completely withdrawn from Kronstadt and played an important role at the fronts and in the local soviets throughout the country. What was left was the grey mass with big pretensions (‘We are from Kronstadt’), but without the political education and unprepared for revolutionary sacrifice. The country was starving. The Kronstaders demanded privileges. The uprising was dictated by a desire to get privileged food rations.”* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 79]

This was Trotsky’s first comment on the uprising for 16 years and it contained a lie. As Ida Mett notes, “[s]uch a demand was never put forward by the men of Kronstadt” and so Trotsky “started his public accusations with a lie.” [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 73] He repeated the claim again, six months later [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 92] Unfortunately for him, the opposite was the case. Point 9 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly called for an end of privileges by the “equalisation of rations for all workers.” This was implemented during the uprising.

As an aside, Trotsky later states that “[w]hen conditions became very critical in hungry Petrograd, the Political Bureau more than once discussed the possibility of securing an ‘internal loan’ from Kronstadt, where a quantity of old provisions still remained. But delegates of the Petrograd workers answered: ‘You will get nothing from them by kindness. They speculate in cloth, coal, and bread. At present in Kronstadt every kind of riffraff has raised its head.’” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 87–8] As Ida Mett pointed out, “[w]e should add that before the insurrection these ‘stores’ were in the hands of communist functionaries and that it was upon these people alone that consent to the proposed ‘loan’ depended. The rank and file sailor, who took part in the insurrection, had no means open to him whereby he could have opposed the loan, even if he had wanted to.” [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 74–5] If Trotsky’s words were true, then they were a crushing indictment of Bolshevik practice, **not** the Kronstadt sailors.

As for Trotsky’s claim of a “lack of political education,” the 15 point resolution voted upon by the sailors exposes this as nonsense and the fact the sailors fought the Red Army to the end indicates that they were prepared to die for their ideals. Similarly, Trotsky’s argument that “in 1917–18, the Kronstadt sailor stood considerably higher than the average level of the Red Army” but by 1921 they “stood . . . on a level considerably lower, in general, than the average level of the Red Army.” In fact, as we indicate in section 9, the political programme of the revolt was fundamentally the same as Kronstadt’s soviet democracy of 1917 and, we should note, opposed the introduction of wage labour, a basic socialist idea (and one missing from the Bolshevik’s NEP policies). Moreover, the mass meeting that agreed the resolution did so unanimously, meaning old and new sailors agreed to it. So much for Trotsky’s assertions.



Others have pointed out the weak nature of Trotsky's arguments as regards the changing nature of the sailors. We will quote Emma Goldman's evaluation of Trotsky's assertions. As will be seen, Trotsky's assertions seem to be based on expediency (and, significantly, were not uttered before the revolt):

*"Now, I do not presume to argue what the Kronstadt sailors were in 1918 or 1919. I did not reach Russia until January, 1920. From that time on until Kronstadt was 'liquidated' the sailors of the Baltic fleet were held up as the glorious example of valour and unflinching courage. Time on end I was told not only by Anarchists, Mensheviks and social revolutionists, but by many Communists, that the sailors were the very backbone of the Revolution. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, 1920, during the celebration and the other festivities organised for the first British Labour Mission, the Kronstadt sailors presented a large clear-cut contingent, and were then pointed out as among the great heroes who had saved the Revolution from Kerensky, and Petrograd from Yudenich. During the anniversary of October the sailors were again in the front ranks, and their re-enactment of the taking of the Winter Palace was wildly acclaimed by a packed mass.*

*"Is it possible that the leading members of the party, save Leon Trotsky, were unaware of the corruption and the demoralisation of Kronstadt, claimed by him? I do not think so. Moreover, I doubt whether Trotsky himself held this view of the Kronstadt sailors until March, 1921. His story must, therefore, be an afterthought, or is it a rationalisation to justify the senseless 'liquidation' of Kronstadt?" [Trotsky Protests Too Much]*

Ante Ciliga quoted the testimony regarding Kronstadt of a fellow political prisoner in Soviet Russia:

*"It is a myth that, from the social point of view, Kronstadt of 1921 had a wholly different population from that of 1917,' [a] man from Petrograd, Dv., said to me in prison. In 1921 he was a member of the Communist youth, and was imprisoned in 1932 as a 'decist' (a member of Saprionov's group of 'Democratic Centralists')."* [Op. Cit., pp. 335-6]

Since then, both Paul Avrich and Israel Gelzter have analysed this question and confirmed the arguments and accounts of Goldman and Ciliga. Moreover, continuity between the sailors of 1917 and 1921 can also be seen from their actions (rising in solidarity with the Petrograd workers) and in their politics (as expressed in their demands and in their paper).

Now we turn to our second reason for looking into this issue, namely the misuse of these sources to support their case. This indicates well the nature of

Bolshevik ethics. “*While the revolutionaries,*” argued Ciliga with regards to the Bolsheviks, “*remaining such only in words, accomplished in fact the task of the reaction and counter-revolution, they were compelled, inevitably, to have recourse to lies, to calumny and falsification.*” [Op. Cit., p. 335] Defending these acts also pays its toll on those who follow this tradition, as we shall see.

Needless to say, such evidence as provided by Avrigh and Getzler is rarely mentioned by supporters of Bolshevism. However, rather than ignore new evidence, the Trotskyists use it in their own way, for their own purposes. Every new work about Kronstadt has been selectively quoted from by Trotskyists to support their arguments, regardless of the honesty of such activity. We can point to two works, Paul Avrigh’s **Kronstadt 1921** and **Kronstadt 1917–1921** by Israel Getzler, which have been used to support Bolshevik conclusions when, in fact, they do the opposite. The misuse of these references is quite unbelievable and shows the mentality of Trotskyism well.

Pierre Frank argues that Paul Avrigh’s work has “conclusions” which are “*similar to Trotsky’s*” and “*confirms the changes in the composition of the Kronstadt garrison that took place during the civil war, although with a few reservations.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 25] A quick look at these reservations shows how false Frank is. It is worth quoting Avrigh at length to show this:

*“There can be little doubt that during the Civil War years a large turnover had indeed taken place within the Baltic Fleet, and that many of the old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural districts who brought with them the deeply felt discontent of the Russian peasantry. By 1921, according to official figures, more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin, a substantially higher proportion than in 1917 . . . Yet this does not necessarily mean that the behavioural patterns of the fleet had undergone any fundamental change. On the contrary, alongside the technical ratings, who were largely drawn from the working class, there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors . . . Indeed, in 1905 and 1917 it was these very youths from the countryside who had given Kronstadt its reputation as a hotbed of revolutionary extremism. And throughout the Civil War the Kronstadters had remained an independent and headstrong lot, difficult to control and far from constant in their support for the government. It was for this reason so many of them . . . had found themselves transferred to new posts remote from the centres of Bolshevik powers. Of those who remained, many hankered for the freedoms they had won in 1917 before the new regime began to establish its one-party dictatorship throughout the country.*”

*“Actually, there was little to distinguish the old-timers from the recent recruits in their midst. Both groups were largely of peasant background . . . Not unexpectedly, when the rebellion finally erupted, it was the older seamen, veterans of many years of service (dating in some cases before the First World War) who took the lead . . . Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants of the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising . . . The proximity of Petrograd, moreover, with its intense intellectual and political life, had contributed towards sharpening their political awareness, and a good many had engaged in revolutionary activity during 1917 and after . . .*

*“As late as the autumn of 1920, Emma Goldman recalled, the sailors were still held up by the Communists themselves as a glowing example of valour and unflinching courage; on November 7, the third anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power, they were in the front ranks of the celebrations . . . No one at the time spoke of any ‘class degeneration’ at Kronstadt. The allegation that politically retarded **muzhiks** had diluted the revolutionary character of the fleet, it would seem, was largely a device to explain away dissident movements among the sailors, and had been used as such as early as October 1918, following the abortive mutiny at the Petrograd naval station, when the social composition of the fleet could not yet have undergone any sweeping transformation.”*  
[Kronstadt 1921, pp. 89–92]

As can be seen, Avrich’s “reservations” are such as to make clear he does **not** share Trotsky’s “conclusions” as regards the class make-up of Kronstadt and, indeed, noted the ideological bias in this “explanation.”

Moreover, Avrich points to earlier revolts which the Bolsheviks had also explained in terms of a diluting of the revolutionary sailors of the Baltic Fleet by peasants. In April 1918 “the crews of several Baltic vessels passed a strongly worded resolution” which “went so far as to call for a general uprising to dislodge the Bolsheviks and install a new regime that would adhere more faithfully to the principles of the revolution.” In October that year, “a mass meeting at the Petrograd naval base adopted a resolution” which included the sailors going “on record against the Bolshevik monopoly of political power. Condemning the suppression of the anarchists and opposition socialists, they called for free elections to the soviets . . . [and] denounced the compulsory seizure of gain.” Their demands, as Avrich notes, “strikingly anticipated the Kronstadt programme of 1921, down to the slogans of ‘free soviets’ and ‘Away with the commissarocracy.’” He stresses that a “glance at the behaviour of the Baltic Fleet from 1905 to 1921 reveals many elements of continuity.”  
[Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 63–4]

However, a worse example of Trotskyist betrayal of the truth is provided by the British SWP's John Rees. The evidence Rees musters for the claim that the "composition" of the Kronstadt sailors "had changed" between 1917 and 1921 is a useful indication of the general Leninist method when it comes to the Russian revolution. Rees argues as follows:

*"In September and October 1920 the writer and the Bolshevik party lecturer Ieronymus Yasinsky went to Kronstadt to lecture 400 naval recruits. They were 'straight from the plough'. And he was shocked to find that many, 'including a few party members, were politically illiterate, worlds removed from the highly politicised veteran Kronstadt sailors who had deeply impressed him'. Yasinsky worried that those steeled in the revolutionary fire' would be replaced by 'inexperienced freshly mobilised young sailors'." [Op. Cit., p. 61]*

This quote is referenced to Israel Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917–1921**. Rees account is a fair version of the first half of Yasinsky's report. The quote however continues exactly as reproduced below:

*"Yasinsky was apprehensive about the future when, 'sooner or later, Kronstadt's veteran sailors, who were steeled in revolutionary fire and had acquired a clear revolutionary world-view would be replaced by inexperienced, freshly mobilised young sailors'. Still he comforted himself with the hope that Kronstadt's sailors would gradually infuse them with their 'noble spirit of revolutionary self-dedication' to which Soviet Russia owed so much. As for the present he felt reassured that 'in Kronstadt the red sailor still predominates.'" [Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 207]*

Rees handy 'editing' of this quote transforms it from one showing that three months before the rising that Kronstadt had retained its revolutionary spirit to one implying the garrison had indeed been replaced.

Rees tries to generate "[f]urther evidence of the changing class composition" by looking at the "social background of the Bolsheviks at the base." However, he goes on to contradict himself about the composition of the Bolshevik party at the time. On page 61 he says the "same figures for the Bolshevik party as a whole in 1921 are 28.7% peasants, 41% workers and 30.8% white collar and others". On page 66 however he says the figures at the end of the civil war (also 1921) were 10% factory workers, 25% army and 60% in "the government or party machine". An endnote says even of those classed as factory workers "most were in administration." [Op. Cit., p. 61 and p. 78] The first set of figures is more useful for attacking Kronstadt and so is used.

What is the basis of Rees “*further evidence*”? Simply that in “*September 1920, six months before the revolt, the Bolsheviks had 4,435 members at Kronstadt. Some 50 per cent of these were peasants, 40 percent workers and 10 percent intellectuals . . . Thus the percentage of peasants in the party was considerably higher than nationally . . . If we **assume** [our emphasis] that the Bolshevik party was more working class in composition than the base as a whole, then it seems **likely** [our emphasis] that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested.*” [Op. Cit., p. 61]

So on the basis of an assumption, it may be “*likely*” that Trotsky was correct! Impressive “*evidence*” indeed!

The figures Rees uses are extracted from D. Fedotoff-White’s **The Growth of the Red Army**. Significantly, Rees fails to mention that the Kronstadt communists had just undergone a “*re-registration*” which saw about a quarter of the 4,435 members in August 1920 voluntarily resigning. By March 1921, the party had half as many members as in the previous August and during the rebellion 497 members (again, about one-quarter of the total membership) voluntarily resigned, 211 were excluded after the defeat of the rebellion and 137 did not report for re-registration. [Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 140] It seems strange that the party leadership had not taken the opportunity to purge the Kronstadt party of “*excessive*” peasant influence in August 1920 when it had the chance.

Other questions arise from Rees’ argument. He uses the figures of Communist Party membership in an attempt to prove that the class composition of Kronstadt had changed, favouring the peasantry over the workers. Yet this is illogical. Kronstadt was primarily a military base and so its “*class composition*” would be skewed accordingly. Since the Bolshevik military machine was made up mostly of peasants, can we be surprised that the Communist Party in Kronstadt had a higher percentage of peasants than the national average? Significantly, Rees does not ponder the fact that the percentage of workers in the Kronstadt Communist Party was around the national average (indeed, Fedotoff-White notes that it “*compares favourably in that respect with some of the large industrial centres.*” [Op. Cit., p. 142]).

Also, given that Rees acknowledges that by December 1920 only 1,313 new recruits had arrived in the Baltic Fleet, his pondering of the composition of the Communist organisation at Kronstadt smacks more of desperation than serious analysis. By arguing that we “*do not know how many more new recruits arrived in the three months before Kronstadt erupted,*” Rees fails to see that this shows the irrelevance of his statistical analysis. [Op. Cit., p. 61] After all, how many of these “*new recruits*” would be allowed to join the Communist Party in the first place? Given that the Bolshevik membership had halved between August 1920

and March 1921, his analysis is simply pointless, a smokescreen to draw attention away from the weakness of his own case.

Moreover, as evidence of **changing** class composition these figures are not very useful. This is because they do not compare the composition of the Kronstadt Bolsheviks in 1917 to those in 1921. Given that the Kronstadt base always had a high percentage of peasants in its ranks, it follows that in 1917 the percentage of Bolsheviks of peasant origin could have been higher than normal as well. If this was the case, then Rees argument falls. Simply put, he is not comparing the appropriate figures.

It would have been very easy for Rees to inform his readers of the real facts concerning the changing composition of the Kronstadt garrison. He could quoted Getzler's work on this subject. As noted above, Getzler demonstrates that the crew of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol*, which formed the core of the rising, were recruited into the navy before 1917, only 6.9% having been recruited between 1918 and 1921. These figures are on the same page as the earlier quotes Rees uses but are ignored by him. Unbelievably Rees even states "[w]e do not know how many new recruits arrived in the three months before Kronstadt erupted" in spite of quoting a source which indicates the composition of the two battleships which started the revolt! [Op. Cit., p. 61]

Or, then again, he could have reported Samuel Farber's summary of Getzler's (and others) evidence. Rees rather lamely notes that Farber "does not look at the figures for the composition of the Bolsheviks" [Op. Cit., p. 62] Why should he when he has the appropriate figures for the sailors? Here is Farber's account of the facts:

*"this [Trotsky's class composition] interpretation has failed to meet the historical test of the growing and relatively recent scholarship on the Russian Revolution . . . In fact, in 1921, a smaller proportion of Kronstadt sailors were of peasant social origin than was the case of the Red Army troops supporting the government . . . recently published data strongly suggest that the class composition of the ships and naval base had probably remained unchanged since before the Civil War. We now know that, given the war-time difficulties of training new people in the technical skills required in Russia's ultra-modern battleships, very few replacements had been sent to Kronstadt to take the place of the dead and injured sailors. Thus, at the end of the Civil War in late 1920, no less than 93.9 per cent of the members of the crews of the <em>Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol . . . were recruited into the navy before and during the 1917 revolutions. In fact, 59 per cent of these crews joined the navy in the years 1914-16, while only 6.8 per cent had been recruited in the years 1918-21 . . . of the approximately 10,000 recruits who were supposed to be*

trained to replenish the Kronstadt garrison, only a few more than 1,000 had arrived by the end of 1920, and those had been stationed not in Kronstadt, but in Petrograd, where they were supposed to be trained.” [Before Stalinism, pp. 192–3]

And Rees bemoans Farber for not looking at the Bolshevik membership figures! Yes, assumptions and “*likely*” conclusions drawn from assumptions are more important than hard statistical evidence!

After stating “*if, for the sake of argument, we accept Sam Farber’s interpretation of the evidence*” (evidence Rees refuses to inform the reader of) Rees then tries to save his case. He states Farber’s “*point only has any validity if we take the statistics in isolation. But in reality this change [!] in composition acted on a fleet whose ties with the peasantry had recently been strengthened in other ways. In particular, the Kronstadt sailors had recently been granted leave for the first time since the civil war. Many returned to their villages and came face to face with the condition of the countryside and the trials of the peasantry faced with food detachments.*” [Op. Cit., p. 62]

Of course, such an argument has **nothing to do with Rees original case**. Let us not forget that he argued that the class composition of the garrison had changed, **not** that its **political** composition had changed. Faced with overwhelming evidence against his case, he not only does not inform his readers of it, he changes his original argument! Very impressive.

So, what of this argument? Hardly an impressive one. Let us not forget that the revolt came about in response to the wave of strikes in Petrograd, **not** a peasant revolt. Moreover, the demands of the revolt predominantly reflected workers demands, **not** peasant ones (Rees himself acknowledges that the Kronstadt demands were not reproduced by any other “peasant” insurrection). The political aspects of these ideas reflected the political traditions of Kronstadt, which were not, in the main, Bolshevik. The sailors supported soviet power in 1917, not party power, and they again raised that demand in 1921 (see section 9 for details). In other words, the **political** composition of the garrison was the same as in 1917. Rees is clearly clutching at straws.

The fact that the class composition of the sailors was similar in 1917 and in 1921 **and** that the bulk of the sailors at the heart of the revolt were veterans of 1917, means that Trotskyists can only fall back on their ideological definition of class. This perspective involves defining a specific “proletarian” political position (i.e. the politics of Bolshevism) and arguing that anyone who does not subscribe to that position is “petty-bourgeois” regardless of their actual position in society (i.e. their class position). As Ida Mett notes:

*“When Trotsky asserts that all those supporting the government were genuinely proletarian and progressive, whereas all others represented the peasant counterrevolution, we have a right to ask of him that he present us with a serious factual analysis in support of his contention.”* [Op. Cit., pp. 75–6]

As we show in the next section, the political composition of the Kronstadt rebels, like their class composition, was basically unchanged in 1921 when compared to that which pre-dominated in 1917.

## 9 Was Kronstadt different politically?

As we proved in the last section, the Kronstadt garrison had not fundamentally changed by 1921. On the two battleships which were the catalyst for the rebellion, over 90% of the sailors for whom years of enlistment are known had been there since 1917. However, given that most Leninists mean “support the party” by the term “class politics,” it is useful to compare the political perspectives of Kronstadt in 1917 to that expressed in the 1921 revolt. As will soon become clear, the political ideas expressed in 1921 were essentially similar to those in 1917. This similarity also proves the continuity between the Red sailors of 1917 and the rebels of 1921.

Firstly, we must point out that Kronstadt in 1917 was **never** dominated by the Bolsheviks. At Kronstadt, the Bolsheviks were always a minority and a “*radical populist coalition of Maximalists and Left SRs held sway, albeit precariously, within Kronstadt and its Soviet*” (“*externally Kronstadt was a loyal stronghold of the Bolshevik regime*”). [I. Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 179] In 1917 Trotsky even stated that the Kronstadters “*are anarchists*.” [quoted by Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 98] Kronstadt was in favour of soviet power and, unsurprisingly, supported those parties which claimed to support that goal.

Politically, the climate in Kronstadt was “*very close to the politics of the Socialist Revolutionary Maximalists, a left-wing split-off from the SR Party, politically located somewhere between the Left SRs and the Anarchists*.” [Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 194] In Kronstadt this group was led by Anatolii Lamanov and according to Getzler, “*it rejected party factionalism*” and “*stood for pure sovietism*”. They sought an immediate agrarian and urban social revolution, calling for the “*socialisation of power, of the land and of the factories*” to be organised by a federation of soviets based on direct elections and instant recall, as a first step towards socialism. [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 135] The similarities with anarchism are clear.

During the October revolution, the Bolsheviks did not prevail in the Kronstadt soviet. Instead, the majority was made up of SR Maximalists and Left SRs. Kronstadt’s delegates to the third Congress of Soviets were an Left-SR (157 votes), a



SR-Maximalist (147 votes) and a Bolshevik (109 votes). It was only in the January elections in 1918 that the Bolsheviks improved their position, gaining 139 deputies compared to their previous 96. In spite of gaining their highest ever vote during the era of multi-party soviets the Bolsheviks only gained 46 percent of seats in the soviet. Also elected at this time were 64 SRs (21 percent), 56 Maximalists (19 percent), 21 non-party delegates (7 percent), 15 Anarchists (5 percent) and 6 Mensheviks (2 percent). The soviet elected a Left SR as its chairman and in March it elected its three delegates to the Fourth Congress of Soviets, with the Bolshevik delegate receiving the lowest vote (behind a Maximalist and an anarchist with 124, 95 and 79 votes respectively). [I. Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 182–4]

By the April 1918 elections, as in most of Russia, the Bolsheviks found their support had decreased. Only 53 Bolsheviks were elected (29 per cent) as compared to 41 SR Maximalists (22 percent), 39 Left SRs (21 percent), 14 Menshevik Internationalists (8 percent), 10 Anarchists (5 percent) and 24 non-party delegates (13 percent). Indeed, Bolshevik influence at Kronstadt was so weak that on April 18<sup>th</sup>, the Kronstadt soviet denounced the Bolsheviks attack against the anarchists in Moscow, April 12<sup>th</sup> by a vote of 81 to 57. The “*Bolshevisation*” of Kronstadt “*and the destruction of its multi-party democracy was not due to internal developments and local Bolshevik strength, but decreed from outside and imposed by force.*” [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186]

Thus the dominant political perspective in 1917 was one of “*sovietism*” — namely, all power to the soviets and not to parties. This was the main demand of the 1921 uprising. Politically, Kronstadt had not changed.

In addition to the soviet, there was the “*general meetings in Anchor square, which were held nearly every day.*” [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57] The Kronstadt Soviet was itself constantly pressurised by mass meetings, generally held in Anchor Square. For example, on 25 May 1917, a large crowd, inspired by Bolshevik and anarchist speakers, marched to the Naval Assembly and forced the leaders of the Soviet to rescind their agreement with the more moderate Petrograd Soviet. In February 1921, the Kronstadt rebels met in Anchor square to pass the *Petropavlovsk* resolution — just as happened before in 1917. And as in 1917, they elected a “*conference of delegates*” to manage the affairs of the Kronstadt. In other words, the sailors re-introduced exactly the same political forms they practised in 1917.

These facts suggest that any claims that the majority of sailors, soldiers and workers in Kronstadt had changed ideas politically are unfounded. This, ironically enough, is confirmed by Trotsky.

Trotsky’s memory (which, after all, seems to be the basis of most of his and his followers arguments) does play tricks on him. He states that there “*were no Mensheviks at all in Kronstadt.*” As for the anarchists, “*most*” of them “*represented the city petty bourgeoisie and stood at a lower level than the SRs.*” The Left SRs

*“based themselves on the peasant part of the fleet and of the shore garrison.” All in all, “in the days of the October insurrection the Bolsheviki constituted less than one-half of the Kronstadt soviet. The majority consisted of SRs and anarchists.” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 86]*

So we have Trotsky arguing that the majority of the *“pride and glory”* of the revolution in 1917 voted for groups of a *“lower level”* than the Bolsheviki (and for a party, the Mensheviks, Trotsky said did not exist there!).

Looking at the politics of these groups, we discover some strange inconsistencies which undermine the validity of Trotsky’s claims.

For example, in the beginning of 1918, *“the working population of Kronstadt, after debating the subject at many meetings, decided to proceed to socialise dwelling places. . . . A final monster meeting definitely instructed several members of the Soviet — Left Social-Revolutionaries and Anarcho-Syndicalists — to raise the question at the next [soviet] plenary session.”* While the Bolshevik delegates tried to postpone the decision (arguing in the soviet that the decision was too important and should be decided by the central government) the *“Left Social-Revolutionaries, Maximalists and Anarcho-Syndicalists asked for an immediate discussion and carried the vote.”* [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 460–1]

This fits in exactly with the communist-anarchist programme of socialisation but it is hardly an expression of representatives of *“the city petty bourgeoisie.”*

Let us quote a *“representative”* of the *“city petty bourgeoisie”*:

*“I am an anarchist because contemporary society is divided into two opposing classes: the impoverished and dispossessed workers and peasants . . . and the rich men, kings and presidents . . .*

*“I am an anarchist because I scorn and detest all authority, since all authority is founded on injustice, exploitation and compulsion over the human personality. Authority dehumanises the individual and makes him a slave.*

*“I am an opponent of private property when it is held by individual capitalist parasites, for private property is theft. . .*

*“I am an anarchist because I believe only in the creative powers and independence of a united proletariat and not of the leaders of political parties of various kinds.*

*“I am an anarchist because I believe that the present struggle between the classes will end only when the toiling masses, organised as a class, gain their true interests and conquer, by means of a violent social revolution, all the riches of the earth . . . having abolished all institutions of government and authority, the oppressed class must proclaim a society of free producers . . . The popular masses themselves will conduct their affairs on equal and communal lines in*

*free communities.*” [N. Petrov, cited by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 35–6]

Very “petty bourgeois”! Of course Trotsky could argue that this represented the minority of “*real revolutionaries*,” the “*elements most closely linked to the Bolsheviks*” among the anarchists, but such an analysis cannot be taken seriously considering the influence of the anarchists in Kronstadt. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 86] For example, a member of the Petrograd Committee and the Helsingfors party organisation in 1917 recalled that the Anarchist-Communists had great influence in Kronstadt. Moreover, according to historian Alexander Rabinowitch, they had an “*undeniable capacity to influence the course of events*” and he speaks of “*the influential Anarcho-Syndicalist Communists [of Kronstadt] under Iarchuk.*” Indeed, anarchists “*played a significant role in starting the July uprising*” in 1917. [**Prelude to Revolution**, p. 62, p. 63, p. 187 and p. 138] This confirms Paul Avrich’s comments that the “*influence of the anarchists . . . had always been strong within the fleet*” and “*the spirit of anarchism*” had been “*powerful in Kronstadt in 1917*” (and “*had by no means dissipated*” in 1921). [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 168 and p. 169]

A similar analysis of the Maximalists would produce the same results for Trotsky’s claims. Paul Avrich provides a useful summary of their politics. He notes the Maximalists occupied “*a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR’s and the anarchists while sharing elements of both.*” They “*preached a doctrine of total revolution*” and called for a “*‘toilers’ soviet republic’ founded on freely elected soviets, with a minimum of central state authority. Politically, this was identical with the objective of the Kronstadters [in 1921], and ‘Power to the soviets but not the parties’ had originally been a Maximalist rallying-cry.*” [**Op. Cit.**, p. 171]

Economically, the parallels “*are no less striking.*” They denounced grain requisitioning and demanded that “*all the land be turned over to the peasants.*” For industry they rejected the Bolshevik theory and practice of “*workers’ control*” over bourgeois administrators in favour of the “*social organisation of production and its systematic direction by representatives of the toiling people.*” Opposed to nationalisation and centralised state management in favour of socialisation and workers’ self-management of production. Little wonder he states that the “*political group closest to the rebels in temperament and outlook were the SR Maximalists.*” [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 171–2]

Indeed, “[o]n nearly every important point the Kronstadt program, as set forth in the rebel ***Izvestiia***, coincided with that of the Maximalists.” [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 171] This can be quickly seen from reading both the ***Petropavlovsk*** resolution and the Kronstadt newspaper ***Izvestiia*** (see **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, pp. 183–204). The political continuity is striking between 1917 and 1921.

As can be seen, the Maximalists were in advance of the Bolsheviks too. They argued for soviet power, not party power, as well as workers' self-management to replace the state capitalism of the Bolsheviks.

Clearly, the political outlook of the Kronstadt rebels had not changed dramatically. Heavily influenced by anarchist and semi-anarchists in 1917, in 1921 the same political ideas came to the fore again once the sailors, soldiers and civilians had freed themselves from Bolshevik dictatorship and created the "conference of delegates."

According to the logic of Trotsky's argument, the Kronstadt sailors were revolutionary simply because of the actions of the Bolshevik minority, as a "revolution is 'made' directly by a **minority**. The success of a revolution is possible, however, only where this minority finds more or less support . . . on the part of the majority. The shift in different stages of the revolution . . . is directly determined by changing political relations between the minority and the majority, between the vanguard and the class." It is this reason that necessitates "the dictatorship of the proletariat" as the level of the masses cannot be "equal" and of "extremely high development." Trotsky argued that the "political composition of the Kronstadt Soviet reflected the composition of the garrison and the crews." [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 85, p. 92 and p. 86]

In other words, with the vanguard (the minority of Bolsheviks) gone, the majority of the Kronstadters fell back to their less developed ways. So, if the political composition of the revolt reflected the composition of the crews, then Trotsky's argument suggests that this composition was remarkably unchanged! It also suggests that this "composition" had changed in the early months of 1918 as the Bolsheviks saw their vote nearly half between late January and April 1918!

Similarly, we find John Rees, in contradiction to his main argument, mentioning that the "ideology of the Kronstadt garrison was one factor" in the revolt because "in its heroic days the garrison had an ultra-left air." [Rees, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62] If, as he maintains, the sailors were new, how could they have had time to be influenced by this ideology, the ideology of sailors he claims were not there? And if the new recruits he claims were there had been influenced by the sailors of 1917 then it is hard to maintain that the revolt was alien to the spirit of 1917.

This can also be seen from Rees' comment that while we did not know the composition of the sailors, we did "know about the composition of some of the other units based at Kronstadt, like the 2,500 Ukrainians of the 160<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment, recruited from areas particularly friendly to the Makhno guerrillas and with less than 2 percent of Bolsheviks in its ranks." [Op. Cit., p. 61] In other words, we know the origin of one other unit at Kronstadt, not the class "composition" of "some of the other units" there. However, Rees does not see how this fact undermines his argument. Firstly, Rees does not think it important to note that Communists

numbered less than 2 per cent of metal-workers in Petrograd and only 4 per cent of 2,200 employed in metal works in Moscow. [D. Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 132] As such the low figure for Communists in the 160<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment does not tell us much about its class composition. Secondly, as Fedotoff-White (the source of Rees' information) notes, while "*the soldiers were also disaffected and had no love of the Communists and the commissars,*" they were "*unable to formulate their grievances clearly and delineate the issues at stake . . . They did not have it in them to formulate a plan of action. All that was done at Kronstadt was the work of the bluejackets [the sailors], who were the backbone of the movement.*" [Op. Cit., p. 154]

If, as Rees argues, that "new recruits" explain the uprising, then how can we explain the differences between the army and navy? We cannot. The difference can be explained only in terms of what Rees is at pains to deny, namely the existence and influence of sailors who had been there since 1917. As Fedotoff-White speculates, "*the younger element among the seamen*" would "*easily [fall] under the spell of the . . . older men they served with on board ships*" and of the "*large number of old-ex-sea men, employed in the industrial enterprises of Kronstadt.*" He notes that "*a good many*" of the rebels "*had had ample experience in organisational and political work since 1917. A number had long-standing associations with Anarchists and the Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left.*" Thus the "*survival of the libertarian pattern of 1917 . . . made it possible for the bluejackets not only to formulate, but carry out a plan of action, no doubt under a certain amount of influence of the Anarchists, and those who had left the party in such great numbers during the September 1920 re-registration.*" [Op. Cit., p. 155] The political continuity of the Kronstadt rebellion is clear from the way the revolt developed and who took a leading role in it.

All of which raises an interesting question. If revolutions are made by a minority who gain the support of the majority, what happens when the majority reject the vanguard? As we indicate in sections 13 and 15, Trotsky was not shy in providing the answer — party dictatorship. In this he just followed the logic of Lenin's arguments. In 1905, Lenin argued (and using Engels as an authority) "*the principle, 'only from below' is an anarchist principle.*" For Lenin, Marxists must be in favour of "*From above as well as from below*" and "*renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism.*" According to Lenin, "*[p]ressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 192, p. 196 and pp. 189–90]

As Kronstadt shows, "*pressure from above*" has a slight advantage over "*pressure from below*" as it has the full power of the state apparatus to use against the citizens. In other words, the seeds for Bolshevik dictatorship and the repression

of Kronstadt lie in Trotsky's argument and arguments like it (see section 15 for further details).

Simply put, the evidence shows that the political ideas dominant in Kronstadt, like the bulk of the personnel themselves, had not changed (indeed, it is these politics which visibly show the statistical evidence we present in the last section). The revolt of 1921 reflected the politics and aspirations of those active in 1917. It were these politics which had made Kronstadt the "*pride and glory*" of the revolution in 1917 and, four years later, made it so dangerous to the Bolsheviks.

## 10 Why did the Petrograd workers not support Kronstadt?

For Trotskyists, the inaction of the Petrograd workers during the revolt is a significant factor in showing its "*backward peasant*" character. Trotsky, for example, argued that from "*the class point of view*" it is "*extremely important to contrast the behaviour of Kronstadt to that of Petrograd in those critical days.*" He argues that the "*uprising did not attract the Petrograd workers. It repelled them. The stratification proceeded along class lines. The workers immediately felt that the Kronstadt mutineers stood on the opposite side of the barricades — and they supported the Soviet power. The political isolation of Kronstadt was the cause of its internal uncertainty and its military defeat.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 90–1]

Firstly, it should be noted that Trotsky's claims in 1937 are at odds with his opinion during the crisis. In a cable dated March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921, to a member of the Council of Labour and Defence Trotsky insisted that "*only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd.*" [quoted by Israel Getzler, "*The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24–44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 32] Thus, in 1921, Trotsky was well aware of the links between the Kronstadt revolt and the Petrograd strikes, seeing the destruction of the former as a means to defeating the latter. Simply put, the crushing of Kronstadt would give the rebel workers in Petrograd a clear message of what to expect if they persisted in their protests.

Secondly, needless to say, Trotsky's later arguments leave a lot to be desired. For example, he fails to note (to use Victor Serge's words — see section 5) that the state and Communist Press "*was positively berserk with lies.*" The press and radio campaign directed against Kronstadt stated that the revolt had been organised by foreign spies and was led by ex-Tsarist generals.

On 5<sup>th</sup> March the Petrograd Defence Committee put out a call to the insurgents, inviting them to surrender. It stated:

*“You are being told fairy tales when they tell you that Petrograd is with you or that the Ukraine supports you. These are impertinent lies. The last sailor in Petrograd abandoned you when he learned that you were led by generals like Kozlovskv. Siberia and the Ukraine support the Soviet power. Red Petrograd laughs at the miserable efforts of a handful of White Guards and Socialist Revolutionaries.”* [cited by Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 50]

These lies would, of course, alienate many workers in Petrograd. Two hundred emissaries were sent from Kronstadt to distribute their demands but only a few avoided capture. The Party had brought the full weight of its propaganda machine to bear, lying about the revolt and those taking part in it. The government also placed a “careful watch” on the “trains from Petrograd to mainland points in the direction of Kronstadt to prevent any contact with the insurgents.” [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140 and p. 141]

Unsurprising, in such circumstances many workers, soldiers and sailors would have been loath to support Kronstadt. Isolated from the revolt, the Petrograd workers had to rely on official propaganda (i.e. lies) and rumours to base any judgement on what was happening there. However, while this is a factor in the lack of active support, it is by no means the key one. This factor, of course, was state repression. Emma Goldman indicates the situation in Petrograd at the time:

*“An exceptional state of martial law was imposed throughout the entire province of Petrograd, and no one except officials with special passes could leave the city now. The Bolshevik press launched a campaign of calumny and venom against Kronstadt, announcing that the sailors and soldiers had made common cause with the ‘tsarist General Kozlovsky;’ they were thereby declaring the Kronstadters outlaws.”* [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, p. 171]

Given what everyone knew what happened to people outlawed by the Bolsheviks, is it surprising that many workers in Petrograd (even if they knew they were being lied to) did not act? Moreover, the threat made against Kronstadt could be seen on the streets of Petrograd:

*“On March 3 [the day after the revolt] the Petrograd Defence Committee, now vested with absolute power throughout the entire province, took stern measures to prevent any further disturbances. The city became a vast garrison, with troops patrolling in every quarter. Notices posted on the walls reminded the citizenry*

*that all gatherings would be dispersed and those who resisted shot on the spot. During the day the streets were nearly deserted, and, with the curfew now set at 9 p.m., night life ceased altogether.*” [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 142]

Berkman, an eyewitness to the repression, states that:

*“The Petrograd committee of defence, directed by Zinoviev, its chairman, assumed full control of the city and Province of Petrograd. The whole Northern District was put under martial law and all meetings prohibited. Extraordinary precautions were taken to protect the Government institutions and machine guns were placed in the Astoria, the hotel occupied by Zinoviev and other high Bolshevik functionaries. The proclamations posted on the street bulletin boards ordered the immediate return of all strikers to the factories, prohibited suspension of work, and warned the people against congregating on the streets. ‘In such cases’, the order read, ‘the soldiery will resort to arms. In case of resistance, shooting on the spot.’*

*“The committee of defence took up the systematic ‘cleaning of the city.’ Numerous workers, soldiers and sailors suspected of sympathising with Kronstadt, placed under arrest. All Petrograd sailors and several Army regiments thought to be ‘politically untrustworthy’ were ordered to distant points, while the families of Kronstadt sailors living in Petrograd were taken into custody as **hostages.**”* [The Russian Tragedy, p. 71]

However, part of the Petrograd proletariat continued to strike during the Kronstadt events. Strikes were continuing in the biggest factories of Petrograd: Poutilov, Baltisky, Oboukhov, Nievskaia Manoufactura, etc. However, the Bolsheviks acted quickly shut down some of the factories and started the re-registration of the workers. For workers to be locked out of a factory meant to be “*automatically deprived of their rations.*” [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41]

At the “Arsenal” factory, “*the workers organised a mass meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> March, (the day the bombardment of Kronstadt began). This meeting adopted a resolution of the mutinous sailors! It elected a commission which was to go from factory to factory, agitating for a general strike.*” [Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 52] The Cheka confirms this event, reporting to Zinoviev on March 8<sup>th</sup> that “[a]t a rally of workers of the Arsenal Plant a resolution was passed to join the Kronstadt uprising. The general meeting had elected a delegation to maintain contact with Kronstadt.” This delegation had already been arrested. This was a common practice and during this period the Cheka concentrated its efforts on the leaders and on disrupting communication: all delegates to other workplaces, all Mensheviks and SRs who could be found, all speakers at rallies were being arrested day after day. On the day the Bolsheviks



attacked Kronstadt (March 7<sup>th</sup>) the Cheka reported that it was launching “*decisive actions against the workers.*” [quoted by Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 396]

These “*decisive actions*” involved a “*massive purge of Petrograd factories and plants.*” The Communists “*suppressed the workers’ uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March.*” Unlike the Kronstadt sailors, the workers did not have weapons and “*were essentially defenceless vis-a-vis the Cheka.*” [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 396]

The state of siege was finally lifted on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, five days after the crushing of Kronstadt.

In these circumstances, is it surprising that the Petrograd workers did not join in the rebellion?

Moreover, the Petrograd workers had just experienced the might of the Bolshevik state. As we noted in section 2, the events in Kronstadt were in solidarity with the strike wave in Petrograd at the end of February. Then the Bolsheviks had repressed the workers with “*arrests, the use of armed patrols in the streets and in the factories, and the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force.*” [Mary McAuley, **Op. Cit.**, p. 409]

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev “*proclaimed martial law*” on February 24<sup>th</sup> (this was later “*vested with absolute power throughout the entire province*” on March 3<sup>rd</sup>). [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39 and p. 142] As part of this process, they had to rely on the *kursanty* (Communist officer cadets) as the local garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government’s orders. Hundreds of *kursanty* were called in from neighbouring military academies to patrol the city. “*Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked . . . the curfew [was] strictly enforced.*” The Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 46–7]

As can be seen, Trotsky is insulting the intelligence of his readers by arguing that the lack of support in Petrograd for Kronstadt reflected “*class lines.*” Indeed, by failing to mention (to use Emma Goldman’s words) “*the campaign of slander, lies and calumny against the sailors*” conducted by the Soviet Press (which “*fairly oozed poison against the sailors*”) or that “*Petrograd was put under martial law*” Trotsky, quite clearly, “*deliberately falsifies the facts.*” [**Trotsky Protests Too Much**]

Ida Mett states the obvious:

*“Here again Trotsky is saying things which are quite untrue. Earlier on we showed how the wave of strikes had started in Petrograd and how Kronstadt had followed suit. It was against the strikers of Petrograd that the Government had to organise a special General Staff: the Committee of Defence. The repression was*

*first directed against the Petrograd workers and against their demonstrations, by the despatch of armed detachments of Koursantys.*

*“But the workers of Petrograd had no weapons. They could not defend themselves as could the Kronstadt sailors. The military repression directed against Kronstadt certainly intimidated the Petrograd workers. The demarcation did not take place ‘along class lines’ but according to the respective strengths of the organs of repression. The fact that the workers of Petrograd did not follow those of Kronstadt does not prove that they did not sympathise with them. Nor, at a later date, when the Russian proletariat failed to follow the various ‘oppositions’ did this prove that they were in agreement with Stalin! In such instances it was a question of the respective strengths of the forces confronting one another.”* [Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73]

So, unlike the Kronstadt sailors, the Petrograd workers did not have arms and so could not take part in an “armed revolt” against the well armed Red Army unless part of that force sided with the strikers. The Communist leaders recognised this danger, with untrustworthy troops being confined to their barracks and in place of regular troops they had shipped in *kursanty* (they had obviously learned the lessons of the 1917 February revolution!). Ultimately, the city was “*appeased by concessions and cowed by the presence of troops.*” [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 200]

Not that this was the first time Trotsky confused force with class. In his infamous work **Terrorism and Communism** he defended the fact of Communist Party dictatorship (i.e. “*of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party*”). He argued that “*it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party*” and that there is “*no substitution at all*” when the “*power of the party*” replaces that of the working class. The rule of the party “*has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour.*” [Terrorism and Communism, p. 109] He continued by arguing:

*“But where is your guarantee, certain wise men ask us, that it is just your party that expresses the interests of historical development? Destroying or driving underground the other parties, you have thereby prevented their political competition with you, and consequently you have deprived yourselves of the possibility of testing your line of action.*

*“This idea is dictated by a purely liberal conception of the course of the revolution. In a period in which all antagonisms assume an open character, and the political struggle swiftly passes into a civil war, the ruling party has sufficient material*

*standard by which to test its line of action, without the possible circulation of Menshevik papers. Noske crushes the Communists, but they grow. We have suppressed the Mensheviks and the S.R.s-and they have disappeared. This criterion is sufficient for us.* [Op. Cit., pp. 109–10]

An interesting criterion, to say the least. The faulty logic he displayed with regards to Petrograd and Kronstadt had a long history. By this logic Hitler expressed the “*interests of historical development*” when the German Communists and Trotskyists “*disappeared*” by leaps and bounds. Similarly, the Trotskyists in Russia “*disappeared*” under Stalin. Is this a Trotskyist justification of Stalinism? All it proves is the power of the repressive system — just as the “*passivity*” of the Petrograd workers during the Kronstadt revolt indicates the power of the Bolshevik regime rather than the class basis of the Kronstadt uprising.

On this theme, we can see the depths which Trotskyists go to re-write history from Pierre Frank’s “*Introduction*” to the work **Kronstadt**. He decides to quote Paul Avrigh’s work (after, of course, warning the reader that Avrigh “*is not a Bolshevik or a Trotskyist*” and his “*political features are blurred*”). Frank states that Avrigh “*done his work conscientiously, without skipping over the facts.*” It is a shame that the same cannot be said of Frank! Frank states that Avrigh “*discusses the strikes in Petrograd preceding Kronstadt and comes to the following conclusion*”:

*“For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*“For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime.”* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 24–35]

It is the “*moreover*” in the first paragraph that gives the game away. Avrigh lists a few more reasons than the one listed by Frank. Here is what Avrigh actually lists as the reasons for the end of the strike wave:

*“after several days of tense excitement, the Petrograd disturbances petered out . . . The concessions had done their work, for more than anything else it was cold and hunger which had stimulated popular disaffection. Yet there is no denying that the application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities had been indispensable in restoring order. Particularly impressive in this regard was the discipline shown by the local party organisation. Setting aside their internal disputes,*

*the Petrograd Bolsheviks swiftly closed ranks and proceeded to carry out the unpleasant task of repression with efficiency and dispatch . . .*

*“Then, too, the collapse of the movement would not have come so soon but for the utter demoralisation of Petrograd’s inhabitants. The workers were simply too exhausted to keep up any sustained political activity . . . What is more, they lacked effective leadership and a coherent program of action. In the past these had been supplied by the radical intelligentsia . . . [but they] were themselves in no condition to lend the workers any meaningful support, let alone active guidance . . . they now felt too weary and terrorised . . . to raise their voices in opposition. With most of their comrades in prison or exile, and some already executed, few of the survivors were willing to risk the same fate, especially when the odds against them were so overwhelming and when the slightest protest might deprive their families of their rations. For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*“For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime.” [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt**, pp. 49–51]*

As can be seen, Frank “skips over” most of Avrich’s argument and the basis of his conclusion. Indeed, what Frank calls Avrich’s “conclusion” cannot be understood by providing, as Frank does, the **last** reason Avrich gives for it.

*The dishonesty is clear, if not unexpected nor an isolated case. John Rees, to use another example, states that the revolt was <em>“preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.” [Rees, Op. Cit., p. 61] No mention that the strikes were “resolved” by force nor that the Kronstadt revolt was not only “preceded” by the strikes but was directly inspired by them, was in **solidarity with them** and raised many of the same demands!</em>*

Similarly, he argues that the Kronstadters’ “insistence that they were fighting for a ‘third revolution’, freedom of expression and for ‘soviets without parties’ [although, in fact, they **never** raised that slogan and so we have to wonder who Rees is quoting here] has convinced many historians that this revolt was fundamentally distinct from the White Rebellions.” But this, apparently, is not the case as “one must be careful to analyse the difference between the conscious aims of the rebels and the possible outcome of their actions. The Bolshevik regime still rested on the shattered remnants of the working class. The Kronstadt sailors’ appeals to the Petrograd workers had met with little or no response.” [Op. Cit., p. 63]

One has to wonder what planet Rees is on. After all, if the Bolsheviks **had** rested on the “*shattered remnants of the working class*” then they would **not** have had to turn Petrograd into an armed camp, repress the strikes, impose martial law and arrest militant workers. The Kronstadt sailors appeals “*met with little or no response*” due to the Bolshevik coercion exercised in those fateful days. To not mention the Bolshevik repression in Petrograd is to deliberately deceive the reader. That the Kronstadt demands would have met with strong response in Petrograd can be seen from the actions of the Bolsheviks (who did not rest upon the workers but rather arrested them). Given that the Kronstadt demands simply reflected those raised by the Petrograd strikers **themselves** we can safely say that Rees is talking nonsense (see section 4). Moreover, the sailors’ resolution **had** meet with strong support from the workers of Kronstadt. Thus Rees’ “class analysis” of the Kronstadt revolt is pathetic and has no bearing to the reality of the situation in Petrograd nor to the history of the revolt itself.

As can be seen, any attempt to use the relative inaction of the Petrograd workers as evidence of the class nature of the revolt has to do so by ignoring all the relevant facts of the situation. This can go so far as to selectively quote from academic accounts to present a radically false conclusion to that of the misused author’s.

## 11 Were the Whites a threat during the Kronstadt revolt?

The lack of foreign intervention during the Kronstadt revolt suggests more than just the fact that the revolt was not a “White conspiracy.” It also suggests that the White forces were in no position to take advantage of the rebellion or even support it.

This is significant simply because the Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that the revolt had to be repressed simply because the Soviet State was in danger of White and/or foreign intervention. How much danger was there? According to John Rees, a substantial amount:

*“The Whites, even though their armies had been beaten in the field, were still not finished — as the emigre response to the Kronstadt rising shows . . . They had predicted a rising at Kronstadt and the White National Centre abroad raised a total of nearly 1 million French Francs, 2 million Finnish marks, £5000, \$25,000 and 900 tons of flour in just two weeks; Indeed, the National Centre was already making plans for the forces of the French navy and those of General Wrangel,*

*who still commanded 70,000 men in Turkey, to land in Kronstadt if the revolt were to succeed.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 63–4]

To back up his argument, Rees references Paul Avrigh’s book. We, in turn, will consult that work to evaluate his argument.

Firstly, the Kronstadt revolt broke out months after the end of the Civil War in Western Russia. Wrangel had fled from the Crimea in November 1920. The Bolsheviks were so afraid of White invasion that by early 1921 they demobilised half the Red Army (some 2,500,000 men). [Paul Avrigh, Op. Cit., p. 13]

Secondly, the Russian emigres “*remained as divided and ineffectual as before, with no prospect of co-operation in sight.*” [Avrigh, Op. Cit., p. 219]

Thirdly, as far as Wrangel, the last of the White Generals, goes, his forces were in no state to re-invade Russia. His troops were “*dispersed and their moral sagging*” and it would have taken “*months . . . merely to mobilise his men and transport them from the Mediterranean to the Baltic.*” A second front in the south “*would have meant almost certain disaster.*” Indeed, in a call issued by the Petrograd Defence Committee on March 5<sup>th</sup>, they asked the rebels: “*Haven’t you heard what happened to Wrangel’s men, who are dying like flies, in their thousands of hunger and disease?*” The call goes on to add “[*t*]his is the fate that awaits you, unless you surrender within 24 hours.” [Avrigh, Op. Cit., p. 219, p. 146 and p. 105]

Clearly, the prospect of a White invasion was slim. This leaves the question of capitalist governments. Avrigh has this to say on this:

*“Apart from their own energetic fund-raising campaign, the emigres sought the assistance of the Entene powers. . . the United States government, loath to resume the interventionist policies of the Civil War, turned a deaf ear to all such appeals. The prospects of British aid were even dimmer . . . The best hope of foreign support came from France . . . the French refused to interfere either politically or militarily in the crisis.”* [Op. Cit., pp. 117–9]

The French government had also “*withdrew its recognition of Wrangel’s defunct government*” in November 1920 “*but continued to feed his troops on ‘humane grounds,’ meanwhile urging him to disband.*” [Op. Cit., p. 105]

Thus, the claim that foreign intervention was likely seems without basis. Indeed, the Communist radio was arguing that “the organisation of disturbances in Kronstadt have the sole purpose of influencing the new American President and changing his policy toward Russia. At the same time the London Conference is holding its sessions, and the spreading of similar rumours must influence also the Turkish delegation and make it more submissive to the demands of the Entente. The rebellion the *Petropavlovsk* crew is undoubtedly part of a great conspiracy

to create trouble within Soviet Russia and to injure our international position.” [quoted by Berkman, *The Russian Tragedy*, p. 71] Lenin himself argued on March 16<sup>th</sup> that “*the enemies*” around the Bolshevik state were “*no longer able to wage their war of intervention*” and so were launching a press campaign “*with the prime object of disrupting the negotiations for a trade agreement with Britain, and the forthcoming trade agreement with America.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 52] The demobilising of the Red Army seems to confirm this perspective.

Moreover, these governments had to take into account of its own working class. It was doubtful that they would, after years of war, been able to intervene, particularly if there was a clearly socialist revolt coming from below. Their own working class, in such a situation, would have prevented intervention by foreign capitalist states (a fact Lenin acknowledged in July 1921 [Lenin and Trotsky, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62]).

So in spite of massive social unrest and the revolt of a key fortress protecting Petrograd, the Western powers took no action. The Whites were disorganised and could only raise non-military supplies (none of which reached Kronstadt). Could this situation have changed if Kronstadt had spread to the mainland? It is doubtful simply because the Western governments, as Lenin argued, had to take into account the anti-interventionist position of their own working classes. The Whites had no military forces available (as the Bolsheviks themselves argued). Avrich notes it would have taken months for these forces to reach Kronstadt by which time soviet democracy would have been consolidated and ready to protect itself.

Even if we assume that Kronstadt had survived until the ice melted while Petrograd remained under Bolshevik dictatorship it, again, is doubtful that it would have been the basis for renewed White attacks. Neither Wrangel’s troops nor foreign government forces would have been welcomed by Red Kronstadt. While non-military aid would have been welcome (i.e. food supplies and so on), it is hard to believe that the Conference of Delegates would have allowed troops to arrive or pass them by to attack Petrograd. Simply put, the Kronstadters were fighting for soviet power and were well aware that others may try to support the revolt for their own, anti-revolutionary, reasons (see section 7).

So it seems that the possibility of foreign intervention was not a real threat at the time. The arguments of Lenin at the time, plus the demobilisation of the Red Army, points in that direction. Moreover, the total lack of response by Western governments during the revolt indicates that they were unlikely to take advantage of continuing unrest in Kronstadt, Petrograd and other towns and cities. Their working classes, sick of war and class consciousness enough to resist another intervention in Russia, would have been a factor in this apathetic response. Wrangel’s troops, as the Bolsheviks were aware, were not a threat.

The only real threat to Bolshevik power was internal — from the workers and peasants the Bolsheviks claimed to be representing. Many of the ex-soldiers swelled the ranks of peasant guerrilla forces, fighting the repressive (and counter-productive) food collection squads. In the Ukraine, the Bolsheviks were fighting the remnants of the Makhnovist army (a fight, incidentally, brought upon the Bolsheviks by themselves as they had betrayed the agreements made with the anarchist forces and attacked them once Wrangel had been defeated).

Thus the only potential danger facing the “soviet power” (i.e. Bolshevik power) was soviet democracy, a danger which had existed since the October revolution. As in 1918, when the Bolsheviks disbanded and repressed any soviet electorate which rejected their power, they met the danger of soviet democracy with violence. The Bolsheviks were convinced that their own dictatorship was equivalent to the revolution and that their power was identical to that of the working class. They considered themselves to be the embodiment of “soviet power” and it obviously did not bother them that the demand for free soviets can hardly be considered as actions against the power of the soviets.

In such circumstances, the Bolshevik government viewed the Kronstadt revolt **not** as socialists should but rather as a ruling class. It was suppressed for “reasons of state” and not to defend a revolutionary regime (which was, by this stage, revolutionary in name only). As Bakunin had argued decades before, the “workers’ state” would not remain controlled by the workers for long and would soon become a dictatorship **over** the proletariat by an elite which claimed to know the interests of the working class better than they did themselves (see section 15).

The only possible justification for maintaining the party dictatorship was the argument that soviet democracy would have lead to the defeat of the Communists at the polls (which would mean recognising it was a dictatorship **over** the proletariat and had been for some time). This would, it is argued, have resulted in (eventually) a return of the Whites and an anti-working class dictatorship that would have slaughtered the Russian workers and peasants en mass.

Such a position is self-serving and could have been used by Stalin to justify **his** regime. Unsurprisingly enough, the Hungarian Stalinists argued after crushing the 1956 revolution that *“the dictatorship of the proletariat, if overthrown, cannot be succeeded by any form of government other than fascist counter-revolution.”* [quoted by Andy Anderson, **Hungary ’56**, p. 101] And, of course, an even more anti-working class dictatorship than Lenin’s did appear which did slaughter the Russian workers and peasants en mass, namely Stalinism. No other option was possible, once party dictatorship was fully embraced in 1921 (repression against dissidents was **more** extreme after the end of the Civil War than during it). It is utopian in the extreme to believe that the good intentions of the dictators would have been enough to keep the regime within some kind of limits. Thus this



argument is flawed as it seriously suggests that dictatorship and bureaucracy can reform itself (we discuss this in more detail in section 13).

## 12 Was the country too exhausted to allow soviet democracy?

Trotskyists have, in general, two main lines of attack with regards the Kronstadt revolt. The main one is the claim that the garrison in 1921 was not of the same class composition as the one in 1917. This meant that the 1921 revolt expressed the peasant counter-revolution and had to be destroyed. We have indicated that, firstly, the garrison was essentially the same in 1921 as it had been in 1917 (see section 8). Secondly, we have shown that politically the ideas expressed in its program were the same as those in 1917 (see section 9). Thirdly, that this program had many of the same points as strikers resolutions in Petrograd and, indeed, were **more** socialist in many cases by clearly calling for soviet democracy rather than the constituent assembly (see section 4).

Now we turn to the second excuse, namely that the country was too exhausted and the working class was decimated. In such circumstances, it is argued, objective conditions meant that soviet democracy was impossible and so the Bolsheviks had to maintain their dictatorship at all costs to defend what was left of the revolution. Leninist Pat Stack of the British SWP is typical of this approach. It is worth quoting him at length:

*“Because anarchists dismiss the importance of material reality, events such as the 1921 Kronstadt rising against the Bolshevik government in Russia can become a rallying cry. The revolutionary Victor Serge was not uncritical of the Bolshevik handling of the rising, but he poured scorn on anarchist claims for it when he wrote, ‘The third revolution it was called by certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed by infantile delusions.’*

*“This third revolution, it was argued, would follow the first one in February 1917 and the second in October. The second had swept away the attempts to create capitalist power, had given land to the peasants and had extracted Russia from the horrible imperialist carnage of the First World War. The revolution had introduced a huge literacy programme, granted women abortion rights, introduced divorce and accepted the rights of the various Russian republics to self determination. It had done so, however, against a background of a bloody and horrendous civil war where the old order tried to regain power. Sixteen*

*imperialist powers sent armies against the regime, and trade embargoes were enforced.*

*“The reality of such actions caused huge suffering throughout Russia. The regime was deprived of raw materials and fuel, transportation networks were destroyed, and the cities began running out of food. By 1919 the regime only had 10 percent of the fuel that was available in 1917, and the production of iron ore in the same year stood at 1.6 percent of that in 1914. By 1921 Petrograd had lost 57 percent of its population and Moscow 44.5 percent. Workers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was being decimated. . .*

*“The choice facing the regime in Russia was either to crush the uprising and save the revolution, or surrender to the rising and allow the forces of reaction to march in on their back. There was no material basis for a third way. A destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward. Great efforts would have to be made to solve these problems. There were no overnight solutions and preserving the revolutionary regime was crucial. Ultimately real solutions could only be found if the revolution were to spread internationally, but in the meantime to have any chance of success the regime had to survive. Only the right and the imperialist powers would have benefited from its destruction.” [“Anarchy in the UK?”, **Socialist Review**, no. 246, November 2000]*

Anarchists, in spite of Stack’s assertions, were and are well aware of the problems facing the revolution. Alexander Berkman (who was in Petrograd at the time) pointed out the “[l]ong years of war, revolution, and civil struggle” which “had bled Russia to exhaustion and brought her people to the brink of despair.” [**The Russian Tragedy**, p. 61] Like every worker, peasant, sailor and soldier in Russia, anarchists knew (and know) that reconstruction would not take place “overnight.” The Kronstadters’ recognised this in the first issue of their newspaper **Izvestia**:

*“Comrades and citizens, our country is passing through a tough time. For three years now, famine, cold and economic chaos have trapped us in a vice-like grip. The Communist Party which governs the country has drifted away from the masses and proved itself powerless to rescue them from a state of general ruination . . . All workers, sailors and Red soldiers today can clearly see that only concentrated efforts, only the concentrated determination of the people can afford the country bread, wood and coal, can clothe and shoe the people*

*and rescue the Republic from the impasse in which it finds itself.*" [cited in **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, p. 183]

In the Kronstadt *Izvestiia* of March 8 they wrote that it was "*here in Kronstadt that the foundation stone was laid of the Third Revolution that will smash the last shackles on the toiler and open up before him the broad new avenue to socialist construction.*" They stress that the "*new revolution will rouse the toiling masses of the Orient and Occident. For it will offer the example of fresh socialist construction as opposed to mechanical, governmental 'Communist' construction.*" [Op. Cit., p. 194] Clearly, the Kronstadt rebels knew that construction would take time and were arguing that the only means of rebuilding the country was via the participation of what of left of the working class and peasantry in free class organisations like freely elected soviets and unions.

The experience of the revolt provides evidence that this analysis was far from "utopian." A Finish reporter at Kronstadt was struck by the "*enthusiasm*" of its inhabitants, by their renewed sense of purpose and mission. Avrich argues that for a "*fleeting interval Kronstadt was shaken out if its listlessness and despair.*" [Kronstadt, p. 159] The sailors, soldiers and civilians sent their delegates to delegates, started to re-organise their trade unions and so on. Freedom and soviet democracy was allowing the masses to start to rebuild their society and they took the opportunity. The Kronstadter's faith in "*direct mass democracy of and by the common people through free soviets*" did seem to be justified in the response of the people of Kronstadt. This suggests that a similar policy implemented by the workers who had just organised general strikes, demonstrations and protest meetings all across Russia's industrial centres was not impossible or doomed to failure.

Indeed, this wave of strikes refutes Stack's claim that "*[w]orkers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was being decimated.*" Clearly, a sizeable percentage of the workers were still working and so not dead, on the frontline or fleeing the cities. As we discuss below, approximately one-third of factory workers were still in Petrograd (the overall decrease of urban working people throughout Russia exceeded 50 percent [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 24]). The working class, in other words, still existed and were able to organise strikes, meetings and mass demonstrations in the face of state repression. The fact, of course, is that the majority of what remained of the working class would not have voted Communist in free soviet elections. Thus political considerations have to be factored in when evaluating Stack's arguments.

The question for anarchists, as for the Kronstadt rebels, was what the necessary pre-conditions for this reconstruction were. Could Russia be re-built in a socialist

way while being subject to a dictatorship which crushed every sign of working class protest and collective action? Surely the first step, as Kronstadt shows, would have to be the re-introduction of workers' democracy and power for only this would give allow expression to the creative powers of the masses and interest them in the reconstruction of the country. Continuing party dictatorship would never do this:

*“by its very essence a dictatorship destroys the creative capacities of a people . . . The revolutionary conquest could only be deepened through a genuine participation of the masses. Any attempt to substitute an ‘elite’ for those masses could only be profoundly reactionary.*

*“In 1921 the Russian Revolution stood at the cross roads. The democratic or the dictatorial way, that was the question. By lumping together bourgeois and proletarian democracy the Bolsheviks were in fact condemning both. They sought to build socialism from above, through skilful manoeuvres of the Revolutionary General Staff. While waiting for a world revolution that was not round the corner, they built a state capitalist society, where the working class no longer had the right to make the decisions most intimately concerning it.” [Mett, Op. Cit., pp. 82–3]*

The Russian revolution had faced economic crisis all through 1917 and 1918. Indeed, by the spring of 1918 Russia was living through an almost total economic collapse, with a general scarcity of all resources and mass unemployment. According to Tony Cliff (the leader of the SWP) in the spring of 1918 Russia's “[w]ar-damaged industry continued to run down. ‘The bony hand of hunger’ . . . gripped the whole population . . . One of the causes of the famine was the breakdown of transport. . . Industry was in a state of complete collapse. Not only was there no food to feed the factory workers; there was no raw materials or fuel for industry. The oilfields of the Baku, Grozny and Emba regions came to a standstill. The situation was the same in the coalfields. The production of raw materials was in no better a state . . . The collapse of industry meant unemployment for the workers.” [Lenin: **The Revolution Besieged**, vol. 3, pp. 67–9] The industrial workforce dropped to 40% of its 1917 levels. The similarities to Stack's description of the situation in early 1921 is striking.

Does this mean that, for Leninists, soviet democracy was impossible in early 1918 (of course, the Bolsheviks **in practice** were making soviet democracy impossible by suppressing soviets that elected the wrong people)? After all, in the start of 1918 the Russian Revolution also faced a “*destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world.*” If these “*were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward*” then

it also applied in 1918 as well as in 1921. And, if so, then this means admitting that soviet democracy is impossible during a revolution, marked as it will always be marked by exceptionally difficult circumstances. Which, of course, means to defend party power and not soviet power and promote the dictatorship of the party over the working class, positions Leninists deny holding.

Incredibly, Stack fails to even mention the power and privileges of the bureaucracy at the time. Officials got the best food, housing and so on. The lack of effective control or influence from below ensured that corruption was widespread. One of the leaders of the Workers' Opposition gives us an insight of the situation which existed at the start of 1921:

*“The rank and file worker is observant. He sees that so far . . . the betterment of the workers' lot has occupied the last place in our policy . . . We all know that the housing problem cannot be solved in a few months, even years, and that due to our poverty, its solution is faced with serious difficulties. But the facts of ever-growing inequality between the privileged groups of the population in Soviet Russia and the rank and file workers, ‘the frame-work of the dictatorship’, breed and nourish the dissatisfaction.*

*“The rank and file worker sees how the Soviet official and the practical man lives and how he lives . . . [It will be objected that] ‘We could not attend to that; pray, there was the military front.’ And yet whenever it was necessary to make repairs to any of the houses occupied by the Soviet institutions, they were able to find both the materials and the labour.” [Alexandra Kollontai, **The Workers' Opposition**, p. 10]*

A few months earlier, the Communist Yoffe wrote to Trotsky expressing the same concerns. *“There is enormous inequality,”* he wrote, *“and one's material position largely depends on one's post in the party; you'll agree that this is a dangerous situation.”* [quoted by Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 695] To talk about anarchists dismissing the importance of material reality and a *“revolutionary regime”* while ignoring the inequalities in power and wealth, and the bureaucratisation and despotism which were their root, is definitely a case of the pot calling the kettle black!

Under the harsh material conditions facing Russia at the time, it goes without saying that the bureaucracy would utilise its position to gather the best resources around it. Indeed, part of the factors resulting in Kronstadt was *“the privileges and abuses of commissars, senior party functionaries and trade union officials who received special rations, allocations and housing and . . . quite openly enjoying the good life.”* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 210] Stack fails to mention this and instead talks about the necessity of defending a *“workers' state”* in which workers had no

power and where bureaucratic abuses were rampant. If anyone is denying reality, it is him! Thus Ciliga:

*“The Soviet Government and the higher circles in the Communist Party applied their own solution [to the problems facing the revolution] of **increasing the power of the bureaucracy**. The attribution of powers to the ‘Executive Committees’ which had hitherto been vested in the soviets, the replacement of the dictatorship of the class by the dictatorship of the party, the shift of authority even within the party from its members to its cadres, the replacement of the double power of the bureaucracy and the workers in the factory by the sole power of the former — to do all this was to ‘save the Revolution!’ [. . .] The Bureaucracy prevented the bourgeois restoration . . . by eliminating the proletarian character of the revolution.” [Op. Cit., p. 331]*

Perhaps, in light of this, it is significant that, in his list of revolutionary gains from October 1917, Stack fails to mention what anarchists would consider the most important, namely workers’ power, freedom, democracy and rights. But, then again, the Bolsheviks did not rate these gains highly either and were more than willing to sacrifice them to ensure their most important gain, state power (see section 15 for a fuller discussion of this issue). Again, the image of revolution gains a victory over its content!

When Stack argues that it was necessary to crush Kronstadt to “*save the revolution*” and “*preserv[e] the revolutionary regime*” we feel entitled to ask what was there left to save and preserve? The dictatorship and decrees of “Communist” leaders? In other words, party power. Yes, by suppressing Kronstadt Lenin and Trotsky saved the revolution, saved it for Stalin. Hardly something to be proud of.

Ironically, given Stack’s assertions that anarchists ignore “*material reality*”, anarchists had predicted that a revolution would be marked by economic disruption. Kropotkin, for example, argued that it was “*certain that the coming Revolution . . . will burst upon us in the middle of a great industrial crisis . . . There are millions of unemployed workers in Europe at this moment. It will be worse when Revolution has burst upon us . . . The number of the out-of-works will be doubled as soon as barricades are erected in Europe and the United States . . . we know that in time of Revolution exchange and industry suffer most from the general upheaval . . . A Revolution in Europe means, then, the unavoidable stoppage of at least half the factories and workshops.*” He stressed that there would be “*the complete disorganisation*” of the capitalist economy and that during a revolution “*[i]nternational commerce will come to a standstill*” and “*the circulation of commodities and of provisions will be paralysed.*” [The Conquest of Bread, pp. 69–70 and p. 191]

Elsewhere, he argued that a revolution would “*mean the stoppage of hundreds of manufactures and workshops, and the impossibility of reopening them. Thousands of workmen will find no employment . . . The present want of employment and misery will be increased tenfold.*” He stressed that “*the reconstruction of Society in accordance with more equitable principles will necessitate a disturbed period*” and argued that any revolution will be isolated to begin with and so (with regards to the UK) “*the imports of foreign corn will decrease*” as will “*exports of manufactured wares.*” A revolution, he argued, “*is not the work of one day. It means a whole period, mostly lasting for several years, during which the country is in a state of effervescence.*” To overcome these problems he stressed the importance of reconstruction from the bottom up, organised directly by working people, with local action being the basis of wider reconstruction. The “*immense problem – the re-organisation of production, redistribution of wealth and exchange, according to new principles – cannot be solved by . . . any kind of government. It must be a natural growth resulting from the combined efforts of all interested in it, freed from the bonds of the present institutions. It must grow naturally, proceeding from the simplest up to complex federations; and it cannot be something schemed by a few men and ordered from above. In this last shape it surely would have no chance of living at all.*” [Act for Yourselves, pp. 71–2, p. 67, pp. 72–3, pp. 25–6 and p. 26]

Anarchists had predicted the problems facing the Russian Revolution decades previously and, given the lack of success of Bolshevik attempts to solve these problems via centralism, had also predicted the only way to solve them. Far from ignoring “*material reality*” it is clear that anarchists have long been aware of the difficulties a revolution would face and had organised our politics around them. In contrast, Stack is arguing that these inevitable effects of a revolution create “*circumstances*” in which the revolution cannot “*move forward*”? If this is so, then revolution is an impossibility as it will always face economic disruption and isolation at some stage in its development, for a longer or shorter period. If we base our politics on the “best-case scenario” then they will soon be proven to be lacking.

Ultimately, Stack’s arguments (and those like it) are the ones which ignore “*material reality*” by arguing that Lenin’s state was a “*revolutionary regime*” and reconstruction could be anything but to the advantage of the bureaucracy without the active participation of what was left of the working class. Indeed, the logic of his argument would mean rejecting the idea of socialist revolution as **such** as the problems he lists will affect **every** revolution and had affected the Russian Revolution from the start.

The problems facing the Russian working class were difficult in the extreme in 1921 (some of which, incidentally, were due to the results of Bolshevik economic policies which compounded economic chaos via centralisation), but they could

never be solved by someone else bar the thousands of workers taking strike action all across Russia at the time: *“And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?”* [Ida Mett, *Op. Cit.*, p. 81]

So, as far as *“material reality”* goes, it is clear that it is Stack who ignores it, not anarchists or the Kronstadt rebels. Both anarchists and Kronstadters recognised that the country was in dire straits and that a huge effort was required for reconstruction. The material basis at the time offered two possibilities for reconstruction — either from above or from below. Such a reconstruction could **only** be socialist in nature if it involved the direct participation of the working masses in determining what was needed and how to do it. In other words, the process had to start **from below** and no central committee utilising a fraction of the creative powers of the country could achieve it. Such a bureaucratic, top-down re-construction would rebuild the society in a way which benefited a few. Which, of course, was what happened.

John Rees joins his fellow party member by arguing that the working class base of the workers’ state had *“disintegrated”* by 1921. The working class was reduced *“to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917.”* The *“bureaucracy of the workers’ state was left suspended in mid-air, its class base eroded and demoralised.”* He argues that Kronstadt was *“utopian”* as *“they looked back to the institutions of 1917 when the class which made such institutions possible no longer had the collective capacity to direct political life.”* [Rees, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65 and p. 70]

There are two problems with this kind of argument. Firstly, there are factual problems with it. Second, there are ideological problems with it. We will discuss each in turn.

The factual problems are clear. All across Russia in February 1921 the Russian working class were going on strike, organising meetings and demonstrations. In other words, **taking collective action** based on demands collectively agreed in workplace meetings. One factory would send delegates to others, urging them to join the movement which soon became a general strike in Petrograd and Moscow. In Kronstadt, workers, soldiers and sailors went the next step and organised a delegate conference. In other places they tried to do so, with various degrees of success. During the strikes in Petrograd *“workers from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries”* which raised similar demands as that of Kronstadt. Its activities and other attempts to organise collectively were obviously hindered by the fact the Cheka arrested *“all delegates to other enterprises”* the strikers sent. Brovkin states that following the example of Petrograd, *“workers in some cities set up assemblies of plenipotentiaries”* as well. In



Saratov “such a council grew out of a strike co-ordination committee.” [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Lines of the Russian Civil War**, p. 393, p. 396 and p. 398]

Any claim that the Russian working class had no capacity for collective action seems invalidated by such events. Not that Rees is not unaware of these strikes. He notes that the Kronstadt revolt was “*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*” [Op. Cit., p. 61] An “*atomised, individualised mass*” which was “*no longer able to exercise the collective power*” being able to conduct a “*wave of serious . . . strikes*” all across Russia? That hardly fits. Nor does he mention the repression which “*quickly resolved*” the strikes and which, by its very nature, atomised and individualised the masses in order to break the collective action being practised.

The fact that these strikes did not last longer of course suggests that the strikers could not sustain this activity indefinitely. However, this was more a product of state repression and the lack of rations while on strike than any objectively predetermined impossibility of collective decision making. The workers may have been too exhausted to wage indefinite general strikes against a repressive state but that does not imply they could not practice continual collective decision making in less extreme circumstances in a soviet democracy.

Of course, these striking workers would have been unlikely to voted Communist en mass if free soviet elections were organised (in Kronstadt, Communists made up one-third of the conference of delegates). Thus there were pressing **political** reasons to deny free elections rather than an objective impossibility. Moreover, the actions of the Soviet state were designed to break the collective resistance of the working force. The use of armed patrols on the streets and in the factories, and the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force were designed to break the strike and atomise the workforce. These actions would not have been needed if the Russian working class was, in fact, atomised and incapable of collective action and decision making.

The size of the working class in 1921 was smaller in 1921 than it was in 1917. However, the figures for May 1918 and 1920 were nearly identical. In 1920, the number of factory workers in Petrograd was 148,289 (which was 34% of the population and 36% of the number of workers in 1910). [Mary McAuley, Op. Cit., p. 398] In January 1917, the number was 351,010 and in April 1918, it was 148,710. [S.A. Smith, **Red Petrograd**, p. 245] Thus factory worker numbers were about 40% of the pre-Civil War number and remained so throughout the Civil War. A proletarian core remained in every industrial town or city in Russia.

Nor was this work force incapable of collective action or decision making. All through the civil war they organised strikes and protests for specific demands (and faced Bolshevik repression for so doing). In March 1919, for example, tens of thousands of workers went on strike in Petrograd. The strikes were broken by

troops. Strikes regularly occurred throughout 1919 and 1920 (and, again, usually met with state repression). In 1921, the strike wave resurfaced and became near general strikes in many cities, including Petrograd and Moscow (see section 2). If the workers could organise strikes (and near general strikes in 1921), protest meetings and committees to co-ordinate their struggles, what could stop them starting to manage their own destinies? Does soviet democracy become invalid once a certain number of workers is reached?

Given that Rees gets the key slogan of Kronstadt wrong (they called for all power to the soviets and not to parties rather than Rees' "*soviets without parties*") it is hard to evaluate whether Rees claims that without Bolshevik dictatorship the Whites would inevitably have taken power. After all, the Kronstadt delegate meeting had one-third Communists in it. Ultimately, he is arguing that working people cannot manage their own fates themselves without it resulting in a counter-revolution!

In addition, the logic of Rees' argument smacks of double-think. On the one hand, he argues that the Bolsheviks represented the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*." On the other hand, he argues that free soviet elections would have seen the Bolsheviks replaced by "*moderate socialists*" (and eventually the Whites). In other words, the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, represent the Russian working class and their dictatorship was **over**, not **of**, the proletariat. The basic assumption, therefore, is flawed. Rees and his fellow Trotskyists seriously want us to believe that a dictatorship will not become corrupt and bureaucratic, that it can govern in the interests of its subjects and, moreover, reform itself. And he calls the Kronstadters "*utopians*"!

Given these factors, perhaps the real reason for the lack of soviet democracy and political freedom and rights was that the Bolsheviks knew they would lose any free elections that would be held? As we noted in section 2, they had not been shy in disbanding soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities before the start of the civil war nor in suppressing strikes and workers' protests before, during and after the Civil War. In effect, the Bolsheviks would exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat over and above the wishes of that proletariat if need be (as Trotsky made clear in 1921 at the Tenth Party Congress). Thus the major factor restricting soviet democracy was Bolshevik power — this repressed working class collective action which promoted atomisation in the working class and the unaccountability of the Bolshevik leadership. The bureaucracy was "*left suspended in mid-air*" simply because the majority of the workers and peasants did not support it and when they protested against the party dictatorship they were repressed.

Simply put, objective factors do not tell the whole story.

Now we turn to these objective factors, the economic breakdown affecting Russia in 1921. This is the basis for the ideological problem with Rees' argument.

The ideological problem with this argument is that both Lenin and Trotsky had argued that revolution inevitably implied civil war, “*exceptional circumstances*” and economic crisis. For example, in **Terrorism and Communism** Trotsky argued that “[a]ll periods of transition have been characterised by . . . tragic features” of an “*economic depression*” such as exhaustion, poverty and hunger. Every class society “*is violently swept off [the arena] by an intense struggle, which immediately brings to its participants even greater privations and sufferings than those against which they rose.*” He gave the example of the French Revolution “*which attained its titanic dimensions under the pressure of the masses exhausted with suffering, itself deepened and rendered more acute their misfortunes for a prolonged period and to an extraordinary extent.*” He asked: “*Can it be otherwise?*” [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 7]

Indeed, he stressed that “*revolutions which drag into their whirlpool millions of workers*” automatically affect the “*economic life of the country.*” By “[d]ragging the mass of the people away from labour, drawing them for a prolonged period into the struggle, thereby destroying their connection with production, the revolution in all these ways strikes deadly blows at economic life, and inevitably lowers the standard which it found at its birth.” This affects the socialist revolution as the “*more perfect the revolution, the greater are the masses it draws in; and the longer it is prolonged, the greater is the destruction it achieves in the apparatus of production, and the more terrible inroads does it make upon public resources. From this there follows merely the conclusion which did not require proof — that a civil war is harmful to economic life.*” [**Ibid.**]

Lenin in 1917 argued the similarly, mocking those who argued that revolution was out of the question because “*the circumstances are exceptionally complicated.*” He noting that any revolution, “*in its development, would give rise to exceptionally complicated circumstances*” and that it was “*the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war. No one who does not live in a shell could imagine that civil war is conceivable without exceptionally complicated circumstances. If there were no exceptionally complicated circumstances there would be no revolution.*” [**Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?**, p. 80 and p. 81]

A few months early, Lenin argues that “[w]hen unavoidable disaster is approaching, the most useful and indispensable task confronting the people is that of organisation. Marvels of proletarian organisation — this is our slogan at the present, and shall become our slogan and our demand to an even greater extent, when the proletariat is in power. . . . There are many such talents [i.e. organisers] among the people. These forces lie dormant in the peasantry and the proletariat, for lack of application. They must be mobilised from below, by practical work . . .” [**The Threatening Catastrophe and how to avoid it**, pp. 49–50]

The problem in 1921 (as during the war), of course, was that when the proletariat **did** organise itself, it was repressed as counterrevolutionary by the Bolsheviks. The reconstruction from below, the organisation of the proletariat, automatically came into conflict with party power. The workers and peasants could not act because soviet and trade union democracy would have ended Bolshevik dictatorship.

Therefore, Rees' and Stack's arguments fail to convince. As noted, their ideological gurus clearly argued that revolution without civil war and economic exhaustion was impossible. Sadly, the means to mitigate the problems of Civil War and economic crisis (namely workers' self-management and power) inevitably came into conflict with party power and could not be encouraged. If Bolshevism cannot meet the inevitable problems of revolution and maintain the principles it pays lip-service to (i.e. soviet democracy and workers' power) then it clearly does not work and should be avoided.

Stack's and Rees' argument, in other words, represents the bankruptcy of Bolshevik ideology rather than a serious argument against the Kronstadt revolt.

### 13 Was there a real alternative to Kronstadt's "*third revolution*"?

Another Trotskyist argument against Kronstadt and in favour of the Bolshevik repression is related to the country was exhausted argument we discussed in the last section. It finds its clearest expression in Victor Serge's argument:

*"the country was exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there was no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses. The working-class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. The Party, swollen by the influx of power-seekers, inspired little confidence . . . Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions and inspiration . . ."*

*"The popular counter-revolution translated the demand for freely-elected soviets into one for 'Soviets without Communists.' If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the emigres, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian."* [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, pp. 128–9]

Serge supported the Bolsheviks, considering them as the only possible means of defending the revolution. Some modern day Leninists follow this line of reasoning

and want us to believe that the Bolsheviks were defending the remaining gains of the revolution. What gains, exactly? The only gains that remained were Bolshevik power and nationalised industry — both of which excluded the real gains of the Russian Revolution (namely soviet power, the right to independent unions and to strike, freedom of assembly, association and speech for working people, the beginnings of workers' self-management of production and so on). Indeed, both “gains” were the basis for the Stalinist bureaucracy's power.

Anarchists and libertarian Marxists who defend the Kronstadt revolt and oppose the actions of the Bolsheviks are not foolish enough to argue that Kronstadt's “*third revolution*” would have definitely succeeded. Every revolution is a gamble and may fail. As Ante Ciliga correctly argues:

*“Let us consider, finally, one last accusation which is commonly circulated: that action such as that at Kronstadt could have **indirectly** let loose the forces of the counter-revolution. It is **possible** indeed that even by placing itself on a footing of workers' democracy the revolution might have been overthrown; but what is **certain** is that it has perished, and that it has perished on account of the policy of its leaders. The repression of Kronstadt, the suppression of the democracy of workers and soviets by the Russian Communist party, the elimination of the proletariat from the management of industry, and the introduction of the NEP, already signified the death of the Revolution.” [Op. Cit., p. 335]*

No revolution is guaranteed to succeed. The same with Kronstadt's “*Third Revolution*.” Its call for soviet power may have lead to defeat via renewed intervention. That is possible — just as it was possible in 1917. One thing is sure, by maintaining the Bolshevik dictatorship the Russian Revolution was crushed.

The only alternative to the “*third revolution*” would have been self-reform of the party dictatorship and, therefore, of the soviet state. Such an attempt was made after 1923 by the **Left Opposition** (named “*Trotskyist*” by the Stalinists because Trotsky was its main leader). John Rees discusses the **Left Opposition**, arguing that “*without a revival of struggle in Russia or successful revolution elsewhere*” it “*was doomed to failure.*” [Op. Cit., p. 68] Given the logic of Serge's arguments, this is the only option left for Leninists.

How viable was this alternative? Could the soviet dictatorship reform itself? Was soviet democracy more of a danger than the uncontrolled dictatorship of a party within a state marked by already serious levels of corruption, bureaucracy and despotism? History provides the answer with the rise of Stalin.

Unfortunately for the **Left Opposition**, the bureaucracy had gained experience in repressing struggle in breaking the wave of strikes in 1921 and crushing the Kronstadt rebellion. Indeed, Rees incredulously notes that by 1923 “*the well-head*

*of renewal and thorough reform — the activity of the workers — had dried to a trickle*” and yet does not see that this decline was aided by the example of what had happened to Kronstadt and the repression of the 1921 strike wave. The **Left Opposition** received the crop that Lenin and Trotsky sowed the seeds of in 1921.

Ironically, Rees argues that the Stalinist bureaucracy could betray the revolution without “*an armed counter-revolutionary seizure of power*” (and so “*no martial law, no curfew or street battles*”) because of “*the atomisation of the working class.*” However, the atomisation was a product of the armed counter-revolutionary activities of Lenin and Trotsky in 1921 when they broke the strikes and crushed Kronstadt by means of martial law, curfew and street battles. The workers had no interest in which branch of the bureaucracy would govern and exploit them and so remained passive. Rees fails to see that the Stalinist coup simply built upon the initial counter-revolution of Lenin. There was martial law, curfew and street battles but they occurred in 1921, not 1928. The rise of Stalinism was the victory of one side of the new bureaucratic class over another but that class had defeated the working class in March 1921.

As for the idea that an external revolution could have regenerated the Soviet bureaucracy, this too was fundamentally utopian. In the words of Ida Mett:

*“Some claim that the Bolsheviks allowed themselves such actions (as the suppression of Kronstadt) in the hope of a forthcoming world revolution, of which they considered themselves the vanguard. But would not a revolution in another country have been influenced by the spirit of the Russian Revolution? When one considers the enormous moral authority of the Russian Revolution throughout the world one may ask oneself whether the deviations of this Revolution would not eventually have left an imprint on other countries. Many historical facts allow such a judgement. One may recognise the impossibility of genuine socialist construction in a single country, yet have doubts as to whether the bureaucratic deformations of the Bolshevik regime would have been straightened out by the winds coming from revolutions in other countries.” [Op. Cit., p. 82]*

The Bolsheviks had already been manipulating foreign Communist Parties in the interests of their state for a number of years. That is part of the reason why the Left-Communists around Pannekoek and Gorter broke with the Third International later in 1921. Just as the influence of Lenin had been a key factor in fighting the anti-Parliamentarian and libertarian communist tendencies in Communist Parties all across the world, so the example and influence of the Bolsheviks would have made its impact on any foreign revolution. The successful revolutionaries would have applied such “lessons” of October such as the dictatorship of the proletariat being impossible without the dictatorship of the communist party,

centralism, militarisation of labour and so on. This would have distorted any revolution from the start (given how obediently the Communist Parties around the world followed the insane policies of Stalinism, can we doubt this conclusion?).

Not that the Left Opposition's political platform could have saved the revolution. After all, it was utopian in that it urged the party and state bureaucracy to reform itself as well as contradictory. It did not get at the root of the problem, namely Bolshevik ideology. The theoretical limitations of the "Left Opposition" can be found in more detail in section 3 of the appendix on "Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?". Here we will restrict ourselves to looking at **The Platform of the Opposition** written in 1927 (unless otherwise specified all quotes come from this document).

It urged a "*consistent development of a workers' democracy in the party, the trade unions, and the soviets*" and to "*convert the urban soviets into real institutions of proletarian power.*" It states that "*Lenin, as long ago as in the revolution of 1905, advanced the slogan of soviets as organs of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasants.*" The Kronstadt sailors argued the same, of course, and were branded "*White Guardists*" and "*counter-revolutionary*". At the same time as this call for democracy, we find affirmation of the "*Leninist principle*" ("*inviolable for every Bolshevik*") that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.*" It repeats the principle by mentioning that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat demands a single and united proletarian party as the leader of the working masses and the poor peasantry.*" It stresses that a "*split in our party, the formation of two parties, would represent an enormous danger to the revolution.*" This was because:

*"Nobody who sincerely defends the line of Lenin can entertain the idea of 'two parties' or play with the suggestion of a split. Only those who desire to replace Lenin's course with some other can advocate a split or a movement along the two-party road.*

*"We will fight with all our power against the idea of two parties, because the dictatorship of the proletariat demands as its very core a single proletarian party. It demands a single party. It demands a proletarian party — that is, a party whose policy is determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus. Correction of the line of our party, improvement of its social composition — that is not the two-party road, but the strengthening and guaranteeing of its unity as a revolutionary party of the proletariat."*

We can note, in passing, the interesting notion of party (and so "*proletarian*" state) policy "*determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus*" but which is **not** determined by the proletariat itself. Which

means that the policy of the “workers’ state” must be determined by some other (unspecified) group and not by the workers. What possibility can exist that this other group actually knows what is in the interests of the proletariat? None, of course, as any form of democratic decision can be ignored when those who determine the policy consider the protests of the proletariat to be not “*in the interests of the proletariat.*”

This was the opinion of Trotsky, who argued against the Workers’ Opposition faction of the Communist Party who urged re-introducing some elements of democracy at the Tenth Party Conference at the time of the Kronstadt uprising (while, of course, keeping the Communist Party dictatorship intact). As he put it, they “*have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers’ right to elect representatives above the party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!*” He continued by stating that the “*Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.*” [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 78]

Thus the call for democracy is totally annulled by other arguments in the Platform, arguments which logically eliminates democracy and results in such acts as the repression of Kronstadt (see section 15).

The question, of course, arises as to how democracy can be introduced in the soviets and unions when party dictatorship is essential for the “*realisation*” of the “proletarian” dictatorship and there can only be **one** party? What happens if the proletariat vote for someone else (as they did in Kronstadt)? If “proletarian” dictatorship is impossible without the dictatorship of the party then, clearly, proletarian democracy becomes meaningless. All the workers would be allowed to do would be to vote for members of the same party, all of whom would be bound by party discipline to carry out the orders of the party leadership. Power would rest in the party hierarchy and definitively **not** in the working class, its unions or its soviets (both of which would remain mere fig-leaves for party rule). Ultimately, the only guarantee that the party dictatorship would govern in the interests of the proletariat would be the good intentions of the party. However, being unaccountable to the masses, such a guarantee would be worthless — as history shows.

Kronstadt is the obvious end result of such politics. The starting point was the disbanding of soviets which had been elected with a majority of “wrong” parties (as the Bolsheviks did in early 1918, **before** the start of the civil war). While the Platform may be useful as an expression of the usual Leninist double-think on the “workers’ state”, its practical suggestions are useless. Unlike the Kronstadt



Platform, it was doomed to failure from the start. The new bureaucratic class could only be removed by a “third revolution” and while this, possibly, could have resulted in a bourgeois counter-revolution the alternative of maintaining Bolshevik dictatorship would **inevitably** have resulted in Stalinism. When supporters of Bolshevism argue that Kronstadt would have opened the gate to counter-revolution, they do not understand that the Bolsheviks **were** the counter-revolution in 1921 and that by suppressing Kronstadt the Bolsheviks not only opened the gate to Stalinism but invited it in and gave it the keys to the house.

The Platform, moreover, smacks of the re-writing of history Trotsky correctly accused Stalinism of.

It argues, for example, that the urban soviets “*in recent years have been losing importance. This undoubtedly reflects a shift in the relation of class forces to the disadvantage of the proletariat.*” In fact, the soviets had lost their importance since the October revolution (see section 2 for details). The “*shift*” in the relation of class forces started immediately after the October revolution, when the **real** gains of 1917 (i.e. soviet democracy, workers’ rights and freedom) were slowly and surely eliminated by the bureaucratic class forming around the new state — a class who could justify their actions by claiming it was in the “*interests*” of the masses whose wishes they were ignoring.

As regards the Communist Party itself, it argues for introducing (“*in deeds and not words*”) “*a democratic regime. Do away with administrative pressure tactics. Stop the persecution and expulsion of those who hold independent opinions about party questions.*” No mention, of course, that these tactics were used by Lenin and Trotsky against Left-wing dissidents after the October revolution.

The Left-Communists in early 1918 were subject to such pressure. For example, they were ousted from leading positions in the Supreme Economic Council in March 1918. After their views were denounced by Lenin a “*campaign was whipped up in Leningrad which compelled **Kommunist** [their paper] to transfer publication to Moscow . . . After the appearance of the first issue of the paper a hastily convened Leningrad Party Conference produced a majority for Lenin and ‘demanded that the adherents of **Kommunist** cease their separate organisational existence.*” The paper lasted four issues, with the last having to be published as a private factional paper. The issue had been settled by a high pressure campaign in the Party organisation, backed by a barrage of violent invective in the Party press and in the pronouncements of the Party leaders. [Maurice Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 39–40]

Similarly, the Workers’ Opposition three years later also experienced them. At the Tenth Party congress, A. Kollontai (author of their platform) stated that the circulation of her pamphlet had been deliberately impeded. “*So irregular were some of these that the Moscow Party Committee at one stage voted a resolution **publicly** censuring the Petrograd organisation ‘for not observing the rules of proper*

controversy.” The success of the Leninist faction in getting control of the party machine was such that “*there is serious doubt as to whether they were not achieved by fraud.*” [Brinton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 75 and p. 77] Victor Serge witnessed the rigging of an election to ensure Lenin’s victory in the trade union debate. [*Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 123] Kollontai herself mentions (in early 1921) that comrades “*who dare to disagree with decrees from above are still being persecuted.*” [our emphasis, *The Workers’ Opposition*, p. 22]

The Platform states that “*the dying out of inner-party democracy leads to a dying out of workers’ democracy in general — in the trade unions, and in all other nonparty mass organisations.*” In fact, the opposite causation is correct. The dying out of workers’ democracy in general leads to a dying out of inner-party democracy. The dictatorship of the party by necessity clashes with the “*democratic dictatorship of the working masses and the poor peasantry.*” As the party dictatorship replaces the working masses, eliminating democracy by the dictatorship of a single party, democracy in that party must wither. If the workers can join that party and influence its policies then the same problems that arose in the soviets and unions appear in the party (i.e. voting for the wrong policies and people). This necessitates a corresponding centralisation in power within the party as occurred in the soviets and unions, all to the detriment of rank and file power and control.

As Ida Mett argued:

*“There is no doubt that the discussion taking place within the [Communist] Party at this time [in early 1921] had profound effects on the masses. It overflowed the narrow limits the Party sought to impose on it. It spread to the working class as a whole, to the soldiers and to the sailors. Heated local criticism acted as a general catalyst. The proletariat had reasoned quite logically: if discussion and criticism were permitted to Party members, why should they not be permitted to the masses themselves who had endured all the hardships of the Civil War?”*

*“In his speech to the Tenth Congress — published in the Congress Proceedings — Lenin voiced his regret at having ‘permitted’ such a discussion. ‘We have certainly committed an error,’ he said, ‘in having authorised this debate. Such a discussion was harmful just before the Spring months that would be loaded with such difficulties.’”* [*The Kronstadt Uprising*, pp. 34–5]

Unsurprisingly, the Tenth Congress voted to ban factions within the Party. The elimination of discussion in the working class led to its ban in the party. Having the rank-and-file of the Party discuss issues would give false hopes to the working class as a whole who may attempt to influence policy by joining the party (and, of course, vote for the wrong people or policies).

Thus the only alternative to Kronstadt's "*Third Revolution*" and free soviets was doomed to failure.

Lastly, we should draw some parallels between the fates of the Kronstadt sailors and the Left Opposition.

John Rees argues that the Left Opposition had "*the whole vast propaganda machine of the bureaucracy . . . turned against them,*" a machine used by Trotsky and Lenin in 1921 against Kronstadt. Ultimately, the Left Opposition "*were exiled, imprisoned and shot,*" again like the Kronstadters and a host of revolutionaries who defended the revolution but opposed the Bolshevik dictatorship. [Op. Cit., p. 68]

As Murray Bookchin argued:

*"All the conditions for Stalinism were prepared for by the defeat of the Kronstadt sailors and Petrograd strikers."* ["Introduction", Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 13]

Thus, the argument that Kronstadt was "*utopian*" is false. The third revolution was the only **real** alternative in Bolshevik Russia. Any struggle from below post-1921 would have raised the same problems of soviet democracy and party dictatorship which Kronstadt raised. Given that the **Left Opposition** subscribed to the "*Leninist principle*" of "*the dictatorship of the party,*" they could not appeal to the masses as they would not vote for them. The arguments raised against Kronstadt that soviet democracy would lead to counter-revolution are equally applicable to movements which appealed, as Rees desires, to the Russian working class post-Kronstadt.

In summary, the claim that Kronstadt would inevitably have led to an anti-proletarian dictatorship fails. Yes, it might have but the Bolshevik dictatorship itself was anti-proletarian (it had repressed proletarian protest, organisation, freedom and rights on numerous occasions) and it could never be reformed from within by the very logic of its "*Leninist principle*" of "*the dictatorship of the party.*" The rise of Stalinism was inevitable after the crushing of Kronstadt.

## 14 How do modern day Trotskyists misrepresent Kronstadt?

We have discussed how Trotskyists have followed their heroes Lenin and Trotsky in abusing the facts about the Kronstadt sailors and uprising in previous sections. In section 8, we have indicated how they have selectively quoted from

academic accounts of the uprising and suppressed evidence which contradicts their claims. In section 7 we have shown how they have selectively quoted from Paul Avrich's book on the revolt to paint a false picture of the connections between the Kronstadt sailors and the Whites. Here we summarise some of the other misrepresentations of Trotskyists about the revolt.

John Rees, for example, asserts that the Kronstadters were fighting for "*soviets without parties*." Indeed, he makes the assertion twice on one page. [Op. Cit., p. 63] Pat Stack goes one further and asserts that the "*central demand of the Kronstadt rising though was 'soviets without Bolsheviks', in other words, the utter destruction of the workers' state.*" ["Anarchy in the UK?", *Socialist Review*, no. 246, November 2000] Both authors quote from Paul Avrich's book **Kronstadt 1921** in their articles. Let us turn to that source:

*"Soviets without Communists' was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan."* [Kronstadt 1921, p. 181]

Nor did they agitate under the banner "*soviets without parties*." They argued for "*all power to the soviets and not to parties*." Political parties were not to be excluded from the soviets, simply stopped from dominating them and substituting themselves for them. As Avrich notes, the Kronstadt program "*did allow a place for the Bolsheviks in the soviets, alongside the other left-wing organisations . . . Communists . . . participated in strength in the elected conference of delegate, which was the closest thing Kronstadt ever had to the free soviets of its dreams.*" [Ibid.] The index for Avrich's work handily includes this page in it, under the helpful entry "*soviets: 'without Communists.'*"

The central demand of the uprising was simply soviet democracy and a return to the principles that the workers and peasants had been fighting the whites for. In other words, both Leninists have misrepresented the Kronstadt revolt's demands and so misrepresented its aims.

Rees goes one step further and tries to blame the Bolshevik massacre on the sailors themselves. He argues "*in Petrograd Zinoviev had already essentially withdrawn the most detested aspects of War Communism in response to the strikes.*" Needless to say, Zinoviev did not withdraw the **political** aspects of War Communism, just some of the **economic** ones and, as the Kronstadt revolt was mainly **political**, these concessions were not enough (indeed, the repression directed against workers rights and opposition socialist and anarchist groups **increased**). He then states the Kronstadters "*response [to these concessions] was contained in their **What We Are Fighting For***" and quotes it as follows:

*“there is no middle ground in the struggle against the Communists . . . They give the appearance of making concessions: in Petrograd province road-block detachments have been removed and 10 million roubles have been allotted for the purchase of foodstuffs . . . But one must not be deceived . . . No there can be no middle ground. Victory or death!”*

What Rees fails to inform the reader is that this was written on March 8<sup>th</sup>, while the Bolsheviks had started military operations on the previous evening. Moreover, the fact the “response” clearly stated “[w]ithout a single shot, without a drop of blood, the first step has been taken [of the “Third Revolution”]. The toilers do not need blood. They will shed it only at a moment of self-defence” is not mentioned. [Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 243] In other words, the Kronstadt sailors reaffirmed their commitment to non-violent revolt. Any violence on their part was in self-defence against Bolshevik actions. Not that you would know that from Rees’ work. Indeed, as one of Rees’ sources indicates, the rebels “had refrained from taking any communist lives. The Soviet Government, on the other hand, as early as March 3, already had executed forty-five seamen at Oranienbaum — a quite heavy proportion of the total personnel of the men at the Naval Aviation Detachment. These men had voted for the Kronstadt resolution, but did not take arms against the government. This mass execution was merely a prelude to those that took place after the defeat of the mutineers.” These executions at Oranienbaum, it should be noted, exceeded the total of 36 seamen who had paid with their lives for the two large rebellions of the 1905 revolution at Kronstadt and Sveaborg. [D. Fedotoff-White, *The Growth of the Red Army*, p. 156]

Ted Grant, of the UK’s **Socialist Appeal** re-writes history significantly in his work **Russia: From revolution to counter-revolution**. For example, he claims (without providing any references) that the “*first lie*” of anti-Bolshevik writers on the subject “*is to identify the Kronstadt mutineers of 1921 with the heroic Red sailors of 1917.*” As we have indicated in section 8, research has **proven** that over 90% of the sailors on the two battleships which started the revolt had been recruited before and during the 1917 revolution and at least three-quarters of the sailors were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution. So was the majority of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Grant asserts that the sailors in 1917 and 1921 “*had nothing in common*” because those “*of 1917 were workers and Bolsheviks.*” In fact, as we indicated section 9, the Bolsheviks were a minority in Kronstadt during 1917 (a fact even Trotsky admitted in 1938). Moreover, the demands raised in the revolt matched the politics dominant in 1917.

Grant then claims that “*almost the entire Kronstadt garrison volunteered to fight in the ranks of the Red Army during the civil war.*” Are we to believe that the Bolshevik commanders left Kronstadt (and so Petrograd) defenceless during the

Civil War? Or drafted the skilled and trained (and so difficult to replace) sailors away from their ships, so leaving them unusable? Of course not. Common sense refutes Grant's argument (and statistical evidence supports this common sense position — on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1921, at least 75.5% of the Baltic Fleet was likely to have been drafted before 1918 and over 80% were from Great Russian areas and some 10% from the Ukraine. [Gelzter, *Op. Cit.*, p. 208]).

Not to be outdone, he then states that the “Kronstadt garrison of 1921 was composed mainly of raw peasant levies from the Black Sea Fleet. A cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers immediately shows that they were almost all Ukrainians.” According to Paul Avrigh, “[s]ome three or four hundred names appear in the journal of the rebel movement . . . So far as one can judge from these surnames alone . . . Great Russians are in the overwhelming majority.” Of the 15 person Provisional Revolutionary Committee, “three . . . bore patently Ukrainian names and two others . . . Germanic names.” [Paul Avrigh, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 92–3] Of the three Ukrainians, two were sailors of long standing and “had fought on the barricades in 1917.” [Avrigh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91] So much for a “cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers.” To top it off, he states: “That there were actual counter-revolutionary elements among the sailors was shown by the slogan ‘Soviets without Bolsheviks’.” Which, of course, the Kronstadt sailors **never** raised as a slogan!

And Grant talks about the “[m]any falsifications . . . written about this event,” that it “has been virtually turned into a myth” and that “these allegations bear no relation to the truth.” Truly amazing. As can be seen, his words apply to his own inventions.

Another SWP member, Abbie Bakan, asserts that, for example, “more than three quarters of the sailors” at Kronstadt “were recent recruits of peasant origin” but refuses to provide a source for this claim. [“A Tragic Necessity”, *Socialist Worker Review*, no. 136, November 1990, pp. 18–21] As noted in section 8, such a claim is false. The likely source for the assertion is Paul Avrigh, who noted that more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin but Avrigh does **not** say they were all recent recruits. While stating that there could be “little doubt” that the Civil War produced a “high turnover” and that “many” old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural areas, he does not indicate that all the sailors from peasant backgrounds were new recruits. He also notes that “there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors.” [*Op. Cit.*, pp. 89–90]

Bakan asserts that anti-semitism “was vicious and rampant” yet fails to provide **any** official Kronstadt proclamations expressing this perspective. Rather, we are to generalise from the memoirs of **one** sailor and the anti-semitic remark of Vershinin, a member of the Revolutionary Committee. Let us not forget that the opinions of these sailors and others like them were irrelevant to the Bolsheviks when they drafted them in the first place. And, more importantly, this “vicious

*and rampant*” anti-semitism failed to mark the demands raised nor the Kronstadt rebels’ newspaper or radio broadcasts. Nor did the Bolsheviks mention it at the time.

Moreover, it is true that the “*worse venom of the Kronstadt rebels was levelled against Trotsky and Zinoviev*” but it was **not** because, as Bakan asserts, they were “*treated as Jewish scapegoats.*” Their ethnical background was not mentioned by the Kronstadt sailors. Rather, they were strong **political** reasons for attacking them. As Paul Avrich argues, “*Trotsky in particular was the living symbol of War Communism, of everything the sailors had rebelled against. His name was associated with centralisation and militarisation, with iron discipline and regimentation.*” As for Zinoviev, he had “*incurred the sailors’ loathing as the party boss who had suppressed the striking workers and who had stooped to taking their own families as hostages.*” Good reasons to attack them and nothing to do with them being Jewish. [Op. Cit., p. 178 and p. 176]

Bakan states that the “*demands of the Kronstadt sailors reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry.*” As can be seen from section 3, such a comment cannot be matched with the actual demands of the revolt (which, of course, he does not provide). So what ideas did these demands of the “*most backward section of the peasantry*” state? Free elections to the Soviets, freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, right of assembly, freedom for trade union and peasant organisations, a conference of workers, soldiers and sailors, liberation of all political, worker and peasant prisoners, equalisation of rations, freedom for peasants as long as they do not employ hired labour, and so on. What would, in other words, be included in most socialist parties programmes and was, in fact, key elements of Bolshevik rhetoric in 1917. And, of course, all of the political aspects of the Kronstadt demands reflected key aspects of the Soviet Constitution.

How “*backward*” can you get! Indeed, these “*backward*” peasants send a radio message marking International Woman’s Day, hoping that women would “*soon accomplish*” their “*liberation from every form of violence and oppression.*” [quoted by Alexander Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 85]

Bakan pathetically acknowledges that their demands included “*calls for greater freedoms*” yet looks at the “*main economic target*” (not mentioning they were points 8, 10 and 11 of the 15 demands, the bulk of the rest are political). These, apparently, were aimed at “*the programme of forced requisitioning of peasant produce and the roadblock detachments that halted the black market in grain.*” Given that he admits that the Bolsheviks were “*already discussing*” the end of these features (due to their lack of success) it must be the case that the Bolsheviks also “*reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry*”! Moreover, the demand to end the roadblocks was also raised by the Petrograd and Moscow workers during their

strikes, as were most of the other demands raised by Kronstadt. [Paul Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42] Surely the “*most backward section of the peasantry*” was getting around in those days, appearing as they were in the higher reaches of the Bolshevik party bureaucracy and the factories of Petrograd and other major cities!

In reality, of course, the opposition to the forced requisitioning of food was a combination of ethical and practical considerations — it was evil and it was counterproductive. You did not have to be a peasant to see and know this (as the striking workers show). Similarly, the roadblocks were also a failure. Victor Serge, for example, recollected he would “*have died without the sordid manipulations of the black market.*” [*Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p.79] He was a government official. Think how much worse it would have been for an ordinary worker. The use of roadblock detachments harmed the industrial workers — little wonder they struck for their end and little wonder the sailors expressed solidarity with them and included it in their demands. Therefore, **nothing** can be drawn from these demands about the class nature of the revolt.

In an interesting example of double-think, Bakan then states that the sailors “*called for the abolition of Bolshevik authority in the army, factories and mills.*” What the resolution demanded was, in fact, “*the abolition Party combat detachments in all military groups*” as well as “*Party guards in factories and enterprises*” (point 10). In other words, to end the intimidation of workers and soldiers by armed communist units in their midst! When Bakan states that “*the real character of the rebellion*” can be seen from the opening declaration that “*the present soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants*” he could not have made a truer comment. The Kronstadt revolt was a revolt for soviet democracy and against party dictatorship. And soviet democracy would only abolish “*Bolshevik authority*” if the existing soviets, as the resolution argued, did not express the will of their electors!

Similarly, he asserts that the Provisional Revolutionary Committee was “*non-elected*” and so contradicts every historian who acknowledges it was elected by the conference of delegates on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and expanded by the next conference a few days later. He even considers the fact the delegate meeting’s “*denial of party members’ usual role in chairing the proceedings*” as one of many “*irregularities*” while, of course, the **real** irregularity was the fact that **one** party (the government party) had such a “*usual role*” in the first place! Moreover, given that that Petrograd soviet meeting to discuss the revolt had Cheka guards (Lenin’s political police) on it, his notion that sailors guarded the conference of delegates meeting (a meeting held in opposition to the ruling party) was “*irregular*” seems ironic.

Lastly, he raises the issue of the “*Memorandum*” of the White “*National Centre*” and uses it as evidence that “*Lenin’s suspicion of an international conspiracy linked up with the Kronstadt events has been vindicated.*” Needless to say, he fails to



mention that the historian who discovered the document rejected the notion that it proved that Kronstadt was linked to such a conspiracy (see section 6 for a full discussion). Ironically, he mentions that “[t]wo weeks after the Kronstadt rebellion the ice was due to melt.” Two weeks **after** the rebellion was crushed, of course, and he fails to mention that the “Memorandum” he uses as evidence assumes that the revolt would break out **after** the ice had melted, not before. While he claims that “[h]olding out until the ice melted was identified as critical in the memorandum,” this is not true. The Memorandum in fact, as Paul Avrich notes, “assumes that the rising will occur after the ice has melted.” [Op. Cit., p. 237f] No other interpretation can be gathered from the document.

Altogether, Bakan’s article shows how deeply the supporters of Leninism will sink to when attempting to discuss the Kronstadt rebellion. Sadly, as we have indicated many, many times, this is not an isolated occurrence.

## 15 What does Kronstadt tell us about Bolshevism?

The rationales used by Lenin, Trotsky and their followers are significant aids to getting to the core of the Bolshevik Myth. These rationales and activities allow us to understand the limitations of Bolshevik theory and how it contributed to the degeneration of the revolution.

Trotsky stated that the “Kronstadt slogan” was “soviets without Communists.” [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 90] This, of course, is factually incorrect. The Kronstadt slogan was “all power to the soviets but not to the parties” (or “free soviets”). From this incorrect assertion, Trotsky argued as follows:

*“to free the soviets from the leadership [!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves. The experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats, proved this. Social Revolutionary-anarchist soviets could only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship. They could play no other role, regardless of the ‘ideas’ of their participants. The Kronstadt uprising thus had a counterrevolutionary character.”* [Op. Cit., p. 90]

Interesting logic. Let us assume that the result of free elections would have been the end of Bolshevik “leadership” (i.e. dictatorship), as seems likely. What Trotsky is arguing is that to allow workers to vote for their representatives would “only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship”! This argument was made (in 1938) as a **general point** and is **not** phrased in terms of the problems facing

the Russian Revolution in 1921. In other words Trotsky is clearly arguing for the dictatorship of the party and contrasting it to soviet democracy. So much for “*All Power to the Soviets*” or “*workers’ power*”!

Indeed, Trotsky was not shy in explicitly stating this on occasion. As we noted in section 13, the **Left Opposition** based itself on “*Leninist principle*” (“*inviolable for every Bolshevik*”) that “*the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.*” Trotsky stressed ten years later that the whole working class cannot determine policy in the so-called “workers’ state” (as well as indicating his belief that one-party dictatorship is an inevitable stage in a “proletarian” revolution):

*“The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities — the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history. . . The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.”* [Trotsky, **Writings 1936–37**, pp. 513–4]

This is the very essence of Bolshevism. Trotsky is clearly arguing that the working class, as a class, is incapable of making a revolution or managing society itself — hence the party must step in on its behalf and, if necessary, ignore the wishes of the people the party claims to represent. To re-quote Trotsky’s comments against the **Workers’ Opposition** at the Tenth Party Congress in early 1921: “*They have made a fetish of democratic principles! They have placed the workers’ right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!*” He stressed that the “*Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.*” [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 78]

In 1957, after crushing the 1956 workers’ revolution, the Hungarian Stalinists argued along **exactly** the same lines as Trotsky had after the Bolsheviks had

crushed Kronstadt. The leader of the Hungarian Stalinist dictatorship argued that *“the regime is aware that the people do not always know what is good for them. It is therefore the duty of the leadership to act, not according to the will of the people, but according to what the leadership knows to be in the best interests of the people.”* [quoted by Andy Anderson, *Hungary '56*, p. 101]

Little wonder, then, that Samuel Farber notes that *“there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers’ control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921.”* [Before Stalinism, p. 44]

Such a perspective cannot help have disastrous consequences for a revolution (and explains why the Bolsheviks failed to pursue a peaceful resolution to the Kronstadt revolt). The logic of this argument clearly implies that when the party suppressed Kronstadt, when it disbanded non-Bolshevik soviets in early 1918 and robbed the workers and soviets of their power, the Bolsheviks were acting in the best interests of masses! The notion that Leninism is a revolutionary theory is invalidated by Trotsky’s arguments. Rather than aim for a society based on workers’ power, they aim for a “workers’ state” in which workers **delegate** their power to the leaders of the party. Which confirmed Bakunin’s argument that Marxism meant *“the highly despotic government of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of real or pretended scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be liberated from the cares of government and included in entirety in the governed herd.”* [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 178–9]

Such an approach is doomed to failure – it cannot produce a socialist society as such a society (as Bakunin stressed) can only be built from below by the working class itself.

As Vernon Richards argues:

*“The distinction between the libertarian and authoritarian revolutionary movements in their struggle to establish the free society, is the means which each proposes should be used to this end. The libertarian maintains that the initiative must come from below, that the free society must be the result of the will to freedom of a large section of the population. The authoritarian . . . believes that the will to freedom can only emerge once the existing economic and political system has been replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat [as expressed by the dictatorship of the party, according to Trotsky] which, as the awareness and sense of responsibility of the people grows, will wither away and the free society emerge.*

*“There can be no common ground between such approaches. For the authoritarian argues that the libertarian approach is noble but ‘utopian’ and doomed to failure*

*from the start, while the libertarian argues on the evidence of history, that the authoritarian **methods** will simply replace one coercive state by another, equally despotic and remote from the people, and which will no more 'wither away' than its capitalist predecessor.*" [Lessons of the Spanish Revolution, p. 206]

Modern day Leninists follow Trotsky's arguments (although they rarely acknowledge where they logically led or that their heroes explicitly acknowledged this conclusion and justified it). They do not state this position as honestly as did Trotsky.

Chris Bambery of the British SWP, for example, argues in his article "*Leninism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*" that "*in Lenin's concept of the party, democracy is balanced by centralism*" and the first of three reasons for this is:

*"The working class is fragmented. There are always those who wish to fight, those who will scab and those in between. Even in the soviets those divisions will be apparent. Revolutionary organisation does not aspire to represent the working class as a whole. It bases itself on those workers who want to challenge capitalism, and seeks to organise those to win the majority of workers to the need to take power."* [Socialist Review, no. 248, January 2001]

This, of course, has **exactly** the same basis of Trotsky's defence of the need of party dictatorship and why Kronstadt was counterrevolutionary. Bambery notes that even "*in the soviets*" there will be "*divisions.*" Thus we have the basic assumption which, combined with centralisation, vanguardism and other aspects of Bolshevism, leads to events like Kronstadt and the destruction of soviet power by party power. The arguments for centralisation mean, in practice, the concentration of power in the centre, in the hands of the party leaders, as the working masses cannot be trusted to make the correct ("revolutionary") decisions. This centralised power is then used to impose the will of the leaders, who use state power against the very class they claim to represent:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 42, p. 170]

In other words, whoever protests against the dictatorship of the party.

Of course, it will be replied that the Bolshevik dictatorship used its power to crush the resistance of the bosses (and "*backward workers*"). Sadly, this is not the

case. First, we must stress that anarchists are **not** against defending a revolution or expropriating the power and wealth of the ruling class, quite the reverse as this is about **how** a revolution does this. Lenin's argument is flawed as it confuses the defence of the revolution with the defence of the party in power. These are two totally different things.

The "*revolutionary coercion*" Lenin speaks of is, apparently, directed against one part of the working class. However, this will also intimidate the rest (just as bourgeois repression not only intimidates those who strike but those who may think of striking). As a policy, it can have but one effect — to eliminate **all** workers' power and freedom. It is the violence of an oppressive minority against the oppressed majority, not vice versa. Ending free speech harmed working class people. Militarisation of labour did not affect the bourgeoisie. Neither did eliminating soviet democracy or union independence. As the dissident (working class) Communist Gavriii Miasnokov argued in 1921 (in reply to Lenin):

*"The trouble is that, while you raise your hand against the capitalist, you deal a blow to the worker. You know very well that for such words as I am now uttering hundreds, perhaps thousands, of workers are languishing in prison. That I myself remain at liberty is only because I am a veteran Communist, have suffered for my beliefs, and am known among the mass of workers. Were it not for this, were I just an ordinary mechanic from the same factory, where would I be now? In a Cheka prison or, more likely, made to 'escape,' just as I made Mikhail Romanov 'escape.' Once more I say: You raise your hand against the bourgeoisie, but it is I who am spitting blood, and it is we, the workers, whose jaws are being cracked."* [quoted by Paul Avrich, **G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group**]

This can be seen from the make-up of Bolshevik prisoners. Of the 17 000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40 913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Unsurprisingly, Miasnikov refused to denounce the Kronstadt insurgents nor would he have participated in their suppression had he been called upon to do so.

Thus, the ideas of centralisation supported by Leninists are harmful to the real gains of a revolution, namely working class freedom and power (as we noted in section 12, some of them do not even mention these when indicating the gains of 1917). Indeed, this can be seen all through the history of Bolshevism.

Bambery states (correctly) that “*Lenin and the Bolsheviks initially opposed*” the spontaneously formed soviets of 1905. Incredulously, however, he assigns this opposition to the assertion that their “*model of revolution was still shaped by that of the greatest previous revolution in France in 1789.*” [Ibid.] In reality, it was because they considered, to quote a leading Bolshevik, that “*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*” [P. N. Gvozdev, quoted by, Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, p. 77]

The soviet, in other words, could not represent the interests of the working class because it was elected by them! Trotsky repeated this argument almost word for word in 1920 when he argued that “*it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party*” and that there is “*no substitution at all*” when the “*power of the party*” replaces that of the working class. The party, he stressed, “*has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour.*” [Communistism and Terrorism] How labour could express this “*supremacy*” when it could not even vote for its delegates (never mind manage society) is never explained.

In 1905, the Bolsheviks saw the soviets as a rival to their party and demanded it either accept their political program or simply become a trade-union like organisation. They feared that it pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the “*subordination of consciousness to spontaneity.*” [Oskar Anweiler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 78] This was following Lenin in *What is to be Done?*, where he had argued that the “*spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*” [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 82] This perspective is at the root of all Bolshevik justifications for party power after the October revolution.

Such a combination of political assumptions inevitably leads to such events as Kronstadt. With the perception that spontaneous developments inevitably leads to bourgeois domination, any attempt to revoke Bolshevik delegates and elect others to soviets **must** represent counter-revolutionary tendencies. As the working class is divided and subject to “*vacillations*” due to “*wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves,*” working class people simply cannot manage society themselves. Hence the need for “*the Leninist principle*” of “*the dictatorship of the party.*” And, equally logically, to events like Kronstadt.

Thus Cornelius Castoriadis:

*“To manage the work of others — this is the beginning and the end of the whole cycle of exploitation. The ‘need’ for a specific social category to manage the work*

*of others in production (and the activity of others in politics and in society), the 'need' for a separate business management and for a Party to rule the State — this is what Bolshevism proclaimed as soon as it seized power, and this is what it zealously laboured to impose. We know that it achieved its ends. Insofar as ideas play a role in the development of history — and, **in the final analysis**, they play an enormous role — the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy.*” [Political and Social Writings, vol. 3, p. 104]

Moreover, the logic of the Bolshevik argument is flawed:

*“if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing a genius from the votes of a mass of fools? And what will happen to the minorities which are still the most intelligent, most active and radical part of a society?”* [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 53]

Hence the need for soviet democracy and self-management, of the demands of the Kronstadt revolt. As Malatesta put it, *“[o]nly freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom.”* [Life and Ideas, p. 59] The *“epic of Kronstadt”* proves **“conclusively that what belongs really to the workers and peasants can be neither governmental nor statist, and what is governmental and statist can belong neither to the workers nor the peasants.”** [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 503]

Anarchists are well aware that differences in political perspective exists within the working class. We are also aware of the importance of revolutionaries organising together to influence the class struggle, raising the need for revolution and the creation of working class organisations which can smash and replace the state with a system of self-managed communes and workers’ councils. However, we reject the Bolshevik conclusion for centralised power (i.e. power delegated to the centre) as doomed to failure. Rather, we agree with Bakunin who argued that revolutionary groups must *“not seek anything for themselves, neither privilege nor honour nor power”* and reject *“any idea of dictatorship and custodial control.”* The *“revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations . . . organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegations . . . [who] will set out to administer public services, not to rule over peoples.”* [Michael Bakunin: **Selected Writings**, p. 172]

Anarchists seek to influence working people directly, via their natural influence in working class organisations like workers' councils, unions and so on. Only by discussion, debate and self-activity can the political perspectives of working class people develop and change. This is impossible in a centralised system based on party dictatorship. Debate and discussion are pointless if they have no effect on the process of the revolution nor if working people cannot elect their own delegates. Nor can self-activity be developed if the government uses "*revolutionary coercion*" against "*waving or unstable elements*" (i.e. those who do not unquestioningly follow the orders of the government or practice initiative).

In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is, in fact, the strongest argument against it. By concentrating power in the hands of a few, the political development of the bulk of the population is hindered. No longer in control of their fate, of **their** revolution, they will become prey to counter-revolutionary tendencies.

Nor was the libertarian approach impossible to implement during a revolution or civil war. Anarchists applied their ideas very successfully in the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine. In the areas they protected, the Makhnovists refused to dictate to the workers and peasants what to do:

*"The freedom of the peasants and workers, said the Makhnovists, resides in the peasants and workers themselves and may not be restricted. In all fields of their lives it is up to the workers and peasants to construct whatever they consider necessary. As for the Makhnovists — they can only assist them with advice, by putting at their disposal the intellectual or military forces they need, but under no circumstances can the Makhnovists prescribe for them in advance."* [Peter Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 148]

The Makhnovists urged workers to form free soviets and labour unions and to use them to manage their own fates. They organised numerous conferences of workers' and peasants' delegates to discuss political and military developments as well as to decide how to re-organise society from the bottom up in a self-managed manner. After they had liberated Aleksandrovsk, for example, they "*invited the working population to participate in a general conference of the workers of the city . . . and it was proposed that the workers organise the life in the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their own organisations.*" [Op. Cit., p. 149] In contrast, the Bolsheviks tried to **ban** congresses of workers', peasants' and soldiers' delegates organised by the Makhnovists (once by Dybenko and once by Trotsky). [Op. Cit., pp. 98–104 and 120–5]

The Makhnovists replied by holding the conferences anyway, asking "*[c]an there exist laws made by a few people who call themselves revolutionaries, which*



*permit them to outlaw a whole people who are more revolutionary than they are themselves?” and “[w]hose interests should the revolution defend: those of the Party or those of the people who set the revolution in motion with their blood?” Makhno himself stated that he “consider[ed] it an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call conferences on their own account, to discuss their affairs.” [Op. Cit., p. 103 and p. 129]*

These actions by the Bolsheviks should make the reader ponder if the elimination of workers’ democracy during the civil war can be fully explained by the objective conditions facing Lenin’s government or whether Leninist ideology played an important role in it. Indeed, the Kronstadt revolt occurred, in part, because in February 1921 the administration of the Baltic Fleet and the Communist Party organisation had collapsed, so allowing “*unauthorised meetings of ships’ crews . . . [to] tak[e] place behind the backs of their commissars, there being too few loyal rank and file party members left to nip them in the bud.*” [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917–1921**, p. 212]

Thus, the anarchist argument is no utopian plan. Rather, it is one which has been applied successfully in the same circumstances which Trotskyists argue forced the Bolsheviks to act as they did. As can be seen, a viable alternative approach existed and was applied (see the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?” for more on the Makhnovists).

The terrible objective circumstances facing the revolution obviously played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution. However, this is not the whole story. The ideas of the Bolsheviks played a key role as well. The circumstances the Bolsheviks faced may have shaped certain aspects of their actions, but it cannot be denied that the impulse for these actions were rooted in Bolshevik theory.

In regards to this type of analysis, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank argues that anarchists think that bureaucratic conceptions “*beget bureaucracy*” and that “*it is ideas, or deviations from them, that determine the character of revolutions. The most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism has laid low historical materialism.*” This means, apparently, that anarchists ignore objective factors in the rise of the bureaucracy such as “*the country’s backwardness, low cultural level, and the isolation of the revolution.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 22–3]

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. What anarchists argue (like Lenin before the October revolution) is that **every** revolution will suffer from isolation, uneven political development, economic problems and so on (i.e. “*exceptional circumstances,*” see section 12). The question is whether your revolution can survive them and whether your political ideas can meet these challenges without aiding bureaucratic deformations. As can be seen from the Russian Revolution, Leninism fails that test.

Moreover, Frank is being incredulous. If we take his argument seriously then we have to conclude that Bolshevik ideology played **no** role in how the revolution developed. In other words, he subscribes to the contradictory position that Bolshevik politics were essential to the success of the revolution and yet played no role in its outcome.

The facts of the matter is that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold — they will not occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot — and their ideas are shaped by the social relationships they experience. Thus, someone placed into a position of power over others will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations.

So, obviously “ideas” matter, particularly during a revolution. Someone in favour of centralisation, centralised power and who equates party rule with class rule (like Lenin and Trotsky), will act in ways (and create structures) totally different from someone who believes in decentralisation and federalism. In other words, political ideas do matter in society. Nor do anarchists leave our analysis at this obvious fact, we also argue that the types of organisation people create and work in shapes the way they think and act. This is because specific kinds of organisation have specific authority relations and so generate specific social relationships. These obviously affect those subject to them — a centralised, hierarchical system will create authoritarian social relationships which shape those within it in totally different ways than a decentralised, egalitarian system. That Frank denies this obvious fact suggests he knows nothing of materialist philosophy and subscribes to the distinctly lobotomised (and bourgeois) “historical materialism” of Lenin (see Anton Pannekoek’s **Lenin as Philosopher** for details).

The attitude of Leninists to the Kronstadt event shows quite clearly that, for all their lip-service to history from below, they are just as fixated with leaders as is bourgeois history. As Cornelius Castoriadis argues:

*“Now, we should point out that it is not workers who write history. It is always the **others**. And these others, whoever they may be, have a historical existence only insofar as the masses are passive, or active simply to support them, and this is precisely what ‘the others’ will tell us at every opportunity. Most of the time these others will not even possess eyes to see and ears to hear the gestures and utterances that express people’s autonomous activity. In the best of instances, they will sing the praises of this activity so long as it **miraculously** coincides with their own line, but they will radically condemn it, and impute to it the basest motives, as soon as it strays therefrom. Thus Trotsky describes in grandiose terms the anonymous workers of Petrograd moving ahead of the*

*Bolshevik party or mobilising themselves during the Civil War, but later on he was to characterise the Kronstadt rebels as ‘stool pigeons’ and ‘hirelings of the French High Command.’ They lack the categories of thought — the brain cells, we might dare say — necessary to understand, or even to record, this activity as it really occurs: to them, an activity that is not instituted, that has neither boss nor program, has no status; it is not even clearly perceivable, except perhaps in the mode of ‘disorder’ and ‘troubles.’ The autonomous activity of the masses belongs by definition to what is **repressed** in history.” [Op. Cit., p. 91]*

The Trotskyist accounts of the Kronstadt revolt, with their continual attempts to portray it as a White conspiracy, proves this analysis is correct. Indeed, the possibility that the revolt was a spontaneous mass revolt with political aims was dismissed by one of them as “*absurd*” and instead was labelled the work of “*backward peasants*” being misled by SRs and spies. Like the capitalist who considers a strike the work of “outside agitators” and “communists” misleading their workers, the Trotskyists present an analysis of Kronstadt reeking of elitism and ideological incomprehension. Independence on behalf of the working class is dismissed as “backward” and to be corrected by the “proletarian dictatorship.” Clearly Bolshevik ideology played a key role in the rise of Stalinism.

Lastly, the supporters of Bolshevism argue that in suppressing the revolt “*the Bolsheviks only did their duty. They defended the conquests of the revolution against the assaults of the counterrevolution.*” [Wright, Op. Cit., p. 123] In other words, we can expect more Kronstadts if these “revolutionaries” gain power. The “*temporary vacillations*” of future revolutions will, like Kronstadt, be rectified by bullets when the Party “*assert[s] its dictatorship even if its dictatorship clashes even with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy.*” [Trotsky, quoted by M. Brinton, Op. Cit., p. 78] No clearer condemnation of Bolshevism as a socialist current is required.

And, we must ask, what, exactly, were these “conquests” of the revolution that must be defended? The suppression of strikes, independent political and labour organisations, elimination of freedom of speech, assembly and press and, of course, the elimination of soviet and union democracy in favour of party dictatorship? Which, of course, for all Leninists, is the **real** revolutionary conquest. Any one who attacks that is, of course, a counter-revolutionary (even if they are workers). Thus:

*“Attitudes to the Kronstadt events, expressed . . . years after the event often provide deep insight into the political thinking of contemporary revolutionaries. They may in fact provide a deeper insight into their conscious or unconscious*

*aims than many a learned discussion about economics, or philosophy or about other episodes of revolutionary history.*

*“It is a question of one’s basic attitude as to what socialism is all about. what are epitomised in the Kronstadt events are some of the most difficult problems of revolutionary strategy and revolutionary ethics: the problems of ends and means, of the relations between Party and masses, in fact whether a Party is necessary at all. Can the working class by itself only develop a trade union consciousness? . . .*

*“Or can the working class develop a deeper consciousness and understanding of its interests than can any organisations allegedly acting on its behalf? When Stalinists or Trotskyists speak of Kronstadt as ‘an essential action against the class enemy’ when some more ‘sophisticated’ revolutionaries refer to it as a ‘tragic necessity,’ one is entitled to pause for thought. One is entitled to ask how seriously they accept Marx’s dictum that ‘the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself.’ Do they take this seriously or do they pay mere lip service to the words? Do they identify socialism with the autonomy (organisational and ideological) of the working class? Or do they see themselves, with their wisdom as to the ‘historic interests’ of others, and with their judgements as to what should be ‘permitted,’ as the leadership around which the future elite will crystallise and develop? One is entitled not only to ask . . . but also to suggest the answer!” [“Preface”, Ida Mett’s **The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 26–7]*

The issue is simple — either socialism means the self-emancipation of the working class or it does not. Leninist justifications for the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt simply means that for the followers of Bolshevism, when necessary, the party will paternalistically repress the working class for their own good. The clear implication of this Leninist support of the suppression of Kronstadt is that, for Leninism, it is dangerous to allow working class people to manage society and transform it as they see fit as they will make wrong decisions (like vote for the wrong party). If the party leaders decide a decision by the masses is incorrect, then the masses are overridden (and repressed). So much for “*all power to the soviets*” or “*workers’ power*.”

Ultimately, Wright’s comments (and those like it) show that Bolshevism’s commitment to workers’ power and democracy is non-existent. What is there left of workers’ self-emancipation, power or democracy when the “workers state” represses the workers for trying to practice these essential features of any real form of socialism? It is the experience of Bolshevism in power that best refutes the Marxist claim that the workers’ state “will be democratic and participatory.”

The suppression of Kronstadt was just one of a series of actions by the Bolsheviks which began, **before** the start of the Civil War, with them abolishing soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, abolishing elected officers and soldiers soviets in the Red Army and Navy and replacing workers' self-management of production by state-appointed managers with "*dictatorial*" powers (see sections H.4 and 2 for details).

As Bakunin predicted, the "workers' state" did not, could not, be "participatory" as it was still a state. Kronstadt is part of the empirical evidence which proves Bakunin's predictions on the authoritarian nature of Marxism. These words by Bakunin were confirmed by the Kronstadt rebellion and the justifications made at the time and afterwards by the supporters of Bolshevism:

*"What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class?' Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 million be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one would be ruled. Then there will be no government, there will be no state; but if there is a state, there will also be those who are ruled, there will be slaves.*

*"In the Marxists' theory this dilemma is resolved in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage — the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school — is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will.*

*"So . . . it always comes down to the same dismal result: government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people. . .*

*"They say that this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, the means. Thus, for the masses to be liberated they must first be enslaved. . . They claim that only a dictatorship (theirs, of course) can create popular freedom. We reply that no dictatorship can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself, and that it can engender and nurture only slavery in the people who endure it. Liberty can only be created*

*by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.*" [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 178–9]

# What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?

As is well known, the Russian Revolution failed. Rather than produce socialism, the Bolshevik revolution gave birth to an autocratic party dictatorship residing over a state capitalist economy. In turn, this regime gave rise to the horrors of Stalin's system. While Stalinism was denounced by all genuine socialists, a massive debate has existed within the Marxist movement over when, exactly, the Russian Revolution failed and why it did. Some argue around 1924, others say around 1928, some (libertarian Marxists) argue from the Bolshevik seizure of power. The reasons for the failure tend to be more readily agreed upon: isolation, the economic and social costs of civil war, the "backward" nature of Russian society and economy are usually listed as the key factors. Moreover, what the Stalinist regime was is also discussed heatedly in such circles. Some (orthodox Trotskyists) claiming it was a "degenerated workers state," others (such as the neo-Trotskyist UK SWP) that it was "state capitalist."

For anarchists, however, the failure of Bolshevism did not come as a surprise. In fact, just as with the reformist fate of the Social Democrats, the failure of the Russian Revolution provided empirical evidence for Bakunin's critique of Marx. As Emma Goldman recounts in her memoirs

*"Professor Harold Laski . . . expressed the opinion that I ought to take some comfort in the vindication anarchism had received by the Bolsheviki. I agreed, adding that not only their regime, but their stepbrothers as well, the Socialists in power in other countries, had demonstrated the failure of the Marxian State better than any anarchist argument. Living proof was always more convincing than theory. Naturally I did not regret the Socialist failure but I could not rejoice in it in the face of the Russian tragedy."* [Living My Life, vol. 2, p. 969]

Given that Leninists claim that the Russian revolution was a success (at least initially) and so proves the validity of their ideology, anarchists have a special duty to analysis and understand what went wrong. Simply put, if the Russian Revolution was a "success," Leninism does not need "failures"

This section of the FAQ will discuss these explanations for the failure of Bolshevism. Simply put, anarchists are not convinced by Leninist explanations on why Bolshevism created a new class system, not socialism.

This subject is very important. Unless we learn the lessons of history we will be doomed to repeat them. Given the fact that many people who become interested

in socialist ideas will come across the remnants of Leninist parties it is important that anarchists explain clearly and convincingly why the Russian Revolution failed and the role of Bolshevik ideology in that process. We need to account why a popular revolution became in a few short years a state capitalist party dictatorship. As Noam Chomsky put it:

*“In the stages leading up to the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, there **were** incipient socialist institutions developing in Russia — workers’ councils, collectives, things like that. And they survived to an extent once the Bolsheviks took over — but not for very long; Lenin and Trotsky pretty much eliminated them as they consolidated their power. I mean, you can argue about the **justification** for eliminating them, but the fact is that the socialist initiatives were pretty quickly eliminated.*

*“Now, people who want to justify it say, ‘The Bolsheviks had to do it’ — that’s the standard justification: Lenin and Trotsky had to do it, because of the contingencies of the civil war, for survival, there wouldn’t have been food otherwise, this and that. Well, obviously the question is, was that true. To answer that, you’ve got to look at the historical facts: I don’t think it was true. In fact, I think the incipient socialist structures in Russia were dismantled **before** the really dire conditions arose . . . But reading their own writings, my feeling is that Lenin and Trotsky knew what they were doing, it was conscious and understandable.”*  
[**Understanding Power**, p. 226]

As we discussed in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, Chomsky’s feelings are more than supported by the historical record. The elimination of meaningful working class freedom and self-management started from the start and was firmly in place before the start of the civil war at the end of May, 1918. The civil war simply accelerated processes which had already started, strengthened policies that had already been applied. And it could be argued that rather than impose alien policies onto Bolshevism, the civil war simply brought the hidden (and not-so-hidden) state capitalist and authoritarian politics of Marxism and Leninism to the fore.

Which is why analysing the failure of the revolution is important. If the various arguments presented by Leninists on why Bolshevism failed (and, consequently, Stalinism developed) can be refuted, then we are left with the key issues of revolutionary politics — whether Bolshevik politics had a decisive negative impact on the development of the Russian Revolution and, if so, there is an alternative to those politics. As regards the first issue, as we discussed in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, anarchists argue that this was the case. Bolshevik ideology itself played a key role in the



degeneration of the revolution. And as regards the second one, anarchists can point to the example of the Makhnovists, which proves that alternative policies were possible and could be applied with radically different outcomes (see the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?” for more on the Makhnovist movement).

This means that anarchists stress the interplay between the “objective factors” and the subjective one (i.e. party ideology). Faced with difficult circumstances, people and parties react in different ways. If they did not then it would imply what they thought has no impact at all on their actions. It also means that the politics of the Bolsheviks played no role in their decisions. As we discussed in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, this position simply cannot be maintained. Leninist ideology itself played a key role in the rise of Stalinism. A conclusion Leninists reject. They, of course, try to distance themselves from Stalinism, correctly arguing that it was a brutal and undemocratic system. The problem is that it was Lenin and Trotsky rather than Stalin who first shot strikers, banned left papers, radical organisations and party factions, sent workers and revolutionaries to the gulags, advocated and introduced one-man management and piece-work in the workplace, eliminated democracy in the military and shut down soviets elected with the “wrong” (i.e. non-Bolshevik) delegates.

Many Leninists know nothing of these facts. Their parties simply do not tell them the whole story of when Lenin and Trotsky were in power. Others do know and attempt to justify these actions. When anarchists discuss why the Russian Revolution failed, these Leninists have basically one reply. They argue that anarchists never seem to consider the objective forces at play during the Russian revolution, namely the civil war, the legacy of World War One, the international armies of counter-revolution and economic disruption. These “*objective factors*” meant that the revolution was, basically, suffocated and where the overriding contribution to the rise of militarism and the crushing of democracy within the soviets.

For anarchists such “*objective factors*” do not (and must not) explain why the Russian Revolution failed. This is because, as we argue in the following sections, almost all revolutions will face the same, or similar, problems. Indeed, in sections 1 and 2 both anarchists like Kropotkin and Marxists like Lenin argued that this was the case. As we discussed in section H.2.1, Leninists like to claim that they are “*realistic*” (unlike the “*utopian*” anarchists) and recognise civil war is inevitable in a revolution. As section 3 indicates, any defence of Bolshevism based on blaming the impact of the civil war is both factually and logically flawed. As far as economic disruption goes, as we discuss in section 4 this explanation of Bolshevik authoritarianism is unconvincing as every revolution will face this

problem. Then section 5 analyses the common Leninist argument that the revolution failed because the Russian working class became “atomised” or “declassed.” As that section indicates, the Russian working class was more than capable of collective action throughout the 1918 to 1921 period (and beyond). The problem was that it was directed **against** the Bolshevik party. Finally, section 6 indicates whether the Bolshevik leaders explained their actions in terms of the “objective factors” they faced.

It should be stressed that we are discussing these factors individually simply because it is easier to do so. In reality, it is less hard to do so. For example, civil war will, undoubtedly, mean economic disruption. Economic disruption will mean unemployment and that will affect the working class via unemployment and less goods available (for example). So just because we separate the specific issues for discussion purposes, it should not be taken to imply that we are not aware of their combined impact on the Russian Revolution.

Of course there is the slight possibility that the failure of Bolshevism can be explained **purely** in these terms. Perhaps a future revolution will be less destructive, less isolated, less resisted than the Russian (although, as we noted in the section 2, leading Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin doubted this). That is a possibility. However, should we embrace an ideology whose basic, underlying, argument is based on the hope that fate will be kinder to them this time? As Lenin argued against the Russian left-communists in early 1918:

*“Yes, we shall see the world revolution, but for the time being it is a very good fairy-tale . . . But I ask, is it proper for a serious revolutionary to believe in fairy-tales? . . . [I]f you tell the people that civil war will break out in Germany and also guarantee that instead of a clash with imperialism we shall have a field revolution on a world-wide scale, the people will say you are deceiving them. In doing this you will be overcoming the difficulties with which history has confronted us only in your minds, by your wishes . . . You are staking everything on this card! If the revolution breaks out, everything is saved . . . But if it does not turn out as we desire, if it does not achieve victory tomorrow — what then? Then the masses will say to you, you acted like gamblers — you staked everything on a fortunate turn of events that did not take place . . .”*  
[Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 102]

Anarchists have always recognised that a revolution would face problems and difficult “objective factors” and has developed our ideas accordingly. We argue that to blame “*objective factors*” on the failure of the Russian Revolution simply shows that believing in fairy-tales is sadly far too common on the “*serious*” Leninist “revolutionary” left. And as we discuss in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik

ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the impact of Bolshevik ideology on the failure of the revolution was important and decisive. Even if the next revolution is less destructive, it cannot be argued that socialism will be the result if Bolshevik ideology is reapplied. And as Cornelius Castoriadis argues, “this ‘response’ [of explaining the failure of the Russian Revolution on “objective factors”] teaches us nothing we could extend beyond the confines of the Russian situation in 1920. The sole conclusion to be drawn from this kind of ‘analysis’ is that revolutionaries should ardently hope that future revolutions break out in more advanced countries, that they should not remain isolated, and that civil wars should not in the least be devastating.” [The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy, p. 92] While this may be sufficient for the followers of Bolshevism, it cannot be sufficient for anyone who wants to learn from history, not to repeat it.

Ultimately, if difficult times back in 1918–21 justified suppressing working class freedom and self-management, imprisoning and shooting anarchists and other socialists, implementing and glorifying party dictatorship, what might we expect in difficult times in the future? Simply put, if your defence of the Bolsheviks rests simply on “difficult circumstances” then it can only mean one thing, namely if “difficult circumstances” occur again we can expect the same outcome.

One last point. We should stress that libertarians do not think any future revolution will suffer as terrible conditions as that experienced by the Russian one. However, it might and we need to base our politics on the worse case possibility. That said, we argue that Bolshevik policies made things worse — by centralising economic and political power, they automatically hindered the participation of working class people in the revolution, smothering any creative self-activity under the dead-weight of state officialdom. As a libertarian revolution would be based on maximising working class self-activity (at all levels, locally and upwards) we would argue that it would be better placed to respond to even the terrible conditions facing the Russian Revolution.

That is not all. As we argue in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?” we are of the opinion that Bolshevism itself undermined the socialist potential of the revolution, irrespective of the actual circumstances involved (which, to some degree, will affect **any** revolution). For example, the Bolshevik preference for centralisation and nationalisation would negatively affect a revolution conducted in even the best circumstances, as would the seizure of state power rather than its destruction. As is clear from the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, only the elimination of what makes Bolshevism Bolshevik would ensure that a revolution would be truly libertarian. So anarchists stress that rather than be forced upon them by “objective factors” many of these policies were, in fact, in

line with pre-civil war Bolshevik ideas. The Bolshevik vision of socialism, in other words, ensured that they smothered the (libertarian) socialist tendencies and institutions that existed at the time. As Chomsky summarises, “*Lenin and Trotsky, shortly after seizing state power in 1917, moved to dismantle organs of popular control, including factory committees and Soviets, thus proceeding to deter and overcome socialist tendencies.*” [**Deterring Democracy**, p. 361] That they **thought** their system of state capitalism was a form of “socialism” is irrelevant — they systematically combated (real) socialist tendencies in favour of state capitalist ones and did so knowingly and deliberately (see sections H.3.1 and H.3.13 on the differences between real socialism and Marxism in its Bolshevik mode and, of course, “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” on Bolshevik practice itself).

So it is important to stress that even if the Russian Revolution had occurred in better circumstances, it is unlikely that Bolshevism would have resulted in socialism rather than state capitalism. Certain Bolshevik principles ensure that any revolution lead by a vanguard party would not have succeeded. This can be seen from the experience of Bolshevism immediately after it seized power, before the start of the civil war and major economic collapse. In the circumstances of post-world war I Russia, these principles were attenuated but their application in even the best of situations would have undermined socialist tendencies in the revolution. Simply put, a statist revolution will have statist, not libertarian, ends.

The focusing on “objective factors” (particularly the civil war) has become the traditional excuse for people with a romantic attachment to Leninism but who are unwilling to make a stand over what the Bolsheviks actually did in power. This excuse is not viable if you seek to build a revolutionary movement today: you need to choose between the real path of Lenin and the real, anarchist, alternative. As Lenin constantly stressed, a revolution will be difficult — fooling ourselves about what will happen now just undermines our chances of success in the future and ensure that history will repeat itself.

Essentially, the “objective factors” argument is not a defence of Leninism, but rather one that seeks to evade having to make such a defence. This is very typical of Leninist parties today. Revolutionary politics would be much better served by confronting this history and the politics behind it head on. Perhaps, if Leninists did do this, they would probably remain Leninists, but at least then their party members and those who read their publications would have an understanding of what this meant. And they would have to dump Lenin’s **State and Revolution** into the same place Lenin himself did when in power — into the rubbish bin — and admit that democracy and Bolshevik revolution do not go together.

It is precisely these rationalisations for Bolshevism based on “objective factors” which this section of the FAQ discusses and refutes. However, it is important to

stress that it was **not** a case of the Bolshevik regime wanting to introduce communism but, being isolated, ended up imposing state capitalism instead. Indeed, the idea that “objective factors” caused the degeneration of the revolution is only valid if and only if the Bolsheviks were implementing socialist policies during the period immediately after the October revolution. That was not the case. Rather than objective factors undermining socialist policies, the facts of the matter are that the Bolsheviks pursued a statist and (state) capitalist policy from the **start**. As we discuss in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?” the likes of Lenin explicitly argued for these policies as essential for building socialism (or, at best, the preconditions of socialism) in Russia and Bolshevik practice flowed from these comments. As we discuss in more detail in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, the Bolsheviks happily introduced authoritarian and state capitalist policies **from the start**. Many of the policies denounced as “Stalinist” by Leninists were being advocated and implemented by Lenin in the spring of 1918, i.e. before the start of the civil war and massive economic chaos. In other words, the usual excuses for Bolshevik tyranny do not hold much water, both factually and logically — as this section of the FAQ seeks to show.

And, ironically, the framework which Leninists use in this discussion shows the importance of Bolshevik ideology and the key role it played in the outcome of the revolution. After all, pro-Bolsheviks argue that the “*objective factors*” forced the **Bolsheviks** to act as they did. However, the proletariat is meant to be the “*ruling class*” in the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*.” As such, to argue that the Bolsheviks were forced to act as they did due to circumstances means to implicitly acknowledge that the party held power in Russia, **not** the working class. That a ruling party could become a party dictatorship is not that unsurprising. Nor that **its** vision of what “socialism” was would be given preference over the desires of the working class in whose name it ruled.

Ultimately, the discussion on why the Bolshevik party failed shows the validity of Bakunin’s critique of Marxism. As he put it:

*“Nor can we comprehend talk of freedom of the proletariat or true deliverance of the masses within the State and by the State. State signifies domination, and all domination implies subjection of the masses, and as a result, their exploitation to the advantage of some governing minority.*”

*“Not even as revolutionary transition will we countenance national Conventions, nor Constituent Assemblies, nor provisional governments, nor so called revolutionary dictatorships: because we are persuaded that revolution is sincere, honest and real only among the masses and that, whenever it is concentrated in*

*the hands of a few governing individuals, it inevitably and immediately turns into reaction.*” [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 160]

The degeneration of the Russian Revolution can be traced from when the Bolsheviks seized power **on behalf of** the Russian working class and peasantry. The state implies the delegation of power and initiative into the hands of a few leaders who form the “revolutionary government.” Yet the power of any revolution, as Bakunin recognised, derives from the decentralisation of power, from the active participation of the masses in the collective social movement and the direct action it generates. As soon as this power passes out of the hands of the working class, the revolution is doomed: the counter-revolution has begun and it matters little that it is draped in a red flag. Hence anarchist opposition to the state.

Sadly, many socialists have failed to recognise this. Hopefully this section of our FAQ will show that the standard explanations of the failure of the Russian revolution are, at their base, superficial and will only ensure that history will repeat itself.

## **1 Do anarchists ignore the objective factors facing the Russian revolution?**

It is often asserted by Leninists that anarchists simply ignore the “objective factors” facing the Bolsheviks when we discuss the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Thus, according to this argument, anarchists present a basically idealistic analysis of the failure of Bolshevism, one not rooted in the material conditions facing (civil war, economic chaos, etc.) facing Lenin and Trotsky.

According to one Trotskyist, anarchists “*do not make the slightest attempt at a serious analysis of the situation*” and so “*other considerations, of a different, ‘theoretical’ nature, are to be found in their works.*” Thus:

*“Bureaucratic conceptions beget bureaucracy just as opium begets sleep by virtue of its sleep-inducing properties. Trotsky was wrong to explain the proliferation and rise of the bureaucracy on the basis of the country’s backwardness, low cultural level, and the isolation of the revolution. No, what have rise to a social phenomenon like Stalinism was a conception or idea . . . it is ideas, or deviations from them, that determine the character of revolutions. The most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism has laid low historical materialism.”* [Pierre Frank, “Introduction,” Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 22–3]

Many other Trotskyists take a similar position (although most would include the impact of the Civil War on the rise of Bolshevik authoritarianism and the bureaucracy). Duncan Hallas, for example, argues that the account of the Bolshevik counter-revolution given in the Cohn-Bendit brothers' **Obsolete Communism** is marked by a "complete omission of any consideration of the circumstances in which they [Bolshevik decisions] took place. The ravages of war and civil war, the ruin of Russian industry, the actual disintegration of the Russian working class: all of this, apparently, has no bearing on the outcome." [**Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party**, p. 41] Thus the "degree to which workers can 'make their own history' depends on the weight of objective factors bearing down on them . . . To decide in any given circumstance the weight of the subjective and objective factors demands a concrete analysis of the balance of forces." The conditions in Russia meant that the "subjective factor" of Bolshevik ideology "was reduced to a choice between capitulation to the Whites or defending the revolution with whatever means were at hands. Within these limits Bolshevik policy was decisive. But it could not wish away the limits and start with a clean sheet. It is a tribute to the power of the Bolsheviks' politics and organisation that they took the measures necessary and withstood the siege for so long." [John Rees, "In Defence of October," pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 30]

So, it is argued, by ignoring the problems facing the Bolsheviks and concentrating on their **ideas**, anarchists fail to understand **why** the Bolsheviks acted as they did. Unsurprisingly anarchists are not impressed with this argument. This is for a simple reason. According to anarchist theory the "*objective factors*" facing the Bolsheviks are to be expected in **any** revolution. Indeed, the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin predicted that a revolution would face the very "*objective factors*" which Leninists use to justify and rationalise Bolshevik actions (see next section). As such, to claim that anarchists ignore the "*objective factors*" facing the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution is simply a joke. How can anarchists be considered to ignore what they consider to be the inevitable results of a revolution? Moreover, these Bolshevik assertions ignore the fact that the anarchists who wrote extensively about their experiences in Russia never failed to note that difficult objective factors facing it. Alexander Berkman in **The Bolshevik Myth** paints a clear picture of the problems facing the revolution, as does Emma Goldman in her **My Disillusionment in Russia**. This is not to mention anarchists like Voline, Arshinov and Maximoff who took part in the Revolution, experiencing the "*objective factors*" first hand (and in the case of Voline and Arshinov, participating in the Makhnovist movement which, facing the same factors, managed **not** to act as the Bolsheviks did).

However, as the claim that anarchists ignore the "*objective circumstances*" facing the Bolsheviks is relatively common, it is important to refute it once and for all.

This means that while we have discussed this issue in association with Leninist justifications for repressing the Kronstadt revolt (see section 12 of the appendix “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”), it is worthwhile repeating them here. We are sorry for the duplication.

Anarchists take it for granted that, to quote Bakunin, revolutions “*are not child’s play*” and that they mean “*war, and that implies the destruction of men and things.*” The “*Social Revolution must put an end to the old system of organisation based upon violence, giving full liberty to the masses, groups, communes, and associations, and likewise to individuals themselves, and destroying once and for all the historic cause of all violences, the power and existence of the State.*” This meant a revolution would be “*spontaneous, chaotic, and ruthless, always presupposes a vast destruction of property.*” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 372, p. 373, p. 380] In other words:

*“The way of the anarchist social revolution, which will come from the people themselves, is an elemental force sweeping away all obstacles. Later, from the depths of the popular soul, there will spontaneously emerge the new creative forms of life.”* [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 325]

He took it for granted that counter-revolution would exist, arguing that it was necessary to “*constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces . . . to organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction*” and “*for the purpose of self-defence.*” [Selected Writings, p. 171]

It would, of course, be strange if this necessity for defence and reconstruction would have little impact on the economic conditions in the revolutionised society. The expropriation of the means of production and the land by a free federation of workers’ associations would have an impact on the economy. Kropotkin built upon Bakunin’s arguments, stressing that a **social** revolution would, by necessity, involve major difficulties and harsh objective circumstances. It is worth quoting one of his many discussions of this at length:

*“Suppose we have entered a revolutionary period, with or without civil war — it does not matter, — a period when old institutions are falling into ruins and new ones are growing in their place. The movement may be limited to one State, or spread over the world, — it will have nevertheless the same consequence: an immediate slackening of individual enterprise all over Europe. Capital will conceal itself, and hundreds of capitalists will prefer to abandon their undertakings and go to watering-places rather than abandon their unfixed capital in industrial production. And we know how a restriction of production*



*in any one branch of industry affects many others, and these in turn spread wider and wider the area of depression.*

*“Already, at this moment, millions of those who have created all riches suffer from want of what must be considered **necessaries** for the life of a civilised man. . . . Let the slightest commotion be felt in the industrial world, and it will take the shape of a general stoppage of work. Let the first attempt at expropriation be made, and the capitalist production of our days will at once come to a stop, and millions and millions of ‘unemployed’ will join the ranks of those who are already unemployed now.*

*“More than that . . . . The very first advance towards a Socialist society will imply a thorough reorganisation of industry as **to what we have to produce**. Socialism implies . . . . a transformation of industry so that it may be adapted to the needs of the customer, not those of the profit-maker. Many a branch of industry must disappear, or limits its production; many a new one must develop. We are now producing a great deal for export. But the export trade will be the first to be reduced as soon as attempts at Social Revolution are made anywhere in Europe . . . .*

*“All that **can** be, and **will** be reorganised in time — not by the State, of course (why, then, not say by Providence?), but by the workers themselves. But, in the meantime, the worker . . . . cannot wait for the gradual reorganisation of industry. . . .*

*“The great problem of how to supply the wants of millions will thus start up at once in all its immensity. And the necessity of finding an **immediate solution** for it is the reason we consider that a step in the direction of [libertarian] Communism will be imposed on the revolted society — not in the future, but as soon as it applies its crowbar to the first stones of the capitalist edifice.” [Act for Yourselves, pp. 57–9]*

As noted in section 12 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Uprising?”, the perspective was at the core of Kropotkin’s politics. His classic work **Conquest of Bread** was based on this clear understanding of the nature of a social revolution and the objective problems it will face. As he put it, while a “*political revolution can be accomplished without shaking the foundations of industry*” a revolution “*where the people lay hands upon property will inevitably paralyse exchange and production . . . . This point cannot be too much insisted upon; the reorganisation of industry on a new basis . . . . cannot be accomplished in a few days.*” Indeed, he considered it essential to “*show how tremendous this problem is.*” [**The Conquest of Bread**, pp. 72–3]

Therefore, “[o]ne of the great difficulties in every Revolution is the feeding of the large towns.” This was because the “large towns of modern times are centres of various industries that are developed chiefly for the sake of the rich or for the export trade” and these “two branches fail whenever any crisis occurs, and the question then arises of how these great urban agglomerations are to be fed.” This crisis, rather than making revolution impossible, spurred the creation of what Kropotkin terms “the communist movement” in which “the Parisian proletariat had already formed a conception of its class interests and had found men to express them well.” [Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution*, vol. II, p. 457 and p. 504]

As for self-defence, he reproached the authors of classic syndicalist utopia **How we shall bring about the Revolution** for “considerably attenuat[ing] the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way.” He stressed that the “check of the attempt at Revolution in Russia has shown us all the danger that may follow from an illusion of this kind.” [“preface,” Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the Revolution*, p. xxxvi]

It must, therefore, be stressed that the very “objective factors” supporters of Bolshevism use to justify the actions of Lenin and Trotsky were predicted correctly by anarchists decades before hand. Indeed, rather than ignore them anarchists like Kropotkin based their political and social ideas on these difficulties. As such, it seems ironic for Leninists to attack anarchists for allegedly ignoring these factors. It is even more ironic as these very same Leninists are meant to know that **any** revolution will involve these exact same “objective factors,” something that Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks acknowledged (see next section).

Therefore, as noted, when anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman arrived in Russia they were aware of the problems it, like any revolution, would face. In the words of Berkman, “what I saw and learned as in such crying contrast with my hopes and expectations as to shake the very foundation of my faith in the Bolsheviks. Not that I expected to find Russia a proletarian Eldorado. By no means. I knew how great the travail of a revolutionary period, how stupendous the difficulties to be overcome. Russia was besieged on numerous fronts; there was counter-revolution within and without; the blockade was starving the country and denying even medical aid to sick women and children. The people were exhausted by long war and civil strife; industry was disorganised, the railroads broken down. I fully realised the dire situation, with Russia shedding her blood on the altar of the Revolution.” [The Bolshevik Myth, p. 329] Emma Goldman expressed similar opinions. [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. xlvii-xlix]

Unsurprisingly, therefore this extremely realistic perspective can be found in their later works. Berkman, for example, stressed that “when the social revolution had become thoroughly organised and production is functioning normally there will be enough for everybody. But in the first stages of the revolution, during the process

*of re-construction, we must take care to supply the people the best we can, and equally, which means rationing.*” This was because the “*first effect of the revolution is reduced production.*” This would be initially due to the general strike which is its “*starting point.*” However, “[w]hen the social revolution begins in any land, its foreign commerce stops: the importation of raw materials and finished products is suspended. The country may even be blockaded by the bourgeois governments.” In addition, he thought it important not to suppress “*small scale industries*” as they would be essential when “*a country in revolution is attacked by foreign governments, when it is blockaded and deprived of imports, when its large-scale industries threaten to break down or the railways do break down.*” [ABC of Anarchism, p. 67, p. 74 p. 78–9 and p. 79]

He, of course, considered it essential that to counteract isolation workers must understand “*that their cause is international*” and that “*the organisation of labour*” must develop “*beyond national boundaries.*” However, “*the probability is not to be discounted that the revolution may break out in one country sooner than in another*” and “*in such a case it would become imperative . . . not to wait for possible aid from outside, but immediately to exert all her energies to help herself supply the most essential needs of her people by her own efforts.*” [Op. Cit., p. 78]

Emma Goldman, likewise, noted that it was “*a tragic fact that all revolutions have sprung from the loins of war. Instead of translating the revolution into social gains the people have usually been forced to defend themselves against warring parties.*” “*It seems,*” she noted, “*nothing great is born without pain and travail*” as well as “*the imperative necessity of defending the Revolution.*” However, in spite of these inevitable difficulties she point to how the Spanish anarchists “*have shown the first example in history how Revolutions should be made*” by “*the constructive work*” of “*socialising of the land, the organisation of the industries.*” [Vision on Fire, p. 218, p. 222 and p. 55–56]

These opinions were, as can be seen, to be expected from revolutionary anarchists schooled in the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin. Clearly, then, far from ignoring the “*objective factors*” facing the Bolsheviks, anarchists have based their politics around them. We have always argued that a social revolution would face isolation, economic disruption and civil war and have, for this reason, stressed the importance of mass participation in order to overcome them. As such, when Leninists argue that these inevitable “*objective factors*” caused the degeneration of Bolshevism, anarchists simply reply that if it cannot handle the inevitable then Bolshevism should be avoided. Just as we would avoid a submarine which worked perfectly well until it was placed in the sea or an umbrella which only kept you dry when it was not raining.

Moreover, what is to be made of this Leninist argument against anarchism? In fact, given the logic of their claims we have to argument we have to draw the

conclusion that the Leninists seem to think a revolution **could** happen **without** civil war and economic disruption. As such it suggests that the Leninists have the “*utopian*” politics in this matter. After all, if they argue that civil war is inevitable then how can they blame the degeneration of the revolution on it? Simply put, if Bolshevism cannot handle the inevitable it should be avoided at all costs.

Ironically, as indicated in the next section, we can find ample arguments to refute the Trotskyist case against the anarchist analysis in the works of leading Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin. Indeed, their arguments provide a striking confirmation of the anarchist position as they, like Kropotkin, stress that difficult “*objective factors*” will face **every** revolution. This means to use these factors to justify Bolshevik authoritarianism simply results in proving that Bolshevism is simply non-viable or that a liberatory social revolution is, in fact, impossible (and, as a consequence, genuine socialism).

There are, of course, other reasons why the Leninist critique of the anarchist position is false. The first is theoretical. Simply put, the Leninist position is the crudest form of economic determinism. Ideas **do** matter and, as Marx himself stressed, can play a key in how a social process develops. As we discuss in the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, Marxist ideology played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution and in laying the groundwork for the rise of Stalinism.

Ultimately, any Leninist defence of Bolshevism based purely on stressing the “*objective factor*” implies that Bolshevik ideology played **no role** in the decisions made by the party leaders, that they simply operated on autopilot from October 1917 onwards. Yet, at the same time, they stress the importance of Leninist ideology in ensuring the “victory” of the revolution. They seek to have it both ways. However, as Samuel Farber puts it:

*“determinism’s characteristic and systemic failure is to understand that what the masses of people do and think politically is as much part of the process determining the outcome of history as are the objective obstacles that most definitely limit peoples’ choices.”* [Before Stalinism, p. 198]

This is equally applicable when discussing the heads of a highly centralised state who have effectively expropriated political, economic and social power from the working class and are ruling in their name. Unsurprisingly, rather than just select policies at random the Bolshevik leadership pursued consistently before, during and after the civil war policies which reflected their ideology. Hence there was a preference in policies which centralised power in the hands of a few (politically **and** economically), that saw socialism as being defined by nationalisation rather than self-management, that stressed that role and power of the vanguard above

that of the working class, that saw class consciousness as being determined by how much a worker agreed with the party leadership rather than whether it expressed the actual needs and interests of the class as a whole.

Then there is the empirical evidence against the Trotskyist explanation.

As we indicate in section 3, soviet democracy and workers' power in the workplace was **not** undermined by the civil war. Rather, the process had begun before the civil war started and, equally significantly, continued after its end in November 1920. Moreover, the "gains" of October Trotskyists claim that Stalinism destroyed were, in fact, long dead by 1921. Soviet democracy, working class freedom of speech, association and assembly, workers' self-management or control in the workplace, trade union freedom, the ability to strike, and a host of other, elementary, working class rights had been eliminated long before the end of the civil war (indeed, often before it started) and, moreover, the Bolsheviks did not lament this. Rather, *"there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921."* [Samuel Farber, *Op. Cit.*, p. 44]

And then there is the example of the Makhnovist movement. Operating in the same "objective circumstances," facing the same "objective factors," the Makhnovists did **not** implement the same policies as the Bolsheviks. As we discussed in the appendix on "Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?", rather than undermine soviet, soldier and workplace democracy and replace all with party dictatorship, the Makhnovists applied these as fully as they could. Now, if "objective factors" explain the actions of the Bolsheviks, then why did the Makhnovists not pursue identical policies?

Simply put, the idea that Bolshevik policies did not impact on the outcome of the revolution is a false assertion, as the Makhnovists show. Beliefs are utopian if subjective ideas are not grounded in objective reality. Anarchists hold that part of the subjective conditions required before socialism can exist is the existence of free exchange of ideas and working class democracy (i.e. self-management). To believe that revolution is possible without freedom, to believe those in power can, through their best and genuine intentions, impose socialism from above, as the Bolsheviks did, is indeed utopian. As the Bolsheviks proved. The Makhnovists shows that the received wisdom is that there was no alternative open to the Bolsheviks is false.

So while it cannot be denied that objective factors influenced how certain Bolshevik policies were shaped and applied, the inspiration of those policies came from Bolshevik ideology. An acorn will grow and develop depending on the climate and location it finds itself in, but regardless of the "objective factors" it will grow into an oak tree. Similarly with the Russian revolution. While the

circumstances it faced influenced its growth, Bolshevik ideology could not help but produce an authoritarian regime with no relationship with **real** socialism.

In summary, anarchists do not ignore the objective factors facing the Bolsheviks during the revolution. As indicated, we predicted the problems they faced and developed our ideas to counter them. As the example of the Makhnovists showed, our ideas were more than adequate for the task. Unlike the Bolsheviks.

## 2 Can “*objective factors*” really explain the failure of Bolshevism?

As noted in the previous section Leninists tend to argue that anarchists downplay (at best) or ignore (at worse) the “*objective factors*” facing the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. As noted in the same section, this argument is simple false. For anarchists have long expected the “*objective factors*” usually used to explain the degeneration of the revolution.

However, there is more to it than that. Leninists claim to be revolutionaries. They claim to know that revolutions face problems, the civil war is inevitable and so forth. It therefore strikes anarchists as being somewhat hypocritical for Leninists to blame these very same “*objective*” but allegedly inevitable factors for the failure of Bolshevism in Russia.

Ironically enough, Lenin and Trotsky agree with these anarchist arguments. Looking at Trotsky, he dismissed the CNT’s leaderships’ arguments in favour of collaborating with the bourgeois state:

*“The leaders of the Spanish Federation of Labour (CNT) . . . became, in the critical hour, bourgeois ministers. They explained their open betrayal of the theory of anarchism by the pressure of ‘exceptional circumstances.’ But did not the leaders of the German social democracy invoke, in their time, the same excuse? Naturally, civil war is not a peaceful and ordinary but an ‘exceptional circumstance.’ Every serious revolutionary organisation, however, prepares precisely for ‘exceptional circumstances’ . . . We have not the slightest intention of blaming the anarchists for not having liquidated the state with the mere stroke of a pen. A revolutionary party, even having seized power (of which the anarchist leaders were incapable in spite of the heroism of the anarchist workers), is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society. But all the more severely do we blame the anarchist theory, which seemed to be wholly suitable for times of peace, but which had to be dropped rapidly as soon as the ‘exceptional circumstances’ of the . . . revolution had begun. In the old days there*

*were certain generals — and probably are now — who considered that the most harmful thing for an army was war. Little better are those revolutionaries who complain that revolution destroys their doctrine.” [Stalinism and Bolshevism]*

Thus to argue that the “*exceptional circumstances*” caused by the civil war are the only root cause of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution is a damning indictment of Bolshevism. After all, Lenin did not argue in **State and Revolution** that the application of soviet democracy was dependent only in “*times of peace.*” Rather, he stressed that they were for the “*exceptional circumstance*” of revolution and the civil war he considered its inevitable consequence. As such, we must note that Trotsky’s followers do not apply this critique to their own politics, which are also a form of the “*exceptional circumstances*” excuse. Given how quickly Bolshevik “*principles*” (as expressed in **The State and Revolution**) were dropped, we can only assume that Bolshevik ideas are also suitable purely for “*times of peace*” as well. As such, we must note the irony of Leninist claims that “*objective circumstances*” explains the failure of the Bolshevik revolution.

Saying that, we should not that Trotsky was not above using such arguments himself (making later-day Trotskyists at least ideologically consistent in their hypocrisy). In the same essay, for example, he justifies the prohibition of other Soviet parties in terms of a “*measure of defence of the dictatorship in a backward and devastated country, surrounded by enemies on all sides.*” In other words, an appeal to the exceptional circumstances facing the Bolsheviks! Perhaps unsurprisingly, his followers have tended to stress this (contradictory) aspect of his argument rather than his comments that those “*who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party dictatorship were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat. The Bolshevik party achieved in the civil war the correct combination of military art and Marxist politics.*” [Op. Cit.] Which, of course, suggests that the prohibition of other parties had little impact on levels of soviet “democracy” allowed under the Bolsheviks (see section 6 of the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for more on this).

This dismissal of the “*exceptional circumstances*” argument did not originate with Trotsky. Lenin repeatedly stressed that any revolution would face civil war and economic disruption. In early January, 1918, he was pointing to “*the incredibly complications of war and economic ruin*” in Russia and noting that “*the fact that Soviet power has been established . . . is why civil war has acquired predominance in Russia at the present time.*” [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 453 and p. 459]

A few months later he states quite clearly that “*it will never be possible to build socialism at a time when everything is running smoothly and tranquilly; it will never be possible to realise socialism without the landowners and capitalists putting up*

*a furious resistance.*” He reiterated this point, acknowledging that the “*country is poor, the country is poverty-stricken, and it is impossible just now to satisfy all demands; that is why it is so difficult to build the new edifice in the midst of disruption. But those who believe that socialism can be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistake: it will be everywhere built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine. That is how it must be.*” [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 520 and p. 517]

As regards civil war, he noted that “*not one of the great revolutions of history has take place*” without one and “*without which not a single serious Marxist has conceived the transition from capitalism to socialism.*” Moreover, “*there can be no civil war — the inevitable condition and concomitant of socialist revolution — without disruption.*” [Op. Cit., p. 496 and p. 497] He considered this disruption as being applicable to advanced capitalist nations as well:

*“In Germany, state capitalism prevails, and therefore the revolution in Germany will be a hundred times more devastating and ruinous than in a petty-bourgeois country — there, too, there will be gigantic difficulties and tremendous chaos and imbalance.”* [Op. Cit., vol. 28, p. 298]

And from June, 1918:

*“We must be perfectly clear in our minds about the new disasters that civil war brings for every country. The more cultured a country is the more serious will be these disasters. Let us picture to ourselves a country possessing machinery and railways in which civil war is raging., and this civil war cuts off communication between the various parts of the country. Picture to yourselves the condition of regions which for decades have been accustomed to living by the interchange of manufactured goods and you will understand that every civil war brings forth disasters.”* [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 463]

As we discuss in section 4, the economic state of Germany immediately after the end of the war suggests that Lenin had a point. Simply put, the German economy was in a serious state of devastation, a state equal to that of Russia during the equivalent period of its revolution. If economic conditions made party dictatorship inevitable in Bolshevik Russia (as pro-Leninists argue) it would mean that soviet democracy and revolution cannot go together.

Lenin reiterated this point again and again. He argued that “*we see famine not only in Russia, but in the most cultured, advanced countries, like Germany . . . it is spread over a longer period than in Russia, but it is famine nevertheless, still more severe and painful than here.*” In fact, “*today even the richest countries are experiencing unprecedented food shortages and that the overwhelming majority of*



*the working masses are suffering incredible torture.*” [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 460 and p. 461]

Lenin, unlike many of his latter day followers, did not consider these grim objective conditions are making revolution impossible. Rather, for him, there was “*no other way out of this war*” which is causing the problems “*except revolution, except civil war . . . a war which always accompanies not only great revolutions but every serious revolution in history.*” He continued by arguing that we “*must be perfectly clear in our minds about the new disasters that civil war brings for every country. The more cultured a country is the more serious will be these disasters. Let us picture to ourselves a country possessing machinery and railways in which civil war is raging, and this civil war cuts communication between the various parts of the country. Picture to yourselves the condition of regions which for decades have been accustomed to living by interchange of manufactured goods and you will understand that every civil war brings fresh disasters.*” [Op. Cit., p. 463] The similarities to Kropotkin’s arguments made three decades previously are clear (see section 1 for details).

Indeed, he mocked those who would argue that revolution could occur with “*exceptional circumstances*”:

*“A revolutionary would not ‘agree’ to a proletarian revolution only ‘on the condition’ that it proceeds easily and smoothly, that there is, from the outset, combined action on the part of proletarians of different countries, that there are guarantees against defeats, that the road of the revolution is broad, free and straight, that it will not be necessary during the march to victory to sustain the heaviest casualties, to ‘bide one’s time in a besieged fortress,’ or to make one’s way along extremely narrow, impassable, winding and dangerous mountain tracks. Such a person is no revolutionary.”* [Selected Works, vol. 2, p. 709]

He then turned his fire on those who failed to recognise the problems facing a revolution and instead simply blamed the Bolsheviki:

*“The revolution engendered by the war cannot avoid the terrible difficulties and suffering bequeathed it by the prolonged, ruinous, reactionary slaughter of the nations. To blame us for the ‘destruction’ of industry, or for the ‘terror’, is either hypocrisy or dull-witted pedantry; it reveals an inability to understand the basic conditions of the fierce class struggle, raised to the highest degree of intensity, that is called revolution.”* [Op. Cit., pp. 709–10]

Thus industrial collapse and terrible difficulties would face any revolution. It goes without saying that if it was “*hypocrisy*” to blame Bolshevik politics for these

problems, it would be the same to blame these problems for Bolshevik politics. As Lenin noted, “*in revolutionary epochs the class struggle has always, inevitably, and in every country, assumed the form of civil war, and civil war is inconceivable without the severest destruction, terror and the restriction of formal democracy in the interests of this war.*” Moreover, “[w]e know that fierce resistance to the socialist revolution on the part of the bourgeoisie is inevitable in all countries, and that this resistance will **grow** with the growth of the revolution.” [Op. Cit., p. 710 and p. 712] To blame the inevitable problems of a revolution for the failings of Bolshevism suggests that Bolshevism is simply not suitable for revolutionary situations.

At the 1920 Comintern Congress Lenin lambasted a German socialist who argued against revolution because “*Germany was so weakened by the War*” that if it had been “*blockaded again the misery of the German masses would have been even more dreadful.*” Dismissing this argument, Lenin argued as follows:

“A revolution . . . can be made only if it does not worsen the workers’ conditions ‘too much.’ Is it permissible, in a communist party, to speak in a tone like this, I ask? This is the language of counter-revolution. The standard of living in Russia is undoubtedly lower than in Germany, and when we established the dictatorship, this led to the workers beginning to go more hungry and to their conditions becoming even worse. The workers’ victory cannot be achieved without sacrificing, without a temporary deterioration of their conditions. . . . If the German workers now want to work for the revolution, they must make sacrifices and not be afraid to do so . . . . The labour aristocracy, which is afraid of sacrifices, afraid of ‘too great’ impoverishment during the revolutionary struggle, cannot belong to the party. Otherwise the dictatorship is impossible, especially in western European countries.” [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, pp. 382–3]

In 1921 he repeated this, arguing that “*every revolution entails enormous sacrifice on the part of the class making it. . . . The dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has entailed for the ruling class — the proletariat — sacrifices, want and privation unprecedented in history, and the case will, in all probability, be the same in every other country.*” [Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 488] Thus Lenin is on record as saying these “objective factors” will always be the circumstances facing a socialist revolution. Indeed, in November 1922 he stated that “*Soviet rule in Russia is celebrating its fifth anniversary, It is now sounder than ever.*” [Op. Cit., vol. 33, p. 417]

All of which must be deeply embarrassing to Leninists. After all, here is Lenin arguing that the factors Leninist’s list as being responsible for the degeneration of the Russian Revolution were inevitable side effects of **any** revolution!

Nor was this perspective limited to Lenin. The inevitability of economic collapse being associated with a revolution was not lost on Trotsky either (see section 12 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”). Nikolai Bukharin even wrote the (infamous) **The Economics of the Transition Period** to make theoretical sense of (i.e. rationalise and justify) the party’s changing policies and their social consequences since 1918 in terms of the inevitability of bad “objective factors” facing the revolution. While some Leninists like to paint Bukharin’s book (like most Bolshevik ideas of the time) as “*making a virtue out of necessity*,” Bukharin (like the rest of the Bolshevik leadership) did not. As one commentator notes, Bukharin “*belive[d] that he was formulating universal laws of proletarian revolution.*” [Stephan F. Cohen, **In Praise of War Communism: Bukharin’s The Economics of the Transition Period**, p. 195]

Bukharin listed four “*real costs of revolution*,” namely “the physical destruction or deterioration of material and living elements of production, the atomisation of these elements and of sectors of the economy, and the need for unproductive consumption (civil war materials, etc.). These costs were interrelated and followed sequentially. Collectively they resulted in ‘**the curtailment of the process of reproduction**’ (and ‘negative expanded reproduction’) and Bukharin’s main conclusion: ‘the production “*anarchy*” . . . , “*the revolutionary disintegration of industry*,” is an historically inevitable stage which no amount of lamentation will prevent.” This was part of a general argument and his “*point was that great revolutions were always accompanied by destructive civil wars . . . But he was more intent on proving that a proletarian revolution resulted in an even greater temporary fall in production than did its bourgeois counterpart.*” To do this he formulated the “*costs of revolution*” as “a law of revolution.” [Op. Cit., pp. 195–6 and p. 195]

Cohen notes that while this “*may appear to have been an obvious point, but it apparently came as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks. It directly opposed the prevailing Social Democratic assumption that the transition to socialism would be relatively painless . . . Profound or not, Bolsheviks generally came to accept the ‘law’ and to regard it as a significant discovery by Bukharin.*” [Op. Cit., p. 196] To quote Bukharin:

*“during the transition period the labour apparatus of society inevitably disintegrates, that reorganisation presupposes disorganisation, and that there the temporary collapse of productive forces is a law inherent to revolution.”* [quoted by Cohen, Op. Cit., p. 196]

It would appear that this “*obvious point*” would **still** come “*as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks*” today! Significantly, of course, Kropotkin had formulated this law decades previously! How the Bolsheviks sought to cope with this

inevitable law is what signifies the difference between anarchism and Leninism. Simply put, Bukharin endorsed the coercive measures of war communism as the means to go forward to socialism. As Cohen summarises, “*force and coercion . . . were the means by which equilibrium was to be forged out of disequilibrium.*” [Op. Cit., p. 198] Given that Bukharin argued that a workers’ state, by definition, could not exploit the workers, he opened up the possibility for rationalising all sorts of abuses as well as condoning numerous evils because they were “*progressive.*” Nor was Bukharin alone in this, as Lenin and Trotsky came out with similar nonsense.

It should be noted that Lenin showed “*ecstatic praise for the most ‘war communist’ sections*” of Bukharin’s work. “*Almost every passage,*” Cohen notes, “*on the role of the new state, statisation in general, militarisation and mobilisation met with ‘very good,’ often in three languages, . . . Most striking, Lenin’s greatest enthusiasm was reserved for the chapter on the role of coercion . . . at the end [of which] he wrote, ‘Now this chapter is superb!’*” [Op. Cit., pp. 202–3] Compare this to Kropotkin’s comment that the “*revolutionary tribunal and the guillotine could not make up for the lack of a constructive communist theory.*” [The Great French Revolution, vol. II, p. 519]

Ultimately, claims that “objective factors” caused the degeneration of the revolution are mostly attempts to let the Bolsheviks off the hook for Stalinism. This approach was started by Trotsky and continued to this day. Anarchists, unsurprisingly, do not think much of these explanations. For anarchists, the list of “objective factors” listed to explain the degeneration of the revolution are simply a list of factors every revolution would (and has) faced — as Lenin, Bukharin and Trotsky all admitted at the time!

So we have the strange paradox of Leninists dismissing and ignoring the arguments of their ideological gurus. For Trotsky, just as for Lenin, it was a truism that revolutionary politics had to handle “*objective*” factors and “*exceptional circumstances.*” And for both, they thought they had during the Russian revolution. Yet for their followers, these explain the failure of Bolshevism. Tony Cliff, one of Trotsky’s less orthodox followers, gives us a means of understanding this strange paradox. Discussing the **Platform of the United Opposition** he notes that it “*also suffered from the inheritance of the exceptional conditions of the civil war, when the one-party system was transformed from a necessity into a virtue.*” [Trotsky, vol. 3, pp. 248–9] Clearly, “*exceptional circumstances*” explain nothing and are simply an excuse for bad politics while “*exceptional conditions*” explain everything and defeat even the best politics!

As such, it seems to us extremely ironic that Leninists blame the civil war for the failure of the revolution as they continually raise the inevitability of civil war in a revolution to attack anarchism (see section H.2.1 for an example). Did Lenin not explain in **State and Revolution** that his “*workers’ state*” was designed

to defend the revolution and suppress capitalist resistance? If it cannot do its proclaimed task then, clearly, it is a flawed theory. Ultimately, if “civil war” and the other factors listed by Leninists (but considered inevitable by Lenin) preclude the implementation of the radical democracy Lenin argued for in 1917 as the means to suppress the resistance of the capitalists then his followers should come clean and say that that work has no bearing on their vision of revolution. Therefore, given that the usual argument for the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” is that it is required to repress counter-revolution, it seems somewhat ironic that the event it was said to be designed for (i.e. revolution) should be responsible for its degeneration!

As such, anarchists tend to think these sorts of explanations of Bolshevik dictatorship are incredulous. After all, as **revolutionaries** the people who expound these “*explanations*” are meant to know that civil war, imperialist invasion and blockade, economic disruption, and a host of other “*extremely difficult circumstances*” are part and parcel of a revolution. They seem to be saying, “*if only the ruling class had not acted as our political ideology predicts they would then the Bolshevik revolution would have been fine!*” As Bertrand Russell argued after his trip to Soviet Russia, while since October 1917 “*the Soviet Government has been at war with almost all the world, and has at the same time to face civil war at home*” this was “*not to be regarded as accidental, or as a misfortune which could not be foreseen. According to Marxian theory, what has happened was bound to happen.*” [The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism, p. 103]

In summary, anarchists are not at all convinced by the claims that “*objective factors*” can explain the failure of the Russian Revolution. After all, according to Lenin and Trotsky these factors were to be expected in **any** revolution — civil war and invasion, economic collapse and so forth were not restricted to the Russian revolution. That is why they say they want a “*dictatorship of the proletariat,*” to defend against counter-revolution (see section H.3.8 on how, once in power, Lenin and Trotsky revised this position). Now, if Bolshevism cannot handle what it says is inevitable, then it should be avoided. To use an analogy:

Bolshevik: “*Join with us, we have a great umbrella which will keep us dry.*”

Anarchist: “*Last time it was used, it did not work. We all got soaked!*”

Bolshevik: “*But what our anarchist friend fails to mention is that it was raining at the time!*”

Not very convincing! Yet, sadly, this is the logic of the common Leninist justification of Bolshevik authoritarianism during the Russian Revolution.

### 3 Can the civil war explain the failure of Bolshevism?

One of the most common assertions against the anarchists case against Bolshevism is that while we condemn the Bolsheviks, we fail to mention the civil war and the wars of intervention. Indeed, for most Leninists the civil war is usually considered the key event in the development of Bolshevism, explaining and justifying all anti-socialist acts conducted by them after they seized power.

For anarchists, such an argument is flawed on two levels, namely logical and factual. The logical flaw is that Leninist argue that civil war is inevitable after a revolution. They maintain, correctly, that it is unlikely that the ruling class will disappear without a fight. Then they turn round and complain that because the ruling class did what the Marxists predicted, the Russian Revolution failed! And they (incorrectly) harp on about anarchists ignoring civil war (see section H.2.1).

So, obviously, this line of defence is nonsense. If civil war is inevitable, then it cannot be used to justify the failure of the Bolshevism. Marxists simply want to have their cake and eat it to. You simply cannot argue that civil war is inevitable and then blame it for the failure of the Russian Revolution.

The other flaw in this defence of Bolshevism is the factual one, namely the awkward fact that Bolshevik authoritarianism started **before** the civil war broke out. Simply put, it is difficult to blame a course of actions on an event which had not started yet. Moreover, Bolshevik authoritarianism **increased** after the civil war finished. This, incidentally, caused anarchists like Alexander Berkman to re-evaluate their support for Bolshevism. As he put it, *“I would not concede the appalling truth. Still the hope persisted that the Bolsheviks, though absolutely wrong in principle and practice, yet grimly held on to some shreds of the revolutionary banner. ‘Allied interference,’ ‘the blockade and civil war,’ ‘the necessity of the transitory stage’ — thus I sought to placate my outraged conscience . . . At last the fronts were liquidated, civil war ended, and the country at peace. But Communist policies did not change. On the contrary . . . The party groaned under the unbearable yoke of the Party dictatorship. . . Then came Kronstadt and its simultaneous echoes throughout the land . . . Kronstadt was crushed as ruthlessly as Thiers and Gallifet slaughtered the Paris Communards. And with Kronstadt the entire country and its last hope. With it also my faith in the Bolsheviks.”* [The Bolshevik Myth, p. 331]

If Berkman had been in Russia in 1918, he may have realised that the Bolshevik tyranny during the civil war (which climaxed, post civil war, with the attack on Kronstadt — see the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?” for more on the Kronstadt rebellion) was not at odds with their pre-civil war activities to maintain their power. The simple fact is that Bolshevik authoritarianism was **not** caused by the pressures of the civil war, rather they started before then.

All the civil war did was strengthen certain aspects of Bolshevik ideology and practice which had existed from the start (see the appendix on “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”).

While we discuss the Russian Revolution in more detail in the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, it is useful to summarise the Bolshevik attacks on working class power and autonomy before the civil war broke out (i.e. before the end of May 1918).

The most important development during this period was the suppression of soviet democracy and basic freedoms. As we discuss in section 6 of the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, the Bolsheviks pursued a policy of systematically undermining soviet democracy from the moment they seized power. The first act was the creation of a Bolshevik government over the soviets, so marginalising the very organs they claimed ruled in Russia. The process was repeated in the local soviets, with the executive committees holding real power while the plenary sessions become infrequent and of little consequence. Come the spring of 1918, faced with growing working class opposition they started to delay soviet elections. When finally forced to hold elections, the Bolsheviks responded in two ways to maintain their power. Either they gerrymandered the soviets, packing them with representatives of Bolshevik dominated organisation or they simply disbanded them by force if they lost the soviet elections (and repressed by force any protests against this). This was the situation at the grassroots. At the summit of the soviet system, the Bolsheviks simply marginalised the Central Executive Committee of the soviets. Real power was held by the Bolshevik government. The power of the soviets had simply become a fig-leaf for a “soviet power” — the handful of Bolsheviks who made up the government and the party’s central committee.

It should be stressed that the Bolshevik assault on the soviets occurred in March, April and May 1918. That is, **before** the Czech uprising and the onset of full-scale civil war. So, to generalise, it cannot be said that it was the Bolshevik party that alone whole-heartedly supported Soviet power. The facts are that the Bolsheviks only supported “*Soviet power*” when the soviets were Bolshevik. As recognised by the left-Menshevik Martov, who argued that the Bolsheviks loved Soviets only when they were “*in the hands of the Bolshevik party.*” [quoted by Getzler, **Martov**, p. 174] If the workers voted for others, “*soviet power*” was quickly replaced by party power (the real aim). The Bolsheviks had consolidated their position in early 1918, turning the Soviet State into a de facto one party state by gerrymandering and disbanding of soviets before the start of the Civil War.

Given this legacy of repression, Leninist Tony Cliff’s assertion that it was only “*under the iron pressure of the civil war [that] the Bolshevik leaders were forced to move, as the price of survival, to a one-party system*” needs serious

revising. Similarly, his comment that the “*civil war undermined the operation of the local soviets*” is equally inaccurate, as his is claim that “*for some time — i.e. until the armed uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion — the Mensheviks were not much hampered in their propaganda work.*” Simply put, Cliff’s statement that “*it was about a year after the October Revolution before an actual monopoly of political power was held by one party*” is false. Such a monopoly existed **before** the start of the civil war, with extensive political repression existing **before** the uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion which began it. There was a **de facto** one-party state by the spring of 1918. [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 163, p. 150, p. 167 and p. 172]

The suppression of Soviet democracy reached it logical conclusion in 1921 when the Kronstadt soviet, heart of the 1917 revolution, was stormed by Bolshevik forces, its leaders executed or forced into exile and the rank and file imprisoned, and scattered all over the USSR. Soviet democracy was not just an issue of debate but one many workers died in fighting for. As can be seen, similar events to those at Kronstadt had occurred three years previously.

Before turning to other Bolshevik attacks on working class power and freedom, we need to address one issue. It will be proclaimed that the Mensheviks (and SRs) were “*counter-revolutionaries*” and so Bolshevik actions against them were justified. However, the Bolsheviks’ started to suppress opposition soviets **before** the civil war broke out, so at the time neither group could be called “*counter-revolutionary*” in any meaningful sense of the word. The Civil War started on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May and the SRs and Mensheviks were expelled from the Soviets on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June. While the Bolsheviks “*offered some formidable fictions to justify the expulsions*” there was “*of course no substance in the charge that the Mensheviks had been mixed in counter-revolutionary activities on the Don, in the Urals, in Siberia, with the Czechoslovaks, or that they had joined the worst Black Hundreds.*” [Getzler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 181] The charge that the Mensheviks “*were active supporters of intervention and of counter-revolution*” was “*untrue . . . and the Communists, if they ever believed it, never succeeded in establishing it.*” [Schapiro, *Op. Cit.*, p. 193] The Bolsheviks expelled the Mensheviks in the context of political losses before the Civil War. As Getzler notes the Bolsheviks “*drove them underground, just on the eve of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets in which the Mensheviks were expected to make significant gains.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 181]

Attacks on working class freedoms and democracy were not limited to the soviets. As well as the gerrymandering and disbanding of soviets, the Bolsheviks had already presented economic visions much at odds with what most people consider as fundamentally socialist. Lenin, in April 1918, was arguing for one-man management and “[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.” [Six Theses on the Immediate



Tasks of the Soviet Government, p. 44] His support for a new form of wage slavery involved granting state appointed “*individual executives dictatorial powers (or ‘unlimited’ powers).*” Large-scale industry (“*the foundation of socialism*”) required “*thousands subordinating their will to the will of one,*” and so the revolution “*demands*” that “*the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour.*” Lenin’s “*superior forms of labour discipline*” were simply hyper-developed capitalist forms. The role of workers in production was the same, but with a novel twist, namely “*unquestioning obedience to the orders of individual representatives of the Soviet government during the work.*” [Lenin, **Selected Writings**, vol. 2, p. 610, p. 611, p. 612]

This simply replaced private capitalism with state capitalism. “*In the shops where one-man management (Lenin’s own preference) replaced collegial management,*” notes Diane Koenker, “*workers faced the same kinds of authoritarian management they thought existed only under capitalism.*” [Labour Relations in Socialist Russia, p. 177] If, as many Leninists claim, one-man management was a key factor in the rise of Stalinism and/or “*state-capitalism*” in Russia, then, clearly, Lenin’s input in these developments cannot be ignored. After advocating “*one-man management*” and “*state capitalism*” in early 1918, he remained a firm supporter of them. In the light of this it is bizarre that some later day Leninists claim that the Bolsheviks only introduced one-man management because of the Civil War. Clearly, this was **not** the case. It was **this** period (before the civil war) that saw Lenin advocate and start to take the control of the economy out of the hands of the workers and placed into the hands of the Bolshevik party and the state bureaucracy.

Needless to say, the Bolshevik undermining of the factory committee movement and, consequently, genuine worker’s self-management of production in favour of state capitalism cannot be gone into great depth here (see the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, for a fuller discussion). Suffice to say, the factory committees were deliberately submerged in the trade unions and state control replaced workers’ control. This involved practising one-man management and, as Lenin put in at the start of May 1918, “*our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare **no effort** in copying it and not to shrink from adopting **dictatorial** methods to hasten the copying of it.*” He stressed that this was no new idea, rather he “*gave it **before** the Bolsheviks seized power.*” [Selected Writings, vol. 2, p. 635 and p. 636]

It will be objected that Lenin advocated “*workers’ control.*” This is true, but a “*workers’ control*” of a **very** limited nature. As we discuss in section H.3.14, rather than seeing “*workers’ control*” as workers managing production directly, he always saw it in terms of workers’ “*controlling*” those who did and his views on this matter were **radically** different to those of the factory committees. This is

not all, as Lenin always placed his ideas in a statist context — rather than base socialist reconstruction on working class self-organisation from below, the Bolsheviks started “*to build, from the top, its ‘unified administration’*” based on central bodies created by the Tsarist government in 1915 and 1916. [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 36] The institutional framework of capitalism would be utilised as the principal (almost exclusive) instruments of “socialist” transformation. Lenin’s support for “*one-man management*” must be seen in this context, namely his vision of “*socialism.*”

Bolshevik advocating and implementing of “*one-man management*” was not limited to the workplace. On March 30<sup>th</sup> Trotsky, as Commissar of Military Affairs, set about reorganising the army. The death penalty for disobedience under fire was reintroduced, as was saluting officers, special forms of address, separate living quarters and privileges for officers. Officers were no longer elected. Trotsky made it clear: “*The elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree.*” [quoted by Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 37–8] The soldiers were given no say in their fate, as per bourgeois armies.

Lenin’s proposals also struck at the heart of workers’ power in other ways. For example, he argued that “*we must raise the question of piece-work and apply it . . . in practice.*” [**The Immediate Tasks Of The Soviet Government**, p. 23] As Leninist Tony Cliff (of all people) noted, “*the employers have at their disposal a number of effective methods of disrupting th[e] unity [of workers as a class]. Once of the most important of these is the fostering of competition between workers by means of piece-work systems.*” He notes that these were used by the Nazis and the Stalinists “*for the same purpose.*” [**State Capitalism in Russia**, pp. 18–9] Obviously piece-work is different when Lenin introduces it!

Finally, there is the question of general political freedom. It goes without saying that the Bolsheviks suppressed freedom of the press (for left-wing opposition groups as well as capitalist ones). It was also in this time period that the Bolsheviks first used the secret police to attack opposition groups. Unsurprisingly, this was not directed against the right. The anarchists in Moscow were attacked on the night of April 11–12, with armed detachments of the Cheka raiding 26 anarchist centres, killing or wounding 40 and jailing 500. Shortly afterwards the Cheka carried out similar raids in Petrograd and in the provinces. In May **Burevestnik**, **Anarkhiia**, **Golos Truda** and other leading anarchist periodicals closed down. [Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, pp. 184–5] It must surely be a coincidence that there had been a “*continued growth of anarchist influence among unskilled workers*” after the October revolution and, equally coincidentally, that “[*b*]y the spring of 1918, very little was heard from the anarchists in Petrograd.” [David Mandel, **The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power**, p. 357]

All this **before** the Trotsky provoked revolt of the Czech legion at the end of May, 1918, and the consequent “democratic counter-revolution” in favour of the Constituent Assembly (which the right-Socialist Revolutionaries led). This, to repeat, was months before the rise of the White Armies and Allied intervention. In summary, it was **before** large-scale civil war took place, in an interval of relative peace, that we see the introduction of most of the measures Leninists now try and pretend were necessitated by the Civil War itself.

So if anarchists appear to “downplay” the effects of the civil war it is not because we ignore. We simply recognise that if you think it is inevitable, you cannot blame it for the actions of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, when the Bolsheviks eliminated military democracy, undermined the factory committees, started to disband soviets elected with the “wrong” majority, repress the anarchists and other left-wing opposition groups, and so on, **the civil war had not started yet**. So the rot had started before civil war (and consequent White Terror) and “imperialist intervention” started. Given that Lenin said that civil war was inevitable, blaming the inevitable (which had not even started yet!) for the failure of Bolshevism is **not** very convincing.

This factual problem with the “*civil war caused Bolshevik authoritarianism*” is the best answer to it. If the Bolsheviks pursued authoritarian policies before the civil war started, it is hard to justify their actions in terms of something that had not started yet. This explains why some Leninists have tried to muddy the waters somewhat by obscuring when the civil war started. For example, John Rees states that “[m]ost historians treat the revolution and the civil war as separate processes” yet “[i]n reality they were one.” He presents a catalogue of “armed resistance to the revolution,” including such “precursors of civil war before the revolution” as the suppression after the July days and the Kornilov revolt in 1917. [John Rees, “*In Defence of October*,” pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 31–2]

Ironically, Rees fails to see how this blurring of when the civil war started actually **harms** Leninism. After all, most historians place the start of the civil war when the Czech legion revolted **because** it marked large-scale conflict between armies. It is one thing to say that authoritarianism was caused by large-scale conflict, another to say **any** form of conflict caused it. Simply put, if the Bolshevik state could not handle relatively minor forms of counter-revolution then where does that leave Lenin’s **State and Revolution**? So while the period from October to May of 1918 was not trouble free, it was not one where the survival of the new regime looked to be seriously threatened as it was after that, particularly in 1919 and 1920. Thus “civil war” will be used, as it is commonly done, to refer to the period from the Czech revolt (late May 1918) to the final defeat of Wrangel (November 1920).

So, the period from October to May of 1918, while not trouble free, was not one where the survival of the new regime looked to be seriously threatened as it was to be in 1919 and 1920. This means attempts to push the start of the civil war back to October 1917 (or even earlier) simply weakens the Leninist argument. It still leaves the major problem for the “*blame it on the civil war*” Leninists, namely to explain why the months **before** May of 1918 saw soviets being closed down, the start of the suppression of the factory committees, restrictions on freedom of speech and association, plus the repression of opposition groups (like the anarchists). Either any level of “civil war” makes Lenin’s **State and Revolution** redundant or the source of Bolshevik authoritarianism must be found elsewhere.

That covers the period **before** the start of the civil war. we now turn to the period **after** it finished. Here we find the same problem, namely an **increase** of authoritarianism even after the proclaimed cause for it (civil war) had ended.

After the White General Wrangel was forced back into the Crimea, he had to evacuate his forces to Constantinople in November 1920. With this defeat the Russian civil war had come to an end. Those familiar with the history of the revolution will realise that it was some 4 months **later** that yet another massive strike wave occurred, the Kronstadt revolt took place and the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress banned the existence of factions within the Bolshevik party itself. The repression of the strikes and Kronstadt revolt effectively destroying hope for mass pressure for change from below and the latter closing off the very last “legal” door for those who opposed the regime from the left.

It could be argued that the Bolsheviks were still fighting peasant insurrections and strikes across the country, but this has everything to do with Bolshevik policies and could only be considered “*counter-revolutionary*” if you think the Bolsheviks had a monopoly of what socialism and revolution meant. In the case of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine, the Bolsheviks started that conflict by betraying them once Wrangel had been defeated. As such, any resistance to Bolshevik rule by the working class and peasantry of Russia indicated the lack of democracy within the country rather than some sort of “*counter-revolutionary*” conflict.

So even the end of the Civil War causes problems for this defence of the Bolsheviks. Simply put, with the defeat of the Whites it would be expected that some return to democratic norms would happen. It did not, in fact the reverse happened. Factions were banned, even the smallest forms of opposition was finally eliminated from both the party and society as a whole. Those opposition groups and parties which had been tolerated during the civil war were finally smashed. Popular revolts for reform, such as the Kronstadt rebellion and the strike wave which inspired it, were put down by force (see “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?” on these events). No form of opposition was tolerated, no freedom

allowed. If civil war was the cause of Bolshevik authoritarianism, it seems strange that it got worse after it was finished.

So, to conclude. Bolshevik authoritarianism did not begin with the start of the civil war. Anti-socialist policies were being implemented before it started. Similarly, these policies did not stop when the civil war ended, indeed the reverse happened. This, then, is the main factual problem with the “*blame the civil war*” approach. Much of the worst of the suppression of working class democracy either happened **before** the Civil War started or **after** it had finished.

As we discuss in “How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?”, the root causes for Bolshevik authoritarian post-October was Bolshevik ideology combined with state power. After all, how “democratic” is it to give all power to the Bolshevik party central committee? Surely socialism involves more than voting for a new government? Is it not about mass participation, the kind of participation centralised government precludes and Bolshevism fears as being influenced by “*bourgeois ideology*”? In such circumstances, moving from party rule to party dictatorship is not such a leap.

That “civil war” cannot explain what happened can be shown by a counter-example which effectively shows that civil war did not inevitably mean party dictatorship over a state capitalist economy (and protesting workers and peasants!). The Makhnovists (an anarchist influenced partisan army) managed to defend the revolution and encourage soviet democracy, freedom of speech, and so on, while doing so (see the appendix “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?” discusses the Makhnovists in some detail). In fact, the Bolsheviks tried to **ban** their soviet congresses. Which, of course, does not really fit in with the Bolsheviks being forced to be anti-democratic due to the pressures of civil war.

So, in summary, civil war and imperialist intervention cannot be blamed for Bolshevik authoritarianism simply because the latter had started before the former existed. Moreover, the example of the Makhnovists suggests that Bolshevik policies during the civil war were also not driven purely by the need for survival. As Kropotkin argued at the time, “*all foreign armed intervention necessarily strengthens the dictatorial tendencies of the government . . . The evils inherent in a party dictatorship have been accentuated by the conditions of war in which this party maintains its power. This state of war has been the pretext for strengthening dictatorial methods which centralise the control of every detail of life in the hands of the government, with the effect of stopping an immense part of the ordinary activity of the country. The evils natural to state communism have been increased ten-fold under the pretext that all our misery is due to foreign intervention.*” [Kropotkin’s *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, p. 253]

In other words, while the civil war may have increased Bolshevik authoritarianism, it did not create it nor did it end with the ending of hostilities.

## 4 Did economic collapse and isolation destroy the revolution?

One of the most common explanations for the failure revolution is that the Bolsheviks faced a terrible economic conditions, which forced them to be less than democratic. Combined with the failure of the revolution to spread to more advanced countries, party dictatorship, it is argued, was inevitable. In the words of one Leninist:

*“In a country where the working class was a minority of the population, where industry had been battered by years of war and in conditions of White and imperialist encirclement, the balance gradually tilted towards greater coercion. Each step of the way was forced on the Bolsheviks by dire and pressing necessities.”* [John Rees, *“In Defence of October,” International Socialism*, no. 52, p. 41]

He talks of *“economic devastation”* [p. 31] and quotes various sources, including Victor Serge. According to Serge, the *“decline in production was uninterrupted. It should be noted that this decline had already begun before the revolution. In 1916 the output of agricultural machinery, for example, was down by 80 per cent compared with 1913. The year 1917 had been marked by a particularly general, rapid and serious downturn. The production figures for the principal industries in 1913 and 1918 were, in millions of poods: coal, from 1,738 to 731 (42 per cent); iron ore, from 57, 887 to 1,686; cast-iron, from 256 to 31.5 (12.3 per cent); steel, from 259 to 24.5; rails, from 39.4 to 1.1. As a percentage of 1913 production, output of linen fell to 75 per cent, of sugar to 24 per cent, and tobacco to 19 per cent.”* Moreover, production continued *“to fall until the end of civil war . . . For 1920, the following indices are given as a percentage of output in 1913: coal, 27 per cent; cast iron, 2.4 per cent; linen textiles, 38 per cent.”* [Year One of the Russian Revolution, p. 352 and p. 425]

According to Tony Cliff (another of Rees’s references), the war-damaged industry *“continued to run down”* in the spring of 1918: *“One of the causes of famine was the breakdown of transport . . . Industry was in a state of complete collapse. Not only was there no food to feed the factory workers; there was no raw material or fuel for industry . . . The collapse of industry meant unemployment for the workers.”* Cliff provides economic indexes. For large scale industry, taking 1913 as the base, 1917 saw production fall to 77%. In 1918, it was at 35% of the 1913 figure, 1919 it

was 26% and 1920 was 18%. Productivity per worker also fell, from 85% in 1917, to 44% in 1918, 22% in 1919 and then 26% in 1920. [Lenin, vol. 3, pp. 67–9, p. 86 and p. 85]

In such circumstances, it is argued, how can you expect the Bolsheviks to subscribe to democratic and socialist norms? This meant that the success or failure of the revolution depended on whether the revolution spread to more advanced countries. Leninist Duncan Hallas argues that the “*failure of the German Revolution in 1918–19 . . . seems, in retrospect, to have been decisive . . . for only substantial economic aid from an advanced economy, in practice from a socialist Germany, could have reversed the disintegration of the Russian working class.*” [“Towards a revolutionary socialist party,” pp. 38–55, **Party and Class**, Alex Callinicos (ed.), p. 44]

Anarchists are not convinced by these arguments. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, we are aware that revolutions are disruptive no matter where they occur (see section 1) Moreover, Leninists are meant to know this to. Simply put, there is a certain incredulous element to these arguments. After all, Lenin himself had argued that “[e]very revolution . . . by its very nature implies a crisis, and a very deep crisis at that, both political and economic. This is irrespective of the crisis brought about by the war.” [Collected Works, vol. 30, p. 341] Serge also considered crisis as inevitable, arguing that the “*conquest of production by the proletariat was in itself a stupendous victory, one which saved the revolution’s life. Undoubtedly, so thorough a recasting of all the organs of production is impossible without a substantial decline in output; undoubtedly, too, a proletariat cannot labour and fight at the same time.*” [Op. Cit., p. 361] As we discussed in detail in section 2, this was a common Bolshevik position at the time (which, in turn, belatedly echoed anarchist arguments — see section 1). And if we look at other revolutions, we can say that this is the case.

Secondly, and more importantly, every revolution or near revolutionary situation has been accompanied by economic crisis. For example, as we will shortly prove, Germany itself was in a state of serious economic collapse in 1918 and 1919, a collapse which would have got worse if a Bolshevik-style revolution had occurred there. This means that if Bolshevik authoritarianism is blamed on the state of the economy, it is not hard to conclude that every Bolshevik-style revolution will suffer the same fate as the Russian one.

As we noted in section 1, Kropotkin had argued from the 1880s that a revolution would be accompanied by economic disruption. Looking at subsequent revolutions, he has been vindicated time and time again. Every revolution has been marked by economic disruption and falling production. This suggests that the common Leninist idea that a successful revolution in, say, Germany would

have ensured the success of the Russian Revolution is flawed. Looking at Europe during the period immediately after the first world war, we discover great economic hardship. To quote one Trotskyist editor:

*“In the major imperialist countries of Europe, production still had not recovered from wartime destruction. A limited economic upswing in 1919 and early 1920 enabled many demobilised soldiers to find work, and unemployment fell somewhat. Nonetheless, in ‘victorious’ France overall production in 1920 was still only two-thirds its pre-war level. In Germany industrial production was little more than half its 1914 level, human consumption of grains was down 44 per cent, and the economy was gripped by spiralling inflation. Average per capita wages in Prague in 1920, adjusted for inflation, were just over one-third of pre-war levels.”* [John Riddell, “Introduction,” **Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920**, vol. I, p. 17]

Now, if economic collapse was responsible for Bolshevik authoritarianism and the subsequent failure of the revolution, it seems hard to understand why an expansion of the revolution into similarly crisis ridden countries would have had a major impact in the development of the revolution. Since most Leninists agree that the German Revolution, we will discuss this in more detail before going onto other revolutions.

By 1918, Germany was in a bad state. Victor Serge noted *“the famine and economic collapse which caused the final ruin of the Central Powers.”* [Op. Cit., p. 361] The semi-blockade of Germany during the war badly effected the economy, the *“dynamic growth”* of which before the war *“had been largely dependent on the country’s involvement in the world market”*. The war *“proved catastrophic to those who had depended on the world market and had been involved in the production of consumer goods . . . Slowly but surely the country slithered into austerity and ultimately economic collapse.”* Food production suffered, with *“overall food production declined further after poor harvests in 1916 and 1917. Thus grain production, already well below its prewar levels, slumped from 21.8 million to 14.9 million tons in those two years.”* [V. R. Berghahn, **Modern Germany**, p. 47, pp. 47–8, p. 50]

The parallels with pre-revolution Russia are striking and it is hardly surprising that revolution did break out in Germany in November 1918. Workers’ councils sprang up all across the country, inspired in part by the example of the Russian soviets (and what people **thought** was going on in Russia under the Bolsheviks). A Social-Democratic government was founded, which used the Free Corps (right-wing volunteer troops) to crush the revolution from January 1919 onwards. This meant that Germany in 1919 was marked by extensive civil war within the country. In January 1920, a state of siege was re-introduced across half the country.



This social turmoil was matched by economic turmoil. As in Russia, Germany faced massive economic problems, problems which the revolution inherited. Taking 1928 as the base year, the index of industrial production in Germany was slightly lower in 1913, namely 98 in 1913 to 100 in 1928. In other words, Germany effectively lost 15 years of economic activity. In 1917, the index was 63 and by 1918 (the year of the revolution), it was 61 (i.e. industrial production had dropped by nearly 40%). In 1919, it fell again to 37, rising to 54 in 1920 and 65 in 1921. Thus, in 1919, the “*industrial production reached an all-time low*” and it “*took until the late 1920s for [food] production to recover its 1912 level . . . In 1921 grain production was still . . . some 30 per cent below the 1912 figure.*” Coal production was 69.1% of its 1913 level in 1920, falling to 32.8% in 1923. Iron production was 33.1% in 1920 and 25.6% in 1923. Steel production likewise fell to 48.5% in 1920 and fell again to 36% in 1923. [V. R. Berghahn, **Op. Cit.**, p. 258, pp. 67–8, p. 71 and p. 259]

Significantly, one of the first acts of the Bolshevik government towards the new German government was to “*the offer by the Soviet authorities of two trainloads of grain for the hungry German population. It was a symbolical gesture and, in view of desperate shortages in Russia itself, a generous one.*” The offer, perhaps unsurprisingly, was rejected in favour of grain from America. [E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 106]

The similarities between Germany and Russia are clear. As noted above, in Russia, the index for large scale industry fell to 77 in 1917 from 100 in 1913, falling again to 35 in 1918, 26 in 1919 and 18 in 1920. [Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 86] In other words, a fall of 23% between 1913 and 1917, 54.5% between 1917 and 1918, 25.7% in 1918 and 30.8% in 1919. A similar process occurred in Germany, where the fall production was 37.7% between 1913 and 1917, 8.2% between 1917 and 1918 and 33.9% between 1918 and 1919 (the year of revolution). While production did rise in 1920 by 45.9%, production was still around 45% less than before the war.

Thus, comparing the two countries we discover a similar picture of economic collapse. In the year the revolution started, production had fallen by 23% in Russia (from 1913 to 1917) and by 43% in Germany (from 1913 to 1918). Once revolution had effectively started, production fell even more. In Russia, it fell to 65% of its pre-war level in 1918, in Germany it fell to 62% of its pre-war level in 1919. Of course, in Germany revolution did not go as far as in Russia, and so production did rise somewhat in 1920 and afterwards. What is significant is that in 1923, production fell dramatically by 34% (from around 70% of its pre-war level to around 45% of that level). This economic collapse did not deter the Communists from trying to provoke a revolution in Germany that year, so suggesting that economic disruption played no role in their evaluation of the success of a revolution.

This economic chaos in Germany is never mentioned by Leninists when they discuss the “*objective factors*” facing the Russian Revolution. However, once these

facts are taken into account, the superficiality of the typical Leninist explanation for the degeneration of the revolution becomes obvious. The very problems which, it is claimed, forced the Bolsheviks to act as they did also were rampant in Germany. If economic collapse made socialism impossible in Russia, it would surely have had the same effect in Germany (and any social revolution would also have faced more disruption than actually faced post 1919 in Germany). This means, given that the economic collapse in both 1918/19 and 1923 was as bad as that facing Russia in 1918 and that the Bolsheviks had started to undermine soviet and military democracy along with workers' control by spring and summer of that year (see section 5), to blame Bolshevik actions on economic collapse would mean that any German revolution would have been subject to the same authoritarianism if the roots of Bolshevik authoritarianism were forced by economic events rather than a product of applying a specific political ideology via state power. Few Leninists draw this obvious conclusion from their own arguments although there is no reason for them not to.

So the German Revolution was facing the same problems the Russian one was. It seems unlikely, therefore, that a successful German revolution would have been that much aid to Russia. This means that when John Rees argues that giving machinery or goods to the peasants in return for grain instead of simply seizing it required "*revolution in Germany, or at least the revival of industry*" in Russia, he completely fails to indicate the troubles facing the German revolution. "*Without a successful German revolution,*" he writes, "*the Bolsheviks were thrown back into a bloody civil war with only limited resources. The revolution was under siege.*" [John Rees, "*In Defence of October,*" pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 40 and p. 29] Yet given the state of the German economy at the time, it is hard to see how much help a successful German revolution would have been. As such, his belief that a successful German Revolution would have mitigated Bolshevik authoritarianism seems exactly that, a belief without any real evidence to support it (and let us not forget, Bolshevik authoritarianism had started before the civil war broke out — see section 3). Moreover, if the pro-Bolshevik argument Rees is expounding is correct, then the German Revolution would have been subject to the same authoritarianism as befell the Bolshevik one simply because it was facing a similar economic crisis. Luckily, anarchists argue, that this need not be the case if libertarian principles are applied in a revolution:

*"The first months of emancipation will inevitably increase consumption of goods and production will diminish. And, furthermore, any country achieving social revolution will be surrounded by a ring of neighbours either unfriendly or actually enemies . . . The demands upon products will increase while production decreases, and finally famine will come. There is only one way of avoiding it.*

*We should understand that as soon as a revolutionary movement begins in any country the only possible way out will consist in the workingmen [and women] and peasants from the beginning taking the whole national economy into their hands and organising it themselves . . . But they will not be convinced of this necessity except when all responsibility for national economy, today in the hands of a multitude of ministers and committees, is presented in a simple form to each village and city, in every factory and shop, as their own affair, and when they understand that they must direct it themselves.” [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, pp. 77–8]*

So, as regards the Russian and German revolution, Kropotkin’s arguments were proven correct. The same can be said of other revolutions as well. Basing himself on the actual experiences of both the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, we can see why Kropotkin argued as he did. The Paris Commune, for example, was born after a four-month-long siege “*had left the capital in a state of economic collapse. The winter had been the severest in living memory. Food and fuel had been the main problems . . . Unemployment was widespread. Thousands of demobilised soldiers wandered loose in Paris and joined in the general hunt for food, shelter and warmth. For most working men the only source of income was the 1.50 francs daily pay of the National Guard, which in effect had become a form of unemployment pay.*” The city was “*near starving*” and by March it was “*in a state of economic and political crisis.*” [Stewart Edwards, “*Introduction,*” **The Communards of Paris, 1871**, p. 23] Yet this economic collapse and isolation did not stop the commune from introducing and maintaining democratic forms of decision making, both political and economic. A similar process occurred during the French Revolution, where mass participation via the “*sections*” was not hindered by economic collapse. It was finally stopped by state action organised by the Jacobins to destroy popular participation and initiative (see Kropotkin’s **The Great French Revolution** for details).

During the Spanish Revolution, “*overall Catalan production fell in the first year of war by 30 per cent, and in the cotton-working sector of the textile industry by twice as much. Overall unemployment (complete and partial) rose by nearly a quarter in the first year, and this despite the military mobilisation decreed in September 1936. The cost of living quadrupled in just over two years; wages . . . only doubled.*” [Ronald Fraser, **Blood of Spain**, p. 234] Markets, both internally and externally, for goods and raw materials were disrupted, not to mention the foreign blockade and the difficulties imposed in trying to buy products from other countries. These difficulties came on top of problems caused by the great depression of the 1930s which affected Spain along with most other countries. Yet, democratic norms of economic and social decision making continued in spite of economic disruption.

Ironically, given the subject of this discussion, it was only once the Stalinist counter-revolution got going were they fatally undermined or destroyed.

Thus economic disruption need not automatically imply authoritarian policies. And just as well, given the fact that revolution and economic disruption seem to go hand in hand.

Looking further afield, even **revolutionary** situations can be accompanied with economic collapse. For example, the Argentine revolt which started in 2001 took place in the face of massive economic collapse. The economy was a mess, with poverty and unemployment at disgusting levels. Four years of recession saw the poverty rate balloon from 31 to 53 percent of the population of 37 million, while unemployment climbed from 14 to 21.4 percent, according to official figures. Yet in the face of such economic problems, working class people acted collectively, forming popular assemblies and taking over workplaces.

The Great Depression of the 1930s in America saw a much deeper economic contradiction. Indeed, it was as bad as that associated with revolutionary Germany and Russia after the first world war. According to Howard Zinn, after the stock market crash in 1929 *“the economy was stunned, barely moving. Over five thousand banks closed and huge numbers of businesses, unable to get money, closed too. Those that continued laid off employees and cut the wages of those who remained, again and again. Industrial production fell by 50 percent, and by 1933 perhaps 15 million (no knew exactly) — one-fourth or one-third of the labour force — were out of work.”* [A People’s History of the United States, p. 378]

Specific industries were badly affected. For example, total GNP fell to 53.6% in 1933 compared to its 1929 value. The production of basic goods fell by much more. Iron and Steel saw a 59.3% decline, machinery a 61.6% decline and *“non-ferrous metals and products”* a 55.9% decline. Transport was also affected, with transportation equipment declining by 64.2% railroad car production dropping by 73.6% and locomotion production declining by 86.4%. Furniture production saw a decline of 57.9%. The workforce was equally affected, with unemployment reaching 25% in 1933. In Chicago 40% of the workforce was unemployed. Union membership, which had fallen from 5 million in 1920 to 3.4 million in 1929 fell to less than 3 million by 1933. [Lester V. Chandler, **America’s Greatest Depression, 1929–1941**, p. 20, p. 23, p. 34, p. 45 and p. 228]

Yet in the face of this economic collapse, no Leninist proclaimed the impossibility of socialism. In fact, the reverse what the case. Similar arguments could apply to, say, post-world war two Europe, when economic collapse and war damage did not stop Trotskyists looking forward to, and seeking, revolutions there. Nor did the massive economic that occurred after the fall of Stalinism in Russia in the early 1990s deter Leninist calls for revolution. Indeed, you can rest assured that any drop in economic activity, no matter how large or small, will be accompanied

by Leninist articles arguing for the immediate introduction of socialism. And this was the case in 1917 as well, when economic crisis had been a fact of Russian life throughout the year. Lenin, for example, argued at the end of September of that “*Russia is threatened with an inevitable catastrophe . . . A catastrophe of extraordinary dimensions, and a famine, are unavoidably threatening . . . Half a year of revolution has passed. The catastrophe has come still closer. Things have come to a state of mass unemployment. Think of it: the country is suffering from a lack of commodities.*” [The Threatening Catastrophe and how to Fight It, p. 5] This did not stop him calling for revolution and seizing power. Nor did this crisis stop the creation of democratic working class organisations, such as soviets, trade unions and factory committees being formed. It did not stop mass collective action to combat those difficulties. It appears, therefore, that while the economic crisis of 1917 did not stop the development of socialist tendencies to combat it, the seizure of power by a socialist party did.

Given that no Leninist has argued that a revolution could take place in Germany after the war or in the USA during the darkest months of the Great Depression, the argument that the grim economic conditions facing Bolshevik Russia made soviet democracy impossible seem weak. By arguing that both Germany and the USA could create a viable socialist revolution in economic conditions just as bad as those facing Soviet Russia, the reasons why the Bolsheviks created a party dictatorship must be looked for elsewhere. Given this support for revolution in 1930s America and post-world war I and II Europe, you would have to conclude that, for Leninists, economic collapse only makes socialism impossible once they are in power! Which is hardly convincing, or inspiring.

## 5 Was the Russian working class atomised or “declassed”?

A standard Leninist explanation for the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party (and subsequent rise of Stalinism) is based on the “atomisation” or “declassing” of the proletariat. John Rees summarises this argument as follows:

*“The civil war had reduced industry to rubble. The working class base of the workers’ state, mobilises time and again to defeat the Whites, the rock on which Bolshevik power stood, had disintegrated. The Bolsheviks survived three years of civil war and wars in intervention, but only at the cost of reducing the working class to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917 . . . The*

*bureaucracy of the workers' state was left suspended in mid-air, its class base eroded and demoralised. Such conditions could not help but have an effect on the machinery of the state and organisation of the Bolshevik Party.*" [“In Defence of October,” pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 65]

It is these objective factors which, it is argued, explain why the Bolshevik party substituted itself for the Russian working class. “*Under such conditions,*” argues Tony Cliff, “*the class base of the Bolshevik Party disintegrated — not because of some mistakes in the policies of Bolshevism, not because of one or another conception of Bolshevism regarding the role of the party and its relation to the class — but because of mightier historical factors. The working class had become declassed . . . Bolshevik ‘substitutionism’ . . . did not jump out of Lenin’s head as Minerva out of Zeus’s, but was born of the objective conditions of civil war in a peasant country, where a small working class, reduced in weight, became fragmented and dissolved into the peasant masses.*” [Trotsky on Substitutionism, pp. 62–3] In other words, because the working class was so decimated the replacement of class power by party power was inevitable.

Before discussing this argument, we should point out that this argument dates back to Lenin. For example, he argued in 1921 that the proletariat, “*owning to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed, i.e. dislodged from its class groove, and had ceased to exist as proletariat . . . the proletariat has disappeared.*” [Collected Works, vol. 33, p. 66] However, unlike his later-day followers, Lenin was sure that while it “*would be absurd and ridiculous to deny that the fact that the proletariat is declassed is a handicap*” it could still “*fulfil its task of winning and holding state power.*” [Op. Cit., vol. 32, p. 412] As we will see, the context in which Lenin started to make these arguments is important.

Anarchists do not find these arguments particularly convincing. This is for two reasons. Firstly, it seems incredulous to blame the civil war for the “*substitution*” of Bolshevik power for working class power as party power had been Lenin’s stated aim in 1917 and October saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, **not** the soviets. As we saw in section 3, the Bolsheviks started to gerrymander and disband soviets to remain in power **before** the civil war started. As such, to blame the civil war and the problems it caused for the usurpation of power by the Bolsheviks seems unconvincing. Simply put, the Bolsheviks had “*substituted*” itself for the proletariat from the start, from the day it seized power in the October revolution.

Secondly, the fact is the Russian working class was far from “*atomised.*” Rather than being incapable of collective action, as Leninists assert, Russia’s workers were more than capable of taking collective action throughout the civil war period. The problem is, of course, that any such collective action was directed **against**

the Bolshevik party. This caused the party no end of problems. After all, if the working class was the ruling class under the Bolsheviks, then who was it striking against? Emma Goldman explains the issue well:

*“In my early period the question of strikes had puzzled me a great deal. People had told me that the least attempt of that kind was crushed and the participants sent to prison. I had not believed it, and, as in all similar things, I turned to Zorin [a Bolshevik] for information. ‘Strikes under the dictatorship of the proletariat!’ he had proclaimed; ‘there’s no such thing.’ He had even upbraided me for crediting such wild and impossible tales. Against whom, indeed, should the workers strike in Soviet Russia, he argued. Against themselves? They were the masters of the country, politically as well as industrially. To be sure, there were some among the toilers who were not yet fully class-conscious and aware of their own true interests. These were sometimes disgruntled, but they were elements incited by . . . self-seekers and enemies of the Revolution.” [Living My Life, vol. 2, p. 872]*

This, unfortunately, still seems to be the case in pro-Bolshevik accounts of the Revolution and its degeneration. After the Bolshevik seizure of power, the working class as an active agent almost immediately disappears from the accounts. This is unsurprising, as it does not bode well for maintaining the Bolshevik Myth to admit that workers were resisting the so-called “*proletarian dictatorship*” from the start. The notion that the working class had “*disappeared*” fits into this selective blindness well. Why discuss the actions of a class which did not exist? Thus we have a logical circle from which reality can be excluded: the working class is “*atomised*” and so cannot take industrial action, evidence of industrial action need not be looked for because the class is “*atomised*.”

This can be seen from Lenin. For example, he proclaimed in October 1921 that “*the proletariat had disappeared*.” Yet this non-existent class had, in early 1921, taken collective action which “*encompassed most of the country’s industrial regions*.” [J. Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 111] Significantly, the Communists (then and now) refused to call the movement a strike, preferring the word “*volynka*” which means “*go-slow*.” The Menshevik leader Dan explained why: “*The Bolshevik press carefully tried, at first, to hush up the movement, then to hide its real size and character. Instead of calling the strike a strike, they thought up various new terms — yolynka, buza and so on.*” [quoted by Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 112] As Russian anarchist Ida Mett succinctly put it: “*And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?*” [Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Rebellion**, p. 81]

The year after Lenin proclaimed the proletariat “*disappeared*” we discover similar evidence of working class collective action. Ironically, it is Leninist Tony Cliff who presents the evidence that “*the number of workers involved in labour conflicts was three and a half million, and in 1923, 1,592,800.*” Strikes in state-owned workplaces in 1922 involved 192,000 workers. [State Capitalism in Russia, p. 28] Given that Cliff states that in 1921 there was only “*one and a quarter million*” industrial workers “*proper*” (compared to over three million in 1917), this level of strikes is extremely large — particular for members of a class which did not, according to Lenin which had “*disappeared*”!

Before providing more evidence for the existence of working class collective struggle throughout the period 1918 to 1923, it is necessary to place Lenin’s comments on the “*declassing*” of the working class in context. Rather than being the result of a lack of industrial protest, Lenin’s arguments were the product of its opposite — the rise in collective struggle by the Russian working class. As one historian notes: “*As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin . . . began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated . . . workers had become ‘declassed.’*” “*Lenin’s analysis,*” he continues, “*had a superficial logic but it was based on a false conception of working-class consciousness. There is little evidence to suggest that the demands that workers made at the end of 1920 . . . represented a fundamental change in aspirations since 1917 . . . [Moreover] an analysis of the industrial unrest in 1921 shows that long-standing workers were prominent in protest.*” [J. Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 90 and pp. 90–1]

Lenin’s pessimistic analysis of 1921 is in sharp contrast to the optimistic mood of early 1920, reproduced by the defeat of the White armies, in Bolshevik ranks. For example, writing in May, 1920, Trotsky seemed oblivious to the “*atomisation*” of the Russian working class, arguing that “*in spite of political tortures, physical sufferings and horrors, the labouring masses are infinitely distinct from political decomposition, from moral collapse, or from apathy . . . Today, in all branches of industry, there is going on an energetic struggle for the establishment of strict labour discipline, and for the increase of the productivity of labour. The party organisations, the trade unions, the factory and workshop administrative committees, rival each one another in this respect, with the undivided support of the working class as a whole.*” Indeed, they “*concentrate their attention and will on collective problems*” (“*Thanks to a regime which . . . given their life a pursue*”). Needless to say, the party had “*the undivided support of the public opinion of the working class as a whole.*” [Terrorism and Communism, p. 6]

The turn around in perspective after this period did not happen by accident, independently of the working class resistance to Bolshevik rule. After all, the defeat of the Whites in early of 1920 saw the Bolsheviks take “*victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of reconstruction on the*



*basis of an intensification of War Communism policies with redoubled determination.*” This led to “*an increase in industrial unrest in 1920,*” including “*serious strikes.*” The resistance was “*becoming increasingly politicised.*” Thus, the stage was set for Lenin’s turn around and his talk of “*declassing.*” In early 1921 “*Lenin argued that workers, who were no more demoralised than they were in early 1920, had become ‘declassed’ in order to justify a political clamp-down.*” [J. Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37, p. 80 and p. 18]

Other historians also note this context. For example, while the “*working class had decreased in size and changed in composition, . . . the protest movement from late 1920 made clear that it was not a negligible force and that in an inchoate way it retained a vision of socialism which was not identified entirely with Bolshevik power . . . Lenin’s arguments on the declassing of the proletariat was more a way of avoiding this unpleasant truth than a real reflection of what remained, in Moscow at least, a substantial physical and ideological force.*” [Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, p. 261] In the words of Diane Koenker, “[*if Lenin’s perceptions of the situation were at all representative, it appears that the Bolshevik party made deurbanisation and declassing the scapegoat for its political difficulties, when the party’s own policies and its unwillingness to accept changing proletarian attitudes were also to blame.*” Ironically, this was not the first time that the Bolsheviks had blamed its problems on the lack of a “*true*” proletariat and its replacement by “*petty-bourgeois*” elements, “[*t*]his was the same argument used to explain the Bolsheviks’ lack of success in the early months of 1917 — that the cadres of conscious proletarians were diluted by non-proletarian elements.” [“*Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War,*” pp. 424–450, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 57, no. 3, p. 449 and p. 428]

It should be noted that the “*declassing*” argument does have a superficial validity if you accept the logic of vanguardism. After all, if you accept the premise that the party alone represents socialist consciousness and that the working class, by its own efforts, can only reach a reformist level of political conscious (at best), then any deviation in working class support for the party obviously represents a drop in class consciousness or a “*declassing*” of the proletariat (see section H.5.1 — “*Why are vanguard parties anti-socialist?*”). Thus working class protest against the party can be dismissed as evidence of “*declassing*” which has to be suppressed rather than what it really is, namely evidence of working class autonomy and collective struggle for what it considers its interests to be against a new master class. In fact, the “*declassing*” argument is related to the vanguardist position which, in turn, justifies the dictatorship of the party **over** the class (see section H.5.3 — “*Why does vanguardism imply party power?*”).

So the “*declassing*” argument is not some neutral statement of fact. It was developed as a weapon on the class struggle, to justify Bolshevik repression

of collective working class struggle. To justify the continuation of Bolshevik party dictatorship **over** the working class. This in turn explains why working class struggle during this period generally fails to get mentioned by later day Bolsheviks – it simply undermines their justifications for Bolshevik dictatorship. After all, how can they say that the working class could not exercise “*collective power*” when it was conducting mass strikes throughout Russia during the period 1918 to 1923?

As such, it does not seem that strange that in most Leninist account of the revolution post-October rarely, if ever, mention what the working class was actually doing. We do get statistics on the drop of the numbers of industrial workers in the cities (usually Petrograd and Moscow), but any discussion on working class protest and strikes is generally, at best, mentioned in passing or, usually, ignored utterly. Given this was meant to be a “*proletarian*” dictatorship, it seems strange this silence. It could be argued that this silence is due to the working class being decimated in number and/or “*declassed*” in terms of itself perspective. This, however, seems unlikely, as collective working class protest was common place in Bolshevik Russia. The silence can be better understood by the fact this protest was directed **against** the Bolsheviks.

Which shows the bankruptcy of what can be called the “*statistical tendency*” of analysing the Russian working class. While statistics can tell us how many workers remained in Russia in, say, 1921, it does not prove any idea of their combativeness or their ability to take collective decisions and action. If numbers alone indicated the ability of workers to take part in collective struggle, then the massive labour struggles in 1930s American would not have taken place. Millions had been made redundant. At the Ford Motor Company, 128,000 workers had been employed in the spring of 1929. There were only 37,000 by August of 1931 (only 29% of the 1929 figure). By the end of 1930, almost half of the 280,000 textile mill workers in New England were out of work. [Howard Zinn, **A People’s History of the United States**, p. 378] Yet in the face of these massive redundancies, the workers organised themselves and fought back. As we will indicate, the reduction in the number of Russian workers did not restrict their ability to make collective decisions and act collectively on them – Bolshevik repression **did**.

Moreover, while Leninists usually point to the fall in population in Petrograd and Moscow during the civil war, concentrating on these cities can be misleading. “*Using the Petrograd figures,*” notes Daniel R. Bower, “*historians have painted a lurid picture of flight from the cities. In 1918 alone the former capital lost 850,000 people and was by itself responsible for one-half of the total urban population decline of the Civil War years. If one sets aside aggregate figures to determine the trend characteristic of most cities, however, the experiences of Petrograd appears exception. Only a handful of cities . . . lost half their population between 1917 and 1920, and*

even Moscow, which declined by over 40 percent, was not typical of most towns in the northern, food-importing areas. A study of all cities . . . found that the average decline in the north (167 towns in all, excluding the capital cities) amounted to 24 percent between 1917 and 1920. Among the towns in the food-producing areas in the southern and eastern regions of the Russian Republic (a total of 128), the average decline came to only 14 percent.” [“The city in danger”: *The Civil War and the Russian Urban Population*,” **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 61] Does this mean that the possibility of soviet democracy declined less in these towns? Yet the Bolsheviks applied their dictatorships even there, suggesting that declining urban populations was not the source of their authoritarianism.

Equally, what are we to make of towns and cities which increased their populations? Some towns and cities actually grew in size. For example, Minsk, Samara, Khar’kov, Tiflis, Baku, Rostov-on-don, Tsaritsyn and Perm all grew in population (often by significant amounts) between 1910 and 1920 while other cities shrunk. [Diane Koenker, “Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War,” pp. 424–450, **The Journal of Modern History**, vol. 57, no. 3, p. 425] Does that mention soviet democracy was possible in those towns but not in Petrograd or Moscow? Or does the fact that the industrial workforce grew by 14.8% between October 1920 and April 1921 mean that the possibility for soviet democracy also grew by a similar percentage? [J. Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 159]

Then there is the question of when the reduction of workers makes soviet democracy impossible. After all, between May 1917 and April 1918 the city of Moscow lost 300,000 of its two million inhabitants. Was soviet democracy impossible in April 1918 because of this? During the civil war, Moscow lost another 700,000 by 1920 (which is basically the same amount per year). [Diane Koenker, **Op. Cit.**, p. 424] When did this fall in population mean that soviet democracy was impossible? Simply put, comparing figures of one year to another simply fails to understand the dynamics at work, such as the impact of “*reasons of state*” and working class resistance to Bolshevik rule. It, in effect, turns the attention away from the state of working class autonomy and onto number crunching.

Ultimately, the question of whether the working class was too “*atomised*” to govern can only be answered by looking at the class struggle in Russia during this period, by looking at the strikes, demonstrations and protests that occurred. Something Leninists rarely do. Needless to say, certain strike waves just cannot be ignored. The most obvious case is in Petrograd just before the Kronstadt revolt in early 1921. After all, the strikes (and subsequent Bolshevik repression) inspired the sailors to revolt in solidarity with them. Faced with such events, the scale of the protest and Bolshevik repression is understated and the subject

quickly changed. As we noted in section 10 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”, John Rees states that Kronstadt was “*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*” [Rees, *Op. Cit.*, p. 61] Needless to say, he does not mention that the strikes were “*resolved*” by “*serious*” force. Nor does he explain how “*an atomised, individualised mass*” could conduct such “*serious*” strikes, strikes which required martial law to break. Little wonder, then, Rees does expound on the strikes and what they meant in terms of the revolution and his own argument.

Similarly, we find Victor Serge arguing that the “*working class often fretted and cursed; sometimes it lent an ear to the Menshevik agitators, as in the great strikes at Petrograd in the spring of 1919. But once the choice was posed as that between the dictatorship of the White Generals and the dictatorship of its own party — and there was not and could not be any other choice — every fit man . . . came to stand . . . before the windows of the local party offices.*” [Year One of the Russian Revolution, pp. 365–6] An exhausted and atomised working class capable of “*great strikes*”? That seems unlikely. Significantly, Serge does not mention the Bolshevik acts of repression used against the rebel workers (see below). This omission cannot help distort any conclusions to be drawn from his account.

Which, incidentally, shows that the civil war was not all bad news for the Bolsheviks. Faced with working class protest, they could play the “*White card*” — unless the workers went back to work, the Whites would win. This explains why the strikes of early 1921 were larger than before and explains why they were so important. As the “*White card*” could no longer be played, the Bolshevik repression could not be excused in terms of the civil war. Indeed, given working class opposition to the party, it would be fair to say that civil war actually **helped** the Bolsheviks remain in power. Without the threat of the Whites, the working class would **not** have tolerated the Bolsheviks longer than the Autumn of 1918.

The fact is that working class collective struggle against the new regime and, consequently, Bolshevik repression, started before the outbreak of the civil war. It continued throughout the civil war period and reached a climax in the early months of 1921. Even the repression of the Kronstadt rebellion did not stop it, with strikes continuing into 1923 (and, to a lesser degree, afterward). Indeed, the history of the “*workers’ state*” is a history of the state repressing the revolt of the workers.

Needless to say, it would be impossible to give a full account of working class resistance to Bolshevism. All we can do here is give a flavour of what was happening and the sources for further information. What should be clear from our account is that the idea that the working class in this period was incapable of collective organisation and struggle is false. As such, the idea that Bolshevik “*substitutionism*” can be explained in such term is also false. In addition, it will

become clear that Bolshevik repression explicitly aimed to break the ability of workers to organise and exercise collective power. As such, it seems hypocritical for modern-day Leninists to blame Bolshevik power on the “atomisation” of the working class when Bolshevik power was dependent on smashing working class collective organisation and resistance. Simply put, to remain in power Bolshevism, from the start, had to crush working class power. This is to be expected, given the centralised nature of the state and the assumptions of vanguardism. If you like, October 1917 did not see the end of “dual power.” Rather the Bolshevik state replaced the bourgeois state and working class power (as expressed in its collective struggle) came into conflict with it.

This struggle of the “workers’ state” against the workers started early in 1918. “By the early summer of 1918,” records one historian, “there were widespread anti-Bolshevik protests. Armed clashes occurred in the factory districts of Petrograd and other industrial centres. Under the aegis of the Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives . . . a general strike was set for July 2.” [William Rosenberg, “Russian labour and Bolshevik Power,” pp. 98–131, **The Workers’ revolution in Russia**, 1917, Daniel H. Kaiser (ed.), p. 107] According to another historian, economic factors “were soon to erode the standing of the Bolsheviks among Petrograd workers . . . These developments, in turn, led in short order to worker protests, which then precipitated violent repressions against hostile workers. Such treatment further intensified the disenchantment of significant segments of Petrograd labour with Bolshevik-dominated Soviet rule.” [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 37]

The reasons for these protest movement were both political and economic. The deepening economic crisis combined with protests against Bolshevik authoritarianism to produce a wave of strikes aiming for political change. Feeling that the soviets were distant and unresponsive to their needs (with good reason, given Bolshevik postponement of soviet elections and gerrymandering of the soviets), workers turned to direct action and the initially Menshevik inspired “Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives” (also known as the “Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants”) to voice their concerns. At its peak, reports “estimated that out of 146,000 workers still in Petrograd, as many as 100,000 supported the conference’s goals.” [Op. Cit., p. 127] The aim of the Conference (as per Menshevik policy) was to reform the existing system “from within” and, as such, the Conference operated openly. As Alexander Rabinowitch notes, “[F]or the Soviet authorities in Petrograd, the rise of the Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants was an ominous portent of worker defection.” [Op. Cit., p. 37]

The first wave of outrage and protests occurred after Bolshevik Red Guards opened fire on a demonstration for the Constituent Assembly in early January

(killing 21, according to Bolshevik sources). This demonstration “was notable as the first time workers came out actively against the new regime. More ominously, it was also the first time forces representing soviet power used violence against workers.” [David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power*, p. 355] It would not be the last — indeed repression by the “workers’ state” of working class protest became a recurring feature of Bolshevism.

By April “it appeared that the government was now ready to go to whatever extremes it deemed necessary (including sanctioning the arrest and even shooting of workers) to quell labour unrest. This in turn led to intimidation, apathy, lethargy and passivity of other workers. In these circumstances, growth in support of the Assembly slowed down.” [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 40] The Assembly aborted its plans for a May Day demonstration to protest the government’s policies were cancelled because of workers did not respond to the appeals to demonstrate (in part because of “Bolshevik threats against ‘protesters’” [Op. Cit., pp. 40–1]).

This apathy did not last long. After early May events “served to reinvigorate and temporarily radicalise the Assembly. These developments included yet another drastic drop in food supplies, the shooting of protesting housewives and workers in the Petrograd suburb of Kolpino, the arbitrary arrest and abuse of workers in another Petrograd suburb, Sestroresk, the closure of newspapers and the arrests of individuals who had denounced the Kolpino and Sestroresk events, the intensification of labour unrest and conflict with the authorities in the Obukhov plant and in other Petrograd factories and districts.” [Op. Cit., p. 41]

So the next major protest wave occurred in early May, 1918, after armed guards opened fire on protesting workers in Kolpino — “while the incident was hardly the first of its kind, it triggered a massive wave of indignation.” Work temporarily stopped in a number of plants. Between Kolpino and early July, more than seventy incidents occurred in Petrograd, including strikes, demonstrations and anti-Bolshevik meetings. Many of these meetings “were protests against some form of Bolshevik repression: shootings, incidents of ‘terroristic activities,’ and arrests.” In some forty incidents “worker’s protests focused on these issues, and the data is surely understate the actual number by a wide margin. There were as well some eighteen separate strikes or some other work stoppages with an explicitly anti-Bolshevik character.” [Rosenberg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 123 and pp. 123–4] Then, “[a]t the very end of May and the beginning of June, when a wave of strikes to protest at bread shortages broke out in the Nevskii district, a majority of Assembly delegates . . . resolved to call on striking Nevskii district workers to return to work and continue preparation for a general city-wide strike.” [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42] Unfortunately, for the Assembly postponing the strikes until a “better time” rather than encouraging them gave the authorities time to prepare.

Things came to a head during and after the soviet elections in June. On June 20<sup>th</sup> the Obukhov works issued an appeal to the Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives “to declare a one-day strike of protest on June 25<sup>th</sup>” against Bolshevik reprisals for the assassination of a leading Bolshevik. “The Bolsheviks responded by ‘invading’ the whole Nevskii district with troops and shutting down Obukhov completely. Meetings everywhere were forbidden.” The workers were not intimidated and “[i]n scores of additional factories and shops protests mounted and rapidly spread along the railroads.” At the June 26<sup>th</sup> “extraordinary session” of the Conference a general strike was declared for July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Faced with this, the Bolsheviks set up “machine guns . . . at main points throughout the Petrograd and Moscow railroad junctions, and elsewhere in both cities as well. Controls were tightened in factories. Meetings were forcefully dispersed.” [Rosenberg, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 126–7 and p. 127] In other words, “as a result of extreme government intimidation, the response to the Assembly’s strike call on 2 July was negligible.” [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42] This repression was not trivial:

*“Among other things, all newspapers were forced to print on their front pages Petrograd soviet resolutions condemning the Assembly as part of the domestic and foreign counter-revolution. Factories participating in the strike were warned that they would be shut down and individual strikers were threatened with the loss of work — threats that were subsequently made good. Printing plants suspected of opposition sympathies were sealed, the offices of hostile trade unions were raided, martial law declared on rail lines, and armed strike-breaking patrols with authority to take whatever action was necessary to prevent work stoppages were formed and put on 24-hour duty at key points throughout Petrograd.”* [Op. Cit., p. 45]

Needless to say, “the Petrograd authorities drew on the dubious mandate provided by the stacked soviet elections to justify banning the Extraordinary Assembly.” [Op. Cit., p. 42] While the Bolsheviks had won around 50% of workplace votes, as we note in section 6 of the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” they had gerrymandered the soviet making the election results irrelevant. The fact the civil war had started undoubtedly aided the Bolsheviks during this election and the fact that the Mensheviks and SRs had campaigned on a platform to win the soviet elections as the means of replacing soviet democracy by the Constituent Assembly. Many workers still viewed the soviets as **their** organisations and aimed for a functioning soviet system rather than its end.

The Bolsheviks turned on the Conference, both locally and nationally, and arrested its leading activists, so decapitating the only independent working class organisation left in Russia. As Rabinowitch argues, “the Soviet authorities were

*profoundly worried by the threat posed by the Assembly and fully aware of their growing isolation from workers (their only real social base) . . . Petrograd Bolsheviks developed a siege mentality and a corresponding disposition to consider any action — from suppression of the opposition press and manipulation of elections to terror even against workers — to be justified in the struggle to retain power until the start of the imminent world revolution.” [Op. Cit., pp. 43–4]*

Similar events happened in other cities. As we discuss in section 6 of the appendix on “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, the Bolsheviks had disbanded soviets elected with non-Bolshevik majorities all across Russia and suppressed the resulting working class protest. In Moscow, workers also organised a “Conference” movement and “[r]esentment against the Bolsheviks was expressed through strikes and disturbances, which the authorities treated as arising from supply difficulties, from ‘lack of consciousness,’ and because of the ‘criminal demagoguery’ of certain elements. Lack of support for current Bolshevik practices was treated as the absence of worker consciousness altogether, but the causes of the unrest was more complicated. In 1917 political issues gradually came to be perceived through the lens of party affiliation, but by mid-1918 party consciousness was reversed and a general consciousness of workers’ needs restored. By July 1918 the protest movement had lost its momentum in the face of severe repression and was engulfed by the civil war.” In the light of the fate of workers’ protest, the May 16<sup>th</sup> resolution by the Bogatyr’ Chemical Plant calling (among other things) for “freedom of speech and meeting, and an end to the shooting of citizens and workers” seems to the point. Unsurprisingly, “[f]aced with political opposition within the soviets and worker dissatisfaction in the factories Bolshevik power increasingly came to reply on the party apparatus itself.” [Richard Sakwa, “The Commune State in Moscow in 1918,” pp. 429–449, *Slavic Review*, vol. 46, no. 3/4, p. 442–3, p. 442 and p. 443]

Repression occurred elsewhere: “In June 1918 workers in Tula protested a cut in rations by boycotting the local soviet. The regime declared martial law and arrested the protestors. Strikes followed and were suppressed by violence. In Sormovo, when a Menshevik-Social Revolutionary newspaper was closed, 5,000 workers went on strike. Again firearms were used to break the strike.” Other techniques were used to break resistance. For example, the regime often threatened rebellious factories with a lock out, which involved numerous layoffs, new rules of discipline, purges of workers’ organisations and the introduction of piece work. [Thomas F. Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, p. 105 and p. 107]

Rather than the Civil War disrupting the relationship between the vanguard party and the class it claimed to lead, it was in fact the Bolsheviks who did so in face of rising working class dissent and disillusionment in the spring of 1918. In fact, “after the initial weeks of ‘triumph’ . . . Bolshevik labour relations after October” changed and “soon lead to open conflict, repression, and the consolidation



*of Bolshevik dictatorship over the proletariat in place of proletarian dictatorship itself.*” [Rosenberg, *Op. Cit.*, p. 117]

Given this, the outbreak of the civil war consolidated workers support for the Bolsheviks and saved it from even more damaging workers’ unrest. As Thomas F. Remington puts it:

*“At various times groups of workers rebelled against Bolshevik rule But for the most part, forced to choose between ‘their’ regime and the unknown horrors of a White dictatorship, most willingly defended the Bolshevik cause. The effect of this dilemma may be seen in the periodic swings in the workers’ political temper. When Soviet rule stood in peril, the war simulated a spirit of solidarity and spared the regime the defection of its proletarian base. During lulls in the fighting, strikes and demonstrations broke out.”* [Op. Cit., p. 101]

Which, as we will discuss, explains the increased repression in 1921 and onwards. Without the Whites, the Bolsheviks had to enforce their rule directly onto workers who did not want it. Ironically, the Whites **helped** the Bolsheviks remain in power. Without the start of the civil war, labour protest would have either ended Bolshevik rule or exposed it as a dictatorial regime.

This process of workers protest and state repression continued in 1919 and subsequent years. It followed a cyclical pattern. There was a “*new outbreak of strikes in March 1919 after the collapse of Germany and the Bolshevik re-conquest of the Ukraine. The pattern of repression was also repeated. A strike at a galosh factory in early 1919 was followed by the closing of the factory, the firing of a number of workers, and the supervised re-election of its factory committee. The Soviet garrison at Astrakhan mutinied after its bread ration was cut. A strike among the city’s workers followed in support. A meeting of 10,000 Astrakhan workers was suddenly surrounded by loyal troops, who fired on the crowd with machine guns and hand grenades, killing 2,000. Another 2,000, taken prisoner, were subsequently executed. In Tula, when strikes at the defence factories stopped production for five days, the government responded by distributing more grain and arresting the strike organisers . . . strikes at Putilov again broke out, at first related to the food crisis . . . The government treated the strike as an act of counter-revolution and responded with a substantial political purge and re-organisation. An official investigation . . . concluded that many shop committees were led by [Left] Social Revolutionaries . . . These committees were abolished and management representatives were appointed in their stead.*” [Remington, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 109–10]

The strikes in Petrograd centred around the Putilov shows the response of the authorities to the “*atomised*” workers who were taking collective action. “*In March fifteen factories struck together (roughly 35,000 workers were involved) . . . workers at*

*Putilov assembled and sent a delegation to the works committee . . . and put forward a number of demands . . . On 12 March Putilov stopped work. Its workers called to others to join them, and some of them came out in a demonstration where they were fired upon by Cheka troops. Strikes then broke out at fourteen other enterprises . . . On Sunday 16 March an appeal was made to the Putilovtsy to return to normal working the following day or . . . the sailors and soldiers would be brought in. After a poor showing on the Monday, the sailor went in, and 120 workers were arrested; the sailors remained until the 21<sup>st</sup> and by the 22<sup>nd</sup> normal work had been resumed.”* In July strikes broke out again in response to the cancellation of holidays which involved 25,000 workers in 31 strikes. [Mary McAuley, **Bread and Justice**, pp. 251–253 and p. 254]

In the Moscow area, while it is “*impossible to say what proportion of workers were involved in the various disturbances,*” following the lull after the defeat of the workers’ conference movement in mid-1918 “*each wave of unrest was more powerful than the last, culminating in the mass movement from late 1920.*” For example, at the end of June 1919, “*a Moscow committee of defence (KOM) was formed to deal with the rising tide of disturbances . . . KOM concentrated emergency power in its hands, overriding the Moscow Soviet, and demanding obedience from the population. The disturbances died down under the pressure of repression.*” [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 94 and pp. 94–5]

Vladimir Brovkin summarises the data he provides in his essay “*Workers’ Unrest and the Bolshevik Response in 1919*” (reproduced along with data from other years in his book **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**) as follows:

*“Data on one strike in one city may be dismissed as incidental. When, however, evidence is available from various sources on simultaneous independent strikes in different cities and overall picture begins to emerge . . . Workers’ unrest took place in Russia’s biggest and most important industrial centres: Moscow, Petrograd, Tver’, Tula, Briansk, and Sormovo. Strikes affected the largest industries . . . Workers’ demands reflected their grievances . . . The greatest diversity was in workers’ explicitly political demands or expression of political opinion . . . all workers’ resolutions demanded free and fair elections to the soviets . . . some workers . . . demanded the Constituent Assembly . . .*

*“The strikes of 1919 . . . fill an important gap in the development of the popular movement between October 1917 and February 1921. On the one hand, they should be seen as antecedents of similar strikes in February 1921, which forced the Communists to abandon war communism. In the capitals, workers, just as the Kronstadt sailors had, still wanted fairly elected soviets and not a party dictatorship. On the other hand, the strikes continued the protests that had*

*began in the summer of 1918. The variety of behavioural patterns displayed during the strikes points to a profound continuity. . .*

*“In all known cases the Bolsheviks’ initial response to strikes was to ban public meetings and rallies . . . In several cities . . . the authorities confiscated strikers’ food rations in order to suppress the strike. In at least five cities . . . the Bolsheviks occupied the striking plant and dismissed the strikers en masse . . . In all known cases the Bolsheviks arrested strikers . . . In Petrograd, Briansk, and Astrakhan’ the Bolsheviks executed striking workers.” [Slavic Review, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 370–2]*

Nor was this collective struggle stop in 1919 — *“strike action remained endemic in the first nine months of 1920”* and *“in the first six months of 1920 strikes had occurred in seventy-seven per cent of middle-sized and large works.”* For the Petrograd province, soviet figures state that in 1919 there were 52 strikes with 65,625 participants and in 1920 73 strikes with 85,645, both high figures as according to one set of figures, which are by no means the lowest, there were 109,100 workers there. *“Strikes in 1920,”* recounts Aves, *“were frequently a direct protest against the intensification of War Communist labour policies, the militarisation of labour, the implementation of one-man management and the struggle against absenteeism, as well as food supply difficulties. The Communist Party press carried numerous articles attacking the slogan of ‘free labour.’”* [J. Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 69 and p. 74]

The spring of 1920 *“saw discontent on the railways all over the country.”* This continued throughout the year. For example, the Aleksansrovskii locomotive works at the end of August, workers sent three representatives to the works commissar who had them arrested. Three days later, the workers stopped work and demanded their release. The authorities locked the workers out of the works and a guard of 70 sailors were placed outside the enterprise. The Cheka arrested the workers’ soviet delegates (who were from the SR (Minority) list) as well as thirty workers. *“The opportunity was taken to carry out a general round-up”* and arrests were made at other works. After the arrests, *“a meeting was held to elect new soviet delegates but the workers refused to co-operate and a further 150 were arrested and exiled to Murmansk or transferred to other workshops.”* [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 44 and pp. 46–7]

Strikes occurred in other places, such as Tula where the workforce *“contained a high proportion of skilled, long-standing, hereditary workers.”* The *“all-out strike”* started at the start of June and on 8 June the local newspaper published a declaration from the Tula soviet threatening the strikers with *“the most repressive measures, including the application of the highest measure of punishment”* (i.e. executions). The following day the city was declared to be under a *“state of siege”*

by the local military authorities. The strikers lost ration cards and by 11 June there had been a return to work. Twenty-three workers were sentenced to a forced labour camp until the end of the war. However, the “*combined impact of these measures did not prevent further unrest and the workers put forward new demands.*” On 19 June, the soviet approved “*a programme for the suppression of counter-revolution*” and “*the transfer of Tula to the position of an armed camp.*” The Tula strike “*highlights the way in which workers, particularly skilled workers who were products of long-standing shop-floor subcultures and hierarchies, retained the capability as well as the will to defend their interests.*” [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50–55]

While strike activity “*was most common in Petrograd, where there had been 2.5 strikers for every workman,*” the figure for Moscow was 1.75 and 1.5 in Kazan. In early March “*a wave of strikes hit the Volga town of Samara*” when a strike by printers in spread to other enterprises. “*Strike action in Moscow did not just include traditionally militant male metal workers.*” Textile workers, tram workers and printers all took strike action. [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69, p. 72 and pp. 77–8]

Thus strike action was a constant feature of civil war Bolshevik Russia. Rather than being an “*atomised*” mass, the workers repeatedly organised themselves, made their demands and took collective action to achieve them. In response, the Bolshevik regime used state repression to break this collective activity. As such, if the rise of Stalinism can, as modern-day Leninists argue, be explained by the “*atomisation*” of the working class during the civil war then the Bolshevik regime and its repression should be credited with ensuring this happened.

The end of the civil war did not see the end of working class protest. Quite the reverse. In February and March 1921 “*industrial unrest broke out in a nationwide wave of discontent . . . General strikes, or very widespread unrest, hit Petrograd, Moscow, Saratov and Ekaterinoslavl.*” Only one major industrial region was unaffected. As noted above, the Bolsheviks refused to call this movement a strike wave, preferring the term *volynka* (which means “*go-slow*”), yet “*the continued use of the term can be justified not to hide its significance but to show that workers’ protest consisted not just of strikes but also of factory occupations, ‘Italian strikes,’ demonstrations, mass meetings, the beating up of communists and so on.*” [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 109 and p. 112]

In Petrograd in the beginning of February “*strikes were becoming an everyday occurrence*” and by “*the third week of February the situation rapidly deteriorated.*” The city was rocked by strikes, meetings and demonstrations. In response to the general strike the Bolsheviks replied with a “*military clamp-down, mass arrests and other coercive measures, such as the closure of enterprises, the purging of the workforce and stopping of rations which accompanied them.*” As we discuss in “*What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?*”, these strikes produced the Kronstadt revolt (and,

as noted in section 10 of that appendix, the Bolshevik repression ensured the Petrograd workers did not act with the sailors). [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 113, p. 120]

A similar process of workers revolt and state repression occurred in Moscow at the same time. There “*industrial unrest*” also “*turned into open confrontation and protest spilled on to the streets.*” Meetings were held, followed by demonstrations and strikes. Over the next few days strikes spread to other districts. Workers demanded now elections to the soviets be held. Striking railway workers sent emissaries along the railway to spread the strike and strikes spread to outside Moscow city itself and into the surrounding provinces. Unsurprisingly, Moscow and Moscow province were put under martial law and SR and menshevik leaders were arrested. [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 130 pp. 139–144] However, “*military units called in*” against striking workers “*refused to open fire, and they were replaced by the armed communist detachments*” who did. “*The following day several factories went on strike*” and troops “*disarmed and locked in as a precaution*” by the government against possible fraternising. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, “*Moscow was placed under martial law with a 24-hour watch on factories by the communist detachments and trustworthy army units.*” [Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, p. 94 and pp. 94–5 and p. 245] The mixture of (economic) concessions and coercion broke the will of the strikers.

Strikes and protests occurred all across Russia at this time (see Aves, *Op. Cit.*). In Saratov, the strike started on March 3 when railroad shop workers did not return to their benches and instead rallied to discuss an anticipated further reduction in food rations. “*Led by a former Communist, the railroad workers debated resolutions recently carried by the Moscow proletariat . . . The next day the strike spread to the metallurgical plants and to most other large factories, as Saratov workers elected representatives to an independent commission charged with evaluating the functioning of all economic organs. When it convened, the body called for the re-election of the soviets and immediate release of political prisoners.*” The ration cut “*represent[ed] the catalyst, but not the cause, of the labour unrest.*” While “*the turmoil touched all strata of the proletariat, male and female alike, the initiative for the disturbances came from the skilled stratum that the Communists normally deemed the most conscious.*” The Communists shut down the commission and they “*expected workers to protest the dissolution of their elected representatives*” and so they “*set up a Provincial Revolutionary Committee . . . which introduced martial law both in the city and the garrison. It arrested the ringleaders of the workers’ movement . . . the police crackdown depressed the workers’ movement and the activities of the rival socialist parties.*” The Cheka sentenced 219 people to death. [Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, p. 379, p. 387, p. 388, pp. 388–9]

A similar “*little Kronstadt*” broke out in the Ukrainian town of Ekaterinoslavl at the end of May. The workers there “*clearly had strong traditions of organisation*”

and elected a strike committee of fifteen which “*put out a series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels.*” On 1 June, “*by a pre-arranged signal*” workers went on strike throughout the town, with workers joining a meeting of the railway workers. The local Communist Party leader was instructed “*to put down the rebellion without mercy . . . Use Budennyi’s cavalry.*” The strikers prepared a train and its driver instructed to spread the strike throughout the network. Telegraph operators were told to send messages throughout the Soviet Republic calling for “*free soviets*” and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The Communists used the Cheka to crush the movement, carrying out mass arrests and shooting 15 workers (and dumping their bodies in the River Dnepr). [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 171–3]

So faced with an “*atomised*” working class during the period of 1918 and 1921, the Bolsheviks had to respond with martial law, mass arrests and shootings:

*“It is not possible to estimate with any degree of accuracy how many workers were shot by the Cheka during 1918–1921 for participation in labour protest. However, an examination of individual cases suggests that shootings were employed to inspire terror and were not simply used in the occasional extreme case.”* [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 35]

Post-Kronstadt, similar Bolshevik responses to labour unrest continued. The economic crisis of 1921 which accompanied the introduction of the NEP saw unemployment rise yet “*[d]espite the heavy toll of redundancies, the ability to organise strikes did not disappear. Strike statistics for 1921 continue to provide only a very rough indicator of the true scale of industrial unrest and appear not to include the first half of the year.*” The spring of 1922 saw Soviet Russia “*hit by a new strike wave*” and the strikes “*continued to reflect enterprise traditions.*” That year saw 538 strikes with 197,022 participants recorded. [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 183 and p. 184]

The following year saw more strikes: “*In July 1923 more than 100 enterprises employing a total of some 50,000 people were on strike. In August figures totalled some 140 enterprises and 80,00 workers. In September and November the strike wave continued unabated.*” As in the civil war, the managers shut down plants, fired the workers and rehired them on an individual basis. In this way, trouble-makers were dismissed and “*order*” restored. “*The pattern of workers’ action and Bolshevik reaction played itself out frequently in dozens of other strikes. The Bolsheviks acted with the explicit purpose of rooting out the possibility of further protest. They tried to condition workers that labour protest was futile.*” The GPU “*used force to disperse workers demonstrating with the arrested strike leaders.*” [Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, p. 174, pp. 174–5 and p. 175]

In Moscow, for example, “[b]etween 1921 and 1926, all branches of industry and transport . . . experienced wildcat strikes or other spontaneous labour disturbances. Strike waves peaked in the winter of 1920–21 . . . and in the summer and fall of 1922 and 1923 . . . during July–December 1922, for example, 65 strikes and 209 other industrial disturbances were recorded in Moscow’s state enterprises.” Metalworkers were arguably the most active sector at this time while “a number of large strikes” took place in the textile industry (where “strikes were sometimes co-ordinated by spontaneously organised strike committees or ‘parallel’ factory committees”). And in spite of repression, “politicisation continued to characterise many labour struggles” and, as before, “spontaneous labour activism hindered not only the party’s economic program but also the political and social stabilisation of the factories.” [John B. Hatch, *Labour Conflict in Moscow, 1921–1925*, p. 62, p. 63, p. 65, pp. 66–7 and p. 67]

Given this collective rebellion all across the industrial centres of Russia throughout the Civil War and after, it hard to take seriously claims that Bolshevik authoritarianism was the product of an “atomisation” or “declassing” of the working class or that it had ceased to exist in any meaningful sense. Clearly it had and was capable of collective action and organisation — until it was repressed by the Bolsheviks and even then it keep returning. This implies that a key factor in rise of Bolshevik authoritarianism was political — the simple fact that the workers would not vote Bolshevik in free soviet and union elections and so they were not allowed to. As one Soviet Historian put it, “taking the account of the mood of the workers, the demand for free elections to the soviets [raised in early 1921] meant the implementation in practice of the infamous slogan of soviets without communists,” although there is little evidence that the strikers actually raised that “infamous” slogan. [quoted by Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 123] It should also be noted that Bolshevik orthodoxy at the time stressed the necessity of Party dictatorship **over** the workers (see section H.1.2 for details).

Nor can it be said that this struggle can be blamed on “declassed” elements within the working class itself. In her study of this question, Diane Koenker notes that 90% of the change in the number of workers in Moscow “is accounted for by men. Working women did not leave the city,” their numbers dropping from 90,000 in 1918 to 80,000 in 1920. Why these 80,000 women workers should be denied a say in their own revolution is not clear, given the arguments of the pro-Bolshevik left. After all, the same workers remained in roughly the same numbers. Looking at the male worker population, their numbers fell from 215,000 to 124,000 during the same period. However, “the skilled workers whose class consciousness and revolutionary zeal had helped win the October revolution did not entirely disappear, and the women who remained were likely to be family members of these veterans of 1917.” It was “the loss of young activists rather than all skilled and class conscious

*urban workers that caused the level of Bolshevik support to decline during the civil war.*” Indeed *“the workers who remained in the city were among the most urbanised elements.”* In summary, *“the deurbanisation of those years represented a change in quantity but not entirely in quality in the cities. The proletariat declined in the city, but it did not wither away . . . a core of the city’s working class remained.”* [Op. Cit., p. 440, p. 442, p. 447 and p. 449]

As Russian anarchist Ida Mett argued decades before in relation to the strikes in early 1921:

*“The population was drifting away from the capital. All who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside.*

*“This fact must be emphasised, in order to nail the official lies seeking to attribute the Petrograd strikes that were soon to break out to peasant elements, ‘insufficiently steeled in proletarian ideas.’ The real situation was the very opposite. A few workers were seeking refuge in the countryside. The bulk remained. There was certainly no exodus of peasants into the starving towns! . . . It was the famous Petrograd proletariat, the proletariat which had played such a leading role in both previous revolutions, that was finally to resort to the classical weapon of the class struggle: the strike.”* [The Kronstadt Uprising, p. 36]

In terms of struggle, links between the events in 1917 and those during the civil war also exist. For example Jonathan Aves writes that there were *“distinct elements of continuity between the industrial unrest in 1920 and 1917. This is not surprising since the form of industrial unrest in 1920, as in the pre-revolutionary period and in 1917, was closely bound up with enterprise traditions and shop-floor sub-cultures. The size of the Russian industrial workforce had declined steeply during the Civil War but where enterprises stayed open . . . their traditions of industrial unrest in 1920 shows that such sub-cultures were still capable of providing the leaders and shared values on which resistance to labour policies based on coercion and Communist Party enthusiasm could be organised. As might be anticipated, the leaders of unrest were often to be found amongst the skilled male workers who enjoyed positions of authority in the informal shop-floor hierarchies.”* Moreover, *“despite intense repression, small groups of politicised activists were also important in initiating protest and some enterprises developed traditions of opposition to the communists.”* [Op. Cit., p. 39]

Looking at the strike wave of early 1921 in Petrograd, the *“strongest reason for accepting the idea that it was established workers who were behind the **volyanka** [i.e. the strike wave] is the form and course of protest. Traditions of protest reaching back through the spring of 1918 to 1917 and beyond were an important factor in the*



organisation of the *volynka*. . . . There was also a degree of organisation . . . which belies the impression of a spontaneous outburst.” [Aves, *Op. Cit.*, p. 126]

Clearly, then, the idea that the Russian working class was atomised or declassed cannot be defended given this series of struggles and state repression. In fact, as noted, the notion that the workers were “declassed” was used to justify state repression of collective working class struggle. “*The thought oppressed me,*” wrote Emma Goldman, “*that what [the Bolsheviks] called ‘defence of the Revolution’ was really only the defence of [their] party in power.*” [My **Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 57] She was right — the class struggle in Bolshevik Russia did not stop, it continued except the ruling class had changed from bourgeoisie to Bolshevik dictatorship.

Faced with this collective resistance to Bolshevism, the Leninist could argue that while the working class was capable of collective decision making and action, the nature of that action was suspect. This argument rests on the premise that the “advanced” workers (i.e. party members) left the workplace for the front or for government posts, leaving the “backward” workers behind. This argument is often used, particularly in regard to the Kronstadt revolt of 1921 (see section 8 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”).

Of course, this argument raises more problems than it solves. In any revolution the “*most politically consciousness*” tend to volunteer to go to the front first and, of course, tend to be elected as delegates to committees of various kinds (local, regional and national). There is little that can be done about it. Needless to say, if “*soviet democracy*” depends on the “advanced” workers being there in order for it to work, then it suggests that the commitment to democracy is lacking in those who argue along these lines. It suggests that if the “backward” masses reject the “advanced” ones then the latter have the right, even the duty, to impose their will on the former. And it also begs the question of who determines what constitutes “backward” — if it means “*does not support the party*” then it becomes little more than a rationale for party dictatorship (as it did under Lenin and Trotsky).

Writing in 1938, Trotsky inadvertently exposes the logic of this position. Asserting that a “*revolution is ‘made’ directly by a minority,*” he argued that the “*success*” of a revolution is “*possible*” when “*this minority finds more or less support, or at least friendly neutrality, on the part of the majority.*” So what happens if the majority expresses opposition to the party? Unfortunately Trotsky does not raise this question, but he does answer it indirectly. As we discuss in section 15 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”, Trotsky argues that “*to free the soviets from the leadership [sic!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves. The experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats,*

*proved this. Social Revolutionary-anarchist soviets could only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship. They could play no other role, regardless of the 'ideas' of their participants.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 85 and p. 90]

Thus to let the working masses (the "*majority*") have free soviet elections and reject the vanguard (the "*minority*") would mean the end of soviet power. Thus allowing the proletariat a say in progress of the revolution means the end of the "*proletarian dictatorship*"! Which, of course, is interesting logic. The authoritarian core of the Bolshevik vision of revolution is thus exposed.

Victor Serge also presents an insight into the Bolshevik perspective on the revolution. He states that "*[a]gitation conducted by the SRs and Mensheviks called demonstrations in the streets and prepared for a general strike. The demands were: free trade, wage increases, payment of wages one, two or three months in advance and 'democracy.'* The intention was to incite the working class itself against the revolution." Which only makes sense once you realise that by "*the revolution*" Serge simply meant "*the Bolsheviks*" and the obvious truth that the working class was **not** managing the revolution at all, was **not**, in any sense, "in power." "*The best elements among the workers,*" explains Serge, "*were away fighting; those in the factories were precisely the less energetic, less revolutionary sections, along with the petty folk, yesterday's small shopkeepers and artisans, who had come there to find refuge. This proletariat of the reserve often allowed itself to fall under the sway of Menshevik propaganda.*" [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 229]

Given that Serge is discussing the period **before** the Czechoslovak revolt, a greater indictment of Bolshevism cannot be found. After all, what does "*workers' democracy*" mean unless the proletariat can vote for its own delegates? Little wonder Daniel Guerin described Serge's book as "*largely a justification of the liquidation of the soviets by Bolshevism.*" [**Anarchism**, p. 97] After all, what point is there having genuine soviet elections if the "*less revolutionary sections*" (i.e. Trotsky's "*majority*") will not vote for the vanguard? And can socialism exist without democracy? Can we expect an unaccountable vanguard to govern in the interests of anyone but its own? Of course not!

Thus the Bolsheviks did not solve the answer the questions Malatesta raised in 1891, namely "*if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing the election of a genius from the votes of a mass of fools?*" [**Anarchy**, p. 53]

Given this, is it surprising that the Bolsheviks revised the Marxist theory of the state to justify elite rule? As discussed in section H.3.8, once in power Lenin and Trotsky stressed that the "*workers' state*" had to be independent of the working class in order to overcome the "*wavering*" and "*vacillation of the masses themselves.*"

Or, to quote Serge, the “*party of the proletariat must know, at hours of decision, how to break the resistance of the backward elements among the masses; it must know how to stand firm sometimes against the masses . . . it must know how to go against the current, and cause proletarian consciousness to prevail against lack of consciousness and against alien class influences.*” [Op. Cit., p. 218] Of course, by definition, **every** group is “backward” compared to the vanguard and so Serge’s argument amounts to little more than a justification for party dictatorship **over** the proletariat.

The reason why such a system would not result in socialism does not take long to discover. For anarchists, freedom is not just a goal, a noble end to be achieved, but rather a necessary part of the process of creating socialism. Eliminate freedom (and, as a necessary result, workplace and community self-management) and the end result will be anything **but** socialism. Ultimately, as Malatesta argued, “*the only way that the masses can raise themselves*” is by freedom “*for it is only through freedom that one educates oneself to be free.*” [Op. Cit., p. 52] Ironically, by using state repression to combat “backward” elements, the Bolsheviks ensured that they stayed that way and, more importantly, disempowered the **whole** working class so ensuring that Bolshevik dictatorship came into constant conflict with it and its continuing struggle for autonomy. Rather than base itself on the creative powers of the masses, Bolshevism crushed it as a threat to its power and so ensured that the economic and social problems affecting Russia increased.

And need it be pointed out that “low” culture and/or “backward” social life have been used by numerous imperialist and authoritarian states to justify their rule over a given population? It matters little whether the population are of the same nationality of the rulers or from a subjugated people, the arguments and the logic are the same. Whether dressed up in racist or classist clothing, the same elitist pedigree lies behind the pro-Bolshevik argument that democracy would have brought “chaos” or “capitalist restoration.” The implicit assumption that working class people are not fit for self-government is clear from these rationales. Equally obvious is the idea that the party knows better than working class people what is best for them.

Sounding like Bolshevik Henry Kissingers, the Leninists argue that Lenin and Trotsky had to enforce their dictatorship **over** the proletariat to stop a “*capitalist restoration*” (Kissinger was the US state’s liaison with the Chilean military when it helped their coup in 1973 and infamously stated that the country should not be allowed to turn communist due to the stupidity of its own people). Needless to say, anarchists argue that even if the Bolshevik regime had not already need capitalist (specifically, **state** capitalist) this logic simply represents an elitist position based on “*socialism from above.*” Yes, soviet democracy **may** have resulted in the return of (private) capitalism but by maintaining party dictatorship the possibility of

socialism was automatically nullified. Simply put, the pro-Leninist argument implies that socialism can be implemented from above as long as the right people are in power. The authoritarian core of Leninism is exposed by these arguments and the repression of working class revolt which they justified.

Given this, it seems incredulous for Leninists like Chris Harman to argue that it was the “*decimation of the working class*” which caused (by “*necessity*”) the “*Soviet institutions*” to take “*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.*” [How the revolution was lost] Given that this “*independent*” life is required to allow the party to “*go against the current,*” Harman simply fails to understand the dynamics of the revolution, the position of the vanguard and the resistance of the working class subject to it. Moreover, the reason **why** the “*workers and peasants*” could not govern themselves collectively was because the party had seized power for itself and systematically destroyed soviet, workplace and military democracy to remain there. Then there is the way the Bolsheviks reacted to such collective unrest. Simply put, they sought to break the workers as a collective force. The use of lockouts, re-registration was typical, as was the arresting of “*ringleaders.*” It seems ironic, therefore, to blame “*objective factors*” for the “*atomisation*” of the working class when, in fact, this was a key aim of Bolshevik repression of labour protest.

Little wonder, then, that the role of the masses in the Russian Revolution after October 1917 is rarely discussed by pro-Bolshevik writers. Indeed, the conclusion to be reached is simply that their role is to support the party, get it into power and then do what it tells them. Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, the Russian working class refused to do this. Instead they practised collective struggle in defence of their economic **and** political interests, struggle which inevitably brought them into conflict both with the “*workers’ state*” and their role in Bolshevik ideology. Faced with this collective action, the Bolshevik leaders (starting with Lenin) started to talk about the “*declassing*” of the proletariat to justify their repression of (and power **over**) the working class. Ironically, it was the aim of Bolshevik repression to “*atomise*” the working class as, fundamentally, their rule depended on it. While Bolshevik repression did, in the end, win out it cannot be said that the working class in Russia did not resist the usurpation of power by the Bolshevik party. As such, rather than “*atomisation*” or “*declassing*” being the cause for Bolshevik power and repression, it was, in fact, one of **results** of them.

## 6 Did the Bolsheviks blame “*objective factors*” for their actions?

In a word, no. At the time of the revolution and for some period afterwards, the idea that “*objective factors*” were responsible for their policies was one which few, if any, Bolshevik leaders expressed. As we discussed in section 2, Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin argued that **any** revolution would face civil war and economic crisis. Lenin **did** talk about the “*declassing*” of the proletariat from 1920 onwards, but that did not seem to affect the proletarian and socialist character of his regime (as we noted in section 5, Lenin’s argument was developed in the context of **increasing** working class collective action, **not** its absence).

This is not to say that the Bolshevik leaders were 100% happy with the state of their revolution. Lenin, for example, expressed concern about the rising bureaucratic deformations he saw in the soviet state (particularly after the end of the civil war). Yet Lenin, while concerned about the bureaucracy, was not concerned about the Party’s monopoly of power. Unsurprisingly, he fought the bureaucracy by “top-down” and, ironically, bureaucratic methods, the only ones left to him. A similar position was held by Trotsky, who was quite explicit in supporting the party dictatorship throughout the 1920s (and, indeed, the 1930s). Needless to say, both failed to understand how bureaucracy arises and how it could be effectively fought.

This position started to change, however, as the 1920s drew on and Trotsky was increasingly sidelined from power. Then, faced with the rise of Stalinism, Trotsky had to find a theory which allowed him to explain the degeneration of the revolution and, at the same time, absolve Bolshevik ideology (and his own actions and ideas!) from all responsibility for it. He did so by invoking the objective factors facing the revolution. Since then, his various followers have utilised this argument, with various changes in emphasis, to attack Stalinism while defending Bolshevism.

The problem with this type of argument is that all the major evils usually associated with Stalinism already existed under Lenin and Trotsky. Party dictatorship, one-man management, repression of opposition groups and working class protest, state bureaucracy and so on all existed before Stalin manoeuvred himself into absolute power. And with the exception of state bureaucracy, none of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders found anything to complain about. Indeed, the reverse. Whether it is Lenin or Trotsky, the sad fact of the matter is that a party dictatorship presiding over an essentially state capitalism economy was not considered a bad thing. Which, of course, causes problems for those who

seek to distance Lenin and Trotsky from Stalinism and claim that Bolshevism is fundamentally “*democratic*” in nature.

The knots Leninists get into to do this can be ludicrous. A particularly crazy example of this can be seen from the UK’s Socialist Workers’ Party. For John Rees, it is a truism that “*it was overwhelmingly the force of circumstance which obliged the Bolsheviks to retreat so far from their own goals. They travelled this route in opposition to their own theory, not because of it — no matter what rhetorical justifications were given at the time.*” [“*In Defence of October,*” pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 70]

However, this sort of position has little substance to it. It is both logically and factually flawed. Logically, it simply makes little sense as anything but an attempt to narrow political discussion and whitewash Bolshevik practice and politics. Rees, in effect, is saying that not only are we **not** to judge the Bolsheviks by their actions, we must also discount what they said — unless it was something modern day Leninists approve of! Given that Leninists constantly quote from Lenin’s (and Trotsky’s) post-1918 works, it seems strange that they try to stop others so doing! Strange, but not surprising, given their task is to perpetuate the Bolshevik Myth. Where that leaves revolutionary politics is left unsaid, but it seems to involve worshipping at the shrine of October and treating as a heretic anyone who dares suggest we analysis it in any depth and perhaps learn lessons from it and the Bolshevism that dominated it.

Of course Rees’ comments are little more than assertions. Given that he dismisses the idea that we can actually take what any Bolshevik says at face value, we are left with little more than a mind reading operation in trying to find out what the likes of Lenin and Trotsky “*really*” thought. Perhaps the root explanation of Rees’ position is the awkward fact that there are no quotes from any of the leading Bolsheviks which support it? After all, if they were quotes from the hallowed texts expounding the position Rees says the Bolshevik leaders “*really*” held then he would have provided them. The simple fact is that Lenin and Trotsky, like all the Bolshevik leaders, considered a one-party dictatorship ruling over a state capitalist economy as some form of “*socialism.*” That was certainly Trotsky’s position and he was **not** shy in expressing. But, of course, we can dismiss this simply as “*rhetorical justifications*” rather than an expression of “*their own theory*”! We will never know, as they never expressed “*their own theory*” and instead made do with the “*rhetorical justifications*” Rees is at such pains for us to ignore!

Which shows that a major problem in discussing the failure of the Russian Revolution is the attitude of modern day Leninists. Rees presents us with another example when he asserts that “*what is required of historians, particularly Marxists, is to separate phrase from substance.*” The Bolsheviks, Rees argues, were “*inclined to make a virtue of necessity, to claim that the harsh measures of the civil war were*

*the epitome of socialism.*” Thus the Bolsheviks cannot be blamed either for what they did or what they said. Indeed, he states that non-Leninists “*take Lenin or Trotsky’s shouts of command in the midst of battle and portray them as considered analyses of events.*” [Op. Cit., p. 46]

This argument is simply incredulous. After all, neither Lenin nor Trotsky could be said to be anything **but** political activists who took the time to consider events and analyse them in detail. Moreover, they defended their arguments in terms of Marxism. Would Rees consider Lenin’s **State and Revolution** as an unimportant work? After all, this was produced in the midst of the events of 1917, in often difficult circumstances. If so, then why not his other, less appealing, political proclamations (never mind actions)? Moreover, looking at some of the works produced in this period it is clear that they are anything **but** “*shouts of command in the midst of battle.*” Trotsky’s **Terrorism and Communism** is a substantial book, for example It was not an ad hoc comment made during a conference or “*in the midst of battle.*” Quite the reverse, it was a detailed, substantial and thought-out reply to the criticism by the influential German social democrat Karl Kaustky (and, before Lenin, the most internationally respected Marxist thinker). Indeed, Trotsky explicitly asks the question “[i]s there still theoretical necessity to justify revolutionary terrorism?” and answers yes, his “*book must serve the ends of an irreconcilable struggle against the cowardice, half-measures, and hypocrisy of Kautskianism in all countries.*” [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 9 and p. 10]

Therefore, on the face of it, Rees’s comments are hard to take seriously. It is even harder to take when it becomes clear that Rees does not apply his comments consistently or logically. He does not object to quoting Lenin and Trotsky during this period when they say something he **approves** of, regardless of how well it fits into their actions. It would be no exaggeration to say that his “*argument*” is simply an attempt to narrow the area of debate, marking off limits any comments by his heroes which would place his ideology in a bad light. It is hardly convincing, particularly when their “*good*” quotes are so at odds with their practice and their “*bad*” quotes so in line with them. And as Marx argued, we should judge people by what they do, **not** by what they say. This seems a basic principle of scientific analysis and it is significant, if not surprising, that Leninists like Rees want to reject it.

Ultimately, the theoretical problem with this position is that it denies the importance of implementing ideas. After all, even if it were true that the “*theory*” of Bolshevism was different to its practice and the justifications for that practice, it would leave us with the conclusion that this “*theory*” was not sufficient when faced with the rigours of reality. In other words, that it is impractical. A conclusion that Leninists do not want to draw, hence the stress on “*objective factors*” to explain the failure of Bolshevism. As Marx said, judge people by what they do, not what

they say (unless, of course, as with the Bolsheviks post-October, what they said reflects what they did!)

Similarly, there seems to be an idealist tint to Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution. After all, they seem to think that the Lenin of 1921 was, essentially, the same person as the Lenin of 1917! That seems to violate the basic ideas of materialism. As Herbert Read points out, *“the phrase ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ . . . became fatal through the interventions of two political expedients — the identification of the proletariat with the Bolshevik Party, and the use of the State as an instrument of revolution. Expedients and compromises may have been necessary for the defeat of the reactionary forces; but there is no doubt whatsoever that what took place was a progressive brutalisation of Lenin’s own mind under the corrupting influence of the exercise of power.”* [A One-Man Manifesto, p. 51] It seems common sense that if a political strategy exposes its followers to the corrupting effects of power we should factor this into any evaluation of it. Sadly, Leninists fail to do this — even worse, they attempt to whitewash the post-October Lenin (and Trotsky) by excluding the “bad” quotes which reflect their practice, a practice which they are at pains to downplay (or ignore)!

Then, of course, there is the attitude of the Bolshevik leaders themselves to these so-called *“shouts of command in the midst of battle.”* Rather than dismiss them as irrelevant, they continued to subscribe to them years later. For example, Trotsky was still in favour of party dictatorship in the late 1930s (see section H.1.2). Looking at his justly infamous **Terrorism and Communism**, we discover Trotsky in the 1930s reiterating his support for his arguments of 1920. His preface to the 1936 French edition sees him state that it was *“devoted to a clarification of the methods of the proletariat’s revolutionary policy in our epoch.”* He concluded as follows: *“Victory is conceivable only on the basis of Bolshevik methods, to the defence of which the present work is devoted.”* The previous year, in his introduction to the second English edition, he was equally unrepentant. *“The British proletariat,”* he argued, *“will enter upon a period of political crisis and theoretical criticism . . . The teachings of Marx and Lenin for the first time will find the masses as their audience. Such being the case, it may be also that the present book will turn out to be not without its use.”* He dismissed the *“consoling illusion”* that *“the arguments of this book [were] true for backward Russia”* but *“utterly without application to advanced lands.”* The *“wave of Fascist or militarised police dictatorships”* in the 1920s and 1930s was the reason. It seems ironic that Trotsky’s self-proclaimed followers are now repeating the arguments of what he termed *“incurable Fabians.”* [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. xix, p. xxxv, p. xlvii and p. xxxix]

Rather than distance himself from the authoritarian and state capitalist policies modern day Leninists claim were thrust upon an unwilling Bolshevik party by *“objective factors,”* Trotsky defends them! Moreover, as we noted in section 12 of



the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”, Trotsky himself argues that these “*objective factors*” would face every revolution. As it is, he argues that it was only the “*slow development of the revolution in the West*” which stopped “*a direct passage from military Communism to a Socialistic system of production.*” Rather than admit to “*illusions*” caused by the “*iron necessity*” of wiling the civil war, he talks about “*those economic hopes which were bound up with the development of the world revolution.*” He even links Bolshevik practice with Stalinism, noting that the “*idea of five-year plans was not only formulated in that period [1918–1920], but in some economic departments it was also technically worked out.*” [Op. Cit., p. xliii]

Even his essay outlining what he considers the differences between Stalinism and Bolshevism does not see him fundamentally distancing himself from the positions modern day Leninists like to explain by “*objective factors.*” He stated that the “*Bolshevik party achieved in the civil war the correct combination of military art and Marxist politics.*” What did that involve? Immediately before making that claim he argued that the “*Bolshevik party has shown the entire world how to carry out armed insurrection and the seizure of power. Those who propose the abstraction of the Soviets from the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party dictatorship were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.*” Thus the “*party dictatorship*” is seen as being an example of “*Marxist politics*” being successfully applied and not something to be opposed. Moreover, “*the Bolshevik party was able to carry on its magnificent ‘practical’ work only because it illuminated all its steps with theory.*” [Stalinism and Bolshevism] Clearly, rather than denounce the power of the party as being against Bolshevik theory, as Rees claims, for Trotsky it represented its application. While he excuses some Bolshevik actions (such as the banning of opposition groups) as a product of “*objective factors,*” he clearly sees the degeneration of the revolution coming **after** the civil war and its “*correct combination*” of “*Marxist politics*” and “*military art,*” which included “*party dictatorship*” over the soviets.

This lack of distancing is to be expected. After, the idea that “*objective factors*” caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution was first developed by Trotsky to explain, after his fall from power) the rise of Stalinism. While he was head of the Soviet state no such “*objective*” factors seemed to be required to “*explain*” the party dictatorship over the working class. Indeed, quite the reverse. As he argued in 1923 “[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party.” [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 158]

Trotsky was just stating mainstream Bolshevik ideology, echoing a statement made in March 1923 by the Central Committee (of which he and Lenin were members) to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party. It sums up the lessons gained from the revolution and states that “*the party of*

*the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat.*” Vacillations, of course, are expressed by workers’ democracy. Little wonder the statement rejects it: *“The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party.”* [“*To the Workers of the USSR*” in G. Zinoviev, **History of the Bolshevik Party**, p. 213, p. 214] It should be noted that Trotsky had made identical comments before and immediately after the civil war — as well as long after (see section H.3.8 for details).

So, as with all the leading Bolsheviks, he considered the party dictatorship as an inevitable result of any proletarian revolution. Moreover, he did not question the social relationships within production either. One-man management held no fears for him and he called the state capitalist regime under himself and Lenin as “*socialist*” and defended it as such. He was fully supportive of one-man management. Writing in 1923, he argued that the “*system of actual one-man management must be applied in the organisation of industry from top to bottom. For leading economic organs of industry to really direct industry and to bear responsibility for its fate, it is essential for them to have authority over the selection of functionaries and their transfer and removal.*” These economic organs must “*in actual practice have full freedom of selection and appointment.*” [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, p. 237]

All of these post-civil war opinions of course, fit in well with his civil war opinions on the matter. Which, incidentally, explains why, to quote a Leninist, Trotsky “*continued to his death to harbour the illusion that somehow, despite the lack of workers’ democracy, Russia was a ‘workers’ state.’*” Simply put, there had been no workers’ democracy under Lenin and Trotsky and he considered that regime a “*workers’ state.*” The question arises why Harman thinks Lenin’s Russia was some kind of “workers’ state” if workers’ democracy is the criteria by which such things are to be judged. But, then again, he thinks Trotsky’s **Left Opposition** “*framed a policy along [the] lines*” of “*returning to genuine workers’ democracy*”! [Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 20 and p. 19]

Now, it seems strange that rather than present what he “*really*” thought, Trotsky expounded what presumably is the **opposite** of it. Surely the simplistic conclusion to draw is that Trotsky said what he really did think and that this was identical to his so-called “*shouts of command*” made during the civil war? But, of course, all these comments can be dismissed as “*rhetorical justifications*” and not reflective of Trotsky’s real “*theory.*” Or can they? Ultimately, either you subscribe to the idea that Lenin and Trotsky were able to express their ideas themselves or you subscribe to the notion that they hid their “*real*” politics and only modern-day Leninists can determine what they, in fact, “*really*” meant to say and what they

“really” stood for. And as for all those “awkward” quotes which express the **opposite** of the divined true faith, well, they can be ignored.

Which is, of course, hardly a convincing position to take. Particularly as Lenin and Trotsky were hardly shy in justifying their authoritarian policies and expressing a distinct lack of concern over the fate of any **meaningful** working class conquest of the revolution like, say, soviet democracy. As Samuel Farber notes that “*there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers’ control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921.*” [**Before Stalinism**, p. 44]

The sad fact is that the inter-party conflicts of the 1920s were **not** about “*workers’ democracy*,” rather party democracy. The Bolsheviks simply relabelled “*party democracy*” as “*workers’ democracy*.” Little wonder in 1925 that Max Eastman, one of Trotsky’s main supporters at the time, stated “*this programme of democracy within the party [was] called ‘Workers’ Democracy’ by Lenin*” and that “*Trotsky merely revived this original plea.*” [**Since Lenin Died**, p. 35] Trotsky held this position throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As we noted in section 13 of the appendix on “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?”, the 1927 **Platform of the Opposition** restated its belief in party dictatorship and argued that Stalin was undermining it in favour of rule by the bureaucracy. Ironically, Trotskyists in soviet prisons in the early 1930s “*continued to consider that ‘Freedom to choose one’s party — that is Menshevism’*” and this was their “*final verdict.*” [Ante Ciliga, **The Russian Enigma**, p. 280] No wonder they seemed surprised to be there!

Trotsky’s issue with Stalinism was not based on **real** socialist principles, such as meaningful working class freedoms and power. Rather it was a case of “*the political centre of gravity ha[ving] shifted from the proletarian vanguard to the bureaucracy*” and this caused “*the party*” to change “*its social structure as well as in its ideology.*” [**Stalinism and Bolshevism**] The party dictatorship had been replaced by the dictatorship of the state bureaucracy, in other words. Once this happened, Trotsky sought to explain it. As analysing the impact of Bolshevik ideology and practice were, by definition, out of the question, that left the various objective factors Trotsky turned to to explain developments after 1923. Now the concern for “*objective factors*” appeared, to explain Stalinism while keeping true to Bolshevik ideology **and** practice.

So, in summary, the leading Bolsheviks did not view “objective factors” as explaining the failure of the revolution. Indeed, until Trotsky was squeezed out of power they did not think that the revolution **had** failed. Party dictatorship and one-man management were **not** considered as expressions of a failed revolution, rather a successful one. Trotsky’s issue with Stalinism was simply that the bureaucracy had replaced the “*the proletarian vanguard*” (i.e. himself and his followers) as

the dominant force in the Soviet State and it had started to use the techniques of political repression developed against opposition parties and groups against him. The idea that “objective factors” caused the failure of the revolution was not used until the late 1920s and even then not used to explain the party dictatorship but rather the usurpation of its power by the bureaucracy.

## How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?

It is a truism of Leninism that Stalinism has nothing to do with the ideas of Bolshevism. Moreover, most are at pains to stress that these ideas have no relation to the actual practice of the Bolshevik Party after the October Revolution. To re-quote one Leninist:

*“it was overwhelmingly the force of circumstance which obliged the Bolsheviks to retreat so far from their own goals. They travelled this route in opposition to their own theory, not because of it — no matter what rhetorical justifications were given at the time.”* [John Rees, *“In Defence of October,”* pp. 3–82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 70]

His fellow party member Duncan Hallas argued that it was *“these desperate conditions”* (namely terrible economic situation combined with civil war) which resulted in *“the Bolshevik Party [coming] to substitute its own rule for that of a decimated, exhausted working class”* anarchists disagree. [**Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party**, p. 43]

We have discussed in the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” why the various *“objective factors”* explanations favoured by Leninists to explain the defeat of the Russian Revolution are unconvincing. Ultimately, they rest on the spurious argument that if only what most revolutionaries (including, ironically, Leninists!) consider as inevitable side effects of a revolution did not occur, then Bolshevism would have been fine. It is hard to take seriously the argument that if only the ruling class disappeared without a fight, if the imperialists had not intervened and if the economy was not disrupted then Bolshevism would have resulted in socialism. This is particularly the case as Leninists argue that only **their** version of socialism recognises that the ruling class will **not** disappear after a revolution, that we will face counter-revolution and so we need a state to defend the revolution! As we argued in section H.2.1, this is not the case. Anarchists have long recognised that a revolution will require defending and that it will provoke a serious disruption in the economic life of a country.

Given the somewhat unrealistic tone of these kinds of assertions, it is necessary to look at the ideological underpinnings of Bolshevism and how they played their part in the defeat of the Russian Revolution. This section, therefore, will discuss why such Leninist claims are not true. Simply put, Bolshevik ideology **did** play

a role in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. This is obvious once we look at most aspects of Bolshevik ideology as well as the means advocated by the Bolsheviks to achieve their goals. Rather than being in opposition to the declared aims of the Bolsheviks, the policies implemented by them during the revolution and civil war had clear relations with their pre-revolution ideas and visions. To quote Maurice Brinton's conclusions after looking at this period:

*“there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practices of Stalinism. We know that many on the revolutionary left will find this statement hard to swallow. We are convinced however that any honest reading of the facts cannot but lead to this conclusion. The more one unearths about this period the more difficult it becomes to define — or even to see — the ‘gulf’ allegedly separating what happened in Lenin’s time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept . . . that the whole course of events was ‘historically inevitable’ and ‘objectively determined’. Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period. Now that more facts are available self-mystification on these issues should no longer be possible. Should any who have read these pages remain ‘confused’ it will be because they want to remain in that state — or because (as the future beneficiaries of a society similar to the Russian one) it is their interest to remain so.” [The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, p. 84]*

This is unsurprising. The Leninist idea that politics of the Bolsheviks had no influence on the outcome of the revolution, that their policies during the revolution were a product purely of objective forces, is unconvincing. The facts of the matter is that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions that they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold — they will **not** occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot — and their ideas are shaped by the social relationships they experience. Thus, someone who favours centralisation and sees nationalisation as the defining characteristic of socialism will make different decisions than someone who favours decentralising power and sees self-management as the key issue. The former will also create **different** forms of social organisation based on their perceptions of what “socialism” is and what is “efficient.” Similarly, the different forms of social organisation favoured will also impact on how a revolution develops and the political decisions they make. For example, if you have a vision which favours centralised, hierarchical organisation then those placed into a position of power

over others within such structures will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations.

In summary, the ideas in people's heads matter, including during a revolution. Someone in favour of centralisation, centralised power and who equates party rule with class rule (like Lenin and Trotsky), will act in ways (and create structures) totally different from someone who believes in decentralisation and federalism. The organisation they create will create specific forms of social relationships which, in turn, will shape the ideas of those subject to them. This means that a centralised, hierarchical system will create authoritarian social relationships and these will shape those within them and the ideas they have in totally different ways than a decentralised, egalitarian system.

Similarly, if Bolshevik policies hastened the alienation of working class people and peasants from the regime which, in turn, resulted in resistance to them then some of the "objective factors" facing Lenin's regime were themselves the products of earlier political decisions. Unwelcome and unforeseen (at least to the Bolshevik leadership) consequences of specific Bolshevik practices and actions, but still flowing from Bolshevik ideology all the same. So, for example, when leading Bolsheviks had preconceived biases against decentralisation, federalism, "petty-bourgeois" peasants, "declassed" workers or "anarcho-syndicalist" tendencies, this would automatically become an ideological determinant to the policies decided upon by the ruling party. While social circumstances may have limited Bolshevik options, these social circumstances were also shaped by the results of Bolshevik ideology and practice and, moreover, possible solutions to social problems were also limited by Bolshevik ideology and practice.

So, **political ideas do matter**. And, ironically, the very Leninists who argue that Bolshevik politics played no role in the degeneration of the revolution accept this. Modern day Leninists, while denying Bolshevik ideology had a negative on the development of the revolution also subscribe to the contradictory idea that Bolshevik politics were essential for its "success"! Indeed, the fact that they are Leninists shows this is the case. They obviously think that Leninist ideas on centralisation, the role of the party, the "*workers' state*" and a host of other issues are correct and, moreover, essential for the success of a revolution. They just dislike the results when these ideas were applied in practice within the institutional context these ideas promote, subject to the pressures of the objective circumstances they argue every revolution will face!

Little wonder anarchists are not convinced by Leninist arguments that their ideology played no role in the rise of Stalinism in Russia. Simply put, if you use certain methods then these will be rooted in the specific vision you are aiming for. If you think socialism is state ownership and centralised planning then you will favour institutions and organisations which facilitate that end. If you want

a highly centralised state and consider a state as simply being an “*instrument of class rule*” then you will see little to worry about in the concentration of power into the hands of a few party leaders. However, if you see socialism in terms of working class managing their own affairs then you will view such developments as being fundamentally in opposition to your goals and definitely **not** a means to that end.

So part of the reason why Marxist revolutions yield such anti-working class outcomes is to do with its ideology, methods and goals. It has little to do with the will to power of a few individuals (important a role as that can play, sometimes, in events). In a nutshell, the ideology and vision guiding Leninist parties incorporate hierarchical values and pursue hierarchical aims. Furthermore, the methods and organisations favoured to achieve (their vision of) “socialism” are fundamentally hierarchical, aiming to ensure that power is centralised at the top of pyramidal structures in the hands of the party leaders.

It would be wrong, as Leninists will do, to dismiss this as simply a case of “idealism.” After all, we are talking about the ideology of a ruling party. As such, these ideas are more than just ideas: after the seizure of power, they became a part of the real social situation within Russia. Individually, party members assumed leadership posts in all spheres of social life and started to apply their ideology. Then, overtime, the results of this application ensured that the party could not be done otherwise as the framework of exercising power had been shaped by its successful application (e.g. Bolshevik centralism ensured that all its policies were marked by centralist tendencies, simply because Bolshevik power had become centralised). Soon, the only real instance of power is the Party, and very soon, only the summits of the Party. This cannot help but shape its policies and actions. As Castoriadis argues:

*“If it is true that people’s real social existence determines their consciousness, it is from that moment illusory to expect the Bolshevik party to act in any other fashion than according to its real social position. The real social situation of the Party is that of a directorial organ, and its point of view toward this society henceforth is not necessarily the same as the one this society has toward itself.”*  
[**The role of Bolshevik Ideology in the birth of the Bureaucracy**, p. 97]

As such, means and ends are related and cannot be separated. As Emma Goldman argued, there is “*no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another. This conception is a potent menace to social regeneration. All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose;*”



*they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical. . . The great and inspiring aims of the Revolution became so clouded with and obscured by the methods used by the ruling political power that it was hard to distinguish what was temporary means and what final purpose. Psychologically and socially the means necessarily influence and alter the aims. The whole history of man is continuous proof of the maxim that to divest one's methods of ethical concepts means to Sink into the depths of utter demoralisation. In that lies the real tragedy of the Bolshevik philosophy as applied to the Russian Revolution. May this lesson not be in vain.*" In summary, "[n]o revolution can ever succeed as a factor of liberation unless the MEANS used to further it be identical in spirit and tendency with the PURPOSES to be achieved." [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. 260–1]

If this analysis of the anarchists against Bolshevism is true then it follows that the Bolsheviks were not just wrong on one or two issues but their political outlook right down to the core was wrong. Its vision of socialism was flawed, which produced a flawed perspective on the potentially valid means available to achieve it. Leninism, we must never forget, does not aim for the same kind of society anarchism does. As we discussed in section H.3.1, the short, medium and long term goals of both movements are radically different. While both claim to aim for "communism," what is meant by that word is radically different in details if somewhat similar in outline. The anarchist ideal of a classless, stateless and free society is based on a decentralised, participatory and bottom-up premise. The Leninist ideal is the product of a centralised, party ruled and top-down paradigm.

This explains why Leninists advocate a democratic-centralist "Revolutionary Party." It arises from the fact that their programme is the capture of state power in order to abolish the "*anarchy of the market.*" Not the abolition of wage labour, but its universalisation under the state as one big boss. Not the destruction of alienated forces (political, social and economic) but rather their capture by the party on behalf of the masses. In other words, this section of the FAQ is based on the fact that Leninists are not (libertarian) communists; they have not broken sufficiently with Second International orthodoxy, with the assumption that socialism is basically state capitalism ("*The idea of the State as Capitalist, to which the Social-Democratic fraction of the great Socialist Party is now trying to reduce Socialism.*" [Peter Kropotkin, **The Great French Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 31]). Just as one cannot abolish alienation with alienated means, so we cannot attack Leninist "*means*" also without distinguishing our libertarian "*ends*" from theirs.

This means that both Leninist means and ends are flawed. Both will fail to produce a socialist society. As Kropotkin said at the time, the Bolsheviks "*have shown how the Revolution is not to be made.*" [quoted by Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 75] If applied today, Leninist ideas will undoubtedly fail from an anarchist point of view while, as under Lenin, "succeeding" from the limited perspective of

Bolshevism. Yes, the party may be in power and, yes, capitalist property may be abolished by nationalisation but, no, a socialist society would be no nearer. Rather we would have a new hierarchical and class system rather than the classless and free society which non-anarchist socialists claim to be aiming for.

Let us be perfectly clear. Anarchists are **not** saying that Stalinism will be the inevitable result of any Bolshevik revolution. What we are saying is that some form of class society will result from any such a revolution. The exact form this class system will take will vary depending on the objective circumstances it faces, but no matter the specific form of such a post-revolutionary society it will not be a socialist one. This is because of the ideology of the party in power will shape the revolution in specific ways which, by necessity, form new forms of hierarchical and class exploitation and oppression. The preferred means of Bolshevism (vanguardism, statism, centralisation, nationalisation, and so on) will determine the ends, the ends being not communist anarchism but some kind of bureaucratic state capitalist society labelled “*socialism*” by those in charge. Stalinism, in this perspective, was the result of an interaction of certain ideological goals and positions as well as organisational principles and preferences with structural and circumstantial pressures resulting from the specific conditions prevalent at the time. For example, a Leninist revolution in an advanced western country would not require the barbaric means used by Stalinism to industrialise Russia.

This section of the FAQ will, therefore, indicate the key areas of Bolshevik ideology which, when applied, will undermine any revolution as they did the Russian. As such, it is all fine and well for Trotskyist Max Shachtman (like so many others) to argue that the Bolsheviks had “*convert[ed] the expediencies and necessities of the civil war period into virtues and principles which had never been part of their original program.*” Looking at this “*original program*” we can see elements of what was latter to be applied. Rather than express a divergence it could be argued that it was this that undermined the more democratic aspects of their original program. In other words, perhaps the use of state power and economic nationalisation came into conflict with, and finally destroyed, the original proclaimed socialist principles? And, perhaps, the “*socialist*” vision of Bolshevism was so deeply flawed that even attempting to apply it destroyed the aspirations for liberty, equality and solidarity that inspired it? For, after all, as we indicated in section H.3.1, the anarchist and mainstream Marxist visions of socialism and how to get there **are** different. Can we be surprised if Marxist means cannot achieve anarchist (i.e. authentic socialist) ends? To his credit, Shachtman acknowledges that post-civil war salvation “*required full democratic rights*” for all workers, and that this was “*precisely what the Bolsheviks . . . were determined not to permit.*” Sadly he failed to wonder **why** the democratic principles of the “*original program*” were

only “honoured in the breach” and why “*Lenin and Trotsky did not observe them.*” The possibility that Bakunin was right and that statism and socialism cannot go together was not raised. [“*Introduction*” to Trotsky’s **Terrorism and Communism**, p. xv]

Equally, there is a tendency of pro-Leninists to concentrate on the period between the two revolutions of 1917 when specifying what Bolshevism “really” stood for, particularly Lenin’s book **State and Revolution**. To use an analogy, when Leninists do this they are like politicians who, when faced with people questioning the results of their policies, ask them to look at their election manifesto rather than what they have done when in power. As we discuss in section 4 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” Lenin’s book was never applied in practice. From the very first day, the Bolsheviks ignored it. After 6 months **none** of its key ideas had been applied. Indeed, in all cases the exact opposite had been imposed. As such, to blame (say) the civil war for the reality of “Bolshevik in power” (as Leninists do) seems without substance. Simply put, **State and Revolution** is no guide to what Bolshevism “really” stood for. Neither is their position **before** seizing power if the realities of their chosen methods (i.e. seizing state power) quickly changed their perspective, practice **and** ideology (i.e. shaped the desired ends). Assuming of course that most of their post-October policies were radically different from their pre-October ones, which (as we indicate here) they were not.

With that said, what do anarchists consider the key aspects of Bolshevik ideology which helped to ensure the defeat of the Russian Revolution and had, long before the civil war started, had started its degeneration into tyranny? These factors are many and so we will, by necessity, concentrate on the key ones. These are belief in centralisation, the confusion of party power with popular power, the Marxist theory of the state, the negative influence of Engels’ infamous essay “*On Authority*”, the equation of nationalisation and state capitalism with socialism, the lack of awareness that working class economic power was a key factor in socialism, the notion that “big” was automatically “more efficient,” the identification of class consciousness with supporting the party, how the vanguard party organises itself and, lastly, the underlying assumptions that vanguardism is based on.

Each one of these factors had a negative impact on the development of the revolution, combined they were devastating. Nor can it be a case of keeping Bolshevism while getting rid of some of these positions. Most go to the heart of Bolshevism and could only be eliminated by eliminating what makes Leninism Leninist. Thus some Leninists now pay lip service to workers’ control of production and recognise that the Bolsheviks saw the form of property (i.e., whether private or state owned) as being far more important than workers’ management of production. Yet revising Bolshevism to take into account this flaw means little

unless the others are also revised. Simply put, workers' management of production would have little impact in a highly centralised state ruled over by an equally centralised vanguard party. Self-management in production or society could not co-exist with a state and party power nor with "*centralised*" economic decision making based on nationalised property. In a nutshell, the only way Bolshevism could result in a genuine socialist society is if it stopped being Bolshevik!

## 1 How did the Marxist historical materialism affect Bolshevism?

As is well known, Marx argued that history progressed through distinct stages. After his death, this "*materialist conception of history*" became known as "*historical materialism*." The basic idea of this is that the "*totality of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness . . . At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or — this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms — with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.*" [A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, pp. 20–1]

Thus slavery was replaced by feudalism, feudalism with capitalism. For Marx, the "*bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production*" and "*the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism.*" [Op. Cit., p. 21] In other words, after capitalism there would be socialism:

*"The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. The integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."* [Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 929]

Socialism replaces capitalism once the "*proletariat seized political power and turns the means of production into state property.*" By so doing, "*it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as state.*" [Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 713]

Most Marxists subscribe to this schema of historical progress. For example, Tony Cliff noted that, “[f]or Lenin, whose Marxism was never mechanical or fatalistic, the definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a **transition period** meant that there could be **two** outcomes of this phase: going forward to socialism, or backsliding to capitalism. The policy of the party would tip the balance.” [Revolution Besieged, p. 364]

Marxists, like Marx, argue that socialism was the society which would come after capitalism. Thus the Bolsheviks had the mindset that whatever they did there was only two possibilities: (their version of) socialism or the restoration of capitalism. However, this is based on a false premise. Is it valid to assume that there is only one possible post-capitalist future, one that, by definition, is classless? If so, then any action or structure could be utilised to fight reaction as after victory there can be only one outcome. However, if there is more than one post-capitalist future then the question of means becomes decisive. If we assume just two possible post-capitalist futures, one based on self-management and without classes and another with economic, social and political power centralised in a few hands, then the means used in a revolution become decisive in determining which possibility will become reality.

If we accept the Marxist theory and assume only one possible post-capitalist system, then all that is required of revolutionary anti-capitalist movements is that they only need to overthrow capitalism and they will wind up where they wish to arrive as there is no other possible outcome. But if the answer no, then in order to wind up where we wish to arrive, we have to not only overthrow capitalism, we have use means that will push us toward the desired future society. As such, **means** become the key and they cannot be ignored or downplayed in favour of the ends — particularly as these ends will never be reached if the appropriate means are not used.

This is no abstract metaphysical or ideological/theoretical point. The impact of this issue can be seen from the practice of Bolshevism in power. For Lenin and Trotsky, **any** and **all** means could and were used in pursuit of their ends. They simply could not see how the means used shaped the ends reached. Ultimately, there was only two possibilities — socialism (by definition classless) or a return to capitalism.

Once we see that because of their flawed perspective on what comes after capitalism we understand why, for the Bolsheviks, the means used and institutions created were meaningless. We can see one of the roots for Bolshevik indifference to working class self-management. As Samuel Farber notes that “*there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers’ control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by*

NEP in 1921.” [Before Stalinism, p. 44] There was no need, for such means had no impact on achieving the ends Bolshevik power had set itself. As we discuss in section 6, such questions of meaningful working class participation in the workplace or the soviets were considered by the likes of Trotsky as fundamentally irrelevant to whether Bolshevik Russia was socialist or whether the working class was the ruling class or not, incredible as it may seem.

So if we accept Marx’s basic schema, then we simply have to conclude that what means we use are, ultimately, irrelevant as there is only one outcome. As long as property is nationalised and a non-capitalist party holds state power, then the basic socialist nature of the regime automatically flows. This was, of course, Trotsky’s argument with regard to Stalinist Russia and why he defended it against those who recognised that it was a new form of class society. Yet it is precisely the rise of Stalinism out of the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks which exposes the limitations in the Marxist schema of historical development.

Simply put, there is no guarantee that getting rid of capitalism will result in a decent society. As anarchists like Bakunin argued against Marx, it is possible to get rid of capitalism while not creating socialism, if we understand by that term a free, classless society of equals. Rather, a Marxist revolution would “concentrate all the powers of government in strong hands, because the very fact that the people are ignorant necessitates strong, solicitous care by the government. [It] will create a single State bank, concentrating in its hands all the commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production; and they will divide the mass of people into two armies — industrial and agricultural armies under the direct command of the State engineers who will constitute the new privileged scientific-political class.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 289] As Bolshevism proved, there was always an alternative to socialism or a reversion to capitalism, in this case state capitalism.

So libertarians have long been aware that actually existing capitalism could be replaced by another form of class society. As the experience of Bolshevik tyranny proves beyond doubt, this perspective is the correct one. And that perspective ensured that during the Russian Revolution the Makhnovists had to encourage free soviets and workers’ self-management, freedom of speech and organisation in order for the revolution to remain socialist (see the appendix on “Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?”). In contrast, the Bolsheviks implemented party dictatorship, nationalisation and one-man management while proclaiming this had something to do with socialism. Little wonder Trotsky had such difficulties understanding the obvious truth that Stalinism has **nothing** to do with socialism.

## 2 Why did the Marxist theory of the state undermine working class power?

As discussed in section H.3.7, anarchists and Marxists have fundamentally different definitions of what constitutes a state. These different definitions resulted, in practice, to the Bolsheviks undermining **real** working class power during the Russian Revolution in favour of an abstract “*power*” which served as little more than a fig-leaf for Bolshevik power.

For anarchists, the state is marked by centralised power in the hands of a few. The state, we argue, is designed to ensure minority rule and, consequently, cannot be used by the majority to manage their own affairs. Every bourgeois revolution, moreover, has been marked by a conflict between centralised power and popular power and, unsurprisingly, the bourgeois favoured the former over the latter. As such, we would expect centralised power (i.e. a state) to be the means by which a minority class seized power **over** the masses and never the means by which the majority managed society themselves. It was for this reason that anarchists refuse to confuse a federation of self-managed organisations with a state:

*“The reader knows by now that the anarchists refused to use the term ‘State’ even for a transitional situation. The gap between authoritarians and libertarians has not always been very wide on this score. In the First International the collectivists, whose spokesman was Bakunin, allowed the terms ‘regenerate State,’ ‘new and revolutionary State,’ or even ‘socialist State’ to be accepted as synonyms for ‘social collective.’ The anarchists soon saw, however, that it was rather dangerous for them to use the same word as the authoritarians while giving it a quite different meaning. They felt that a new concept called for a new word and that the use of the old term could be dangerously ambiguous; so they ceased to give the name ‘State’ to the social collective of the future.”*  
[Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism*, pp. 60–1]

This is no mere semantics. The essence of statism is the removal of powers that should belong to the community as whole (though they may for reasons of efficiency delegate their actual implementation to elected, mandated and recallable committees) into the hands of a tiny minority who claim to act on our behalf and in our interests but who are not under our direct control. In other words it continues the division into rulers and ruled. Any confusion between two such radically different forms of organisation can only have a seriously negative effect on the development of any revolution. At its most basic, it allows those in power

to develop structures and practices which disempower the many while, at the same time, taking about extending working class “power.”

The roots of this confusion can be found at the root of Marxism. As discussed in section H.3.7, Marx and Engels had left a somewhat contradictory inheritance on the nature and role of the state. Unlike anarchists, who clearly argued that only confusion would arise by calling the organs of popular self-management required by a revolution a “state,” the founders of Marxism confused two radically different ideas. On the one hand, there is the idea of a radical and participatory democracy (as per the model of the Paris Commune). On the other, there is a centralised body with a government in charge (as per the model of the democratic state). By using the term “state” to cover these two radically different concepts, it allowed the Bolsheviks to confuse party power with popular power and, moreover, replace the latter by the former without affecting the so-called “proletarian” nature of the state. The confusion of popular organs of self-management with a state ensured that these organs were submerged by state structures and top-down rule.

By confusing the state (delegated power, necessarily concentrated in the hands of a few) with the organs of popular self-management Marxism opened up the possibility of a “workers’ state” which is simply the rule of a few party leaders over the masses. The “truth of the matter,” wrote Emma Goldman, “is that the Russian people have been **locked out** and that the Bolshevik State — even as the bourgeois industrial master — uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviks this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan . . . Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.” [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. xlix] In this, she simply saw in practice that which Bakunin had predicted would happen. For Bakunin, like all anarchists, “every state power, every government, by its nature and by its position stands outside the people and above them, and must invariably try to subject them to rules and objectives which are alien to them.” It was for this reason “we declare ourselves the enemies of every government and state every state power . . . the people can only be happy and free when they create their own life, organising themselves from below upwards.” [Statism and Anarchy, p. 136]

The “workers’ state” proved no exception to that generalisation. The roots of the problem, which expressed itself from the start during the Russian revolution, was the fatal confusion of the state with organs of popular self-management. Lenin argued in “State and Revolution” that, on the one hand, “the armed proletariat itself shall **become the government**” while, on the other, that “[w]e cannot imagine democracy, not even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions.” If, as Lenin asserts, democracy “means equality” he has reintroduced inequality into the “proletarian” state as the representatives have, by definition, more power than those who elected them. [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 363, p. 306 and p. 346] Yet,



as noted in section H.1.2, representative bodies necessarily place policy-making in the hands of deputies and do not (and cannot) mean that the working class as a class can manage society. Moreover, such bodies ensure that popular power can be usurped without difficulty by a minority. After all, a minority already **does** hold power.

True equality implies the abolition of the state and its replacement by a federation of self-managed communes. The state, as anarchists have long stressed, signifies a power **above** society, a concentration of power into a few hands. Lenin, ironically, quotes Engels on the state being marked by “*the establishment of a **public power**, which is no longer directly identical with the population organising itself as an armed power.*” [quoted by Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 275] As Lenin supported **representative** structures rather than one based on elected, mandated and recallable **delegates** then he has created a “*public power*” no longer identical with the population.

Combine this with an awareness that bureaucracy must continue to exist in the “proletarian” state then we have the ideological preconditions for dictatorship **over** the proletariat. “*There can be no thought,*” asserted Lenin, “*of destroying officialdom immediately everywhere, completely. That is utopia. But to **smash** the old bureaucratic machine at once and to begin immediately to construct a new one that will enable all officialdom to be gradually abolished is **not** utopia.*” In other words, Lenin expected “*the gradual ‘withering away’ of all bureaucracy.*” [**Op. Cit.**, p. 306 and p. 307]

Yet why expect a “new” bureaucracy to be as easy to control as the old one? Regular election to posts does not undermine the institutional links, pressures and powers a centralised “*officialdom*” will generate around itself, even a so-called “*proletarian*” one. Significantly, Lenin justified this defence of temporary state bureaucracy by the kind of straw man argument against anarchism “*State and Revolution*” is riddled with. “*We are not utopians,*” asserted Lenin, “*we do not indulge in ‘dreams’ of dispensing **at once** with all administration, with all subordination: these anarchist dreams . . . are totally alien to Marxism, and, as a matter of fact, serve only to postpone the socialist revolution until human nature has changed. No, we want the socialist revolution with human nature as it is now, with human nature that cannot dispense with subordination, control and ‘managers.’*” [**Op. Cit.**, p. 307] Yet anarchists do not wish to “*dispense*” with “*all administration,*” rather we wish to replace government by administration, hierarchical positions (“*subordination*”) with co-operative organisation. Equally, we see the revolution as a process in which “*human nature*” is changed by the struggle itself so that working class people become capable of organising itself and society without bosses, bureaucrats and politicians. If Lenin says that socialism “*cannot dispense*” with the hierarchical structures required by class society why should we expect the same kinds

of structures and social relationships to have different ends just because “red” managers are in power?

Thus Lenin’s work is deeply ambiguous. He is confusing popular self-management with a state structure. Anarchists argue that states, by their very nature, are based on concentrated, centralised, alienated power in the hands of a few. Thus Lenin’s “workers’ state” is just the same as any other state, namely rule by a few over the many. This is confirmed when Lenin argues that “[u]nder socialism, **all** will take part in the work of government in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing.” In fact, once the “overwhelming majority” have “learned to administer the state **themselves**, have taken this business into their own hands . . . the need for government begins to disappear. The more complete democracy becomes, the nearer the moment approaches when it becomes unnecessary. The more democratic the ‘state’ of the armed workers — which is ‘no longer a state in the proper sense of the word’ — becomes, the more rapidly does **the state** begin to wither away.” Moreover, “[u]ntil the ‘higher’ phase of communism arrives, the Socialists demand the **strictest** control, by society **and by the state**, of the amount of labour and of consumption.” [Op. Cit., p. 361, p. 349 and p. 345]

Clearly, the “proletarian” state is **not** based on direct, mass, participation by the population but, in fact, on giving power to a few representatives. It is **not** identical with “society,” i.e. the armed, self-organised people. Rather than look to the popular assemblies of the French revolution, Lenin, like the bourgeoisie, looked to representative structures — structures designed to combat working class power and influence. (at one point Lenin states that “for a certain time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state remains under communism, without the bourgeoisie!” This was because “bourgeois right in regard to the distribution of articles of **consumption** inevitably presupposes the existence of the **bourgeois state**, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of **enforcing** the observance of the standards of right.” [Op. Cit., p. 346]).

Can we expect the same types of organs and social relationships to produce different results simply because Lenin is at the head of the state? Of course not.

As the Marxist theory of the state confused party/vanguard power with working class power, we should not be surprised that Lenin’s “*State and Revolution*” failed to discuss the practicalities of this essential question in anything but a passing and ambiguous manner. For example, Lenin notes that “[b]y educating the workers’ party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of **leading the whole people** to socialism, of directing and organising the new order.” [Op. Cit., p. 288] It is not clear whether it is the vanguard or the proletariat as a whole which assumes power. Later, he states that “the dictatorship of the proletariat” was “the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of crushing the oppressors.” [Op. Cit.,

p. 337] Given that this fits in with subsequent Bolshevik practice, it seems clear that it is the vanguard which assumes power rather than the whole class. The negative effects of this are discussed in section 8.

However, the assumption of power by the party highlights the key problem with the Marxist theory of the state and how it could be used to justify the destruction of popular power. It does not matter in the Marxist schema whether the class or the party is in power, it does not impact on whether the working class is the “*ruling class*” or not. As Lenin put it. “*democracy is **not** identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a **state** which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e. an organisation for the systematic use of **violence** by one class against the other, by one section of the population against another.*” [Op. Cit., p. 332] Thus the majority need not actually “*rule*” (i.e. make the fundamental decisions) for a regime to be considered a “*democracy*” or an instrument of class rule. That power can be delegated to a party leadership (even dictatorship) without harming the “*class nature*” of the state. This results of such a theory can be seen from Bolshevik arguments in favour of party dictatorship during the civil war period (and beyond).

The problem with the centralised, representative structures Lenin favours for the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” is that they are rooted in the inequality of power. They constitute in fact, if not initially in theory, a power **above** society. As Lenin put it, “*the **essence** of bureaucracy*” is “*privileged persons divorced from the masses and **superior** to the masses.*” [Op. Cit., p. 360] In the words of Malatesta, a “*government, that is a group of people entrusted with making laws and empowered to use the collective power to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class and cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will instinctively seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to its special interests. Having been put in a privileged position, the government is already at odds with the people whose strength it disposes of.*” [Anarchy, p. 34] As we discussed in appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, Lenin’s regime provides more than enough evidence to support such an analysis.

This is the fatal flaw in the Marxist theory of the state. As Bakunin put it, “*the theory of the state*” is “*based on this fiction of pseudo-popular representation — which in actual fact means the government of the masses by an insignificant handful of privileged individuals, elected (or even not elected) by mobs of people rounded up for voting and never knowing what or whom they are voting for — on this imaginary and abstract expression of the imaginary thought and will of the all the people, of which the real, living people do not have the faintest idea.*” Thus the state represents “*government of the majority by a minority in the name of the presumed stupidity of the one and the presumed intelligence of the other.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 136–7]

By confusing popular participation with a state, by ignoring the real inequalities of power in any state structure, Marxism allowed Lenin and the Bolsheviks to usurp state power, implement party dictatorship **and** continue to talk about the working class being in power. Because of Marxism's metaphysical definition of the state (see section H.3.7), actual working class people's power over their lives is downplayed, if not ignored, in favour of party power.

As parties represent classes in this schema, if the party is in power then, by definition, so is the class. This raises the possibility of Lenin asserting the "*working class*" held power even when his party was exercising a dictatorship **over** the working class and violently repressing any protests by it. As one socialist historian puts it, "*while it is true that Lenin recognised the different functions and democratic raison d'être for both the soviets and his party, in the last analysis it was the party that was more important than the soviets. In other words, the party was the final repository of working-class sovereignty. Thus, Lenin did not seem to have been reflected on or have been particularly perturbed by the decline of the soviets after 1918.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 212] This can be seen from how the Marxist theory of the state was changed **after** the Bolsheviks seized power to bring into line with its new role as the means by which the vanguard ruled society (see section H.3.8).

This confusion between two radically different concepts and their submersion into the term "*state*" had its negative impact from the start. Firstly, the Bolsheviks constantly equated rule by the Bolshevik party (in practice, its central committee) with the working class as a whole. Rather than rule by all the masses, the Bolsheviks substituted rule by a handful of leaders. Thus we find Lenin talking about "*the power of the Bolsheviks — that is, the power of the proletariat*" as if these things were the same. Thus it was a case of "*the Bolsheviks*" having "*to take the whole governmental power into their own hands,*" of "*the complete assumption of power by the Bolsheviks alone,*" rather than the masses. Indeed, Russia had been "*ruled by 130,000 landowners*" and "*yet they tell us that Russia will not be able to be governed by the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party — governing in the interests of the poor and against the rich.*" [Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?, p. 102, p. 7 and pp. 61–2]

However, governing in the "*interests*" of the poor is **not** the same as the poor governing themselves. Thus we have the first key substitution that leads to authoritarian rule, namely the substitution of the power of the masses by the power of a few members who make up the government. Such a small body will require a centralised state system and, consequently, we have the creation of a hierarchical body around the new government which, as we discuss in section 7, will become the real master in society.

The preconditions for a new form of class society have been created and, moreover, they are rooted in the basic ideas of Marxism. Society has been split into two bodies, the masses and those who claim to rule in their name. Given this basic inequality in power we would, according to anarchist theory, expect the interests of the masses and the rulers to separate and come into conflict. While the Bolsheviks had the support of the working class (as they did in the first few months of their rule), this does not equal mass participation in running society. Quite the reverse. So while Lenin raised the vision of mass participation in the “*final*” stage of communism, he unfortunately blocked the means to get there.

Simply put, a self-managed society can only be created by self-managed means. To think we can have a “*public power*” separate from the masses which will, slowly, dissolve itself into it is the height of naivety. Unsurprisingly, once in power the Bolsheviks held onto power by all means available, including gerrymandering and disbanding soviets, suppressing peaceful opposition parties and violently repressing the very workers it claimed ruled in “*soviet*” Russia (see section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”). Significantly, this conflict developed before the start of the civil war (see section 3 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” for details). So when popular support was lost, the basic contradictions in the Bolshevik position and theory became clear. Rather than be a “*soviet*” power, the Bolshevik regime was simply rule over the workers in their name, nothing more. And equally unsurprising, the Leninists revised their theory of the state to take into account the realities of state power and the need to justify minority power **over** the masses (see section H.3.8).

Needless to say, even electoral support for the Bolsheviks should not and cannot be equated to working class management of society. Echoing Marx and Engels at their most reductionist (see section H.3.9), Lenin stressed that the state was “*an organ or machine for the subjection of one class by another . . . when the State has become proletarian, when it has become a machine for the domination of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, then we shall fully and unreservedly for a strong government and centralism.*” [Op. Cit., p. 75] The notions that the state could have interests of its own, that it is not simply an instrument of class rule but rather **minority** class rule are nowhere to be found. The implications of this simplistic analysis had severe ramifications for the Russian Revolution and Trotskyist explanations of both Stalinism and its rise.

Which brings us to the second issue. It is clear that by considering the state simply as an instrument of class rule Lenin could downplay, even ignore, such important questions of **how** the working class can “*rule*” society, how it can be a “*ruling*” class. Blinded by the notion that a state could not be anything **but** an instrument of class rule, the Bolsheviks simply were able to justify any limitation

of working class democracy and freedom and argue that it had no impact on whether the Bolshevik regime was really a “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” or not. This can be seen from Lenin’s polemic with German Social-Democrat Karl Kautsky, where he glibly stated that “[t]he form of government, has absolutely nothing to do with it.” [Collected Works, vol. 28, p. 238]

Yet the idea that there is a difference between **who** rules in a revolutionary situation and **how** they rule is a key one, and one raised by the anarchists against Marxism. After all, if the working class is politically expropriated how can you maintain that a regime is remotely “proletarian”? Ultimately, the working class can only “rule” society through its collective participation in decision making (social, economic and “political”). If working class people are not managing their own affairs, if they have delegated that power to a few party leaders then they are **not** a ruling class and could never be. While the bourgeoisie can, and has, ruled economically under an actual dictatorship, the same cannot be said to be the case with the working class. Every class society is marked by a clear division between order takers and order givers. To think that such a division can be implemented in a socialist revolution and for it to remain socialist is pure naivety. As the Bolshevik revolution showed, representative government is the first step in the political expropriation of the working class from control over their fate.

This can best be seen by Trotsky’s confused analyses of Stalinism. He simply could not understand the nature of Stalinism with the simplistic analytical tools he inherited from mainstream Marxism and Bolshevism. Thus we find him arguing in 1933 that:

*“The dictatorship of a class does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state. This we have seen, first of all, in the case of the propertied classes. The nobility ruled through the monarchy before which the noble stood on his knees. The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie took on comparatively developed democratic forms only under the conditions of capitalist upswing when the ruling class had nothing to fear. Before our own eyes, democracy has been supplanted in Germany by Hitler’s autocracy, with all the traditional bourgeois parties smashed to smithereens. Today, the German bourgeoisie does not rule directly; politically it is placed under complete subjection to Hitler and his bands. Nevertheless, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie remains inviolate in Germany, because all the conditions of its social hegemony have been preserved and strengthened. By expropriating the bourgeoisie politically, Hitler saved it, even if temporarily, from economic expropriation. The fact that the bourgeoisie was compelled to resort to the fascist regime testifies to the fact that its hegemony was endangered but not at all that it had fallen.”* [Trotsky, **The Class Nature Of The Soviet State**]

Yet Trotsky is confusing the matter. He is comparing the actions of class society with those of a socialist revolution. While a minority class need not “*participate*” **en masse** the question arises does this apply to the transition from class society to a classless one? Can the working class **really** be “*expropriated*” politically and still remain “*the ruling class*”? Moreover, Trotsky fails to note that the working class was **economically** and **politically** expropriated under Stalinism as well. This is unsurprising, as both forms of expropriation had occurred when he and Lenin held the reins of state power. Yet Trotsky’s confused ramblings do serve a purpose in showing how the Marxist theory of the state can be used to rationalise the replacement of popular power by party power. With such ideological baggage, can it be a surprise that the Bolshevik replacement of workers’ power by party power could be a revolutionary goal? Ironically, the Marxist theory of the state as an instrument of class rule helped ensure that the Russian working class did **not** become the ruling class post-October. Rather, it ensured that the Bolshevik party did.

To conclude, by its reductionist logic, the Marxist theory of the state ensured that the substitution of popular power by party power could go ahead and, moreover, be justified ideologically. The first steps towards party dictatorship can be found in such apparently “libertarian” works as Lenin’s “*State and Revolution*” with its emphasis on “representation” and “centralisation.” The net effect of this was to centralise power into fewer and fewer hands, replacing the essential constructive working class participation and self-activity required by a social revolution with top-down rule by a few party leaders. Such rule could not avoid becoming bureaucratized and coming into conflict with the real aspirations and interests of those it claimed to represent. In such circumstances, in a conflict between the “*workers’ state*” and the actual workers the Marxist theory of the state, combined with the assumptions of vanguardism, made the shift to party dictatorship inevitable. As we discussed in section 3 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”, authoritarian tendencies had surfaced before the civil war began.

The strange paradox of Leninism, namely that the theoretical dictatorship of the proletariat was, in practice, a dictatorship **over** the proletariat comes as no surprise. In spite of Lenin announcing “*all power to the soviets*” he remained committed to a disciplined party wielding centralised power. This regime soon expropriated the soviets while calling the subsequent regime “Soviet.” Rather than create the authoritarian tendencies of the Bolshevik state the “objective factors” facing Lenin’s regime simply increased their impact. The preconditions for the minority rule which the civil war intensified to extreme levels already existed within Marxist theory. Consequently, a Leninist revolution which avoided the (inevitable) problems facing a revolution would still create some kind of class

society simply because it reproduces minority rule by creating a “workers’ state” as its first step. Sadly, Marxist theory confuses popular self-government with a state so ensuring the substitution of rule by a few party leaders for the popular participation required to ensure a successful revolution.

### 3 How did Engels’ essay “*On Authority*” affect the revolution?

We have discussed Engels’ infamous diatribe against anarchism already (see section H.4 and subsequent sections). Here we discuss how its caricature of anarchism helped disarm the Bolsheviks theoretically to the dangers of their own actions, so helping to undermine the socialist potential of the Russian revolution. While the Marxist theory of the state, with its ahistoric and ambiguous use of the word “state” undermined popular autonomy and power in favour of party power, Engels’ essay “*On Authority*” helped undermine popular self-management.

Simply put, Engels essay contained the germs from which Lenin and Trotsky’s support for one-man management flowed. He provided the Marxist orthodoxy required to undermine real working class power by confusing all forms of organisation with “*authority*” and equating the necessity of self-discipline with “*subordination*” to one will. Engels’ infamous essay helped Lenin to destroy self-management in the workplace and replace it with appointed “*one-man management*” armed with “*dictatorial powers*.”

For Lenin and Trotsky, familiar with Engels’ “*On Authority*,” it was a truism that any form of organisation was based on “*authoritarianism*” and, consequently, it did not really matter **how** that “*authority*” was constituted. Thus Marxism’s agnostic attitude to the patterns of domination and subordination within society was used to justify one-man management and party dictatorship. Indeed, “*Soviet socialist democracy and individual management and dictatorship are in no way contradictory . . . the will of a class may sometimes be carried by a dictator, who sometimes does more alone and is frequently more necessary.*” [Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 476]

Like Engels, Lenin defended the principle of authority. The dictatorship of the Party over the proletariat found its apology in this principle, thoroughly grounded in the practice of bureaucracy and modern factory production. Authority, hierarchy, and the need for submission and domination is inevitable given the current mode of production, they argued. And no foreseeable change in social relations could ever overcome this blunt necessity. As such, it was (fundamentally) irrelevant **how** a workplace is organised as, no matter what, it would be



“authoritarian.” Thus “one-man management” would be, basically, the same as worker’s self-management via an elected factory committee.

For Engels, any form of joint activity required as its “first condition” a “dominant will that settles all subordinate questions, whether this will is represented by a single delegate or a committee charged with the execution of the resolutions of the majority of persons interested. In either case there is very pronounced authority.” Thus the “necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that.” Collective life, he stressed, required “a certain authority, no matter how delegated” and “a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us.” [The Marx-Engels Reader, p. 732]

Lenin was aware of these arguments, even quoting from this essay in his **State and Revolution**. Thus he was aware that for Engels, collective decisions meant “the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way.” Thus there was no difference if “they are settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a majority vote.” The more advanced the technology, the greater the “despotism”: “The automatic machinery of a big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalist who employ workers ever have been.” [Op. Cit., p. 731] Thus Engels had used the modern factory system of mass production as a direct analogy to argue against the anarchist call for workers’ councils and self-management in production, for workers’ autonomy and participation. Like Engels, Lenin stressed the necessity of central authority in industry.

It can be argued that it was this moment that ensured the creation of state capitalism under the Bolsheviks. This is the moment in Marxist theory when the turn from economics to technics, from proletarian control to technocracy, from workers’ self-management to appointed state management was ensured. Henceforth the end of any critique of alienation in mainstream Marxism was assured. Submission to technique under hierarchical authority effectively prevents active participation in the social production of values. And there was no alternative.

As noted in section 8 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”). and section H.3.14, during 1917 Lenin did not favour workers’ self-management of production. He raised the idea of “workers’ control” after the workers spontaneously raised the idea and practice themselves during the revolution. Moreover, he interpreted that slogan in his own way, placing it within a statist context and within institutions inherited from capitalism (see section H.3.12). Once in power, it was (unsurprisingly) his vision of socialism and workers’ control that was implemented, **not** the workers’ factory committees. The core of that vision he repeatedly stressed had been raised **before** the October revolution.

This vision can be best seen in **The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government**, written by Lenin and published on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1918. This occurred before the

start of the civil war and, indeed, he starts by arguing that “[t]hanks to the peace which has been achieved” the Bolsheviks had “gained an opportunity to concentrate its efforts for a while on the most important and most difficult aspect of the socialist revolution, namely the task of organisation.” The Bolsheviks, who had “managed to complete the conquest of power,” now faced “the principal task of convincing people” and doing “**practical organisational work**.” Only when this was done “will it be possible to say that Russia **has become** not only a Soviet, but also a socialist, republic.” [The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government, p. 2 and p. 8]

Sadly, this “organisation” was riddled with authoritarianism and was fundamentally top-down in nature. His “socialist” vision was simply state capitalism (see section 10 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”). However, what interests us here is that his arguments to justify the “socialist” policies he presented are similar to those put forward by Engels in “On Authority.” As such, we can only reach the following conclusions. Firstly, that the “state capitalist” vision of socialism imposed upon Russia by the Bolsheviks was what they had always intended to introduce. It was their limited support for workers’ control in 1917 that was atypical and not part of their tradition, **not** their policies once in power (as modern day Leninists assert). Secondly, that this vision had its roots in classical Marxism, specifically Engels’ “On Authority” and the identification of socialism with nationalised property (see section H.3.13 for more on this).

That Engels diatribe had a negative impact on the development of the Russian revolution can easily be seen from Lenin’s arguments. For example, Lenin argues that the “tightening of discipline” and “harmonious organisation” calls “for coercion — coercion precisely in the form of dictatorship.” He did not object to granting “individual executives dictatorial power (or ‘unlimited’ powers)” and did not think “the appointment of individual, dictators with unlimited power” was incompatible with “the fundamental principles of the Soviet government.” After all, “the history of revolutionary movements” had “shown” that “the dictatorship of individuals was very often the expression, the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of revolutionary classes.” He notes that “[u]ndoubtedly, the dictatorship of individuals was compatible with bourgeois democracy.” [Op. Cit., p. 28 and p. 32] It would be churlish to note that previous revolutionary movements had not been **socialist** in nature and did not aim to **abolish** classes. In such cases, the government appointing people with dictatorial powers would not have harmed the nature of the revolution, which was transferring power from one minority class to another.

Lenin mocked the “exceedingly poor arguments” of those who objected, saying that they “demand of us a higher democracy than bourgeois democracy and say: personal dictatorship is absolutely incompatible with your, Bolshevik (i.e. not bourgeois, **but socialist**) Soviet democracy.” As the Bolsheviks were “not anarchists,”

he admitted the need “coercion” in the “*transition from capitalism to socialism*,” its form being determined “*by the degree of development of the given revolutionary class, and also by special circumstances.*” In general, he stressed, there was “*absolutely no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 32–3 and p. 33] Which is, of course, sophistry as dictatorship by a few people in some aspects of life will erode democracy in others. For example, being subject to the economic power of the capitalist during work harms the individual and reduces their ability to participate in other aspects of social life. Why should being subject to “red” bosses be any different?

In particular, Lenin argued that “*individual dictatorial power*” was required because “*large-scale machine industry*” (which is the “*foundation of socialism*”) calls for “*absolute and strict unity of will, which directs the joint labours of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. . . . But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.*” He reiterated that the “*unquestioning subordination to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry.*” The people must “*unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour.*” And so it was a case (for the workers, at least) of “[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.” [Op. Cit., p. 33, p. 34 and p. 44]

The parallels with Engels’ “*On Authority*” could not be clearer, as are the fallacies of Lenin’s assertions (see, for example, section H.4.4). Lenin, like Engels, uses the example of modern industry to bolster his arguments. Yet the net effect of Lenin’s argument was to eliminate working class economic power at the point of production. Instead of socialist social relationships, Lenin imposed capitalist ones. Indeed, no capitalist would disagree with Lenin’s workplace regime — they try to create such a regime by breaking unions and introducing technologies and techniques which allow them to control the workers. Unsurprisingly, Lenin also urged the introduction of two such techniques, namely “*piece-work*” and “*applying much of what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 23–4] As Trotskyist Tony Cliff reminds us, “*the employers have at their disposal a number of effective methods of disrupting th[e] unity [of workers as a class]. Once of the most important of these is the fostering of competition between workers by means of piece-work systems.*” He notes that these were used by the Nazis and the Stalinists “*for the same purpose.*” [State Capitalism in Russia, pp. 18–9] Obviously piece-work is different when Lenin introduces it! Similarly, when Trotsky notes that “[b]lind obedience is not a thing to be proud of in a revolutionary,” it is somewhat different when Lenin calls upon workers to do so (or, for that matter, Trotsky himself when

in power — see section 6 for Trotsky’s radically different perspective on blind obedience of the worker to “his” state in 1920!). [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. xlvii]

The **economic** dominance of the bourgeoisie ensures the political dispossession of the working class. Why expect the introduction of capitalist social relations in production to have different outcomes just because Lenin was the head of the government? In the words of libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton:

*“We hold that the ‘relations of production’ — the relations which individuals or groups enter into with one another in the process of producing wealth — are the essential foundations of any society. A certain pattern of relations of production is the common denominator of all class societies. This pattern is one in which the producer does not dominate the means of production but on the contrary both is ‘separated from them’ and from the products of his own labour. In all class societies the producer is in a position of subordination to those who manage the productive process. Workers’ management of production — implying as it does the total domination of the producer over the productive process — is not for us a marginal matter. It is the core of our politics. It is the only means whereby authoritarian (order-giving, order-taking) relations in production can be transcended and a free, communist or anarchist, society introduced.*

*“We also hold that the means of production may change hands (passing for instance from private hands into those of a bureaucracy, collectively owning them) with out this revolutionising the relations of production. Under such circumstances — and whatever the formal status of property — the society is still a class society for production is still managed by an agency other than the producers themselves. Property relations, in other words, do not necessarily reflect the: relations of production. They may serve to mask them — and in fact they often have.”* [**The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. vii-viii]

The net effect of Lenin’s arguments, as anarchist Peter Arshinov noted a few years later, was that the “*fundamental fact*” of the Bolshevik revolution was “*that the workers and the peasant labourers remained within the earlier situation of ‘working classes’ — producers managed by authority from above.*” He stressed that Bolshevik political and economic ideas may have “*remov[ed] the workers from the hands of individual capitalists*” but they “*delivered them to the yet more rapacious hands of a single ever-present capitalist boss, the State. The relations between the workers and this new boss are the same as earlier relations between labour and capital . . . Wage labour has remained what it was before, except that it has taken on the character of an obligation to the State . . . It is clear that in all this we are dealing with a simple substitution of State capitalism for private capitalism.*” [**The History**

of the Makhnovist Movement, p. 35 and p. 71] Moreover, Lenin's position failed to understand that unless workers have power at the point of production, they will soon lose it in society as a whole. Which, of course, they soon did in Bolshevik Russia, even in the limited form of electing a "revolutionary" government.

So while the causes of the failure of the Russian Revolution were many fold, the obvious influence of Engels' "On Authority" on the fate of the workers' control movement should be noted. After all, Engels' argument confuses the issues that Bakunin and other anarchists were trying to raise (namely on the nature of the organisations we create and our relationships with others). If, as Engels' argues, all organisation is "authoritarian," then does this mean that there no real difference between organisational structures? Is a dictatorship just the same as a self-managed group, as they are both organisations and so both "authoritarian"? If so, surely that means the kinds of organisation we create are irrelevant and what really matters is state ownership? Such logic can only lead to the perspective that working class self-management of production is irrelevant to socialism and, unfortunately, the experience of the Russian Revolution tends to suggest that for mainstream Marxism this is the case. The Bolsheviks imposed distinctly authoritarian social structures while arguing that they were creating socialism.

Like Engels, the Bolsheviks defended the principle of authority. The dictatorship of the Party over the proletariat in the workplace (and, indeed, elsewhere) ultimately found its apology in this principle, thoroughly grounded in the practice of bureaucracy and modern factory production. Authority, hierarchy, and the need for submission and domination is inevitable, given the current mode of production, they argued. And, as Engels had stressed, no foreseeable change in social relations could ever overcome this blunt necessity. As such, it was (fundamentally) irrelevant for the leading Bolsheviks how a workplace is organised as, no matter what, it would be "authoritarian." Thus "one-man management" would be, basically, the same as worker's self-management via an elected factory committee. As Trotsky made clear in 1920, for the Bolsheviks the "dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers [i.e. the party, which Trotsky cheerfully admits is exercising a **party dictatorship**], and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered." Thus, it "would be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of the factories." [Terrorism and Communism, p. 162]

By equating "organisation" with "authority" (i.e. hierarchy) and dismissing the importance of revolutionising the social relationships people create between themselves, Engels opened the way for the Bolsheviks' advocacy of "one-man management." His essay is at the root of mainstream Marxism's agnostic attitude

to the patterns of domination and subordination within society and was used to justify one-man management. After all, if Engels was right, then it did not matter **how** the workplace was organised. It would, inherently, be “*authoritarian*” and so what mattered, therefore, was who owned property, **not** how the workplace was run. Perhaps, then, “*On Authority*” was a self-fulfilling prophecy — by seeing any form of organisation and any form of advanced technology as needing hierarchy, discipline and obedience, as being “*authoritarian*,” it ensured that mainstream Marxism became blinded to the key question of **how** society was organised. After all, if “*despotism*” was a fact of life within industry regardless of how the wider society was organised, then it does not matter if “*one-man management*” replaces workers’ self-management. Little wonder then that the continued alienation of the worker was widespread long before Stalin took power and, more importantly, before the civil war started.

As such, the dubious inheritance of classical Marxism had started to push the Bolshevik revolution down an authoritarian path and create economic structures and social relationships which were in no way socialist and, moreover, laid the foundations for Stalinism. Even if the civil war had not occurred, capitalist social relationships would have been dominant within “socialist” Russia — with the only difference being that rather than private capitalism it would have been state capitalism. As Lenin admitted, incidentally. It is doubtful that this state capitalism would have been made to serve “*the whole people*” as Lenin naively believed.

In another way Engels identification of organisation with authority affected the outcome of the revolution. As **any** form of organisation involved, for Engels, the domination of individuals and, as such, “*authoritarian*” then the nature of the socialist state was as irrelevant as the way workplaces were run. As both party dictatorship and soviet democracy meant that the individual was “*dominated*” by collective decisions, so both were “*authoritarian*.” As such, the transformation of the soviet state into a party dictatorship did not fundamentally mean a change for the individuals subject to it. Little wonder that no leading Bolshevik called the end of soviet democracy and its replacement by party dictatorship as a “retreat” or even as something to be worried about (indeed, they all argued the opposite, namely that party dictatorship was essential and not an issue to be worried about).

Perhaps this analogy by the SWP’s Tony Cliff of the relationship between the party and the working class provides an insight:

*“In essence the dictatorship of the proletariat **does not** represent a combination of abstract, immutable elements like democracy and centralism, independent of time and space. The actual level of democracy, as well as centralism, depends on three basic factors: 1. the strength of the proletariat; 2. the material and cultural legacy left to it by the old regime; and 3. the strength of capitalist*

*resistance. The level of democracy feasible must be indirect proportion to the first two factors, and in inverse proportion to the third. The captain of an ocean liner can allow football to be played on his vessel; on a tiny raft in a stormy sea the level of tolerance is far lower.*” [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 179]

Ignoring the obvious points (such as comparing working class freedom and democracy to a game!), we can see shades of Engels in Cliff’s words. Let us not forget that Engels argued that “*a ship on the high seas*” at a “*time of danger*” required “*the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that.*” [Op. Cit., p. 732] Here Cliff is placing the party into the Captain’s role and the workers as the crew. The Captain, in Engels argument, exercised “*imperious authority.*” In Cliff’s, the party decides the freedoms which working class people are allowed to have – and so subjects them to its “*imperious authority.*”

Little wonder Bolshevism failed. By this simple analogy Cliff shows the authoritarian essence of Bolshevism and who really has “*all power*” under that system. Like the crew and passengers dominated by the will of the captain, the working class under Leninism will be dominated by the party. It does not bode well that Cliff thinks that democracy can be “*feasible*” in some circumstances, but not others and it is up to those in power (i.e. the party leaders) to determine when it was. In his rush to justify Bolshevik party dictatorship in terms of “objective conditions” he clearly forgot his earlier comments that the “*liberation of the working class can only be achieved through the action of the working class. Hence one can have a revolution with more or less violence, with more or less suppression of civil rights of the bourgeoisie and its hangers-on [a general catch-all category which, if Bolshevik practice is anything to go by, can include rebel workers, indeed the whole working class!], with more or less political freedom, but one cannot give a revolution, as the history of Russia conclusively demonstrates, without workers’ democracy – even if restricted and distorted. Socialist advance must be gauged by workers’ freedom, by their power to shape their own destiny . . . Without workers’ democracy the immediate means leads to a very different end, to an end that is prefigured in these same means.*” [Op. Cit., p. 110] Obviously if Lenin and Trotsky are the captains of the ship of state, such considerations are less important. When it is Lenin wielding “*imperious authority*” then workers’ democracy can be forgotten and the regime remain a “*workers’ state*”!

By ignoring the key issue Bakunin and other anarchists drew attention to by attacking “*authority*” (and let us not forget that by that they meant hierarchical organisations in which power is concentrated at the top in a few hands – see section H.4), Engels opened up the way of seeing democratic decision as being less than important. This is **not** to suggest that Engels favoured dictatorship.

Rather we are suggesting that by confusing two radically different forms of organisation as self-management and hierarchy he blunted latter Marxists to the importance of participation and collective decision making from below. After all, if all organisation is “*authoritarian*” then it matters little, in the end, how it is structured. Dictatorship, representative democracy and self-management were all equally “*authoritarian*” and so the issues raised by anarchism can safely be ignored (namely that electing bosses does not equate to freedom). Thus the Bolshevik willingness to equate their dictatorship with rule by the working class is not such a surprise after all.

To conclude, rather than the anti-authoritarians not knowing “*what they are talking about*,” “*creating nothing but confusion*,” “*betraying the movement of the proletariat*” and “*serv[ing] the reaction*,” it was Engels’ essay that aided the Bolshevik counter-revolution and helped, in its own small way, to lay the foundations for Leninist tyranny and state capitalism. [Engels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 733] Ultimately, Engels “*On Authority*” helped give Lenin the ideological premises by which to undermine workers’ economic power during the revolution and recreate capitalist social relations and call it “*socialism*.” His ill thought out diatribe had ramifications even he would never have guessed (but were obvious at the time to libertarians). His use of the modern factory system to argue against the anarchist call for workers’ councils, federalism and workers’ autonomy, for participation, for self-management, became the basis for re-imposing **capitalist** relations of production in revolutionary Russia.

## 4 How did the Bolshevik vision of “democracy” affect the revolution?

As discussed in section H.3.2, Marx and Engels had left their followers which a contradictory legacy as regards “*socialism from below*.” On the one hand, their praise for the Paris Commune and its libertarian ideas pointed to a participatory democracy run from below. On the other, Marx’s comments during the German Revolution in 1850 that the workers must “*strive for . . . the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority*” because “*the path of revolutionary activity*” can “*proceed only from the centre*” suggests a top-down approach. He stressed that centralisation of power was essential to overcome local autonomy, which would allow “*every village, every town and every province*” to put “*a new obstacle in the path*” the revolution due to “*local and provincial obstinacy*.” [Marx-Engels Reader, p. 509]



Building upon this contradictory legacy, Lenin unambiguously stressed the “*from above*” aspect of it (see section H.3.3 for details). The only real exception to this perspective occurred in 1917, when Lenin was trying to win mass support for his party. However, even this support for democracy from below was always tempered by reminding the reader that the Bolsheviks stood for centralisation and strong government once they were in power (see section 7).

Once in power, the promises of 1917 were quickly forgotten. Unsurprisingly, modern day Leninists argue that this was due to the difficult circumstances facing the Bolsheviks at the time. They argue that the words of 1917 represent the true democratic vision of Bolshevism. Anarchists are not impressed. After all, for an idea to be useful it must be practical — even in “exceptional circumstances.” If the Bolshevik vision is not robust enough to handle the problems that have affected every revolution then we have to question the validity of that vision or the strength of commitment its supporters hold it.

Given this, the question becomes which of these two aspects of Marxism was considered its “essence” by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Obviously, it is hard to isolate the real Bolshevik vision of democracy from the influence of “objective factors.” However, we can get a taste by looking at how the Bolsheviks acted and argued during the first six months in power. During this period, the problems facing the revolution were hard but not as bad as those facing it after the Czech revolt at the end of May, 1918. Particularly after March, 1918, the Bolsheviks were in a position to start constructive work as in the middle of that month Lenin claimed that the “*Soviet Government has triumphed in the Civil War.*” [quoted by Maximoff, **The Guillotine at Work**, p. 53]

So the question as to whether the Bolsheviks were forced into authoritarian and hierarchical methods by the practical necessities of the civil war or whether all this was inherent in Leninism all along, and the natural product of Leninist ideology, can be answered by looking at the record of the Bolsheviks prior to the civil war. From this we can ascertain the effect of the civil war. And the obvious conclusion is that the record of the initial months of Bolshevik rule point to a less than democratic approach which suggests that authoritarian policies were inherent in Leninism and, as such, pointed the revolution into a path where further authoritarian policies were not only easy to implement, but had to be as alternative options had been eliminated by previous policies. Moreover, Bolshevik ideology itself made such policies easy to accept and to justify.

As discussed in section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, it was during this period that the Bolsheviks started to gerrymander soviets and disband any they lost elections to. As we indicate in section 9 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, they undermined the factory committees, stopping them federating and basically handed the factories to

the state bureaucracy. Lenin argued for and implemented one-man management, piecework, Taylorism and other things Stalinism is condemned for (see section 3, for example). In the army, Trotsky disbanded the soldier committees and elected officers by decree.

How Trotsky defended this policy of appointing officers is significant. It mirrors Lenin's argument in favour of appointed one-man management and, as such, reflects the basic Bolshevik vision of democracy. By looking at his argument we can see how the Bolshevik vision of democracy fatally undermined the Russian Revolution and its socialist content. The problems of the civil war simply deepened the abscess in democracy created by Lenin and Trotsky in the spring of 1918.

Trotsky acknowledged that that *"the soldier-workers and soldier-peasants"* needed *"to elect commanders for themselves"* in the Tzarist army *"not [as] military chiefs, but simply [as] representatives who could guard them against attacks of counter-revolutionary classes."* However, in the new Red Army this was not needed as it was the *"workers' and peasants' Soviets, i.e. the same classes which compose the army"* which is building it. He blandly asserted that *"[h]ere no internal struggle is possible."* To illustrate his point he pointed to the trade unions. *"The metal workers,"* he noted, *"elect their committee, and the committee finds a secretary, a clerk, and a number of other persons who are necessary. Does it ever happen that the workers should say: 'Why are our clerks and treasurers appointed, and not elected?' No, no intelligent workers will say so."* [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 112–3]

Thus in less than six months, Lenin's call in *"State and Revolution"* that *"[a]ll officials, without exception, [would be] elected and subject to recall at any time"* was dismissed as the demand that *"no intelligent workers"* would raise! [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 302] But, then again, Trotsky was in the process of destroying another apparent *"principle"* of Leninism, namely (to quote, like Lenin, Marx) *"the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people."* [quoted by Lenin, Op. Cit., p. 300]

Trotsky continues his argument. The Trade union committee, he asserts, would say *"You yourselves have chosen the committee. If you don't like us, dismiss us, but once you have entrusted us with the direction of the union, then give us the possibility of choosing the clerk or the cashier, since we are better able to judge in the matter than you, and if our way of conducting business is bad, then throw us out and elect another committee."* After this defence of elected dictatorship, he states that the *"Soviet government is the same as the committee of a trade union. It is elected by the workers and peasants, and you can at the All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, at any moment you like, dismiss that government and appoint another."* Until that happens, he was happy to urge blind obedience by the sovereign people to their servants: *"But once you have appointed it, you must give it the right to choose the technical specialists, the clerks, the secretaries in the broad sense of the word, and*

*in military affairs, in particular.*” He tried to calm the nerves of those who could see the obvious problems with this argument by asking whether it was “*possible for the Soviet government to appoint military specialists against the interests of the labouring and peasant masses?*” [Op. Cit., p. 113]

And the answer to that question is, of course, an empathic yes. Even looking at his own analogy, namely that of a trade union committee, it is obvious that an elected body can have interests separate from and in opposition to those who elected it. The history of trade unionism is full of examples of committees betraying the membership of the unions. And, of course, the history of the Soviet government under Lenin and Trotsky (never mind Stalin!) shows that just because it was once elected by a majority of the working people does not mean it will act in their best interests.

Trotsky even went one better. “*The army is now only in the process of formation,*” he noted. “*How could the soldiers who have just entered the army choose the chiefs! Have they have any vote to go by? They have none. And therefore elections are impossible.*” [Op. Cit., p. 113] If only the Tsar had thought of that one! If he had, he would still be in power. And, needless to say, Trotsky did not apply that particular logic to himself. After all, he had no experience of holding governmental office or building an army (or even being in combat). Nor did any of the other Bolshevik leaders. By the logic of his argument, not only should the workers not been allowed to vote for a soviet government, he and his fellow Bolsheviks should not have assumed power in 1917. But, clearly, sauce for the goose is definitely **not** sauce for the gander.

For all his talk that the masses could replace the Bolsheviks at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Trotsky failed to realise that these proposals (and other ones like it) ensured that this was unlikely to happen. Even assuming that the Bolsheviks had not gerrymandered and disbanded soviets, the fact is that the Bolshevik vision of “democracy” effectively hollowed out the grassroots participation required to make democracy at the top anything more than a fig-leaf for party power. He honestly seemed to believe that eliminating mass participation in other areas of society would have no effect on the levels of participation in soviet elections. Would people subjected to one-man management in the workplace and in the army really be truly free and able to vote for parties which had not appointed their bosses? Could workers who were disenfranchised economically and socially remain in political power (assuming you equate voting a handful of leaders into power with “*political power*”)? And does being able to elect a representative every quarter to the All-Russian congress really mean that the working class was really in charge of society? Of course not.

This vision of top-down “democracy” can, of course, be traced back to Marx’s arguments of 1850 and Lenin’s comments that the “*organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy*” was “*to proceed from the top downward.*” (see sections H.3.2 and H.3.3). By equating centralised, top-down decision making by an elected government with “democracy,” the Bolsheviks had the ideological justification to eliminate the functional democracy associated with the factory committees and soldiers committees. In place of workers’ and soldiers’ direct democracy and self-management, the Bolsheviks appointed managers and officers and justified because a workers’ party was in power. After all, had not the masses elected the Bolsheviks into power? This became the means by which **real** democracy was eliminated in area after area of Russian working class life. Needless to say, a state which eliminates functional democracy in the grassroots will not stay democratic in any meaningful sense for long. At best, it will be like a bourgeois republic with purely elections where people elect a party to misrepresent them every four or so years while real economic, political and social power rests in the hands of a few. At worse, it would be a dictatorship with “elections” whose results are known before hand.

The Leninist vision of “democracy” is seen purely as a means of placing the party into power. Thus power in society shifts to the top, to the leaders of the centralised party in charge of the centralised state. The workers’ become mere electors rather than actual controllers of the revolution and are expected to carry out the orders of the party without comment. In other words, a decidedly bourgeois vision of “democracy.” Anarchists, in contrast, seek to dissolve power back into the hands of society and empower the individual by giving them a direct say in the revolution through their workplace and community assemblies and their councils and conferences.

This vision was not a new development. Far from it. While, ironically enough, Lenin’s and Trotsky’s support for the appointment of officers/managers can be refuted by looking at Lenin’s **State and Revolution**, the fact is that the undemocratic perspectives they are based on can be found in Lenin’s **What is to be Done?**. This suggests that his 1917 arguments were the aberration and against the true essence of Leninism, not his and Trotsky’s policies once they were in power (as Leninists like to argue).

Forgetting that he had argued against “*primitive democracy*” in **What is to Be Done?**, Lenin had lambasted the opportunists and “*present Kautskyists*” for “*repeat[ing] the vulgar bourgeois jeers at ‘primitive’ democracy.*” Now, in 1917, it was a case that “*the transition from capitalism to socialism is **impossible** without some ‘reversion’ to ‘primitive’ democracy (how else can the majority, even the whole population, proceed to discharge state functions?)*” [Op. Cit., p. 302] Very true. As Leninism in power showed, the conscious elimination of “*primitive democracy*”

in the army and workplace ensured that socialism was “*impossible*.” And this elimination was not justified in terms of “difficult” circumstances but rather in terms of principle and the inability of working people to manage their own affairs directly.

Particularly ironic, given Trotsky’s trade union committee analogy was Lenin’s comment that “Bernstein [*the arch revisionist and reformist*] combats ‘primitive democracy’ . . . To prove that ‘primitive democracy’ is worthless, Bernstein refers to the experience of the British trade unions, as interpreted by the Webbs. Seventy years of development . . . convinced the trade unions that primitive democracy was useless, and they substituted ordinary democracy, i.e. *parliamentarism*, combined with bureaucracy, for it.” Lenin replied that because the trade unions operated “**in absolute capitalist slavery**” a “number of concessions to the prevailing evil, violence, falsehood, exclusion of the poor from the affairs of the ‘higher’ administration ‘cannot be avoided.’ Under socialism much of the ‘primitive’ democracy will inevitably be revived, since, for the first time in history of civilised society, the **mass** of the population will rise to **independent** participation, not only in voting and elections, **but also in the everyday administration of affairs**” [Op. Cit., p. 361] Obviously things looked a bit different once he and his fellow Bolshevik leaders were in power. Then the exclusion of the poor from the affairs of the “higher” administration was seen as normal practice, as proven by the practice of the trade unions! And as we note in section H.3.8, this “*exclusion*” was taken as a key lesson of the revolution and built into the Leninist theory of the state.

This development was not unexpected. After all, as we noted in section H.5.5, over a decade before Lenin had been less than enthralled by “*primitive democracy*” and more in agreement with Bernstein than he lets on in **State and Revolution**. In **What is to Be Done?**, he based his argument for centralised, top-down party organisation on the experiences of the labour movement in democratic capitalist regimes. He quotes the same book by the Webb’s to defend his position. He notes that “*in the first period of existence in their unions, the British workers thought it was an indispensable sign of democracy for all members to do all the work of managing the unions.*” This involved “*all questions [being] decided by the votes of all the members*” and all “*official duties*” being “*fulfilled by all the members in turn.*” He dismisses “*such a conception of democracy*” as “*absurd*” and “*historical experience*” made them “*understand the necessity for representative institutions*” and “*full-time professional officials.*” Ironically, Lenin records that in Russia the “*primitive*’ conception of democracy” existed in two groups, the “*masses of the students and workers*” and the “*Economists of the Bernstein persuasion.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 162–3]

Thus Trotsky's autocratic and top-down vision of democracy has its roots within Leninism. Rather than being forced upon the Bolsheviks by difficult circumstances, the eroding of grassroots, functional ("primitive") democracy was at the core of Bolshevism. Lenin's arguments in 1917 were the exception, not his practice after he seized power.

This fundamentally undemocratic perspective can be found today in modern Leninism. As well as defending the Bolshevik dictatorship during the civil war, modern Leninists support the continuation of party dictatorship after its end. In particular, they support the Bolshevik repression of the Kronstadt rebellion (see appendix "What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?" for more details). As Trotsky put it in 1937, if the Kronstadt demand for soviet elections had been implemented then *"to free the soviets from the leadership [sic!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves . . . Social-Revolutionary-anarchist soviets would serve only as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship [sic!] to capitalist restoration."* He generalised this example, by pointing to the *"experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 90] Modern day Leninists repeat this argument, failing to note that they sound like leftist Henry Kissingers (Kissinger, let us not forget, ensured US aid for Pinochet's coup in Chile and argued that *"I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people"*).

Today we have Leninists combining rhetoric about democratic socialism, with elections and recall, with a mentality which justifies the suppression of working class revolt because they are not prepared to stand by and watch a country go capitalist due to the irresponsibility of its own people. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, previously in 1937 Trotsky expressed his support for the *"objective necessity"* of the *"revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party"* and, two years later, that the *"vanguard of the proletariat"* must be *"armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself."* (see section H.3.8). If only modern day Leninists were as honest!

So the Bolshevik contempt for working class self-government still exists. While few, however, explicitly proclaim the logic of this position (namely party dictatorship) most defend the Bolsheviks implementing this conclusion in practice. Can we not conclude that, faced with the same problems the Bolsheviks faced, these modern day Leninists will implement the same policies? That they will go from party power to party dictatorship, simply because they know better than those who elected them on such matters? That answer seems all too obvious.

As such, the Bolshevik preference for centralised state power and of representative forms of democracy involved the substitution of the party for the class and, consequently, will facilitate the dictatorship over the proletariat when faced with the inevitable problems facing any revolution. As Bakunin put it, a “*people’s administration, according to [the Marxists], must mean a people’s administration by virtue of a small number of representatives chosen by the people . . . [I]t is a deception which would conceal the despotism of a governing minority, all the more dangerous because it appears as a sham expression of the people’s will . . . [T]he vast majority, the great mass of people, would be governed by a privileged minority . . . [of] former workers, who would stop being workers the moment they became rulers or representatives, and would then come to regard the whole blue-collared world from governmental heights, and would not represent the people but themselves and their pretensions.*” So the Marxist state would be “*the reign of the scientific mind, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real of bogus learning, and the world will be divided into a dominant, science-based minority and a vast, ignorant majority. And then let the ignorant masses beware!*” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 268, pp. 268–9 and p. 266]

In summary, Trotsky’s deeply undemocratic justification for appointing officers, like Lenin’s similar arguments for appointing managers, express the logic and reality of Bolshevism far better than statements made before the Bolsheviks seized power and never implemented. Sadly, modern Leninists concentrate on the promises of the election manifesto rather than the grim reality of Bolshevik power and its long standing top-down vision of “democracy.” A vision which helped undermine the revolution and ensure its degeneration into a party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy.

## 5 What was the effect of the Bolshevik vision of “socialism”?

As we discussed in section H.3.1, anarchists and most Marxists are divided not only by **means** but also by **ends**. Simply put, libertarians and Leninist do **not** have the same vision of socialism. Given this, anarchists are not surprised at the negative results of the Bolshevik revolution — the use of anti-socialist means to attain anti-socialist ends would obviously have less than desirable results.

The content of the Bolshevik vision of “socialism” is criticised by anarchists on two main counts. Firstly, it is a top-down, centralised vision of “socialism.” This can only result in the destruction of working class economic power at the

point of production in favour of centralised bureaucratic power. Secondly, for Bolshevism nationalisation, **not** workers' self-management, was the key issue. We will discuss the first issue here and the second in the following section.

The Bolshevik vision of "socialism" was inherently centralised and top-down. This can be seen from the organisational schemas and arguments made by leading Bolsheviks before and immediately after the Revolution. For example, we discover Trotsky arguing in March 1918 that workplaces "*will be subject to policies laid down by the local council of workmen's deputies*" who, in turn, had "*their range of discretion . . . limited in turn by regulations made for each class of industry by the boards or bureaux of the central government.*" He dismissed Kropotkin's communalist ideas by saying local autonomy was not "*suited to the state of things in modern industrial society*" and "*would result in endless frictions and difficulties.*" As the "*coal from the Donets basin goes all over Russia, and is indispensable in all sorts of industries*" you could not allow "*the organised people of that district [to] do what they pleased with the coal mines*" as they "*could hold up all the rest of Russia.*" [contained in Al Richardson (ed.), **In Defence of the Russian Revolution**, p. 186]

Lenin repeated this centralised vision in June of that year, arguing that "*Communism requires and presupposes the greatest possible centralisation of large-scale production throughout the country. The all-Russian centre, therefore, should definitely be given the right of direct control over all the enterprises of the given branch of industry. The regional centres define their functions depending on local conditions of life, etc., in accordance with the general production directions and decisions of the centre.*" He continued by explicitly arguing that "[t]o deprive the all-Russian centre of the right to direct control over all the enterprises of the given industry . . . would be regional anarcho-syndicalism, and not communism." [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 292]

Thus the Bolshevik economic ideal was centralised and top-down. This is not unsurprising, as Lenin had promised precisely this when the Bolsheviks got into power. As in the Bolshevik party itself, the lower organs were controlled by the higher ones (and as we will discuss, these higher ones were not directly elected by the lower ones). The problems with this vision are many fold.

Firstly, to impose an "ideal" solution would destroy a revolution – the actions and decisions (**including what others may consider mistakes**) of a free people are infinitely more productive and useful than the decisions and decrees of the best central committee. Moreover, a centralised system by necessity is an imposed system (as it excludes by its very nature the participation of the mass of the people in determining their own fate). Thus **real** socialisation must proceed from below, reflecting the real development and desires of those involved. Centralisation can only result in replacing socialisation with nationalisation and the elimination of workers' self-management with hierarchical management. Workers' again would



be reduced to the level of order-takers, with control over their workplaces resting not in their hands but in those of the state.

Secondly, Trotsky seems to think that workers at the base of society would be so unchanged by a revolution that they would hold their fellow workers ransom. And, moreover, that other workers would let them. That, to say the least, seems a strange perspective. But not as strange as thinking that giving extensive powers to a central body will **not** produce equally selfish behaviour (but on a wider and more dangerous scale). The basic fallacy of Trotsky's argument is that the centre will not start to view the whole economy as its property (and being centralised, such a body would be difficult to effectively control). Indeed, Stalin's power was derived from the state bureaucracy which ran the economy in its own interests. Not that did not suddenly arise with Stalin. It was a feature of the Soviet system from the start. Samuel Farber, for example, notes that, "*in practice, [the] hypercentralisation [pursued by the Bolsheviks from early 1918 onwards] turned into infighting and scrambles for control among competing bureaucracies*" and he points to the "*not untypical example of a small condensed milk plant with few than 15 workers that became the object of a drawn-out competition among six organisations including the Supreme Council of National Economy, the Council of People's Commissars of the Northern Region, the Vologda Council of People's Commissars, and the Petrograd Food Commissariat.*" [**Before Stalinism**, p. 73]

In other words, centralised bodies are not immune to viewing resources as their own property and doing as they please with it. Compared to an individual workplace, the state's power to enforce its viewpoint against the rest of society is considerably stronger and the centralised system would be harder to control. The requirements of gathering and processing the information required for the centre to make intelligent decisions would be immense, thus provoking a large bureaucracy which would be hard to control and soon become the **real** power in the state. A centralised body, therefore, effectively excludes the mass participation of the mass of workers — power rests in the hands of a few people which, by its nature, generates bureaucratic rule. If that sounds familiar, it should. It is precisely what **did** happen in Lenin's Russia and laid the basis for Stalinism.

Thirdly, to eliminate the dangers of workers' self-management generating "propertarian" notions, the workers' have to have their control over their workplace reduced, if not eliminated. This, by necessity, generates bourgeois social relationships and, equally, appointment of managers from above (which the Bolsheviks did embrace). Indeed, by 1920 Lenin was boasting that in 1918 he had "*pointed out the necessity of recognising the dictatorial authority of single individuals for the pursue of carrying out the Soviet idea*" and even claimed that at that stage "*there were no disputes in connection with the question*" of one-man management. [quoted by Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 65] While the first claim is true (Lenin argued for

one-man management appointed from above before the start of the Civil War in May 1918) the latter one is not true (excluding anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and Maximalists, there were also the dissent “*Left Communists*” in the Bolshevik party itself).

Fourthly, centralism was not that efficient. The central bodies the Bolsheviks created had little knowledge of the local situation and often gave orders that contradicted each other or had little bearing to reality, so encouraging factories to ignore the centre: “*it seems apparent that many workers themselves . . . had now come to believe . . . that confusion and anarchy [sic!] at the top were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic . . . Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council . . . issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs.*” [William G. Rosenberg, *Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power*, p. 116] The Bolsheviks, as Lenin had promised, built from the top-down their system of “*unified administration*” based on the Tsarist system of central bodies which governed and regulated certain industries during the war. [Brinton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 36] This was very centralised and very inefficient (see section 7 for more discussion).

Moreover, having little real understanding of the circumstances on the ground they could not compare their ideological assumptions and preferences to reality. As an example, the Bolshevik idea that “big” was automatically “more efficient” and “better” had a negative impact on the revolution. In practice, as Thomas F. Remington notes, this simply resulted generated waste:

*“The waste of scarce materials at [the giant] Putilov [plant] was indeed serious, but not only political unrest had caused it. The general shortage of fuel and materials in the city took its greatest toll on the largest enterprises, whose overhead expenditures for heating the plant and firing the furnaces were proportionally greater than those for smaller enterprises. This point — explained by the relative constant proportions among needed inputs to producers at any given point in time — only was recognised latter. Not until 1919 were the regime’s leaders prepared to acknowledge that small enterprises, under the conditions of the time, might be more efficient in using resources: and not until 1921 did a few Bolsheviks theorists grasp the economic reasons for this apparent violation of their standing assumption that larger units were inherently more productive. Thus not only were the workers accused of politically motivated resistance, but the regime blamed them for the effects of circumstances which the workers had no control.”* [Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia, p. 106]

All in all, the Bolshevik vision of socialism was a disaster. Centralism was a source of massive economic mismanagement and, moreover, bureaucratisation from the start. As anarchists had long predicted. As we discuss in section 12 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, there was an alternative in the form of the factory committees and the federation. Sadly this was not part of the Bolshevik vision. At best they were tacked onto this vision as a (very) junior partner (as in 1917) or they were quickly marginalised and then dumped when they had outlived their usefulness in securing Bolshevik power (as in 1918).

While some Leninists like to paint the economic policies of the Bolsheviks in power as being different from what they called for in 1917, the truth is radically different. For example, Tony Cliff of the UK’s “Socialist Workers Party” asserts, correctly, that in April 1918 the “*defence of state capitalism constituted the essence of his economic policy for this period.*” However, he also states that this was “*an entirely new formulation,*” which was not the case in the slightest. [Cliff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69] As Lenin himself acknowledged.

Lenin had always confused state capitalism with socialism. “*State capitalism,*” he wrote, “*is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no gaps.*” He argued that socialism “*is nothing but the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. In other words, Socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly made to benefit the whole people; by this token it ceases to be capitalist monopoly.*” [The Threatening Catastrophe and how to avoid it, p. 38 and p. 37] This was in May, 1917. A few months latter, he was talking about how the institutions of state capitalism could be taken over and used to create socialism (see section H.3.12). Unsurprisingly, when defending Cliff’s “*new formulation*” against the “*Left Communists*” in the spring of 1918 he noted that he gave his “*high appreciation of state capitalism*” “*before the Bolsheviks seized power.*” [Selected Works, vol. 2, p. 636]

And, indeed, his praise for state capitalism and its forms of social organisation can be found in his **State and Revolution**:

*“the post-office [is] an example of the socialist system . . . At present . . . [it] is organised on the lines of a state capitalist monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organisations of a similar type . . . the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Overthrow the capitalists . . . Our immediate object is to organise the whole of national economy on the lines of the postal system . . . It is such a state, standing on such an economic basis, that we need.”* [Essential Works of Lenin, pp. 307–8]

Given this, Lenin's rejection of the factory committee's model of socialism comes as no surprise (see section 10 of the appendix "What happened during the Russian Revolution?" for more details). As we noted in section H.3.14, rather than promote workers' control, Lenin effectively undermined it. Murray Bookchin points out the obvious:

*"In accepting the concept of worker's control, Lenin's famous decree of November 14, 1917, merely acknowledged an accomplished fact; the Bolsheviks dared not oppose the workers at this early date. But they began to whittle down the power of the factory committees. In January 1918, a scant two months after 'decreeing' workers' control, Lenin began to advocate that the administration of the factories be placed under trade union control. The story that the Bolsheviks 'patiently' experimented with workers' control, only to find it 'inefficient' and 'chaotic,' is a myth. Their 'patience' did not last more than a few weeks. Not only did Lenin oppose direct workers' control within a matter of weeks . . . even union control came to an end shortly after it had been established. By the summer of 1918, almost all of Russian industry had been placed under bourgeois forms of management."* [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, pp. 200–1]

Significantly, even his initial vision of workers' control was hierarchical, centralised and top-down. In the workplace it was to be exercised by factory committees. The "higher workers' control bodies" were to be "composed of representatives of trade unions, factory and office workers' committees, and workers' co-operatives." The decisions of the lower bodies "may be revoked only by higher workers' control bodies." [quoted by Cliff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 10] As Maurice Brinton notes:

*"there [was] . . . a firm hierarchy of control organs . . . each Committee was to be responsible to a 'Regional Council of Workers' Control', subordinated in turn to an 'All-Russian Council of Workers' Control'. The composition of these higher organs was decided by the Party.*

*"The trade unions were massively represented in the middle and higher strata of this new pyramid of 'institutionalised workers' control.' For instance the All-Russian Council of Workers' Control was to consist of 21 'representatives': 5 from the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets, 5 from the Executive of the All-Russian Council of Trade Unions, 5 from the Association of Engineers and Technicians, 2 from the Association of Agronomists, 2 from the Petrograd Trade Union Council, 1 from each All-Russian Trade Union Federation numbering fewer than 100,000 members (2 for Federations of over this number). . . and 5 from the All-Russian Council of Factory Committees! The*

*Factory Committees often under anarcho-syndicalist influence had been well and truly 'cut down to size'.* [Op. Cit., p. 18]

As we note in section 10 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, this was a conscious preference on Lenin’s part. The factory committees had started to federate, creating their own institutional framework of socialism based on the workers own class organisation. Lenin, as he had explained in 1917, favoured using the institutions created by “*state capitalism*” and simply tacked on a form of “*workers’ control*” distinctly at odds with the popular usage of the expression. He **rejected** the suggestions of factory committees themselves. The Supreme Economic Council, established by the Soviet government, soon demonstrated how to really mismanage the economy.

As such, the economic developments proposed by Lenin in early 1918 and onwards were **not** the result of the specific problems facing the Russian revolution. The fact is while the dire problems facing the Russian revolution undoubtedly made many aspects of the Bolshevik system worse, they did not create them. Rather, the centralised, bureaucratic and top-down abuses Leninists like to distance themselves from where, in fact, built into Lenin’s socialism from the start. A form of socialism Lenin and his government explicitly favoured and created in opposition to other, authentically proletarian, versions.

The path to state capitalism was the one Lenin wanted to trend. It was not forced upon him or the Bolsheviks. And, by re-introducing wage slavery (this time, to the state) the Bolshevik vision of socialism helped undermine the revolution, workers’ power and, sadly, build the foundations of Stalinism.

## **6 How did Bolshevik preference for nationalisation affect the revolution?**

As noted in the last section, unlike anarchism, for Bolshevism nationalisation, **not** workers’ self-management, was the key issue in socialism. As noted in section 3, Lenin had proclaimed the necessity for appointed one-man managers and implementing “*state capitalism*” in April 1918. Neither policy was thought to harm the socialist character of the regime. As Trotsky stressed in 1920, the decision to place a manager at the head of a factory instead of a workers’ collective had no political significance:

*“It would be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The*

*dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy of the collective will of the workers and not at all in the form in which individual economic organisations are administered.*” [Terrorism and Communism, p. 162]

Nor was this considered a bad thing or forced upon the Bolsheviks as a result of terrible circumstances. Quite the reverse: “I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully.” [Op. Cit., pp. 162–3] As discussed in the previous section, this evaluation fits perfectly into Bolshevik ideology and practice before and after they seized power. One can easily find dozens of quotations from Lenin expressing the same idea.

Needless to say, Trotsky’s “collective will of the workers” was simply a euphemism for the Party, whose dictatorship **over** the workers Trotsky glibly justified:

*“We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of the party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the . . . party . . . [that] the Soviets . . . [became] transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this ‘substitution’ of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class.”* [Op. Cit., p. 109]

While Trotsky’s honesty on this matter is refreshing (unlike his followers today who hypocritically talk about the “leadership” of the Bolshevik party) we can say that this was a **fatal** position to take. Indeed, for Trotsky **any** system (including the militarisation of labour) was acceptable as the key “*differences . . . is defined by a fundamental test: who is in power?*” — the capitalist class or the proletariat (i.e. the party) [Op. Cit., pp. 171–2] Thus working class control over their own affairs was of little importance: “*The worker does not merely bargain with the Soviet State; no, he is subordinated to the Soviet State, under its orders in every direction — for it is his State.*” [Op. Cit., p. 168] This, of course, echoed his own arguments in favour of appointment (see section 4) **and** Lenin’s demands for the “*exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals*” in the workplace (see section 3) in early 1918. Cornelius Castoriadis points out the obvious:

*“The role of the proletariat in the new State was thus quite clear. It was that of enthusiastic and passive citizens. And the role of the proletariat in work and in production was no less clear. On the whole, it was the same as before — under capitalism — except that workers of ‘character and capacity’ [to quote Trotsky] were to be chosen to replace factory managers who had fled.” [The Role of the Bureaucracy in the birth of the Bureaucracy, p. 99]*

Trotsky’s position, it should be noted, remained consistent. In the early 1930s he argued (in respect to Stalin’s regime) that *“anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class.”* [The Class Nature of The Soviet State] Obviously, if the prime issue is property and not who **manages** the means of production (or even *“the state”*) then having functioning factory-committees becomes as irrelevant as having democratic soviets when determining whether the working class is in power or not.

(As an aside, we should not be surprised that Trotsky could think the workers were the *“ruling class”* in the vast prison-camp which was Stalin’s USSR, given that he thought the workers were the *“ruling class”* when he and Lenin headed the Bolshevik party dictatorship! Thus we have the strange division Leninists make between Lenin’s dictatorship and Stalin’s (and those of Stalin’s followers). When Lenin presides over a one-party dictatorship, breaks up strikes, bans political parties, bans Bolshevik factions, and imprisons and shoots political dissidents these are all regrettable but necessary steps in the protection of the *“proletarian state.”* When Stalin does the exact same thing, a few years later, they are all terrible examples of the deformation of this same *“proletarian state”*!)

For anarchists (and other libertarian socialists) this was and is nonsense. Without workers’ self-management in production, socialism cannot exist. To focus attention of whether individuals own property or whether the state does is fundamentally a red-herring. Without workers’ self-management of production, private capitalism will simply have been replaced by state capitalism. As one anarchist active in the factory committee movement argued in January, 1918, it is *“not the liberation of the proletariat when many individual plunders are changed for one very powerful plunder — the state. The position of the proletariat remains the same.”* Therefore, *“[w]e must not forget that the factory committees are the nuclei of the future socialist order”* nor must we forget *“that the state . . . will try to maintain its own interests at the expense of the interests of the workers. There is no doubt that we will be witnesses of a great conflict between the state power in the centre and the organisations composed exclusively of workers which are found in the localities.”* He was proved right. Instead of centralised the Bolshevik vision of state capitalism,

the anarchists argued that factory committees “*be united on the basis of federalism, into industrial federations . . . [and] poly-industrial soviets of national economy.*” Only in that way could **real** socialism be created. [quoted by Frederick I. Kaplan, **Bolshevik Ideology and the Ethics of Soviet Labour**, p. 163 and p. 166] (see section 7 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for more on the factory committee movement).

The reason is obvious. It is worth quoting Cornelius Castoriadis at length on why the Bolshevik system was doomed to failure:

*“So we end up with the uncontested power of managers in the factories, and the Party’s exclusive ‘control’ (in reality, what kind of control was it, anyway?). And there was the uncontested power of the Party over society, without any control. From that point on, nobody could prevent these two powers from merging, could anyone stop the two strata embodying them from merging, nor could the consolidation of an irremovable bureaucracy ruling over all sectors of social life be halted. The process may have been accelerated or magnified by the entry of non-proletarian elements into the Party, as they rushed to jump on the bandwagon. But this was a consequence, and not a cause, of the Party’s orientation . . .*

*“Who is to manage production . . . ? . . . the correct answer [is] the collective organs of labouring people. What the party leadership wanted, what it had already imposed — and on this point there was no difference between Lenin and Trotsky — was a hierarchy directed from above. We know that this was the conception that triumphed. We know, too, where this ‘victory’ led . . .*

*“In all Lenin’s speeches and writings of this period, what recurs again and again like an obsession is the idea that Russia ought to learn from the advanced capitalist countries; that there are not a hundred and one different ways of developing production and labour productivity if one wants to emerge from backwardness and chaos; that one must adopt capitalist methods of ‘rationalisation’ and management as well as capitalist forms of work ‘incentives.’ All these, for Lenin, are just ‘means’ that apparently could freely be placed in the service of a radically different historical end, the building of socialism.*

*“Thus Trotsky, when discussing the merits of militarism, came to separate the army itself, its structure and its methods, from the social system it serves. What is criticisable in bourgeois militarism and in the bourgeois army, Trotsky says in substance, is that they are in the service of the bourgeoisie. Except for that, there is nothing in them to be criticised. The sole difference, he says, lies in this: ‘**Who is in power?**’ Likewise, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not expressed by the ‘form in which individual economic enterprises are administered.’*



*“The idea that like means cannot be placed indifferently into the service of different ends; that there is an intrinsic relationship between the instruments used and the result obtained; that, especially, neither the army nor the factory are simple ‘means’ or ‘instruments,’ but social structures in which are organised two fundamental aspects of human relations (production and violence); that in them can be seen in condensed form the essential expression of the type of social relations that characterise an era — this idea, though perfectly obvious and banal for Marxists, was totally ‘forgotten.’ It was just a matter of developing production, using proven methods and structures. That among these ‘proofs’ the principal one was the development of capitalism as a social system and that a factory produces not so much cloth or steel but proletariat and capital were facts that were utterly ignored.*

*“Obviously, behind this ‘forgetfulness’ is hidden something else. At the time, of course, there was the desperate concern to revive production as soon as possible and to put a collapsing economy back on its feet. This preoccupation, however, does not fatally dictate the choice of ‘means.’ If it seemed obvious to Bolshevik leaders that the sole effective means were capitalist ones, it was because they were imbued with the conviction that capitalism was the only effective and rational system of production. Faithful in this respect to Marx, they wanted to abolish private property and market anarchy, but not the type of organisation capitalism had achieved at the point of production. They wanted to modify the **economy**, not the relations between people at work or the nature of labour itself.*

*“At a deeper level still, their philosophy was to develop the forces of production. Here too they were the faithful inheritors of Marx — or at least one side of Marx, which became the predominant one in his mature writings. The development of the forces of production was, if not the ultimate goal, at any rate the essential means, in the sense that everything else would follow as a by-product and that everything else had to be subordinated to it. . .*

*“To manage the work of others — this is the beginning and the end of the whole cycle of exploitation. The ‘need’ for a specific social category to manage the work of others in production (and the activity of others in politics and in society), the ‘need’ for a separate business management and for a Party to rule the State — this is what Bolshevism proclaimed as soon as it seized power, and this is what it zealously laboured to impose. We know that it achieved its ends. Insofar as ideas play a role in the development of history — and, **in the final analysis**, they play an enormous role — the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy.”*  
[Op. Cit., pp. 100–4]

Therefore, we “*may therefore conclude that, contrary to the prevailing mythology, it was not in 1927, or in 1923, or even in 1921 that the game was played and lost, but much earlier, during the period from 1918 to 1920. . . [1921 saw] the beginning of the reconstruction of the productive apparatus. This reconstruction effort, however, was already firmly set in the groove of bureaucratic capitalism.*” [Op. Cit., p. 99] In this, they simply followed the economic ideas Lenin had expounded in 1917 and 1918, but in an even more undemocratic way. Modern-day Leninism basically takes the revolutionised Russia of the Bolsheviks and, essentially, imposes upon it a more democratic form of government rather than Lenin’s (and then Stalin’s). Anarchists, however, still oppose the economy.

Ironically, proof that libertarians are right on this issue can be found in Trotsky’s own work. In 1936, he argued that the “*demobilisation of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war. Thus on all sides the masses were pushed away gradually from actual participation in the leadership of the country.*” [The Revolution Betrayed] Needless to say, he failed to note who had abolished the election of commanders in the Red Army in March 1918, namely himself (see section 4). Similarly, he failed to note that the “*masses*” had been “*pushed . . . from actual participation in the leadership of the country*” well before the end of the civil war and that, at the time, he was not concerned about it. Equally, it would be churlish to note that back in 1920 he thought that “*Military’ qualities . . . are valued in every sphere. It was in this sense that I said that every class prefers to have in its service those of its members who, other things being equal, have passed through the military school . . . This experience is a great and valuable experience. And when a former regimental commissary returns to his trade union, he becomes not a bad organiser.*” [Terrorism and Communism, p. 173]

In 1937 Trotsky asserted that “*liberal-anarchist thought closes its eyes to the fact that the Bolshevik revolution, with all its repressions, meant an upheaval of social relations in the interests of the masses, whereas Stalin’s Thermidorian upheaval accompanies the reconstruction of Soviet society in the interest of a privileged minority.*” [Trotsky, Stalinism and Bolshevism] Yet Stalin’s “*upheaval*” was built upon the social relations created when Lenin and Trotsky held power. State ownership, one-man management, and so on were originally advocated and implemented by Lenin and Trotsky. The bureaucracy did not have to expropriate the working class economically — “*real*” Bolshevism had already did so. Nor can it be said that the social relations associated with the political sphere had fundamentally changed under Stalin. He had, after all, inherited the one-party state from Lenin and Trotsky. In a nutshell, Trotsky is talking nonsense.

Simply put, as Trotsky himself indicates, Bolshevik preference for nationalisation helped ensure the creation and subsequent rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Rather than be the product of terrible objective circumstances as his followers suggest, the Bolshevik state capitalist economic system was at the heart of their vision of what socialism was. The civil war simply brought the underlying logic of vision into the fore.

## 7 How did Bolshevik preference for centralism affect the revolution?

The next issue we will discuss is centralisation. Before starting, it is essential that it be stressed that anarchists are **not** against co-ordinated activity and organisation on a large scale. Anarchists stress the need for federalism to meet the need for such work (see section A.2.9, for example). As such, our critique of Bolshevik centralism is **not** a call for “localism” or isolation (as many Leninists assert). Rather, it is a critique of **how** the social co-operation essential for society will be conducted. Will it be in a federal (and so bottom-up) way or will it be in a centralised (and so top-down) way?

It goes almost without saying that Bolshevik ideology was centralist in nature. Lenin repeatedly stressed the importance of centralisation, arguing constantly that Marxism was, by its very nature, centralist (and top-down — section H.3.3). Long before the revolution, Lenin had argued that within the party it was a case of “*the transformation of the power of ideas into the power of authority, the subordination of lower Party bodies to higher ones.*” [Collected Works, vol. 7, p. 367] Such visions of centralised organisation were the model for the revolutionary state. In 1917, he repeatedly stressed that after it the Bolsheviks would be totally in favour of “*centralism*” and “*strong state power.*” [Lenin, Selected Works, vol. 2, p. 374] Once in power, they did not disappoint.

Anarchists argue that this prejudice in favour of centralisation and centralism is at odds with Leninist claims to be in favour of mass participation. It is all fine and well for Trotskyist Tony Cliff to quote Lenin arguing that under capitalism the “*talent among the people*” is “*merely suppressed*” and that it “*must be given an opportunity to display itself*” and that this can “*save the cause of socialism,*” it is something else for Lenin (and the Leninist tradition) to favour organisational structures that allow that to happen. Similarly, it is fine to record Lenin asserting that “*living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves*” but it is something else to justify the barriers Leninist ideology placed in the way of it by its advocacy of centralism. [quoted by Tony Cliff, Lenin, vol. 3, p. 20 and p. 21]

The central contradiction of Leninism is that while it (sometimes) talks about mass participation, it has always prefers an organisational form (centralism) which hinders, and ultimately destroys, the participation that **real** socialism needs.

That centralism works in this way should come as no surprise. After all, it based on centralising power at the top of an organisation and, consequently, into a few hands. It was for this precise reason that **every** ruling class in history has utilised centralisation against the masses. As we indicated in section B.2.5, centralisation has always been the tool of minority classes to disempower the masses. In the American and French revolutions, centralisation of state power was the means used to destroy the revolution, to take it out off the hands of the masses and concentrate it into the hands of a minority. In France:

*“From the moment the bourgeoisie set themselves against the popular stream they were in need of a weapon that could enable them to resist pressure from the bras nus [working people]; they forced one by strengthening the central power . . . [This was] the formation of the state machinery through which the bourgeoisie was going to enslave the proletariat. Here is the centralised state, with its bureaucracy and police . . . [it was] a conscious attempt to reduce . . . the power of the people.”* [Daniel Guerin, **Class Struggle in the First French Republic**, p. 176]

The reason is not hard to understand — mass participation and class society do not go together. Thus, *“the move towards bourgeois dictatorship”* saw *“the strengthening of the central power against the masses.”* [Guerin, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 177–8] *“To attack the central power,”* argued Kropotkin, *“to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more.”* [**Words of a Rebel**, p. 143]

Can we expect a similar concentration of the central power under the Bolsheviks to have a different impact? And, as discussed in appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” we find a similar marginalisation of the working class from its own revolution. Rather than being actively participating in the transformation of society, they were transformed into spectators who simply were expected to implement the decisions made by the Bolsheviks on their behalf. Bolshevik centralisation quickly ensured the disempowerment of working class people. Unsurprisingly enough, given its role in class society and in bourgeois revolutions.

In this section of the FAQ, we will indicate why this process happened, why Bolshevik centralisation undermined the socialist content of the revolution in favour of new forms of oppression and exploitation.

Therefore, anarchists argue, centralism cannot help but generate minority rule, not a classless society. Representative, and so centralised, democracy, argued Malatesta, *“substitutes the will of a few for that of all . . . and in the name of a fictitious collective interest, rides roughshod over every real interests, and by means of elections and the vote, disregards the wishes of each and everyone.”* [**Life and Ideas**, p. 147]

This is rooted in the nature of the system, for democracy does not mean, in practice, *“rule by all the people.”* Rather, as Malatesta pointed out, it *“would be closer to the truth to say ‘government of the majority of the people.’* And even this is false, as *“it is never the case that the representatives of the majority of the people are in the same mind on all questions; it is therefore necessary to have recourse again to the majority system and thus we will get closer still to the truth with ‘government of the majority of the elected by the majority of the electors.’”* This, obviously, *“is already beginning to bear a strong resemblance to minority government.”* And so, *“it is easy to understand what has already been proven by universal historical experience: even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force.”* And so centralism turns democracy into little more than picking masters. Therefore, anarchists argue, *“those who really want ‘government of the people’ . . . must abolish government.”* [**The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 78]

The Russian Revolution is a striking confirmation of this libertarian analysis. By applying centralism, the Bolsheviks disempowered the masses and concentrated power into the hands of the party leadership. This places power in a distinct social class and subject to the pervasive effects of their concrete social circumstances within their institutional position. As Bakunin predicted with amazing accuracy:

*“The falsehood of the representative system rests upon the fiction that the executive power and the legislative chamber issuing from popular elections must, or even can for that matter, represent the will of the people . . . the instinctive aims of those who govern . . . are, because of their exceptional position diametrically opposed to the instinctive popular aspirations. Whatever their democratic sentiments and intentions may be, viewing society from the high position in which they find themselves, they cannot consider this society in any other way but that in which a schoolmaster views the pupils. And there can be no equality between the schoolmaster and the pupils. . . . Whoever says political power says domination. And where domination exists, a more or less considerable section of the population is bound to be dominated by others. . . .”*

*those who do the dominating necessarily must repress and consequently oppress those who are subject to the domination . . . [This] explains why and how men who were democrats and rebels of the reddest variety when they were a part of the mass of governed people, became exceedingly moderate when they rose to power. Usually these backslidings are attributed to treason. That, however, is an erroneous idea; they have for their main cause the change of position and perspective . . . if there should be established tomorrow a government . . . made up exclusively of workers, those . . . staunch democrats and Socialists, will become determined aristocrats, bold or timid worshippers of the principle of authority, and will also become oppressors and exploiters.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 218]*

However, due to the inefficiencies of centralised bodies, this is not the end of the process. Around the new ruling bodies inevitably springs up officialdom. This is because a centralised body does not know what is happening in the grassroots. Therefore it needs a bureaucracy to gather and process that information and to implement its decisions. In the words of Bakunin:

*“where is the head, however brilliant it may be, or if one wishes to speak of a collective dictatorship, were it formed of many hundreds of individuals endowed with superior faculties, where are those brains powerful enough and wide-ranging enough to embrace the infinite multiplicity and diversity of the real interests, aspirations, wishes and needs whose sum total constitutes the collective will of a people, and to invent a social organisation can which can satisfy everybody? This organisation will never be anything but a Procrustean bed which the more or less obvious violence of the State will be able to force unhappy society to lie down on . . . Such a system . . . would lead inevitably to the creation of a new State, and consequently to the formation of a governmental aristocracy, that is, an entire class of people, having nothing in common with the mass of people . . . [and would] exploit the people and subject them.” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, pp. 204–6]*

As the bureaucracy is permanent and controls information and resources, it soon becomes the main source of power in the state. The transformation of the bureaucracy from servant to the master soon results. The “official” government is soon controlled by it, shaping its activities in line with its interests. Being highly centralised, popular control is even more limited than government control — people would simply not know where real power lay, which officials to replace or even what was going on within the distant bureaucracy. Moreover, if the people did manage to replace the correct people, the newcomers would be subject

to the same institutional pressures that corrupted the previous members and so the process would start again (assuming they did not come under the immediate influence of those who remained in the bureaucracy). Consequently, a new bureaucratic class develops around the centralised bodies created by the governing party. This body would soon become riddled with personal influences and favours, so ensuring that members could be sheltered from popular control. As Malatesta argued, they “*would use every means available to those in power to have their friends elected as the successors who would then in turn support and protect them. And thus government would be passes to and fro in the same hands, and **democracy**, which is the alleged government of all, would end up, as usual, in an **oligarchy**, which is the government of a few, the government of a class.*” [Anarchy, p. 34]

This state bureaucracy, of course, need not be dictatorial nor the regime it rules/administers be totalitarian (for example, bourgeois states combine bureaucracy with many real and important liberties). However, such a regime is still a class one and socialism would still not exist — as proven by the state bureaucracies and nationalised property within bourgeois society.

So the danger to liberty of combining political **and** economic power into one set of hands (the state’s) is obvious. As Kropotkin argued:

*“the state was, and continues to be, the chief instrument for permitting the few to monopolise the land, and the capitalists to appropriate for themselves a quite disproportionate share of the yearly accumulated surplus of production. Consequently, while combating the present monopolisation of land, and capitalism altogether, the anarchists combat with the same energy the state, as the main support of that system. Not this or that special form, but the state altogether . . . The state organisation, having always been, both in ancient and modern history . . . the instrument for establishing monopolies in favour of the ruling minorities, cannot be made to work for the destruction of these monopolies. The anarchists consider, therefore, that to hand over to the state all the main sources of economical life — the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on — as also the management of all the main branches of industry, in addition to all the functions already accumulated in its hands (education, state-supported religions, defence of the territory, etc.), would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism. True progress lies in the direction of decentralisation, both **territorial** and **functional**, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, **in lieu** of the present hierarchy from the centre to the periphery.”* [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, p. 286]

Thus we have the basic argument **why** centralism will result in the continuation of class society. Does the Bolshevik experience contradict this analysis? Essentially, it confirms to Kropotkin's predictions on the uselessness of "revolutionary" government:

*"Instead of acting for themselves, instead of marching forward, instead of advancing in the direction of the new order of things, the people confiding in their governors, entrusted to them the charge of taking initiative. This was the first consequence of the inevitable result of elections. . . . Shut up in the city hall, charged to proceed after the forms established by the preceding governments, these ardent revolutionists, these reformers found themselves smitten with incapacity and sterility. . . . but it was not the men who were the cause for this failure — it was the system.. . .*

*"The will of the bulk of the nation once expressed, the rest would submit to it with a good grace, but this is not how things are done. The revolution bursts out long before a general understanding has come, and those who have a clear idea of what should be done the next day are only a very small minority. The great mass of the people have as yet only a general idea of the end which they wish realised, without knowing much how to advance towards that end, and without having much confidence in the direction to follow. The practical solution will not be found, will not be made clear until the change will have already begun. It will be the product of the revolution itself, of the people in action, — or else it will be nothing, incapable of finding solutions which can only spring from the life of the people. . . . The government becomes a parliament with all the vices of a middle-class parliament. Far from being a 'revolutionary' government it becomes the greatest obstacle to the revolution and at last the people find themselves compelled to put it out of the way, to dismiss those that but yesterday they acclaimed as their children.*

*"But it is not so easy to do so. The new government which has hastened to organise a new administration in order to extend its domination and make itself obeyed does not understand giving up so easily. Jealous of maintaining its power, it clings to it with all the energy of an institution which has yet had time to fall into senile decay. It decides to oppose force with force, and there is only one means then to dislodge it, namely, to take up arms, to make another revolution in order to dismiss those in whom the people had placed all their hopes." [Op. Cit., pp. 240–2]*

By the spring and summer of 1918, the Bolshevik party had consolidated its power. It had created a new state, marked as all states are by the concentration



of power in a few hands and bureaucracy. Effective power became concentrated into the hands of the executive committees of the soviets from top to bottom. Faced with rejection at soviet election after soviet election, the Bolsheviks simply disbanded them and gerrymandered the rest. At the summit of the new state, a similar process was at work. The soviets had little real power, which was centralised in Lenin's new government. This is discussed in more detail in section 6 of the appendix "What happened during the Russian Revolution?". Thus centralisation quickly displaced popular power and participation. As predicted by Russia anarchists in November 1917:

*"Once their power is consolidated and 'legalised', the Bolsheviks — who are Social Democrats, that is, men of centralist and authoritarian action — will begin to rearrange the life of the country and of the people by governmental and dictatorial methods, imposed by the centre. The[y] . . . will dictate the will of the party to all Russia, and command the whole nation. Your Soviets and your other local organisations will become little by little, simply executive organs of the will of the central government. In the place of healthy, constructive work by the labouring masses, in place of free unification from the bottom, we will see the installation of an authoritarian and statist apparatus which would act from above and set about wiping out everything that stood in its way with an iron hand. The Soviets and other organisations will have to obey and do its will. That will be called 'discipline.'" [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 235]*

From top to bottom, the new party in power systematically undermined the influence and power of the soviets they claimed to be ensuring the power of. This process had begun, it should be stressed **before** the start of the civil war in May, 1918. Thus Leninist Tony Cliff is wrong to state that it was "*under the iron pressure of the civil war*" which forced the Bolshevik leaders "*to move, as the price of survival, to a **one-party system.***" [**Revolution Besieged**, p. 163] From the summer of 1918 (i.e. before the civil war even started), the Bolsheviks had turned from the first of Kropotkin's "revolutionary" governments (representative government) to the other, dictatorship, with sadly predictable results.

So far, the anarchist predictions on the nature of centralised revolutionary governments had been confirmed. Being placed in a new social position and, therefore, different social relationships, produced a dramatic revision on the perspectives of the Bolsheviks. They went from being in favour of party power to being in favour of party dictatorship. They acted to ensure their power by making accountability and recall difficult, if not impossible, and simply ignored any election results which did not favour them.

What of the second prediction of anarchism, namely that centralisation will recreate bureaucracy? That, too, was confirmed. After all, some means were required to gather, collate and provide information by which the central bodies made their decisions. Thus a necessary side-effect of Bolshevik centralism was bureaucracy, which, as is well known, ultimately fused with the party and replaced Leninism with Stalinism. The rise of a state bureaucracy started immediately with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. Instead of the state starting to “*wither away*” from the start it grew:

*“The old state’s political apparatus was ‘smashed,’ but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity. After the transfer of government to Moscow in March 1918 it continued to expand . . . As the functions of the state expanded so did the bureaucracy, and by August 1918 nearly a third of Moscow’s working population were employed in offices [147,134 employed in state institutions and 83,886 in local ones. This was 13.7% of the total adult population and 29.6% of the independent population of 846,095]. The great increase in the number of employees . . . took place in early to mid-1918 and, thereafter, despite many campaigns to reduce their number, they remained a steady proportion of the falling population . . . At first the problem was dismissed by arguments that the impressive participation of the working class in state structures was evidence that there was no ‘bureaucratism’ in the bureaucracy. According to the industrial census of 31 August 1918, out of 123,578 workers in Moscow, only 4,191 (3.4 percent) were involved in some sort of public organisation . . . Class composition is a dubious criterion of the level of bureaucratism. Working class participation in state structures did not ensure an organisation against bureaucratism, and this was nowhere more true than in the new organisations that regulated the economic life of the country.”* [Richard Sakwa, “*The Commune State in Moscow in 1918,*” pp. 429–449, *Slavic Review*, vol. 46, no. 3/4, pp. 437–8]

The “*bureaucracy grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between ‘people’ and ‘officials,’ which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about ‘bureaucratic excesses,’ lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder.*” [Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, p. 242]

Overtime, this permanent collection of bodies would become the real power in the state, with the party members nominally in charge really under the control of an unelected and uncontrolled officialdom. This was recognised by Lenin in the last years of his life. As he noted in 1922:

*“Let us look at Moscow . . . Who is leading whom? The 4,700 responsible Communists the mass of bureaucrats, or the other way round? I do not believe that you can say that the Communists are leading this mass. To put it honestly, they are not the leaders, but the led.”* [quoted by Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 13]

By the end of 1920, there were five times more state officials than industrial workers. 5, 880,000 were members of the state bureaucracy. However, the bureaucracy had existed since the start. As noted above, the 231,000 people employed in offices in Moscow in August 1918 represented 30 per cent of the workforce there. *“By 1920 the general number of office workers . . . still represented about a third of those employed in the city.”* In November, 1920, they were 200 000 office workers in Moscow, compared to 231 000 in August, 1918. By July, 1921 (in spite of a plan to transfer 10,000 away) their numbers had increased to 228,000 and by October 1922, to 243,000. [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 192, p. 191 and p. 193]

This makes perfect sense as *“on coming to power the Bolsheviks smashed the old state but rapidly created their own apparatus to wage the political and economic offensive against the bourgeois and capitalism. As the functions of the state expanded, so did the bureaucracy . . . following the revolution the process of institutional proliferation reached unprecedented heights.”* [Op. Cit., p. 191] And with bureaucracy came the abuse of it simply because it held real power:

*“The prevalence of bureaucracy, of committees and commissions . . . permitted, and indeed encouraged, endless permutations of corrupt practices. These ranged from the style of living of communist functionaries to bribe-taking by officials. With the power of allocation of scarce resources, such as housing, there was an inordinate potential for corruption.”* [Op. Cit., p. 193]

The growth in **power** of the bureaucracy should not, therefore, come as a major surprise given that had existed from the start in sizeable numbers. However, for the Bolsheviks *“the development of a bureaucracy”* was a puzzle, *“whose emergence and properties mystified them.”* However, it should be noted that, *“[f]or the Bolsheviks, bureaucratism signified the escape of this bureaucracy from the will of the party as it took on a life of its own.”* [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182 and p. 190] This was the key. They did not object the usurpation of power by the party (indeed they placed party dictatorship at the core of their politics and universalised it to a general principle for all *“socialist”* revolutions). Nor did they object to the centralisation of power and activity (and so the bureaucratisation of life). They only objected to it when the bureaucracy was not doing what the party wanted it

to. Indeed, this was the basic argument of Trotsky against Stalinism (see section 3 of the appendix on “Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?”).

Faced with this bureaucracy, the Bolsheviks tried to combat it (unsuccessfully) and explain it. As they failed to achieve the latter, they failed in the former. Given the Bolshevik fixation for all things centralised, they simply added to the problem rather than solve it. Thus we find that “[o]n the eve of the VIII Party Congress Lenin had argued that centralisation was the only way to combat bureaucratism.” [Sakwa, *Op. Cit.*, p. 196]

Unsurprisingly, Lenin’s “anti-bureaucratic” policies in the last years of his life were “organisational ones. He purposes the formation of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection to correct bureaucratic deformations in the party and state — and this body falls under Stalin’s control and becomes highly bureaucratic in its own right. Lenin then suggests that the size of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection be reduced and that it be merged with the Control Commission. He advocates enlarging the Central Committee. Thus it rolls along; this body to be enlarged, this one to be merged with another, still a third to be modified or abolished. The strange ballet of organisational forms continues up to his very death, as though the problem could be resolved by organisational means.” [Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, p. 205]

Failing to understand the links between centralism and bureaucracy, Lenin had to find another source for the bureaucracy. He found one. He “argued that the low cultural level of the working class prevented mass involvement in management and this led to bureaucratism . . . the new state could only rely on a minuscule layer of workers while the rest were backward because of the low cultural level of the country.” However, such an explanation is by no means convincing: “Such culturalist assertions, which could neither be proved or disproved but which were politically highly effective in explaining the gulf, served to blur the political and structural causes of the problem. The working class was thus held responsible for the failings of the bureaucracy. At the end of the civil war the theme of the backwardness of the proletariat was given greater elaboration in Lenin’s theory of the declassing of the proletariat.” [Sakwa, *Op. Cit.*, p. 195] Given that the bureaucracy had existed from the start, it is hard to say that a more “cultured” working class would have been in a better position to control the officials of a highly centralised state bureaucracy. Given the problems workers in “developed” nations have in controlling their (centralised) union bureaucracies, Lenin’s explanation seems simply inadequate and, ultimately, self-serving.

Nor was this centralism particularly efficient. You need only read Goldman’s or Berkman’s accounts of their time in Bolshevik Russia to see how inefficient and wasteful centralisation and its resultant bureaucracy was in practice (see *My Disillusionment in Russia* and *The Bolshevik Myth*, respectively). This can be traced, in part, to the centralised economic structures favoured by the Bolsheviks.

Rejecting the alternative vision of socialism advocated and, in part created, by the factory committees (and supported wholeheartedly by the Russian Anarchists at the time), the Bolsheviks basically took over and used the “*state capitalist*” organs created under Tsarism as the basis of their “socialism” (see section 5). As Lenin promised **before** seizing power:

*“Forced syndicalisation — that is, forced fusion into unions [i.e. trusts] under the control of the State — this is what capitalism has prepared for us — this is what the Banker State has realised in Germany — this is what will be completely realisable in Russia by the Soviets, by the dictatorship of the proletariat.”* [Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?, p. 53]

In practice, Lenin’s centralised vision soon proved to be a disaster (see section 11 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for details). It was highly inefficient and simply spawned a vast bureaucracy. There was an alternative, as we discuss in section 12 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, the only reason that industry did not totally collapse in Russia during the early months of the revolution was the activity of the factory committees. However, such activity was not part of the Bolshevik vision of centralised socialism and so the factory committees were **not** encouraged. At the very moment when mass participation and initiative is required (i.e. during a revolution) the Bolsheviks favoured a system which killed it. As Kropotkin argued a few years later:

*“production and exchange represented an undertaking so complicated that the plans of the state socialists, which lead to a party directorship, would prove to be absolutely ineffective as soon as they were applied to life. No government would be able to organise production if the workers themselves through their unions did not do it in each branch of industry; for in all production there arise daily thousands of difficulties which no government can solve or foresee . . . Only the efforts of thousands of intelligences working on the problems can co-operate in the development of a new social system and find the best solutions for the thousands of local needs.”* [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, pp. 76–7]

No system is perfect. Any system will take time to develop fully. Of course the factory committees made mistakes and, sometimes, things were pretty chaotic with different factories competing for scarce resources. But that does not prove that factory committees and their federations were not the most efficient way of running things under the circumstances. Unless, of course, you share the Bolsheviks a dogmatic belief that central planning is always more efficient. Moreover,

attacks on the factory committees for lack of co-ordination by pro-Leninists seem less than sincere, given the utter lack of encouragement (and, often, actual barriers) the Bolsheviks placed in the way of the creation of federations of factory committees (see section 9 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for further details).

Lastly, Bolshevik centralism (as well as being extremely inefficient) also ensured that the control of production and the subsequent surplus would be in the hands of the state and, so, class society would continue. In Russia, capitalism became state capitalism under Lenin and Trotsky (see sections 5 and 6 for more discussion of this).

So Bolshevik support for centralised power ensured that minority power replaced popular power, which, in turn, necessitated bureaucracy to maintain it. Bolshevism retained statist and capitalist social relations and, as such, could not develop socialist ones which, by their very nature, imply egalitarianism in terms of social influence and power (i.e. the abolition of concentrated power, both economic and political). Ironically, by being centralists, the Bolsheviks systematically eliminated mass participation and ensured the replacement of popular power with party power. This saw the rebirth of non-socialist social relationships within society, so ensuring the defeat of the socialist tendencies and institutions which had started to grow during 1917.

It cannot be said that this centralism was a product of the civil war. As best it could be argued that the civil war extenuated an existing centralist spirit into ultra-centralism, but it did not create it. After all, Lenin was stressing that the Bolsheviks were “*convinced centralists . . . by their programme and the tactics of the whole of their party*” in 1917. Ironically, he never realised (nor much cared, after the seizure of power) that this position precluded his call for “*the deepening and extension of democracy in the administration of a State of the of the proletarian type.*” [**Can the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?**, p. 74 and p. 55] Given that centralism exists to ensure minority rule, we should not be to surprised that party power replaced popular participation and self-government quickly after the October Revolution. Which it did. Writing in September 1918, a Russian anarchist portrays the results of Bolshevik ideology in practice:

*“Within the framework of this dictatorship [of the proletariat] . . . we can see that the centralisation of power has begun to crystallise and grow firm, that the apparatus of the state is being consolidated by the ownership of property and even by an anti-socialist morality. Instead of hundreds of thousands of property owners there is now a single owner served by a whole bureaucratic system and a new ‘statisted’ morality.*”

*“The proletariat is gradually being enserfed by the state. The people are being transformed into servants over whom there has risen a new class of administrators — a new class . . . Isn’t this merely a new class system looming on the revolutionary horizon . . .*

*“The resemblance is all too striking . . . And if the elements of class inequality are as yet indistinct, it is only a matter of time before privileges will pass to the administrators. We do not mean to say . . . that the Bolshevik party set out to create a new class system. But we do say that even the best intentions and aspirations must inevitably be smashed against the evils inherent in any system of centralised power. The separation of management from labour, the division between administrators and workers flows logically from, centralisation. It cannot be otherwise . . . we are presently moving not towards socialism but towards state capitalism.*

*“Will state capitalism lead us to the gates of socialism? Of this we see not the slightest evidence . . . Arrayed against socialism are . . . thousands of administrators. And if the workers . . . should become a powerful revolutionary force, then it is hardly necessary to point out that the class of administrators, wielding the state apparatus, will be a far from weak opponent. The single owner and state capitalism form a new dam before the waves of our social revolution . . .*

*“Is it at all possible to conduct the social revolution through a centralised authority? Not even a Solomon could direct the revolutionary struggle or the economy from one centre . . .”* [M. Sergven, cited by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 123–5]

Subsequent developments proved this argument correct. Working class revolts were crushed by the state and a new class society developed. little wonder, then, Alexander Berkman’s summary of what he saw first hand in Bolshevik Russia a few years later:

*“Mechanical centralisation, run mad, is paralysing the industrial and economic activities of the country. Initiative is frowned upon, free effort systematically discouraged. The great masses are deprived of the opportunity to shape the policies of the Revolution, or take part in the administration of the affairs of the country. The government is monopolising every avenue of life; the Revolution is divorced from the people. A bureaucratic machine is created that is appalling in its parasitism, inefficiency and corruption. In Moscow alone this new class of **sovbers** (Soviet bureaucrats) exceeds, in 1920, the total of office holders throughout the whole of Russia under the Tsar in 1914 . . . The Bolshevik*

*economic policies, effectively aided by this bureaucracy, completely disorganise the already crippled industrial life of the country. Lenin, Zinoviev, and other Communist leaders thunder philippics against the new Soviet bourgeoisie, — and issue ever new decrees that strengthen and augment its numbers and influence.” [The Russian Tragedy, p. 26]*

Bakunin would not have been remotely surprised. As such, the Bolshevik revolution provided a good example to support Malatesta’s argument that “if . . . one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government . . . it follows . . . that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, being able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing.” [Anarchy, pp. 36–7]

By confusing “state action” with collective working class action, the Bolsheviks effectively eliminated the latter in favour of the former. The usurpation of all aspects of life by the centralised bodies created by the Bolsheviks left workers with no choice but to act as isolated individuals. Can it be surprising, then, that Bolshevik policies aided the atomisation of the working class by replacing collective organisation and action by state bureaucracy? The potential for collective action was there. You need only look at the strikes and protests directed **against** the Bolsheviks to see that was the case (see section 5 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” for details). Ironically, Bolshevik policies and ideology ensured that the collective effort and action of workers was directed not at solving the revolution’s problems but resisting Bolshevik tyranny.

That centralism concentrates power in a few hands can be seen even in Leninist accounts of the Russian revolution. To take one example, Tony Cliff may assert that the “mistakes of the masses were themselves creative” but when push comes to shove, he (like Lenin) simply does not allow the masses to make such mistakes and, consequently, learn from them. Thus he defends Lenin’s economic policies of “state capitalism” and “one-man management” (and in the process misleadingly suggests that these were **new** ideas on Lenin’s part, imposed by objective factors, rather than, as Lenin acknowledged, what he had advocated all along — see section 5). Thus we discover that the collapse of industry (which had started in the start of 1917) meant that “[d]rastic measures had to be taken.” But never fear, “Lenin was not one to shirk responsibility, however unpleasant the task.” He called for “state capitalism,” and there “were more difficult decisions to be accepted. To save industry from complete collapse, Lenin argued for the need to impose one-man management.” So much for the creative self-activity of the masses, which was quickly dumped — precisely at the time when it was most desperately needed. And it is nice to



know that in a workers' state it is not the workers who decide things. Rather it is Lenin (or his modern equivalent, like Cliff) who would have the task of not shirking from the responsibility of deciding which drastic measures are required. [Op. Cit., p. 21, p. 71 and p. 73] So much for "workers' power"!

Ultimately, centralism is designed to exclude the mass participation anarchists have long argued is required by a social revolution. It helped to undermine what Kropotkin considered the key to the success of a social revolution — "*the people becom[ing] masters of their destiny.*" [Op. Cit., p. 133] In his words:

*"We understand the revolution as a widespread popular movement, during which in every town and village within the region of revolt, the masses will have to take it upon themselves **the work of construction upon communistic bases**, without awaiting any orders and directions from above . . . As to representative government, whether self-appointed or elected . . . , we place in it no hopes whatever. We know beforehand that it will be able to do nothing to accomplish the revolution as long as the people themselves do not accomplish the change by working out on the spot the necessary new institutions . . . nowhere and never in history do we find that people carried into government by a revolutionary wave, have proved equal to the occasion.*

*"In the task of reconstructing society on new principles, separate men . . . are sure to fail. The collective spirit of the masses is necessary for this purpose . . . a socialist government . . . would be absolutely powerless without the activity of the people themselves, and that, necessarily, they would soon begin to act fatally as a bridle upon the revolution."* [Op. Cit., pp. 188–190]

The Bolshevik revolution and its mania for centralism proved him right. The use of centralisation helped ensure that workers' lost any meaningful say in their revolution and helped alienate them from it. Instead of the mass participation of all, the Bolsheviks ensured the top-down rule of a few. Unsurprisingly, as mass participation is what centralism was designed to exclude. Wishful thinking on behalf of the Bolshevik leaders (and their later-day followers) could not (and can not) overcome the structural imperatives of centralisation and its role in society. Nor could it stop the creation of a bureaucracy around these new centralised institutions.

## 8 How did the aim for party power undermine the revolution?

As well as a passion for centralisation and state capitalism, Bolshevism had another aim which helped undermine the revolution. This was the goal of party power (see section 5 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for details). Given this, namely that the Bolsheviks had, from the start, aimed for party power it should not come as too surprising that Bolshevik dictatorship quickly replaced soviet democracy.

Given this obvious fact, it seems strange for modern day Leninists to blame the civil war for the Bolsheviks substituting their rule for the masses. After all, when strange for modern day Leninists to blame the civil war for the Bolsheviks substituting their rule for the masses. After all, when the Bolshevik Party took power in October 1917, it did “substitute” itself for the working class and did so deliberately and knowingly. As we note in section 2, this usurpation of power by a minority was perfectly acceptable within the Marxist theory of the state, a theory which aided this process no end.

Thus the Bolshevik party would be in power, with the “*conscious workers*” ruling over the rest. The question instantly arises of what happens if the masses turn against the party. If the Bolsheviks embody “*the power of the proletariat*,” what happens if the proletariat reject the party? The undermining of soviet power by party power and the destruction of soviet democracy in the spring and summer of 1918 answers that specific question (see section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”). This should have come as no surprise, given the stated aim (and implementation) of party power plus the Bolshevik identification of party power with workers’ power. It is not a great step to party dictatorship over the proletariat from these premises (particularly if we include the underlying assumptions of vanguardism — see section H.5.3). A step, we must stress, that the Bolsheviks quickly took when faced with working class rejection in the soviet elections of spring and summer of 1918.

Nor was this destruction of soviet democracy by party power just the result of specific conditions in 1917–8. This perspective had been in Russian Marxist circles well before the revolution. As we discuss in section H.5, vanguardism implies party power (see, as noted, section H.5.3 in particular). The ideas of Lenin’s **What is to be Done?** give the ideological justification for party dictatorship over the masses. Once in power, the logic of vanguardism came into its own, allowing the most disgraceful repression of working class freedoms to be justified in terms of “Soviet Power” and other euphemisms for the party.

The identification of workers' power with party power has deeply undemocratic results, as the experience of the Bolshevik proves. However, these results were actually articulated in Russian socialist circles before hand. At the divisive 1903 congress of the Russian Social Democrats, which saw the split into two factions (Bolshevik and Menshevism) Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, argued as follows:

*“Every particular democratic principle must be considered not in itself, abstractly, . . . the success of the revolution is the highest law. And if, for the success of the revolution’s success, we need temporarily to restrict the functioning of a particular democratic principle, then it would be criminal to refrain from imposing that restriction. . . . And we must take the same attitude where the question of the length of parliaments is concerned. If, in an outburst of revolutionary enthusiasm, the people elect a very good parliament . . . it would suit us to try and make that a **long Parliament**; but if the elections turned out badly for us, we should have to try and disperse the resulting parliament not after two years but, if possible, after two weeks.”* [RSDLP, **Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP**, p. 220]

Another delegate argued that “[t]here is not a single one among the principles of democracy which we ought not to subordinate **to the interests of our Party** . . . we must consider democratic principles exclusively from the standpoint of the most rapid achievement of that aim [i.e. revolution], from the standpoint of the interests of our Party. If any particular demand is against our interests, we must not include it.” To which, Plekhanov replied, “I fully associate myself with what Comrade Posadovksy has said.” [Op. Cit., p. 219 and p. 220] Lenin “agreed unreservedly with this subordination of democratic principles to party interests.” [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 211]

Plekhanov at this time was linked with Lenin, although this association lasted less than a year. After that, he became associated with the Mensheviks (before his support for Russia in World War I saw him form his own faction). Needless to say, he was mightily annoyed when Lenin threw his words back in his face in 1918 when the Bolsheviks disbanded the Constituent Assembly. Yet while Plekhanov came to reject this position (perhaps because the elections had not “*turned out badly for*” his liking) it is obvious that the Bolsheviks embraced it and keenly applied it to elections to soviets and unions as well as Parliaments once in power (see section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for example). But, at the time, he sided with Lenin against the Mensheviks and it can be argued that the latter applied these teachings of that most respected pre-1914 Russian Marxist thinker.

This undemocratic perspective can also be seen when, in 1905, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks, like most of the party, opposed the soviets. They argued that *“only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.”* [quoted by Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, p. 77] Thus the soviets could not reflect workers’ interests because they were elected by the workers!

The Bolsheviks saw the soviets as a rival to their party and demanded it either accept their political program or simply become a trade-union like organisation. They feared that it pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the *“subordination of consciousness to spontaneity”* and under the label *“non-party”* allow *“the rotten goods of bourgeois ideology”* to be introduced among the workers. [quoted by Anweiler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 78 and p. 79] In this, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were simply following Lenin’s *What is to be Done?*, in which Lenin had argued that the *“spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.”* [*Essential Works of Lenin*, p. 82] Lenin in 1905, to his credit, rejected these clear conclusions of his own theory and was more supportive of the soviets than his followers (although *“he sided in principle with those who saw in the soviet the danger of amorphous nonpartisan organisation.”* [Anweiler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 81]).

This perspective, however, is at the root of all Bolshevik justifications for party power after the October revolution. The logical result of this position can be found in the actions of the Bolsheviks in 1918 and onwards. For the Bolsheviks in power, the soviets were less than important. The key for them was to maintain Bolshevik party power and if soviet democracy was the price to pay, then they were more than willing to pay it. As such, Bolshevik attitudes in 1905 are significant:

*“Despite the failure of the Bolshevik assault on the non-partisanship of the [St.] Petersburg Soviet, which may be dismissed as a passing episode . . . the attempt . . . is of particular significance in understanding the Bolshevik’s mentality, political ambitions and **modus operandi**. First, starting in [St.] Petersburg, the Bolshevik campaign was repeated in a number of provincial soviets such as Kostroma and Tver, and, possibly, Sormovo. Second, the assault reveals that from the outset the Bolsheviks were distrustful of, if not hostile towards the Soviets, to which they had at best an instrumental and always party-minded attitude. Finally, the attempt to bring the [St.] Petersburg Soviet to heel is an early and major example of Bolshevik take-over techniques hitherto practised within the narrow confines of the underground party and now extended to the larger arena of open mass organisations such as soviets, with the ultimate aim*

*of controlling them and turning them into one-party organisations, or, failing that, of destroying them.*” [Israel Getzler, “The Bolshevik Onslaught on the Non-Party ‘Political Profile’ of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers’ Deputies October-November 1905”, *Revolutionary History*, pp. 123–146, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 124–5]

The instrumentalist approach of the Bolsheviks post-1917 can be seen from their arguments and attitudes in 1905. On the day the Moscow soviet opened, a congress of the northern committees of the Social Democratic Party passed a resolution stating that a “*council of workers deputies should be established only in places where the party organisation has no other means of directing the proletariat’s revolutionary action . . . The soviet of workers deputies must be a technical instrument of the party for the purpose of giving political leadership to the masses through the RSDWP [the Social-Democratic Party]. It is therefore imperative to gain control of the soviet and prevail upon it to recognise the program and political leadership of the RSDWP.*” [quoted by Anweiler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 79]

This perspective that the party should be given precedence can be seen in Lenin’s comment that while the Bolsheviks should “*go along with the unpoliticised proletarians, but on no account and at no time should we forget that animosity among the proletariat toward the Social Democrats is a remnant of bourgeois attitudes . . . Participation in unaffiliated organisations can be permitted to socialists only as an exception . . . only if the independence of the workers party is guaranteed and if within unaffiliated organisations or soviets individual delegates or party groups are subject to unconditional control and guidance by the party executive.*” [quoted by Anweiler, *Op. Cit.*, p. 81] These comments have clear links to Lenin’s argument in 1920 that working class protest against the Bolsheviks showed that they had become “*declassed*” (see section 5 of the appendix on “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?”). It similarly allows soviets to be disbanded if Bolsheviks are not elected (which they were, see section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”). It also ensures that Bolshevik representatives to the soviets are not delegates from the workplace, but rather a “*transmission belt*” (to use a phrase from the 1920s) for the decisions of the party leadership. In a nutshell, Bolshevik soviets would represent the party’s central committee, not those who elected them. As Oskar Anweiler summarised:

*“The ‘revolutionary genius’ of the people, which Lenin had mentioned and which was present in the soviets, constantly harboured the danger of ‘anarcho-syndicalist tendencies’ that Lenin fought against all his life. He detected this danger early in the development of the soviets and hoped to subdue it by subordinating the soviets to the party. The drawback of the new ‘soviet democracy’ hailed by*

*Lenin in 1906 is that he could envisage the soviets only as **controlled** organisations; for him they were the instruments by which the party controlled the working masses, rather than true forms of a workers democracy.” [Op. Cit., p. 85]*

As we noted in section H.3.11, Lenin had concluded in 1907 that while the party could “utilise” the soviets “for the purpose of developing the Social-Democratic movement,” the party “must bear in mind that if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions may actually become superfluous.” [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 210] Thus the means by which working class can manage their own affairs would become “superfluous” once the party was in power. As Samuel Farber argues, Lenin’s position before 1917 was “clearly implying that the party could normally fulfil its revolutionary role without the existence of broad class organisations . . . Consequently, Lenin’s and the party’s eventual endorsement of the soviets in 1905 seems to have been tactical in character. That is, the Bolshevik support for the soviets did not at the time signify a theoretical and/or principled commitment to these institutions as revolutionary organs to overthrow the old society, let alone as key structural ingredients of the post-revolutionary order. Furthermore, it is again revealing that from 1905 to 1917 the concept of soviets did not play an important role in the thinking of Lenin or of the Bolshevik Party . . . [T]hese strategies and tactics vis-a-vis the soviets . . . can be fairly seen as expressing a predisposition favouring the party and downgrading the soviets and other non-party class organisations, at least in relative terms.” [Before Stalinism, p. 37] Such a perspective on the soviets can be seen once the party was in power when they quickly turned them, without concern, into mere fig-leaves for party power (see section 6 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?” for more details).

It cannot be mere coincidence that the ideas and rhetoric against the soviets in 1905 should resurface again once the Bolsheviks were in power. For example, in 1905, in St. Petersburg “the Bolsheviks pressed on” with their campaign and, “according to the testimony of Vladimir Voitinskii, then a young Bolshevik agitator, the initial thrust of the Bolshevik ‘plan’ was to push the SRs [who were in a minority] out of the Soviet, while ‘the final blow’ would be directed against the Mensheviks. Voitinskii also recalled the heated argument advanced by the popular agitator Nikolai Krylenko (‘Abram’) for the ‘dispersal of the Soviet’ should it reject the ‘ultimatum’ to declare its affiliation with the RSDP.” [Getzler, Op., Cit., pp. 127–8] This mirrored events in 1918. Then “at the local political level” Bolshevik majorities were attained (“by means fair, foul and terrorist”) “in the plenary assemblies of the soviets, and with the barring of all those not ‘completely dedicated to Soviet power’ [i.e. Mensheviks and SRs] from the newly established network of soviet administrative departments

*and from the soviet militias. Soviets where Bolshevik majorities could not be achieved were simply disbanded.*” A similar process occurred at the summit (see section 7). Thus “*the October revolution marked [the soviets] transformation from agents of democratisation into regional and local administrative organs of the centralised, one-party Soviet state.*” [Israel Getzler, **Soviets as Agents of Democratisation**, p. 27 and pp. 26–7]

Can such an outcome really have **no** link at all with the Bolshevik position and practice in period before 1917 and, in particular, during the 1905 revolution? Obviously not. As such, we should not be too surprised or shocked when Lenin replied to a critic who assailed the “dictatorship of one party” in 1919 by clearly and unashamedly stating: “*Yes, the dictatorship of one party! We stand upon it and cannot depart from this ground, since this is the party which in the course of decades has won for itself the position of vanguard of the whole factory and industrial proletariat.*” [quoted by E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 236] Or when he replied to a critic in 1920 that “[h]e says we understand by the words dictatorship of proletariat what is actually the dictatorship of its determined and conscious minority. And that is the fact.” This “minority . . . may be called a party,” Lenin stressed. [quoted by Arthur Ransome, **The Crisis in Russia 1920**, p. 35]

This perspective can be traced back to the underlying ideology expounded by the Bolsheviks before and during 1917. For example, mere days after seizing power in the October Revolution Lenin was stressing that the Bolsheviks’ “*present slogan is: No compromise, i.e. for a homogeneous Bolshevik government.*” He did not hesitate to use the threat to “*appeal to the sailors*” against the other socialist parties, stating “[i]f you get the majority, take power in the Central Executive Committee and carry one. But we will go to the sailors.” [quoted by Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 26] Clearly soviet power was far from Lenin’s mind, rejecting soviet democracy if need be in favour of party power. Strangely, Cliff (a supporter of Lenin) states that Lenin “*did not visualise one-party rule*” and that the “*first decrees and laws issued after the October revolution were full of repetitions of the word ‘democracy.’*” [Op. Cit., p. 161 and p. 146] He goes on to quote Lenin stating that “[a]s a democratic government we cannot ignore the decision of the masses of the people, even though we disagree with it.” Cliff strangely fails to mention that Lenin also applied this not only to the land decree (as Cliff notes) but also to the Constituent Assembly. “*And even if,*” Lenin continued, “*the peasants continue to follow the Socialist Revolutionaries, even if they give this party a majority in the Constituent Assembly, we shall still say — what of it?*” [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 26, pp. 260–1] But the Bolsheviks disbanded the Constituent Assembly after one session. The peasants had voted for the SRs and the Assembly went the same way as Lenin’s promises. And if Lenin’s promises of 1917 on the Assembly proved to be of little value, then why should his various comments to soviet democracy be

considered any different? In a clash between soviet democracy and party power, the Bolsheviks consistently favoured the latter.

Thus Bolshevik ideology had consistently favoured party power and had a long term ideological preference for it. Combine this aim of party power with a vanguardism position (see section H.5) and party dictatorship will soon result. Neil Harding summarises the issue well:

*“There were a number of very basic axioms that lay at the very heart of the theory and practice of Leninism with regard to the party . . . It was the party that disposed of scientific or objective knowledge. Its analysis of the strivings of the proletariat was, therefore, privileged over the proletariat’s own class goals and a single discernible class will was, similarly, axiomatic to both Marxism and Leninism. Both maintained that it was the communists who alone articulated these goals and this will — that was the party’s principal historical role.*

*“At this point, Leninism (again faithful to the Marxist original) resorted to a little-noticed definitional conjuring trick — one that proved to be of crucial importance for the mesmeric effect of the ideology. The trick was spectacularly simple and audacious — the class was defined as class only to the extent that it conformed to the **party’s** account of its objectives, and mobilised itself to fulfil them. . . . The messy, real proletarians — the aggregation of wage workers with all their diverse projects and aspirations — were to be judged by their progress towards a properly class existence by the party that had itself devised the criteria for the class existence.” [Leninism, pp. 173–4]*

This authoritarian position, which allows “socialism” to be imposed by force upon the working class, lies at the core of Leninism. Ironically, while Bolshevism claims to be **the** party of the working class, representing it essentially or exclusively, they do so in the name of possessing a theory that, qua theory, can be the possession of intellectuals and, therefore, has to be “introduced” to the working class from outside (see section H.5.1 for details).

This means that Bolshevism is rooted in the identification of “class consciousness” with supporting the party. Given the underlying premises of vanguardism, unsurprisingly the Bolsheviks took “class consciousness” to mean this. If the workers protested against the policies of the party, this represented a fall in class consciousness and, therefore, working class resistance placed “class” power in danger. If, on the other hand, the workers remained quiet and followed the party’s decision then, obviously, they showed high levels of class consciousness. The net effect of this position was, of course, to justify party dictatorship. Which, of course, the Bolsheviks did create **and** justified ideologically.



Thus the Bolshevik aim for party power results in disempowering the working class in practice. Moreover, the assumptions of vanguardism ensure that only the party leadership is able to judge what is and is not in the interests of the working class. Any disagreement by elements of that class or the whole class itself can be dismissed as “wavering” and “vacillation.” While this is perfectly acceptable within the Leninist “*from above*” perspective, from an anarchist “*from below*” perspective it means little more than pseudo-theoretical justification for party dictatorship over the proletariat and the ensuring that a socialist society will **never** be created. Ultimately, socialism without freedom is meaningless — as the Bolshevik regime proved time and time again.

As such, to claim that the Bolsheviks did not aim to “substitute” party power for working class power seems inconsistent with both Bolshevik theory and practice. Lenin had been aiming for party power from the start, identifying it with working class power. As the party was the vanguard of the proletariat, it was duty bound to seize power and govern on behalf of the masses and, moreover, take any actions necessary to maintain the revolution — even if these actions violated the basic principles required to have any form of meaningful workers’ democracy and freedom. Thus the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” had long become equated with party power and, once in power, it was only a matter of time before it became the “*dictatorship of the party*.” And once this did occur, none of the leading Bolsheviks questioned it. The implications of these Bolshevik perspectives came clear after 1917, when the Bolsheviks raised the need for party dictatorship to an ideological truism.

Thus it seems strange to hear some Leninists complain that the rise of Stalinism can be explained by the rising “independence” of the state machine from the class (i.e. party) it claimed to in service of. Needless to say, few Leninists ponder the links between the rising “independence” of the state machine from the proletariat (by which most, in fact, mean the “*vanguard*” of the proletariat, the party) and Bolshevik ideology. As noted in section H.3.8, a key development in Bolshevik theory on the state was the perceived need for the vanguard to ignore the wishes of the class it claimed to represent and lead. For example, Victor Serge (writing in the 1920s) considered it a truism that the “*party of the proletariat must know, at hours of decision, how to break the resistance of the backward elements among the masses; it must know how to stand firm sometimes against the masses . . . it must know how to go against the current, and cause proletarian consciousness to prevail against lack of consciousness and against alien class influences.*” [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 218]

The problem with this is that, by definition, **everyone** is backward in comparison to the vanguard party. Moreover, in Bolshevik ideology it is the party which determines what is and is not “*proletarian consciousness.*” Thus we have the party

ideologue presenting self-justifications for party power **over** the working class. Now, is the vanguard is to be able to ignore the masses then it must have power **over** them. Moreover, to be independent of the masses the machine it relies on to implement its power must also, by definition, be independent of the masses. Can we be surprised, therefore, with the rise of the “independent” state bureaucracy in such circumstances? If the state machine is to be independent of the masses then why should we expect it not to become independent of the vanguard? Surely it must be the case that we would be far more surprised if the state machine did **not** become “independent” of the ruling party?

Nor can it be said that the Bolsheviks learned from the experience of the Russian Revolution. This can be seen from Trotsky’s 1937 comments that the “*proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. In itself the necessity for state power arises from the insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity.*” Thus “*state power*” is required **not** to defend the revolution against reaction but from the working class itself, who do not have a high enough “*cultural level*” to govern themselves. At best, their role is that of a passive supporter, for “[w]ithout the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power.” While soviets “*are the only organised form of the tie between the vanguard and the class*” it does not mean that they are organs of self-management. No, a “*revolutionary content can be given . . . only by the party. This is proved by the positive experience of the October Revolution and by the negative experience of other countries (Germany, Austria, finally, Spain).*” [Stalinism and Bolshevism]

Sadly, Trotsky failed to explicitly address the question of what happens when the “*masses*” stop having “*confidence in the vanguard*” and decides to support some other group. After all, if a “*revolutionary content*” can only be given by “*the party*” then if the masses reject the party then the soviets can no only be revolutionary. To save the revolution, it would be necessary to destroy the democracy and power of the soviets. Which is **exactly** what the Bolsheviks did do in 1918. By equating popular power with party power Bolshevism not only opens the door to party dictatorship, it invites it in, gives it some coffee and asks it to make itself a home! Nor can it be said that Trotsky ever appreciated Kropotkin’s “*general observation*” that “*those who preach dictatorship do not in general perceive that in sustaining their prejudice they only prepare the way for those who later on will cut their throats.*” [Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, p. 244]

In summary, it cannot be a coincidence that once in power the Bolsheviks acted in ways which had clear links to the political ideology it had been advocating before hand. As such, the Bolshevik aim for party power helped undermine the real power of working class people during the Russian revolution. Rooted in a deeply anti-democratic political tradition, it was ideologically predisposed to

substitute party power for soviet power and, finally, to create — and justify — the dictatorship **over** the proletariat. The civil war may have shaped certain aspects of these authoritarian tendencies but it did not create them.

## Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?

The real limitations in Bolshevism can best be seen by the various oppositions to the mainstream of that party. That Bolshevik politics were not a suitable instrument for working class self-liberation can be seen by the limited way which opposition groups questioned Bolshevik orthodoxy — even, in the case of the opposition to the rising Stalinist bureaucracy. Each opposition was fundamentally in favour of the Bolshevik monopoly of power, basically seeking reforms on areas which did not question it (such as economic policy). This does not mean that the various oppositions did not have valid points, just that they shared most of the key assumptions of Bolshevism which undermined the Russian revolution either by their application or their use to justify specific (usually highly authoritarian) practice.

We will not cover all the various oppositions with the Bolshevik party here (Robert V. Daniels' **The Conscience of the Revolution** discusses all of them in some detail, as does Leonard Schapiro's **The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**). We will concentrate on the "*Left Communists*" of 1918, the "*Workers' Opposition*" of 1920/1 and the Trotsky-led "*Left Opposition*" of 1923–7. It can be said that each opposition is a pale reflection of the one before it and each had clear limitations in their politics which fatally undermined any liberatory potential they had. Indeed, by the time of the "*Left Opposition*" we are reduced to simply the more radical sounding faction of the state and party bureaucracy fighting it out with the dominant faction.

To contrast these fake "oppositions" with a genuine opposition, we will discuss (in section 4) the "*Workers' Group*" of 1923 which was expelled from the Communist Party and repressed because it stood for (at least until the Bolshevik party seized power) traditional socialist values. This repression occurred, significantly, under Lenin and Trotsky in 1922/3. The limited nature of the previous oppositions and the repression of a **genuine** dissident working class group within the Communist Party shows how deeply unlibertarian the real Bolshevik tradition is. In fact, it could be argued that the fate of all the non-Trotskyist oppositions shows what will inevitably happen when someone takes the more democratic sounding rhetoric of Lenin at face value and compares it to his authoritarian practice, namely Lenin will turn round and say unambiguously that he had already mentioned his practice before hand and the reader simply had not been paying attention.

## 1 Were the “*Left Communists*” of 1918 an alternative?

The first opposition of note to Lenin’s state capitalist politics was the “*Left Communists*” in early 1918. This was clustered around the Bolshevik leader Bukharin. This grouping was focused around opposition to the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany and Lenin’s advocacy of “*state capitalism*” and “*one-man management*” as the means of both achieving socialism and getting Russia out of its problems. It is the latter issue that concerns us here.

The first issue of their theoretical journal **Kommunist** was published in April 1920 and it argued vigorously against Lenin’s advocacy of “*one-man management*” and state capitalism for “socialist” Russia. They correctly argued “*for the construction of the proletarian society by the class creativity of the workers themselves, not by the Ukases of the captains of industry . . . 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 and no one can compel it to do this. The stick, if raised against the workers, will find itself in the hands of a social force which is either under the influence of another social class or is in the hands of the soviet power; but the soviet power will then be forced to seek support against the proletariat from another class (e.g. the peasantry) and by this it will destroy itself as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Socialism and socialist organisation will be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all: something else will be set up — state capitalism.*” [Osinsky, quoted by Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 39]

Lenin reacted sharply, heaping insult upon insult on the Left Communists and arguing against their ideas on workers’ self-management. Rather than see self-management (or even workers’ control) as the key, he argued forcefully in favour of one-man management and state capitalism as both the means of solving Russia’s immediate problems **and** building socialism. Moreover, he linked this with his previous writings, correctly noting his “*high’ appreciation of state*” had been given “*before the Bolsheviks seized power.*” For Lenin, “*Socialism [was] inconceivable without large scale capitalist engineering . . . [and] without planned state organisation, which keeps tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a unified standard in production and distribution.*” Thus “*our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare **no effort** in copying it and not shrink from adopting **dictatorial** methods to hasten the copying of it.*” [Selected Works, vol. 2, p. 636 and p. 635] This required appointing capitalists to management positions, from which the vanguard could learn.

So, as long as a workers’ party held power, the working class need not fear “*state capitalism*” and the lack of economic power at the point of production.

Of course, without economic power, working class political power would be fatally undermined. In practice, Lenin simply handed over the workplaces to the state bureaucracy and created the social relationships which Stalinism thrived upon. Unfortunately, Lenin's arguments carried the day (see section 9 of the appendix "What happened during the Russian Revolution?"). How this conflict was resolved is significant, given that the banning of factions (which is generally seen as a key cause in the rise of Stalinism) occurred in 1921 (a ban, incidentally, Trotsky defended throughout the 1920s). As one historian notes:

*"The resolution of the party controversy in the spring of 1918 set a pattern that was to be followed throughout the history of the Communist Opposition in Russia. This was the settlement of the issues not by discussion, persuasion, or compromise, but by a high-pressure campaign in the party organisations, backed by a barrage of violent invective in the party press and in the pronouncements of the party leaders. Lenin's polemics set the tone, and his organisational lieutenants brought the membership into line."* [Daniels, Op. Cit., p. 87]

Indeed, "[s]oon after the party congress had approved the peace [in the spring of 1918], a Petrograd city party conference produced a majority for Lenin. It ordered the suspension of the newspaper *Kommunist* which had been serving as a Left Communist organ . . . The fourth and final issue of the Moscow *Kommunist* had to be published as a private factional paper rather than as the official organ of a party organisation." Ultimately, "[u]nder the conditions of party life established by Lenin, defence of the Opposition position became impossible within the terms of Bolshevik discipline." [Op. Cit., p. 88 and p. 89] So much for faction rights — three years before they were officially prohibited in the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress!

However, the "Left Communists," while correct on socialism needing workers' economic self-management, were limited in other ways. The major problems with the "Left Communists" were two-fold.

Firstly, by basing themselves on Bolshevik orthodoxy they allowed Lenin to dominate the debate. This meant that their more "libertarian" reading of Lenin's work could be nullified by Lenin himself pointing to the authoritarian and state capitalist aspects of those very same works. Which is ironic, as today most Leninists tend to point to these very same democratic sounding aspects of Lenin's ideas while downplaying the more blatant anti-socialist ones. Given that Lenin had dismissed such approaches himself during the debate against the Left Communists in 1918, it seems dishonest for his latter day followers to do this.

Secondly, their perspective on the role of the party undermined their commitment to true workers' power and freedom. This can be seen from the comments of Sorin, a leading Left Communist. He argued that the Left Communists were "the

most passionate proponents of soviet power, but . . . only so far as this power does not degenerate . . . in a petty-bourgeois direction.” [quoted by Ronald I. Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict*, p. 135] For them, like any Bolshevik, the party played the key role. The only true bastion of the interests of the proletariat was the party which “is in every case and everywhere superior to the soviets . . . The soviets represent labouring democracy in general; and its interest, and in particular the interests of the petty bourgeois peasantry, do not always coincide with the interests of the proletariat.” [quoted by Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, p. 182] This support for party power can also be seen in Osinsky’s comment that “soviet power” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” could “seek support” from other social classes, so showing that the class did not govern directly.

Thus soviet power was limited to approval of the party line and any deviation from that line would be denounced as “petty bourgeois” and, therefore, ignored. “Ironically,” the historian Kowalski notes, “Sorin’s call for a revived soviet democracy was becoming vitiated by the dominant role assigned, in the final analysis, to the party.” [Op. Cit., p. 136] Thus their politics were just as authoritarian as the mainstream Bolshevism they attacked on other issues:

*“Ultimately, the only criterion that they appeared able to offer was to define ‘proletarian’ in terms of adherence to their own policy prescriptions and ‘non-proletarian’ by non-adherence to them. In consequence, all who dared to oppose them could be accused either of being non-proletarian, or at the very least suffering from some form of ‘false consciousness’ — and in the interests of building socialism must recant or be purged from the party. Rather ironically, beneath the surface of their fine rhetoric in defence of the soviets, and of the party as ‘a forum for all of proletarian democracy,’ there lay a political philosophy that was arguably as authoritarian as that of which they accused Lenin and his faction.”* [Kowalski, Op. Cit., pp. 136–7]

This position can be traced back to the fundamentals of Bolshevism (see section H.5 on vanguardism). “According to the Left Communists, therefore,” notes Richard Sakwa, “the party was the custodian of an interest higher than that of the soviets. Earlier theoretical considerations on the vanguard role of the party, developed in response to this problem, were confirmed by the circumstances of Bolshevism in power. The political dominance of the party over the soviets encouraged an administrative one as well. Such a development was further encouraged by the emergence of a massive and unwieldy bureaucratic apparatus in 1918 . . . The Left Communists and the party leadership were therefore in agreement that . . . the party should play a tutelary role over the soviets.” Furthermore, “[w]ith such a formulation it proved difficult to maintain the vitality of the soviet plenum as the soviet was controlled by

*a party fraction, itself controlled by a party committee outside the soviet.*” [Op. Cit., p. 182 and p. 182–3]

With this ideological preference for party power and the ideological justification for ignoring soviet democracy, it is doubtful that their (correct) commitment to workers’ economic self-management would have been successful. An economic democracy combined with what amounts to a party dictatorship would be an impossibility that could never work in practice (as Lenin in 1921 argued against the “Workers’ Opposition”).

As such, the fact that Bukharin (one time “*Left Communist*”) “*continued to eulogise the party’s dictatorship, sometimes quite unabashedly*” during and after the civil war becomes understandable. In this, he was not being extreme: “*Bolsheviks no longer bothered to disclaim that the dictatorship of the proletariat as the ‘dictatorship of the party.’*” [Stephen F. Cohen, **Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution**, p. 145 and p. 142] All the leading Bolsheviks had argued this position for some time (see section H.1.2, for example). Bukharin even went so far as to argue that “*the watchword*” taken up by some workers (“even metal workers”!) of “*For class dictatorship, but against party dictatorship!*” showed that the proletariat “*was declassified.*” This also indicated that a “*misunderstanding arose which threatened the whole system of the proletarian dictatorship.*” [contained in Al Richardson (ed.), **In Defence of the Russian Revolution**, p. 192] The echoes of the positions argued before the civil war can be seen in Bukharin’s glib comment that proletarian management of the revolution meant the end of the “*proletarian*” dictatorship!

Lastly, the arguments of the Left Communists against “*one-man management*” were echoed by the Democratic Centralists at the Ninth Party Congress. One member of this grouping (which included such “*Left Communists*” as Osinsky) argued against Lenin’s dominate position in favour of appointed managers inside and outside the party as follows:

*“The Central Committee finds that the [local] party committee is a bourgeois prejudice, is conservatism bordering on the province of treason, and that the new form is the replacement of party committees by political departments, the heads of which by themselves replace the elected committees . . . You transform the members of the party into an obedient gramophone, with leaders who order: go and agitate; but they haven’t the right to elect their own committee, their own organs.*”

*“I then put the question to comrade Lenin: Who will appoint the Central Committee? You see, there can be individual authority here as well. Here also a single commander can be appointed.”* [Sapronov, quoted by Daniels, **Op. Cit.**, p. 114]



Obviously a man before his time. As Stalin proved, if one-man management was such a good idea then why wasn't it being practised in the Council of People's Commissars. However, we should not be surprised by this party regime. After all, Trotsky had imposed a similar regime in the Army in 1918, as had Lenin in industry in the same year. As discussed in section 3 of the appendix "What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?", the Bolshevik preference for centralised "democracy" effectively hollowed out the real democracy at the base which makes democracy more than just picking masters.

## 2 What were the limitations of the "Workers' Opposition" of 1920?

The next major opposition group were the "Workers' Opposition" of 1920 and early 1921. Significantly, the name "Workers' Opposition" was the label used by the party leadership to describe what latter became a proper grouping within the party. This group was more than happy to use the label given to it. This group is generally better known than other oppositions simply because it was the focus for much debate at the tenth party congress and its existence was a precipitating factor in the banning of factions within the Communist Party.

However, like the "Left Communists," the "Workers' Opposition" did not extend their economic demands to political issues. Unlike the previous opposition, however, their support for party dictatorship was more than logically implied, it was taken for granted. Alexandra Kollontai's pamphlet, for example, expounding the position of the "Workers' Opposition" fails to mention political democracy at all, instead discussing exclusively economic and party democracy. Thus it was a case of the "Workers' Opposition" expressing the "basis on which, in its opinions, the dictatorship of the proletariat must rest in the sphere of industrial reconstruction." Indeed, the "whole controversy boils down to one basic question: who shall build the communist economy, and how shall it be build?" [Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai, p. 161 and p. 173]

Kollontai was right to state that the working class "can alone by the creator of communism" and to ask the question of "shall we achieve communist through the workers or over their heads, by the hands of Soviet officials." As she argued, "it is impossible to decree communism." However, her list of demand were purely economic in nature and she wondered "[w]hat shall we do then in order to destroy bureaucracy in the party and replace it by workers' democracy?" She stressed that the "Workers' Opposition" struggle was "for establishing democracy in the party, and for the elimination of all bureaucracy." [Op. Cit., p. 176, p. 174, p. 187, p. 192]

and p. 197] Thus her demands were about the internal regime of the party, **not** a call for wider democratic reforms in the state or society as a whole.

As one historian notes, the “arguments of Kollontai were . . . strictly limited in their appeal to the communist party . . . Nor did they in any form criticise the domination of the communist minority over the majority of the proletariat. The fundamental weakness of the case of the Workers’ Opposition was that, while demanding more freedom of initiative for the workers, it was quite content to leave untouched the state of affairs in which a few hundred thousand imposed their will on many millions. ‘And since when have we [the Workers’ Opposition] been enemies of *komitetchina* [manipulation and control by communist party committees], I should like to know?’ Shlyapnikov asked at the Tenth Party Congress. He went on to explain that the trade union congress in which, as he and his followers proposed, all control of industry should be vested would ‘of course’ be composed of delegates nominated and elected ‘through the party cells, as we always do.’ But he argued that the local trade union cells would ensure the election of men qualified by experience and ability in place of those who are ‘imposed on us at present’ by the centre. Kollontai and her supporters had no wish to disturb the communist party’s monopoly of political power.” [Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*, p. 294]

Even this extremely limited demand for more economic democracy were too much for Lenin. In January, 1921, Lenin was arguing that the Bolsheviks had to “add to our platform the following: we must combat the ideological confusion of those unsound elements of the opposition who go to the lengths of repudiating all ‘militarisation of economy,’ of repudiating not only the ‘method of appointing’ which has been the prevailing method up to now, but **all** appointments. In the last analysis this means repudiating the leading role of the Party in relation to the non-Party masses. We must combat the syndicalist deviation which will kill the Party if it is not completely cured of it.” Indeed, “the syndicate deviation leads to the fall of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” [quoted by Brinton, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 75–6] Maurice Brinton correctly notes that by this Lenin meant that “working class power (‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’) is impossible if there are militants in the Party who think the working class should exert more power in production (‘the syndicalist deviation’).” Moreover, “Lenin here poses quite clearly the question of ‘power of the Party’ or ‘power of the class.’ He unambiguously opts for the former — no doubt rationalising his choice by equating the two. But he goes even further. He not only equates ‘workers power’ with the rule of the Party. He equates it with acceptance of the ideas of the Party leaders!” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 76]

At the tenth party congress, the “Workers’ Opposition” were labelled “petty-bourgeois,” “syndicalist” and even “anarchist” simply because they called for limited participation by workers in the rebuilding of Russia. The group was “caused in part by the entry into the ranks of the Party of elements which had still not completely

*adopted the communist world view.*” Significantly, those who **had** the “*communist world view*” did not really debate the issues raised and instead called the opposition “*genuinely counter-revolutionary,*” “*objectively counter-revolutionary*” as well as “*too revolutionary.*” [quoted by Brinton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 79]

For Lenin, the idea of industrial democracy was a nonsense. In this he was simply repeating the perspective he had held from spring 1918. As he put it, it was “*a term that lends itself to misinterpretations. It may be read as a repudiation of dictatorship and individual authority.*” Industry, he argued, “*is indispensable, democracy is not*” and “*on no account must we renounce dictatorship either.*” Indeed, “[i]ndustry is indispensable, democracy is a category proper only to the political sphere.” He did admit “[t]hat [the opposition] has been penetrating into the broad masses is evident” however it was the duty of the party to ignore the masses. The “*bidding for or flirtation with the non-Party masses*” was a “*radical departure from Marxism.*” “*Marxism teaches,*” Lenin said, “*and this tenet has not only been formally endorsed by the whole Communist International in the decisions of the Second (1920) Congress of the Comintern on the role of the political party of the proletariat, but has also been confirmed in practice by our revolution — that only the political party of the working class, i.e. the Communist Party, is capable of uniting, training and organising a vanguard of the proletariat . . . that alone will be capable of withstanding the inevitable petty-bourgeois vacillation of this mass . . . Without this the dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible.*” [Collected Works, vol. 31, p. 82, p. 27, p. 26, p. 197 and p. 246] In other words, “*Marxism*” teaches that workers’ democracy and protest (the only means by which “*vacillation*” can be expressed) is a danger to the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*”! (see also section H.5.3 on why this position is the inevitable outcome of vanguardism).

It should be stressed that this opposition and the debate it provoked occurred after the end of the Civil War in the west. The Whites under Wrangel had been crushed in November, 1920, and the Russian revolution was no longer in immediate danger. As such, there was an opportunity for constructive activity and mass participation in the rebuilding of Russia. The leading Bolsheviks rejected such demands, even in the limited form advocated by the “*Workers’ Opposition.*” Lenin and Trotsky clearly saw **any** working class participation as a danger to their power. Against the idea of economic participation under Communist control raised by the “*Workers’ Opposition,*” the leading Bolsheviks favoured the NEP. This was a return to the same kind of market-based “*state capitalist*” strategy Lenin had advocated against the “*Left Communists*” **before** the outbreak of the civil war in May 1918 (and, as noted, he had argued for in 1917). This suggests a remarkable consistency in Lenin’s thoughts, suggesting that claims his policies he advocated and implemented in power were somehow the opposite of what he “*really*” wanted are weak.

As with the “Left Communists” of 1918, Lenin saw his opposition to the “Workers’ Opposition” as reflecting the basic ideas of his politics. “If we *perish*,” he said privately at the time according to Trotsky, “it is all the more important to preserve our ideological line and give a lesson to our continuators. This should *never* be forgotten, even in *hopeless* circumstances.” [quoted by Daniels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 147]

In summary, like the “Left Communists”, the “Workers’ Opposition” presented a platform of economic demands rooted in the assumption of Bolshevik party domination. It is, therefore, unsurprising that leading members of the “Workers’ Opposition” took part in the attack on Kronstadt and that they wholeheartedly rejected the consistent demands for political and economic that the Kronstadt rebels had raised (see appendix “What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?” for more information). Such a policy would be too contradictory to be applied. Either the economic reforms would remain a dead letter under party control or the economic reforms would provoke demands for political change. This last possibility may explain Lenin’s vitriolic attacks on the “Workers’ Opposition.”

This opposition, like the “Left Communists” of 1918, was ultimately defeated by organisational pressures within the party and state. Victor Serge “was horrified to see the voting rigged for Lenin’s and Zinoviev’s ‘majority’” in late 1920. [*Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 123] Kollantai complained that while officially one and a half million copies of the “Workers’ Opposition” manifesto was published, in fact only 1500 were “and that with difficulty.” [quoted by Schapiro, *Op. Cit.*, p. 291] This applied even more after the banning of factions, when the party machine used state power to break up the base of the opposition in the trade unions as well as its influence in the party.

“Victimisation of supporters of the Workers’ Opposition,” notes Schapiro, “began immediately after the Tenth Party Congress. ‘The struggle,’ as Shlyapnikov later recounted, ‘took place not along ideological lines but by means . . . of edging out from appointments, of systematic transfers from one district to another, and even expulsion from the party.’ . . . the attack was levelled not for heretical opinions, but for criticism of any kind of party shortcomings. ‘Every member of the party who spoke in defence of the resolution on workers’ democracy [in the party — see next section] was declared a supporter of the Workers’ Opposition and guilty of disintegrating the party,’ and was accordingly victimised.” [*Op. Cit.*, pp. 325–6] Thus “the party Secretariat was perfecting its technique of dealing with recalcitrant individuals by the power of removal and transfer, directed primarily at the adherents of the Workers’ Opposition. (Of the 37 Workers’ Opposition delegates to the Tenth Congress whom Lenin consulted when he was persuading Shlyapnikov and Kutuzov to enter the Central Committee, only four managed to return as voting delegates to the next congress.)” [Daniels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 161]

A similar process was at work in the trade unions. For example, “[w]hen the metalworkers’ union held its congress in May 1921, the Central Committee of the party handed it a list of recommended candidates for the union leadership. The metalworkers’ delegates voted down the party-backed list, but this gesture proved futile: the party leadership boldly appointed their own men to the union offices.” This was “a show of political force” as the union was a centre of the Workers’ Opposition. [Daniels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 157]

This repression was practised under Lenin and Trotsky, using techniques which were later used by the Stalinists against Trotsky and his followers. Lenin himself was not above removing his opponents from the central committee by undemocratic methods. At the Tenth Party Congress he had persuaded Shlyapnikov to be elected to the Central Committee in an attempt to undermine the opposition. A mere “five months later, Lenin was demanding his expulsion for a few sharp words of criticism of the bureaucracy, uttered at a private meeting of a local party cell. If he was looking for a pretext, he could scarcely have picked a weaker one.” [Schapiro, *Op. Cit.*, p. 327] Lenin failed by only one vote short of the necessary two thirds majority of the Committee.

In summary, the “Workers’ Opposition” vision was limited. Politically, it merely wanted democracy within the party. It did not question the party’s monopoly of power. As such, it definitely did not deserve the labels “anarchist” and “syndicalist” which their opponents called them. As far as its economic policy goes, it, too, was limited. Its demands for economic democracy were circumscribed by placing it under the control of the communist cells within the trade unions.

However, Kollontai was right to state that only the working class “can alone by the creator of communism,” that it was impossible to “achieve communist . . . over [the workers’] heads, by the hands of Soviet officials” and that “**it is impossible to decree communism.**” As Kropotkin put it decades before:

*“Communist organisation cannot be left to be constructed by legislative bodies called parliaments, municipal or communal council. It must be the work of all, a natural growth, a product of the constructive genius of the great mass. Communism cannot be imposed from above.”* [Kropotkin’s *Revolutionary Pamphlets*, p. 140]

### 3 What about Trotsky’s “*Left Opposition*” in the 1920s?

Finally, there is Trotsky’s opposition between 1923 and 1927. Since 1918 Trotsky had been wholeheartedly in favour of the party dictatorship and its economic

regime. This position started to change once his own power came under threat and he suddenly became aware of the necessity for reform. Unsurprisingly, his opposition was the last and by far the weakest politically. As Cornelius Castoriadis points out:

*“From the beginning of 1918 until the banning of factions in March 1921, tendencies within the Bolshevik party were formed that, with farsightedness and sometimes an astonishing clarity, expressed opposition to the Party’s bureaucratic line and to its very rapid bureaucratisation. These were the ‘Left Communists’ (at the beginning of 1918), then the ‘Democratic Centralist’ tendency (1919), and finally the ‘Workers’ Opposition’ (1920–21). . . these oppositions were defeated one by one . . . The very feeble echoes of their critique of the bureaucracy that can be found later in the (Trotskyist) ‘Left Opposition’ after 1923 do not have the same signification. Trotsky was opposed to the **bad policies** of the bureaucracy and to the excesses of its power. He never put into question its essential nature. Until practically the end of his life, he never brought up the questions raised by the various oppositions of the period from 1918 to 1921 (in essence: ‘Who manages production?’ and ‘What is the proletariat supposed to do during the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ other than work and follow the orders of ‘its’ party?’).” [Political and Social Writings, vol. 3, p. 98]*

While the “Left Communists” and “Workers’ Opposition” had challenged Lenin’s state capitalist economic regime while upholding the Bolshevik monopoly of power (implicitly or explicitly), Trotsky did not even manage that. His opposition was firmly limited to internal reforms to the party which he hoped would result in wider participation in the soviets and trade unions (he did not bother to explain why continuing party dictatorship would reinvigorate the soviets or unions).

Politically, Trotsky was unashamedly in favour of party dictatorship. Indeed, his basic opposition to Stalinism was because he considered it as the end of that dictatorship by the rule of the bureaucracy. He held this position consistently during the civil war and into the 1920s (and beyond — see section H.3.8). For example, in April 1923, he asserted quite clearly that “[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party.” [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 158] And was true to his word. In “The New Course” (generally accepted as being the first public expression of his opposition), he stated that “[w]e are the only party in the country, and in the period of the dictatorship it could not be otherwise.” Moreover, it was “incontestable that factions [within the party] are a scourge in the present situation” and so the party “does not want factions and

will not tolerate them.” [The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25), p. 78, p. 80 and p. 86] In May 1924, he even went so far as to proclaim that:

*“Comrades, none of us wishes or is able to be right against his party. The party in the last analysis is always right, because the party is the sole historical instrument given to the proletariat for the solution of its basic problems . . . I know that one cannot be right against the party. It is only possible to be right with the party and through the party, for history has not created other ways for the realisation of what is right.”* [quoted by Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 240]

However, confusion creeps into the politics of the Left Opposition simply because they used the term “workers’ democracy” a lot. However, a close reading of Trotsky’s argument soon clarifies this issue. Trotsky, following the Communist Party itself, had simply redefined what “workers’ democracy” meant. Rather than mean what you would expect it would mean, the Bolsheviks had changed its meaning to become “party democracy.” Thus Trotsky could talk about “party dictatorship” and “workers’ democracy” without contradiction. As his support Max Eastman noted in the mid-1920s, Trotsky supported the “programme of democracy within the party — called ‘Workers’ Democracy’ by Lenin.” This “was not something new or especially devised . . . It was part of the essential policy of Lenin for going forward toward the creation of a Communist society — a principle adopted under his leadership at the Tenth Congress of the party, immediately after the cessation of the civil war.” [Since Lenin Died, p. 35] In the words of historian Robert V. Daniels:

*“The Opposition’s political ideal was summed up in the slogan ‘workers’ democracy,’ which referred particularly to two documents [from 1920 and 1923] . . . Both these statements concerned the need to combat ‘bureaucratism’ and implement party democracy.”* [Op. Cit., p. 300]

That this was the case can be seen from the Fourth All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in 1921:

*“At the meeting of delegates who were party members, Tomsky submitted for routine approval a set of these on the tasks of trade unions. The approval was a matter of form, but an omission was noted, The theses made no reference to the formula of ‘proletarian democracy’ with which the Tenth Congress had tried to assuage the rank and file. Riazanov . . . offered an amendment to fill the breach, in language almost identical with the Tenth Congress resolution: ‘The party must observe with special care the normal methods of proletarian*

*democracy, particularly in the trade unions, where most of all the selection of leaders should be done by the organised party masses themselves.’ . . . The party leadership reacted instantaneously to this miscarriage of their plans for curtailing the idea of union autonomy. Tomksy was summarily ejected from the trade union congress. Lenin put in appearance together with Bukharin and Stalin to rectify the unionists’ action.” [Daniels, Op. Cit., p. 157]*

The “New Course Resolution” passed in December, 1923, stresses this, stating that “Workers’ democracy means the liberty of frank discussion of the most important questions of party life by all members, and the election of all leading party functionaries and commissions . . . It does not . . . imply the freedom to form factional groupings, which are extremely dangerous for the ruling party.” [Trotsky, Op. Cit., p. 408] It made it clear that “workers’ democracy” was no such thing:

*“Worker’s democracy signifies freedom of open discussion by all members of the party of the most important questions of party life, freedom of controversy about them, and also electiveness of the leading official individuals and collegia from below upwards. However, it does not at all suggest freedom of factional groupings . . . It is self-evident that within the party . . . it is impossible to tolerate groupings, the ideological contents of which are directed against the party as a whole and against the dictatorship of the proletariat (such as, for example, the ‘Workers’ Truth’ and the ‘Workers’ Group’).” [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, Op. Cit., p. 222]*

As “Left Oppositionist” Victor Serge himself pointed out, “*the greatest reach of boldness of the Left Opposition in the Bolshevik Party was to demand the restoration of inner-Party democracy, and it never dared dispute the theory of single-party government — by this time, it was too late.*” Trotsky had “*ever since 1923 [been] for the renovation of the party through inner party democracy and the struggle against bureaucracy.*” [The Serge-Trotsky Papers, p. 181 and p. 201]

Thus Trotsky’s opposition was hardly democratic. In 1926, for example, he took aim at Stalin’s dismissal of the idea of “*the dictatorship of the party*” as “nonsense” the previous year. If he were the heroic defender of genuine workers democracy modern day Trotskyists assert, he would have agreed with Stalin while exposing his hypocrisy. Instead he defended the concept of “*the dictatorship of the party*” and linked it to Lenin (and so Leninist orthodoxy):

*“Of course, the foundation of our regime is the dictatorship of a class. But this in turn . . . assumes it is class that has come to self-consciousness through its vanguard, which is to say, through the party. Without this, the dictatorship*



*could not exist . . . Dictatorship is the most highly concentrated function of function of a class, and therefore the basic instrument of a dictatorship is a party. In the most fundamental aspects a class realises its dictatorship through a party. That is why Lenin spoke not only of the dictatorship of the class but also the dictatorship of the party and, in a certain sense, made them identical.”* [Trotsky, **The Challenge of the Left Opposition** (1926–27), pp. 75–6]

Trotsky argued that Stalin’s repudiation of the “dictatorship of the party” was, in fact, a ploy to substitute the dictatorship of the party “*apparatus*” for the dictatorship of the party (a theme which would be raised in the following year’s **Platform of the Opposition**). Such a substitution, he argued, had its roots in a “*disproportion*” between workers’ democracy and peasants’ democracy (or “*the private sector of the economy*” in general). As long as there was a “*proper ‘proportion’*” between the two and “*the advance of democratic methods in the party and working class organisations,*” then “*the identification of the dictatorship of the class with that of the party is fully and completely justified historically and politically.*” Needless to say, Trotsky did not bother to ask how much democracy (of any kind) was possible under a party dictatorship nor how a class could run society or have “*democratic*” organisations if subjected to such a dictatorship. For him it was a truism that the “*dictatorship of a party does not contradict the dictatorship of the class either theoretically or practically, but is an expression of it.*” [Op. Cit., p. 76] Needless to say, the obvious conclusion to draw from Trotsky’s argument is that if a revolution occurred in a country without a peasantry then the “*dictatorship of the party*” would be of no real concern!

This was no temporary (7 year!) aberration. As indicated in section H.3.8, Trotsky repeated this support for party dictatorship ten years later (and after). Furthermore, Trotsky’s defence of party dictatorship against Stalin was included in the 1927 **Platform of the Opposition**. This included the same contradictory demands for workers’ democracy and the revitalising of the soviets and trade unions with deeply rooted ideological support for party dictatorship. This document made his opposition clear, attacking Stalin for **weakening** the party’s dictatorship. In its words, the “*growing replacement of the party by its own apparatus is promoted by a ‘theory’ of Stalin’s which denies the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.*” It repeats this principle by arguing that “*the dictatorship of the proletariat demands a single and united proletarian party as the leader of the working masses and the poor peasantry.*” As such, “[w]e will fight with all our power against the idea of two parties, because the dictatorship of the proletariat demands as its very core a single proletarian party. It demands a single party.” [The **Platform of the Opposition**] Even in the prison camps in the

late 1920s and early 1930s, “almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that ‘freedom of party’ would be ‘the end of the revolution.’ ‘Freedom to choose one’s party — that is Menshevism,’ was the Trotskyists’ final verdict.” [Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, p. 280]

Once we understand that “workers’ democracy” had a very specific meaning to the Communist Party, we can start to understand such apparently contradictory demands as the “consistent development of a workers’ democracy in the party, the trade unions, and the soviets.” Simply put, this call for “workers’ democracy” was purely within the respective party cells and **not** a call for **genuine** democracy in the unions or soviets. Such a position in no way undermines the dictatorship of the party.

Economically, Trotsky’s opposition was far more backward than previous oppositions. For Trotsky, economic democracy was not an issue. It played no role in determining the socialist nature of a society. Rather state ownership did. Thus he did not question one-man management in the workplace nor the capitalist social relationships it generated. For Trotsky, it was “necessary for each state-owned factory, with its technical director and with its commercial director, to be subjected not only to control from the top — by the state organs — but also from below, by the market which will remain the regulator of the state economy for a long time to come.” In spite of the obvious fact that the workers did not control their labour or its product, Trotsky asserted that “[n]o class exploitation exists here, and consequently neither does capitalism exist.” Moreover, “socialist industry . . . utilises methods of development which were invented by capitalist economy.” Ultimately, it was not self-management that mattered, it was “the growth of Soviet state industry [which] signifies the growth of socialism itself, a direct strengthening of the power of the proletariat”! [The First 5 Years of the Communist International, vol. 2, p. 237 and p. 245]

Writing in 1923, he argued that the “system of actual one-man management must be applied in the organisation of industry from top to bottom. For leading economic organs of industry to really direct industry and to bear responsibility for its fate, it is essential for them to have authority over the selection of functionaries and their transfer and removal.” These economic organs must “in actual practice have full freedom of selection and appointment.” He also tied payment to performance (just as he did during the civil war), arguing that “the payment of the directors of enterprises must be made to depend on their balance sheets, like wages depend on output.” [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism*, vol. 1, p. 237]

Moreover, Trotsky’s key idea during the 1920s was to industrialise Russia. As the 1927 Platform argued, it was a case that the “present tempo of industrialisation and the tempo indicated for the coming years are obviously inadequate” and so

the “*necessary acceleration of industrialisation*” was required. In fact, the “*Soviet Union must not fall further behind the capitalist countries, but in the near future must overtake them.*” Thus industrialisation “*must be sufficient to guarantee the defence of the country and in particular an adequate growth of war industries.*” [**The Platform of the Opposition**]

In summary, Trotsky’s “opposition” in no way presented any real alternative to Stalinism. Indeed, Stalinism simply took over and applied Trotsky’s demands for increased industrialisation. At no time did Trotsky question the fundamental social relationships within Soviet society. He simply wished the ruling elite to apply different policies while allowing him and his followers more space and freedom within the party structures. Essentially, as the 1927 Platform noted, he saw Stalinism as the victory of the state bureaucracy over the party and its dictatorship. Writing ten years after the Platform, Trotsky reiterated this: “*The bureaucracy won the upper hand. It cowed the revolutionary vanguard, trampled upon Marxism, prostituted the Bolshevik party . . . To the extent that the political centre of gravity has shifted from the proletarian vanguard to the bureaucracy, the party has changed its social structure as well as its ideology.*” [**Stalinism and Bolshevism**] He simply wanted to shift the “*political centre of gravity*” back towards the party, as it had been in the early 1920s when he and Lenin were in power. He in no significant way questioned the nature of the regime or the social relationships it was rooted in.

This explains his continual self-imposed role after his exile of loyal opposition to Stalinism in spite of the violence applied to him and his followers by the Stalinists. It also explains the lack of excitement by the working class over the “*Left Opposition.*” There was really not that much to choose between the two factions within the ruling party/elite. As Serge acknowledged: “*Outraged by the Opposition, they [the bureaucrats] saw it as treason against them; which in a sense it was, since the Opposition itself belonged to the ruling bureaucracy.*” [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 225]

This may come as a shock to many readers. This is because Trotskyists are notorious for their rewriting of the policies of Trotsky’s opposition to the rise of what became known as Stalinism. This revisionism can take extreme forms. For example, Chris Harman (of the UK’s SWP) in his summary of the rise Stalinism asserted that after “*Lenin’s illness and subsequent death*” the “*principles of October were abandoned one by one.*” [**Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 14] Presumably, in that case, the “*principles of October*” included the practice of, and ideological commitment to, party dictatorship, one-man management, banning opposition groups/parties (as well as factions within the Communist Party), censorship, state repression of working class strikes and protests, piece-work, Taylorism, the end of independent trade unions and a host of other crimes

against socialism implemented under Lenin and normal practice at the time of his death.

Harman is correct to say that *“there was always an alternative to Stalinism. It meant, in the late 1920s, returning to genuine workers’ democracy and consciously linking the fate of Russia to the fate of world revolution.”* Yet this alternative was not Trotsky’s. Harman even goes so far as to assert that the *“historical merit of the Left Opposition”* was that it *“did link the question of the expansion of industry with that of working-class democracy and internationalism.”* [Op. Cit., p. 19]

However, in reality, this was **not** the case. Trotsky, nor the Left Opposition, supported *“genuine”* working-class democracy, unless by *“genuine”* Harman means *“party dictatorship presiding over.”* This is clear from Trotsky’s writings for the period in question. The Left Opposition did **not** question the Bolshevik’s monopoly of power and explicitly supported the idea of party dictatorship. This fact helps explain what Harman seems puzzled by, namely that Trotsky *“continued to his death to harbour the illusion that somehow, despite the lack of workers’ democracy, Russia was a ‘workers’ state.’”* [Op. Cit., p. 20] Strangely, Harman does not explain why Russia was a *“workers’ state”* under Lenin and Trotsky, given its *“lack of workers’ democracy.”* But illusions are hard to dispel, sometimes.

So, for Trotsky, like all leading members of the Communist Party and its *“Left Opposition”*, *“workers’ democracy”* was **not** considered important and, in fact, was (at best) applicable only within the party. Thus the capitulation of many of the Left Opposition to Stalin once he started a policy of forced industrialisation comes as less of a surprise than Harman seems to think it was. As Ante Ciliga saw first hand in the prison camps, *“the majority of the Opposition were . . . looking for a road to reconciliation; whilst criticising the Five Year Plan, they put stress not on the part of exploited class played by the proletariat, but on the technical errors made by the Government qua employer in the matter of insufficient harmony within the system and inferior quality of production. This criticism did not lead to an appeal to the workers against the Central Committee and against bureaucratic authority; it restricted itself to proposing amendments in a programme of which the essentials were approved. The socialist nature of State industry was taken for granted. They denied the fact that the proletariat was exploited; for ‘we were in a period of proletarian dictatorship.’”* [The Russian Enigma, p. 213]

As Victor Serge noted, *“[f]rom 1928–9 onwards, the Politbureau turned to its own use the great fundamental ideas of the now expelled Opposition (excepting, of course, that of working-class democracy) and implemented them with ruthless violence.”* While acknowledging that the Stalinists had applied these ideas in a more extreme form than the Opposition planned, he also acknowledged that *“[b]eginning in those years, a good many Oppositionists rallied to the ‘general line’ and renounced their errors since, as they put it, ‘After all, it is our programme that is being applied.’”*

Nor did it help that at “the end of 1928, Trotsky wrote to [the Opposition] from his exile . . . to the effect that, since the Right represented the danger of a slide towards capitalism, we had to support the ‘Centre’ — Stalin — against it.” [Op. Cit., p. 252 and p. 253]

However, Serge’s comments on “working-class democracy” are somewhat incredulous, given that he knew fine well that the Opposition did not stand for it. His summary of the 1927 Platform was restricted to it aiming “to restore life to the Soviets . . . and above all to revitalise the Party and the trade unions. . . . In conclusion, the Opposition openly demanded a Congress for the reform of the Party, and the implementation of the excellent resolutions on internal democracy that had been adopted in 1921 and 1923.” [Op. Cit., pp. 224–5] Which is essentially correct. The Platform was based on redefining “workers’ democracy” to mean “party democracy” within the context of its dictatorship.

We can hardly blame Harman, as it was Trotsky himself who started the process of revising history to exclude his own role in creating the evils he (sometimes) denounced his opponents within the party for. For example, the 1927 Platform states that “[n]ever before have the trade unions and the working mass stood so far from the management of socialist industry as now” and that “[p]re-revolutionary relations between foremen and workmen are frequently found.” Which is hardly surprising, given that Lenin had argued for, and implemented, appointed one-man management armed with “dictatorial powers” from April 1918 and that Trotsky himself also supported one-man management (see section 10 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”).

Even more ironically, Harman argues that the Stalinist bureaucracy became a ruling class in 1928 when it implemented the first five year plan. This industrialisation was provoked by military competition with the west, which forced the “drive to accumulate” which caused the bureaucracy to attack “the living standards of peasants and workers.” He quotes Stalin: “to slacken the pace (of industrialisation) would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten . . . We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do so or they crush us.” Moreover, the “environment in which we are placed . . . at home and abroad . . . compels us to adopt a rapid rate of industrialisation.” [Harman, Op. Cit., pp. 15–6] Given that this was exactly the same argument as Trotsky in 1927, it seems far from clear that the “Left Opposition” presented any sort of alternative to Stalinism. After all, the “Left Opposition took the stand that large-scale new investment was imperative, especially in heavy industry, and that comprehensive planning and new sources of capital accumulation should be employed immediately to effect a high rate of industrial expansion . . . They also stressed the necessity of rapidly overtaking the capitalist powers in economic strength, both as a guarantee of military security and

as a demonstration of the superiority of the socialist system.” [Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 290]

Would the Left Opposition’s idea of “*primitive socialist accumulation*” been obtained by any means other than politically enforced exploitation and the repression of working class and peasant protest? Of course not. Faced with the same objective pressures and goals, would it have been any different if that faction had become dominant in the party dictatorship? It is doubtful, unless you argue that who is in charge rather than social relationships that determine the “socialist” nature of a regime. But, then again, that is precisely what Trotskyists like Harman do do when they look at Lenin’s Russia.

As for Harman’s assertion that the Left Opposition stood for “*internationalism*,” that is less straight forward than he would like. As noted, it favoured the industrialisation of Russia to defend the regime against its foreign competitors. As such, the Left Opposition were as committed to building “socialism” in the USSR as were the Stalinist promoters of “*socialism in one country*.” The difference was that the Left Opposition also argued for spreading revolution externally as well. For them, this was the **only** means of assuring the lasting victory of “socialism” (i.e. stasised industry) in Russia. So, for the Left Opposition, building Russia’s industrial base was part and parcel of supporting revolution internationally rather, as in the case of the Stalinists, an alternative to it.

The contradictions in Trotsky’s position may best be seen from the relations between Lenin’s Russia and the German military. Negotiations between the two states started as early as 1920 with an important aide of Trotsky’s. The fruit of the German military’s negotiations were “*secret military understandings*.” By September 1922 German officers and pilots were training in Russia. An organisation of German military and industrial enterprises in Russia was established and under it’s auspices shells, tanks and aircraft were manufactured in Russia for the German army (an attempt to produce poison gas failed). [E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 327 and pp. 431–2] In April, 1923, the German High Command ordered 35 million gold marks worth of war material. [Aberdeen Solidarity, **Spartakism to National Bolshevism**, p. 24]

These relations had their impact on the politics of the German Communist Party who enforced its so-called “*Schlageter Line*” of co-operation with nationalist and fascist groups. This policy was first promoted in the Comintern by leading Communist Radek and inspired by Zinoviev. According to Radek, “*national Bolshevism*” was required as the “*strong emphasis on the nation in Germany is a revolutionary act*.” [quoted in E.H. Carr, **The Interregnum 1923–1924**, p. 177] During the summer of 1923, joint meetings with them were held and both communist and fascist speakers urged an alliance with Soviet Russia against the Entente powers. So, for several months, the German Communists worked with the Nazis, going so

as far as to stage rallies and share podiums together. The Communist leader Ruth Fischer even argued that *“he who denounces Jewish capital . . . is already a warrior in the class war, even though he does not know it”* (she latter said her remarks had been distorted). [quoted in E.H. Carr, *Op. Cit.*, p. 182f] This continued until *“the Nazis leadership placed a ban on further co-operation.”* [E.H. Carr, *Op. Cit.*, p. 183] Thus the activities of the German communists were tailored to fit into the needs of Lenin’s regime and Trotsky played a key role in the negotiations which started the process.

How *“internationalist”* was it to arm and train the very forces which had crushed the German revolutionary workers between 1919 and 1921? How sensible was it, when pressing for world revolution, to enhance the power of the army which would be used to attack any revolution in Germany? Which, of course, was what happened in 1923, when the army repressed the Comintern inspired revolt in November that year. Trotsky was one of the staunchest in favour of this insurrection, insisting that it be fixed for the 7<sup>th</sup> of that month, the anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power. [E.H. Carr, *Op. Cit.*, p. 205] The attempted revolt was a dismal failure. Rather than a revolution in Berlin on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, there was a dinner at the Russian embassy for German officers, industrialists and officials to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian revolution. [Carr, *Op. Cit.*, p. 226] The big question is how many Communists and workers killed in the revolt had been at the receiving end of weapons and training supplied to the German army by Trotsky’s Red Army?

Moreover, the **nature** of any such revolution is what counts. The Left Opposition would have encourage revolutions which followed (to re-quote the **Platform of the Opposition**) the *“Leninist principle”* (*“inviolable for every Bolshevik”*) that *“the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.”* It would have opposed workers’ self-management in favour of nationalisation and one-man management. In other words, the influence of the Left Opposition would have been as detrimental to the global workers’ movement and other revolutions as Stalin’s was (or, for that matter, Lenin’s) although, of course, in a different way. Generalising Lenin’s state capitalism would not have resulted in socialism, no matter how many revolutions in the west the Left Opposition encouraged.

Finally, the fate of the *“Left Opposition”* should be noted. As befell the previous oppositions, the party machine was used against it. Ironically, the Stalinists began by using the very techniques the Trotskyists had used against their opponents years before. For example, the Eighth Party Congress in December 1919 agreed that *“[a]ll decisions of the higher jurisdiction are absolutely binding for the lower.”* Moreover, *“[e]ach decision must above all be fulfilled, and only after this is an appeal to the corresponding party organ permissible.”* Centralism was reaffirmed: *“The*

whole matter of assignment of party workers is in the hands of the Central Committee of the party. Its decision is binding for everyone. . . .” These decisions were used as a weapon against the opposition: “Translating this principle into practice, the Secretariat under Krestinsky [a Trotsky supporter] began deliberately to transfer party officials for political reasons, to end personal conflicts and curb opposition.” In 1923, the Secretariat “brought into play its power of transfer, which had already proven to be an effective political weapon against the Ukrainian Leftists and the Workers’ Opposition.” [Robert V. Daniels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 113 and p. 229]

The party itself had been reorganised, with “the replacement of local party committees, which were at least democratic in form, by bureaucratically constituted ‘political departments.’ With the institution of such bodies, all political activity . . . was placed under rigid control from above. This innovation was taken from the army; as its origin suggests, it was strictly a military, authoritarian institution, designed for transmitting propaganda downward rather than opinion upward.” [Op. Cit., p. 114] Needless to say, it was Trotsky himself who implemented that regime in the army to begin with.

It should also be remembered that when, in early in 1922, the “Workers’ Opposition” had appealed to the Communist abroad in the form of a statement to a Comintern Congress, Trotsky defended the party against its claims. These claims, ironically, included the accusation that the “party and trade-union bureaucracy . . . ignore the decisions of our congresses on putting workers’ democracy [inside the party] into practice.” Their “effort to draw the proletarian masses closer to the state is declared to be ‘anarcho-syndicalism,’ and its adherents are subjected to persecution and discrediting.” They argued that the “tutelage and pressure by the bureaucracy goes so far that it is prescribed for members of the party, under threat of exclusion and other repressive measures, to elect not those whom the Communists want themselves, but those whom the ignorant high places want.” [quoted by Daniels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 162]

Even more ironically, the dominant faction of the bureaucracy heaped upon Trotsky’s opposition faction similar insults to those he (and Lenin) had heaped upon previous oppositions inside and outside the party. In 1924, the Trotskyist opposition was accused of having “clearly violated the decision of the Tenth Congress . . . which prohibited the formation of factions within the party” and has “enlivened the hopes of all enemies of the party, including the West-European bourgeoisie, for a split in the ranks of the Russian Communist Party.” In fact, it was a “direct departure of Leninism” and “also a clearly expressed **petty-bourgeois deviation**” reflecting “the pressure of the petty bourgeois on the position of the proletarian party and its policy.” [contained in Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism*, vol. 1, pp. 247–8] In 1927 the “United Opposition” was “[o]bjectively . . . a tool of the



*bourgeois elements.*” [quoted by Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 318]

One of the ways which supporters of Leninism seek to differentiate it from Stalinism is on the issue of repression within the Communist Party itself. However, the suppression of opposition currents within Bolshevism did not start under Stalinism, it had existed to some degree from the start. Ironically, Trotsky’s belated opposition faced exactly the same measures he had approved for use against groups like the “*Workers’ Opposition*” within a party regime he himself had helped create.

Of course, the Stalinists did not stop there. Once the “Left Opposition” was broken its members were brutally repressed. Some were simply murdered, many more arrested and placed into prison camps where many died. Which shows, in its own way, a key difference between Lenin’s and Stalin’s regime. Under Lenin, the opposition **outside** the party was brutally repressed. Stalin simply applied the methods used by Lenin outside the party to oppositions within it.

## 4 What do these oppositions tell us about the essence of Leninism?

The history and ideas of these oppositions are important in evaluating the claims of pro-Bolsheviks. If, as modern-day supporters of Bolshevism argue, Leninism is inherently democratic and that before the revolution it stood for basic civil liberties for the working class then we have to come to the conclusion that none of the party oppositions represented the “*true*” Leninist tradition. Given that many Trotskyists support the “*Left Opposition*” as the only “*real*” opposition to Stalin, defending the true essence of Bolshevism, we can only wonder what the “*real*” Bolshevik tradition is. After all, the “*Left Opposition*” wholeheartedly supported party dictatorship, remained silent on workers’ control and urged the speeding up of industrialisation to meet competition from the west.

However, there are groups which did raise more substantial critiques of mainstream Bolshevism. They raised their ideas between 1921 and 1923. How Lenin and Trotsky responded to them is significant. Rather than embrace them as expressing what the (according to Leninists) **really** stood for, they used state repression to break them and they were kicked out of the Communist Party. All with the approval of Lenin and Trotsky.

The only groups associated with the Bolshevik party which advocated democracy and freedom for working people were the dissidents of the “*Workers’ Truth*” and “*Workers’ Group*.” Material on both is hard to come by. The “*Workers’ Truth*”

group was labelled “Menshevik” by the ruling party while the “Workers’ Group” was dismissed as “anarcho-syndicalist.” Both were expelled from the party and their members arrested by the Bolsheviks. The latter group is better known than the former and so, by necessity, we will concentrate on that. It was also the largest, boldest and composed mainly of workers. We find them labelled the NEP the “New Exploitation of the Proletariat” and attacking, like the “Workers’ Opposition”, the “purely bureaucratic way” industry was run and urging “the direct participation of the working class” in it. However, unlike the “Workers’ Opposition”, the “Workers’ Group” extended their call for workers’ democracy to beyond the workplace and party. They wondered if the proletariat might not be “compelled once again to start anew the struggle . . . for the overthrow of the oligarchy.” They noted that ruling clique in the party “will tolerate no criticism, since it considers itself just as infallible as the Pope of Rome.” [quoted by E.H. Carr, *The Interregnum 1923–1924*, p. 82, p. 269]

The “Workers’ Group” is associated with the old worker Bolshevik G. T. Miasnikov, its founder and leading thinker (see Paul Avrich’s essay **Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers’ Group** for more details — any non-attributed quotes can be found in this essay). As Ante Ciliga recounted in his experiences of political debate in the prison camps in the late 1920s and early 1930s (ironically, there had always been more freedom of expression in prison than in Bolshevik society):

*“In the criticism of the Lenin of the revolutionary period the tone was set by . . . the Workers Group . . . [It was], in origin, from the Bolshevik old guard. But . . . they criticised Lenin’s course of action from the beginning, and not on details but as a whole. The Workers Opposition denounced Lenin’s economic line. The Workers Group went even farther and attacked the political regime and the single party established by Lenin prior to the NEP . . .*

*“Having put as the basis of its programme Marx’s watchword for the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 organisation of production, enunciated by Lenin in the initial period of the revolution’s decline. Against the Leninist line, they demanded organisation 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 country, 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. Contrary to . . . the majority*

*of the Workers' Opposition, for whom the demand for 'workers' democracy' was practically limited to the economic domain, and who tried to reconcile it with the 'single party,' the Workers Group extended its struggle for workers' democracy to the demand for the workers to choose among competing political parties of the worker milieu. Socialism could only be the work of free creation by the workers. While that which was being constructed by coercion, and given the name of socialism, was for them nothing but bureaucratic State capitalism from the very beginning."* [Op. Cit., pp. 277–8]

Years before, Miasnikov had exposed the abuses he has seen first hand under Lenin's regimed. In 1921, he stated the obvious that "[i]t stands to reason that workers' democracy presupposes not only the right to vote but also freedom of speech and press. If workers who govern the country, manage factories, do not have freedom of speech, we get a highly abnormal state." He urged total freedom of speech for all. He discussed corruption within the party, noting that 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." Furthermore, "[i]f one of the party rank and file dares to have an opinion of his own, he is looked upon as a heretic and people scoff at him saying, 'Wouldn't Ilyitch (Lenin) have come to this idea if it were timely now? So you are the only clever man around, eh, you want to be wiser than all? Ha, ha, ha! You want to be clever than Ilyitch!' This is the typical 'argumentation' of the honourable Communist fraternity." "Any one who ventures a critical opinion of his own," he noted, "will be labelled a Menshevik of Social-Revolutionist, with all the consequences that entails." [quoted by G. P. Maximoff, **The Guillotine at Work**, p. 269 and p. 268]

Lenin tried to reply to Miasnikov's demand for freedom of speech. Freedom of the press, Lenin argued, would, under existing circumstances, strengthen the forces of counter-revolution. Lenin rejected "freedom" in the abstract. Freedom for whom? he demanded. Under what conditions? For which class? "We do not believe in 'absolutes.' We laugh at 'pure democracy,'" he asserted. "Freedom of press in the RSFSR," Lenin maintained, "surrounded by bourgeois enemies everywhere means freedom for the bourgeoisie" and as "we do not want to commit suicide and that is why we will never do this" (i.e. introduce freedom of speech). According to Lenin, freedom of speech was a "non-party, anti-proletarian slogan" as well as a "flagrant political error." After sober reflection, Lenin hoped, Miasnikov would recognise his errors and return to useful party work.

Miasnikov was not convinced by Lenin's arguments. He drafted a strong reply. Reminding Lenin of his revolutionary credentials, he wrote: "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, who has been

*a party member in Russia and not abroad. I spent seven and a half of the eleven years of my party membership before 1917 in prisons and at hard labour, with a total of seventy-five days in hunger strikes. I was mercilessly beaten and subjected to other tortures . . . I escaped not abroad, but for party work here in Russia. To me one can grant at least a little freedom of press. Or is it that I must leave or be expelled from the party as soon as I disagree with you in the evaluation of social forces? Such simplified treatment evades but does not tackle our problems.*” [quoted by Maximoff, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 270–1] Lenin said, Miasnikov went on, that the jaws of the bourgeoisie must be cracked:

*“To break the jaws of international bourgeoisie, is all very well, but the trouble is that, you raise your hand against the bourgeoisie and you strike at the worker. Which class now supplies the greatest numbers of people arrested on charges of counter-revolution? Peasants and workers, to be sure. There is no Communist working class. There is just a working class pure and simple.”* [quoted by Maximoff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 271]

“Don’t you know,” he asked Lenin, *“that thousands of proletarians are kept in prison because they talked the way I am talking now, and that bourgeois people are not arrested on this source for the simple reason that they are never concerned with these questions? If I am still at large, that is so because of my standing as a Communist. I have suffered for my Communist views; moreover, I am known by the workers; were it not for these facts, were I just an ordinary Communist mechanic from the same factory, where would I be now? In the Che-Ka [prison] . . . Once more I say: you raise your hand against the bourgeoisie, but it is I who am spitting blood, and it is we, the workers, whose jaws are being cracked.”* [quoted by Maximoff, *Ibid.*]

After engaging in political activity in his home area, Miasnikov was summoned to Moscow and placed under the control of the Central Committee. In defiance of the Central Committee, he returned to the Urals and resumed his agitation. At the end of August he appeared before a general meeting of Motovilikha party members and succeeded in winning them over to his side. Adopting a resolution against the Orgburo’s censure of Miasnikov, they branded his transfer to Moscow a form of “*banishment*” and demanded that he be allowed “*full freedom of speech and press within the party.*”

On November 25 he wrote to a sympathiser in Petrograd urging a campaign of agitation in preparation for the 11<sup>th</sup> party congress. By now Miasnikov was being watched by the Cheka, and his letter was intercepted. For Lenin, this was the last straw: “*We must devote greater attention to Miasnikov’s agitation,*” he wrote to Molotov on December 5, “*and to report on it to the Politburo twice a month.*” To deal with Miasnikov, meanwhile, the Orgburo formed a new commission. This

commission recommended his expulsion from the party, which was agreed by the Politburo on February 20, 1922. This was the first instance, except for the brief expulsion of S. A. Lozovsky in 1918, where Lenin actually expelled a well-known Bolshevik of long standing.

By the start of 1923, he had organised a clandestine opposition and formed (despite his expulsion) the “*Workers’ Group of the Russian Communist Party.*” He claimed that it, and not the Bolshevik leadership, represented the authentic voice of the proletariat. Joining hands in the venture were P. B. Moiseev, a Bolshevik since 1914, and N. V. Kuznetsov, the former Workers’ Oppositionist. The three men, all workers, constituted themselves as the “*Provisional Central Organisational Bureau*” of the group. Their first act, in February 1923, was to draw up a statement of principles in anticipation of the Twelfth Party Congress called the “*Manifesto of the Workers’ Group of the Russian Communist Party.*” The manifesto was “*denouncing the New Exploitation of the Proletariat and urging the workers to fight for soviet democracy,*” according to Trotskyist historian I. Deutscher. [**The Prophet Unarmed**, p.107]

The manifesto recapitulated the program of Miasnikov’s earlier writings: workers’ self-determination and self-management, the removal of bourgeois specialists from positions of authority, freedom of discussion within the party, and the election of new soviets centred in the factories. It protested against administrative high-handedness, the expanding bureaucracy, the predominance of non-workers within the party, and the suppression of local initiative and debate. The manifesto denounced the New Economic Policy (NEP) as the “*New Exploitation of the Proletariat.*” In spite of the abolition of private ownership, the worst features of capitalism had been preserved: wage slavery, differences of income and status, hierarchical authority, bureaucratism. In the words of the manifesto, the “*organisation of this industry since the Ninth Congress of the RCP(b) is carried out without the direct participation of the working class by nominations in a purely bureaucratic way.*” [quoted by Daniels, **Op. Cit.**, p. 204]

The manifesto wondered whether the Russian proletariat might not be compelled “*to start anew the struggle — and perhaps a bloody one — for the overthrow of the oligarchy.*” Not that it contemplated an immediate insurrection. Rather it sought to rally the workers, Communist and non-Communist alike, to press for the elimination of bureaucratism and the revival of proletarian democracy. Within the party the manifesto defended the right to form factions and draw up platforms. “*If criticism does not have a distinct point of view,*” Miasnikov wrote to Zinoviev, “*a platform on which to rally a majority of party members, on which to develop a new policy with regard to this or that question, then it is not really criticism but a mere collection of words, nothing but chatter.*” He went even further, calling into question the very Bolshevik monopoly of power. Under a single-party

dictatorship, he argued, elections remained “*an empty formality.*” To speak of “*workers’ democracy*” while insisting on one-party government, he told Zinoviev, was to entwine oneself in a contradiction, a “*contradiction in terms.*”

Miasnikov was arrested by the GPU (the new name for the Cheka) on May 25, 1923, a month after the Twelfth Party Congress (the rest of the group’s leadership was soon to follow). Miasnikov was released from custody and permitted to leave the country and left for Germany (this was a device not infrequently used by the authorities to rid themselves of dissenters). In Berlin he formed ties with the council communists of the German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD) and with the left wing of the German Communist Party. With the aid of these groups, Miasnikov was able to publish the manifesto of the Workers’ Group, prefaced by an appeal drafted by his associates in Moscow. The appeal concluded with a set of slogans proclaiming the aims of the Workers’ Group: “*The strength of the working class lies in its solidarity. Long live freedom of speech and press for the proletarians! Long live Soviet Power! Long live Proletarian Democracy! Long live Communism!*”

Inside Russia the manifesto was having its effect. Fresh recruits were drawn into the Workers’ Group. It established ties with discontented workers in several cities and began negotiations with leaders of the now defunct Workers’ Opposition. The group won support within the Red Army garrison quartered in the Kremlin, a company of which had to be transferred to Smolensk. By summer of 1923 the group had some 300 members in Moscow, as well as a sprinkling of adherents in other cities. Many were Old Bolsheviks, and all, or nearly all, were workers. Soon an unexpected opportunity for the group to extend its influence arrived. In August and September 1923 a wave of strikes (which recalled the events of February 1921) swept Russia’s industrial centres. An economic crisis (named the “*scissors’ crisis*”) had been deepening since the beginning of the year, bringing cuts in wages and the dismissal of large numbers of workers. The resulting strikes, which broke out in Moscow and other cities, were spontaneous and no evidence existed to connect them with any oppositionist faction. The Workers’ Group, however, sought to take advantage of the unrest to oppose the party leadership. Stepping up its agitation, it considered calling a one-day general strike and organising a mass demonstration of workers, on the lines of Bloody Sunday 1905, with a portrait of Lenin (rather than the Tzar!) at the lead.

The authorities became alarmed. The Central Committee branded the Workers’ Group as “*anti-Communist and anti-Soviet*” and ordered the GPU to suppress it. By the end of September its meeting places had been raided, literature seized, and leaders arrested. Twelve members were expelled from the party and fourteen others received reprimands. As one Trotskyist historian put it, the “*party leaders*” were “*determined to suppress the Workers’ Group and the Workers’ Truth.*” [I. Deutscher, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108] Miasnikov was considered such a threat that in the

autumn of 1923 he was lured back to Russia on assurances from Zinoviev and Krestinsky, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, that he would not be molested. Once in Russia he was immediately placed behind bars. The arrest was carried out by Dzerzhinsky himself (the infamous creator and head of the Cheka), a token of the gravity with which the government viewed the case.

This response is significant, simply because Trotsky was still an influential member of the Communist Party leadership. As Paul Avrich points out, “[i]n January 1924, Lenin died. By then the Workers’ Group had been silenced. It was the last dissident movement within the party to be liquidated while Lenin was still alive. It was also the last rank-and-file group to be smashed with the blessing of all the top Soviet leaders, who now began their struggle for Lenin’s mantle.” [Bolshevik Opposition To Lenin: G. Miasnikov and the Workers Group]

The response of Trotsky is particularly important, given that for most modern day Leninists he raised the banner of “authentic” Leninism against the obvious evils of Stalinism. What was his reaction to the state repression of the Workers’ Group? As Deutscher notes, Trotsky “*did not protest when their adherents were thrown into prison . . . Nor was he inclined to countenance industrial unrest . . . Nor was he at all eager to support the demand for Soviet democracy in the extreme form in which the Workers’ Opposition and its splinter groups [like the Workers’ Group] had raised it.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 108–9] Dzerzhinsky was given the task of breaking the opposition groups by the central committee. He “*found that even party members of unquestioned loyalty regarded them as comrades and refused to testify against them. He then turned to the Politburo and asked it to declare it was the duty of any party member to denounce to the GPU people inside the party engaged aggressive action against the official leaders.*” Trotsky “*did not tell the Politburo plainly that it should reject Dzerzhinsky’s demand. He evaded the question.*” [Op. Cit., p. 108 and p. 109]

Trotskyist Tony Cliff presents a similar picture of Trotsky’s lack of concern for opposition groups and his utter failure to support working class self-activity or calls for real democracy. He notes that in July and August 1923 Moscow and Petrograd “*were shaken by industrial unrest . . . Unofficial strikes broke out in many places . . . In November 1923, rumours of a general strike circulated throughout Moscow, and the movement seems at the point of turning into a political revolt. Not since the Kronstadt rising of 1921 had there been so much tension in the working class and so much alarm in the ruling circles.*” The ruling elite, including Trotsky, acted to maintain their position and the secret police turned on any political group which could influence the movement. The “*strike wave gave a new lease of life to the Mensheviks*” and so “*the GPU carried out a massive round up of Mensheviks, and as many as one thousand were arrested in Moscow alone.*” When it was the turn of the Workers Group and Workers Truth, Trotsky “*did not condemn their*

persecution” and he “did not support their incitement of workers to industrial unrest.” Moreover, “[n]or was Trotsky ready to support the demand for workers’ democracy in the extreme form to which the Workers Group and Workers Truth raised it.” [Trotsky, vol. 3, p. 25, p. 26 and pp. 26–7]

By “extreme,” Cliff obviously means “genuine” as Trotsky did not call for workers’ democracy in any meaningful form. Indeed, his “New Course Resolution” even went so far as to say that “it is obvious that there can be no toleration of the formation of groupings whose ideological content is directed against the party as a whole and against the dictatorship of the proletariat. as for instance the Workers’ Truth and Workers’ Group.” Trotsky himself was at pains to distance himself from Myainikov. [The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25), p. 408 and p. 80] The resolution made it clear that it considered “the dictatorship of the proletariat” to be incompatible with real workers democracy by arguing “it is impossible to tolerate groupings, the ideological contents of which are directed against the party as a whole and against the dictatorship of the proletariat (such as, for example, the ‘Workers’ Truth’ and the ‘Workers’ Group’).” [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, Op. Cit., p. 222] Given that both these groups advocated actual soviet and trade union democracy, the Politburo was simply indicating that actual “workers’ democracy” was “against” the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e. the dictatorship of the party).

Thus we come to the strange fact that it was Lenin and Trotsky themselves who knowingly destroyed the groups which represent what modern day Leninists assert is the “real” essence of Leninism. Furthermore, modern day Leninists generally ignore these opposition groups when they discuss alternatives to Stalinism or the bureaucratisation under Lenin. This seems a strange fate to befall tendencies which, if we take Leninists at their word, expressed what their tradition stands for. Equally, in spite of their support for party dictatorship, the “Workers’ Opposition” did have some constructive suggests to make as regards combating the economic bureaucratisation which existed under Lenin. Yet almost all modern Leninists (like Lenin and Trotsky) dismiss them as “syndicalist” and utopian. Which is, of course, significant about the real essence of Leninism.

Ultimately, the nature of the various oppositions within the party and the fate of such real dissidents as the “Workers’ Group” says far more about the real reasons the Russian revolution than most Trotskyist books on the matter. Little wonder there is so much silence and distortion about these events. They prove that the “essence” of Bolshevism is not a democratic one but rather a deeply authoritarian one hidden (at times) behind libertarian sounding rhetoric. Faced with opposition which were somewhat libertarian, the response of Lenin and Trotsky was to repress them. In summary, they show that the problems of the revolution and subsequent civil war did not create but rather revealed Bolshevism’s authoritarian core.



## Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?

The key Leninist defence of the actions of the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution is that they had no other choice. Complaints against the Bolshevik attacks on the gains of the revolution and the pro-revolutionary Left in Russia are met with a mantra involving the white terror, the primitive state of Russia and the reactionary peasantry, the invading imperialist armies (although the actual number can, and does, vary depending on who you are talking to) and other such “*forces of nature*” which we are to believe could only be met by a centralised authoritarian regime that would flinch at nothing in order to survive.

However, this is not the case. This is for three reasons.

Firstly, there is the slight problem that many of the attacks on the revolution (disbanding soviets, undermining the factory committees, repressing socialists and anarchists, and so on) started **before** the start of the civil war. As such, its difficult to blame the degeneration of the revolution on an event which had yet to happen (see section 3 of the appendix “What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?” for details).

Secondly, Leninists like to portray their ideology as “realistic,” that it recognises the problems facing a revolution and can provide the necessary solutions. Some even claim, flying in the face of the facts, that anarchists think the ruling class will just “*disappear*” (see section H.2.1 ) or that we think “*full-blown*” communism will appear “*overnight*” (see section H.2.5). Only Bolshevism, it is claimed, recognises that civil war is inevitable during a revolution and only it provides the necessary solution, namely a “*workers state*.” Lenin himself argued that “[n]ot a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war. No one who does not live in a shell could imagine that civil war is conceivable without exceptionally complicated circumstances.” [Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?, p. 81] As such, its incredulous that modern day followers of Lenin blame the degeneration of the Russian Revolution on the very factors (civil war and exceptional circumstances) that they claim to recognise an inevitable!

Thirdly, and even more embarrassingly for the Leninists, numerous examples exist both from revolutionary Russia at the time and from earlier and later revolutions that suggest far from Bolshevik tactics being the most efficient way of defending the revolution other methods existed which looked to the massive creative energies of the working masses unleashed by the revolution.

During the Russian Revolution the biggest example of this is found in South-Eastern Ukraine. For much of the Civil War this area operated without a centralised state apparatus of the Bolshevik type and was, instead, based on the anarchist idea of Free Soviets. There “*the insurgents raised the black flag of anarchism and set forth on the anti-authoritarian road of the free organisation of the workers.*” [Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 50] The space in which this happened was created by a partisan force that instead of using the “*efficiency*” of executions for desertion, tsarist officers appointed over the rank and file soldiers’ wishes and saluting so loved by the Bolsheviks instead operated as a volunteer army with elected officers and voluntary discipline. This movement was the Makhnovists, named after its leader, the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno. The Black Flag which floated over the lead wagon of the Insurgent Army was inscribed with the slogans “*Liberty or Death*” and “*The Land to the Peasants, the Factories to the Workers.*” These slogans summarised what the Makhnovist were fighting for – a libertarian socialist society. At its height in the autumn of 1919, the Makhnovists numbered around 40,000 and its extended area of influence corresponded to nearly one third of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, comprising a population of over seven million.

It is this that explains the importance of the Makhnovists. As historian Christopher Reed notes, the “*Bolsheviks’ main claim to legitimacy rested on the argument that they were the only ones capable of preventing a similar disaster [counter-revolution] for the workers and peasants of Russia and that their harsh methods were necessary in the face of a ruthless and unrelenting enemy.*” However, Reed argues that “*the Makhno movement in the Ukraine suggests that there was more than one way to fight against the counter-revolution.*” [From **Tsar to Soviets**, pp. 258–9] This is why the Makhnovist movement is so important, why it shows that there was, and is, an alternative to the ideas of Bolshevism. Here we have a mass movement operating in the same “*exceptional circumstances*” as the Bolsheviks which did **not** implement the same policies. Indeed, rather than suppress soviet, workplace and military democracy in favour of centralised, top-down party power and modify their political line to justify their implementation of party dictatorship, the Makhnovists did all they could to implement and encourage working-class self-government.

As such, it is difficult to blame the development of Bolshevik policies towards state-capitalist and party-dictatorship directions on the problems caused during the revolution when the Makhnovists, facing similar conditions, did all they could to protect working-class autonomy and freedom. Indeed, it could be argued that the problems facing the Makhnovists were greater in many ways. The Ukraine probably saw more fighting in the Russian Civil War than any other area. Unlike the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists lost the centre of their movement and had to

re-liberate it. To do so they fought the Austrian and German armies, Ukrainian Nationalists, Bolsheviks and the White Armies of Denikin and then Wrangel. There were smaller skirmishes involving Cossacks returning to the Don and independent “Green” bands. The anarchists fought all these various armies over the four years their movement was in existence. This war was not only bloody but saw constant shifts of fronts, advances and retreats and changes from near conventional war to mobile partisan war. The consequences of this was that no area of the territory was a safe “rear” area for any period of time and so little constructive activity was possible. Section 4 presents a summary of the military campaigns of these years. A brief idea of the depth of fighting in these years can be seen by considering the town at the centre of the Makhnovists, Hulyai Pole which changed hands no less than 16 times in the period from 1917–1921.

Clearly, in terms of conflict (and the resulting disruption caused by it), the Makhnovists did not have the relative peace the Bolsheviks had (who never once lost their main bases of Petrograd or Moscow, although they came close). As such, the problems used to justify the repressive and dictatorial policies of the Bolsheviks also apply to the Makhnovists. Despite this, the activity of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine demonstrated that an alternative to the supposedly necessary methods of the Bolsheviks did exist. Where the Bolsheviks suppressed freedom of speech, assembly and press, the Makhnovists encouraged it. Where the Bolsheviks turned the soviets into mere cyphers of their government and undermined soviet power, the Makhnovists encouraged working-class participation and free soviets. As we discuss in section 7, the Makhnovists applied their ideas of working class self-management whenever and wherever they could.

Sadly, the Makhnovist movement is a relatively unknown event during the revolution. There are few non-anarchist accounts of it and the few histories which do mention it often simply slander it. However, as the Cohn-Bendit brothers correctly argue, the movement, “*better perhaps than any other movement, shows that the Russian Revolution could have been a great liberating force.*” Equally, the reason why it has been almost totally ignored (or slandered, when mentioned) by Stalinist and Trotskyist writers is simple: “*It shows the Bolsheviks stifling workers and peasants with lies and calumnies, and then crushing them in a bloody massacre.*” [Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, **Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative**, p. 200]

This section of our FAQ will indicate the nature and history of this important social movement. As we will prove, “*the Makhnovshchina . . . was a true popular movement of peasants and workers, and . . . its essential goal was to establish the freedom of workers by means of revolutionary self-activity on the part of the masses.*” [Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 209] They achieved this goal in extremely difficult circumstances and resisted all attempts to limit the

freedom of the working class, no matter where it came from. As Makhno himself once noted:

*“Our practice in the Ukraine showed clearly that the peasant problem had very different solutions from those imposed by Bolshevism. If our experience had spread to the rest of Russia, a pernicious division between country and city would not have been created. Years of famine would have been avoided and useless struggles between peasant and workers. And what is more important, the revolution would have grown and developed along very different lines . . . We were all fighters and workers. The popular assembly made the decisions. In military life it was the War Committee composed of delegates of all the guerrilla detachments which acted. To sum up, everyone took part in the collective work, to prevent the birth of a managing class which would monopolise power. And we were successful. Because we had succeeded and gave lie to Bolshevik bureaucratic practices, Trotsky, betraying the treaty between the Ukraine and the Bolshevik authorities, sent the Red Army to fight us. Bolshevism triumphed militarily over the Ukraine and at Kronstadt, but revolutionary history will acclaim us one day and condemn the victors as counter-revolutionary grave-diggers of the Russian Revolution.”* [quoted by Abel Paz, **Durruti: The People Armed**, p. 88–9]

Two distinct aspects of the anarchist movement existed in the Ukraine at this time, a political and non-military structure called the Nabat (Alarm) federation which operated through the soviets and collectives and a military command structure usually known after its commander Nestor Makhno as the ***Makhnovshchina*** (which means the “*Makhno movement*”) although its proper name was the ***Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine***. This section of the FAQ will cover both, although the *Makhnovshchina* will be the main focus.

For more information on the Makhnovist movement, consult the following books. Anarchist accounts of the movement can be found in Peter Arshinov’s excellent **The History of the Makhnovist Movement** and Voline’s **The Unknown Revolution** (Voline’s work is based on extensive quotes from Arshinov’s work, but does contain useful additional material). For non-anarchist accounts, Michael Malet’s **Nestor Makhno in the Russian Revolution** is essential reading as it contains useful information on both the history of the movement, its social basis and political ideas. Malet considers his work as a supplement to Michael Palij’s **The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918–1921** which is primarily a military account of the movement but which does cover some of its social and political aspects. Unfortunately, both books are rare. Paul Avrich’s **The Russian Anarchists** contains a short account of the movement and his **Anarchist Portraits** has a

chapter on Nestor Makhno. Makhnovist source material is included in Avrich's **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**. Daniel Guerin includes a section on Makhno and the Makhnovist Movement in volume 2 of **No Gods, No Masters**. As well as extracts from Arshinov's book, it has various manifestos from the movement as well as Makhno's account of his meeting with Lenin. Christopher Read's **From Tsar to Soviets** has an excellent section on the Makhnovists. Serge Cipko presents an excellent overview of works on the Makhnovists in his "*Nestor Makhno: A Mini-Historiography of the Anarchist Revolution in Ukraine, 1917–1921*" (**The Raven**, no. 13). Alexander Skirda presents an overview of perestroika soviet accounts of Makhno in his essay "*The Rehabilitation of Makhno*" (**The Raven**, no. 8). Skirda's biography **Nestor Makhno: Le Cosaque de l'anarchie** is by far the best account of the movement available.

Lastly, a few words on names. There is a large variation on the spelling of names within the source material. For example, Makhno's home town has been translated as Gulyai Pole, Gulyai Polye Huliai-Pole and Hulyai Pole. Similarly, with other place names. The bandit Grigor'ev has been also translated as Hryhor'iv and Hryhoriyiv. We generally take Michael Malet's translations of names as a basis (i.e. we use Hulyai Pole and Hryhoriyiv, for example).

## 1 Who was Nestor Makhno?

The Makhnovist movement was named after Nestor Makhno, a Ukrainian anarchist who played a key role in the movement from the start. Indeed, Makhnoshchina literally means "*Makhno movement*" and his name is forever linked with the revolution in the South-East of the Ukraine. So who was Makhno?

Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October, 1889 in Hulyai Pole, which is situated in Katerynoslav province, in the south east of the Ukraine between the Dnieper River and the Sea of Azov. While it seems to be conventional for many historians to call Hulyai Pole a "village," it was in fact a town with a population of about 30,000 and boasted several factories and schools.

Makhno was the son of a poor peasant family. His father died when he was ten months old, leaving him and his four brothers in the care of their mother. Due to the extreme poverty of his family, he had to start work as a shepherd at the age of seven. At eight he started to attend the Second Hulyai Pole primary school in winter and worked for local landlords during the summer. He left school when he was twelve and took up full-time employment as a farmhand on the estates of nobles and on the farms of the German colonist **kulaks**. At the age of seventeen, he started to work in Hulyai Pole itself, first as an apprentice painter, then as an

unskilled worker in a local iron foundry and, finally, as a founder in the same establishment.

It was when he was working in the iron foundry that he became involved in revolutionary politics. In the stormy years following the 1905 revolution, Makhno got involved in revolutionary politics. This decision was based on his experiences of injustice at work and seeing the terror of the Russian regime during the 1905 events (in Hulyai Pole there had been no serious disorder, yet the regime sent a detachment of mounted police to suppress gatherings and meetings in the town, terrorising the population by whipping those caught in the streets and beating prisoners with rifle butts). In 1906, Makhno decided to join the anarchist group in Hulyai Pole (which had been formed the previous year and consisted mainly of sons of poorer peasants).

At the end of 1906 and in 1907, Makhno was arrested and accused of political assassinations, but was released due to lack of evidence. In 1908, due to the denunciation of a police spy within the anarchist group, he was arrested and put in jail. In March, 1910, Makhno and thirteen others were tried by a military court and sentenced to death by hanging. Due to his youth and the efforts of his mother, the death penalty was commuted to life imprisonment with hard labour. He served his time at the Butyrki prison in Moscow, resisting the prison authorities by every means available to him. Due to this resistance, he spent much of his time in chains or in damp and freezing confinement. This experience ensured that Makhno developed an intense hatred of prisons (later, during the revolution, his first act in entering a town or city was to release all prisoners and destroy the prison).

It was during his time in Butyrki that Makhno met Peter Arshinov, a fellow anarchist prisoner and later activist and historian of the Makhnovist movement. Arshinov was born in 1887 in the Ukrainian industrial town of Katerinoslav. His father was a factory worker and he was a metal worker. Originally a Bolshevik, he had become an anarchist in 1906, taking a leading part in organising factory workers and actions against the regime. In 1907 he was arrested and sentenced to death, escaping to Western Europe. In 1909, he returned to Russia and was again arrested and again escaped. In 1910, he was arrested and placed in the Butyrki prison where he met Makhno. The two anarchists established a close personal and political friendship, with Arshinov helping Makhno develop and deepen his anarchist ideas.

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917, after eight years and eight months in prison, Makhno was released along with all other political prisoners as a result of the February Revolution. After spending three weeks in Moscow with the Moscow anarchists, Makhno returned to Hulyai Pole. As the only political prisoner who was returned to his family by the revolution, Makhno became very well-respected in his home

town. After years of imprisonment, suffering but learning, Makhno was no longer an inexperienced young activist, but a tested anarchist militant with both a powerful will and strong ideas about social conflict and revolutionary politics. Ideas which he immediately set about applying.

Once home in Hulyai Pole, Makhno immediately devoted himself to revolutionary work. Unsurprisingly, the remaining members of the anarchist group, as well as many peasants, came to visit him. After discussing ideas with them, Makhno proposed beginning organisational work immediately in order to strengthen links between the peasants in Hulyai Pole and its region with the anarchist group. On March 28–29, a Peasant Union was created with Makhno as its chairman. Subsequently, he organised similar unions in other villages and towns in the area. Makhno also played a large part in a successful strike by wood and metal workers at a factory owned by his old boss (this defeat led to the other bosses capitulating to the workers as well). At the same time, peasants refused to pay their rent to the landlords. [Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War*, p. 4] Regional assemblies of peasants were called, both at Hulyai Pole and elsewhere, and on August 5–7, the provincial congress at Katerinoslav decided to reorganise the Peasant Unions into Soviets of Peasants' and Workers' Deputies.

In this way, *“Makhno and his associates brought socio-political issues into the daily life of the people, who in turn supported his efforts, hoping to expedite the expropriation of large estates.”* [Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, p. 71] In Hulyai Pole, the revolution was moving faster than elsewhere (for example, while the Aleksandrovsk soviet supported the actions of the Provisional Government during the July days in Petrograd, a meeting in Hulyai Pole saluted the rebellious soldiers and workers). Peasants were drawn to Hulyai Pole for advice and help from the neighbouring *volosts* (administrative districts). The peasantry wanted to seize the land of the large landowners and the kulaks (rich peasants). Makhno presented this demand at the first sessions of the regional Soviet, which were held in Hulyai Pole. In August, Makhno called all the local landlords and rich peasants (kulaks) together and all documents concerning ownership (of land, livestock and equipment) were taken from them. An inventory of this property was taken and reported to the session of the local soviet and then at a regional meeting. It was agreed that all land, livestock and equipment was to be divided equally, the division to include the former owners. This was the core of the agrarian program of the movement, namely the liquidation of the property of the landowners and kulaks. No-one could own more land than they could work with their own labour. All this was in flat defiance to the Provisional Government which was insisting that all such questions be left to the Constituent Assembly. Free communes were also created on ex-landlord estates.

Unsurprisingly, the implementation of these decisions was delayed because of the opposition of the landlords and kulaks, who organised themselves and appealed to the provisional authorities. When General Kornilov tried to march on Petrograd and take power, the Hulyai Pole soviet took the initiative and formed a local “*Committee for the Salvation of the Revolution*” headed by Makhno. The real aim was to disarm the potential local enemy – the landlords, bourgeoisie, and kulaks – as well as to expropriate their ownership of the people’s wealth: the land, factories, plants, printing shops, theatres and so on. On 25 September a volost congress of Soviets and peasant organisations in Hulyai Pole proclaimed the confiscation of the landowners’ land and its transformation into social property. Raids on the estates of landlords and rich peasants, including German colonists, began and the expropriation of the expropriators began.

Makhno’s activities came to a halt the following spring when Lenin’s government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This treaty gave sizeable parts of the Russian Empire, including the Ukraine, to Germany and Austria in return for peace. The Treaty also saw the invasion of the Ukraine by large numbers of German and Austrian troops, who conquered the entire country in less than three months. Makhno succeeded in forming several military units, consisting of 1700 men, but could not stop Hulyai Pole being taken. After an anarchist congress at the end of April in Taganrog, it was decided to organise small combat units of five to ten peasants and workers, to collect arms from the enemy and to prepare for a general peasant uprising against the Austro-German troops and, finally, to send a small group to Soviet Russia to see at first hand what was happening there to both the revolution and to the anarchists under Bolshevik rule. Makhno was part of that group.

By June, Makhno had arrived in Moscow. He immediately visited a number of Russian anarchists (including his old friend Peter Arshinov). The anarchist movement in Moscow was cowed, due to a Cheka raid in April which broke the backbone of the movement, so ending a political threat to the Bolsheviks from the left. To Makhno, coming from an area where freedom of speech and organisation was taken for granted, the low level of activity came as a shock. He regarded Moscow as the capital of the “*paper revolution*,” whose red tape and meaninglessness had affected even the anarchists. Makhno also visited Peter Kropotkin, asking his advice on revolutionary work and the situation in the Ukraine. To Makhno, “*Moscow appeared as ‘the capital of the Paper Revolution,’ a vast factory turning out empty resolutions and slogans while one political party, by means of force and fraud, elevated itself into the position of a ruling class.*” [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 252]

While in Moscow, Makhno met with Lenin. This meeting came about by chance. Visiting the Kremlin to obtain a permit for free board and lodging, he met the



chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets, Jakov M. Sverdloy, who arranged for Makhno to meet Lenin. Lenin asked Makhno, “How did the peasants of your region understand the slogan ALL POWER TO THE SOVIETS IN THE VILLAGES?” Makhno states that Lenin “was astonished” at his reply:

*“The peasants understood this slogan in their own way. According to their interpretation, all power, in all areas of life, must be identified with the consciousness and will of the working people. The peasants understand that the soviets of workers and peasants of village, country and district are neither more nor less than the means of revolutionary organisation and economic self-management of working people in the struggle against the bourgeoisie and its lackeys, the Right socialists and their coalition government.”*

To this Lenin replied: “Well, then, the peasants of your region are infected with anarchism!” [Nestor Makhno, *My Visit to the Kremlin*, p. 18] Later in the interview, Lenin stated: “Do the anarchists ever recognise their lack of realism in present-day life? Why, they don’t even think of it.” Makhno replied:

*“But I must tell you, comrade Lenin, that your assertion that the anarchists don’t understand ‘the present’ realistically, that they have no real connection with it and so forth, is fundamentally mistaken. The anarchist-communists in the Ukraine . . . the anarchist-communists, I say, have already given many proofs that they are firmly planted in ‘the present.’ The whole struggle of the revolutionary Ukrainian countryside against the Central Rada has been carried out under the ideological guidance of the anarchist-communists and also in part by the Socialist Revolutionaries . . . Your Bolsheviks have scarcely any presence in our villages. Where they have penetrated, their influence is minimal. Almost all the communes or peasant associations in the Ukraine were formed at the instigation of the anarchist-communists. The armed struggle of the working people against the counter-revolution in general and the Austro-German invasion in particular has been undertaken with the ideological and organic guidance of the anarchist-communists exclusively.*

*“Certainly it is not in your party’s interest to give us credit for all this, but these are the facts and you can’t dispute them. You know perfectly well, I assume, the effective force and the fighting capacity of the free, revolutionary forces of the Ukraine. It is not without reason that you have evoked the courage with which they have heroically defended the common revolutionary conquests. Among them, at least one half have fought under the anarchist banner. . .*

*“All this shows how mistaken you are, comrade Lenin, in alleging that we, the anarchist-communists, don’t have our feet on the ground, that our attitude*

*towards 'the present' is deplorable and that we are too fond of dreaming about the future. What I have said to you in the course of this interview cannot be questioned because it is the truth. The account which I have made to you contradicts the conclusions you expressed about us. Everyone can see we are firmly planted in 'the present,' that we are working and searching for the means to bring about the future we desire, and that we are in fact dealing very seriously with this problem."*

Lenin replied: "*Perhaps I am mistaken.*" [Makhno, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 24–5]

The Bolsheviks helped Makhno to return to the Ukraine. The trip was accomplished with great difficulty. Once Makhno was almost killed. He was arrested by Austro-German troops and was carrying libertarian pamphlets at the time. A Jewish inhabitant of Hulyai Pole, who had known Makhno for some time, succeeded in saving him by paying a considerable sum of money for his liberation. Once back in Hulyai-Pole, he started to organise resistance to the occupying forces of the Austro-Germans and their puppet regime led by Hetman Skoropadsky. With the resistance, the Makhno movement can be said to have arisen (see section 3 on way it was named after Makhno). From July 1918 to August 1921, Makhno led the struggle for working class freedom against all oppressors, whether Bolshevik, White or Nationalist. During the course of this struggle, he proved himself to be "*a guerrilla leader of quite outstanding ability.*" [David Footman, **Civil War in Russia**, p. 245] The military history of this movement is discussed in section 4, while other aspects of the movement are discussed in other sections.

After the defeat of the Makhnovist movement in 1921, Makhno was exiled in Western Europe. In 1925 he ended up in Paris, where he lived for the rest of his life. While there, he remained active in the anarchist movement, with the pen replacing the sabre (to use Alexander Skirda's colourful expression). Makhno contributed articles to various anarchist journals and in particular to **Delo Truda**, an anarchist-communist paper started in Paris by Peter Arshinov (many of these articles have been published in the book **The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays**). He remained active in the anarchist movement to the end.

In Paris, Makhno met the famous Spanish anarchists Buenaventura Durruti and Francisco Ascaso in 1927. He argued that in Spain "*conditions for a revolution with a strong anarchist content are better than in Russia*" because not only was there "*a proletariat and a peasantry with a revolutionary tradition whose political maturity is shown in its reactions,*" the Spanish anarchists had "*a sense of organisation which we lacked in Russia. It is organisation which assures the success in depth of all revolutions.*" Makhno recounted the activities of the Hulyai Pole anarchist group and the events in revolutionary Ukraine:

*“Our agrarian commune was at once the economic and political vital centre of our social system. These communities were not based on individual egoism but rested on principles of communal, local and regional solidarity. In the same way that the members of a community felt solidarity among themselves, the communities were federated with each other . . . It is said against our system that in the Ukraine, that it was able to last because it was based only on peasant foundations. It isn’t true. Our communities were mixed, agricultural-industrial, and, even, some of them were only industrial. We were all fighters and workers. The popular assembly made the decisions. In military life it was the War Committee composed of delegates of all the guerrilla detachments which acted. To sum up, everyone took part in the collective work, to prevent the birth of a managing class which would monopolise power. And we were successful.” [quoted by Abel Paz, **Durruti: The People Armed**, p. 88–9]*

As can be seen from the social revolution in Aragon, Durruti took Makhno’s advice seriously (see section I.8 for more on the Spanish Revolution). Unsurprisingly, in 1936 a number of veterans of Makhno’s Insurgent Army went to fight in the Durruti column. Sadly, Makhno’s death in 1934 prevented his own concluding statement to the two Spaniards: *“Makhno has never refused to fight. If I am alive when you start your struggle, I will be with you.”* [quoted by Paz, **Op. Cit.**, p. 90]

Makhno’s most famous activity in exile was his association with, and defence of, the **Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists** (known as the *“Platform”*). As discussed in section J.3.3, the Platform was an attempt to analyse what had gone wrong in the Russian Revolution and suggested a much tighter anarchist organisation in future. This idea provoked intense debate after its publication, with the majority of anarchists rejecting it (for Makhno’s discussion with Malatesta on this issue, see **The Anarchist Revolution** published by Freedom Press). This debate often resulted in bitter polemics and left Makhno somewhat isolated as some of his friends, like Voline, opposed the Platform. However, he remained an anarchist to his death in 1934.

Makhno died on the morning of July 25<sup>th</sup> and was cremated three days later and his ashes placed in an urn within Pere Lachaise, the cemetery of the Paris Commune. Five hundred Russian, French, Spanish and Italian comrades attended the funeral, at which the French anarchist Benar and Voline spoke (Voline used the occasion to refute Bolshevik allegations of anti-Semitism). Makhno’s wife, Halyna, was too overcome to speak.

So ended the life of one great fighters for working-class freedom. Little wonder Durruti’s words to Makhno:

*“We have come to salute you, the symbol of all those revolutionaries who struggled for the realisation of Anarchist ideas in Russia. We also come to pay our respects to the rich experience of the Ukraine.”* [quoted by Abel Paz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88]

For fuller details of Makhno’s life, see the accounts by Peter Arshinov (**The History of the Makhnovist Movement**), Paul Avrich (*“Nestor Makhno: The Man and the Myth,”* in **Anarchist Portraits**), Michael Paliy, (**The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno**) and Michael Malet (**Nestor Makhno in the Russian Revolution**).

## 2 Why was the movement named after Makhno?

Officially, the Makhnovist movement was called the **Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of the Ukraine**. In practice, it was usually called the *“Makhno movement”* (*“Makhnovshchina”* in Russian) or the Makhnovists. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky placed great significance on this:

*“The anti-popular character of the Makhno movement is most clearly revealed in the fact that the army of Hulyai Pole is actually called ‘Makhno’s Army’. **There, armed men are united not around a programme, not around an ideological banner, but around a man.**”* [The Makhno Movement]

Ignoring the irony of a self-proclaimed Marxist (and later Leninist and founder of Trotskyism!) making such a comment, we can only indicate why the Makhnovists called themselves by that name:

*“Because, first, in the terrible days of reaction in the Ukraine, we saw in our ranks an unfailing friend and leader, MAKHNO, whose voice of protest against any kind of coercion of the working people rang out in all the Ukraine, calling for a battle against all oppressors, pillagers and political charlatans who betray us; and who is now marching together with us in our common ranks unwavering toward the final goal: liberation of the working people from any kind of oppression.”* [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 272]

The two of the anarchists who took part in the movement and later wrote its history concur. Voline argues that the reason why the movement was known as the *“Makhnovist movement”* was because the *“most important role in this work of unification [of the peasant masses] and in the general development of the revolutionary insurrection in the southern Ukraine was performed by the detachment of*

*partisans guided by a peasant native to the region: Nestor Makhno.*” [The Unknown Revolution, p. 551] “From the first days of the movement,” Arshinov notes, “up to its culminating point, when the peasants vanquished the landowners, Makhno played a preponderant and central role to such an extent that the whole insurgent region and the most heroic moments of the struggle are linked to his name. Later, when the insurrection had triumphed completely over the Skoropadsky counter-revolution and the region was threatened by Denikin, Makhno became the rallying point for millions of peasants in several regions.” [Op. Cit., p. 50]

It must be stressed that Nestor Makhno was not the boss of the Makhnovista. He was not their ruler or general. As such, the fact that the Makhnovists were (unofficially) named after Makhno does not imply that it was his personal fiefdom, nor that those involved followed him as an individual. Rather, the movement was named after him because he was universally respected within it as a leading militant. This fact also explains why Makhno was nicknamed “Batko” (see next section).

This can be seen from how the movement was organised and was run. As we discuss in section 5, it was organised in a fundamentally democratic way, by means of mass assemblies of insurgents, elected officers, regular insurgent, peasant and worker congresses and an elected “*Revolutionary Military Soviet*.” The driving force in the Makhnovist movement was not, therefore, Makhno but rather the anarchist ideas of self-management. As Trotsky himself was aware, the Makhnovists were influenced by anarchist ideas:

*“Makhno and his companions-in-arms are not non-party people at all. They are all of the Anarchist persuasion, and send out circulars and letters summoning Anarchists to Hulyai Pole so as to organise their own Anarchist power there.”*  
[Trotsky, Op. Cit.]

As part of this support for anarchist theory, the Makhnovists organised insurgent, peasant and worker conferences to discuss key issues in the revolution and the activities of the Makhno movement itself. Three such conferences had been before Trotsky wrote his diatribe **The Makhno Movement** on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1919. A fourth one was called for June 15<sup>th</sup>, which Trotsky promptly banned (on pain of death) on June 4<sup>th</sup> (see section 13 for full details). Unlike the Bolshevik dictatorship, the Makhnovists took every possibility of ensuring the participation of the working people they were fighting for in the revolution. The calling of congresses by the Makhnovists shows clearly that the movement did not, as Trotsky asserted, follow a man, but rather ideas.

As Voline argued, “*the movement would have existed without Makhno, since the living forces, the living masses who created and developed the movement, and who*

brought Makhno forward merely as their talented military leader, would have existed without Makhno.” Ultimately, the term “Makhnovshchina” is used “to describe a unique, completely original and independent revolutionary movement of the working class which gradually becomes conscious of itself and steps out on the broad arena of historical activity.” [“preface,” Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 19]

### 3 Why was Makhno called “*Batko*”?

Nestor Makhno was often called in the movement “*Batko*”, which is Ukrainian for “*father*.” Peter Arshinov explains how and in what circumstances Makhno was given this name:

*“It was . . . in September 1918, that Makhno received the nickname **Batko** — general leader of the revolutionary insurrection in the Ukraine. This took place in the following circumstances. Local **pomeshchiks** [landed gentry] in the major centres, the **kulaks** [rich peasants], and the German authorities [the Ukraine being occupied by them at the time], decided to eliminate Makhno and his detachment [of partisans] at any cost. The **pomeshchiks** created a special volunteer detachment consisting of their own sons and those of **kulaks** for the decisive struggle against Makhno. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of September this detachment, with the help of the Austro-Germans, cornered Makhno in the region of Bol’shaya Mihhailovka, setting up strong military posts on all roads. At this time Makhno found himself with only 30 partisans and one machine gun. He was forced to make a fighting retreat, manoeuvring in the midst of numerous enemy forces. Arriving in the forest of Dibrivki, Makhno found himself in an extremely difficult situation. The paths of retreat were occupied by the enemy. It was impossible for the detachment to break through, and escaping individually was beneath their revolutionary dignity. No-one in the detachment would agree to abandon their leader so as to save himself. After some reflection, two days later, Makhno decided to return to the village of Bol’shaya Mikhailovka (Dibrivki). Leaving the forest the partisans met peasants who came to warn them that there were large enemy forces in Dibrivki and that they should make haste to go elsewhere. This information did not stop Makhno and his partisans . . . [and] they set out for Bol’shaya Mikhailovka. They approached the village guardedly. Makhno himself and a few of his comrades went on reconnaissance and saw a large enemy camp on the church square, dozens of machine guns, hundreds of saddle horses, and groups of cavalry. Peasants informed them that a battalion of Austrians and a special **pomeshchik** detachment were in the village. Retreat was impossible. Then Makhno, with his usual stubbornness and determination,*

said to his companions: 'Well, my friends! We should all be ready to die on this spot . . .' The movement was ominous, the men were firm and full of enthusiasm. All 30 saw only one path before them — the path toward the enemy, who had about a thousand well-armed men, and they all realised that this meant certain death for them. All were moved, but none lost courage.

"It was at this movement that one of the partisans, Shchus', turned to Makhno and said:

"From now on you will be **Batko** to all of us, and we vow to die with you in the ranks of the insurgents.'

"Then the whole detachment swore never to abandon the insurgent ranks, and to consider Makhno the general **Batko** of the entire revolutionary insurrection. Then they prepared to attack. Shchus' with five to seven men was assigned to attack the flank of the enemy. Makhno with the others attacked from the front. With a ferocious 'Hurrah!' the partisans threw themselves headlong against the enemy, smiting the very centre with sabres, rifles and revolvers. The attack had a shattering effect. The enemy, who were expecting nothing of the kind, were bowled over and began to flee in panic, saving themselves in groups and individually, abandoning arms, machine guns and horses. Without leaving them time to come to themselves, to become aware of the number of attacking forces, and to pass to a counter-attack, the insurgents chased them in separate groups, cutting them down in full gallop. A part of the **pomeshchik** detachment fled to the Volchya River, where they were drowned by peasants who had joined the battle. The enemy's defeat was complete.

"Local peasants and detachments of revolutionary insurgents came from all directions to triumphantly acclaim the heroes. They unanimously agreed to consider Makhno as **Batko** of the entire revolutionary insurrection in the Urkaine." [Arshinov, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 59–60]

This was how Makhno acquired the nickname "Batko," which stuck to him thereafter.

It should be stressed that "Batko" was a nickname and did not signify any form of autocratic or hierarchical position within the movement:

"During the civil war, it signified the leadership and control of a specific area and its population in both civil and military fields. The central point of the use of the word, rather than 'leader' or 'dictator' is that the leadership is usually based on respect, as in Makhno's case, and always on intimate knowledge of the home territory." [Michael Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 17]

That this was a nickname can be seen from the fact that “[a]fter 1920 he was usually called ‘Malyi’ (‘Shorty’), a nickname referring to his short stature, which was introduced by chance by one of the insurgents.” [Peter Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 226] To attach significance to the fact that the peasants called Makhno “Batko” (as the Bolsheviks did) simply signifies an ignorance of the Makhnovist movement and its social environment.

## 4 Can you give a short overview of the Makhnovist movement?

This section of the FAQ gives a short overview of the Makhnovists from July 1918 (when Makhno returned to the Ukraine) and August 1921, when it was finally defeated by Bolshevik armed force. It will be primarily a military history, with the socio-political aspects of the movement discussed in sections 6 (its theory) and 7 (its practice). For details of the rise of influence of Makhno after his release from prison in 1917, see section 1.

The history of the Makhno movement can be broken up into roughly four periods — from July 1918 to February 1919, then the rest of 1919, then January to October 1920 and, finally, from October 1920 to August 1921. This section will give an overview of each period in turn.

By the time Makhno arrived back in the Ukraine in July, 1918, opposition to the German-backed Hetman’s regime was mounting and was frequently met with brutal repression, including reprisal executions. Makhno was forced to live underground and on the move, secretly meeting with others, with the Austrians always close behind. Voline recounts Makhno’s activities at this time:

*“Back in Hulyai Pole, Makhno came to the decision to die or obtain victory for the peasants . . . He did not delay starting his mission openly among the great masses of peasants, speaking at improvised meetings, writing and distributing letters and tracts. By pen and mouth, he called on the peasants for a decisive struggle against the power of Skoropadsky and the landlords. He declared tirelessly that the workers should now take their fates into their own hands and not let their freedom to act be taken from them . . .*

*“Besides his appeals, Makhno proceeded immediately to direct action. His first concern was to form a revolutionary military unit, sufficiently strong to guarantee freedom of propaganda and action in the villages and towns and at the same time to begin guerrilla operations. This unit was quickly organised . . .*



*“His first unit undertook two urgent tasks, namely, pursuing energetically the work of propaganda and organisation among the peasants and carrying out a stubborn armed struggle against all their enemies. The guiding principle of this merciless struggle was as follows. No lord who persecuted the peasants, no policeman of the Hetman, no Russian or German officer who was an implacable enemy of the peasants, deserved any pity; he must be destroyed. All who participated in the oppression of the poor peasants and workers, all who sought to suppress their rights, to exploit their labour, should be executed.*

*“Within two or three weeks, the unit had already become the terror, not only of the local bourgeoisie, but also of the Austro-German authorities.” [The Unknown Revolution, p. 558]*

The night of 26 September saw Hulyai Pole briefly liberated from Hetman and Austrian troops by the actions of Makhno's troops in association with local people. On the retreat from this Makhno's small band grew when he met the partisan troops headed by Schus. When the Austrians cornered them, they launched a surprise counter attack and routed the opposition. This became known as the battle of Dibrivki and it is from this date, 5 October 1918 that Makhno is given the nickname 'Batko', meaning "father" (see section 3 for details). For the next two months already-existing partisan groups sought out and joined the growing army.

In this period, Makhno, with portable printing equipment, was raiding the occupying garrisons and troop trains in the Southern Ukraine. Normal practice was to execute the officers and free the troops. In this period the moral of the occupying troops had crumbled and revolutionary propaganda had made inroads into many units. This was also affecting the nationalist troops and on 20 November the first nationalist unit defected to the Makhnovists. This encouraged them to return to Hulyai Pole on 27 December and there the insurrectionary Staff was formed, this body was to lead the army in the coming years and consisted initially of four old and trusted friends and three political comrades. The Makhnovist presence allowed the setting up of a local soviet and the re-opening of the anarchist clubs. German forces started pulling back to the major cities and on December 14 the Hetman fled Kiyiv. In the resulting vacuum, the Makhnovists rapidly expanded taking in most of the South East Ukraine and setting up fronts against local whites. The Ukrainian nationalists had taken power in the rest of the Ukraine under Petliura and on the 15<sup>th</sup> December the Makhnovists agreed to make common cause with them against the Whites. In return for arms and ammunition they allowed the nationalists to mobilise in the Makhnovist area (while engaging in propaganda directed at the mobilised troops on their way by train to Katerynoslav).

This was a temporary and pragmatic arrangement directed against the greater enemy of the Whites. However, the nationalists were no friends of working-class autonomy. The nationalists banned elections to the Katerynoslav soviet on 6<sup>th</sup> of December and the provincial soviet at Kharkiv meet with a similar fate on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 22] At the same time as their agreement with the nationalists, the Makhnovista had set up links with Bolshevik partisans to the south and before dawn on the 26<sup>th</sup> the Bolshevik and Makhnovista forces launched a joint attack on the nationalists at Katerynoslav. The city was taken but held only briefly when a nationalist attack on the 29<sup>th</sup> drove out all the insurgent forces with heavy losses. In the south, White reinforcements led to the insurgents being pushed North and losing Hulyai Pole.

1919 opened with the Makhnovists organising a congress of front- unit delegates to discuss the progress of the struggle. Over forty delegates attended and a committee of five was elected, along with an operational staff to take charge of the southern front and its rear. It was agreed that local soviets were to be supported in every way, with no military violence directed towards them permitted. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 25]

By the end of January, white reinforcements were landing in the ports of the south. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, a worker, peasant and insurgent congress was held at Velyka Mykhailivka. A resolution was passed urging an end to conflict between Makhnovists, Nationalists and Bolsheviks. An alliance was signed between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks in early February. This agreement ensured that the Partisan units entered the Red Army as distinct formations, with their internal organisation (including the election of commanders) intact, and the Red Army in the area formed a brigade to be known as “*the third Transdnieper Batko Makhno brigade*” with Makhno as commander. The Whites were repulsed and Hulyai Pole retaken and the front pushed some distance eastwards.

Thus the military situation had improved by the time of the second worker, peasant and insurgent congress held at Hulyai Pole on February 12<sup>th</sup>. This congress set up a “*Revolutionary Military Soviet*” to co-ordinate civilian affairs and execute its decisions. The congress resolved that “*the land belongs to nobody*” and should be cultivated without the use of hired labour. It also accepted a resolution opposing anti-Jewish pogroms. Also passed was a resolution which sharply attacked the Bolsheviks, caused by their behaviour since their arrival in the Ukraine. [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 154–5] A report by the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Red Army, Skatchco, indicates the nature of this behaviour:

*“Little local Chekas are undertaking a relentless campaign against the Makhnovists, even when they are shedding their blood at the front. They are hunting them down from the rear and persecuting them solely for belonging to the*

*Makhnovist movement . . . It cannot continue like this: the activity of the local Chekas is deliberately ruining the front, reducing all military successes to nothing, and contributing to the creation of a counter-revolution that neither Denikin nor Krasnov [Hetman of the Don Cossacks] could have achieved. . . .*” [quoted by Alexander Skirda, **The Rehabilitation of Makhno**, p. 346]

Unsurprisingly, the peasants reacted strongly to the Bolshevik regime. Their “*agricultural policy and terrorism*” ensured that “*by the middle of 1919, all peasants, rich and poor, distrusted the Bolsheviks.*” [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 156] In April alone, there were 93 separate armed rebellions against the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine. The “*more oppressive the Bolshevik policy, the more the peasants supported Makhno. Consequently, the Bolsheviks began to organise more systematically against the Makhno movement, both as an ideology and as a social movement.*” [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 157]

In mid-March the Red Army attacked eastwards. In the course of this Dybenko, commander of the Trandneiper division, recommended one of Makhno’s commanders for a medal. Then the Makhnovists attacked the Donbas (east) to relieve the pressure on the Soviet 8<sup>th</sup> Army caused by a White advance. They took Mariupol following a White incursion at the beginning of April. A White counter-offensive resulted in the Red 9<sup>th</sup> division panicking, allowing the Whites into Makhno’s rear. Red Commander Dybenko refused orders to come to the Makhnovists aid as he was more interested in the Crimea (south). [Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 31]

This period saw the most sustained freedom for the region around Hulyai Pole. It had been free of enemy occupation since January, allowing constructive activity to restart. The inhabitants of the free region “*created new forms of social organisation: free workers’ communes and Soviets.*” [Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 574] The Revolutionary Military Soviet (RMS) called a third regional worker, peasant and insurgent congresses had on April 10<sup>th</sup> to review progress and to look forward. This was the largest congress to date, with delegates from 72 volosts containing two million people. The Bolshevik military commander Dybenko tried to ban it. The Makhnovists, needless to say, ignored him and the RMS made a famous reply to his arrogance (see section 13 for more details).

It was during this period (late 1918 and early 1919), that the **Nabat** anarchist federation was organised. “*Anarchist influence was reported from Aleksandrovsk and other centres,*” notes David Footman, “*Anarchists were holding a conference in Kursk at about the same time and in one of their resolutions it was stated that ‘the Ukrainian Revolution will have great chances of rapidly becoming Anarchist in its ideas.’ The position called for renewed Bolshevik measures against the Anarchists. **Nabat**, the main Anarchist newspaper in the Ukraine, was suppressed, and its editorial board dispersed under threat of arrest.*” [**Op. Cit.**, p. 270] Daniel Guerin

has reproduced two documents from the Nabat federation in volume II of his **No Gods, No Masters**.

The anarchist influence in and around Hulyai Pole also worried the Bolsheviks. They started a slander campaign against the Makhnovists, to the alarm of Antonov, the overall front commander, who replied in response to an article in Kharkiv *Izvestiya*:

*“The article is the most perverted fiction and does not in the least correspond to the existing situation. The insurgents fighting the whites are on a level with the Red Army men, but are in a far worse condition for supplies.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 33]

In a postscript, Antonov added that the press campaign had certainly helped turn Makhno anti-Soviet (i.e. anti-Bolshevik, as Makhno supported free soviets).

At the beginning of May, another partisan commander, Hryhoriyiv, revolted against the Bolsheviks in the central Ukraine. Hryhoriyiv, like the Makhnovists, had joined with the Bolsheviks when they had re-entered the Ukraine, however his social and political background was totally different. Hryhoriyiv was a former Tsarist officer, who had commanded numerous troops under the Petliurist authority and joined the Bolsheviks once that that regime’s armed forces had disintegrated. Arshinov notes that he had “*never been a revolutionary*” and that there had been a “*great deal of adventurism in his joining the ranks of the Petliurists and then the ranks of the Red Army.*” His temperament was mixed, consisting of “*a certain amount of sympathy for oppressed peasants, authoritarianism, the extravagance of a Cossack chieftain, nationalist sentiments and anti-Semitism.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 110]

Hryhoriyov started his revolt by issuing a Universal, or declaration to the Ukrainian people, which contained a virulent attack on the Bolsheviks as well as one explicit anti-Semitic reference, but without mention of Makhno. The height of the revolt was his appearance in the suburbs of Katerynoslav, which he was stopped from taking. He started a pogrom in Yelyzavethrad which claimed three thousand victims.

Once the Makhnovists had been informed of this rebellion, an enlarged staff and RMS meeting was held. A telegram was sent to the soldiers at the front urging them to hold the front and another to the Bolsheviks with a similar message. A few days latter, when more information had been received, a proclamation was issued against Hyyhoriyiv attacking him for seeking to impose a new authority on the working class, for encouraging toiling people to attack each other, and for inciting pogroms. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 112 and pp. 114–7]

While it took a fortnight for Red forces to contain Hryhoriyiv without trouble, this involved using all available reserves of all three Ukrainian armies. This left none for Makhno's hard-pressed forces at the front. In addition, Dybenko withdrew a front-line regiment from Makhno for use against the revolt and diverted reinforcements from the Crimea which were intended for Makhno. Despite this Makhno's forces (now numbering 20,000) were ordered to resume the attack on the Whites. This was due to "*unremitting pressure from Moscow to take Taganrog and Rostov.*" [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 36] The Makhnovist advance stopped due to the non-fulfilment of an urgent order for ammunition.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, a White counter-attack not only stopped the advance of the Red Army, it forced the 9<sup>th</sup> division (and then the Makhnovists) to retreat. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, the Whites launched a further offensive against the northern Donbas, opening a gap between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Red Armies. Due to the gravity of the situation, the RSV summoned a fourth congress for June 15<sup>th</sup>. Trotsky not only banned this congress but took the lead in slandering the Makhnovists and calling for their elimination (see section 13 for details). As well as "*this deliberately false agitational campaign, the [Bolshevik] blockade of the region was carried to the limit . . . The provisioning of shells, cartridges and other indispensable equipment which was used by daily at the front, ceased completely.*" [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 118] Palij confirms this, noting that "*the supplies of arms and other war material to Makhno was stopped, thus weakening the Makhno forces vis-a-vis the Denikin troops.*" [*Op. Cit.*, p. 175] David Footman also notes that the Bolshevik "*hold-back of supplies for the Insurgents developed into a blockade of the area. Makhnovite units at the front ran short of ammunition.*" He also mentions that "*[i]n the latter part of May the Cheka sent over two agents to assassinate Makhno.*" [*Civil War in Russia*, p. 271]

Needless to say, Trotsky blamed this White success to the Makhnovists, arguing it was retreating constantly before even the slightest attack by the Whites. However, this was not the case. Analysing these events in July 1919, Antonov (the commander of the Southern Front before Trotsky replaced him) wrote:

*"Above all, the facts witness that the affirmations about the weakness of the most contaminated region — that from Hulyai Pole to Berdiansk — are without foundation . . . It is not because we ourselves have been better organised militarily, but because those troops were directly defending their native place . . . Makhno stayed at the front, in spite of the flight of the neighbouring 9<sup>th</sup> division, following by the whole of the 13<sup>th</sup> army . . . The reasons for the defeat on the southern front do not rest at all in the existence of 'Ukrainian partisans' . . . above all it must be attributed to the machinery of the southern front, in not*

*keeping its fighting spirit and reinforcing its revolutionary discipline.*" [quoted by Alexander Skirda, **The Rehabilitation of Makhno**, p. 348]

This, incidentally, tallies with Arshinov's account that "*hordes of Cossacks had overrun the region, not through the insurrectionary front but from the left flank where the Red Army was stationed.*" [Op. Cit., p. 126] For what it is worth, General Denikin himself concurs with this account of events, noting that by the 4<sup>th</sup> of June his forces "*repulsed the routed and demoralised contingents of the Eight and Thirteenth Soviet Armies . . . The resistance of the Thirteenth Army being completely broken.*" He notes that an attempt by the Fourteenth Army (which Makhno's troops were part of) to attack on the flank came to nothing. He only mentions Makhno when he recounts that "*General Shkuro's division routed Makhno at Hulyai Pole.*" [The White Armies, p. 272] With Whites broken through on their flank and with limited ammunition and other supplies (thanks to the Bolsheviks), the Makhnovists had no choice but to retreat.

It was around this time that Trotsky, in a public meeting in Kharkov, "*announced that it were better to permit the Whites to remain in the Ukraine than to suffer Makhno. The presence of the Whites, he said, would influence the Ukrainian peasantry in favour of the Soviet Government, whereas Makhno and his povstantsi, would never make peace with the Bolsheviks; they would attempt to possess themselves of some territory and to practise their ideas, which would be a constant menace to the Communist Government.*" [Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 63]

Due to this Bolshevik betrayal, the Makhnovist sector was in very grave danger. At Hulyai Pole, a peasant regiment was scraped together in 24 hours in an attempt to save the town. It encountered White Cossacks ten miles away from the town and was mown down. The Whites entered Hulyai Pole the next day (June 6<sup>th</sup>) and gave it a good going over. On the same day, the Bolsheviks issued an order for Makhno's arrest. Makhno was warned and put in his resignation, arguing that it was "*an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call congresses on their own account, to discuss their affairs.*" Combined with the "*hostile attitude*" of the Bolshevik authorities towards him, which would lead "*unavoidably to the creation of a special internal front,*" Makhno believed it was his duty to do what he could to avert it, and so he left his post. [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., p. 129] While Makhno escaped, his staff was not so lucky. Five of them were arrested the same day and shot as a result of Trotsky's order to ban the fourth congress.

Leaving his troops in the frontline, Makhno left with a small cavalry detachment. While leaving the rest under Red command, Makhno made a secret agreement with his regimental commanders to await a message from him to leave the Red Army and join up against with the partisans. On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of June,

Hulyai Pole was retaken by Bolshevik forces, who took the opportunity to attack and sack the Makhnovist communes. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 86f]

After intense fighting, the Whites finally split the Southern Front into three on June 21<sup>st</sup>. Needless to say, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks blamed this on the partisan forces (even stating that they had “*opened the front*” to the Whites). This was nonsense, as noted above.

After leaving the front, Makhno took refuge in the Chorno-Znamenski forest before continuing the retreat north and skirmishing with Red Army units. This brought him into the territory held by Hryhoriyiv and this, in turn, meant they had to proceed carefully. While the Makhnovists had made a public denunciation of Hryhoriyiv, Makhno was approaching the centre of Hryhoriyov’s remaining influence. Surrounded by enemies, Makhno had little choice but to begin discussions with Hryhoriyiv. This was problematic to say the least. Hryhoriyiv’s revolt had been tinged with anti-Semitism and had seen at least one major pogrom. Being faced with Hryhoriyov’s anti-Semitism and his proposal for an alliance with the Whites against the Reds led the Makhnovists to plot his downfall at a meeting planned for the 27<sup>th</sup> July.

This meeting had originally been called to discuss the current tasks of the insurgents in the Ukraine and was attended by nearly 20,000 insurgents and local peasants. Hryhoriyiv spoke first, arguing that the most urgent task was to chase out the Bolsheviks and that they should ally themselves with any anti-Red forces available (a clear reference to the Whites under Denikin). The Makhnovist Chubenko spoke next, declaring that the “*struggle against the Bolsheviks could be revolutionary only if it were carried out in the name of the social revolution. An alliance with the worst enemies of the people — with generals — could only be a counter-revolutionary and criminal adventure.*” Following him, Makhno “*demanded before the entire congress*” that Hryhoriyiv “*immediately answer for the appalling pogrom of Jews he had organised in Elisavetgrad in May, 1919, as well as other anti-Semitic actions.*” [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 136]

Seeing that things were going badly, Hryhoriyiv went for his revolver, but was shot by a Makhnovist. Makhno finished him off. Makhnovist guards disarmed the leading Hryhoriyivists. Then Makhno, Chubenko and others justified the killing before the mass meeting, which approved the act passing a resolution that stated that Hryhoriyiv’s death was “*an historical and necessary fact, for his policy, acts and aims were counter-revolutionary and mainly directed to helping Denikin and other counter-revolutionaries, as is proved by his Jewish pogroms.*” [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42] The troops under Hryhoriyiv became part of the general Insurrectionary Army.

At the end of July, Makhno recalled the troops he had earlier left in the Red Army and by mid-August the forces met up, becoming an army of some 15,000.

At Mykolaiv, the Red Army units were defecting to Makhno in large numbers due in part to the feeling that the Red Army were abandoning the defence of the Ukraine. This was the start of Denikin's massive push north and Petliura's push east. By the end of August, Makhno felt strong enough to go on the offensive against the Whites. Superior White forces pushed the Makhnovists further and further west, away from their home region. "Denikin," in Voline's words, "not only made war on the army as such, but also on the whole peasant population. In addition to the usual persecutions and beatings, the villages he occupied were burnt and wrecked. The greater part of the peasants' dwellings were looted and wrecked. Hundreds of peasants were shot. The women maltreated, and nearly all the Jewish women . . . were raped." This repression "obliged the inhabitants of the villages threatened by the approach of the Denikinists to abandon their hearths and flee. Thus the Makhnovist army was joined and followed in their retreat by thousands of peasant families in flight from their homes with their livestock and belongings. It was a veritable migration. An enormous mass of men, women and children trailed after the army in its slow retreat towards the west, a retreat which gradually extended over hundreds of kilometres." [Op. Cit., p. 607]

Meeting the Nationalists in mid-September, it was agreed on both sides that fighting would only aid the Whites and so the Makhnovists entered a non-aggression pact with Petliura. This enabled them to offload over 1,000 wounded. The Makhnovists continued their propaganda campaign against the Nationalists, however. By the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, intelligence reports suggested that White forces had appeared to the west of their current position (i.e. where the Nationalists were). The Makhnovists concluded that the only way this could have happened was if the Nationalists had allowed the Whites to cross their territory (the Nationalists disputed this, pointing to the fighting that had started two days before between them and the Whites).

This meant that the Makhnovists were forced to fight the numerically superior Whites. After two days of desperate fighting, the Whites were routed and two regiments were destroyed at the battle of Peregonovka village. Makhno's forces then conducted an incredibly rapid advance in three directions helped by their mobile cart-transported infantry, in three days smashing three reserve regiments and at the greatest point advancing 235 miles east. On the 6<sup>th</sup> October a drive to the south started which took key White ports and captured a huge quantity of equipment including 600 trucks of British-supplied ammunition and an aeroplane. This was disastrous for Denikin whose forces had reached the northernmost point on their advance on Moscow, for these ports were key for his supply routes. The advance continued, cutting the railway route and so stopping all shells reaching Denikin's Moscow front.



Denikin was forced to send some of his best troops from the Moscow front to drive back the Makhnovists and British boats were sent to towns on the coast where Makhno might retreat through. The key city of Katerinoslav was taken with the aid of a workers' uprising on November 9<sup>th</sup> and held for a month before the advancing Whites and a typhoid epidemic which was to devastate the Makhnovista ranks by the end of the year forced them out of the city. In December, the Red Army advance made possible by Makhno's devastation of Denikin's supply lines continued.

Thus Voline:

*"It is necessary to emphasise here the historic fact that the honour of having annihilated the Denikinist counter-revolution in the autumn of 1919, belongs entirely to the Makhnovist Insurrectionary Army. If the insurgents had not won the decisive victory of Peregonovka, and had not continued to sap the bases in Denikin's rear, destroying his supply service for artillery, food and ammunition, the Whites would probably have entered Moscow in December 1919 at the latest."*  
[Op. Cit., p. 625]

In December the Red Army advance made possible by Makhno's devastation of Denikin's supply lines continued. By early January the Reds had split White forces into three and their troops had reached Katerynoslav. The attitude of the Bolsheviks to the Makhnovists had already been decided. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1919, Trotsky stated that when the two forces met, the Bolsheviks had "*an order . . . from which we must not retreat one single step.*" While we discuss this secret order in more depth in section 13, we will note here that it gave partisans the option of becoming "*fully subordinate to [Bolshevik] command*" or "*be subjected to ruthless punishment.*" [How the Revolution Armed, vol. II, pp. 110-1 and p. 442] Another secret order to the 45<sup>th</sup> division issued on January 4<sup>th</sup> instructed them to "*annihilate Makhnovist bands*" and "*disarm the population.*" The 41<sup>st</sup> was sent "*into reserve*" to the Hulyai Pole region. This was "*five days before Makhno was outlawed, and shows that the Bolshevik command had a clear view of Makhno's future, even if the latter did not.*" [Malet, Op. Cit., p. 54]

Unaware of this, the Makhnovista put out propaganda leaflets directed at the Red Army rank and file, appealing to them as comrades. At Aleksandrovsk on December 5<sup>th</sup> talks occurred between a representative of the Makhnovists and the commander of the 45<sup>th</sup> division's 1<sup>st</sup> brigade. These broke down when Makhno was ordered to the Polish front, which the Makhnovists refused. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, Yegorov, commander of the Red Army southern front, used this pretext to outlaw Makhno. This outlawing was engineered deliberately by the Bolsheviks:

*“The author of the order realised at that time there was no real war between the Poles and the Bolsheviks at that time and he also knew that Makhno would not abandon his region . . . Uborevich [the author] explained that ‘an appropriate reaction by Makhno to this order would give us the chance to have accurate grounds for our next steps’ . . . [He] concluded: ‘The order is a certain political manoeuvre and, at the very least, we expect positive results from Makhno’s realisation of this.’” [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 210]*

In addition, war with Poland did not break out until the end of April, over three months later.

Needless to say, the Makhnovists **did** realise the political motivations behind the order. As Arshinov notes, “[s]ending the insurrectionary army to the Polish front meant removing from the Ukraine the main nerve centre of the revolutionary insurrection. This was precisely what the Bolsheviks wanted: they would then be absolute masters of the rebellious region, and the Makhnovists were perfectly aware of this.” Moreover, the Makhnovists considered the move “*physically impossible*” as “*half the men, the entire staff and the commander himself were in hospital with typhus.*” [Op. Cit., p. 163]

This was the signal for nine months of bitter fighting between the Red Army and the Makhnovists. Military events in this period are confused, with the Red Army claiming victory again and again, only for the Makhnovists to appear somewhere else. Hulyai Pole changed hands on a couple of occasions. The Bolsheviks did not use local troops in this campaign, due to fear of fraternisation. In addition, they used “*new tactics,*” and “*attacked not only Makhno’s partisans, but also the villages and towns in which the population was sympathetic toward Makhno. They shot ordinary soldiers as well as their commanders, destroying their houses, confiscating their properties and persecuting their families. Moreover the Bolsheviks conducted mass arrests of innocent peasants who were suspected of collaborating in some way with the partisans. It is impossible to determine the casualties involved.*” They also set up “*Committees of the Poor*” as part of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus, which acted as “*informers helping the Bolshevik secret police in its persecution of the partisans, their families and supporters, even to the extent of hunting down and executing wounded partisans.*” [Palij, Op. Cit., pp. 212–3]

In addition to this suffering, the Bolshevik decision to attack Makhno rather than push into the Crimea was also to prolong the civil war by nine more months. The Whites re-organised themselves under General Wrangel, who began a limited offensive in June. Indeed, the Bolshevik “*policy of terror and exploitation turned almost all segments of Ukrainian society against the Bolsheviks, substantially strengthened the Makhno movement, and consequently facilitated the advance of*

*the reorganised anti-Bolshevik force of General Wrangel from the Crimea into South Ukraine, the Makhno region.*” [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 214]

It was widely believed on the White side that Makhno was ready to co-operate with them and, desperate for men, Wrangel decided to appeal to the Makhnovists for an alliance. Their response was simple and direct, they decided to immediately execute his delegate and publish both his letter and a response in the Makhnovist paper *“The Road to Freedom.”* [Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 60] Of course, this did not stop the Bolsheviks later claiming such an alliance existed!

Ironically enough, at a general assembly of insurgents, it was decided that *“the destruction of Wrangel”* would *“eliminate a threat to the revolution”* and so free *“all of Russia”* from *“the counter-revolutionary barrage.”* The mass of workers and peasants *“urgently needed an end to all those wars”* and so they proposed *“to the Communists that hostilities between them and the Makhnovists be suspended in order that they might wipe out Wrangel. In July and August, 1920, telegrams to this effect were sent to Moscow and Kharkov.”* There was no reply and the Bolsheviks *“continued their war against the Makhnovists, and they also continued their previous campaign of lies and calumnies against them.”* [Arshinov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 176]

In July and August the Makhnovists went on the offensive, raiding the Bolsheviks in three provinces and attacking the Red Army infrastructure. Wrangel began another offensive in September, driving the Red Army back again and again and threatening the Makhnovist area. Faced with Wrangel’s success, the Bolsheviks started to rethink their position on Makhno, although on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September the Bolshevik commander-in-chief Kamenev was still declaring the need for *“the final liquidation of the Makhno band.”* [Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 62] A few days later, the Bolsheviks changed their mind and negotiations began.

So, by October 1920, the success of the Wrangel offensive was again forcing the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists to put aside their differences and take on the common enemy. A deal was reached and on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Frunze, the new Red Army commander of the Southern Front, ordered a cessation of hostilities against the Makhnovists. A statement from the Soviet of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (Makhnovists) explained the treaty as necessitated by the White offensive but also representing a victory over the *“high-handed communists and commissars”* in forcing them to recognise the *“free insurrection.”* [Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 64]

The agreement was signed between October 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. It consisted of two parts, a Political and a Military agreement (see section 13 for full details). The Political agreement simply gave the Makhnovists and anarchists the rights they should have had according to the Soviet Constitution. The Military agreement resulted in the Makhnovists becoming part of the Red Army, keeping their established internal structure and, significantly, stopped them from accepting into

their ranks any Red Army detachments or deserters therefrom. According to Bolshevik sources, *“there was never the slightest intention on the Bolshevik side of keeping to the agreement once its military value had passed.”* [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 296]

Even before the agreement came into effect, the Makhnovists were fighting alongside the Bolsheviks and between October 4 and 17, Hulyai Pole was retaken by the Aleksandrovsk group, which included 10,000 Makhnovista. On October 22, Aleksandrovsk was taken with 4,000 white prisoners and from then to early November the Makhnovists cut through Wrangel’s rear, hoping to cut off his retreat by seizing the Crimean passes. The Whites fought a skilful rearguard which together with the new White fortifications on the peninsula held up the advance. But by the 11<sup>th</sup>, his hold in the Crimea gone, Wrangel had no choice but to order a general retreat to the ports and an evacuation. Even the Bolsheviks had to acknowledge that the *“Makhnovist units fulfilled their military tasks with no less heroism than the Red Army units.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69]

On hearing this success on 16<sup>th</sup> November, the reaction of the Makhnovista still at Hulyai Pole was cynical but realistic: *“It’s the end of the agreement. I’ll bet you anything that the Bolsheviks will be on us within the week.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 70] They were not wrong. Already Frunze, the Red Army commander, had ordered two entire cavalry armies to concentrate near Hulyai Pole at the same time as he ordered the Makhnovist forces to the Caucasus Front! By 24<sup>th</sup> November Frunze was preparing for the treachery to come, in Order 00149 (which was not sent to the Makhnovist units) saying if they had not departed to the Caucasus front by the 26<sup>th</sup> *“the Red regiments of the front, who have now finished with Wrangel, will start speaking a different language to these Makhnovist youths.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 71]

Of course this treachery went right to the top, just before the 26<sup>th</sup> *“deadline”* (which Makhno, not having seen the orders, was unaware of), Lenin urged Rakovski, head of the Ukrainian government to *“[k]eep a close watch on all anarchists and prepare documents of a criminal nature as soon as possible, on the basis of which charges can be preferred against them.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 71] Indeed, it later appeared the treachery had been prepared from at least 14<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> November, as prisoners captured later stated they had received undated anti-Makhnovist proclamations on that date. [Malet, *Ibid.*]

At 3am on the 26<sup>th</sup> the attacks on the Makhnovists started. Alongside this one of the Makhnovist commanders was lured to a meeting by the Bolsheviks, seized and shot. Some Makhnovist forces managed to break through the encircling Bolsheviks but only after taking heavy losses — of the 2,000–4,000 cavalry at Simferopol, only 250 escaped. By the 1<sup>st</sup> December, Rakovski reported the imminent demise of the Makhnovists to the Kharkiv soviet only to have to eat his

words when Makhno routed the 42<sup>nd</sup> division on the 6<sup>th</sup>, retaking Hulyai Pole and 6,000 prisoners, of whom 2,000 joined his forces. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 72] Simultaneously with the attack on the Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks rounded up all known anarchists in the Ukraine (many of whom were in Kharkiv waiting for a legally organised Nabat conference to begin).

In the resulting struggle between the two forces, as Palij notes, the “*support of the population was a significant advantage to Makhno, for they supplied the partisans with needed material, including horses and food, while the Red troops operated among a foreign and hostile people.*” The Bolsheviks found that the peasants not only refused to supply them with goods, they also refused to answer their questions or, at best, gave answers which were vague and confusing. “*In contrast to the Bolsheviks, Makhno partisans received detailed, accurate information from the population at all times.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 236–7]

Frunze brought in extra forces and ordered both the “*annihilation of the Makhnovists*” and total disarming of the region. Plagued by desertions, it was also ordered that all Makhnovist prisoners were to be shot, to discourage the local population and Red Army soldiers thinking of joining them. There is also evidence of unrest in the Azov fleet, with acts of sabotage being carried out by sailors to prevent their weapons being used against the Makhnovists. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 73] While it was common practice for the Bolsheviks to shoot all Makhnovist prisoners, the “*existence of roundup detachments at the end of 1920, whose task was to re-collect prisoners freed by the Makhnovists*” shows that the Makhnovists did not reciprocate in kind. [Malet *Op. Cit.*, p. 129]

At the end of 1920, the Makhnovists had ten to fifteen thousand troops and the “*growing strength of the Makhno army and its successes caused serious concern in the Bolshevik regime, so it was decided to increase the number of troops opposing Makhno.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 237] All the pressure exerted by the Bolsheviks was paying off. Although Makhno repeatedly broke through numerous mass encirclements and picked up deserters from the Red Army, his forces were being eroded by the far greater numbers employed against them. In addition, “*the Red command worked out new plans to fight Makhno by stationing whole regiments, primarily cavalry, in the occupied villages, to terrorise the peasants and prevent them from supporting Makhno. . . Also the Cheka punitive units were constantly trailing the partisans, executing Makhno’s sympathisers and the partisans’ families.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 238] In spite of the difficult conditions, Makhno was still able to attract some Red Army soldiers and even whole units to his side. For example, “*when the partisans were fighting Budenny’s Fourth Cavalry Division, their First Brigade, commanded by Maslak, joined Makhno.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 239]

Makhno was forced to leave his home areas of operations and flee east, then west again. By early January his forces had fought 24 battles in 24 days. This

pattern continued throughout March and April into May. In June, the Bolsheviks changed their strategy to one of predicting where Makhno was heading and garrisoning troops in that area. In one battle on 15 June, Frunze himself was almost captured. Despite this, the insurgents were very weak and their peasant base was exhausted by years of war and civil war. In the most sympathetic areas, Red Army troops were garrisoned on the peasants. Thus Palij:

*“[T]hrough combat losses, hardship, and sickness, the number of Makhno partisans was diminishing and they were cut off from their main sources of recruits and supplies. The Ukrainian peasants were tried of the endless terror caused by successive occupation of village after village by the Red troops and the Cheka. The continuous fighting and requisitions were leaving the peasants with little food and horses for the partisans. They could not live in a state of permanent revolution. Moreover, there was extreme drought and consequently a bad harvest in Ukraine, especially in the region of the Makhno movement.”* [Op. Cit., pp. 240–1]

The state terrorism and the summer drought caused Makhno to give up the struggle in mid-August and instead fight his way to the Dniester with the last of his forces and cross into Romania on August 26. Some of his forces which stayed behind were still active for a short time. In November 1921 the Cheka seized 20 machine guns and 2,833 rifles in the new Zaporizhya province alone.

For more details of the history of the movement, Michael Malet’s **Nestor Makhno in the Russian Revolution** is an excellent summary. Michael Palij’s **The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno** is also worth consulting, as are the anarchist histories of Voline and Arshinov.

## 5 How were the Makhnovists organised?

Being influenced by anarchist ideas, the Makhnovists were organised along libertarian lines. This meant that in both civilian and military areas, self-management was practised. This section discusses the military organisation, while the next discusses the social aspect of the movement.

By practising self-management, the Makhnovists offered a completely different model of military organisation to that of both the Red Army and traditional military forces. While the army structure changed depending on its circumstances, the core ideas remained. These were as follows:

*“The Makhnovist insurrectionary army was organised according to three fundamental principles: voluntary enlistment, the electoral principle, and self-discipline.*

*“**Voluntary enlistment** meant that the army was composed only of revolutionary fighters who entered it of their own free will.*

*“**The electoral principle** meant that the commanders of all units of the army, including the staff, as well as all the men who held other positions in the army, were either elected or accepted by the insurgents of the unit in question or by the whole army.*

*“**Self-discipline** meant that all the rules of discipline were drawn up by commissions of insurgents, then approved by general assemblies of the various units; once approved, they were rigorously observed on the individual responsibility of each insurgent and each commander.” [Op. Cit., p. 96]*

Voline paints a similar picture. He also notes that the electoral principle was sometimes violated and commanders appointed “*in urgent situations by the commander himself,*” although such people had to be “*accepted without reservation*” by “*the insurgents of the unit in question or by the whole army.*” [Op. Cit., p. 584]

Thus the Makhnovist army, bar some deviation provoked by circumstances, was a fundamentally democratic organisation. The guerrillas elected the officers of their detachments, and, at mass assemblies and congresses, decided policy and discipline for the army. In the words of historian Michael Palij:

*“As the Makhno army gradually grew, it assumed a more regular army organisation. Each tactical unit was composed of three subordinate units: a division consisted of three brigades; a brigade, of three regiments; a regiment, of three battalions. Theoretically commanders were elected; in practice, however, the top commanders were usually carefully selected by Makhno from among his close friends. As a rule, they were all equal and if several units fought together the top commanders commanded jointly. The army was nominally headed by a Revolutionary Military Council of about ten to twenty members . . . Like the commanders, the council members were elected, but some were appointed by Makhno . . . There also was an elected cultural section in the army. Its aim was to conduct political and ideological propaganda among the partisans and peasants.” [Palij, Op. Cit., pp. 108–9]*

The Revolutionary Military Council was elected and directly accountable to the regional workers, peasants and insurgent congresses. It was designed to co-ordinate the local soviets and execute the decisions of the regional congresses.

Hence Voline:

*“This council embraced the whole free region. It was supposed to carry out all the economic, political, social and military decisions made at the congress. It was thus, in a certain sense, the supreme executive of the whole movement. **But it was not at all an authoritarian organ.** Only strictly executive functions were assigned to it. It confined itself to carrying out the instructions and decisions of the congress. At any moment, it could be dissolved by the congress and cease to exist.” [Op. Cit., p. 577]*

As such, when Palij notes that this council “*had no decisive voice in the army’s actions,*” he misses the point of the council. [Palij, *Ibid.*] It did not determine the military affairs of the army, but rather the interaction of the military and civilians and made sure that the decisions of congresses were executed. Thus the whole army was nominally under the control of the regional congresses of workers, peasants and insurgents. At these congresses, delegates of the toiling people decided upon the policy to be pursued by the Makhnovist Army. The Revolutionary Military Soviet existed to oversee that decisions were implemented, not to determine the military activities of the troops.

It should also be noted that women not only supported the Makhnovists, they also “*fought alongside the men.*” [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 145] However, “*the participation of women in the movement (by all accounts, quite substantial)*” needs “*further investigation.*” [Serge Cipko, “*Nestor Makhno: A Mini-Historiography of the Anarchist Revolution in Ukraine, 1917–1921,*” pp. 57–75, *The Raven*, no. 13, p. 75]

At its height, the army was made up of infantry, cavalry, artillery, machine-gun units, and special branches, including an intelligence service. As the success of partisan warfare depends upon mobility, the army gradually mounted its infantry in light carts (called “*tachanka*”) during 1918–19. As Michael Malet notes, this was a “*novel tactic*” and Makhno “*could be described as the inventor of the motorised division before the car came into general use.*” [Op. Cit., p. 85] The tachanka was used to transport as many troops as possible, giving the Makhnovists mobile infantry which could keep up with the cavalry. In addition, a machine-gun was sometimes mounted in the rear (in autumn 1919, the 1<sup>st</sup> machine-gun regiment consisted of 120 guns, all mounted on tachanki).

For the most part the Makhnovist army was a volunteer army, unlike all others operating in the Russian Civil War. However, at times of crisis attempts were made to mobilise troops. For example, the Second regional congress agreed that a “*general voluntary and equalitarian mobilisation*” should take place. This meant that this appeal, “*sanctioned by the moral authority of the congress, emphasised the*



*need for fresh troops in the insurrectionary army, no-one was compelled to enlist.*" [Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 577] The Congress itself passed a resolution after a long and passionate debate that stated it "*rejected 'compulsory' mobilisation, opting for an 'obligatory' one; that is, each peasant who is able to carry arms, should recognise his obligation to enlist in the ranks of the partisans and to defend the interests of the entire toiling people of Ukraine.*" [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155] There were far more volunteers than arms, the opposite of what occurred to both the Reds and Whites during the Civil War. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106]

The third Congress decided to conduct a voluntary mobilisation all those born between 1889 and 1898. This congress told them to assemble at certain points, organise themselves and elect their officers. Another mobilisation decided at the Aleksandrovsk congress never took place. How far the Makhnovists were forced to conscript troops is still a matter of debate. Paul Avrich, for example, states that "*voluntary mobilisation*" in reality "*meant outright conscription, as all able-bodied men were required to serve.*" [Op. Cit., p. 114] On the other side, surviving leaflets from 1920 "*are in the nature of appeals to join up, not instructions.*" [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 105] Trotsky, ironically, noted that "*Makhno does not have general mobilisations, and indeed these would be impossible, as he lacks the necessary apparatus.*" [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106] It is probably right to say that the Congresses desired that every able-bodied man join the Makhnovist army, but they simply did not have the means to enforce that desire and that the Makhnovists tried their best to avoid conscription by appealing to the peasants' revolutionary conscience, with some success.

As well as the military organisation, there was also an explicitly anarchist federation operating in the Ukraine at the same time. The first conference to organise a "*Confederation of Anarchist Organisations of the Ukraine*" was held between November 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918. The new federation was named "*Nabat*" (Alarm) and had a six-person Secretariat. Kharkiv was chosen as its headquarters, while it had groups in other major Ukrainian cities (including Kyiv, Odessa and Katerynoslav). The final organisation of the Nabat was accomplished at a conference held in April 2–7, 1919. The federation aimed to form a "*united anarchism*" and guaranteed a substantial degree of autonomy for every participating group and individual. A number of newspapers appeared in a Ukrainian towns and cities (mostly entitled Nabat), as did leaflets and pamphlets. There was a main weekly paper (called Nabat) which was concerned largely with anarchist theory. This completed the Makhnovist papers **Road to Freedom** (which was often daily, sometimes weekly and dealt with libertarian ideas, everyday problems and information on partisan activities) and **The Makhnovist Voice** (which dealt primarily with the interests, problems, and tasks of the Makhnovist movement and its army). The Nabat organisation was also published a pamphlet dealing with the Makhnovist movement's

problems, the economic organisation of the region, the free soviets, the social basis of the society that was to be built, and the problem of defence.

Unsurprisingly, the Nabat federation and the Makhnovists worked together closely, with Nabat members worked in the army (particularly its cultural section). Some of its members were also elected to the Makhnovist Revolutionary Military Soviet. It should be noted that the Nabat federation gained a number of experienced anarchists from Soviet Russia, who fled to the Ukraine to escape Bolshevik repression. The Nabat shared the fortunes of the Makhno movement. It carried on its work freely as long as the region was controlled by the Makhnovist Army, but when Bolshevik or White forces prevailed, the anarchists were forced underground. The movement was finally crushed in November 1920, when the Bolsheviks betrayed the Makhnovists.

As can be seen, the Makhnovists implemented to a large degree the anarchist idea of self-managed, horizontally federated associations (when possible, of course). Both the two major organisational layers to the Makhnovist structure (the army and the congresses) were federated horizontally and the “top” structure was essentially a mass peasant, worker and guerrilla decision-making coalition. In other words, the masses took decisions at the “top” level that the Revolutionary Military Soviet and the Makhnovist army were bound to follow. The army was answerable to the local Soviets and to the congresses of soviets and, as we discuss in section 7, the Makhnovists called working-people and insurgent congresses whenever they could.

The Makhnovist movement was, fundamentally, a working class movement. It was “*one of the very few revolutionary movements to be led and controlled throughout by members of ‘the toiling masses.’*” [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 245] It applied its principles of working class autonomy and self-organisation as far as it could. Unlike the Red Army, it was predominantly organised from the bottom up, rejecting the use of Tsarist officers, appointed commanders, and other “top-down” ways of the Red Army (see section 14 for further discussion of the differences between the two forces).

The Makhnovist army was not by any means a perfect model of anarchist military organisation. However, compared to the Red Army, its violations of principle are small and hardly detract from their accomplishment of applying anarchist ideas in often extremely difficult circumstances.

## 6 Did the Makhnovists have a constructive social programme?

Yes, they did. The Makhnovists spent a great deal of energy and effort in developing, propagating and explaining their ideas on how a free society should be created and run. As Michael Malet noted, the “*leading Makhnovists had definite ideas about the ideal form of social organisation.*” [**Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War**, p. 107] Moreover, as we discuss in the next section, they also successfully applied these ideas when and where they could.

So what was their social programme? Being anarchists, it comprised two parts, namely political and economic aspects. The Makhnovists aimed for a true social revolution in which the working classes (both urban and rural) could actively manage their own affairs and society. As such, their social programme reflected the fact that oppression has its roots in both political and economic power and so aimed at eliminating both the state and private property. As the core of their social ideas was the simple principle of working-class autonomy, the idea that the liberation of working-class people must be the task of the working-class people themselves. This vision is at the heart of anarchism and was expressed most elegantly by Makhno:

*“Conquer or die — such is the dilemma that faces the Ukrainian peasants and workers at this historic moment . . . But we will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of the past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives according to our own will and our own conception of the truth.”* [quoted by Peter Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 58]

As such, the Makhnovists were extremely hostile to the idea of state power, recognising it simply as a means by which the majority are ruled by the few. Equally, they were opposed to wage slavery (to private or state bosses), recognising that as long as the workers do not manage their own work, they can never be free. As they put it, their goals could only be achieved by an “*implacable revolution and consistent struggle against all lies, arbitrariness and coercion, wherever they come from, a struggle to the death, a struggle for free speech, for the righteous cause, a struggle with weapons in hand. Only through the abolition of all rulers, through the destruction of the whole foundation of their lies, in state affairs as well as in political and economic affairs. And only through the social revolution can the genuine Worker-Peasant soviet system be realised and can we arrive at SOCIALISM.*”

[contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 273] They, like other anarchists and the Kronstadt rebels, termed this programme of working class self-management the “*third revolution.*”

We will discuss the political aspect of the Makhnovist programme first, then its economic one. However, the Makhnovists considered (correctly) that both aspects could not be separated. As they put it: “*We will not lay down our arms until we have wiped out once and for all every political and economic oppression and until genuine equality and brotherhood is established in the land.*” [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 281] We split the aspects simply to aid the presentation of their ideas.

At the core of their ideas was what they termed the “*Free Soviet System*” (or “*free soviets*” for short). It was this system which would allow the working class to create and run a new society. As they put it:

*“[The] Makhnovists realise that the working people are no longer a flock of sheep to be ordered about by anyone. We consider the working people capable of building, on their own and without parties, commissars or generals, their own FREE SOVIET SYSTEM, in which those who are elected to the Soviet will not, as now [under the Bolsheviks], command and order us, but on the contrary, will be only the executors of the decisions made in our own workers’ gatherings and conferences.”* [contained in Peter Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 280–1]

Thus the key idea advocated by the leading Makhnovista for social organisation and decision-making was the “*free toilers’ soviet of peasant and worker organisations.*” This meant they were to be independent of all central authority and composed of those who worked, and not political parties. They were to federate on a local, then regional and then national level, and power within the federation was to be horizontal and not vertical. [Michael Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 107] Such a system was in opposition to the Bolshevik practice of Soviets defined and dominated by political parties with a vertical decision-making structure that reached its highest point in the Bolshevik Central Committee.

Thus, for the Makhnovists, the soviet system would be a “bottom-up” system, one designed not to empower a few party leaders at the centre but rather a means by which working people could manage their own affairs. As they put it, the “*soviet system is not the power of the social-democratic Communist-Bolsheviks who now call themselves a soviet power; rather it is the supreme form of non-authoritarian anti-state socialism, which expresses itself in the organisation of a free, happy and independent system of social life for the working people.*” This would be based on the “*principles of solidarity, friendship and equality.*” This meant that in the Makhnovist system of free soviets, the “*working people themselves must freely choose their own soviets, which will carry out the will and desires of the working people themselves,*

that is to say, ADMINISTRATIVE, not ruling soviets.” [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 272–3]

As David Footman summarises, Makhno’s “ultimate aims were simple. All instruments of government were to be destroyed. All political parties were to be opposed, as all of them were working for some or other form of new government in which the party members would assume the role of a ruling class. All social and economic affairs were to be settled in friendly discussion between freely elected representatives of the toiling masses.” [Op. Cit., p. 247]

Hence the Makhnovist social organisation was a federation of self-managed workers’ and peasants’ councils (soviets), which would “be only the executors of the decisions made in our workers’ gatherings and conferences.” [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 281] In other words, an anarchist system based on mass assemblies and decision-making from the bottom up.

Economically, as is to be expected, the Makhnovists opposed private property, capitalism and wage-slavery. Their economic ideas were summarised in a Makhnovist declaration as follows:

*“The lands of the service gentry, of the monasteries, of the princes and other enemies of the toiling masses, with all their livestock and goods, are passed on to the use of those peasants who support themselves solely through their own labour. This transfer will be carried out in an orderly fashion determined in common at peasant assemblies, which must remember in this matter not only each of their own personal interests, but also bear in mind the common interest of all the oppressed, working peasantry.*

*“Factories, workshops, mines and other tools and means of production become the property of the working class as a whole, which will run all enterprises themselves, through their trade unions, getting production under way and striving to tie together all industry in the country in a single, unitary organisation.”* [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 266]

They continually stressed that the “land, the factories, the workshops, the mines, the railroads and the other wealth of the people must belong to the working people themselves, to those who work in them, that is to say, they must be socialised.” This meant a system of use-rights, as “the land, the mines, the factories, the workshops, the railroads, and so on, will belong neither to individuals nor to the government, but solely to those who work with them.” [Op. Cit., p. 273 and p. 281]

In industry, such a system clearly implied a system of worker’s self-management within a system of federated factory committees or union branches. On the land, it meant the end of landlordism, with peasants being entitled to as much

land and equipment as they could cultivate without the use of hired labour. As a Makhnovist congress in 1919 resolved:

*“The land question should be decided on a Ukraine-wide scale at an all-Ukrainian congress of peasants on the following basis: in the interests of socialism and the struggle against the bourgeoisie, all land should be transferred to the hands of the toiling peasants. According to the principle that ‘the land belongs to nobody’ and can be used only by those who care about it, who cultivate it, the land should be transferred to the toiling peasantry of Ukraine for their use without pay according to the norm of equal distribution.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155]

In addition to advocating the abolition of private property in land and the end of wage labour by distributing land to those who worked it, the Makhnovists also supported the forming of “free” or “working” communes. Like their policy of land distribution, it also aimed to benefit the poorer peasants and rural wage labourers. The “free commune” was a voluntary association of rural workers who took over an expropriated estate and managed the land in common. The commune was managed by a general meeting of all its members and based on the liberty, equality and solidarity of its members.

Clearly, in terms of their economic policies, the Makhnovists proposed a clear and viable alternative to both rural and urban capitalism, namely workers’ self-management. Industry and land would be socialised, with the actual management of production resting in the hands of the workers themselves and co-ordinated by federated workers’ organisations. On the land, they proposed the creation of voluntary communes which would enable the benefits of co-operative labour to be applied. Like their political ideas, their economic ideas were designed to ensure the freedom of working people and the end of hierarchy in all aspects of society.

In summary, the Makhnovist had a constructive social ideas which aimed to ensure the total economic and political emancipation of the working people. Their vision of a free society was based on a federation of free, self-managed soviets, the socialisation of the means of life and workers’ self-management of production by a federation of labour unions or factory committees. As the black flags they carried into battle read, “liberty or death” and “the land to the peasants, the factories to the workers.”

## 7 Did they apply their ideas in practice?

Yes, the Makhnovists consistently applied their political and social ideas when they had the opportunity to do so. Unlike the Bolsheviks, who quickly turned away from their stated aims of soviet democracy and workers' control in favour of dictatorship by the Bolshevik party, the Makhnovists did all in their power to encourage, create and defend working-class freedom and self-management (see section 14 for further discussion). In the words of historian Christopher Reed:

*“there can be no question that the anarchists did everything they could to free the peasants and workers and give them the opportunity to develop their own forms of collective control over land and factories . . . [T]he Ukrainian anarchists fought under the slogan of land to the peasants, factories to the workers and power to the soviets. Wherever they had influence they supported the setting up of communes and soviets. They introduced safeguards intended to protect direct self-government from organised interference . . . They conducted relentless class war against landlords, officers, factory owners and the commercial classes could expect short shrift from Makhno and his men, especially if they had taken up arms against the people or, like the Whites . . . , had been responsible for looting, pogroms and vicious reprisals against unarmed peasants on a colossal scale.”*  
[From *Tsar to Soviets*, p. 263]

As we discussed in the last section, the core ideas which inspired the Makhnovists were working-class self-determination and self-management. They aimed at the creation of a “free soviet system” and the end of capitalism by rural and industrial self-management. It is to the credit of the Makhnovists that they applied these ideas in practice rather than talking about high principles and doing the exact opposite.

In practice, of course, the war left little room for much construction work. As Voline pointed out, one of the key disadvantages of the movement was the “almost continual necessity of fighting and defending itself against all kinds of enemies, without being able to concentrate on peaceful and truly positive works.” [The Unknown Revolution, p. 571] However, in the disruption of the Civil War the Makhnovists applied their ideas when and where they could.

Within the army, as we discussed in section 5, the insurgent troops elected their own commanders and had regular mass assemblies to discuss policy and the agreed norms of conduct within it. In civilian matters, the Makhnovists **from the start** encouraged working-class self-organisation and self-government. By late 1917, in the area around Hulyai Pole “the toiling masses proceeded . . . to consolidate their revolution. The little factories functioned . . . under the control of

*the workers. The estates were split up . . . among the peasants . . . a certain number of agricultural communes were formed.*" [David Footman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 248]

The aim of the Makhnovists was to "*transfer all the lands owned by the gentry, monasteries, and the state into the hands of peasants or to organise, if they wished, peasant communes.*" [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 70] This policy was introduced from the start, and by the autumn of 1917, all land, equipment and livestock around Hulyai Pole had been expropriated from the gentry and kulaks and placed in the hands of working peasants. Land reform had been achieved by the direct action of the peasantry.

However, "*many of the peasants understood that the task was not finished, that it was not enough to appropriate a plot of land and be content with it. From the hardships of their lives they learned that enemies were watching from all sides, and that they must stick together. In several places there were attempts to organise social life communally.*" [Arshinov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 86]

In line with social anarchist theory, the Makhnovists also tried to introduce collective forms of farming. These experiments in collective working and living were called "*free communes.*" Despite the difficult military situation communes were established, principally near Hulyai Pole, in the autumn of 1917. This activity was resumed in February to March of 1918. They re-appeared in early 1919, once the threat of counter-revolution had been (temporarily) defeated.

There were four of these communes within five miles of Hulyai Pole itself and many more further afield. According to Makhno, these agricultural communes "*were in most cases organised by peasants, though sometimes their composition was a mixture of peasants and workmen [sic!]. Their organisation was based on equality and solidarity of the members. All members of these communes — both men and women — applied themselves willingly to their tasks, whether in the field or the household.*" Unlike many communes, people were given the personal space they desired, so "*any members of the commune who wanted to cook separately for themselves and their children, or to take food from the communal kitchens and eat it in their own quarters, met with no objection from the other members.*" The management of each commune "*was conducted by a general meeting of all its members.*" In addition, the communes decided to introducing anarchist schooling based on the ideas of Francisco Ferrer (see section J.5.13 for details). Makhno himself worked on one for two days a week for a period. [Makhno, quoted by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 131]

They were set up on the former estates of landlords, and consisted of around 10 families or 100 to 300 people and although each had peasant anarchist members not all the members were anarchists. Makhno worked on Commune No. 1, which was on the estate of former landlord Klassen. When re-founded in 1919 this commune was named after Rosa Luxemburg, the Marxist revolutionary who had



recently been murdered in the German revolution. It was a success, for by the spring sowing it had grown from nine families to 285 members working 340 acres of land. The communes represented a way that poor and middle peasants could pool resources to work estates that they could not have worked otherwise and, as Michael Malet points out, *“they were organised from the bottom up, not the top down.”* [Op. Cit., p. 121]

However, as Makhno himself acknowledged, while the *“majority of the toiling population saw in the organisation of rural communes the healthy germ of a new social life”* which could provide a *“model of a free and communal form of life,”* the *“mass of people did not go over to it.”* They cited as their reasons *“the advance of the German and Austrian armies, their own lack of organisation, and their inability to defend this order against the new ‘revolutionary’ [Bolshevik] and counter-revolutionary authorities. For this reason the toiling population of the district limited their revolutionary activity to supporting in every way those bold springs.”* [Makhno, quoted by Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 132] Given that the communes were finally destroyed by White and Red forces in June 1919, their caution was justified. After this, peace did not return long enough for the experiment to be restarted.

As Michael Malet argues:

*“Very few peasant movements in history have been able to show in practice the sort of society and type of landholding they would like to see. The Makhnovist movement is proof that peasant revolutionaries can put forward positive, practical ideas.”* [Op. Cit., p. 121]

The Makhnovist experiments, it should be noted, have strong similarities to the rural revolution during the Spanish Revolution of 1936 (see sections I.8.5 and I.8.6 for more details).

As well as implementing their economic ideas on workers’ self-management, land reform and free communes, the Makhnovists also organised regional congresses as well as local soviets. Most of the activity happened in and around Hulyai Pole, the focal point of the movement. This was in accord with their vision of a *“free soviet system.”* Needless to say, the congresses could only be called during periods of relative calm (i.e. the Makhnovist home area was not occupied by hostile forces) and so congresses of insurgents, peasants and workers were called in early 1919 and another in October of that year. The actual dates of the regional congresses were:

23 January 1919 at Velyka Mykhailivka

12 February 1919 at Hulyai Pole

10 April 1919 at Hulyai Pole

20 October 1919 at Aleksandrovska

A congress for the fifteenth of June 1919 never met because Trotsky unilaterally banned it, under pain of death to anyone even **discussing** it, never mind calling for it or attending as a delegate. Unlike the third congress, which ignored a similar ban by Dybenko, the fourth congress could not go ahead due to the treacherous attack by the Red Army that preceded it. Four Makhnovist commanders were executed by the Red Army for advertising this congress. Another congress planned for Aleksandrovska in November 1920 was also prevented by Bolshevik betrayal, namely the attack after Wrangel had been defeated. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108] See section 13 for further details.

The reason for these regional congresses was simple, to co-ordinate the revolution. *“It was indispensable,”* Arshinov notes, *“to establish institutions which unified first a district composed of various villages, and then the districts and departments which composed the liberated region. It was indispensable to find general solutions for problems common to the entire region. It was indispensable to create organs suitable for these tasks. And the peasants did not fail to create them. These organs were the regional congresses of peasants and workers.”* [Op. Cit., pp. 87–8] These congresses *“were composed of delegates of peasants, workers and of the insurgent army, and were intended to clarify and record the decisions of the toiling masses and to be regarded as the supreme authority for the liberated area.”* [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 266]

The first congress, which was the smallest, discussed the strengthening of the front, the adoption of a common nomenclature for popular organisations (soviets and the like) and to send a delegation to convince the draftees in the Nationalist forces to return home. It was also decided to organise a second congress. The second congress was larger, having 245 delegates from 350 districts. This congress *“was strongly anti-Bolshevik and favoured a democratic socio-political way of life.”* [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 153] One delegate made the issue clear:

*“No party has a right to usurp governmental power into its own hands . . . We want life, all problems, to be decided locally, not by order from any authority above; and all peasants and workers should decide their own fate, while those elected should only carry out the toilers’ wish.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 154]

A general resolution was passed, which acknowledged the fact that the Bolshevik party was *“demanding a monopoly of the Revolution.”* It also stated:

*“With deep regret the Congress must also declare that apart from external enemies a perhaps even greater danger, arising from its internal shortcomings, threatens the Revolution of the Russian and Ukrainian peasants and workers. The Soviet Governments of Russia and of the Ukraine, by their orders and decrees, are making efforts to deprive local soviets of peasants and workers’ deputies of their freedom and autonomy.”* [quoted by Footman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 267]

As noted in section 5, the congress also decided to issue an “obligatory” mobilisation to gather troops for the Army. It also accepted a resolution on land reform, stating that the land “*belongs to nobody*” and could be used by anyone as long as they did not use wage labour (see section 6 for the full resolution). The congress accepted a resolution against plunder, violence, and anti-Jewish pogroms, recognising it as an attempt by the Tsarist government to “*turn the attention of all toiling people away from the real reason for their poverty,*” namely the Tsarist regime’s oppression. [quoted by Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 155]

The second congress also elected the Revolutionary Military Soviet of Peasants, Workers and Insurgents, which had “*no powers to initiate policy but designed merely to implement the decisions of the periodic congresses.*” [Footman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 267]

The third congress was the largest and most representative, with delegates from 72 volosts (in which two million people lived). This congress aimed to “*clarify the situation and to consider the prospects for the future of the region.*” It decided to conduct a voluntary mobilisation of men to fight the Whites and “*rejected, with the approval of both rich and poor peasants, the Bolshevik expropriations.*” [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 158] Toward the end of the congress, it received a telegram from the Bolshevik commander Dybenko calling it “*counter-revolutionary,*” its organisers “*outlaws*” and dissolving it by his order. The congress immediately voted an indignant resolution in reply. This corrected Dybenko’s factual mistakes on who called it, informed him why it was called, gave him a history lesson on the Makhnovist region and asked him:

*“Can there exist laws made by a few people who call themselves revolutionaries which permit them to outlaw a whole people who are more revolutionary than they are themselves? . . .*

*“Is it permissible, is it admissible, that they should come to the country to establish laws of violence, to subjugate a people who have just overthrown all lawmakers and all laws?*

*“Does there exist a law according to which a revolutionary has the right to apply the most severe penalties to a revolutionary mass, of which he calls himself*

*the defender, simply because this mass has taken the good things which the revolution promised them, freedom and equality, without his permission?*

*“Should the mass of revolutionary people perhaps be silent when such a revolutionary takes away the freedom which they have just conquered?”*

*“Do the laws of the revolution order the shooting of a delegate because he believes he ought to carry out the mandate given him by the revolutionary mass which elected him?”*

*“Whose interests should the revolutionary defend; those of the Party or those of the people who set the revolution in motion with their blood?”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 103]

As we discuss in section 13, Trotsky’s order to ban the fourth congress indicates that such laws do exist, with the *“entire peasant and labouring population are declared guilty of high treason if they dare participate in their own free congress.”* [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 123]

The last congress was held between 20<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of October in Aleksandrovsk. One delegate was to be elected per 3000 people and one delegate per military unit. This gave 270 mostly peasant delegates. Only 18 were workers, of which 6 were Mensheviks, who walked out after Makhno called them *“lapdogs of the bourgeoisie”* during the discussion on *“free socio-economic organisations”*! [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 109] The congress passed a number of resolutions, concentrating on the care of the wounded and the poorest part of the population, a voluntary mobilisation, voluntary peasant contributions to feed the army and forced levies on the bourgeoisie.

According to Voline, the chairman, Makhnovist ideas were freely discussed:

*“The idea of free Soviets, genuinely functioning in the interests of the working population; the question of direct relationships between peasants and city workers, based on mutual exchange of the products of their labour; the launching of a libertarian and egalitarian social organisation in the cities and the country; all these question were seriously and closely studied by the delegates themselves, with the assistance and co-operation of qualified comrades.”* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 640]

He notes that the congress *“decided that the workers, without any authority, would organise their economic, political and administrative life for themselves, by means of their own abilities, and through their own direct organs, united on a federative basis.”* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 641]

It is significant to note that the congress also discussed the activities of the Makhnovists within the city itself. One delegate raised the issue of the activities

of the Kontrrazvedka, the Makhnovist “*counter-intelligence*” section. As noted in section 5, the Makhnovists, like all the armies in the Russian Civil War, had its intelligence service. It combined a number of functions, such as military reconnaissance, arrest and holding of prisoners, counter-insurgency (“*Originally it had a punitive function, but because of improper treatment of prisoners of war, it was deprived of its punitive function.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 300]). The delegate stated that this “*counter-espionage service*” was engaged in “*arbitrary acts and uncontrolled actions — of which some are very serious, rather like the Bolshevik Cheka.*” [quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 643] Immediately a commission of several delegates was created to investigate the situation. Voline argues that “[s]uch an initiative on the part of workers’ delegates would not have been possible under the Bolshevik regime. It was by activity of this kind that the congress gave a preview of the way in which a society should function from the beginning if it is based on a desire for progress and self-realisation.” [Voline, *Ibid.*] Sadly, the commission could not complete its work due to the city being evacuated soon after the congress.

Another incident shows that under the Makhnovists the civilian population was in control. A delegate noted that Klein, the Makhnovist military commander in the city, had become publicly and riotously drunk after issuing proclamations against drunkenness. Klein was called before the congress, which accepted his apology and his request to be sent to the front, away from the boredom of desk work which had driven him to drink! This, according to Voline, showed that the workers and their congress were the masters and the army its servant. [Voline, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 645–7]

Outside of the congresses the work of local Soviets was to be co-ordinated through the Revolutionary Military Soviet (RMS), the first RMS was set up by the 2<sup>nd</sup> congress and consisted of one delegate for each of the 32 volsts the Makhnovista had liberated. The RMS was to be answerable to the congresses and limited to implementing their decisions but the difficult military situation meant this seldom happened. When it did (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress) the Congress had no problems with its actions in the previous period. After the Aleksandrovsk congress, the RMS consisted of 22 delegates including three known Bolsheviks and four known Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks considered the remaining delegates “*anarchists or anarchist sympathisers*”.

The military chaos of 1920 saw the RMS dissolved and replaced by the Soviet of Revolutionary Insurgents of the Ukraine, which consisted of seven members elected by the insurgent army. Its secretary was a left Socialist Revolutionary. The RMS in addition to making decisions between Congresses carried out propaganda work including the editing of the Makhnovist paper “*The Road to Freedom*” and collected and distributed money.

Lastly, we must discuss what happened when the Makhnovists applied their ideas in any cities they liberated as this gives a clear idea of the way they applied their ideas in practice. Anarchist participant Yossif the Emigrant stated that it was *“Makhno’s custom upon taking a city or town to call the people together and announce to them that henceforth they are free to organise their lives as they think best for themselves. He always proclaims complete freedom of speech and press; he does not fill the prisons or begin executions, as the Communists do.”* He stressed it was *“the expression of the toilers themselves”* and *“the first great mass movement that by its own efforts seeks to free itself from government and establish economic self-determination. In that sense it is thoroughly Anarchistic.”* [Alexander Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, pp. 193–5]

Arshinov paints a similar picture:

*“As soon as they entered a city, they declared that they did not represent any kind of authority, that their armed forces obliged no one to any sort of obligation and had no other aim than to protect the freedom of the working people. The freedom of the peasants and the workers, said the Makhnovists, resides in the peasants and workers themselves and may not be restricted. In all fields of their lives it is up to the workers and peasants themselves to construct whatever they consider necessary. As for the Makhnovists — they can only assist them with advice, by putting at their disposal the intellectual or military forces they need, but under no circumstances can the Makhnovists prescribe for them in any manner.”* [Arshinov, **Op. Cit.**, p. 148]

In addition, the Makhnovists *“fully applied the revolutionary principles of freedom of speech, of thought, of the press, and of political association. In all cities and towns occupied by the Makhnovists, they began by lifting all the prohibitions and repealing all the restrictions imposed on the press and on political organisations by one or another power.”* Indeed, the *“only restriction that the Makhnovists considered necessary to impose on the Bolsheviks, the left Socialist-Revolutionaries and other statists was a prohibition on the formation of those ‘revolutionary committees’ which sought to impose a dictatorship over the people.”* They also took the opportunity to destroy every prison they got their hands on, believing that free people *“have no use for prisons”* which are *“always built only to subjugate the people, the workers and peasants.”* [Op. Cit., p. 153, p. 154 and p. 153]

The Makhnovists encouraged self-management. Looking at Aleksandrovsk:

*“They immediately invited the working population to participate in a general conference of the workers of the city. When the conference met, a detailed report was given on the military situation in the region and it was proposed*

*that the workers organise the life of the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their own organisations, basing themselves on the principles of labour and equality. The workers enthusiastically acclaimed all these suggestions; but they hesitated to carry them out, troubled by their novelty, and troubled mainly by the nearness of the front, which made them fear that the situation of the town was uncertain and unstable. The first conference was followed by a second. The problems of organising life according to principles of self-management by workers were examined and discussed with animation by the masses of workers, who all welcomed these ideas with the greatest enthusiasm, but who only with difficulty succeeded in giving them concrete forms. Railroad workers took the first step in this direction. They formed a committee charged with organising the railway network of the region . . . From this point, the proletariat of Aleksandrovsk began to turn systematically to the problem of creating organs of self-management.” [Op. Cit., p. 149]*

Unfortunately, the Makhnovists occupied only two cities (Alexandrovsk for four weeks and Katerinoslav for two periods of one and five weeks respectively). As a rule the Makhnovist rank and file had little or no experience of life in the cities and this placed severe limits on their ability to understand the specific problems of the workers there. In addition, the cities did not have a large anarchist movement, meaning that the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had more support than they did. Both parties were, at best, neutral to the Makhnovists and anarchists, so making it likely that they would influence the city workers against the movement. As Voline noted, the “*absence of a vigorous organised workers’ movement which could support the peasant insurgents*” was a disadvantage. [Op. Cit., p. 571]

There were minor successes in both cities. In Alexandrovsk, some trains were got running and a few factories reopened. In Katerinoslav (where the city was under a state of siege and constant bombardment by the Whites), the tobacco workers won a collective agreement that had long been refused and the bakers set themselves to preparing the socialisation of their industry and drawing up plans to feed both the army and the civilian population. Unsurprisingly, the bakers had long been under anarcho-syndicalist influence. [Malet, Op. Cit., p. 124]

Clearly, whenever they could, the Makhnovists practised their stated goals of working-class self-management and supported the organisational structures to ensure the control of and participation in the social revolution by the toiling masses. Equally, when they liberated towns and cities they did not impose their own power upon the working-class population but rather urged it to organise itself by setting up soviets, unions and other forms of working-class power. They urged workers to organise self-management of industry. True to the anarchist

vision of a free society, they advocated and practised freedom of assembly, speech and organisation. In the words of historian Christopher Reed:

*“Makhno’s Insurgent Army . . . was the quintessence of a self-administered, people’s revolutionary army. It arose from the peasants, it was composed of peasants, it handed power to the peasants. It encouraged the growth of communes, co-operatives and soviets but distrusted all permanent elites attempting to take hold within them. It would be foolish to think that Makhno was supported by every peasant or that he and his followers could not, on occasions, direct their cruelty towards dissidents within their own ranks, but, on the whole, the movement perhaps erred on the side of being too self-effacing, of handing too much authority to the population at key moments.” [From *Tsar to Soviets*, p. 260]*

As such, Makhnovist practice matched its theory. This can be said of few social movements and it is to their credit that this is the case.

## 8 Weren’t the Makhnovists just Kulaks?

According to Trotsky (and, of course, repeated by his followers), *“Makhno created a cavalry of peasants who supplied their own horses. These were not the downtrodden village poor whom the October revolution first awakened, but the strong and well-fed peasants who were afraid of losing what they had. The anarchist ideas of Makhno (ignoring of the state, non-recognition of the central power) corresponded to the spirit of this kulak cavalry as nothing else could.”* He argued that the Makhnovist struggle was not the anarchist struggle against the state and capitalism, but rather *“a struggle of the infuriated petty property owner against the proletarian dictatorship.”* The Makhno movement, he stressed, was just an example of the *“convulsions of the peasant petty bourgeoisie which desired, of course, to liberate itself from capital but at the same time did not consent to subordinate itself to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”* [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 80, p. 89 and pp. 89–90]

Unfortunately for those who use this kind of argument against the Makhnovists, it fails to stand up to any kind of scrutiny. Ignoring the sophistry of equating the Bolshevik party’s dictatorship with the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” we can easily refute Trotsky’s somewhat spurious argument concerning the background of the Makhnovists.

Firstly, however, we should clarify what is meant by the term *“kulak.”* According to one set of Trotskyist editors, it was *“popularly used to refer to well-to-do peasants who owned land and hired poor peasants to work it.”* [“glossary,” Lenin



and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 146] The term itself derives from the Russian for “fist,” with appropriate overtones of grasping and meanness. In other words, a rural small-scale capitalist (employer of wage labour and often the renter of land and loaner of money as well) rather than a well-off peasant as such. Trotsky, however, muddies the water considerably by talking about the “*peasant petty bourgeoisie*” as well. Given that a peasant is “*petty*” (i.e. petit) bourgeois (i.e. own and use their own means of production), Trotsky is blurring the lines between rural capitalist (kulak) and the middle peasantry, as occurred so often under Bolshevik rule.

Secondly, we could just point to the eyewitness accounts of the anarchists Arshinov and Voline. Both stress that the Makhno movement was a mass revolutionary movement of the peasant and working poor in the Southern Ukraine. Arshinov states that after Denikin’s troops had been broken in 1919, the Makhnovists “*literally swept through villages, towns and cities like an enormous broom*” and the “*returned pomeshchiks [landlords], the kulaks, the police, the priests*” were destroyed, so refuting the “*the myth spread by the Bolsheviks about the so-called kulak character of the Makhnovshchina.*” Ironically, he states that “*wherever the Makhnovist movement developed, the kulaks sought the protection of the Soviet authorities, and found it there.*” [Op. Cit., p. 145] Yossif the Emigrant, another anarchist active in the movement, told anarchist Alexander Berkman that while there was a “*kulak*” element within it, “*the great majority are not of that type.*” [quoted by Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 187] According to Gallina Makhno (Makhno’s wife), when entering a town or village it was “*always Makhno’s practice to compel the rich peasants, the kulaki, to give up their surplus wealth, which was then divided among the poor, Makhno keeping a share for his army. Then he would call a meeting of the villagers, address them on the purposes of the povstantsi [partisan] movement, and distribute his literature.*” [Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 149]

However, this would be replying to Trotsky’s assertions with testimony which was obviously pro-Makhnovist. As such, we need to do more than this, we need to refute Trotsky’s assertions in depth, drawing on as many non-anarchist sources and facts as possible.

The key to refuting Trotsky’s argument that the Makhnovists were just kulaks is to understand the nature of rural life before and during 1917. Michael Malet estimates that in 1917, the peasantry could be divided into three broad categories. About 40 percent could no longer make a living off their land or had none, another 40 per cent who could make ends meet, except in a bad year, and 20 per cent who were relatively well off, with a fraction at the very top who were very well off. [Op. Cit., p. 117] Assuming that “*kulak*” simply meant “*rich*” or “*well-off*” peasant, then Trotsky is arguing that the Makhnovist movement represented and was based on this top 20 per cent. However, if we take the term “*kulak*” to

mean “*small rural capitalist*” (i.e. employer of wage labour) then this figure would be substantially smaller as few within this group would employ hired labour or rent land. In fact, the percentage of peasant households in Russia employing permanent wage-labour was 3.3% in 1917, falling to 1% in 1920. [Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class*, p. 171]

In 1917, the peasants all across the Russian Empire took back the land stolen by the landlords. This led to two developments. Firstly, there was a “*powerful levelling effect*” in rural life. [Shanin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 159] Secondly, the peasants would only support those who supported their aspirations for land reform (which was why the Bolsheviks effectively stole the Socialist-Revolutionary land policy in 1917). The Ukraine was no different. In 1917 the class structure in the countryside changed when the Hulyai Pole peasants were amongst the first to seize the landlords’ land. In August 1917 Makhno assembled all the landed gentry (“*pomeshchiks*”) of the region “*and made them give him all the documents relating to lands and buildings.*” After making an exact inventory of all this property and presenting a report to the local and then district congress of soviets, he “*proceeded to equalise the rights of the pomeshchiks and kulaks with those of the poor peasant labourers in regard to the use of the land . . . the congress decided to let the pomeshchiks and kulaks have a share of the land, as well as tools and livestock, equal to that of the labourers.*” Several other peasant congresses nearby followed this example and adopted the same measure. [Peter Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 53–4]

Most of this land, tools and livestock was distributed to poor peasants, the rest was used to set up voluntary communes where the peasants themselves (and not the state) self-managed the land. Thus the peasants’ “*economic conditions in the region of the Makhno movement were greatly improved at the expense of the landlords, the church, monasteries, and the richest peasants.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 214] This redistribution was based on the principle that every peasant was entitled to as much land as their family could cultivate without the use of hired labour. The abolition of wage labour in the countryside was also the method the anarchists were to use in Spain to divide up the land some 20 years later.

We should also note that the Makhnovist policy of land reform based on the abolition of wage labour was, as we noted in section 7, the position agreed at the second regional congress called in 1919. The Makhnovists specifically argued with regards to the kulaks:

*“We are sure that . . . the kulak elements of the village will be pushed to one side by the very course of events. The toiling peasantry will itself turn effortlessly on the kulaks, first by adopting the kulak’s surplus land for general use, then naturally drawing the kulak elements into the social organisation.”* [cited by Michael Malet, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 118–9]

As such, when Trotsky talks about the “*downtrodden village poor whom the October revolution first awakened*,” he is wrong. In the area around Hulyai Pole it was **not** the October revolution which “*first awakened*” them into action, it was the activities of Makhno and the anarchists during the summer and autumn of 1917 which had done that (or, more correctly, it was their activities which aided this process as the poor peasants and landless workers needed no encouragement to expropriate the landlords).

Needless to say, this land redistribution reinforced Makhno’s popularity with the people and was essential for the army’s later popularity and its ability to depend on the peasants for support. However, the landlords and richer kulaks did not appreciate it and, unsurprisingly, tried to crush the movement when they could. Once the Austro-Germans invaded, the local rich took the opportunity to roll back the social revolution and the local **pomeshchiks** and **kulaks** formed a “*special volunteer detachment*” to fight Makhno once he had returned from exile in July 1918. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 59]

This system of land reform did not seek to divide the village. Indeed, the Makhnovist approach is sometimes called the “*united village*” theory. Rather than provoke unnecessary and damaging conflict behind the frontlines, land reform would be placed in the hands of the village community, which would ensure that even the kulaks would have a fair stake in the post-revolutionary society as everyone would have as much land as they could till without using hired labour. The Bolshevik policy, as we will see, aimed at artificially imposing “class conflict” upon the villages from without and was a disaster as it was totally alien to the actual socio-economic situation. Unsurprisingly, peasant communities **as a whole** rose up against the Bolsheviks all across Russia.

As such, the claim that the Makhnovists were simply “*kulaks*” is false as it fails to, firstly, acknowledge the actual pre-revolutionary composition of the peasantry and, secondly, to understand the social-revolution that had happened in the region of Hulyai Pole in 1917 and, thirdly, totally ignores the actual Makhnovist position on land reform. As Michael Malet argues, the Bolsheviks “*totally misconstrued the nature of the Makhno movement. It was not a movement of kulaks, but of the broad mass of the peasants, especially the poor and middle peasants.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 122]

This was sometimes acknowledged by Bolsheviks themselves. Iakovlev acknowledged in 1920 that in 1919 Makhno “*was a real peasant idol, an expression of all peasant spontaneity against . . . Communists in the cities and simultaneously against city capitalists and landowners. In the Makhno movement it is difficult to distinguish where the poor peasant begins [and] the ‘kulak’ ends. It was a spontaneous peasant movement . . . In the village we had no foothold, there was not one element with which we could join that would be our ally in the struggle against the bandits [sic!].*” [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 157]

According to a Soviet author present at the Makhnovist regional congresses on January 23 and February 12: “In 1919 when I asked the chairman of the two Congresses (a Jewish farmer) whether the ‘kulaks’ were allowed to participate in the Congress, he angrily responded: ‘When will you finally stop talking about kulaks? Now we have no kulaks among us: everybody is tilling as much land as he wishes and as much as he can.’” [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 293]

According to Christian Rakovskii, the Bolshevik ruler of Ukraine, “three-fourths of the membership of the [partisan] bands were poor peasants.” He presented a highly original and inventive explanation of this fact by arguing that “rich peasants stayed in the village and paid poor ones to fight. Poor peasants were the hired army of the kulaks.” [Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front the Lines of the Civil War*, p. 112 and p. 328]

Even Trotsky (himself the son of a rich peasant!) let the cat out of the bag in 1919:

*“The liquidation of Makhno does not mean the end of the Makhnovschyna, which has its roots in the ignorant popular masses.”* [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 122]

Ultimately, all sources (including Bolshevik ones) accept that in the autumn of 1919 (at the very least) Makhno’s support was overwhelming and came from all sections of the population.

Even ignoring the fact there was a social revolution and the eye-witness Bolshevik accounts (including Trotsky’s!) which contradict Trotsky’s assertions, Trotsky can be faulted for other reasons.

The most important issue is simply that the Makhnovist movement could not have survived four years if (at best) 20 per cent of the population supported it. As Christopher Reed notes, when the Makhnovists were “in retreat they would abandon their weapons and merge with the local population. The fact that they were able to succeed shows how closely they were linked with the ordinary peasants because such tactics made Makhno’s men very vulnerable to informers. There were very few examples of betrayal.” [Op. Cit., p. 260] If Makhno’s social base was as weak as claimed there would have been no need for the Bolsheviks to enter into alliances with him, particularly in the autumn of 1920 when the Makhnovists held no significant liberated area. Even after the defeat of Wrangel and the subsequent Bolshevik betrayal and repression, Makhno’s mass base allowed him to remain active for months. Indeed, it was only when the peasants themselves had become exhausted in 1921 due to worsening economic conditions and state repression, were the Makhnovists finally forced into exile.

In the attempt to “*eradicate his influence in the countryside*” the Bolsheviks “*by weight of numbers and consistent ruthlessness they achieved a partial success.*” This was achieved by state terrorism:

*“On the occupation of a village by the Red Army the **Cheka** would hunt out and hang all active Makhnovist supporters; an amenable Soviet would be set up; officials would be appointed or imported to organise the poor peasants . . . and three or four Red militia men left as armed support for the new village bosses.”*  
[David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 292]

Moreover, in these “*military operations the Bolsheviks shot all prisoners. The Makhnovists shot all captured officers unless the Red rank and file strongly interceded for them. The rank and file were usually sent home, though a number volunteered for service with the Insurgents. Red Army reports complain of poor morale . . . The Reds used a number of Lettish and Chinese troops to decrease the risk of fraternisation.*” [Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 293] If the Makhnovists were made up of kulaks, why would the Bolsheviks fear fraternisation? Equally, if the Makhnovists were “kulaks” then how could they have such an impact on Red Army troops (who were mostly poor peasants)? After all, Trotsky had been complaining that “Makhnovism” had been infecting nearby Red Army troops and in August 1919 was arguing that it was “*still a poison which has infected backward units in the Ukrainian army.*” In December 1919, he noted that “*disintegration takes place in unstable units of our army when they came into contact with Makhno’s forces.*” It seems unlikely that a movement made up of “kulaks” could have such an impact. Moreover, as Trotsky noted, not all Makhnovists were anarchists, “*some of them wrongly regard themselves as Communists.*” Again, why would people who regarded themselves as Communists join a movement of “kulaks”? [How the Revolution Armed, vol. II, p. 367, p. 110 and p. 137]

In addition, it seems highly unlikely (to say the least!) that a movement which is alleged to be either made up of or supported by the kulaks could have had a land policy which emphasised and implemented an equal share for the poorest peasantry, not just of land but also of live and dead stock as well as opposing the hiring of labour. This fact is reinforced when we look at the peasant reaction to the Bolshevik (and, presumably, anti-kulak and pro-“downtrodden village poor”) land policy. Simply put, their policies resulted in massive peasant unrest directed against the Bolsheviks.

The Bolshevik land decrees of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of February, 1919, stated that large landlord holdings would become state farms and all stock was to be taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture, with only between one third and one half of the land being reserved for poor peasants. This was “*largely irrelevant, since the*

peasantry had expected, and in some cases already controlled, all of it. To them, the government was taking away their land, and not seizing it from the landlords, then keeping some of it and handing the rest over to its rightful owners.” [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 134] Thus the land was to expropriated by the state, **not** by the peasants. The result of this policy soon became clear:

*“The Bolsheviks expropriation policy was countervailed by the peasants’ resistance based upon their assumption that ‘the land belongs to nobody . . . it can be used only by those who care about it, who cultivate it.’ Thus the peasants maintained that all the property of the former landlords was now by right their own. This attitude was shared not only by the rich and middle peasants but also the poor and landless, for they all wished to be independent farmers. The poorer the areas, the more dissatisfied were the peasants with the Bolshevik decrees.*

*“Thus Communist agricultural policy and terrorism brought about a strong reaction against the new Bolshevik regime. By the middle of 1919, all peasants, rich and poor, distrusted the Bolsheviks.”* [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 156]

The Bolshevik inspired Poor Peasant Committees were “associated with this disastrous policy, were discredited, and their reintroduction would need the aid of troops.” [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 135] The Makhnovists, in contrast, did not impose themselves onto the villages, nor did they attempt to tell the peasants what to do and how to divide the land. Rather they advocated the formation of Free Soviets through which these decisions could be made. This, along with their support for land reform, helped win them mass support.

After evacuating the Ukraine in mid-1919 due to the success of Denikin’s counter-revolution, the Ukrainian Communists took time to mull over what had happened. The Central Committee’s November 1919 resolution on the Ukraine “gave top priority to the middle peasant — so often and so conveniently lumped in together with the kulak and dealt with accordingly — the transfer of landlord land to the poor peasants with only minimum exceptions for state farms.” These points were the basis of the new Ukrainian land law of 5<sup>th</sup> of February, 1920. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 135] This new law reflected long standing Makhnovist theory and practice. Therefore, the changing nature of Bolshevik land policy in the Ukraine indicates that Trotsky’s claims are false. The very fact that the Bolsheviks had to adjust their policies in line with Makhnovist theory indicates that the later appealed to the middle and poor peasants.

Equally, it seems strange that the “kulaks” who apparently dominated the movement should have let themselves be led by poor peasants and workers. Voline presents a list of some of the participants of the movement and the vast majority are either peasants or workers. [*Op. Cit.*, pp. 688–91] As historian

Michael Palij notes, “[a]lmost to a man, they [the Makhnovist leadership] were of poor peasant origin, with little formal education.” [Op. Cit., p. 254] Exceptions to the general rule were usually workers. Most were Anarchists or Socialist-Revolutionaries. [Palij, Op. Cit., pp. 254–62]

Of course, it can be argued that the leadership of a movement need not come from the class which it claims to lead. The leadership of the Bolsheviks, for example, had very few actual proletarians within it. However, it seems unlikely that a class would select as its leaders members of the population it oppressed! Equally, it seems as unlikely that poor peasants and workers would let themselves lead a movement of kulaks, whose aims would be alien to theirs. After all, poor peasants would seek land reform while kulaks would view this as a threat to their social position. As can be seen from the Makhnovist land policy, they argued for (and implemented) radical land reform, placing the land into the hands of peasants who worked the land without hiring labour (see section 7)

As regards Trotsky’s argument that the Makhnovists had to be kulaks because they originally formed a cavalry unit, it is easy to refute. Makhno himself was the son of poor peasants, an agricultural labourer and a worker in a factory. He was able to ride a horse, so why could other poor peasants not do so? Ultimately, it simply shows that Trotsky knew very little of Ukrainian peasant life and society.

Given that the Bolshevik government was meant to be a “worker-peasant” power, it seems strange that Trotsky dismisses the concerns of the peasantry so. He should have remembered that peasant uprisings against the Bolshevik government occurred constantly under the Bolsheviks, forcing them (eventually) to, first, recognise the false nature of their peasant policies in 1919 and, second, to introduce the NEP in 1921. As such, it seems somewhat ironic for Trotsky to attack the Makhnovists for not following flawed Bolshevik ideology as regards the peasantry!

The Bolsheviks, as Marxists, saw the peasants as “petit bourgeoisie” and uninterested in the revolution except as a means to grab their own plot of land. Their idea of land collectivisation was limited to state ownership. The initial Bolshevik land strategy can be summed up as mobilising the poor peasantry against the rest on the one hand and mobilising the city worker against the peasants (through forced grain confiscation on the other). The lack of knowledge of peasant life was the basis of this policy, which was abandoned in 1919 when it was soon proven to be totally wrong. Rather than see wealth extremes rise, the 1917 revolution saw a general levelling.

As regards the peasantry, here as elsewhere the Bolsheviks claimed their strategy was the objectively necessary (only possible) one in the circumstances. And

here again the Makhnovists demonstrate this to be false, as the Bolsheviks themselves acknowledged in practice by changing their agricultural policies and bringing them closer to the Makhnovist position.

Clearly, both factually and logically, Trotsky's arguments are false. Ultimately, like most Bolsheviks, Trotsky uses the term "*kulak*" as a meaningless term of abuse, with no relation to the actual class structure of peasant life. It simply means a peasant opposed to the Bolsheviks rather than an actual social strata. Essentially, he is using the standard Leninist technique of specifying a person's class (or ideas) based on whether they subscribe to (or simply follow without question) Leninist ideology (see section H.2.12 for further discussion of this). This explains why the Makhnovists went from being heroic revolutionaries to kulak bandits (and back again!) depending on whether their activity coincided with the needs of Bolshevik power or not. Expediency is not a sound base to build a critique, particularly one based simply on assertions like Trotsky's.

## 9 Were the Makhnovists anti-Semitic and pogromists?

No, they were not. Anyone who claims that the Makhnovist movement was anti-Semitic or conducted pogroms against Jews simply shows ignorance or a desire to deceive. As we will show, the Makhnovists were both theoretically and practically opposed to anti-Semitism and pogroms.

Unsurprisingly, many Leninists slander the Makhnovists on this score. Trotsky, for example, asserted in 1937 that Makhno's followers expressed "*a militant anti-Semitism.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 80] Needless to say, the Trotskyist editors of the book in question did not indicate that Trotsky was wrong in the accusation. In this way a slander goes unchecked and becomes "accepted" as being true. As the charge of "*militant anti-Semitism*" is a serious one, so it is essential that we (unlike Trotsky) provide evidence to refute it.

To do so we will present a chronological overview of the evidence against it. This will, to some degree, result in some duplication as well as lengthy quotations, however it is unavoidable. We are sorry to labour this point, but this allegation is sadly commonplace and it is essential to refute it fully.

Unsurprisingly, Arshinov's 1923 account of the movement takes on the allegations that the Makhnovists were anti-Semitic. He presents extensive evidence to show that the Makhnovists opposed anti-Semitism and pogroms. It is worth quoting him at length:



*“In the Russian press as well as abroad, the Makhnovshchina was often pictured as a very restricted guerrilla movement, foreign to ideas of brotherhood and international solidarity, and even tainted with anti-Semitism. Nothing could be more criminal than such slanders. In order to shed light on this question, we will cite here certain documented facts which relate to this subject.*

*“An important role was played in the Makhnovist army by revolutionaries of Jewish origin, many of whom had been sentenced to forced labour for participation in the 1905 revolution, or else had been obliged to emigrate to Western Europe or America. Among others, we can mention:*

*“**Kogan** — vice-president of the central organ of the movement, the Regional Revolutionary Military Council of Hulyai Pole. Kogan was a worker who, for reasons of principle, had left his factory well before the revolution of 1917, and had gone to do agricultural work in a poor Jewish agricultural colony. Wounded at the battle of Peregonovka, near Uman, against the Denikinists, he was seized by them at the hospital at Uman where he was being treated, and, according to witnesses, the Denikinists killed him with sabres.*

*“**L. Zin’kovsky (Zadov)** — head of the army’s counter espionage section, and later commander of a special cavalry regiment. A worker who before the 1917 revolution was condemned to ten years of forced labour for political activities. One of the most active militants of the revolutionary insurrection.*

*“**Elena Keller** — secretary of the army’s cultural and educational section. A worker who took part in the syndicalist movement in America. One of the organisers of the ‘Nabat’ Confederation.*

*“**Iosif Emigrant (Gotman)** — Member of the army’s cultural and educational section. A worker who took an active part in the Ukrainian anarchist movement. One of the organisers of the ‘Nabat’ Confederation, and later a member of its secretariat.*

*“**Ya. Alyi (Sukhovol’sky)** — worker, and member of the army’s cultural and educational section. In the Tsarist period he was condemned to forced labor for political activity. One of the organisers of the ‘Nabat’ Confederation and a member of its secretariat.*

*“We could add many more names to the long list of Jewish revolutionaries who took part in different areas of the Makhnovist movement, but we will not do this, because it would endanger their security.*

*“At the heart of the revolutionary insurrection, the Jewish working population was among brothers. The Jewish agricultural colonies scattered throughout*

*the districts of Mariupol, Berdyansk, Aleksandrovsk and elsewhere, actively participated in the regional assemblies of peasants, workers and insurgents; they sent delegates there, and also to the regional Revolutionary Military Council.*

*“Following certain anti-Semitic incidents which occurred in the region in February, 1919, Makhno proposed to all the Jewish colonies that they organise their self-defence and he furnished the necessary guns and ammunition to all these colonies. At the same time Makhno organised a series of meetings in the region where he appealed to the masses to struggle against anti-Semitism.*

*“The Jewish working population, in turn, expressed profound solidarity and revolutionary brotherhood toward the revolutionary insurrection. In answer to the call made by the Revolutionary Military Council to furnish voluntary combatants to the Makhnovist insurgent army, the Jewish colonies sent from their midst a large number of volunteers.*

*“In the army of the Makhnovist insurgents there was an exclusively Jewish artillery battery which was covered by an infantry detachment, also made up of Jews. This battery, commanded by the Jewish insurgent Shneider, heroically defended Hulyai Pole from Denikin’s troops in June, 1919, and the entire battery perished there, down to the last man and the last shell.*

*“In the extremely rapid succession of events after the uprising of 1918–19, there were obviously individuals who were hostile to Jews, but these individuals were not the products of the insurrection; they were products of Russian life. These individuals did not have any importance in the movement as a whole. If people of this type took part in acts directed against Jews, they were quickly and severely punished by the revolutionary insurgents.*

*“We described earlier the speed and determination with which the Makhnovists executed Hryhoriyiv and his staff, and we mentioned that one of the main reasons for this execution was their participation in pogroms of Jews.*

*“We can mention other events of this nature with which we are familiar.*

*“On May 12, 1919, several Jewish families — 20 people in all — were killed in the Jewish agricultural colony of Gor’kaya, near Aleksandrovsk. The Makhnovist staff immediately set up a special commission to investigate this event. This commission discovered that the murders had been committed by seven peasants of the neighbouring village of Uspenovka. These peasants were not part of the insurrectionary army. However, the Makhnovists felt it was impossible to leave this crime unpunished, and they shot the murderers. It was later established that this event and other attempts of this nature had been carried out at the instigation of Denikin’s agents, who had managed to infiltrate the region and*

*had sought by these means to prepare an atmosphere favourable for the entry of Denikin's troops into the Ukraine.*

*“On May 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>, 1919, Makhno and a few commanders hurriedly left the front and went to Hulyai Pole, where they were awaited by the Extraordinary Plenipotentiary of the Republic, L. Kamenev, who had arrived from Khar'kov with other representatives of the Soviet government. At the Verkhonii Tokmak station, Makhno saw a poster with the words: 'Death to Jews, Save the Revolution, Long Live Batko Makhno.'*

*“‘Who put up that poster?’ Makhno asked.*

*“He learned that the poster had been put up by an insurgent whom Makhno knew personally, a soldier who had taken part in the battle against Denikin's troops, a person who was in general decent. He presented himself immediately and was shot on the spot.*

*“Makhno continued the journey to Hulyai Pole. During the rest of the day and during his negotiations with the Plenipotentiary of the Republic, he could not free himself from the influence of this event. He realised that the insurgent had been cruelly dealt with, but he also knew that in conditions of war and in view of Denikin's advance, such posters could represent an enormous danger for the Jewish population and for the entire revolution if one did not oppose them quickly and resolutely.*

*“When the insurrectionary army retreated toward Uman in the summer of 1919, there were several cases when insurgents plundered Jewish homes. When the insurrectionary army examined these cases, it was learned that one group of four or five men was involved in all these incidents — men who had earlier belonged to Hryhoriyiv's detachments and who had been incorporated into the Makhnovist army after Hryhoriyiv was shot. This group was disarmed and discharged immediately. Following this, all the combatants who had served under Hryhoriyiv were discharged from the Makhnovist army as an unreliable element whose re-education was not possible in view of the unfavorable conditions and the lack of time. Thus we see how the Makhnovists viewed anti-Semitism. Outbursts of anti-Semitism in various parts of the Ukraine had no relation to the Makhnovshchina.*

*“Wherever the Jewish population was in contact with the Makhnovists, it found in them its best protectors against anti-Semitic incidents. The Jewish population of Hulyai Pole, Aleksandrovsk, Berdyansk, Mariupol, as well as all the Jewish agricultural colonies scattered throughout the Donets region, can themselves*

*corroborate the fact that they always found the Makhnovists to be true revolutionary friends, and that due to the severe and decisive measures of the Makhnovists, the anti-Semitic leanings of the counter-revolutionary forces in this region were promptly squashed.*

*“Anti-Semitism exists in Russia as well as in many other countries. In Russia, and to some extent in the Ukraine, it is not a result of the revolutionary epoch or of the insurrectionary movement, but is on the contrary a vestige of the past. The Makhnovists always fought it resolutely in words as well as deeds. During the entire period of the movement, they issued numerous publications calling on the masses to struggle against this evil. It can firmly be stated that in the struggle against anti-Semitism in the Ukraine and beyond its borders, their accomplishment was enormous.” [Arshinov, Op. Cit., pp. 211–215]*

Arshinov then goes on to quote an appeal published by Makhnovists together with anarchists referring to an anti-Semitic incident which took place in the spring of 1919. It is called **WORKERS, PEASANTS AND INSURGENTS FOR THE OPPRESSED, AGAINST THE OPPRESSORS — ALWAYS!**:

*“During the painful days of reaction, when the situation of the Ukrainian peasants was especially difficult and seemed hopeless, you were the first to rise as fearless and unconquerable fighters for the great cause of the liberation of the working masses. . . This was the most beautiful and joyful moment in the history of our revolution. You marched against the enemy with weapons in your hands as conscious revolutionaries, guided by the great idea of freedom and equality. . . But harmful and criminal elements succeeded in insinuating themselves into your ranks. And the revolutionary songs, songs of brotherhood and of the approaching liberation of the workers, began to be disrupted by the harrowing cries of poor Jews who were being tormented to death. . . On the clear and splendid foundation of the revolution appeared indelible dark blots caused by the parched blood of poor Jewish martyrs who now, as before, continue to be innocent victims of the criminal reaction, of the class struggle . . . Shameful acts are being carried out. Anti-Semitic pogroms are taking place.*

*“Peasants, workers and insurgents! You know that the workers of all nationalities — Russians, Jews, Poles, Germans, Armenians, etc. — are equally imprisoned in the abyss of poverty. You know that thousands of Jewish girls, daughters of the people, are sold and dishonoured by capital, the same as women of other nationalities. You know how many honest and valiant revolutionary Jewish fighters have given their lives for freedom in Russia during our whole liberation movement. . . The revolution and the honour of workers obliges all*

*of us to declare as loudly as possible that we make war on the same enemies: on capital and authority, which oppress all workers equally, whether they be Russian, Polish, Jewish, etc. We must proclaim everywhere that our enemies are exploiters and oppressors of various nationalities: the Russian manufacturer, the German iron magnate, the Jewish banker, the Polish aristocrat . . . The bourgeoisie of all countries and all nationalities is united in a bitter struggle against the revolution, against the labouring masses of the whole world and of all nationalities.*

*“Peasants, workers and insurgents! At this moment when the international enemy — the bourgeoisie of all countries — hurries to the Russian revolution to create nationalist hatred among the mass of workers in order to distort the revolution and to shake the very foundation of our class struggle — the solidarity and unity of all workers — you must move against conscious and unconscious counter-revolutionaries who endanger the emancipation of the working people from capital and authority. Your revolutionary duty is to stifle all nationalist persecution by dealing ruthlessly with all instigators of anti-Semitic pogroms.*

*“The path toward the emancipation of the workers can be reached by the union of all the workers of the world.” [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., 215–7]*

Arshinov also quotes an order issued by Makhno to “*all revolutionary insurgents without exception*” which states, in part, that the “*goal of our revolutionary army, and of every insurgent participating in it, is an honourable struggle for the full liberation of the Ukrainian workers from all oppression.*” This was “*why every insurgent should constantly keep in mind that there is no place among us for those who, under the cover of the revolutionary insurrection, seek to satisfy their desires for personal profit, violence and plunder at the expense of the peaceful Jewish population.*” [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., pp. 217–8]

Unsurprisingly, as an anarchist, Makhno presents a class analysis of the problem of racism, arguing as follows:

*“Every revolutionary insurgent should remember that his personal enemies as well as the enemies of all the people are the rich bourgeoisie, regardless of whether they be Russian, or Jewish, or Ukrainian. The enemies of the working people are also those who protect the unjust bourgeois regime, i.e., the Soviet Commissars, the members of repressive expeditionary corps, the Extraordinary Commissions which go through the cities and villages torturing the working people who refuse to submit to their arbitrary dictatorship. Every insurgent should arrest and send to the army staff all representatives of such expeditionary corps, Extraordinary Commissions and other institutions which oppress and*

*subjugate the people; if they resist, they should be shot on the spot. As for any violence done to peaceful workers of whatever nationality — such acts are unworthy of any revolutionary insurgent, and the perpetrator of such acts will be punished by death.*” [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 218]

It should also be noted that the chairmen of three Makhnovist regional congresses were Jewish. The first and second congresses had a Jewish chairman [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 293], while Voline was the chair for the fourth one held at Aleksandrovsk. Similarly, one of the heads of the army’s counter-espionage section was Jewish. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 212] Little wonder both Arshinov and Voline stress that an important role was played by Jews within the movement.

The Jewish American anarchists Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman were also in Russia and the Ukraine during the revolution. Between 1920 and 1921, they were in contact with anarchists involved with the Makhnovists and were concerned to verify what they had heard about the movement from Bolshevik and other sources. Berkman recounts meeting the Jewish anarchist Yossif the Emigrant (shot by the Bolsheviks in late 1920). Yossif stated that “*Nestor is merciless toward those guilty of Jew-baiting. Most of you have read his numerous proclamations against pogroms, and you know how severely he punishes such things.*” He stressed that any stories of atrocities and pogroms committed by the Makhnovists were “*lies wilfully spread by the Bolsheviks*” who “*hate Nestor worse than they do Wrangel.*” For Yossif, “*Makhno represents the real spirit of October.*” [quoted by Berkman, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 187–9] He also notes that Gallina Makhno, Nestor’s wife, would “*slightly raise her voice in indignation when reports of Jew-baiting by povstantsi [partisans] were mentioned. These stories were deliberately spread by the Bolsheviks, she averred. No-one could be more severe in punishing such excesses than Nestor. Some of his best comrades are Jews; there are a number of them in the Revolutionary Soviet and in other branches of the army. Few men are so loved and respected by the povstantsi as Yossif the Emigrant, who is a Jew, and Makhno’s best friend.*” [Berkman, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 238–9] Both Goldman and Berkman became friends with Makhno during his exile in Paris.

After his exile, Makhno himself spent time refuting allegations of anti-Semitism. Two articles on this subject are contained in **The Struggle Against the State and other Essays**, a collection of Makhno’s exile writings. In the article “*The Makhnovshchina and Anti-Semitism*” he recounts various examples of the “*uncompromising line on the anti-Semitism of pogromists*” which the Makhnovists took “*throughout its entire existence.*” This was “*because it was a genuinely revolutionary toilers’ movement in the Ukraine.*” He stressed that “[a]t no time did the movement make it its business to carry out pogroms against Jews nor did it ever encourage any.”

[**The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays**, p. 38 and p. 34] He wrote another article (called “*To the Jews of All Countries*”):

*“In my first ‘Appeal to Jews, published in the French libertarian newspaper, **Le Libertaire**, I asked Jews in general, which is to say the bourgeois and the socialist ones as well as the ‘anarchist’ ones like Yanovsky, who have all spoken of me as a pogromist against Jews and labelled as anti-Semitic the liberation movement of the Ukrainian peasants and workers of which I was the leader, to detail to me the specific facts instead of blathering vacuously away: just where and just when did I or the aforementioned movement perpetrate such acts? . . . Thus far, no such evidence advanced by Jews has come to my attention. The only thing that has appeared thus far in the press generally, certain Jewish anarchist organs included, regarding myself and the insurgent movement I led, has been the product of the most shameless lies and of the vulgarity of certain political mavericks and their hirelings.” [Op. Cit., p. 28]*

It should be noted that Yanovsky, editor of the Yiddish language anarchist paper **Freie Arbeiter Stimme** later admitted that Makhno was right. Yanovsky originally believed the charges of anti-Semitism made against Makhno, going so far as ignoring Makhno’s appeal to him out of hand. However, by the time of Makhno’s death in 1934, Yanovsky had learned the truth:

*“So strongly biased was I against him [Makhno] at that time I did not think it necessary to find out whether my serious accusation was founded on any real facts during the period of his great fight for real freedom in Russia. Now I know that my accusations of anti-Semitism against Makhno were built entirely on the lies of the Bolsheviks and to the rest of their crimes must be added this great crime of killing his greatness and the purity of this fighter for freedom.”*

Due to this, he could not forgive himself for “so misjudg[ing] a man merely on the basis of calumny by his bitter enemies who more than once shamefully betrayed him, and against whom he fought so heroically.” He also notes that it had “become known to me that a great many Jewish comrades were heart and soul with Makhno and the whole Makhno movement. Amongst them was one whom I knew well personally, Joseph Zutman of Detroit, and I know that he would not have had anything to do with persons, or a movement, which possessed the slightest leaning towards anti-Semitism.” [“appendix,” **My Visit to the Kremlin**, pp. 36–7]

However, by far the best source to refute claims of anti-Semitism the work of the Jewish anarchist Voline. He summarises the extensive evidence against such claims:

*“We could cover dozens of pages with extensive and irrefutable proofs of the falseness of these assertions. We could mention articles and proclamations by Makhno and the Council of Revolutionary Insurgents denouncing anti-Semitism. We could tell of spontaneous acts by Makhno himself and other insurgents against the slightest manifestation of the anti-Semitic spirit on the part of a few isolated and misguided unfortunates in the army and the population . . . One of the reasons for the execution of Grigoriev by the Makhnovists was his anti-Semitism and the immense pogrom he organised at Elizabethgrad . . .*

*“We could cite a whole series of similar facts, but we do not find it necessary . . . and will content ourselves with mentioning briefly the following essential facts:*

*“1. A fairly important part in the Makhnovist movement was played by revolutionists of Jewish origin.*

*“2. Several members of the Education and Propaganda Commission were Jewish.*

*“3. Besides many Jewish combatants in various units of the army, there was a battery composed entirely of Jewish artillery men and a Jewish infantry unit.*

*“4. Jewish colonies in the Ukraine furnished many volunteers to the Insurrectionary Army.*

*“5. In general the Jewish population, which was very numerous in the Ukraine, took an active part in all the activities of the movement. The Jewish agricultural colonies which were scattered throughout the districts of Mariupol, Berdiansk, Alexandrovsk, etc., participated in the regional assemblies of workers, peasants and partisans; they sent their delegates to the regional Revolutionary Military Council.*

*“6. Rich and reactionary Jews certainly had to suffer from the Makhnovist army, not as Jews, but just in the same way as non-Jewish counter-revolutionaries.”*  
[**The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 967–8]

However, it could be claimed that these accounts are from anarchists and so are biased. Ignoring the question of why so many Jewish anarchists should defend Makhno if he was, in fact, a pogromist or anti-Semite, we can turn to non-anarchist sources for confirmation of the fact that Makhno and the Makhnovist movement were not anti-Semites.

First, we turn to Voline, who quotes the eminent Jewish writer and historian M. Tcherikover about the question of the Makhnovists and anti-Semitism. Tcherikover had, for a number of years, had specialised in research on the persecutions of the Jews in Russia. The Jewish historian states *“with certainty that, on the whole, the behaviour of Makhno’s army cannot be compared with that of the*



other armies which were operating in Russian during the events 1917–21. Two facts I can certify absolutely explicitly.

“1. It is undeniable that, of all these armies, including the Red Army, the Makhnovists behaved best with regard the civil population in general and the Jewish population in particular. I have numerous testimonies to this. The proportion of **justified** complaints against the Makhnovist army, in comparison with the others, is negligible.

“2. Do not speak of pogroms alleged to have been organised by Makhno himself. That is a slander or an error. Nothing of the sort occurred. As for the Makhnovist Army, I have had hints and precise denunciations on this subject. But, up to the present, every time I have tried to check the facts, I have been obliged to declare that on the day in question no Makhnovist unit could have been at the place indicated, the whole army being far away from there. Upon examining the evidence closely, I established this fact, every time, with absolute certainty, at the place and on the date of the pogrom, no **Makhnovist** unit was operating or even located in the vicinity. **Not once** have I been able to prove the existence of a Makhnovist unit at the place a pogrom against the Jews took place. Consequently, the pogroms in question could not have been the work of the Makhnovists.” [quoted by Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 699]

This conclusion is confirmed by later historians. Paul Avrich notes that “[c]harges of Jew-baiting and of anti-Jewish pogroms have come from every quarter, left, right, and centre. Without exception, however, they are based on hearsay, rumour, or intentional slander, and remain undocumented and unproved.” He adds that the “Soviet propaganda machine was at particular pains to malign Makhno as a bandit and pogromist.” Wishing to verify the conclusions of Tcherikover proved by Voline, Avrich examined several hundred photographs in the Tcherikover Collection, housed in the YIVO Library in New York and depicting anti-Jewish atrocities in the Ukraine during the Civil War. He found that “only one [was] labelled as being the work of the Makhnovists, though even here neither Makhno himself nor any of his recognisable subordinates are to be seen, nor is there any indication that Makhno had authorised the raid or, indeed, that the band involved was in fact affiliated with his Insurgent Army.” Avrich then states that “there is evidence that Makhno did all in his power to counteract anti-Semitic tendencies among his followers” and that “a considerable number of Jews took part in the Makhnovist movement.” He also points out that the Jewish anarchists Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Sholem Schwartzbard, Voline, Senya Fleshin, and Mollie Steimer did not criticise Makhno as an anti-Semite, they also “defended him against the campaign of slander that persisted from all sides.” [*Anarchist Portraits*, pp. 122–3] It should be noted that Schwartzbard assassinated the Nationalist leader Petliura in 1926 because he considered him responsible for pogroms conducted by Nationalist troops during the civil war. He shot Petliura the day after he, Makhno and Berkman had seen him at a Russian restaurant in Paris. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 189]

Michael Malet, in his account of the Makhnovists, states that “*there is overwhelming evidence that Makhno himself was not anti-Semitic.*” [Op. Cit., p. 168] He indicates that in the period January to September 1919, the Central Committee of Zionist Organisations in Russia listed the Nationalists as creating 15,000 victims of pogroms, then the Denikinists with 9,500 followed by Hryhoriyiv, Sokolovsky, Struk, Yatsenko and Soviet troops (500 victims). Makhno is not mentioned. Of the pogroms listed, almost all took place on the western Ukraine, where the local otamany (warlords) and the Nationalists were strong. Very few took place where Makhno’s influence predominated, the nearest being in Katerinoslav town and Kherson province; none in the provinces of Katerinoslav or Tavria. It should also be noted that the period of January to June of that year was one of stability within the Makhnovist region, so allowing them the space to apply their ideas. Malet summarises:

*“Even granted the lower level of Jewish involvement in left-bank trade, the almost total lack of anti-Semitic manifestations would show that Makhno’s appeals, at a time when anti-Semitism was fast becoming fashionable, did not go unheeded by the population. There were a number of Jewish colonies in the south-east Ukraine.”* [Op. Cit., p. 169]

Unsurprisingly, Malet notes that apart from certain personal considerations (such as his friendship with a number of Jews, including Voline and Yossif the Emigrant), “*the basis of Makhno’s hostility to anti-Semitism was his anarchism. Anarchism has always been an international creed, explicitly condemning all forms of racial hatred as incompatible with the freedom of individuals and the society of equals.*” And like other serious historians, he points to “*the continual participation in the movement of both intellectual Jews from outside, and Jews from the local colonies*” as “*further proof . . . of the low level of anti-Semitism within the Makhnovshchina.*” [Op. Cit., p. 171 and pp. 171–2]

Anarchist Serge Cipko summarises the literature by stating that the “*scholarly literature that discusses Makhno’s relationships with the Jewish population is of the same opinion [that the Makhnovists were not anti-Semitic] and concur that unlike the Whites, Bolsheviks and other competing groups in Ukraine during the Revolution, the Makhnovists did not engage in pogroms.*” [“Nestor Makhno: A Mini-Historiography of the Anarchist Revolution in Ukraine, 1917–1921,” pp. 57–75, **The Raven**, no. 13, p. 62]

Historian Christopher Reed concurs, noting that “*Makhno actively opposed anti-Semitism . . . Not surprisingly, many Jews held prominent positions in the Insurgent movement and Jewish farmers and villagers staunchly supported Makhno in the face of the unrestrained anti-Semitism of Ukrainian nationalists like Grigoriev and of the*

*Great Russian chauvinists like the Whites.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 263–4] Arthur E. Adams states that “*Makhno protected Jews and in fact had many serving on his own staff.*” [Bolsheviks in the Ukraine, p. 402]

We apologise again for labouring this point, but the lie that Makhno and the Makhnovists were anti-Semitic is relatively commonplace and needs to be refuted. As noted, Trotskyists repeat Trotsky’s false assertions without correction. Other repeat the lie from other sources. It was essential, therefore, to spend time making the facts available and to nail the lie of Makhnovist anti- Semitism once and for all!

## 10 Did the Makhnovists hate the city and city workers?

For some reason the Makhnovists have been portrayed as being against the city and even history as such. This assertion is false, although sometimes made. For example, historian Bruce Lincoln states that Makhno “*had studied the anarchist writings of Bakunin, whose condemnation of cities and large-scale industries fit so well with the anti-urban, anti-industrial feelings of the Ukrainian peasants, and his program was precisely the sort that struck responsive chords in peasant hearts.*” [Red Victory, p. 325] Lincoln fails to present any evidence for this claim. This is unsurprising as it is doubtful that Makhno read such condemnations in Bakunin as they do not, in fact, exist. Similarly, the Makhnovist “*program*” (like anarchism in general) was not “*anti-urban*” or “*anti-industrial.*”

However, Lincoln’s inventions are mild compared to Trotsky’s. According to Trotsky, “*the followers of Makhno*” were marked by “*hatred for the city and the city worker.*” He later gives some more concrete examples of this “*hostility to the city*” which, as with the general peasant revolt, also “*nourished the movement of Makhno, who seized and looted trains marked for the factories, the plants, and the Red Army; tore up railway tracks, shot Communists, etc.*” [Lenin and Trotsky, Kronstadt, p. 80 and p. 89]

Unsurprisingly, Trotsky simply shows his ignorance of the Makhno movement by these statements. To refute Trotsky’s claim we can simply point to how the Makhnovists acted once they occupied a city. As we discuss in section 7, the first thing the Makhnovists did was to call a conference of workers and urge them to organise their own affairs directly, using their own class organs of self-management (soviets, unions, etc.). Hardly the activity of a group of people who allegedly “*hated*” city workers!

We can also point to the fact that the Makhnovists arranged direct exchanges of goods between the towns and country. In early 1918, for example, corn was shipped directly to a Moscow factory in return for textiles (without state interference). In 1919, 1500 tons of grain (and a small amount of coal) was sent by train to Petrograd and Moscow where the commander of the train was to exchange it again for textiles. The initiative in both cases came from the Hulyai Pole peasants. Again, hardly the work of city-hating peasants.

Peter Arshinov indicates the underlying theory behind the Makhnovists as regards the relations between city and country:

*“The Makhnovshchina . . . understands that the victory and consolidation of the revolution . . . cannot be realised without a close alliance between the working classes of the cities and those of the countryside. The peasants understand that without urban workers and powerful industrial enterprises they will be deprived of most of the benefits which the social revolution makes possible. Furthermore, they consider the urban workers to be their brothers, members of the same family of workers.*

*“There can be no doubt that, at the moment of the victory of the social revolution, the peasants will give their entire support to the workers. This will be voluntary and truly revolutionary support given directly to the urban proletariat. In the present-day situation [under the Bolsheviks], the bread taken by force from the peasants nourishes mainly the enormous governmental machine. The peasants see and understand perfectly that this expensive bureaucratic machine is not in any way needed by them or by the workers, and that in relation to the workers it plays the same role as that of a prison administration toward the inmates. This is why the peasants do not have the slightest desire to give their bread voluntarily to the State. This is why they are so hostile in their relations with the contemporary tax collectors — the commissars and the various supply organs of the State.*

*“But the peasants always try to enter into **direct** relations with the urban workers. The question was raised more than once at peasant congresses, and the peasants always resolved it in a revolutionary and positive manner.” [Op. Cit., p. 258]*

Simply put, Trotsky misinterprets hostility to the repressive policies of the Bolshevik dictatorship with hostility to the city.

Moreover, ignoring the **actual** relationships of the Makhnovists with the city workers, we can fault Trotsky’s arguments without recourse to such minor things as facts. This is because every one of his “examples” of “*hatred for the city and the city worker*” can be explained by more common sense arguments.

As regards the destruction of trains and railway tracks, a far simpler and more plausible explanation can be found than Trotsky's "*hostility to the city*." This is the fact that a civil war was taking place. Both the Reds and Whites used armoured trains to move troops and as bases of operations. To destroy the means by which your enemy attacks you is common sense! Equally, in the chaotic times of the war, resources were often in low supply and in order to survive the Makhnovists had to "*loot*" trains (needless to say, Trotsky does not explain how the Makhnovists knew the trains were "*marked for the factories*."). It should be noted that the Bolsheviks "*looted*" the countryside, can we surmise that the Bolsheviks simply expressed "*hostility to the village*"?

As regards the shooting of Communists, a far simpler and more plausible explanation also exists. Rather than show "*hostility to the city*," it shows "*hostility*" to the Communist Party, its policies and its authoritarian ideas. Given that the Bolsheviks had betrayed the Makhnovists on *three* occasions (see section 13) and attacked them, "*hostility*" to Communists seems a sensible position to take! Equally, the first Bolshevik attack on the Makhnovists occurred in mid-1919, when the Bolsheviks began justifying their party dictatorship as essential for the success of the revolution. The other two occurred in 1920, when the Bolsheviks were announcing to the whole world at the Communist International (to quote Zinoviev) that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party*." [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, vol. 1, p. 152] Given this, perhaps the fact that the Makhnovists shot Communists can be explained in terms of defence against Bolshevik betrayal and opposition to the dictatorship of the Communist Party rather than "*hostility to the city*." Needless to say, the Communists shot Makhnovists and anarchists. What does that suggest a "*hostility*" to by the Bolsheviks? Working-class autonomy and freedom?

Clearly, Trotsky was clutching at straws in his smearing of the Makhnovist movement as haters of the city worker. The "*hostility*" Trotsky speaks of can be far more easily explained in terms of the necessities imposed upon the Makhnovists by the civil war and the betrayals of the Bolsheviks. As such, it would be fairer to state that the Makhnovists showed "*hostility*" or "*hatred*" to the city or city workers only if you equate both with the Bolshevik party dictatorship. In other words, the Makhnovists showed "*hostility*" to the new ruling class of the Communist Party hierarchy.

All this does not mean that there were not misunderstandings between the Makhno movement, a predominantly rural movement, and the workers in the cities. Far from it. Equally, it can be said that the Makhnovists did not understand the workings of an urban economy and society as well as they understood their own. However, they made no attempt to **impose** their world-view on the

city workers (unlike the Bolsheviks, who did so on both urban and rural workers). However, ignorance of the city and its resulting misunderstandings do not constitute “hostility” or “hatred.”

Moreover, where these misunderstandings developed show that the claims that the Makhnovists hated the city workers are simply false. Simply put, the misunderstanding occurred when the Makhnovists had liberated cities from the Whites. As we discussed in section 7, the first thing the Makhnovists did was to call a conference of workers’ delegates to discuss the current situation and to urge them to form soviets, unions and co-operatives in order to manage their own affairs. This hardly shows “hatred” of the city worker. In contrast, the first thing the Bolsheviks did in taking a city was to form a “revolutionary committee” to govern the town and implement Bolshevik policy.

This, needless to say, shows a distinct “hostility” to the city workers on the part of the Bolsheviks. Equally, the Bolshevik advocacy of party dictatorship to overcome the “wavering” of the working class. In the words of Trotsky himself (in 1921):

*“The Workers’ Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They place the workers’ right to elect representatives above the Party, as if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.”* [quoted by Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 209]

Opposing workers’ democracy because working people could make decisions that the party thought were wrong shows a deep “hostility” to the real city workers and their liberty and equality. Equally, Bolshevik repression of workers’ strikes, freedom of speech, assembly, organisation and self-determination shows far more “hostility” to the city worker than a few Makhnovist misunderstandings!

All in all, any claim that the Makhnovists “hated” city workers is simply false. While some Makhnovists may not have liked the city nor really understood the complexities of an urban economy, they did recognise the importance of encouraging working-class autonomy and self-organisation within them and building links between the rural and urban toilers. While the lack of a large-scale anarcho-syndicalist movement hindered any positive construction, the Makhnovists at least tried to promote urban self-management. Given Bolshevik authoritarianism

and its various rationalisations, it would be fairer to say that it was the Bolsheviks who expressed “*hostility*” to the city workers by imposing their dictatorship upon them rather than supporting working-class self-management as the Makhnovists did!

## 11 Were the Makhnovists nationalists?

Some books on the Makhnovist movement try to present the Makhnovists as being Ukrainian nationalists. A few discuss the matter in order, perhaps, to increase the respectability of the Makhnovist movement by associating it with a more “*serious*” and “*respectable*” political theory than anarchism, namely “*Nationalism*.” Those who seriously investigate the issue come to the same conclusion, namely that neither Makhno nor the Makhnovist movement was nationalist (see, for example, Frank Sysyn’s essay *Nestor Makhno and the Ukrainian Revolution* which discusses this issue).

Therefore, any claims that the Makhnovists were nationalists are incorrect. The Makhnovist movement was first and foremost an internationalist movement of working people. This is to be expected as anarchists have long argued that nationalism is a cross-class movement which aims to maintain the existing class system but without foreign domination (see section D.6 for details). As such, the Makhnovists were well aware that nationalism could not solve the social question and would simply replace a Russian ruling class and state with a Ukrainian one.

This meant that the aims of the Makhnovists went further than simply national liberation or self-determination. Anarchists, rather, aim for working-class self-liberation and self-determination, both as individuals and as groups, as well as politically, economically and socially. To quote Makhno’s wire to Lenin in December 1918, the Makhnovist “*aims are known and clear to all. They are fighting against the authority of all political governments and for liberty and independence of the working people.*” [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 80]

From this class and anti-hierarchical perspective, it is not unsurprising that the Makhnovists were not nationalists. They did not seek Ukrainian independence but rather working-class autonomy. This, of necessity, meant they opposed all those who aimed to govern and/or exploit the working class. Hence Arshinov:

*“Composed of the poorest peasants, who were united by the fact that they all worked with their own hands, the Makhnovist movement was founded on the deep feeling of fraternity which characterises only the most oppressed. During its entire history it did not for an instant appeal to national sentiments. The whole struggle of the Makhnovists against the Bolsheviks was conducted solely in the*

*name of the rights and interests of the workers. Denikin's troops, the Austro-Germans, Petliura, the French troops in Berdyansk, Wrangel — were all treated by the Makhnovists as enemies of the workers. Each one of these invasions represented for them essentially a threat to the workers, and the Makhnovists had no interest in the national flag under which they marched.” [Op. Cit., p. 210]*

He stressed that “*national prejudices had no place in the Makhnovshchina. There was also no place in the movement for religious prejudices . . . Among modern social movements, the Makhnovshchina was one of the few in which an individual had absolutely no interest in his own or his neighbour's religion or nationality, in which he respected only the labour and the freedom of the worker.*” [Op. Cit., p. 211]

The Makhnovists made their position on nationalism clear in the ‘Declaration’ published by the Revolutionary Military Council of the army in October, 1919:

*“When speaking of Ukrainian independence, we do not mean national independence in Petliura's sense but the social independence of workers and peasants. We declare that Ukrainian, and all other, working people have the right to self-determination not as an ‘independent nation’ but as ‘independent workers’”* [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., p. 210]

In other words, the Makhnovists “*declared, that in their option **Petlurovtchina** [the Petliura movement, Petliura being the leader of the Nationalists] was a bourgeois nationalist movement whose road was entirely different from that of the revolutionary peasants, that the Ukraine should be organised on a basis of free labour and the independence of the peasants and the workers . . . and that nothing but struggle was possible between the **Makhnovitchina**, the movement of the workers, and the **Petlurovtchina**, the movement of the bourgeoisie.*” [Voline, Op. Cit., p. 572]

This does not mean that anarchists are indifferent to cultural and national domination and oppression. Far from it! As we discussed in sections D.6 and D.7, anarchists are against foreign domination and cultural imperialism, believing that every community or national group has the right to be itself and develop as it sees fit. This means that anarchists seek to transform national liberation struggles into **human** liberation struggles, turning any struggle against foreign oppression and domination into a struggle against **all** forms of oppression and domination.

This means that the Makhnovists, like anarchists in general, seek to encourage local culture and language while opposed nationalism. As Frank Sysyn argues, it “*would be a mistake . . . to label the Makhnivtsi as ‘anti-Ukrainian.’ Although they opposed the political goals of most ‘svidomi ukraintsi’ (nationally conscious Ukrainians), they accepted the existence of a Ukrainian nation and used the terms*



*'Ukraine' and 'Ukrainian.'*” [Nestor Makhno and the Ukrainian Revolution, p. 288] It should be noted that opponents of Ukrainian independence generally called it the “*south of Russia*” or “*Little Russia*.”

Thus an opposition to nationalism did not imply a rejection or blindness to foreign domination and free cultural expression. On the question of the language to be taught in schools, the Cultural-Educational Section of the Makhnovist Insurgent Army wrote the following in October, 1919:

*“The cultural-educational section of the Makhnovist army constantly receives questions from school teachers asking about the language in which instruction should be given in the schools, now that Denikin’s troops have been expelled.*

*“The revolutionary insurgents, holding to the principles of true socialism, cannot in any field or by any measure do violence to the natural desires and needs of the Ukrainian people. This is why the question of the language to be taught in the schools cannot be solved by our army, but can only be decided by the people themselves, by parents, teachers and students*

*“It goes without saying that all the orders of Denikin’s so-called ‘Special Bureau’ as well as General Mai-Maevsky’s order No. 22, which forbids the use of the mother tongue in the schools, are null and void, having been forcibly imposed on the schools.*

*“In the interest of the greatest intellectual development of the people, the language of instruction should be that toward which the local population naturally tends, and this is why the population, the students, the teachers and the parents, and not authorities or the army, should freely and independently resolve this question.”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 210–1]

They also printed a Ukrainian version of their paper (*“The Road to Freedom”*).

Clearly their opposition to Ukrainian nationalism did not mean that the Makhnovists were indifferent to imperialism and foreign political or cultural domination. This explains why Makhno criticised his enemies for anti-Ukrainian actions and language. Michael Malet summarises, for the Makhnovists *“Ukrainian culture was welcome, but political nationalism was highly suspect.”* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 143]

Given anarchist support for federal organisation from below upwards, working-class self-determination and autonomy, plus a healthy respect for local culture, it is easy to see why some historians have fostered a nationalist perspective onto the Makhnovists where none existed. This means that when they agitated with the slogan *“All to whom freedom and independence are dear should stay in the Ukraine and fight the Denikinists,”* it should be noted that “[n]owhere . . .

*nationalism openly advocated, and the line of argument put forward can more easily be interpreted as libertarian and, above all, anti-White.*" [Malet, **Op. Cit.**, p. 146]

In 1928, Makhno wrote a rebuttal to a Soviet historian's claim that Makhno became a Ukrainian Nationalist during the 1920–21 period. He "*totally dismissed the charges*" and argued that the historian "*distorted anarchism's espousal of local autonomy so as to create trumped-up charges of nationalism.*" As Sysyn argues, while Makhno "*never became a nationalist, he did to a degree become a Ukrainian anarchist.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 292 and p. 303]

Thus while neither Makhno nor the movement were nationalists, they were not blind to national and cultural oppression. They considered nationalism as too narrow a goal to satisfy the **social** aspirations of the working classes. As Makhno argued in exile, the Ukrainian toilers had "*asserted their rights to use their own language and their entitlement to their own culture, which had been regarded before the revolution as anathema. They also asserted their right to conform in their lives to their own way of life and specific customs.*" However, "[i]n the aim of building an independent Ukrainian State, certain statist gentlemen would dearly love to arrogate to themselves all natural manifestations of Ukrainian reality." Yet the "*healthy instincts of the Ukrainian toilers and their baleful life under the Bolshevik yoke has not made them oblivious of the State danger in general*" and so they "*shun the chauvinist trend and do not mix it up with their social aspirations, rather seeking their own road to emancipation.*" [**The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays**, pp. 24–5]

In summary, the Makhnovists were opposed to nationalism but supported culture diversity and self-determination within a free federation of toilers communes and councils. They did not limit their aims to national liberation, but rather sought the self-liberation of the working classes from every oppression — foreign or domestic, economic or political, cultural or social.

## 12 Did the Makhnovists support the Whites?

No, they did not. However, black propaganda by the Bolsheviks stated they did. Victor Serge wrote about the "*strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Party*" against him "*which went so far as to accuse him of signing pacts with the Whites at the very moment when he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against them.*" [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 122]

According to Arshinov, "*Soviet newspapers spread the false news of an alliance between Makhno and Wrangel*" and in the summer of 1920, a representative of the Kharkov government "*declared at the Plenary Session of the Ekaterinoslav Soviet, that Soviet authorities had written proof of the alliance between Makhno*

*and Wrangel. This was obviously an intentional lie.*” Wrangel, perhaps believing these lies had some basis, sent a messenger to Makhno in July, 1920. “*Wrangel’s messenger was immediately executed*” and the “*entire incident was reported in the Makhnovist press. All this was perfectly clear to the Bolsheviks. They nevertheless continued to trumpet the alliance between Makhno and Wrangel. It was only after a military-political agreement had been concluded between the Makhnovists and the Soviet power that the Soviet Commissariat of War announced that there had never been an alliance between Makhno and Wrangel, that earlier Soviet assertions to this effect were an error.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 173–5]

Needless to say, while the Bolsheviks spread the rumour to discredit Makhno, the Whites spread it to win the confidence of the peasants. Thus when Trotsky stated that Wrangel had “*united with the Ukrainian partisan Makhno,*” he was aiding the efforts of Wrangel to learn from previous White mistakes and build some kind of popular base. [quoted by Palij, Op. Cit., p. 220] By October, Trotsky had retracted this statement:

*“Wrangel really tried to come into direct contact with Makhno’s men and dispatched to Makhno’s headquarters two representatives for negotiations . . . [However] Makhno’s men not only did not enter into negotiations with the representatives of Wrangel, but publicly hanged them as soon as they arrived at the headquarters.”* [quoted by Palij, Ibid.]

Trotsky, of course, still tried to blacken the Makhnovists. In the same article he argued that “[u]ndoubtedly Makhno actually co-operated with Wrangel, and also with the Polish *szlachta*, as he fought with them against the Red Army. However, there was no formal alliance between them. All the documents mentioning a formal alliance were fabricated by Wrangel . . . All this fabrication was made to deceive the protectors of Makhno, the French, and other imperialists.” [quoted by Palij, Op. Cit., p. 225]

It is hard to know where to start in this amazing piece of political story-telling. As we discuss in more detail in section 13, the Makhnovists were fighting the Red Army from January to September 1920 because the Bolsheviks had engineered their outlawing! As historian David Footman points out, the attempt by the Bolsheviks to transfer Makhno to Polish front was done for political reasons:

*“it is admitted on the Soviet side that this order was primarily ‘dictated by the necessity’ of liquidating **Makhnovshchina** as an independent movement. Only when he was far removed from his home country would it be possible to counteract his influence”* [Op. Cit., p. 291]

Indeed, it could be argued that by attacking Makhno in January helped the Whites to regroup under Wrangel and return later in the year. Equally, it seems like a bad joke for Trotsky to blame the victim of Bolshevik intrigues for defending themselves. And the idea that Makhno had “*protectors*” in any imperialist nation is a joke, which deserves only laughter as a response!

It should be noted that it is “*agreed that the initiative for joint action against Wrangel came from the Makhnovites.*” This was ignored by the Bolsheviks until after “*Wrangel started his big offensive*” in September 1920 [Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 294 and p. 295]

So while the Bolsheviks claimed that the Makhnovists had made a pact with General Wrangel, the facts are that Makhnovists fought the Whites with all their energy. Indeed, they considered the Whites so great a threat to the revolution they even agreed to pursue a pact with the Bolsheviks, who had betrayed them twice already and had subjected both them and the peasantry to repression. As such, it could be argued that the Bolsheviks were the only counter-revolutionaries the Makhnovists can be accurately accused of collaborating with.

Every historian who has studied the movement has refuted claims that the Makhnovist movement made any alliance with the counter-revolutionary White forces. For example, Michael Palij notes that Denikin “*was the main enemy that Makhno fought, stubbornly and uncompromising, from the end of 1918 to the end of 1919. Its social and anti-Ukrainian policies greatly antagonised all segments of Ukrainian society. The result of this was an increased resistance to the Volunteer Army and its regime and a substantial strengthening of the Makhno movement.*” He also notes that after several months of “*hard fighting*” Denikin’s troops “*came to regard Makhno’s army as their most formidable enemy.*” Makhno’s conflict with Wrangel was equally as fierce and “[a]lthough Makhno had fought both the Bolsheviks and Wrangel, his contribution to the final defeat of the latter was essential, as is proved by the efforts of both sides to have him as an ally.” [Op. Cit., p. 177, p. 202 and p. 228] According to Footman, Makhno “*remained to the end the implacable enemy of the Whites.*” [Op. Cit., p. 295] Malet just states the obvious: “*The Makhnovists were totally opposed to the Whites.*” [Op. Cit., p. 140]

We will leave the last word to the considered judgement of the White General Denikin who, in exile, stated that the Makhno movement was “*the most antagonistic to the idea of the White movement.*” [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140]

In summary, the Makhnovists fought the White counter-revolution with all their might, playing a key role in the struggle and defeat of both Denikin and Wrangel. Anyone who claims that they worked with the Whites is either ignorant or a liar.

## 13 What was the relationship of the Bolsheviks to the movement?

The Makhnovists worked with the Bolsheviks in three periods. The first (and longest) was against Denikin after the Red Army had entered the Ukraine after the withdrawal of the Austro-Germans. The second was an informal agreement for a short period after Denikin had been defeated. The third was a formal political and military agreement between October and November 1920 in the struggle against Wrangel. Each period of co-operation ended with Bolshevik betrayal and conflict between the two forces.

As such, the relationship of the Bolsheviks to the Makhnovists was one of, at best, hostile co-operation against a common enemy. Usually, it was one of conflict. This was due, fundamentally, to two different concepts of social revolution. While the Makhnovists, as anarchists, believed in working-class self-management and autonomy, the Bolsheviks believed that only a centralised state structure (headed by themselves) could ensure the success of the revolution. By equating working-class power with Bolshevik party government (and from 1919 onwards, with the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party), they could not help viewing the Makhnovist movement as a threat to their power (see section 14 for a discussion of the political differences and the evolving nature of the Bolshevik's conception of party rule).

Such a perspective ensured that they could only co-operate during periods when the White threat seemed most dangerous. As soon as the threat was defeated or they felt strong enough, the Bolsheviks turned on their former allies instantly. This section discusses each of the Bolshevik betrayals and the subsequent conflicts. As such, it is naturally broken up into three parts, reflecting each of the betrayals and their aftermath.

Michael Malet sums up the usual Bolshevik-Makhnovist relationship by arguing that it *“will be apparent that the aim of the Soviet government from the spring of 1919 onwards was to destroy the Makhnovists as an independent force, preferably killing Makhno himself in the process . . . Given the disastrous nature of Bolshevik land policy . . . this was not only unsurprisingly, it was inevitable.”* He also adds that the *“fact that Makhno had a socio-political philosophy to back up his arguments only made the Bolsheviks more determined to break his hold over the south-east Ukraine, as soon as they realised that Nestor would not surrender that hold voluntarily.”* [Op. Cit., p. 128 and p. 129]

The first betrayal occurred in June 1919. The Makhnovists had been integrated with the Red Army in late January 1919, retaining their internal organisation (including the election of commanders) and their black flags. With the Red Army they fought against Denikin's Volunteer Army. Before the arrival of Red forces in

their region and the subsequent pact, the Makhnovists had organised a successful regional insurgent, peasant and worker congress which had agreed to call a second for February 12<sup>th</sup>. This second congress set up a Revolutionary Military Soviet to implement the decisions of this and following congresses. This congress (see section 7) passed an anti-Bolshevik resolution, which urged *“the peasants and workers to watch vigilantly the actions of the Bolshevik regime that cause a real danger to the worker-peasant revolution.”* Such actions included the monopolisation of the revolution, centralising power and overriding local soviets, repressing anarchists and Left Socialist Revolutionaries and *“stifling any manifestation of revolutionary expression.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 154]

This change from the recent welcome was simply the behaviour of the Bolsheviks since their arrival. The (unelected) Ukrainian Bolshevik government had tried to apply the same tactics as its Russian equivalent, particularly as regards the peasants. In addition, the Bolshevik land policy (as indicated in section 8) was a complete disaster, alien to the ideas and needs of the peasants and, combined with grain requisitioning, alienating them.

The third congress was held on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April. By this time, Communist agricultural policy and terrorism had alienated all the peasantry, who *“rich and poor alike”* were *“united in their opposition”* to the Bolsheviks. [Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 269] Indeed, the *“poorer the areas, the more dissatisfied were the peasants with the Bolshevik decrees.”* [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 156] As we indicated in section 7, the third congress was informed that it was *“counter-revolutionary”* and banned by the Bolshevik commander Dybenko, provoking a famous reply which stressed the right of a revolutionary people to apply the gains of that revolution when they see fit. It is worth re-quoting the relevant section:

*“Can there exist laws made by a few people who call themselves revolutionaries which permit them to outlaw a whole people who are more revolutionary than they are themselves? . . .*

*“Is it permissible, is it admissible, that they should come to the country to establish laws of violence, to subjugate a people who have just overthrown all lawmakers and all laws?*

*“Does there exist a law according to which a revolutionary has the right to apply the most severe penalties to a revolutionary mass, of which he calls himself the defender, simply because this mass has taken the good things which the revolution promised them, freedom and equality, without his permission?*

*“Should the mass of revolutionary people perhaps be silent when such a revolutionary takes away the freedom which they have just conquered?*

*“Do the laws of the revolution order the shooting of a delegate because he believes he ought to carry out the mandate given him by the revolutionary mass which elected him?”*

*“Whose interests should the revolutionary defend; those of the Party or those of the people who set the revolution in motion with their blood?”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 103]

After the 3<sup>rd</sup> congress, the Bolsheviks started to turn against Makhno:

*“It was now that favourable mention of Makhno ceased to appear in the Soviet Press; an increasingly critical note became apparent. Supplies failed to get through to Makhnovite units and areas.”* [Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 271]

Lenin himself advised local Bolshevik leaders on Makhno, stating in early May that *“temporarily, while Rostov is not yet captured, it is necessary to be diplomatic.”* [quoted by Arthur E. Adams, *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*, pp. 352–3] Thus, as long as the Bolsheviks needed cannon fodder, Makhno was to be tolerated. Things changed when Trotsky arrived. On May 17<sup>th</sup> he promised a *“radical and merciless liquidation of partisanshchina [the partisan movement], independence, hooliganism, and leftism.”* [quoted by Adams, *Op. Cit.*, p. 360] According to one historian, Trotsky *“favoured a thorough-going annihilation of the partisan’s ideological leaders as well as men like Hryhoriyov who wielded political power.”* [Adams, *Op. Cit.*, p. 360] Unsurprisingly, given Trotsky’s stated mission, Bolshevik hostility towards the Makhnovists became more than mere words. It took the form of both direct and indirect aggression. *“In the latter part of May,”* states Footman, *“the Cheka sent over two agents to assassinate Makhno.”* Around the same time, the Red *“hold-back of supplies for the Insurgents developed into a blockade of the area. Makhnovite units at the front ran short of ammunition.”* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 271 and p. 272] This, obviously, had a negative impact the Makhnovists’ ability to fight the Whites.

Due to the gravity of the military and political situations both at and behind the front, the Makhnovist Revolutionary Military Soviet decided to call an extraordinary congress of peasants, workers, insurgents and Red soldiers. This congress was to determine the immediate tasks and the practical measures to be taken by the workers to remedy the mortal danger represented by the Whites. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, a call was sent out which stated, in part, *“that only the working masses themselves can find a solution [to the current problem], and not individuals or parties.”* The congress would be based as follows: *“elections of delegates of peasants and workers will take place at general assemblies of villages, towns, factories and workshops.”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 121]

The Bolshevik reply came quickly, with Trotsky issuing his infamous Order no. 1824 on June 4<sup>th</sup>:

*“This Congress is directed squarely against the Soviet Power in the Ukraine and against the organisation of the southern front, where Makhno’s brigade is stationed. This congress can have no other result then to excite some new disgraceful revolt like that of Grigor’ev, and to open the front to the Whites, before whom Makhno’s brigade can only retreat incessantly on account of the incompetence, criminal designs and treason of its commanders.*

*“1. By the present order this congress is forbidden, and will in no circumstances be allowed to take place.*

*“2. All the peasant and working class population shall be warned. orally and in writing, that participation in the said congress will be considered an act of high treason against the Soviet Republic and the Soviet front.*

*“3. All delegates to the said Congress shall be arrested immediately and brought before the Revolutionary Military Tribunal of the 14<sup>th</sup>, formerly 2<sup>nd</sup>, Army of the Ukraine.*

*“4. The persons spreading the call of Makhno and the Hulyai Pole Executive Committee to the Congress shall likewise be arrested.*

*“5. The present order shall have the force of law as soon as it is telegraphed. It should be widely distributed, displayed in all public places, and sent to the representatives of the executive committees of towns and villages, as well as to all the representatives of Soviet authority, and to commanders and commissars of military units.” [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., pp. 122–3]*

Arshinov argues that this “document is truly classic” and “[w]hoever studies the Russian revolution should learn it by heart.” He compares Trotsky’s order to the reply the Makhnovists had sent to the Bolsheviks’ attempt to ban the third congress. Clearly, Order No. 1824 shows that laws did exist “made by a few people who call themselves revolutionaries which permit them to outlaw a whole people who are more revolutionary than they are themselves”! Equally, the order shows that “a revolutionary has the right to apply the most severe penalties to a revolutionary mass . . . simply because this mass has taken the good things which the revolution has promised them, freedom and equality, without his permission”! Little wonder Arshinov states that this order meant that the “entire peasant and labouring population are declared guilty of high treason if they dare to participate in their own free congress.” [Op. Cit., p. 123]



According to Voline, in Alexandrovsk “*all workers meetings planned for the purpose of discussing the call of the Council and the agenda of the Congress were forbidden under pain of death. Those which were organised in ignorance of the order were dispersed by armed force. In other cities and towns, the Bolsheviks acted in the same way. As for the peasants in the villages, they were treated with still less ceremony; in many places militants and even peasants ‘suspected of acting in favour of the insurgents and the Congress’ were seized and executed after a semblance of a trial. Many peasants carrying the call were arrested, ‘tried’ and shot, before they could even find out about Order No. 1824.*” [Op. Cit., pp. 599–600]

As Arshinov summarises:

*“This entire document represents such a crying usurpation of the rights of the workers that it is pointless to comment further on it.”* [Op. Cit., p. 124]

Trotsky continued his usurpation of the rights of the workers in a later order on the congress. In this, Trotsky called this openly announced workers, peasant and insurgent congress a “*conspiracy against Soviet power*” and a “*congress of Anarchist-kulaks delegates for struggle against the Red Army and the Soviet power*” (which explains why the congress organisers had asked that hotbed of kulakism, the Red Army troops, to send delegates!). Trotsky indicated the fate of those workers and peasants who dared participate in their own revolution: “*There can be only one penalty for these individuals: shooting.*” [How the Revolution Armed, vol. II, p. 293]

Trotsky also ordered the arrest of Makhno, who escaped but who ordered his troops to remain under Bolshevik command to ensure that the front against Denikin was maintained. However, five members of his staff were shot for having distributed literature concerning the banned fourth congress. This order was the first step in the Bolshevik attempt to “*liquidate the Makhnovist movement.*” This campaign saw Bolshevik regiments invade the insurgent area, shooting militants on the spot and destroying the free communes and other Makhnovist organisations. [Arshinov, Op. Cit., p. 121] It should be noted that during the Spanish Revolution, the Stalinists acted in the same way, attacking rural collectives while the anarchist troops fought against Franco at the front.

Thus the participating event for the break between the Makhnovists and Bolsheviks was Trotsky’s banning of the fourth regional congress. However, this was preceded by an intense press campaign against the Makhnovists as well as holding back of essential supplies from the frontline troops. Clearly the Bolsheviks considered that the soviet system was threatened if soviet conferences were called and that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was undermined if the proletariat took part in the revolutionary process!

With the Makhnovist front weakened, they could not hold against Denikin's attacks, particularly when Red Army troops retreated on their flank. Thus, the front which the Makhnovists themselves had formed and held for more than six months was finally broken. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 124] The Red Army was split into three and the Whites entered the Ukraine, which the Bolsheviks promptly abandoned to its fate. The Makhnovists, drawing stray Red Army and other forces to it, continued to fight the Whites, ultimately inflicting a decisive defeat on them at Peregonovka, subsequently destroying their supply lines and ensuring Denikin's defeat (see section 4).

The Red Army re-entered the Ukraine at the end of 1919. Bolshevik plans with regard to the Makhnovists had already been decided in a secret order written by Trotsky on December 11<sup>th</sup>. Red Army troops had to *"be protected against infection by guerrilla-ism and Makhnovism"* by various means, including *"extensive agitation"* which used *"examples from the past to show the treacherous role played by the Makhnovites."* A *"considerable number of agents"* would be sent *"ahead"* of the main forces to *"join the guerrilla detachments"* and would agitate against *"guerrilla-ism."* Once partisan forces meet with Red Army troops, the former *"ceases to be a military unit after it has appeared on our side of the line . . . From that moment it becomes merely material for processing, and for that purpose is to be sent to our rear."* To *"secure complete subordination of the detachments,"* the Red forces *"must make use of the agents previously set to these detachments."* The aim, simply put, was to ensure that the partisans became *"fully subordinate to our command."* If the partisans who had been fighting for revolution and against the Whites opposed becoming *"material for processing"* (i.e. cannon fodder), *"refuses to submit to orders, displays unruliness and self-will,"* then it *"must be subjected to ruthless punishment."* Recognising the organic links the partisans had with the peasants, Trotsky argues that *"in the Ukraine, guerrilla detachments appear and disappear with ease, dissolving themselves into the mass of the armed peasant population"* and so *"a fundamental condition for the success against guerrilla-ism is unconditional disarmament of the rural population, without exception."* [Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, vol. II, pp. 440–2] As events would show, the Bolsheviks implemented Trotsky's order to the letter.

On December 24<sup>th</sup>, Makhno's troops met with the Bolshevik 14<sup>th</sup> army and its commander *"admitted Makhno's service in defeating Denikin."* However, while *"the Bolsheviks fraternised with the Makhno troops . . . they distrusted Makhno, fearing the popularity he had gained as a result of his successful fighting against Denikin."* The Bolsheviks had *"no intention of tolerating Makhno's independent policy, but hoped first to destroy his army by removing it from its own base. With this in mind, on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the Revolutionary Military Council of the Fourteenth Army ordered Makhno to move to the Polish Front . . . The author of the order realised*

*that there was no real war between the Poles and the Bolsheviks at the time and he also knew that Makhno would not abandon his region. . . . Uborevich [the author] explained that ‘an appropriate reaction by Makhno to this order would give us the chance to have accurate grounds for our next steps’ . . . [He] concluded: ‘The order is a certain political manoeuvre and, at the very least, we expect positive results from Makhno’s realisation of this.’” [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 209 and p. 210] As can be seen, these actions fit perfectly with Trotsky’s secret order and with Bolshevik desire for a monopoly of power for itself (see next section).*

As expected, the Makhnovists refused to leave their territory. They realised the political motivations behind the order. As Arshinov notes, “[s]ending the insurrectionary army to the Polish front meant removing from the Ukraine the main nerve centre of the revolutionary insurrection. This was precisely what the Bolsheviks wanted: they would then be absolute masters of the rebellious region, and the Makhnovists were perfectly aware of this.” [Op. Cit., p. 163] As well as political objections, the Makhnovists listed practical reasons for not going. Firstly, *“the Insurrectionary Army was subordinate neither to the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps nor to any other unit of the Red Army. The Red commander had no authority to give orders to the Insurrectionary Army.”* Secondly, *“it was materially impossible to carry it out, since half the men, as well as nearly all the commanders and staff, and Makhno himself, were sick [with typhus].”* Thirdly, *“the fighting qualities and revolutionary usefulness of the Insurrectionary Army were certainly much greater on their own ground.”* [Voline, Op. Cit., pp. 650–1]

The Bolsheviks refused to discuss the issue and on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, they declared the Makhnovists outlawed. They then *“made a great effort to destroy”* Makhno. [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 210] In summary, the Bolsheviks started the conflict in order to eliminate opposition to their power. This led to nine months of bitter fighting between the Red Army and the Makhnovists. To prevent fraternisation, the Bolsheviks did not use local troops and instead imported Latvian, Estonian and Chinese troops. They also used other *“new tactics,”* and *“attacked not only Makhno’s partisans, but also the villages and towns in which the population was sympathetic toward Makhno. They shot ordinary soldiers as well as their commanders, destroying their houses, confiscating their properties and persecuting their families. Moreover the Bolsheviks conducted mass arrests of innocent peasants who were suspected of collaborating in some way with the partisans. It is impossible to determine the casualties involved.”* They also set up *“Committees of the Poor”* as part of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus, which acted as *“informers helping the Bolshevik secret police in its persecution of the partisans, their families and supporters, even to the extent of hunting down and executing wounded partisans.”* [Palij, Op. Cit., pp. 212–3]

This conflict undoubtedly gave time for the Whites to reorganise themselves and encouraged the Poles to invade the Ukraine, so prolonging the Civil War. The Makhnovists were threatened by both the Bolsheviks and Wrangel. By mid-1920, Wrangel appeared to be gaining the upper hand and the Makhnovists “*could not remain indifferent to Wrangel’s advance . . . Everything done to destroy him would in the last analysis benefit the revolution.*” This led the Makhnovists to consider allying with the Bolsheviks as “*the difference between the Communists and Wrangel was that the Communists had the support of the masses with faith in the revolution. It is true that these masses were cynically misled by the Communists, who exploited the revolutionary enthusiasm of the workers in the interests of Bolshevik power.*” With this in mind, the Makhnovists agreed at a mass assembly to make an alliance with the Bolsheviks against Wrangel as this would eliminate the White threat and end the civil war. [Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 176]

The Bolsheviks ignored the Makhnovist offer using mid-September, when “*Wrangel’s success caused the Bolsheviks leaders to reconsider.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 223] Sometime between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of October the final agreement was signed:

*“Part I – Political Agreement.*

*“1. Immediate release of all Makhnovists and anarchists imprisoned or in exile in the territories of the Soviet Republic; cessation of all persecutions of Makhnovists or anarchists, except those who carry on armed conflict against the Soviet Government.*

*“2. Complete freedom in all forms of public expression and propaganda for all Makhnovists and anarchists, for their principles and ideas, in speech and the press, with the exception of anything that might call for the violent overthrow of the Soviet Government, and on condition that the requirements of military censorship be respected. For all kinds of publications, the Makhnovists and anarchists, as revolutionary organisations recognised by the Soviet Government may make use of the technical apparatus of the Soviet State, while naturally submitting to the technical rules for publication.*

*“3. Free participation in elections to the Soviets; and the right of Makhnovists and anarchists to be elected thereto. Free participation in the organisation of the forthcoming Fifth Pan-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets . . .*

*“Part II – Military Agreement.*

*“1. The Ukrainian Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army (Makhnovist) will join the armed forces of the Republic as a partisan army, subordinate, in regard to*

*operations, to the supreme command of the Red Army; it will retain its established internal structure, and does not have to adopt the bases and principles of the regular Red Army.*

*“2. When crossing Soviet territory at the front, or going between fronts, the Insurrectionary Army will not accept into its ranks neither any detachments of, nor deserters from, the Red Army . . .*

*“3. For the purpose of destroying the common enemy — the White Army — the Ukrainian Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army (Makhnovists) will inform the working masses that collaborate with it the agreement that has been concluded; it will call upon the people to cease all military actions hostile to the Soviet power; and for its part, the Soviet power will immediately publish the clauses of the agreement.*

*“4. The families of combatants of the Makhnovist Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army living in the territory of the Soviet Republic shall enjoy the same rights as those of soldiers of the Red Army . . .” [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., p. 178]*

This agreement was agreed by both sides, although the Bolsheviks immediately broke it by publishing the military agreement first, followed by the political agreement a week later, so obscuring the real meaning of the pact. As it stands, the political clause simply gave anarchists and Makhnovists the rights they should have already had, according to the constitution of the Soviet state. This shows how far the Bolsheviks had applied that constitution.

The agreement is highly significant as in itself it disproves many of the Bolsheviks' slanders about the Makhnovists and it proves the suppression of the anarchist press to have been on political grounds.

However, the Makhnovists desired to add a fourth clause to the Political Agreement:

*“Since one of the essential principles of the Makhnovist movement is the struggle for the self-management of the workers, the Insurrectionary Army (Makhnovist) believes it should insist on the following fourth point of the political agreement: in the region where the Makhnovist Army is operating, the population of workers and peasants will create its own institutions of economic and political self-management; these institutions will be autonomous and joined in federation, by means of agreement, with the government organs of the Soviet Republic,” [quoted by Arshinov, Op. Cit., pp. 179–80]*

Unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks refused to ratify this clause. As one Bolshevik historian pointed out, the *“fourth point was fundamental to both sides, it meant the*

*system of free Soviets, which was in total opposition to the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat.*” [quoted by Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108] As we discuss in the next section, the Bolsheviks had equated the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” with the dictatorship of their party and so working-class self-management could not be allowed. It should be noted that this fourth clause was the cause of Lenin and Trotsky’s toying with the idea of allowing the Makhnovists south-eastern Ukraine as an anarchist experiment (as mentioned by both Victor Serge and Trotsky in later years).

Once Wrangel had been defeated by Makhnovist and Red Army units, the Bolsheviks turned on the movement. Makhno had “*assumed that the coming conflict with the Bolsheviks could be limited to the realm of ideas, feeling that the strong revolutionary ideas and feelings of the peasants, together with their distrust of the foreign invaders, were the best guarantees for the movement’s territory. Moreover, Makhno believed that the Bolsheviks would not attack his movement immediately. A respite of some three months would have allowed him to consolidate his power [sic!] and to win over much of the Bolshevik rank and file.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 231] From the wording of the second clause of the military agreement (namely, to refuse Red Army deserters or units), it is clear that the Bolsheviks were aware of the appeal of Makhnovist politics on the Red Army soldiers. As soon as Wrangel was defeated, the Red Army attacked. Makhnovist commanders were invited to meetings, arrested and then shot. The Red Army surrounded Makhnovist units and attacked them. At the same time, anarchists were arrested all across the Ukraine. Hulyai Pole itself was attacked (Makhno, despite overwhelming odds, broke out). [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 71–2]

In the words of Makhno:

*“In this difficult and responsible revolutionary position the Makhno movement made one great mistake: alliance with the Bolsheviks against a common enemy, Wrangel and the Entente. In the period of this alliance that was morally right and of practical value for the revolution, the Makhno movement mistook Bolshevik revolutionism and failed to secure itself in advance against betrayal. The Bolsheviks and their experts treacherously circumvented it.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 234]

While the Bolsheviks continuously proclaimed the final defeat of the Makhnovists, they held out for nearly a year before being forced to leave the Ukraine in August 1921. Indeed, by the end of 1920 his troops number ten to fifteen thousand men and the “*growing strength of the Makhno army and its successes caused serious concern in the Bolshevik regime.*” More Red troops were deployed, “*stationing whole regiments, primarily cavalry, in the occupied villages to terrorise the peasants and*

*prevent them from supporting Makhno. . . Cheka punitive units were constantly trailing the partisans, executing Makhno's sympathisers and the partisans' families.*" [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 237 and p. 238] Combined with this state terrorism, economic conditions in the villages got worse. The countryside was exhausted and 1921 was a famine year. With his rural base itself barely surviving, the Makhnovists could not survive long.

It should be noted that during the periods after the Bolsheviks had turned on the Makhnovists, the latter appealed to rank-and-file Red Army troops not to attack them. As one of their leaflets put it: "*Down with fratricidal war among the working people!*" They urged the Red Army troops (with some success) to rebel against the commissars and appointed officers and join with the Makhnovists, who would "*greet [them] as our own brothers and together we will create a free and just life for workers and peasants and will struggle against all tyrants and oppressors of the working people.*" [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 276 and p. 283]

Even after the defeat of the Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks did not stop their campaign of lies. For example, Trotsky reported to the Ninth Congress of Soviets on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1921, that the Makhnovists were "*in Romania,*" where Makhno had "*received a friendly welcome*" and was "*liv[ing] comfortably in Bucharest.*" The Makhnovists had picked Romania because it was, like Poland, "*a country where they . . . felt secure*" due to the way they treated "*Russian counter-revolutionary bands.*" [How the Revolution Armed, vol. IV, p. 404] In reality, the "*Romanian authorities put Makhno, his wife, and his followers in an internment camp.*" The Bolsheviks were not unaware of this, as they "*sent a series of sharp diplomatic notes demanding Makhno's extradition.*" They expelled Makhno and his wife to Poland on April 11, 1922. The Poles also interned them and, again, the Bolsheviks demanded Makhno's extradition "*on the ground that he was a criminal and not entitled to political asylum.*" [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 242] Trotsky's lies come as no surprise, given his and his party's track record on slandering anarchists.

As can be seen, the relationship of the Makhnovists to the Bolsheviks was one of constant betrayal of the former by the latter. Moreover, the Bolsheviks took every opportunity to slander the Makhnovists, with Trotsky going so far as to report Makhno was living well while he was rotting in a capitalist prison. This is to be expected, as the aims of the two groups were at such odds. As we discuss in the next section, while the Makhnovists did whatever they could to encourage working-class self-management and freedom, the Bolsheviks had evolved from advocating the government of their party as the expression of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" to stating that only the dictatorship of their party could ensure the success of a social revolution and so was "the dictatorship of the proletariat." As the Makhnovist movement shows, if need be, the party would happily exercise

its dictatorship over the proletariat (and peasantry) if that was needed to retain its power.

## 14 How did the Makhnovists and Bolsheviks differ?

Like chalk and cheese.

Whereas the Bolsheviks talked about soviet democracy while exercising a party dictatorship, the Makhnovists not only talked about “*free soviets*,” they also encouraged them with all their ability. Similarly, while Lenin stated that free speech was “*a bourgeois notion*” and that there could be “*no free speech in a revolutionary period*,” the Makhnovists proclaimed free speech for working people. [Lenin quoted by Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, p. 33] While the Bolsheviks ended up arguing for the necessity of party dictatorship during a revolution, the Makhnovists introduced free soviets and organised peasant, worker and insurgent congresses to conduct the revolution.

We have discussed the Makhnovist ideas in both theory and practice in sections 5, 6 and 7. In spite of the chaos and difficulties imposed upon the movement by having to fight the counter-revolution, the Makhnovists applied their ideals constantly. The Makhnovists were a mass movement and its constructive efforts showed that there was an alternative route the Russian revolution could have followed other than the authoritarian dictatorship that Leninists, then and now, claimed was inevitable if the revolution was to be saved.

To see why, we must compare Bolshevik ideology and practice to that of the Makhnovists in three key areas. Firstly, on how a revolution should be defended. Secondly, on the role of the soviets and party in the revolution. Thirdly, on the question of working-class freedom.

Early in 1918, after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty the Bolsheviks re-introduced Tsarist officers into the army alongside bourgeois military discipline. As Maurice Brinton correctly summarises:

*“Trotsky, appointed Commissar of Military Affairs after Brest-Litovsk, had rapidly been reorganising the Red Army. The death penalty for disobedience under fire had been restored. So, more gradually, had saluting, special forms of address, separate living quarters and other privileges for officers. Democratic forms of organisation, including the election of officers, had been quickly dispensed with.”* [The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, p. 37]

Officers were appointed rather than elected. They argued this had to be done to win the war. The “*principle of election*,” stated Trotsky, “*is politically purposeless*



*and technically inexpedient and has been, in practice, abolished by decree.*” Thus the election of officers and the creation of soldiers’ committees was abolished from the top, replaced by appointed officers. Trotsky’s rationale for this was simply that *“political power is in the hands of the same working class from whose ranks the Army is recruited.”* In other words, the Bolshevik Party held power as power was actually held by it, **not** the working class. Trotsky tried to answer the obvious objection:

*“Once we have established the Soviet regime, that is a system under which the government is headed by persons who have been directly elected by the Soviets of Workers’, Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, there can be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members, and, therefore, there cannot be any grounds for fearing the **appointment** of members of the commanding staff by the organs of the Soviet Power.”* [**Work, Discipline, Order**]

He repeated this argument in his 1919 diatribe against the Makhnovists:

*“The Makhnovites shout raucously: ‘Down with appointed commanders!’ This they do only so as to delude the ignorant element among their own soldiers. One can speak of ‘appointed’ persons only under the bourgeois order, when Tsarist officials or bourgeois ministers appointed at their own discretion commanders who kept the soldier masses subject to the bourgeois classes. Today there is no authority in Russia but that which is elected by the whole working class and working peasantry. It follows that commanders appointed by the central Soviet Government are installed in their positions by the will of the working millions. But the Makhnovite commanders reflect the interests of a minute group of Anarchists who rely on the kulaks and the ignorant.”* [**The Makhno Movement**]

Of course, most workers are well aware that the administration of a trade union usually works against them during periods of struggle. Indeed, so are most Trotskyists as they often denounce the betrayals by that administration. Thus Trotsky’s own analogy indicates the fallacy of his argument. Equally, it was not *“the will of the working millions”* which appointed anyone, it was a handful of leaders of the Bolshevik party (which had manipulated the soviets to remain in power). Needless to say, this was a vast change from Lenin’s comments in **State and Revolution** opposing appointment and calling for election of **all** officials!

Moreover, the explanation that “*the ignorant*” were to blame for Makhnovist opposition to appointed officers had a long legacy with Trotsky. In April 1918, when justifying Bolshevik introduction of appointed officers, he had argued that the “*Soviet government is the same as the committee of a trade union. It is elected by the workers and peasants and you can at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, at any moment you like, dismiss that government and appoint another. But once you have appointed it, you must give it the right to choose the technical specialists.*” He stressed that this applied “*in military affairs, in particular.*” Using the trade union analogy, he argued that the workers had “*entrusted us [the Bolshevik leaders] with the direction of the union*” and this meant that the Bolshevik leaders, not the workers, should decide things as “*we are better able to judge in the matter*” than them! The workers role was stated clearly: “*if our way of conducting the business is bad, then throw us out and elect another committee!*” [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 113] In other words, like any bureaucrat, for Trotsky working-class participation in the affairs of the revolution was seen as irrelevant: the masses had voted and their role was now that of obeying those who “*are better able to judge.*”

Using an argument the Tsar could have been proud of, Trotsky defended the elimination of soldier democracy:

*“How could soldiers who have just entered the army choose the chiefs! Have they any vote to go by? They have none. And therefore elections are impossible.”*  
[Ibid.]

Equally, how could workers and peasants who have just entered political or economic struggle in 1917 choose the chiefs? Had they any vote to go by? They had none. And therefore political and workplace elections are impossible. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky soon ended up applying this logic to politics as well, defending (like all the leaders of Bolshevism) the dictatorship of the party over working class. How could the “*ignorant*” workers be expected to elect the best “*chiefs*” never mind manage their own affairs!

Ironically, in 1936 the Stalinist Communist Party in Spain was to make very similar arguments about the need for a regular army and army discipline to win the war. As Aileen O’Carroll in her essay “*Freedom and Revolution*” argues:

*“The conventional army structure evolved when feudal kings or capitalist governments required the working class to fight its wars for them. These had to be authoritarian institutions, because although propaganda and jingoism can play a part initially in encouraging enlistment, the horrors of war soon expose the futility of nationalism. A large part of military organisation is aimed at ensuring that soldiers remain fighting for causes they do not necessarily believe*

*in. Military discipline attempts to create an unthinking, unquestioning body of soldiers, as fearful of their own side as of the other.*” [Red & Black Revolution, no. 1]

In short in both Russia and Spain the Bolsheviks wanted an army that would obey them regardless of whether the individual soldiers felt they were doing the correct thing, indeed who would obey through fear of their officers even when they knew what they were doing was wrong. Such a body would be essential for enforcing minority rule over the wishes of the workers. Would a self-managed army be inclined to repress workers’ and peasants’ strikes and protests? Of course not.

The Makhnovists show that another kind of revolutionary army was possible in the Russian Revolution and that the “*ignorant*” masses could choose their own officers. In other words, the latter-day justifications of the followers of Bolshevism are wrong when they assert that the creation of the top-down, hierarchical Red Army was a result of the “*contradiction between the political consciousness and circumstantial coercion*” and “*a retreat*” because “*officers were appointed and not elected,*” it was a conscript army and “*severe military discipline.*” [John Rees, “*In Defence of October*”, **International Socialism**, no. 52, pp. 3–82, p. 46] As can be seen, Trotsky did not consider it as a “*retreat*” or caused by “*circumstances.*” Equally, the Makhnovists managed to organise themselves relatively democratically in the circumstances created by the same civil war.

As such, the differences between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks as regards the internal organisation of a revolutionary army are clear. The Bolsheviks applied top-down, bourgeois methods of internal organisation and discipline. The Makhnovists applied democratic internal organisation and discipline as far as possible.

From our discussion of the Bolshevik justifications for its system of appointed officers in the Red Army, it will come as no surprise that as regards the relationship of the soviets to the revolutionary organisation (party) the Makhnovists and Bolsheviks were (again) miles apart. While we discuss this in greater detail in section 14 of the appendix “What happened during the Russian Revolution?”, we will give a flavour of Bolshevik ideology on this subject here.

From the start, Lenin identified soviet (or working class) power with the power of their own party. In October 1917, Lenin was equating party and class: “*the power of the Bolsheviks — that is, the power of the proletariat.*” [Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?, p. 102] After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks were clear that the soviets would not have “*all power.*” Rather, the first act of soviet sovereignty was to alienate it into the hands of a Bolshevik government. In response to a few leading Bolsheviks who called for a coalition government, the

Bolshevik Central Committee stated that it was “*impossible to refuse a purely Bolshevik government without treason to the slogan of the power of the Soviets, since a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . handed power over to this government.*” [quoted by Robery V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, pp. 127–8] How can the “*power of the Soviets*” exist when said soviets immediately “*handed power*” over to another body? Thus the only “*power*” the soviets had was simply the “*power*” to determine who actually held political power.

The question of who held power, the soviets or the party, came into focus when the soviet elections resulted in non-Bolshevik majorities being elected. After the initial honeymoon period, soviet elections started to go badly for the Bolsheviks. Ever since taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks had become increasingly alienated from the working class. The spring and summer of 1918 saw “*great Bolshevik losses in the soviet elections*” in all provincial city elections that data is available for. The Mensheviks were the main beneficiaries of these election swings (Socialist Revolutionaries also gained) The Bolsheviks forcibly disbanded such soviets. They continually postponed elections and “*pack[ed] local soviets once they could no longer count on an electoral majority*” by giving representation to the organisations they dominated which made workplace elections meaningless. [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, pp. 22–4 and p. 33] In Petrograd, such packing swamped the actual number of workplace delegates, transforming the soviets and making elections irrelevant. Of the 700-plus deputies to the “new” soviet, over half were elected by Bolshevik dominated organisations so ensuring a solid Bolshevik majority even before the factory voting began.

Thus, the regime remained “soviet” in name only. Faced with a defeat in the soviets, the Bolsheviks simply abolished them or changed them to ensure their position. This process, it should be noted, started **before** the outbreak of Civil War in late May 1918, implying that Bolshevik authoritarianism cannot be explained as reactions to difficult objective circumstances.

Unsurprisingly, Bolshevik ideology started to adjust to the position the party found itself in. As Samuel Farber argues, in the “*period of March to June 1918, Lenin began to make frequent distinctions **within** the working class, singling out workers who could still be trusted, denouncing workers whom he accused of abandoning the working class and deserting to the side of the bourgeoisie, and complaining about how the working class had become ‘infected with the disease of petty-bourgeois disintegration.’*” [Op. Cit., p. 25] Combined with the vision of “working-class” or “soviet” power expressed by the power of his party, this laid the foundations for what came next. In 1919 Lenin fully and explicitly argued that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was, in fact, the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party:

*“we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party . . . we say, ‘Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position . . . ’”* [Collected Works, vol. 29, p. 535]

This quickly become Bolshevik orthodoxy. Trotsky argued in his infamous work **Terrorism and Communism** that there was *“no substitution at all”* when *“the power of the party”* replaces *“the power of the working class.”* Zinoviev argued this point at the Second Congress of the Communist International. As he put it:

*“Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class . . . [T]he dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.”* [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920, vol. 1, pp. 151–2]

Neither Lenin nor Trotsky disagreed. By the end of the civil war, Lenin was arguing that *“the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts . . . that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”* [Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 21]

This places the Bolshevik betrayals of the Makhnovists in 1919 and 1920 into **political** context. It also explains the Bolshevik opposition to the proposed fourth clause of the 1920 political and military agreement (see last section). Simply put, at the time (and long afterwards) the Bolsheviks equated the revolution with their own power. As such, Makhnovist calls for soviet self-management threatened the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (i.e. dictatorship of the party) by encouraging working people to participate in the revolution and giving the radically false idea that working-class power could be exercised by working people and their own class organisations.

Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev held this position until their deaths. Trotsky, for example, was arguing in 1923 that *“[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party, and its leadership in all spheres*

of our work.” [Leon Trotsky Speaks, p. 158] Even after the rise of Stalinism, he was still arguing for the “objective necessity” of the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party” in 1937. He stressed that the “revolutionary party (*vanguard*) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions.” [Trotsky, *Writings 1936–37*, pp. 513–4]

This suggests that the later Trotskyist argument that the Bolsheviks were forced by “objective factors” to replace the dictatorship of the proletariat by that of the party is false. At the time, and afterwards, the Bolsheviks did not argue in these terms. The end of soviet democracy was not considered a problem or a retreat for the revolution. The opposite was the case, with the elimination of democracy being raised to an ideological truism to be applied everywhere. Equally, the fact that the Makhnovists did all they could to promote soviet self-management and actually called regional congresses of workers, peasants and insurgents suggests that “objective factors” simply cannot explain Bolshevik actions. Simply put, like the Bolshevik betrayals of the Makhnovists, the Bolshevik elimination of soviet democracy by party dictatorship can only be fully understood by looking at Bolshevik ideology.

Little wonder the Makhnovists argued as followed:

*“Since the arrival of the Bolsheviks the dictatorship of their party has been established here. As a party of statist, the Bolshevik Party everywhere has set up state organs for the purpose of governing the revolutionary people. Everything has to be submitted to their authority and take place under their vigilant eye. All opposition, protest, or even independent initiative has been stifled by their Extraordinary Commissions [the secret police, the Cheka]. Furthermore, all these institutions are composed of people who are removed from labour and from revolution. In other words, what has been created is a situation in which the labouring and revolutionary people have fallen under the surveillance and rule of people who are alien to the working classes, people who are inclined to exercise arbitrariness and violence over the workers. Such is the dictatorship of the Bolshevik-Communist Party . . .*

*“We again remind the working people that they will liberate themselves from oppression, misery and violence only through their own efforts. No change in power will help them in this. Only by means of their own free worker-peasant organisations can the workers reach the summit of the social revolution*

— *complete freedom and real equality.*” [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.* pp. 116–7]

Which brings us to the next issue, namely working-class freedom. For anarchists, the key point of a revolution is to increase working-class freedom. It means the end of hierarchy and the direct participation in the revolution by the working classes themselves. As Bakunin put it, “*revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.*” [Michael Bakunin: *Selected Writings*, p. 237] For this reason, the Makhnovists (like Bakunin) argued for a revolutionary society based on free federations of worker and peasant organisations (free soviets).

This means that actions which consolidated rule by a few cannot be revolutionary, even if the few are made up of the most revolutionary of the revolutionaries. Thus working class power cannot be equated to the power of a political party, no matter how “*socialist*” or “*revolutionary*” its ideas or rhetoric. This means that Bolshevik restrictions on working class freedom (of speech, assembly, press, organisation) struck at the heart of the revolution. It did not signify the defence of the revolution, but rather its defeat. Ultimately, as Emma Goldman quickly recognised, what the Bolsheviks called “*defence of the Revolution*” was “*really only the defence of [the] party in power.*” [My *Disillusionment in Russia*, p. 57]

Anarchists had long argued that, to quote Goldman again, there is “*no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another. This conception is a potent menace to social regeneration. All human experience teaches that methods and means cannot be separated from the ultimate aim. The means employed become, through individual practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical.*” [Op. Cit., p. 260] The evolution of Bolshevik practice and theory reinforces this argument. The means used had an impact on the course of events, which in turn shaped the next set of means and the ideology used to justify it.

This explains the Makhnovist and Bolshevik differences in relationship to working-class freedom. For anarchists, only freedom or the struggle for freedom can teach people to be free (and so is genuinely revolutionary). This explains why the Makhnovists not only proclaimed freedom of election, speech, press, assembly and organisation for working people, which was an essential revolutionary position, they also implemented it (see section 7). The Bolsheviks did the reverse, clamping down on the opposition at every occasion (including workers’ strikes and protests). For the Makhnovists, working-class freedom was the key gain

of the revolution, and so had to be introduced, practised and defended. Hence Makhno:

*“I consider it an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call congresses on their own account, to discuss their affairs. That is why the prohibitions of such congresses, and the declaration proclaiming them illegal . . . , represent a direct and insolent violation of the rights of the workers.”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129]

For the Bolsheviks, working-class freedom was something to fear. Back in 1903, Lenin laid the groundwork for this by arguing that the “*spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*” He stressed that “*the working class, exclusively by their own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness . . . the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.*” This meant that “*Social Democratic [i.e. socialist] consciousness . . . could only be brought to them from without.*” [*Essential Works of Lenin*, p. 82 and pp. 74–5] Clearly, if the workers turned against the party, then the workers were “*being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*” It was in their own interests, therefore, for the party to subordinate the workers and so soviet democracy became not an expression of working-class power but rather something which undermined it!

This perspective can be seen when the Makhnovists liberated cities. In Alexandrovsk and Katerinoslav, the Bolsheviks proposed to the Makhnovists spheres of action — their **Revkom** (Revolutionary Committee) would handle political affairs and the Makhnovists military ones. Makhno advised them “*to go and take up some honest trade instead of seeking to impose their will on the workers.*” Instead, the Makhnovists called upon “*the working population to participate in a general conference . . . and it was proposed that the workers organise the life of the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their organisations.*” [Arshinov *Op. Cit.*, p. 154 and p. 149] The differences between the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists could not be clearer.

Lastly, we should note that while Lenin and the leading Bolsheviks wholeheartedly opposed working-class economic self-management by factory committees and instead urged “efficient” top-down one-man management, the Makhnovists supported working-class self-management of production. Under the Bolsheviks, as Arshinov argued, the “*nationalisation of industry, [while] removing the workers from the hands of individual capitalists, delivered them to the yet more rapacious hands of a single, ever-present capitalist boss, the State. The relations between the workers and this new boss are the same as earlier relations between labour and*



*capital, with the sole difference that the Communist boss, the State, not only exploits the workers, but also punishes them himself . . . Wage labour has remained what it was before, except that it has taken on the character of an obligation to the State . . . It is clear that in all this we are dealing with a simple substitution of State capitalism for private capitalism.”* [Op. Cit., p. 71] The Makhnovist propaganda, in contrast, stressed the need for workers to socialise the means of production and place it under their direct management by their own class organs. In other words, the abolition of wage slavery by workers’ self-management of production.

Unsurprisingly, the Makhnovists supported the Kronstadt rebellion (see the appendix “What was the Kronstadt uprising?” for more on Kronstadt). Indeed, there is significant overlap between the Kronstadt demands and the ideas of the Makhnovist movement. For example, the Makhnovist idea of free soviets is almost identical to the first three points of the Kronstadt programme and their land policy the same as point 11 of the Kronstadt demands. The Kronstadt rebels also raised the idea of “free soviets” and the “third revolution,” common Makhnovist slogans (see section 3 of the appendix “What was the Kronstadt uprising?” for details). As one Bolshevik writer notes, it is “characteristic that the anarchist-Makhnovists in the Ukraine reprinted the appeal of the Kronstadters, and in general did not hide their sympathy for them.” [quoted by Malet, Op. Cit., p. 108] Voline also noted that the “ideas and activities of the Makhnovist peasants were similar in all respects to those of the Kronstadt rebels in 1921.” [Op. Cit., p. 575]

In summary, the major difference between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks is that the former stuck by and introduced their stated aims of “soviet power” and working-class freedom while the latter rejected them once they clashed with Bolshevik party policies.

## 15 How do the modern followers of Bolshevism slander the Makhnovists?

Many modern-day supporters of Bolshevism, on the rare occasions when they do mention the Makhnovist movement, simply repeat the old Bolshevik (and Stalinist) slanders against them.

For example, this is what Joseph Seymour of the U.S. **Spartacus League** did. Their newspaper **Workers Vanguard** ran a series entitled “*Marxism vs. Anarchism*” and in part 7, during his discussion of the Russian Revolution, Seymour claimed:

*“The most significant counter-revolutionary force under the banner of anarchism was the Ukrainian peasant-based army of Nestor Makhno, which carried*

*out pogroms against Jewish communities and collaborated with White armies against the Bolsheviks.*” [Workers Vanguard, 8/30/1996, p. 7]

Seymour, needless to say, made these accusations without providing any documentation, and with good reason, for outside of Stalinist hagiographies, no evidence exists to support his claims. As we indicated in section 9, the Makhnovists opposed anti-Semitism and did **not** conduct pogroms. Equally, section 12 proves that the Makhnovists did **not** collaborate with the Whites in any way (although this did not stop the Bolshevik press deliberately spreading the lie that they had).

More recently, the UK Leninist **Revolutionary Communist Group** asserted in their paper that the Makhnovists “*joined with counter-revolutionary White and imperialist armies against socialist Russia. This band of brigands also carried out pogroms against Jewish communities in the Ukraine.*” [Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!, issue no. 174, p. 12] No evidence for such a claim was presented in the original review article. When an anarchist pointed out their assertion was “*falling back on a long tradition of Stalinist lies*” and asked for “*any historical references*” to support it, the paper replied by stating that while there were “*several*” references, it would give two: “*E.H. Carr refers to it in his history of the civil war. Also the anarchist historian Paul Avrich mentions it in his work **The anarchists in the Russian Revolution.***” [Op. Cit., no. 175, p. 15]

In reality, neither work says any such thing. Looking at the first (unnamed) one, assuming it is E.H. Carr’s **The Bolshevik Revolution** there is no reference to pogroms carried out by the Makhnovists (looking in the index for “Makhno”). Which, perhaps, explains why the paper refused to provide a book title and page number. As far as the second reference goes, Avrich made no such claim in **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**. He **did** address the issue in his **Anarchist Portraits**, concluding such charges are false.

And the name of the original article? Ironically, it was entitled “*The anarchist school of falsification*”!

However, more sophisticated slanders, lies and distortions have been levelled at the Makhnovists by the supporters of Bolshevism. This is to be expected, as the experience of the Makhnovists effectively refute the claim that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to act as they did. It is hard to maintain a position that “*objective conditions*” made the Bolsheviks act as they did when another mass revolutionary army, operating in the same environment, did not act in the same way. This means that the Makhnovists are strong evidence that Bolshevik politics played a key role in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Clearly such a conclusion is dangerous to Bolshevism and so the Makhnovist movement must be attacked, regardless of the facts.

A recent example of this is John Rees' essay "*In Defence of October*" (**International Socialism**, no. 52, pp. 3–82). Rees, a member of the UK Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) is at pains to downplay the role of Bolshevik ideology in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. He argues that "*objective factors*" ensured that the Bolsheviks acted as they did. The "*subjective factor*" was simply a choice between defeat and defence against the Whites: "*Within these limits Bolshevik policy was decisive.*" [Op. Cit., p. 30] This explains his attack on the Makhnovist movement. Faced with the same "*objective factors*" as the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists did not act in the same way. As such, the "*subjective factor*" amounts to more than Rees' stark choice and so objective conditions cannot explain everything.

Clearly, then, the Makhnovists undermine his basic thesis. As such, we would expect a less than honest account of the movement and Rees does not disappoint. He talks about the "*muddled anarchism*" of Makhno, dismissing the whole movement as offering no alternative to Bolshevism and being without "*an articulated political programme.*" Ultimately, for Rees, Makhno's "*anarchism was a thin veneer on peasant rebellion*" and while "*on paper*" the Makhnovists "*appeared to have a more democratic programme*" there were "*frauds.*" [p. 57, p. 58, p. 61 and p. 70]

The reality of the situation is totally different. Ignoring the obvious contradiction (i.e. how can the Makhnovists have the appearance of a "*democratic programme*" and, simultaneously, not articulate it?) we shall analyse his account of the Makhnovist movement in order to show exactly how low the supporters of Bolshevism will go to distort the historical record for their own aims (see the appendix "What was the Kronstadt uprising?" for Rees's distortions about the Kronstadt revolt). Once the selective and edited quotations provided by Rees are corrected, the picture that clearly emerges is that rather than the Makhnovists being "*frauds,*" it is Rees' account which is the fraud (along with the political tradition which inspired it).

Rees presents two aspects of his critique of the Makhnovists. The first is a history of the movement and its relationships (or lack of them) with the Bolsheviks. The second is a discussion of the ideas which the Makhnovists tried to put into practice. Both aspects of his critique are extremely flawed. Indeed, the errors in his history of the movement are so fundamental (and, indeed, so at odds with his references) that it suggests that ideology overcame objectivity (to be polite). The best that can be said of his account is that at least he does not raise the totally discredited accusation that the Makhnovists were anti-Semitic or "*kulaks.*" However, he more than makes up for this by distorting the facts and references he uses (it would be no exaggeration to argue that the only information Rees gets correct about his sources is the page number).

Rees starts by setting the tone, stating that the "*methods used by Makhno and Antonov [a leader of the "Greens" in Tambov] in their fight against the Red Army*

*often mirrored those used by the Whites.*” [Op. Cit., p. 57] Strangely enough, while he lists some for Antonov, he fails to specify any against Makhno. However, the scene is set. His strongest piece of evidence as regards Makhno’s “*methods*” against the Red Army come from mid-1920 after, it should be noted, the Bolsheviks had engineered the outlawing of the Makhnovist movement and needlessly started the very conflict Rees uses as evidence against Makhno. In other words, he is attacking the Makhnovists for defending themselves against Bolshevik aggression!

He quotes reports from the Ukrainian Front to blacken the Makhnovists, using them to confirm the picture he extracts from “*the diary of Makhno’s wife.*” These entries, from early 1920, he claims “*betray the nature of the movement*” (i.e. after, as we shall see, the Bolsheviks had engineered the outlawing of the Makhnovists). [Op. Cit., p. 58] The major problem for Rees’ case is the fact that this diary is a fake and has been known to be a fake since Arshinov wrote his classic account of the Makhnovists in 1923:

*“After 1920, the Bolsheviks wrote a great deal about the personal defects of Makhno, basing their information on the diary of his so-called wife, a certain Fedora Gaenko . . . But Makhno’s wife is Galina Andreevna Kuz’menko. She has lived with him since 1918. She never kept, and therefore never lost, a diary. Thus the documentation of the Soviet authorities is based on a fabrication, and the picture these authorities draw from such a diary is an ordinary lie.”*  
[Arshinov, **History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 226f]

Ironically enough, Rees implicitly acknowledges this by lamely admitting (in an end note) that “*Makhno seems to have had two ‘wives’*” [Op. Cit., p. 78] And we should note that the source Rees uses for the fake diary entries (W.H. Chamberlin’s **The Russian Revolution**) uses as his source the very Bolshevik documentation that Arshinov quite correctly denounced over 70 years before Rees put pen to paper. Little wonder Michael Palij, in his detailed account of the movement (**The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918–1921**), fails to use it. So, in summary, a major part of his account is based on falsehoods, falsehoods exposed as such decades ago. This indicates well the quality of his case against the Makhnovist movement.

As regards the “evidence” he extracts from this fake diary and Red Army reports, it simply shows that Bolsheviks were shot by Makhno’s troops and Red Army troops died in combat. This went both ways, of course. In “*military operations the Bolsheviks shot all prisoners. The Makhnovists shot all captured officers unless the Red rank and file strongly interceded for them. The rank and file were usually sent home, though a number volunteered for service with the Insurgents.*” Equally, “[o]n the occupation of a village by the Red Army the Cheka would hunt out and hang all active Makhnovite supporters; an amenable Soviet would be set up; officials would be

*appointed or imported to organise the poor peasants . . . and three or four Red militia men left as armed support for the new village bosses.*” [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 292–3] As such, Rees’ account of Makhnovist “terror” against the Bolsheviks seems somewhat hypocritical. We can equally surmise that the methods used by the Bolsheviks against the Makhnovists also “*often mirrored those used by the Whites*”! And Rees lambastes socialist Samuel Farber for mentioning the “*Red Terror, but not the Green Terror*” in Farber’s discussion of the Tambov revolt! All in all, pretty pathetic.

Rees’ concern for the truth can be seen from the fact that he asserts that Makhno’s “*rebellion*” was “*smaller*” than the Tambov uprising and distinguished from it “*only by the muddled anarchism of its leader.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 58] In fact, the Makhnovist movement was the bigger of the two. As Michael Malet notes:

*“The differences between them explain why the Makhnovshchina lasted over four years, the Antonovshchina less than one year. The initial area of the Makhno movement was larger, and later expanded, whereas the Antonov region was restricted to the southern half of one province throughout its existence. The Makhno movement became established earlier, and was well-known before its break with the soviet regime. A crucial factor was the period of peace between the Bolsheviks and Makhno during the first half of 1919, something Antonov never had. It allowed for political and social development as well as military build-up. It followed from this that Makhno attracted much more support, which was increased and deepened by the positive ideology of Makhno and the anarchists who came to help him. This was not a matter of being anti-State and anti-town — all the Greens, including Antonov, shared this view in a less sophisticated form — but a positive land policy and a realisation of the need to link up with the towns on a federal basis in the post-revolutionary society.”* [*Op. Cit.*, p. 155]

Even in terms of troops, the Makhno movement was larger. The Antonov rebellion had “*a peak of around 20,000*” troops. [Read, *Op. Cit.*, p. 268] Makhno, in comparison, had a peak of about 40,000 in late 1919 [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 112] (Read states a peak of around 30,000 [*Op. Cit.*, p. 264]). Even by the end of 1920, a few months into the Tambov rebellion (it started in August of that year), the Makhnovists still had 10 to 15 thousand troops. [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 237]

In summary, the movement which lasted longer, covered a larger area and involved more troops is classed by Rees as the smaller of the two! Incredible — but it does give a flavour of the scholarship involved in his essay. Perhaps by “*smaller*” Rees simply meant that Makhno was physically shorter than Antonov?

After getting such minor details as size wrong, Rees turns to the actual history of the movement. He looks at the relations between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks, accurately stating that they “*were chequered.*” However, he is wrong when he tries to explain what happened by stating they “*reflect[ed] the fast changing military situation in the Ukraine throughout the civil war.*” [Op. Cit., p. 58] In fact, as we will prove, the relationships between the two forces reflected the military situation refracted through the ideology and needs of Bolshevik power. To ignore the ideological factor in the Makhnovist-Bolshevik relationships cannot be justified as the military situation does **not** fully explain what happened.

The Makhnovists co-operated with the Red Army three times. Only two of these periods were formal alliances (the first and last). Discussing the first two pacts, Rees alleges that the Makhnovists broke with the Bolsheviks. The truth is the opposite — the Bolsheviks turned on the Makhnovists and betrayed them in order to consolidate their power. These facts are hardly unknown to Rees as they are contained in the very books he quotes from as evidence for his rewritten history.

The first pact between the Makhnovists and the Red Army ended June 1918. According to Rees, “[c]o-operation continued until June 1919 when the Insurgent Army broke from the Red Army” and quotes Michael Palij’s book **The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno** as follows: “*as soon as Makhno left the front he and his associates began to organise new partisan detachments in the Bolsheviks’ rear, which subsequently attacked strongholds, troops, police, trains and food collectors.*” [Op. Cit., p. 58] Rees is clearly implying that Makhno attacked the Bolsheviks, apparently for no reason. The truth is totally different. It is easy to show this — all we need to do is look at the book he uses as evidence.

Rees quotes Palij on page 177. This page is from chapter 16, which is called “*The Bolsheviks Break with Makhno.*” As this was not enough of a clue, Palij presents some necessary background for this Bolshevik break. He notes that before the break, “*the Bolsheviks renewed their anti-Makhno propaganda. Trotsky, in particular, led a violent campaign against the Makhno movement.*” He also mentions that “[a]t the same time, the supplies of arms and other war materials to Makhno were stopped, thus weakening the Makhno forces vis-a-vis the Denikin troops.” In this context, the Makhnovists Revolutionary Military Council “*decided to call a fourth congress of peasants, workers, and partisans*” for June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1919, which Trotsky promptly banned, warning the population that “*participation in the Congress shall be considered an act of state treason against the Soviet Republic and the front.*” [Op. Cit., p. 175 and p. 176]

The Bolsheviks had, of course, tried to ban the third congress in April but had been ignored. This time, they made sure that they were not. Makhno and his staff were not informed of Trotsky’s dictatorial order and learned of it three days later.

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, Makhno sent a telegram informing the Bolsheviks that he was leaving his post as leader of the Makhnovists. He “*handed over his command and left the front with a few of his close associates and a cavalry detachment*” while calling upon the partisans to “*remain at the front to hold off Denikin’s forces.*” Trotsky ordered his arrest, but Makhno was warned in advance and escaped. On June 15-16<sup>th</sup>, members of Makhno’s staff “*were captured and executed the next day.*” Now Palij recounts how “[a]s soon as Makhno left the front he and his associates began to organise new partisan detachments in the Bolsheviks’ rear, which subsequently attacked strongholds, troops, police, trains and food collectors.” [Op. Cit., p. 177]

Palij “*subsequently*” refers to Makhno after Denikin’s breakthrough and his occupation of the Ukraine. “*The oppressive policy of the Denikin regime,*” he notes, “*convinced the population that it was as bad as the Bolshevik regime, and brought a strong reaction that led able young men . . . to leave their homes and join Makhno and other partisan groups.*” [Op. Cit., p. 190] As Makhno put it, “[w]hen the Red Army in south Ukraine began to retreat . . . as if to straighten the front line, but in reality to evacuate Ukraine . . . only then did my staff and I decide to act.” [quoted by Palij, Op. Cit., p. 190] After trying to fight Denikin’s troops, Makhno retreated and called upon his troops to leave the Red Army and rejoin the fight against Denikin. He “*sent agents amongst the Red troops*” to carry out propaganda urging them to stay and fight Denikin with the Makhnovists, which they did in large numbers. This propaganda was “*combined with sabotage.*” Between these two events, Makhno had entered the territory of pogromist warlord Hryhoryiv (which did **not** contain Red troops as they were in conflict) and assassinated him. [Op. Cit., p. 191 and p. 173]

It should also be noted that Palij states that it was the Whites who “*were the main enemy that Makhno fought, stubbornly and uncompromisingly, from the end of 1918 to the end of 1919.*” [Op. Cit., p. 177]

Clearly, Rees’s summary leaves a lot to be desired! Rather than Makhno attacking the Bolsheviks, it was they who broke with him — as Palij, Rees’s source, makes clear. Indeed, Makhno made no attempt to undermine the Red Army’s campaign against Denikin (after all, that would have placed his troops and region in danger). Rather, he waited until the Bolsheviks showed that they would not defend the Ukraine against the Whites before he acted. As such, Rees misuses his source material and used Palij as evidence for a viewpoint which is the exact opposite of the one he recounts. The dishonesty is obvious. But, then again, it is understandable, as Trotsky banning a worker, peasant and partisan congress would hardly fit into Rees’ attempt to portray the Bolsheviks as democratic socialists overcome by objective circumstances! Given that the Makhnovists had successfully held three such congresses to discuss the war against reaction, how could objective circumstances be blamed for the dictatorial actions of Trotsky and

other leading Red Army officers in the Ukraine? Better not to mention this and instead rewrite history by making Makhno break with the Bolsheviks and attack them for no reason!

Rees moves onto the period of co-operation between the insurgents and the Bolsheviks. His version of what happened is that *“Denikin’s advance against Makhno’s territory in autumn 1919 quickly forced a renewal of the treaty with the Bolsheviks. Makhno harassed Denikin’s troops from the rear, making their advance more difficult.”* [Op. Cit., p. 58]

A more accurate account of what happened would be that Makhno reorganised his troops after the Bolsheviks had retreated and evacuated the Ukraine. These troops included those that had been left in the Red Army in June, who now left to rejoin him (and brought a few Red Army units along too). After conducting quick and demoralising raids against Denikin’s forces, the Makhnovists were forced to retreat to the West (followed by White forces). In late September, near Peregonovka, Makhno inflicted a major defeat against the following Whites and allowed the Makhnovists to attack across Denikin’s supply lines (which stopped his attack on Moscow thus, ironically, saving the Bolshevik regime). Makhno’s swift attack on the rear of the Whites ensured their defeat. As the correspondent of *Le Temps* observed:

*“There is no doubt that Denikin’s defeat is explained more by the uprising of the peasants who brandished Makhno’s black flag, then by the success of Trotsky’s regular army. The partisan bands of ‘Batko’ tipped the scales in favour of the Reds.”* [quoted by Palij, Op. Cit., p. 208]

Palij argues that it was the *“rapidly changing military situation [which] soon caused a change in the Bolsheviks’ attitude toward Makhno.”* The two forces meet up on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1919. However, *“[a]lthough the Bolsheviks fraternised with the Makhno troops and the commander even offered co-operation, they distrusted Makhno, fearing the popularity he had gained as a result of his successful fight against Denikin.”* [Op. Cit., p. 209] It should also be stressed that **no** formal treaty was signed.

Clearly, Rees’ summary leaves a lot to be desired!

This is not the end of it. Rees even attempts to blame the Makhnovists for the attack of General Wrangel. He argues that *“by the end of 1919 the immediate White threat was removed. Makhno refused to move his troops to the Polish front to meet the imminent invasion and hostilities with the Red Army began again on an even more widespread scale.”* [Op. Cit., p. 58]

This, needless to say, is a total distortion of the facts. Firstly, it should be noted that the *“imminent”* invasion by Poland Rees mentions did not, in fact, occur until



“the end of April” (the 26<sup>th</sup>, to be precise). The break with Makhno occurred as a result of an order issued in early January (the 8<sup>th</sup>, to be precise). [Michael Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 219 and p. 210] Clearly, the excuse of “imminent” invasion was a cover, as recognised by a source Rees himself uses, namely Palij’s work:

*“The author of the order realised at that time there was no real war between the Poles and the Bolsheviks at that time and he also knew that Makhno would not abandon his region . . . Uborevich [the author] explained that ‘an appropriate reaction by Makhno to this order would give us the chance to have accurate grounds for our next steps’ . . . [He] concluded: ‘The order is a certain political manoeuvre and, at the very least, we expect positive results from Makhno’s realisation of this.’”* [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 210]

This is confirmed by Rees’ other references. David Footman, whom Rees also uses for evidence against the Makhnovist movement, notes that while it was “true there were military reasons for reinforcing” the Polish frontier (although he also notes the significant fact that the war “was not to break out for another four months”), it was “admitted on the Soviet side that this order was primarily ‘dictated by the necessity’ of liquidating **Makhnovshchina** as an independent movement. Only when he was far removed from his home country would it be possible to counteract his influence, and to split up and integrate his partisans into various Red Army formations.” He notes that there were “other occasions (notably in Siberia) of the Soviet authorities solving the problem of difficult partisan leaders by sending them off to fight on distant fronts” and, of course, that “Makhno and his staff . . . were perfectly aware of the underlying Soviet motives.” Footman recounts how the Makhnovist staff sent a “reasoned reply” to the Bolsheviks, that there “was no immediate response” from them and in “mid-January the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party declared Makhno and his force to be outside the law, and the Red Army attacked.” [The Russian Civil War, pp. 290–1]

In other words, according to the sources Rees himself selects, the Bolsheviks **started** the conflict in order to eliminate opposition to their power!

Needless to say, the Makhnovists **did** realise the political motivations behind the order. As Arshinov notes, “[s]ending the insurrectionary army to the Polish front meant removing from the Ukraine the main nerve centre of the revolutionary insurrection. This was precisely what the Bolsheviks wanted: they would then be absolute masters of the rebellious region, and the Makhnovists were perfectly aware of this.” In addition, “neither the 14<sup>th</sup> Corps nor any other unit of the Red Army had any ties with the Makhnovist army; least of all were they in a position to give orders to the insurrectionary army.” Nor does Rees mention that the Makhnovists

considered the move “*physically impossible*” as “*half the men, the entire staff and the commander himself were in hospital with typhus.*” [Op. Cit., p. 163]

Consider what Rees is (distortedly) accounting. The beginning of 1920 was a time of peace. The Civil War looked like it was over. The White Generals had been defeated. Now the Bolsheviks turn on their allies after issuing an ultimatum which they knew would never be obeyed. Under the circumstances, a stupider decision cannot be easily found! Moreover, the very logic of the order was a joke. Would be it wise to leave the Ukraine undefended? Of course not and if Red Army units were to stay to defend the region, why not the Makhnovists who actually came from the area in question? Why provoke a conflict when it was possible to transfer Red Army units to the Polish front? Simply put, Rees presents a distorted picture of what was happening in the Ukraine at the time simply so he can whitewash the Bolshevik regime and blacken the Makhnovists. As he himself later notes, the Bolshevik-Makhnovist conflict gave the White General Wrangel the space required to restart the Civil War. Thus the Bolshevik decision to attack the Makhnovists helped prolong the Civil War — the very factor Rees blames the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevik ideology and practice on!

It is **now** that Rees presents his evidence of Makhnovist violence against the Bolsheviks (the Red Army reports and entries from the fake diary of Makhno’s wife). Arguing that the entries from the fake diary “*betray the nature of the movement in this period,*” he tries to link them with Makhnovist theory. “*These actions,*” he argues, “*were consistent with an earlier resolution of the Insurgent Army which declared that it was ‘the actions of the Bolshevik regime which cause a real danger to the worker-peasant revolution.’*” [Op. Cit., p. 59]

Firstly, given a true account of the second break between the Makhnovists and Bolsheviks, it would be fair to conclude that the resolution was, in fact, correct! However, such facts are not mentioned by Rees, so the reader is left in ignorance.

Secondly, to correct another of Rees’ causal mistakes, it should be noted that this resolution was **not** passed by the Insurgent Army. Rather it was passed at the Second Regional Congress of Peasants, Workers and Insurgents held at Hulyai Pole on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1919. This congress had 245 delegates, representing 350 districts and was one of four organised by the Makhnovists. Unsurprisingly, these regional congresses are not even mentioned by Rees in his account. This is for obvious reasons — if the Makhnovists could organise congresses of workers, peasants and insurgents to discuss the progress of the revolution, then why could the Bolsheviks not manage it? Equally, to mention them would also mean mentioning that the Bolsheviks tried to ban one and succeeded in banning another.

Thirdly, the tone of the congress was anti-Bolshevik simply because the Ukraine had had a taste of Bolshevik rule. As Rees himself acknowledges in a roundabout

way, the Bolsheviks had managed to alienate the peasantry by their agricultural policies.

Fourthly, the Bolsheviks had engineered the outlawing of the Makhnovists. Thus the actions of the Makhnovists were **not** “consistent” with the earlier resolution. They were, in fact, “consistent” with self-defence against a repressive state which had attacked them first!

Looking at the congress where the resolution was passed, we find that the list of “real dangers” was, quite simply, sensible and, in fact, in line with Leninist rhetoric. The resolution acknowledged the fact that the Bolshevik party was “demanding a monopoly of the Revolution.” As we discussed in section 14, it was during this period that the Bolsheviks explicitly started to argue that the “dictatorship of the party” was the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The resolution also stated:

*“With deep regret the Congress must also declare that apart from external enemies a perhaps even greater danger, arising from its internal shortcomings, threatens the Revolution of the Russian and Ukrainian peasants and workers. The Soviet Governments of Russia and of the Ukraine, by their orders and decrees, are making efforts to deprive local soviets of peasants and workers’ deputies of their freedom and autonomy.”* [quoted by Footman, **Op. Cit.**, p. 267]

It also stated:

*“the political commissars are watching each step of the local soviets and dealing ruthlessly with those friends of peasants and workers who act in defence of peoples’ freedom from the agency of the central government . . . The Bolshevik regime arrested left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists, closing their newspapers, stifling any manifestation of revolutionary expression.”*

Delegates also complained that the Bolshevik government had not been elected, that it was “imposing upon us its party dictatorship” and “attempting to introduce its Bolshevik monopoly over the soviets.” [quoted by Palij, [**Op. Cit.**, p. 154]

The resolution noted that the current situation was “characterised by the seizure of power by the political party of Communists-Bolsheviks who do not balk at anything in order to preserve and consolidate their political power by armed force acting from the centre. The party is conducting a criminal policy in regard to the social revolution and in regard to the labouring masses.” To top it off, point number three read:

*“We protest against the reactionary habits of Bolshevik rulers, commissars, and agents of the Cheka, who are shooting workers, peasants, and rebels, inventing all kinds of excuses . . . The Cheka which were supposed to struggle with*

*counterrevolution . . . have turned in the Bolsheviks' hands into an instrument for the suppression of the will of the people. They have grown in some cases into detachments of several hundred armed men with a variety of arms. We demand that all these forces be dispatched to the front.*" [quoted by Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War*, pp. 109–10]

We should also point out that Rees selectively quotes the resolution to distort its meaning. The resolution, in fact, "*urges the peasants and workers to watch vigilantly the actions of the Bolshevik regime that cause a real danger to the worker-peasant revolution.*" [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 154] We have listed some of the actions of the Bolsheviks that the congress considered as a "*real danger.*" Considering the truth of these complaints, only someone blinded by Bolshevik ideology would consider it strange that worker and peasant delegates should agree to "*watch vigilantly*" those actions of the Bolsheviks which were a "*real danger*" to their revolution!

Lenin (before taking power, of course) had argued that elections and recall to soviets were essential to ensure that the workers control the "workers' state" and that socialism required the elimination of "*special bodies of armed men*" by an armed population. To this day, his followers parrot his claims (while, simultaneously, justifying the exact opposite in Lenin's Russia). Now, is Rees **really** arguing that the Bolshevik monopoly of power, the creation of a secret police and the clamping down on working people's freedom were **not** dangers to the Russian Revolution and should not be watched "*vigilantly*"? If so, then his conception of revolution includes the strange notion that dictatorship by a party does not threaten a revolution! Then again, neither did the Bolsheviks (indeed, they thought calling worker, peasant and partisan congresses to discuss the development of the revolution as the real danger to it!). If not, then he cannot fault the regional congress resolution for pointing out the obvious. As such, Rees' misquoting of the resolution backfires on him.

Significantly, Rees fails to mention that during this period (the first half of 1920), the Bolsheviks "*shot ordinary soldiers as well as their commanders, destroying their houses, confiscating their properties, and persecuting their families. Moreover the Bolsheviks conducted mass arrests of innocent peasants who were suspected of collaborating in some way with the partisans. It is impossible to determine the casualties involved.*" The hypocrisy is clear. While Rees presents information (some of it, we stress, from a fake source) on Makhnovist attacks against the Bolshevik dictatorship, he remains silent on the Bolshevik tactics, violence and state terrorism. Given that the Bolsheviks had attacked the Makhnovists, it seems strange that that Rees ignores the "*merciless methods*" of the Bolsheviks (to use Palij's phrase) and concentrates instead on the acts of self-defence forced onto

the Makhnovists. Perhaps this is because it would provide too strong a “flavour” of the Bolshevik regime? [Op. Cit., pp. 212–3 and p. 213]

Rees makes great play of the fact that White forces took advantage of the conflict between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks, as would be expected. However, it seems like an act of ideological faith to blame the victims of this conflict for it! In his attempts to demonise the Makhnovists, he argues that “[i]n fact it was Makhno’s actions against the Red Army which made ‘a brief return of the Whites possible.’” In defence of his claims, Rees quotes from W. Bruce Lincoln’s **Red Victory**. However, looking at Lincoln’s work we discover that Lincoln is well aware who is to blame for the return of the Whites. Unsurprisingly, it is **not** the Makhnovists:

*“Once Trotsky’s Red Army had crushed Iudenich and Kolchak and driven Deniken’s forces back upon their bases in the Crimea and the Kuban, it turned upon Makhno’s partisan forces with a vengeance . . . [I]n mid-January 1920, after a typhus epidemic had decimated his forces, a re-established Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party declared Makhno an outlaw. Yet the Bolsheviks could not free themselves from Makhno’s grasp so easily, and it became one of the supreme ironies of the Russian Civil War that his attacks against the rear of the Red Army made it possible for the resurrected White armies . . . to return briefly to the southern Ukraine in 1920.” [Red Victory, p. 327]*

Ignoring the fact that Rees does not bother to give the correct quote (a problem that re-occurs frequently in his essay), it can be seen that he does paraphrase the last sentence of Lincoln’s work correctly. Strange, then, that he ignores the rest of his account which clearly indicates that the Bolsheviks “turned upon” the Makhnovists and “declared Makhno an outlaw.” Obviously such trivial facts as the initial Bolshevik attacks against the Makhnovists are unimportant to understanding what actually happened in this period. Informing his readers that it was the Bolsheviks’ betrayal of the Makhnovists which provoked the resistance that “made it possible for . . . the White armies . . . to return briefly” would confuse them with facts and so it goes unmentioned.

Lincoln, it must be stressed, concurs with Rees’s other main sources (Palij and Footman) on the fact that the Bolsheviks betrayed the Makhnovists! Clearly, Rees has rewritten history and distorted **all** of his main references on the Makhnovist movement. After reading the same fact in three different sources, you would think that the Bolshevik betrayal of the Makhnovists which provoked their resistance against them would warrant **some** mention, but no! In true Stalinist fashion, Rees

managed to turn a Bolshevik betrayal of the Makhnovists into a stick with which to beat them with! Truly amazing.

Simply put, if the Bolsheviks had not wanted to impose their rule over the Ukraine, then the conflict with the Makhnovists need not have taken place and Wrangel would not have been in a position to invade the Ukraine. Why did the Bolsheviks act in this way? There was no “*objective factor*” for this action and so we must turn to Bolshevik ideology.

As we proved in section 14, Bolshevik ideology by this time identified Bolshevik party dictatorship as the only expression of “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Does Rees really believe that such perspectives had no impact on how the Bolsheviks acted during the Revolution? The betrayal of the Makhnovists can only be understood in terms of the “*subjective factor*” Rees seeks to ignore. If you think, as the Bolsheviks clearly did, that the dictatorship of the proletariat equalled the dictatorship of the party (and vice versa) then anything which threatened the rule of the party had to be destroyed. Whether this was soviet democracy or the Makhnovists did not matter. The Makhnovist idea of worker and peasant self-management, like soviet democracy, could not be reconciled with the Bolshevik ideology. As such, Bolshevik policy explains the betrayals of the Makhnovists.

Not satisfied with distorting his source material to present the Makhnovists as the guilty party in the return of Wrangel, he decides to blame the initial success of Wrangel on them as well. He quotes Michael Palij as follows: “*As Wrangel advanced . . . Makhno retreated north . . . leaving behind small partisan units in the villages and towns to carry out covert destruction of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus and supply bases.*” [Op. Cit., p. 59] He again sources Palij’s work on the “*effective*” nature of these groups, stating that White Colonel Noga reported to headquarters that Makhno was critical to Wrangel’s advance.

As regards the claims that Makhno was “*critical*” to Wrangel’s advance, Colonel Noga actually states that it was “*peasant uprisings under Makhno and many other partisan detachments*” which gave “*the Reds no rest.*” [quoted by Palij, Op. Cit., p. 214] However, what Rees fails to mention is that Palij argues that it was the Bolshevik “*policy of terror and exploitation*” which had “*turned almost all segments of Ukrainian society against the Bolsheviks, substantially strengthened the Makhno movement, and consequently facilitated the advance of the reorganised anti-Bolshevik force of General Wrangel from the Crimea into South Ukraine, the Makhno region.*” [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 214] Again, Makhno is blamed for the inevitable results of Bolshevik policies and actions!

It should also be reported that Noga’s comments are dated 25<sup>th</sup> March 1920, while Palij’s summary of Makhno’s activities retreating from Wrangel was about June 1920 — 2 months later! As regards this advance by Wrangel, Palij argues that it was the “*outbreak of the Polish-Bolshevik war at the end of April*” which “*benefited*

Wrangel” and “enabled him to launch an offensive against the Bolsheviks in Tavriia on June 6<sup>th</sup>.” Indeed, it was after a “series of battles” that Wrangel “penetrated north, forcing a general Bolshevik retreat.” Now, “[a]s Wrangel advanced deeper into the Left Bank, Makhno retreated north to the Kharkiv region, leaving behind small partisan units in the villages and towns to carry on covert destruction of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus and supply bases.” [Op. Cit., p. 219] Again, Rees’ account has little bearing to reality or the source material he uses.

Rees continues to re-write history by arguing that “Makhno did not fight with the Reds again until October 1920 when Wrangel advanced on Makhno’s base.” [Op. Cit., p. 59] In fact, it was the **Makhnovists** who contacted the Bolsheviks in July and August in 1920 with a view to suspending hostilities and co-operating in the fight against Wrangel. This decision was made at a mass assembly of insurgents. Sadly, the Bolsheviks made no response. Only in September, after Wrangel had occupied many towns, did the Bolsheviks enter into negotiations. [Arshinov, Op. Cit., pp. 176–7] This is confirmed by Footman, who states that it is “agreed that the initiative for joint action against Wrangel came from the Makhnovists” [Op. Cit., p. 294], as well as by Palij, who notes that “Makhno was compelled to seek an understanding with the Bolsheviks” but “no reply was received.” It was “Wrangel’s success [which] caused the Bolshevik leaders to reconsider Makhno’s earlier proposal.” [Op. Cit., pp. 222–3] Obviously indicating that the Makhnovists placed the struggle against the White counter-revolution above their own politics would place the Bolsheviks in a bad light, and so Rees fails to give the details behind the agreement of joint action against Wrangel.

As regards this third and final break, Rees states that it was (“unsurprisingly”) a “treaty of convenience on the part of both sides and as soon as Wrangel was defeated at the end of the year the Red Army fought Makhno until he have up the struggle.” [Op. Cit., p. 59] Which, as far as it goes, is true. Makhno, however, “assumed [that] the forthcoming conflict with the Bolsheviks could be limited to the realm of ideas” and that they “would not attack his movement immediately.” [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 231] He was wrong. Instead the Bolsheviks attacked the Makhnovists without warning and, unlike the other breaks, without pretext (although leaflets handed out to the Red Army stated that **Makhno** had “violat[ed] the agreement”! [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 236]).

It would be a good idea to reproduce the agreement which the Bolsheviks ripped up. There were two parts, a military and a political one. The military one is pretty straight forward (although the clause on the Makhnovists refusing to accept Red Army detachments or deserters suggests that the Makhnovists’ democratic army was seen by many Red Army soldiers as a better alternative to Trotsky’s autocratic structure). The political agreement was as follows:

*“1. Immediate release, and an end to the persecution of all Makhno men and anarchists in the territories of the Soviet Republics, except those who carry on armed resistance against Soviet authorities.*

*“2. Makhno men and anarchists were to have complete freedom of expression of their ideas and principles, by speech and the press, provided that nothing was expressed that tended to a violent overthrow of Soviet government, and on condition that military censorship be respected. . .*

*“3. Makhno men and anarchists were to enjoy full rights of participation in elections to the soviets, including the right to be elected, and free participation in the organisation of the forthcoming Fifth All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets . . .”* [cited by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 224]

Needless to say, the Bolsheviks delayed the publication of the political agreement several until several days after the military one was published — *“thus blurring its real meaning.”* [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 225] Clearly, as it stands, the agreement just gave the Makhnovists and anarchists the rights they should have had according to the Soviet Constitution! Little wonder the Bolsheviks ignored it — they also ignored their own constitution. However, it is the fourth point of the political agreement which gives the best insight into the nature of Bolshevism. This last point was never ratified by the Bolsheviks as it was *“absolutely unacceptable to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”* [quoted by Palij, *Ibid.*] This clause was:

*“One of the basic principles of the Makhno movement being the struggle for the self-administration of the toilers, the Partisan Army brings up a fourth point: in the region of the Makhno movement, the worker and peasant population is to organise and maintain its own free institutions for economic and political self-administration; this region is subsequently federated with Soviet republics by means of agreements freely negotiated with the appropriate Soviet governmental organ.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 224]

Clearly, this idea of worker and peasant self-management, like soviet democracy, could not be reconciled with the Bolshevik support for party dictatorship as the expression of *“the dictatorship of the proletariat”* which had become a Bolshevik ideological truism by that time. Little wonder the Bolsheviks failed to ratify the fourth clause and violated the other agreements. Simply put, a libertarian alternative to Bolshevism would give the Russian and Ukrainian working masses hope of freedom and make them harder to control. It is unsurprising that Rees fails to discuss the treaty — it would, yet again, undermine his case that the Bolsheviks were forced by objective circumstances to be dictatorial.



And, of course, let us not forget the circumstances in which this betrayal took place. The country was, as Rees reminds us, in a state of economic disruption and collapse. Indeed, Rees blames the anti-working class and dictatorial actions and policies of the Bolsheviks on the chaos caused by the civil war. Yet here are the Bolsheviks prolonging this very Civil War by turning (yet again!) on their allies. After the defeat of the Whites, the Bolsheviks preferred to attack the Makhnovists rather than allow them the freedom they had been fighting for. Resources which could have been used to aid the economic rebuilding of Russia and the Ukraine were used to attack their former allies. The talents and energy of the Makhnovists were either killed or wasted in a pointless conflict. Should we be surprised? After all, the Bolsheviks had preferred to compound their foes during the Civil War (and, indirectly, aid the very Whites they were fighting) by betraying their Makhnovist allies on two previous occasions (once, because the Makhnovists had dared call a conference of working people to discuss the civil war being fought in their name). Clearly, Bolshevik politics and ideology played a key role in all these decisions. They were **not** driven by terrible objective circumstances (indeed, they made them worse).

Rees obviously distorted the truth about the first two agreements between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks. He portrayed the Makhnovists as the guilty party, “breaking” with the Bolsheviks when in fact it was (in both cases) the Bolsheviks who broke with and betrayed the Makhnovists. That explains why he fails to present any information on **why** the first break happened and why he distorts the events of the second. It cannot be said that he was unaware of these facts — they are in the very books he himself references! As such, we have a clear and intended desire to deceive the reader. As regards the third agreement, while he makes no pretence that the Makhnovists were the guilty party however, he implies that the Bolsheviks had to act as they did before the Makhnovists turned on them. Little wonder, then, that he does not provide the details of the agreement made between the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists — to do so would have been to expose the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks. Simply put, Rees’ distortions of the source material he uses comes as no surprise. It undermines his basic argument and so cannot be used in its original form. Hence the cherry-picking of quotations to support his case.

After distorting Makhnovist relations with the Bolsheviks, Rees moves on to distorting the socio-political ideas and practice of the Makhnovists. As would be expected from his hatchet-job on the military history of the movement, his account of its social ideas leaves much to be desired. However, both aspects of his critique have much in common. His account of its theoretical ideas and its attempts to apply them again abuse the source material in disgraceful ways.

For example, Rees states that under the Makhnovists “[p]apers could be published, but the Bolshevik and Left Socialist Revolutionary press were not allowed to call for revolution” and references Michael Palij’s book. [Op. Cit., p. 60] Looking at the page in question, we discover a somewhat different account. According to Palij’s work, what the Makhnovists **actually** “prohibited” was that these parties should “propagate armed uprisings against the Makhnovist movement.” A clear rewriting of the source material and an indication of how low Leninists will sink. Significantly, Palij also notes that this “freedom of speech, press, assembly and association” was implemented “[i]n contrast to the Bolshevik regime” and its policy of crushing such liberties. [Op. Cit. pp. 152–3] Ironically, the military-political agreement of late 1920 between the Reds and Makhnovists included a similar clause, banning expression that “tended to a violent overthrow of the Soviet government.” [quoted by Palij, OP. Cit., p. 224] Which means, to use Rees’ distorted terminology, that the Bolsheviks banned calls for revolution!

However, this distortion of the source material **does** give us an insight into the mentality of Leninism. After all, according to Palij, when the Makhnovists entered a city or town they “immediately announced to the population that the army did not intend to exercise political authority.” The workers and peasants were to set up soviets “that would carry out the will and orders of their constituents” as well as “organis[e] their own self-defence force against counter-revolution and banditry.” These political changes were matched in the economic sphere as well, as the “holdings of the landlords, the monasteries and the state, including all livestock and goods, were to be transferred to the peasants” and “all factories, plants, mines, and other means of production were to become property of all the workers under control of their professional unions.” [Op. Cit., p. 151]

In such an environment, a call for “revolution” (or, more correctly, “armed uprisings against the Makhno movement”) could only mean a Bolshevik coup to install a Bolshevik party dictatorship. As the Makhnovists were clearly defending working-class and peasant self-government, then a Bolshevik call for “armed uprisings” against them also meant the end of such free soviets and their replacement with party dictatorship. Little wonder Rees distorts his source! Arshinov makes the situation clear:

*“The only restriction that the Makhnovists considered necessary to impose on the Bolsheviks, the left Socialist Revolutionaries and other statists was a prohibition on the formation of those ‘revolutionary committees’ which sought to impose a dictatorship over the people. In Aleksandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav, right after the occupation of these cities by the Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks hastened to organise **Revkoms (Revolutionary Committees)** seeking to organise their political power and govern the population . . . Makhno advised them to go and*

*take up some honest trade instead of seeking to impose their will on the workers . . . In this context the Makhnovists' attitude was completely justified and consistent. To protect the full freedom of speech, press, and organisation, they had to take measures against formations which sought to stifle this freedom, to suppress other organisations, and to impose their will and dictatorial authority on the workers."* [Op. Cit., p. 154]

Little wonder Rees distorts the issues and transforms a policy to defend the **real** revolution into one which banned a "*call for revolution*"! We should be grateful that he distorted the Makhnovist message for it allows us to indicate the dictatorial nature of the regime and politics Rees is defending.

All of which disproves Rees' assertion that "*the movement never had any real support from the working class. Neither was it particularly interested in developing a programme which would appeal to the workers.*" [Op. Cit., p. 59] Now, Rees had obviously read Palij's summary of Makhnovist ideas. Is he claiming that workers' self-management and the socialisation of the means of production do not "*appeal*" to workers? After all, most Leninists pay lip-service to these ideas. Is Rees arguing that the Bolshevik policies of the time (namely one-man management and the militarisation of labour) "*appealed*" to the workers more than workers' self-management of production? Equally, the Makhnovists argued that the workers should form their own free soviets which would "*carry out the will and orders of their constituents.*" [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 151] Is Rees **really** arguing that the Bolshevik policy of party dictatorship "*appealed*" to the workers more than soviet democracy? If so, then heaven help us if the SWP ever get into power!

Luckily, as Jonathan Aves' book **Workers Against Lenin** proves, this was not the case. Working-class resistance to Bolshevik policies was extremely widespread and was expressed by strikes. It should be noted that the wave of strikes all across Russia which preceded the Kronstadt revolt also raised the demand for soviet democracy. The call for "*free soviets*" was raised by the Kronstadt revolt itself and during the "mini-Kronstadt" in Katerinoslav in June 1921 where the demands of the workers "*were very similar in content with the resolutions of the Kronstadt rebels*" and telegraph operators sent "*messages throughout the Soviet Republic calling for free soviets.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 172 and p. 173]

Clearly, the Makhnovists **did** create a "*programme that would appeal to the workers.*" However, it is true that the Makhnovists did fail win over more than a minority of workers. This may have been due to the fact that the Makhnovists only freed two cities, both for short periods of time. As Paul Avrich notes, "*he found little time to implement his economic programs.*" [**Anarchist Portraits**, p. 121] Given how Rees bends over backwards to justify Bolshevik policies in terms

of “*objective factors*,” it is significant that in his discussion of the Makhnovists such “*objective factors*” as time fail to get a mention!

Thus Rees’s attempt to paint the Makhnovists as anti-working class fails. While this is the core of his dismissal of them as a possible “*libertarian alternative to the Bolsheviks*,” the facts do not support his assertions. He gives the example of Makhno’s advice to railway workers in Aleksandrovsk “*who had not been paid for many weeks*” that they should “*simply charge passengers a fair price and so generate their own wages*.” He states that this “*advice aimed at reproducing the petit-bourgeois patterns of the countryside*.” [Op. Cit., p. 59] Two points can be raised to this argument.

Firstly, we should highlight the Bolshevik (and so, presumably, “*proletarian*”) patterns imposed on the railway workers. Trotsky simply “*plac[ed] the railwaymen and the personnel of the repair workshops under martial law*” and “*summarily ousted*” the leaders of the railwaymen’s trade union when they objected. The Central Administrative Body of Railways (Tsektran) he created was run by him “*along strictly military and bureaucratic lines*.” In other words, he applied his ideas on the “*militarisation of labour*” in full. [M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 67] Compared to the Bolshevik pattern, only an ideologue could suggest that Makhno’s advice (and it was advice, not a decree imposed from above, as was Trotsky’s) can be considered worse. Indeed, by being based on workers’ self-management it was infinitely more socialist than the militarised Bolshevik state capitalist system.

Secondly, Rees fails to understand the nature of anarchism. Anarchism argues that it is up to working class people to organise their own activities. This meant that, ultimately, it was up to the railway workers **themselves** (in association with other workers) to organise their own work and industry. Rather than being imposed by a few leaders, **real** socialism can only come from below, built by working people, through their own efforts and own class organisations. Anarchists can suggest ideas and solutions, but ultimately its up to workers (and peasants) to organise their own affairs. Thus, rather than being a source of condemnation, Makhno’s comments should be considered as praiseworthy as they were made in a spirit of equality and were based on encouraging workers’ self-management.

Ultimately, the best reply to Rees is simply the fact that after holding a “*general conference of the workers of the city*” at which it was “*proposed that the workers organise the life of the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their own organisations*” based on “*the principles of self-management*,” the “[r]ailroad workers took the first step in this direction” by “*form[ing] a committee charged with organising the railway network of the region*.” [Arshinov, Op. Cit., p. 149]

Even more amazing (if that is possible) is Rees' account of the revolution in the countryside. Rees argues that the "*real basis of Makhno's support was not his anarchism, but his opposition to grain requisitioning and his determination not to disturb the peasant economy*" [Op. Cit., p. 59] and quotes Palij as follows:

*"Makhno had not put an end to the agricultural inequalities. His aim was to avoid conflicts with the villages and to maintain a sort of united front of the entire peasantry."* [M. Palij, Op. Cit., p. 214]

However, here is the actual context of the (corrected) quote:

*"Peasants' economic conditions in the region of the Makhno movement were greatly improved at the expense of the estates of the landlords, the church, monasteries, and the richest peasants, but Makhno had not put an end to the agricultural inequalities. His aim was to avoid conflicts within the villages and to maintain a sort of united front of the entire peasantry."* [M. Palij, Op. Cit., p. 214]

Clearly, Rees has distorted the source material, conveniently missing out the information that Makhno had most definitely "*disturbed*" the peasant economy at the expense of the rich! And, we are sure that Rees would have a fit if it were suggested that the real basis of Bolshevik support was not their socialism, but their opposition to the war and the Whites!

Amazingly, Rees also somehow manages to forget to mention the peasant revolution which had started in 1917 in his attack against Makhno:

*"Makhno and his associates brought socio-political issues into the daily life of the people, who in turn supported the expropriation of large estates . . . On the eve of open conflict [in late 1917], Makhno assembled all the landowners and rich peasants (kulaks) of the area and took from them all official documents relating to their land, livestock, and equipment. Subsequently an inventory of this property was taken and reported to the people at the session of the local soviet, and then at the regional meeting, It was decided to allow the landlords to share the land, livestock, and tools equally with the peasants."* [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 71]

Obviously, Rees considers the expropriating of the landlords and kulaks as an act which "*did not disturb the age-old class structure of the countryside*"!

Let us not forget that the official Makhnovist position was that the "*holdings of the landlords, the monasteries, and the state, including all livestock and goods, were to be transferred to the peasants.*" [Palij, Op. Cit., p. 151] At the second congress

of workers, peasants and insurgents held in February, 1919, it was resolved that “*all land be transferred to the hands of toiling peasants . . . according to the norm of equal distribution.*” [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155] This meant that every peasant family had as much land as they could cultivate without the use of hired labour. The Makhnovists argued with regards to the kulaks:

*“We are sure that . . . the kulak elements of the village will be pushed to one side by the very course of events. The toiling peasantry will itself turn effortlessly on the kulaks, first by adopting the kulak’s surplus land for general use, then naturally drawing the kulak elements into the social organisation.”* [cited by Michael Malet, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 118–9]

Thus, just to stress the point, the Makhnovists **did** “*disturb*” the “*age-old class structure of the countryside.*”

Clearly, Rees is simply taking nonsense. When he states that Makhnovist land policies “*did not disturb the age-old class structure of the countryside,*” he is simply showing his utter and total disregard for the truth. As the Bolsheviks themselves found out, no mass movement could possibly exist among the peasants without having a positive and levelling land policy. The Makhnovists were no exception.

Rees then states that “[i]n 1919 the local Bolshevik authorities made mistakes which played into Makhno’s hands.” Unsurprisingly enough, he argues that this was because they “*tried to carry through the socialisation of the land, rather than handing it over to the peasants.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 60] In fact, the Bolsheviks did **not** try to implement the “*socialisation*” of land. Rather, they tried to **nationalise** the land and place it under state control — a radically different concept. Indeed, it was the Makhnovists who argued that the “*land, the factories, the workshops, the mines, the railroads and the other wealth of the people must belong to the working people themselves, to those who work in them, that is to say, they must be socialised.*” [contained in Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 273] The Bolsheviks, in contrast, initially “*decreed that all lands formerly belonging to the landlords should be expropriated and transformed into state farms.*” [Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 156] The peasants quite rightly thought that this just replaced one set of landlords with another, stealing the land which rightfully belonged to them.

After distorting the source material by selective quoting, Rees does it again when he argues that “*by the spring of 1920 they [the Bolsheviks] had reversed the policy towards the peasants and instituted Committees of Poor Peasants, these ‘hurt Makhno . . . his heart hardened and he sometimes ordered executions.’ This policy helped the Bolshevik ascendancy.*” [*Op. Cit.*, p. 60]

Rees quotes Palij as evidence. To refute his argument we need simply quote the same pages:

*“Although they [the Bolsheviks] modified their agricultural policy by introducing on February 5, 1920, a new land law, distributing the former landlords’, state and church lands among the peasants, they did not succeed in placating them because of the requisitions, which the peasants considered outright robbery . . . Subsequently the Bolsheviks decided to introduce class warfare into the villages. A decree was issued on May 19, 1920, establishing ‘Committees of the Poor’ . . . Authority in the villages was delegated to the committees, which assisted the Bolsheviks in seizing the surplus grain . . . The establishment of Committees of the Poor was painful to Makhno because they became not only part of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus the peasants opposed, but also informers helping the Bolshevik secret police in its persecution of the partisans, their families and supporters, even to the extent of hunting down and executing wounded partisans . . . Consequently, Makhno’s ‘heart hardened and he sometimes ordered executions where some generosity would have bestowed more credit upon him and his movement. That the Bolsheviks preceded him with the bad example was no excuse. For he claimed to be fighting for a better cause.’ Although the committees in time gave the Bolsheviks a hold on every village, their abuse of power disorganised and slowed down agricultural life . . . This policy of terror and exploitation turned almost all segments of Ukrainian society against the Bolsheviks, substantially strengthened the Makhno movement, and consequently facilitated the advance of the reorganised anti-Bolshevik force of General Wrangel from the Crimea into South Ukraine, the Makhno region.” [M. Palij, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 213–4]*

Amazing what a “. . .” can hide, is it not! Rees turns an account which clearly shows the Bolshevik policy was based on informers, secret police and the murder of rebels as well as being a total disaster into a victory. Moreover, he also transforms it so that the victims are portrayed as the villains. Words cannot do this re-writing of history justice. Yes, indeed, an organisation of informers to the secret police in every village can aid the “ascendancy” of a one-party dictatorship (aided, of course, by overwhelming military force), but it cannot aid the ascendancy of freedom, equality and socialism.

Given the actual record of the Bolsheviks’ attempts to break up what they considered the “*age-old class structure*” of the villages with the “*Committees of the Poor*,” it is clear why Rees distorts his source.

It does seem ironic that Rees attacks the Makhnovists for not pursuing Bolshevik peasant policies. Considering the absolute **failure** of those policies, the fact that Makhno did not follow them is hardly cause for condemnation! Indeed, given the numerous anti-Bolshevik uprisings and large-scale state repression they provoked, attacking the Makhnovists for not pursuing such insane policies is

equally insane. After all, who, in the middle of a Civil War, makes matters worse for themselves by creating more enemies? Only the insane — or the Bolsheviks!

That Makhnovist land policy was correct and the Bolshevik one wrong can be seen from the fact that the latter changed their policies and brought them into line with the Makhnovist ones. As Palij notes, the Bolsheviks “*modified their agricultural policy by introducing on February 5, 1920, a new land law, distributing the former landlords’, state, and church lands among the peasants.*” This, of course, was a vindication of Makhnovist policy (which dated from 1917!). Makhno “*initiated the peasants’ movement, confiscating and distributing landlords’ land and goods*” (and, unlike the Bolsheviks, “*encouraging the workers to take over factories and workshops*”). As regards the Bolsheviks attempts to break up what they considered the “*age-old class structure*” of the villages with the “*Committees of the Poor,*” it was, as noted above, a complete disaster and counter-productive. [Op. Cit., p. 213 and p. 250] All in all, the Makhnovist policies were clearly the most successful as regards the peasantry. They broke up the class system in the countryside by expropriating the ruling class and did not create new conflicts by artificially imposing themselves onto the villages.

Lastly, we must also wonder just how sensible it is to “*disturb*” the economy that produces the food you eat. Given that Rees, in part, blames Bolshevik tyranny on the disruption of the economy, it seems incredible that he faults Makhno for not adding to the chaos by failing to “*disrupt the peasant economy*”! However, why let logic get in the way of a good rant!

As well as ignoring the wealth of information on Makhnovist land policy, Rees turns to their attempts to form free agrarian communes. He argues that Makhno’s attempts “*to go beyond the traditional peasant economy were doomed*” and quotes Makhno’s memoirs which state “*the mass of the people did not go over*” to his peasant communes, which only involved a few hundred families. [Op. Cit., p. 59]

Looking at Makhno’s memoirs a somewhat different picture appears. Firstly, Makhno states that there were “*four such agricultural communes within a three- or four-mile radius of Hulyai-Pole,*” but in the whole district “*there were many*” in 1918 (the period being discussed in his memoirs). Makhno recounts how each “*commune consisted of ten families of peasants and workers, totalling a hundred, two hundred or three hundred members*” and the “*management of each commune was conducted by a general meeting of all its members.*” He does state that “*the mass of people did not go over to it*” but, significantly, he argues that this was because of “*the advance of the German and Austrian armies, their own lack of organisation, and their inability to defend this order against the new ‘revolutionary’ and counter-revolutionary authorities. For this reason the toiling population of the district limited their real revolutionary activity to supporting in every way those bold spirits among them who had settled on the old estates [of the landlords] and*



*organised their personal and economic life on free communal lines.*” [quoted by Paul Avrich, **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 130–2]

Of course, failing to mention the time period Makhno was recounting does distort the success of the communes. The Bolsheviks were evacuating the Ukraine as part of their treaty with German and Austrian Imperialism when the communes were being set up. This left them in a dangerous position, needless to say. By July, 1918, the area was occupied by Austrian troops and it was early 1919 before the situation was stable enough to allow their reintroduction. One commune was named “*Rosa Luxemburg*” (after the Marxist revolutionary martyr) and was mostly destroyed by the Bolsheviks in June 1919 and completely destroyed by the Whites a few days later. In such circumstances, can it be surprising that only a minority of peasants got involved in them? Rather than praise the Makhnovists for positive social experimentation in difficult circumstances, Rees shows his ignorance of the objective conditions facing the revolution. Perhaps if the peasants did not have to worry about the Bolsheviks as well as the Whites, they would have had more members?

All in all, Rees account of Makhnovist ideas on the peasant economy are, to put it mildly, incorrect. They paint a radically different picture of the reality of both Makhnovist ideas and practice as regards the peasantry. Ironically, the soundness of Makhnovist policy in this area can be seen from the fact that the Bolsheviks changed their land policy to bring it into line with it. Not, of course, that you would know that from Rees’ account. Nor would you know what the facts of the Bolsheviks’ land policy were either. Indeed, Rees uses Michael Palij’s book to create a picture of events which is the exact opposite of that contained in it! Very impressive!

Intent on driving the final nail into the coffin, he tries to apply “class analysis” to the Makhnovists. Rees actually states that “*given this social base [i.e. the Makhnovists’ peasant base] . . . much of Makhno’s libertarianism amounted to little more than paper decrees.*” [Op. Cit., p. 60]

Ironically enough, the list of “*paper decrees*” Rees presents (when not false or distorted) are also failings associated with the Bolsheviks (and taken to even more extreme measures by the Bolsheviks)! As such, his lambasting of the Makhnovists seems deeply hypocritical. Moreover, his attempt to ground the few deviations that exist between Makhnovist practice and Makhnovist theory in the peasant base of the army seems an abuse of class analysis. After all, these deviations were also shared by the Bolsheviks. As such, how can Rees justify the Bolshevik deviations from socialist theory in terms of “*objective factors*” yet blame Makhnovist ones on their “*social base*”? Do “*objective factors*” only afflict Leninists?

Take for example his first “*paper*” decree, namely the election of commanders. He states that “*in practice the most senior commanders were appointed by Makhno.*”

In other words, the Makhnovists applied this principle extensively but not completely. The Bolsheviks abolished it by decree (and did not blame it on “*exceptional circumstances*” nor consider it as a “*retreat*”, as Rees asserts). Now, if Rees’ “class analysis” of the limitations of the Makhnovists were true, does this mean that an army of a regime with a proletarian base (as he considers the Bolshevik regime) cannot have elected commanders? This is the logical conclusion of his argument.

Equally, his attempt to “*give a flavour of the movement*” by quoting one of the resolutions adopted by a mass meeting of partisans also backfires (namely, “*to obey the orders of the commanders if the commanders are sober enough to give them*”). Firstly, it should be noted that this was, originally, from a Red Army source. Secondly, drunkenness was a big problem during the civil war (as in any war). It was one of the easiest ways of forgetting reality at a time when life was often unpleasant and sometimes short. As such, the “*objective factor*” of civil war explains this resolution rather than the social base of the movement! Thirdly, Rees himself quotes a Central Committee member’s comment to the Eighth Party Congress that there were so many “*horrifying facts about drunkenness, debauchery, corruption, robbery and irresponsible behaviour of many party members that one’s hair stands on end.*” [Op. Cit., p. 66] The Eighth Congress was in 1919. Does this comment give a “*flavour*” of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin? Obviously not, as Rees defends it and blames this list of horrors on the objective factors facing the Bolsheviks. Why does the drunkenness of the Makhnovists come from their “*social base*” while that of the Bolsheviks from “*objective factors*”? Simply put, Rees is insulting the intelligence of his readers.

The Makhnovist resolution was passed by a mass assembly of partisans, suggesting a fundamentally democratic organisation. Rees argues that the civil war resulted in the Bolshevik vices becoming institutionalised in the power of the bureaucracy. However, as can be seen, the Makhnovists practised democracy during the civil war, suggesting that the objective factors Rees tries to blame for the Bolshevik vices simply cannot explain everything. As such, his own example (yet again) backfires on his argument.

Rees claims that “*Makhno held elections, but no parties were allowed to participate in them.*” [Op. Cit., p. 60] This is probably derived from Palij’s comment that the free soviets would “*carry out the will and orders of their constituents*” and “[o]nly working people, not representatives of political parties, might join the soviets.” [Op. Cit., p. 151] This, in turn, derives from a Makhnovist proclamation from January 1920 which stated:

*“Only labourers who are contributing work necessary to the social economy should participate in the soviets. Representatives of political organisations have no place in worker-peasant soviets, since their participation in a workers’ soviet*

*will transform the latter into deputies of the party and can lead to the downfall of the soviet system.*" [contained in Peter Arshinov's **History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 266]

Rees' comments indicate that he is not familiar with the make-up of the Russian Soviets of 1917. Unlike the soviets from the 1905 revolution, those in 1917 allowed "*various parties and other organisations to acquire voting representation in the soviet executive committees.*" Indeed, this was "*often how high party leaders became voting delegates to*" such bodies. It should "*be underlined that these party delegates were selected by the leadership of each political organisation, and not by the soviet assembly itself. In other words, these executive committee members were not directly elected by the representatives of the producers*" (never mind by the producers themselves). [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 31]

In addition, Russian Anarchists had often attacked the use of "*party lists*" in soviet elections, which turned the soviets from working-class organs into talking-shops. [Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, p. 190] This use of party lists meant that soviet delegates could be anyone. For example, the leading left-wing Menshevik Martov recounts that in early 1920 a chemical factory "*put up Lenin against me as a candidate [to the Moscow soviet]. I received seventy-six votes he-eight (in an open vote).*" [quoted by Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 202] How would either of these two intellectuals actually know and reflect the concerns and interests of the workers they would be "delegates" of? If the soviets were meant to be the delegates of working people, then why should non-working class members of political parties be elected to a soviet?

Given that the people elected to the free soviets would be **delegates** and **not** representatives, this would mean that they would reflect the wishes of their workmates rather than the decisions of the party's central committee. As such, if a worker who was a member of a political party could convince their workmates of their ideas, the delegate would reflect the decisions of the mass assembly. As such, the input of political parties would not be undermined in any way (although their domination would be!).

As such, the Makhnovist ideas on soviets did not, in fact, mean that workers and peasants could **not** elect or send delegates who were members of political parties. They had no problems as such with delegates who happened to be working-class party members. They did have problems with delegates representing only political parties, delegates who were not workers and soviets being mere ciphers covering party rule.

That this was the case can be seen from a few facts. Firstly, the February 1919 congress resolution "*was written by the anarchists, left Socialist Revolutionaries, and the chairman.*" [Palij, **Op. Cit.**, p. 155] Similarly, the Makhnovist Revolutionary

Military Soviet created at the Aleksandrovsk congress in late 1919 had three Communists elected to it. There were 18 delegates from workers at that congress, six were Mensheviks and the remaining 12 included Communists [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 111, p. 124] Clearly, members of political parties were elected to both the congresses and the Revolutionary Military Soviet. As such, the idea that free soviets excluded members of political parties is false — they simply were not dominated by them (for example, having executives made up of members of a single party or delegating their power to a government as per the national soviet in Russia). This could, of course, change. In the words of the Makhnovist reply to Bolshevik attempts to ban one of their congresses:

*“The Revolutionary Military Council . . . holds itself above the pressure and influence of all parties and only recognises the people who elected it. Its duty is to accomplish what the people have instructed it to do, and to create no obstacles to any left socialist party in the propagation of ideas. Consequently, if one day the Bolshevik idea succeeds among the workers, the Revolutionary Military Council . . . will necessarily be replaced by another organisation, ‘more revolutionary’ and more Bolshevik.”* [quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 103–4]

As such, the Makhnovists supported the right of working- class self-determination, as expressed by one delegate to Hulyai Pole conference in February 1919:

*“No party has a right to usurp governmental power into its hands . . . We want life, all problems, to be decided locally, not by order from any authority above; and all peasants and workers should decide their own fate, while those elected should only carry out the toilers’ wish.”* [quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 154]

Thus, Rees fails to present an accurate account of Makhnovist theory and practice as regards “free soviets.” Rather than oppose party participation within their soviets and congresses, the Makhnovists opposed the domination of soviets and congresses by political parties, a radically different concept. Like the Kronstadt rebels, they argued for all power to the soviets and not to parties.

Lastly, Rees attacks the Makhnovists for having two security forces, the Cheka-like *razvedka* and the Punitive Commission. How this is an expression of the Makhnovist “social base” is hard to explain, as both the Bolsheviks and Whites also had their security forces and counter-intelligence agencies.

While Rees quotes Footman’s statement that “we can safely assume [!] these services were responsible for frequent injustices and atrocities,” he fails to mention that Footman does not provide any examples (hence his comment that we can

“assume” they occurred!). Footman himself notes that “[o]f the Makhnovite security services . . . we know very little.” [David Footman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 288] Rees himself only lists one, namely the summary shooting of a Bolshevik cell discovered in the Army. Given the bloody record of the Bolshevik Cheka (which, again, Rees defends as necessary to defend against the Whites!), this suggests that the crimes of the Makhnovist counter-intelligence pale in comparison.

Rees also quotes the historian Chamberlin that “Makhno’s private Cheka . . . quickly disposed of anyone who was suspected of plotting against his life.” [Op. Cit., 60] Strangely enough, Rees fails to mention the Bolshevik attempts to assassinate Makhno, including the one in the latter part of May 1919 when, it should be noted, the Makhnovists and Bolsheviks were meant to be in alliance. Nor does he mention that the Cheka “would hunt out and hang all active Makhnovites.” [David Footman, *Civil War in Russia*, p. 271 and p. 293]

As regards the last conflict with the Red Army, it should be noted that while “generalised accusations of Makhnovist atrocities are common” the facts are it was “the Makhnovists who stood to gain by liberating prisoners, the Bolsheviks by shooting them.” This was because “the Red Army soldiers had been conscripted from elsewhere to do work they neither liked nor understood” and the “insurgents had their own homes to defend.” [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 130] Thus, while Rees quotes Footman’s opinion that “Makhno’s later campaigns [were] among the most bloody and vindictive,” these facts suggest that we **cannot** “safely assume that these [security] services were responsible for frequent injustices and atrocities.” Clearly, if the Makhnovists were releasing Red Army prisoners (and many of whom were joining Makhno), the picture of an atrocity inflicting army can hardly be a valid picture.

And it should be stressed that Bolshevik terror and violence against the Makhnovists is strangely absent from Rees’s account.

Rees presents just **one** concrete example of Makhnovist “Cheka-like” violence, namely, the execution of a Bolshevik cell in December, 1919. It should be noted that the Bolsheviks had been explicitly arguing for Party dictatorship for some time by then. The reason why the Bolsheviks had been “denied an open trial” was because they had already been shot. Unfortunately, Makhno gave two contradictory reasons why the Bolsheviks had been killed. This led to the Makhnovist Revolutionary Military Soviet setting up a commission of three to investigate the issue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the commission exonerated Makhno although Voline, out of the members, seemed to have been genuinely embarrassed by the affair. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 51–2] Needless to say, Rees fails to comment on the Bolshevik summary killing of Makhnovist staff in June 1919 or, indeed, any other summary executions conducted by the Bolsheviks against the Makhnovists (including the shooting of prisoners).

Given the summary justice handed out by the Bolshevik Cheka, it seems strange that Rees dismisses the Makhnovist movement on assumptions and one event, yet he does. Obviously, the large-scale and continuous Bolshevik killings of political enemies (including Makhnovists) is irrelevant compared to this one event.

All in all, Rees' attempts to blame the few deviations the Makhnovists had from anarchist theory on the "social base" of the movement are a joke. While justifying the far more extreme deviations of Bolshevik theory and practice in terms of "objective factors," he refuses to consider this possibility for the Makhnovists. The hypocrisy is clear, if not unexpected.

One last point. Taking Rees' "class analysis" of the Makhnovists seriously, the logical conclusion of his argument is clear. For Rees, a movement which compromises slightly with its principles in the face of extreme "objective factors" is "petty bourgeois." However, a movement which compromises totally (indeed introduces and justifies the exact opposite of its original claims) in face of the same "objective factors" is "proletarian." As such, his pathetic attempt at "class analysis" of the Makhnovists simply shows up the dictatorial nature of the Bolsheviks. If trying to live up to libertarian/democratic ideals but not totally succeeding signifies being "petty-bourgeois" while dismissing those ideals totally in favour of top-down, autocratic hierarchies is "proletarian" then sane people would happily be labelled "petty-bourgeois"!

And Rees states that "[n]either Makhno's social programme nor his political regime could provide an alternative to the Bolsheviks"! [Op. Cit., p. 60] Little wonder he distorts that social programme and political regime — an honest account of both would see that Rees is wrong. The Makhnovist movement clearly shows that not only did Bolshevik policies have a decisive impact on the development of the Russian Revolution, there was a clear alternative to Bolshevik authoritarianism and party dictatorship.

In summary, Rees' attack on the Makhnovists fails. It can be faulted on both factual and logical grounds. His article is so riddled with errors, selective quoting and downright lies that it is factually unreliable. Similarly, his attempt to attack the Makhnovist political theory and practice is equally factually incorrect. His attempt to explain the deviations of Makhnovist practice from its theory in terms of the "social base" is simply an insult to the intelligence of the reader and an abuse of class analysis.

A far more compelling analysis would recognise that the Makhnovists were not a perfect social movement but that the deviations of its practice from its theory can be explained by the objective factors it faced. Equally, the example of the Makhnovists shows the weakness of Rees' main argument, namely that the objective factors that Bolshevism faced can solely explain its authoritarian politics. That the Makhnovists, facing the same objective factors, did not act in the

same manner as the Bolsheviks shows that Bolshevik ideology played a key role in the failure of the revolution. This explains Rees' clumsy attempts to rewrite the history and theory of the Makhnovshchina.

## 16 What lessons can be learned from the Makhnovists?

The Makhnovist movement was one of the most important events of the Russian Revolution. It was a mass movement of working people who tried and succeeded to implement libertarian ideas in extremely difficult circumstances.

As such, the most important lesson gained from the experience of the Makhno movement is simply that "*objective factors*" cannot and do not explain the degeneration of the Russian Revolution or Bolshevik authoritarianism. Here was a movement which faced the same terrible circumstances as the Bolsheviks faced (White counter-revolution, economic disruption, and so on) and yet did not act in the same manner as the Bolsheviks. Where the Bolsheviks completely abolished army democracy, the Makhnovists extensively applied it. Where the Bolsheviks implemented party dictatorship **over** the soviets, the Makhnovists encouraged and practised soviet self-management. While the Bolsheviks eliminated freedom of speech, press, assembly, the Makhnovists defended and implemented them. The list is endless (see section 14).

This means that one of the key defences of the Bolshevik Myth, namely that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to act as they did due to "*objective factors*" or "*circumstances*" is totally undermined. As such, it points to the obvious conclusion: Bolshevik ideology influenced the practice of the party, as did their position within the "*workers' state*," and so influenced the outcome of the Revolution. This means that to play down Bolshevik ideology or practice in favour of "*objective factors*", one fails to understand that the actions and ideas generated during the revolution were not "objectively" determined but were **themselves** important and sometimes decisive factors in the outcome.

Take, for example, the Bolshevik decision to betray the Makhnovists in 1920. Neither betrayal was "objectively determined" before-hand. However, it did make perfect sense from a perspective which equated the revolution with the "*dictatorship of the party*." That the first betrayal undoubtedly extended the length of the Civil War by allowing the Whites the space to reorganise under Wrangel also had its impact on Bolshevik theory and practice as well as the "*objective factors*" it had to face.

As such, the Makhnovists give a counter-example to the common pro-Bolshevik argument that the horrors of the Civil War were responsible for the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the revolution. In the words of one historian:

*“[The] Insurgent Army . . . was organised on a voluntary basis and respected the principle of election of commanders and staff. The regulations governing conduct were drawn up by commissions of soldiers and approved by general meetings of the units concerned. In other words, it embodied the principles of the soldiers’ movement of 1917, principles rejected by the Bolsheviks when they set up the Red Army, supposedly because of their harmful effects on fighting efficiency, a characteristic of them discovered by the Bolsheviks only after they had come to power on the basis of promoting them. But the Insurgent Army, given its size and equipment, was very effective. Some have even credited it with greater responsibility than the Red Army for the defeat of Denikin. It took enormous efforts by the Bolsheviks, including the arrest or shooting of thousands of people, in order to pacify the region . . . even after the Insurgent Army was militarily broken, it took six months to mop up the remnants. . . Within its area of operations, which consisted of only two to three per cent of the total population of European Russia, the Insurgent Army was undoubtedly highly effective. While one can never know how history might have turned out had things been different, the Insurgent Army gives plenty of grounds for thinking that a people’s revolutionary war of the kind it represented might have been at least as effective on a national scale with nationwide resources at its disposal as Trotsky and the Red Army’s ruthless centralisation. It would not, however, have been compatible with the imposition from above of the Bolshevik leadership’s vision of revolution. When the Insurgent Army drove the enemy out of an area they encouraged the local population to solve their own problems. Where the Red Army took over, the Cheka quickly followed. The Bolsheviks themselves were energetically snuffing out the ideals of 1917.*

*“Given such considerations it may be, though it cannot be logically proven one way or the other, that the Bolsheviks’ deeply rooted authoritarianism rather than the civil war itself led to the construction of a highly centralised system that aimed at ‘complete control’ over political and many other aspects of social life. It could even be argued, though it is equally unprovable, that the tendency to authoritarianism, far from ensuring victory, nearly led to catastrophe. For one thing, it helped alienate many workers who felt cheated by the outcome of the revolution, and support for the regime was . . . far from even in this core group . . . [It] may, indeed, have been becoming more alienated as a result of Bolshevik measures depriving it of the means of expression of its growing catalogue of*



*grievances. . . Far from being 'necessary' or even functional, the Bolshevik leadership's obsession with externally imposed discipline and authority might even have made the task of victory in the war more difficult and more costly. If the counter-example of Makhno is anything to go by then it certainly did."*  
[Christopher Read, **From Tsar to Soviets**, pp. 264–5]

As such, another key lesson to be learned from the Makhno movement is the importance of practising during a revolution the ideas you preach before it. Means and ends are linked, with the means shaping the ends and the ends inspiring the means. As such, if you argue for working-class power and freedom, you cannot dump these aims during a revolution without ensuring that they are never applied after it. As the Makhnovist movement showed, even the most difficult situations need not hinder the application of revolutionary ideas.

The importance of encouraging working-class autonomy also shines through the Makhnovist experience. The problems facing a social revolution are many, as are the problems involved in constructing a new society. The solutions to these problems cannot be found without the active and full participation of the working class. As the Makhnovist congresses and soviets show, free debate and meaningful meetings are the only means, firstly, to ensure that working-class people are "*the masters of their own lives*," that "*they themselves are making the revolution*," that they "*have gained freedom*." "*Take that faith away*," stressed Alexander Berkman, "*deprive the people of power by setting up some authority over them, be it a political party or military organisation, and you have dealt a fatal blow to the revolution. You will have robbed it of its main source of strength, the masses.*" [ABC of Anarchism, p. 82]

Secondly, it allows the participation of all in solving the problems of the revolution and of constructing the new society. Without this input, **real** socialism cannot be created and, at best, some form of oppressive state capitalist regime would be created (as Bolshevism shows). A new society needs the freedom of experimentation, to adapt freely to the problems it faces, to adjust to the needs and hopes of those making it. Without working-class freedom and autonomy, public life becomes impoverished, miserable and rigid as the affairs of all are handed over to a few leaders at the top of a social hierarchy, who cannot possibly understand, let alone solve, the problems affecting society. Freedom allows the working class to take an active part in the revolution. Restricting working-class freedom means the bureaucratisation of the revolution as a few party leaders cannot hope to direct and rule the lives of millions without a strong state apparatus. Simply put, the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. Either working class people create socialism (and that needs workers' autonomy

and freedom as its basis), or some clique will and the result will not be a socialist society.

As the experience of the Makhnovist movement shows, working-class freedom can be applied during a revolution and when it is faced with the danger of counter-revolution.

Another key lesson from the Makhnovist movement is that of the need for effective anarchist organisation. The Makhnovists did not become anarchist-influenced by chance. The hard effort by the local anarchists in Hulyai Pole before and during 1917 paid off in terms of political influence afterwards. Therefore, anarchists need to take a leading role in the struggles of working people (as we indicated in section I.8.2, this was how the Spanish anarchists gained influence as well). As Voline noted, one of the advantages the Makhnovist movement had was “*the activity of . . . libertarian elements in the region . . . [and the] rapidity with which the peasant masses and the insurgents, despite unfavourable circumstances, became acquainted with libertarian ideas and sought to apply them.*” [Op. Cit., p. 570]

Arshinov expands on this issue in a chapter of his history (“*The Makhnovshchina and Anarchism*”), arguing that many Russian anarchists “*suffered from the disease of disorganisation,*” which led to “*impoverished ideas and futile practice.*” Moreover, most did not join the Makhnovist movement, “*remained in their circles and **slept through** a mass movement of paramount importance.*” [Op. Cit., p. 244 and p. 242]

Indeed, it was only in May 1919 that the “*Nabat*” Ukrainian anarchist confederation was organised. This federation worked closely with the Makhnovists and gained influence in the villages, towns and cities within and around the Makhnovist region. In such circumstances, the anarchists were at a disadvantage compared to the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, who had been organised far longer and so had more influence within the urban workers.

While many anarchists did participate effectively and organisationally within many areas of Russia and the Ukraine (gaining influence in Moscow and Petrograd, for example), they were much weaker than the Bolsheviks. This meant that the Bolshevik idea of revolution gained influence (by, it should be noted, appropriating anarchist slogans and tactics). Once in power, the Bolsheviks turned against their rivals, using state repression to effectively destroy the anarchist movement in Russia in April 1918 (see section 24 of the appendix “*What happened during the Russian Revolution?*” for details). This, incidentally, led to many anarchists coming to the Ukraine to escape repression and many joined the Makhnovists. As Arshinov notes, the Bolsheviks “*knew perfectly well that . . . anarchism in Russia, lacking any contact with a mass movement as important as the Makhnovshchina, did not have a base and could not threaten nor endanger them.*” [Op. Cit., p. 248] Waiting till **after** a revolution starts to build such a base is a dangerous tactic, as

the experience of the Russian anarchists shows. As the experience of the Moscow anarchists active in the bakers' union shows, organised working-class support can be an effective deterrent to state repression (the Moscow bakers' union continued to have anarchists active in it until 1921).

It should be noted that this lesson was recognised by the main anarchists associated with the Makhnovists. In exile, Voline argued for the need to build a "*synthesis*" anarchist federation (see section J.3.2) while Arshinov and Makhno both associated themselves with the Platform (see section J.3.3).

Another key lesson is the need to combine rural and urban organisation. As Voline argued, the "*absence of a vigorous organised workers' movement which could support that of the peasant insurgents*" was a major disadvantage for the Makhno movement. [Voline, *Op. Cit.*, p. 571] If there had been a workers' movement influenced by anarchist or syndicalist ideas within the Ukrainian towns during the Russian Revolution, the possibilities of constructive work would have been increased immensely. Take the example of when the Makhnovists liberated Aleksandrovsk and organised two workers' conferences. It was only at the insurgents' insistence that the unions agreed to send delegates, but for information only. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Mensheviks had some influence in the unions and Bolshevik influence was increasing. Both parties may have preferred the Makhnovists to the Whites, but neither accepted anarchist ideas of workers' self-management and so constructive work was limited to the railway workers. In contrast, when Katerinoslav was liberated, the bakers set themselves to preparing the socialisation of their industry and drawing up plans to feed both the army and the civilian population. Unsurprisingly, the bakers had long been under anarcho-syndicalist influence. [Malet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 123 and p. 124]

As the Makhnovists themselves realised, their movement had to be complemented by urban working-class self-activity and self-organisations. While they did all they could to encourage it, they lacked a base within the workers' movement and so their ideas had to overcome the twin barriers of workers' unfamiliarity with both them and their ideas and Marxist influence. With a strong working-class movement influenced by anarchist ideas, the possibilities for constructive work between city and village would have been helped immensely (this can be seen from the example of the Spanish Revolution of 1936, where rural and urban collectives and unions made direct links with each other).

Lastly, there is the lesson to be gained from Makhnovist co-operation with the Bolsheviks. Simply put, the experience shows the importance of being wary towards Bolshevism. As Voline put it, another disadvantage of the Makhnovists was a "*certain casualness, a lack of necessary distrust, towards the Communists.*" [Op. Cit., p. 571] The Makhnovists were betrayed three times by the Bolsheviks, who continually placed maintaining their own power above the needs of the

revolution. The anarchists were simply used as cannon fodder against the Whites and once their utility had ended, the Bolsheviks turned their guns on them.

Thus a lesson to be learned is that co-operation between anarchists and Bolsheviks is fraught with danger. As many activists are aware, modern-day supporters of Bolshevism constantly urge everyone to unite *“against the common enemy”* and not to be *“sectarian”* (although, somehow this appeal to non-sectarianism does not stop them printing lying accounts of anarchism!). The Makhnovists took them at their word in early 1919 and soon found out that *“unity”* meant *“follow our orders.”* When the Makhnovists continued to apply their ideas of working-class self-management, the Bolsheviks turned on them. Similarly, in early 1920 the Bolsheviks outlawed the Makhnovists in order to break their influence in the Ukraine. The Makhnovist contribution to the defeat of Denikin (the common enemy) was ignored. Lastly, in mid-1920 the Makhnovists placed the need of the revolution first and suggested an alliance to defeat the common enemy of Wrangel. Once Wrangel had been defeated, the Bolsheviks ripped up the agreement they had signed and, yet again, turned on the Makhnovists. Simply put, the Bolsheviks continually placed their own interests before that of the revolution and their allies. This is to be expected from an ideology based on vanguardism (see section H.5 for further discussion).

This does not mean that anarchists and Leninists should not work together. In some circumstances and in some social movements, this may be essential. However, it would be wise to learn from history and not ignore it and, as such, modern activists should be wary when conducting such co-operation. Ultimately, for Leninists, social movements are simply a means to their end (the seizing of state power by them on behalf of the working class) and anarchists should never forget it.

Thus the lessons of the Makhnovist movement are exceedingly rich. Simply put, the Makhnovshchina show that anarchism is a viable form of revolutionary ideas and can be applied successfully in extremely difficult circumstances. They show that social revolutions need not consist of changing one set of bosses for another. The Makhnovist movement clearly shows that libertarian ideas can be successfully applied in a revolutionary situation.

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