Workers' Liberty

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How bureaucracy strangled the Russian Revolution

The Russian revolution remains the high point of working class history. In October 1917, the Russian working class led by the Bolshevik party made a revolution, took power, smashed the old state and proceeded to build a new state based on workers' democracy. This socialist political and social revolution not only showed that working class power was possible, but unleashed an enormous democratic festival of the oppressed — poor peasants, minority nationalities, women. But when and how did the workers' rule degenerate? Paul Hampton assesses the different accounts in historical studies.

The soviets (councils) were the principal organs of workers' political self-expression during the Russian revolution. It was the formation of soviets in February 1917 that propelled an uprising against the tsar into a situation of dual power, where the bourgeois provisional government had to compete with embryonic forms of workers' democratic self-rule.

Some 700 soviets sprang up in spring 1917 embracing around 200,000 deputies by summer. By October there were 1,429 soviets, of which 455 were soviets of peasants' deputies (Smith 2002).

Other forms of working class democracy also proliferated. By October 1917, 23% of all factories and 69% of all factories employing over 200 workers had factory committees. Nearly two-thirds of the committees and 79% of those in enterprises with over 200 workers had taken an active part in managing their enterprise (Farber 1990).

Throughout Russia there were about two million trade-union members — about 10% of wage-earners of all kinds. By October 1917, trade-union membership was about 390,000 in Petrograd (Smith 1983). In Moscow there were more than 60 functioning unions, organising 474,000 workers. By October the main unions, such as the metal workers and textile workers, were Bolshevik led. But a significant number were still controlled by Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (Aves 1989).

The Bolshevik party led the seizure of power in October 1917. In 1905 there were only 8,400 Bolsheviks. The estimated membership at the beginning of 1917 was 23,600. With the downfall of the Tsarist regime the Bolsheviks, like the other opposition parties, grew rapidly; their numbers may have exceeded 400,000 by the time they took power (Rigby 1971).

At a conference of factory committees on 7-12 August, a Bolshevik resolution was passed by 82%. With the exception of the printers' and the paper workers' unions, the Bolsheviks had majorities on the executives of all of Petrograd's industrial unions. Seventeen of the 23 members of the Petrograd Trade Union Council were Bolsheviks (Mandel 1984). The 20 August election to the Petrograd city Duma (municipal council) showed a remarkable increase in Bolshevik support. Not only did their share of the vote jump from approximately one-fifth in May to one-third, but the Bolsheviks were the only party to register an absolute increase in votes (Mandel 1984).

On 31 August the Petrograd Soviet passed the Bolshevik resolution "On Power". The Moscow soviet followed on 5 September. In the first half of September, 80 soviets in large and medium towns backed the call for a transfer of power to the soviets (Smith 2002). When the Second Congress of Soviets convened in October, 507 of 670 delegates favoured a transfer of power to the soviets; almost all of those in the minority (who walked out in protest at the decision) were against soviet power in the first place (Rabinowitch 2004)

Rabinowitch explains Bolshevik success: "the phenomenal success of the Bolsheviks can be attributed in no small measure to the nature of the party in 1917... [to] the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character" (2004). The Bolsheviks could now speak of themselves with some justification as the party of the proletariat. Not only did they enjoy the support of the vast majority of workers, but their party consisted of and to a large extent was run by workers (Mandel 1984).

WORKERS' GOVERNMENT

On 25 October 1917, the Second Soviet Congress unanimously voted to form a coalition government of parties represented in the soviets.

The Congress created the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) as the day-to-day government, with Lenin as chair. Apparently Trotsky proposed the name commissar, to distinguish them from bourgeois cabinet ministers.

On 29 October, the railworkers' union issued an ultimatum to the Soviet government — form a coalition government or face a general strike across the rail network. The Bolsheviks enlarged the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the soviets to include the parties that had walked out, on the basis of proportional representation.

The new CEC consisted of 62 Bolsheviks, 29 Left SRs, six United Social-Democratic Internationalists (Mensheviks), three Ukrainian Socialists and one SR Maksimalist (Rabinowitch 2007). However, the moderates argued for the inclusion of bourgeois representatives from the Petrograd and Moscow municipal councils and the exclusion of Lenin and Trotsky. Only the Left SRs were willing to come into the government.

This then was the workers' revolution — a transfer of state power to a government which enjoyed the support of a majority of the working class (Smith 1983). The Bolshevik "regime" was a workers' government because the party was working class in its goals, programme, strategy and tactics and social composition. This combination of what the party represented and consisted of, together with the ideology it espoused, made the Bolshevik party a genuine class conscious workers' vanguard.

It was natural therefore that the Bolsheviks introduce a wide range of pro-working class measures immediately upon taking power. The new government issued no fewer than 116 different decrees up to 1 January 1918 (Smith 2002) — on land (ratifying the seizure and redistribution of land by the peasants), the eight hour day, workers' control of production, the repudiation of foreign debt, peace, national self-determination, women's equality, bank nationalisation and the confiscation of church property.

Russia became a workers' state because the workers had shattered the old bourgeois state (including the army, demobilised in February 1918) and replaced it with specifically working class institutions of democracy — principally the soviets. The control by workers over their own state and over the surplus product of the economy through the soviets made it a workers' state.

THE SOVIETS

Academic histories tend to neglect the study of Soviet government institutions in favour of accounts focused on the role of the party. That is because they want to project the later degeneration of the workers' state and the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy back onto the original revolution.

At the beginning, neither the Bolshevik party central committee nor the Politburo (formed in 1919) functioned as the

government. Sovnarkom led the government and neither Lenin nor Trotsky occupied any post in the party machine (Rigby 1979).

It was to be several weeks before the Bolsheviks established control over the chief public offices in Petrograd. Many civil servants refused to accept the legitimacy of the new regime and some actively sought to sabotage it. Sovnarkom minutes indicate that it met 77 times between 15 November and its final meeting before transferring to Moscow on 10 March 1918 — a period of 102 days (Rigby 1979).

The early Soviet workers' state was accountable to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, where delegates were elected by local soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers.

The Third All-Russian Soviet Congress took place in January 1918 and ratified the dissolution of a Constituent Assembly (very belatedly called by the bourgeois Provisional Government). That congress elected a new CEC, comprising 162 Bolsheviks, 122 Left SRs, and 21 members of other parties (Rigby 1979).

The Fourth All-Russia Congress of Soviets (14–16 March 1918) ratified the Brest-Litovsk treaty, after a widespread and very public debate between and within parties.

Soviets took the place of previous organs of municipal government, such as Dumas and zemstvos, across Russia. By February 1918, 86% of townships had created soviets; these were not always dominated by Bolsheviks and Left SRs (Smith 2002).

What slippage in working class democracy was there in this period?

One measure is fewer meetings of soviet bodies. Sovnarkom convened 203 times in 1918 but only 97 times in 1919, 69 meetings in 1920 and 51 in 1921.

Another measure is the weakness of the CEC. After June 1918 its meetings fell from about two a week to one a fortnight, and in the course of 1919 apparently ceased altogether. From June 1918 to 1921 the CEC consisted almost entirely of Communists (Rigby 1979).

There were also delays and interference in local soviet elections. Rabinowitch has documented how the Bolsheviks contrived a majority in the new Petrograd Soviet in June 1918. He concedes that "judging by official tabulations, the Bolsheviks had most success in direct elections at the workplace, electing 127 of 260 factory delegates". However, he raises "the nagging question of how many Bolshevik deputies from factories were elected instead of the opposition because of press restrictions, voter intimidation, vote fraud, or the short duration of the campaign" (Rabinowitch 2007).

Similarly, the second Northern Oblast Congress of Soviets on 1-2 August 1918 "was a less meaningful dialogue on key issues than a political rally, similar to what plenary sessions of the Petrograd Soviet had become by then" (Rabinowitch 2007).

The decline of the soviets is explained mainly by the political and economic situation. The Bolsheviks inherited economic chaos, they were forced into terrible terms of peace with Germany, they lacked reliable domestic allies. The Left SRs, rebelling against the peace with Germany, went from participation in the Soviet government in November 1917 to active pursuit of its violent overthrow from July 1918.

Any honest reckoning must conclude that Soviet democracy had ceased to function by 1921. At the Moscow Guberniia (province) conference of Soviets (15 to 17 December 1920) Kamenev acknowledged that the soviets had been emptied of their democratic functions (Farber 1990).

In April 1921 new soviet elections were called, the first after the civil war. As Pirani has explained, in Moscow, the Bolsheviks had a majority, but only because they won seats in small workplaces and among office workers. The non-party socialists heavily defeated the Bolsheviks in all the large factories, and out of 2,000 delegates they had 500 seats. When the soviet convened, the Bolsheviks ignored appeals by the non-party socialists to work together on the soviet executive. The soviet was "an empty talking-shop", because the Bolsheviks used it to rubber-stamp resolutions that had been worked out in advance inside the party. "The Moscow soviet died of boredom", wrote the Menshevik Boris Dvinov. This represented "a lost chance to revive workers' democracy" (Pirani 2008).

FACTORY COMMITTEES

When they sprang up in early 1917, the factory committees functioned essentially as trade-union organisations, fighting to achieve the eight-hour day and to improve wages (Smith 1983). Mandel's study found that workers' control remained "first and foremost a practical response to the concrete problems the workers faced and not, as the dominant view in western historiography has maintained, an anarchistic or anti-authoritarian movement" (1984).

There were 244 factory committees in Petrograd province by October 1917. Some 289,000 workers or 74% of the city's industrial workforce worked in enterprises under some form of workers' control. But workers' control affected mainly one hundred large factories and left the majority of smaller enterprises untouched (Smith 1983).

One of the first and most popular decrees of the new Soviet government (passed November 1917) was on workers' control. This decree breathed "a spirit of libertarianism" and made a nonsense of the claim that, "once power was in his grasp, Lenin, the stop-at-nothing centraliser, proceeded to crush the 'syndicalist' factory committees" (Smith 1983). The decree was passed not not without some controversy. Rem-

ington states that "three times between October 1917 and January 1918 the factory committee leadership outlined a conception of control institutions that ultimately pointed toward a self-managing model of proletarian socialism. On each occasion the party leadership opposed them" (1989).

But the decree was obsolete within weeks, after the Bolsheviks decided that the rising tide of economic chaos required that factory committees be integrated into the trade unions. Smith argues that this proposal was not, as has been argued, contrary to working class democracy. To counterpose the factory committees to the Bolsheviks party is wrong, since most of the leading cadres of the committees were also Bolsheviks. Such a juxtaposition suggests a uniformity of views within both the committees and the Bolshevik party which did not in fact exist (Smith 2002).

On 14 December 1917, Lenin signed the first decree officially nationalising 81 businesses, a large majority of which employed over 1,000 persons. Workers' control organisations were not to participate in or take responsibility for the management of the enterprises.

According to Victor Serge, even in April 1918 the government was still envisaging the formation of mixed companies, which would have been floated jointly by the state and by Russian and foreign capital. Serge is candid on the reasons for nationalisation: the collapse of production and the acute food crisis, the sabotage by employers and managers but also "the backward attitude of various sections of workers" (Serge 1992).

Between November 1917 and March 1918, 836 enterprises were nationalised, including by action from below. On 28 June 1918, the government took some 2,000 joint-stock companies into state ownership (Smith 2002). The decree of nationalisation gave one-third of the places in management to the elected representatives of the workers, while giving effective control to the managers appointed by Sovnarkom (Farber 1990).

Some residual elements of workers' control persisted. By the autumn of 1918, 212 factories in Petrograd province had control-commissions: 24% of these had been established before November 1917; 51% had been established between November and March 1918, and 25% after March 1918 (Smith 1983).

By 1922 the shift away from collegiality had been fully implemented. In March 1920, 69% of Petrograd factories employing more than 200 workers were still run by a collegial board (Farber 1990). However it is clear that even before the civil war had ended, direct workplace democracy and control by workers had been substantially eroded.

TRADE UNIONS

Under the new Soviet state, unions were the site of fractious battles between the Bolsheviks and other political forces.

The main railway workers' union Vikzhel, led by Mensheviks, launched the first general political crisis of the regime over the establishment of a coalition socialist government. At the end of December 1917, the minority Bolshevik fraction walked out of the union's congress and set up a new organisation (Aves 1989).

The trade unions were strengthened by the incorporation of the factory committees at the beginning of 1918.

As early as January 1918 the First Trade-Union Congress rejected Menshevik demands that the unions remain "independent", contending that in a workers' state their chief function was to "organise production and restore the battered productive forces of the country" (Smith 2002). Some Bolsheviks saw trade unions as vestiges of capitalist society while others like the former anarchist Bill Shatov, regarded them "living corpses" (Smith 1983).

The growing disenchantment of Petrograd workers with Bolshevik-led Soviet power in the spring of 1918 was reflected in the formation of the Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants (EAD). For Rabinowitch, the emergence of the EAD "was also stimulated by the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees and soviets, perhaps especially district soviets, were no longer representative, democratically-run working class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies".

Bolshevik leaders in the Petrograd Soviet elected in June 1918 suppressed the EAD and headed off its general strike set for 2 July (2007).

But trade union independence was not completely curtailed during the civil war. The Communist Party's Eighth Congress in March 1919 proposed a large self-managing role for the trade unions (Farber 1990). In June 1920, Sovnarkom issued a decree on the payment of bonuses in kind that gave the All-Russian Trade-Union Council (VTsSPS) control of the bonus system.

Unions resisted attempts by the lesser state bodies to interfere with the setting of money wages. At the Moscow metalworkers' conference in February 1921, one Bolshevik trade union leader said the unions were fighting the most decisive battle, going to court against administrators who ignored pay rates set by the trade unions (Pirani 2003).

The role of the trade unions in a workers' state was the subject of intense debate within the Communist Party towards the end of the civil war. According to Tsuji more than 100 papers were submitted to a debate on "militarisation" of the unions. On 19 January 1921, 3,500 Communist sailors of the Baltic Fleet gathered in the Theatre of the Revolution and heard Zinoviev and Trotsky debate the issues (1989). Whatever the merits or faults of Trotsky's position, it was comprehensively defeated at the Communist Party's 10th congress in March 1921 in favour of a position recognising the need for unions to defend workers even against the workers' state.

That congress in March 1921 made the unions responsible for mobilising workers for production tasks; in practice this was meant campaigning for labour discipline. According to Pirani, the unions' political dependence on the party manifested itself into two linked respects: "firstly, they helped to discipline workers who went outside the proscribed negotiating procedure and used the strike weapon to bargain; secondly, their apparatus became organisationally and financially more closely integrated with the state's. In industrial disputes, the unions almost always acted as, and were perceived by workers as, industrial managers' allies" (2009).

However, the role of the unions was tightly proscribed after the end of the civil war. According to Pirani, just as the soviets' function was redefined in 1921-22 as an organ of municipal administration, so the unions were allocated a new, subordinate role, implementing policies elaborated and supervised by party bodies.

After 1917 "trade union apparatuses had been established, financed from government funds. Although everyone in the Bolshevik party agreed that this was an undesirable state of affairs, and that the unions should be financed and run independently, they never were". In 1922 a campaign to get workers contribute their subscriptions to shop-floor activists, instead of having them deducted in advance from their wages, failed. "The unions grew as an apparatus, closely linked to the state apparatus" (Pirani 2006).

Pirani (2010) argues that by 1922, "bureaucratised unions routinely opposed strikes; had more unelected officials than elected ones; worked together with party and government to discipline and punish strike organisers; and became, despite some Bolsheviks' efforts to avoid it, heavily reliant on state funding.. unions had become dependent on the state and factory committees were getting integrated into management, in the context of the 'social contract'".

As the economy revived, "factory committees usually became better organised and better placed to negotiate with management. But politically the unions never returned to the vitality of 1917-18. The idea that factory-level organisations would participate in political decisions about the republic's future, or even strategic management decisions, was abandoned. On industrial issues, while workers could indeed use official procedures to change some things at factory level, they were largely deprived of the crucial weapons of striking, solidarity action and independent union organisation".

Other recent research has not been so categorical. Diane Koenker found that even after the civil war, "Soviet printers often exercised their right (though their union) to approve the appointment of managerial personnel, and they could act energetically to remove or discipline managers and foremen who violated workers' sense of appropriate relations. Workers and their representatives likewise shared the disciplinary functions of management... Soviet printers, through the opportunity to participate in factory committees, production councils, and shop floor meetings at all levels, acquired formal and informal power to intervene in the work process in ways that could protect their own interests and preferences" (2005).

Murphy (2007) has argued that "for much of the NEP, political considerations — a pro working class policy in industry — took precedence over economic expediency". He also quotes figures on strike resolution from the OGPU summaries from 1922 to 1928, which mention only six incidents in which the authorities arrested striking workers, and only five other strikes in which they used or threatened to use force (Murphy 2009).

PARTY DEGENERATION

At the beginning of its rule the Bolshevik party did not have an apparatus. In February 1918, the staff of the renamed Communist Party central committee consisted of 10 people (Liebman 1975). The central committee secretariat's staff grew from 30 in February 1919 to 150 in March 1920 and 602 the year up to March 1921 (Pirani 2008).

The first year of the revolution was tumultuous for the party. Membership dwindled in Petrograd, going from 30,000 in February to 13,472 in June, to about 6,000 in September, less than 2% of organised factory workers in the city (Rabinowitch 2007). Some of these losses were due to Communists going off to fight in the civil war or join the administration of the new state elsewhere. Some will have left for the countryside to avoid hunger and disease.

Despite civil war losses, the party still retained about 12,000 "undergrounders" in 1922 and over three times that number who had joined between the February and October revolutions. Pre-October Bolsheviks monopolised the upper levels of the regime in the first two years of the new regime. Between 1919 and 1921, however, their numbers were heavily diluted with newcomers (Rigby 1971).

A survey of the Moscow regional party's 35,000 members in October 1920 showed that 32% of them joined between October 1917 and August 1919, and another 51% since then. Only a tiny minority (5%, i.e. 1,763 members) had joined the party before 1917 and another 10% had joined in 1917 before October (Pirani 2008).

Academic historiography has made the party the integrating mechanism of the whole system, reserving for itself all major decisions; directing, supervising and coordinating their

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Lenin and Trotsky with soldiers of the Red Army, 1921

operation and sorting out their problems and conflicts. Rigby argues that such an assumption is mistaken. In the first year or so after the revolution, "there was no evidence that leading Bolsheviks believed the party should perform such a role, there was no attempt to equip them to do so, and it did not in fact do so".

However, between 1919 and 1921, "the relationship between party and state in Soviet Russia underwent a profound change and in the process Sovnarkom became increasingly dependent on the party central committee and its inner bodies in a variety of ways: for policy guidance, for resolution of important and disputed matters, for information necessary to effective executive action, for getting its programmes implemented in the provinces, for choosing its members and for staffing its offices" (1979).

By the end of the civil war, Russia was a one party state. A central reason for this was the implacable behaviour of the other parties during the civil war (Sakwa 1987). The process was not automatic and proceeded in stages as the new regime developed. The Mensheviks and Right SRs who had opposed soviet power remained legal in the early months of the new government. These parties were excluded from the national soviets in June 1918 (though they remained in local bodies), in the context of the burgeoning civil war and foreign intervention. Some anarchists had already turned against the regime in April 1918 and had been repressed. Most spectacularly, in mid July 1918, the Left SRs tried to incite an uprising and restart the war with Germany starting with the assassination of German ambassador.

Nevertheless some political liberty persisted. Until the middle of 1918, the Cadet newspaper *Svoboda Rossii* was still being published and there still existed an extensive Menshevik party press (Farber 1990). The Mensheviks were briefly reinstated in the soviets on 30 November 1918. The newspaper of the Menshevik central committee resumed publication on 22 January 1919. It was so successful — it printed 100,000 copies — that after the fourth issue it came out daily. However, it was closed down again on 26 February 1919. In 1920 the Mensheviks had party offices and a club in Moscow, although the Cheka raided the premises, sealed them up, confiscated papers, and arrested those assembled. That year the Mensheviks held party conferences in the open.

The SRs not allied with the counterrevolution were reinstated in the soviets in February 1919. A group of Left SRs around Steinberg was briefly allowed in 1920 to publish a periodical called *Znamia*. Likewise two different groups of Right SRs were briefly allowed to publish newspapers in 1919, and some, though not all, anarchist periodicals continued to appear until the last ones were closed down after the Kronstadt uprising (March 1921). When Kropotkin died in February 1921, some anarchists were released from prison for his funeral and for a 20,000 strong procession with placards and banners (Farber 1990).

In early 1920, repression was concentrated on the anarchists that had organised the bombing of a Moscow party meeting in September 1919. The Moscow Bolshevik Party Bureau, rather than any soviet body, discussed in July 1920 a formal appeal for legalisation by the Moscow Left SRs; it decided that given "the complexities of the current situation" the request could not be granted. The Cheka also kept an eye on the Left SR Internationalist Group, 11 members of which were arrested and then released in September 1920 (Pirani 2003).

On 17 April 1921, Lenin criticised a Cheka report recommending that certain groups within the Menshevik, SR and Anarchist parties should be legalised, and that individual Mensheviks and SRs should be released to take part in elections to the Moscow Soviets (Farber 1990). There were non-Bolshevik deputies in the Moscow Soviet up to 1923, although they did not threaten the Bolsheviks domination (Sakwa 1987).

After the civil war, there were a number of dissident workers who defined themselves as "non-party". It is arguable that the label "non-party" was simply a cover for opposition socialist activity by workers who previously associated with banned parties like the Mensheviks and SRs. However their ranks included previously loyal but now disillusioned Bolshevik militants. Kamenev criticised non-party workers because they were "brought together exactly by the fact that they do not have a worked out programme and do not answer for each other". I think that criticism was essentially just. Even historians like Pirani who have championed the non-party militants acknowledge that these opposition groups were not a political alternative to the ruling party (2008).

Rather more important was the Left Opposition which emerged in 1923 against Stalin's wing of the party. The precise contours of the dispute are not the subject of this article. The point here is that the very existence of the opposition to Stalinism and its fight for the working class militants that led the revolution showed that there was life left in the party and hence in the possibility that the workers could reimpose control through reform of the state.

In 1927-28, about 8,000 oppositionists were expelled by decisions of the fifteenth party congress, and their leaders exiled. In a secret report, the central committee's information department noted: "At several workplaces [the opposition] were successful, mobilising a significant group of workers. In some cases they took the lead at factory mass meetings, where their representatives took the chair" (Gusev 2009).

The Opposition's aim, to win the best militants from the old guard within the ruling party, was strategically the right approach to reviving workers' democracy in wider Russian society. Despite the evident substitution of the party for the broad, mass-based class rule institutions of the early revolution, perhaps even because of this substitution, the only strategic path to resuscitating genuine workers' democracy was to fight within the party.

THE STATE BUREAUCRACY

In *The State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin wrote that the two institutions most characteristic of the bourgeois state machine were the bureaucracy and the standing army. He took from Marx that the destruction of the bureaucratic-military state machine was "the precondition for every real people's revolution".

Lenin thought that abolishing the bureaucracy "at once, everywhere and completely", was out of the question. But "to smash the old bureaucratic machine at once and to begin immediately to construct a new one that will make possible the gradual abolition of all bureaucracy" was not a utopia. The socialist revolution would "reduce the role of state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, modestly paid 'foremen and accountants'" (Lenin, *Collected Works* 25).

Bureaucracy here meant more than simply administrative methods. It refers to the bureaucratisation of the political process (Sakwa 1987). The early Bolshevik government required an administration simply to carry out decisions. What developed later was a bureaucracy that involved privileges and power for the administrators (Block 1975). But the Bolsheviks had to deal with both administration and bureaucracy from the very beginning.

Immediately after the Soviet government was set up it met with "a wall of hostility and non-cooperation". The old tsarist officials rejected the legitimacy of the "Workers' and Peasants' Government" and refused to work for it. In one instance the saboteurs went so far as to remove the nibs from pens and pour away all the ink. Although a few senior officials were ready to collaborate, and some former officials came forward and offered their services, it was at first mainly the guards, cleaners, office messengers and so on who remained at their posts (Rigby 1979).

According to Rigby, the sacking and arrest of the more intransigent senior officials decapitated the resistance movement in several ministries and had a markedly intimidating effect on their juniors.

In early December 1917 a nationwide strike of government officials took place. Within three weeks the back of the rebellion was broken (1979). Rabinowitch has a slightly different take, arguing that work stoppages by civil servants petered out in early January, "not because they were smashed or replaced by freshly trained representatives of the revolutionary masses but because ultimately most of them were dependent on wages for survival" (2007).

The workers' state barely had an administrative machine in the first months after the October revolution. It also took steps to militate against bureaucratisation. For example, the salaries of the people's commissars were fixed at 500 rubles a month — not much higher than was earned by a skilled worker. In March 1918, the Soviet government transferred to Moscow. It was there that the new rulers fused with the old staff in the face of new crises to create a distinct bureaucratic layer (Rigby 1979).

In 1918, the extensive nationalisation of industry, creation of new economic coordinating agencies, intensified direction of local government bodies, and the exceptional organs, necessitated the recruitment of many thousands of new central government officials, including bourgeois specialists in the army. Rigby's research indicated that "over half the officials in the central offices of the commissariats, and perhaps 90% of the upper-echelon officials, had worked in some kind of administrative position before October 1917". Communists comprised only 10% of the main commissariats, but 52% of the Cheka (1979).

Moscow became dominated by a bureaucratic apparatus. The 231,000 people employed in offices in August 1918 represented 14% of the total population and 30% of the workforce (Sakwa 1987). Not only was carryover high (50% to 80%) in the upper and middle reaches of the central government commissariats, but the social origins and occupation of these men and women clearly placed them within the lower-middle strata (Orlovsky 1989).

The situation was widely perceived as out of control by the end of the civil war. Bukharin joked that the history of humanity could be divided into three great periods: the matriarchate, the patriarchate and the secretariat. As Shachtman said, it was not very funny then; by 1923 the joke was clearly on the party (1965).

The 1921 census revealed that almost a quarter of all senior Soviet officials in the provinces who had acquired a definite occupational affiliation by 1914 stated that they were in more or less senior posts in governmental or private bureaucracies. While it is unlikely that many of these had been in high-level jobs, this represents significant elements of continuity between the old elite and the new (Rigby 1971).

The argument is not that the old tsarist hierarchy managed to hold on intact in any meaningful sense. By 1922, the central administration was controlled by a generation more or less free of the presence of such persons. Rather as Rowney has shown, "the 1922 cohort of top administrators included a majority of persons who had been associated with the pre-revolutionary government and its institutions as teachers, physicians, soldiers, students, and of course bureaucrats — sometimes even as high-level bureaucrats if their skills were rare enough". The Bolsheviks who complained of the presence of too many "chinovniki" were not paranoid but "simply trying to face up to a problem that would not go away as fast as had hoped it would" (1989).

Lenin saw the threat more clearly than other leaders. From 1920 he railed against "the huge bureaucratic machine", "the evils of bureaucracy", Soviet bureaucrats, "bureaucratic litter", the "bureaucratic ulcer", "puffed-up commissars" and "bureaucrats", the "rotten bureaucratic swamp", the bureaucracy "throttling us" . By 1921 he was prepared to define the new state sociologically as "a workers' state with bureaucratic distortions" (The Party Crisis, 19 January 1921). He urged Gleb Krzhizhanovsky at the State Planning Commission to reduce Soviet office staff by 25% or 50% He wrote to Bogdanov in December 1921: "We don't know how to conduct a public trial for rotten bureaucracy; for this all of us... should be hung on stinking ropes. And I have not yet lost all hope that we shall be hung for this, and deservedly so" (Lenin *Collected Works* 36).

Lenin told the 11th congress of the Communist Party in March 1922: "If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed" (Lenin *Collected Works* 33).

He told the Comintern's fourth congress in November 1922: "We took over the old machinery of state, and that was our misfortune. Very often this machinery operates against us. In 1917, after we seized power, the government officials sabotaged us. This frightened us very much and we pleaded:

'Please come back'. They all came back, but that was our misfortune. We now have a vast army of government employees, but lack sufficiently educated forces to exercise real control over them. In practice it often happens that here at the top, where we exercise political power, the machine functions somehow; but down below government employees have arbitrary control and they often exercise it in such a way as to counteract our measures. At the top, we have, I don't know how many, but at all events, I think, no more than a few thousand, at the outside several tens of thousands of our own people. Down below, however, there are hundreds of thousands of old officials whom we got from the tsar and from bourgeois society and who, partly deliberately and partly unwittingly, work against us" (Lenin *Collected Works* 33).

FUSION OF PARTY AND STATE

The bureaucracy was not born of a one-party state, or the rule of Bolshevik party.

Administration is a necessary function of any state, but precisely because of its role in allocating, dividing up and distributing the surplus product, it carries the risk of developing into a bureaucratic layer with its own distinct interests. In backward Russia, with a huge pool of peasant labour and a minority working class, such a bureaucracy composed of residue elements of the old ruling class was able to wrap its tentacles around the organs of workers' power from the beginning.

It was therefore the rising of the state bureaucracy — the industrial managers, military specialists and state functionaries — fusing, combining, amalgamating and interpenetrating with the Stalin apparatus that had grown up within the party, which constituted the new ruling elite (Block 1975). Not to register this process is to treat the party and the state as reified historical actors, set apart from society (Orlovsky 1989). But this social layer was not yet a ruling class in 1921. It had not made itself the sole the master of the surplus product. It had to smash the remnants of working class power, whose principal agents remained largely within the Communist Party.

The process through which the bureaucracy was formed and grew to strangle the ruling workers' party emerged out of the circumstances of the civil war. When the counter-revolutionary army threatened Petrograd in 1919, distinctions between party and soviet often appeared to break down altogether (Rabinowitch 1989).

The party secretariat, in which Stalin played a key role after his appointment as general secretary in April 1922, gathered together separate strands of party organisation. Even before the 11th party congress of March–April 1922, "there were 7,000 national- and regional-level officials reporting directly to the secretariat's record and assignment department"; by the time of the congress, "this department had collated lists of 33,000 officials and set about taking charge of them".

In late 1923 "the first lists (nomenklatury) of party and state appointments that required central approval were drawn up; in 1924, record and assignment departments, responsible to their central parent body, were put into all the main branches of the state apparatus. The Moscow regional party's record and assignment department, set up in July 1922, appointed in its first seven months 5,863 party members (about one-fifth of the Moscow membership), to positions, mostly into central or local party or Soviet bodies. 'Appointism' — that is, the appointment rather than election of party and state officials that had begun during the civil war — now predominated. The tenth party congress in March 1921 had condemned it, but in the years that followed it spread, becoming comprehensive in 1924–25" (Pirani 2008).

This bureaucratic layer gave itself privileges which further differentiated it from the working class. The elite had real material privileges — leather jackets, good living quarters and better meals, a car, a dacha and the freedom to travel.

In 1924, a trade union statistician was scandalised to discover that some "sluzhashchie" admitted to earning more than 30 times the minimum wage. In late 1923, when the trade unions were protesting vociferously about industrial managers being overpaid, they pointed to the "doubtful specialists" who benefited. The Hungarian communist Bela Kun, living in exile in Moscow, received at least 25 times the minimum. Then there were non-cash benefits as the housing, education and healthcare, or the gold watches presented to Party members in industrial management (Pirani 2008).

The communist industrial managers began to organise politically, in the sense that they lobbied to secure their own position within the state bureaucracy. In December 1922, they launched a permanent council of industrialists and began to publish a journal. In 1923, a Moscow "Red directors" club was established as part of the national grouping, with 146 members. Significantly, the communist managers' lobbying was stiffly resisted by communist trade union leaders (Pirani 2008).

Government service personnel in 1924 totalled about 1.8m; by 1926, the figure had increased by 25% to over 2.3m. The hypertrophy of the state was matched by the growth of the party. By 1924, only 14% of all commissars, deputies, department heads, and collegium members in central agencies were registered as party members or candidates (Sternheimer 1980). Of a total party membership of about one million in 1927, some 439,000 were employed by the state directly in the state apparatus or indirectly in such "social" or "economic" institutions (Rowney 1989).

Is the characterisation of Russia in the 1920s as a degenerated workers' state incoherent?

This designation only made sense as long as it was possible to argue that the Russian working class still in some sense ruled politically, i.e. that it still had the channels, the levers and the institutions through which it could control the surplus product.

Immediately following the revolution which shattered the old state, the new soviet government headed by the Bolsheviks based its rule on the mass organisations that had taken power and established a number of democratic channels through which workers played a significant role in determining the major production decisions of Russian society.

The already backward state of the country coupled with international isolation severely limited the possibilities for the new workers' government. Similarly, the absence of reliable allies made the descent to one-party rule difficult to arrest. The onset of the civil war and foreign intervention only compounded these tendencies. In such circumstances, the emergence of a bureaucratic layer within the new state was inevitable. The social, economic and political pressures on the new state made its victory highly likely — probably in the form of a capitalist restoration. However whether it would triumph was not a foregone conclusion. There was a struggle to preserve the forms of working class rule.

The process of formation of the bureaucratic ruling class was well underway by the early 1920s, but still far from complete. The party itself had not been decisively subverted. Workers retained some levers, through the soviets and trade unions, for what might be called partial or negative control of production. The "resilient traditions of working class organisation" had survived the civil war (Aves 1996). Most importantly, the party was not completely dead — though it had clearly already begun to degenerate. The proletarian vanguard that had made the revolution was not completely exhausted, although by 1921 it was severely weakened. The correct strategy, flowing from the situation and the actual relation of forces at the time was to fight for working class democracy, starting from within the party. That was broadly the approach of the Trotskyist opposition and the best of other oppositions such as the Democratic Centralists.

Is the Communist Party in the mid-1920s a model for today? No. A degenerated, heavily bureaucratised party shorn of its democratic structures was no basis on which to make and sustain workers' revolutions at that time. We are certainly in no need of such a prototype today. However this does not mean junking wholesale the Bolshevik party as a model. This was still the party that led the 1917 revolution. This was the party that could take on and defeat all enemies, internal and external and survive the civil war. This was the party that would rancorously debate out its differences, such as over Brest-Litovsk or the trade union debate, often in public and with great sharpness, in order to clarify the assessment and to draw out the political conclusions.

PARTY

That party, and the tradition it embodied, was not finished after the civil war. It had made a tremendous, irreplaceable contribution to the Russian working class over decades, and it was entirely right to seek to salvage whatever could be salvaged from its ranks.

There were no other forces, no other agents capable of turning the tables on the bureaucracy and on Stalin's wing at that time than the old guard of militant worker-Bolsheviks.

Simon Pirani's recent study has provided much detail about Moscow after the civil war, including on the strength of bureaucracy and on the state of workers' organisation. However, by attributing the malaise to the party, I think he understates the role of the state bureaucracy, which had developed as a social force earlier and had already begun to usurp and subvert the party.

Pirani also overstates the situation with regards to the mode of production. He argues that "despite this absence of a ruling class, exploitative social relationships based on alienated labour reappeared" (2008). The slippage here is twofold.

Firstly, it is at least a minimal criterion for a Marxist analysis to define who the ruling class are in any situation. The dispute here is not whether socialist, non-exploitative relations had emerged. Abolishing alienated labour was not possible in a backward, isolated economy. Rather the question concerns the nature of the state at a time when social relations were in flux. The unavoidable question of who ruled is at least answered by the "workers' state" formula, suitably qualified.

Could things have been different? Pirani accepts that the lack of democracy alone did not cause the degeneration of the revolution after 1921. Rather, "there were mountainous obstacles — principally, Russia's economic backwardness, and the failure of the revolution to spread — that anyway might not have been overcome". In the long run, he accepts that different choices would not have greatly altered the course of Russian history (Pirani 2008).

Could the opposition have done more and earlier? Undoubtedly. They should have opposed the ban on factions within the party and fought for the revival of the soviets. They could have opened up elections to the soviets and tried to collaborate with the best of the "non-party" groups in Moscow in 1921. They could have championed trade union independence from the state and other basic freedoms to organise, publish and dissent. The working class still required "light and air" in its own state, for without democracy workers could not control the surplus they had created.

Pirani dates the political expropriation of the working class to 1924. The Democratic Centralist group argued from 1926 that a new party and a new revolution were necessary. This was burying the revolution while it was still alive, while the fight within the party was still possible.

But after the defeat of the Left Opposition in 1927-28 and the closing off once and for all of the party as a channel for working class rule, it is absolutely correct to identify a qualitative shift in the situation.

After 1928 and with the onset of Stalin's forced march industrialisation and collectivisation, the working class no longer ruled politically in any sense and therefore it did not rule socially or economically either. The nationalised property relations are not sufficient to describe Russia as any kind of workers' state, the description "degenerated workers' state" is undoubtedly incoherent. If workers do not rule politically, then they cannot rule at all.

That was the great truth that broke the back of Trotsky's later theories of Stalinism.

However, it is still possible to regard Russia for most of the 1920s as some sort of a workers' state. Not a socialist mode of production, but one in which the working class was still the ruling class, through the Bolshevik party. Certainly a heavily bureaucratised state where the institutions of working class democracy had withered and faded. Undoubtedly an increasingly bureaucratised party within which the apparatus was strangling the healthy forces. But still a party where those who had made the revolution in 1917 still held some weight.

Vicarious abandonment of the Russian workers' state before it was finally lost serves neither history nor the present.

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