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Review: The Third Revolution? Peasant and worker resistance to the Bolsheviks

Anarcho

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This is a useful little pamphlet, giving as it does a short introduction to various rebellions against Bolshevik dictatorship by the proclaimed “ruling class” of that regime, workers and peasants.

Peasant revolts in Siberian, the Don, Kuban, Ukraine and elsewhere are discussed, most of which took place in 1920–1. Interestingly, the leaders of these revolts were usually former Red Army officers. None, though, were as politically sophisticated as the Makhnovists although most raised the demand for soviet democracy rather than the Constituent Assembly (the Antonovschina in Tambov being the exception). Unsurprisingly, those revolts that remained were sympathetic to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels. The pamphlet, fittingly, ends with a short biography of Anatoli Lamanov editor of Kronstadt’s *Izvestia* and populariser of the term “third revolution” in its pages during the 1921 rebellion.

It is fair to say, however, that the pamphlet is far more on peasant rather than worker resistance. The section “Workers Revolts

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against the Bolshevik regime” is short, less than a page, and concentrates on the 1921 strike wave in Petrograd which inspired the Kronstadt rebellion. While there is information on workers struggles under the Bolsheviks, it is scattered through many books. Jonathan Aves’ excellent *Workers Against Lenin* is the most focused on this important subject but that concentrates on the 1920–2 period. Suffice to say, as section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* documents worker resistance to the Bolsheviks started in the spring of 1918 and continued throughout the civil war period.

This makes modern-day Bolshevik apologists claims that the working class had disappeared or become atomised (so necessitating party dictatorship) hard to take seriously. Similarly, Bolshevik authoritarianism started *before* the civil war broke out in late May 1918 (for example, the Bolshevik attacks on the anarchists started in April 1918, not June as the pamphlet states). This, again, makes modern-day Leninist rationalisations for the Bolsheviks even weaker than they already were. Simply put, Leninist ideology as well as difficult objective circumstances played its part in the degeneration of the revolution – particularly when the impact of that ideology made these circumstances far worse.

This can be seen from Bolshevik policies against the peasantry. As Heath notes in his excellent introduction, the peasant revolts were driven by the (usually brutal) seizure of crops by the state. A key problem with Bolshevism was its notion (like Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*) that individual exchange equals capitalism. If there were something the Bolsheviks hated more than the bourgeoisie, it was the petit-bourgeois. This can be seen from Lenin’s praise for big business and willingness to place ex-owners/managers into positions of power in the new “socialist” industrial hierarchy while, at the same time, crushing any attempts by the peasants to come to the towns and cities to sell their crops.

Given that the state food procurement agencies were incompetent (as Heath notes, seized crops often rotted in train sidings as the centralised structure did not know where they were) this was

Still, such issues are minor. As a pamphlet it can be nothing else than an introduction to these revolts. In this it achieves its aim well.

particularly harmful as workers did not get enough food to survive from official sources. It alienated the peasants, harmed food production and diverted resources to stopping attempts at trade. Luckily for the Bolsheviks, the Whites made no attempt to hide their desire to restore the landlords and so made them slightly more appealing to the bulk of the peasantry.

Ideology played its part. Marxism has two somewhat contradictory definitions of capitalism. The first is in volume 1 of *Capital* and stresses that capitalism is marked by wage-labour, not exchange. This implies that exploitation happens in production. The second can be found in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (and elsewhere) and this stresses that the market itself is the problem (hence oxymorons like “self-managed capitalism”). This implies that exploitation happens in exchange. Like most Marxists, the Bolsheviks subscribed to the second definition and singularly failed to recognise that peasants exchanging the product of their labour is not capitalistic.

It also did not help that the Bolsheviks were completely ignorant of village life and so exaggerated the number of farmers hiring wage-workers before 1917 (the kulaks). They were also failed to recognise the levelling effects of the revolution which reduced the small number of kulaks even more. Instead of listening to the Left-SRs (who did have a base in both peasantry and workers) they implemented an ideologically driven policy of “poor peasant committees” which were a disaster and soon ended (once the damage was done). These committees did, though, have the advantage of allowing the Bolsheviks to pack the 5th All-Russian Congress of Soviets so denying the Left-SRs their majority, but is another story...

Heath, as a communist-anarchist, addresses the issue of the frequent calls for trade raised by workers and peasants. He rightly places these demands into their social context, namely in response to Bolshevik mismanagement and the recognition that peasants made up the vast bulk of the Russian working class. He, rightly, argues that the peasants and workers “were not in favour of a free market but of a more equitable and harmonious system of distribu-

tions and exchange” and so the demands were “similar to demands of workers for better pay and conditions.” He does admit that there is “an ambiguity here that cannot fully be resolved” and is right to argue that “when the masses go into struggle a fully revolutionary programme rarely emerges at once. All revolutions contain contradictions within them.”

As Heath would be the first to agree, communism cannot be imposed and if a revolution breaks out in a country dominated by peasants who seek to exchange their goods then that must be taken into account. Ultimately, revolutions rarely unfold as revolutionaries desire and workers in revolt often make what to revolutionaries seem like mistakes. However, these mistakes can be fixed or transcended at later stages by the masses themselves – unlike ideologically correct one imposed from above, as the Bolsheviks with their Marxist confusion over what defines capitalism.

Of course, the modern-day Leninist apologist would argue that it was the breakdown of the urban economy which forced the Bolsheviks into the key policy of what is now termed “war communism” but was then just “communism”, the forced seizure of grain from the peasants. Suffice to say, this defence of Bolshevism is premised on the false assumption that Bolshevik industrial policy was unproblematic.

While the revolution did see a massive economic problems (which, incidentally, confirmed Kropotkin’s arguments in *Conquest of Bread* and elsewhere), Bolshevik prejudices in favour of centralisation and utilising state-capitalist institutions and against workers’ self-management all contributed to making the drop in industrial production fall worse (see section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*). The pressing need was (as Kropotkin stressed) for decentralisation, local knowledge and mass participation, all of which was alien to Bolshevik ideology.

As Heath notes, the massive revolt of early 1921 forced the Bolsheviks to acknowledge reality to some degree and introduce the NEP. This, as the pamphlet correctly states, restored not only ex-

change but capitalism – unlike the peasant rebels and the Kronstadt sailors, it was not against the employment of wage-labour. Needless to say, this partial concession to popular economic demands was not met by any concessions to popular political demands for genuine soviet democracy, freedom of speech, assembly, press and so forth. A step back from “war communism” *economically* was acceptable in order to secure (to quote Trotsky from 1927) “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 must be noted that Bolshevik actions cannot be fully explained nor understood unless you realise that by late 1918 they had concluded that party dictatorship was an essential aspect of any successful revolution. Zinoviev, for example, was not shy in proclaiming it to the Communist International in 1920 while Trotsky was still wittering away about the “objective necessity” of “the party dictatorship” in 1937! So political ideology played its part, particularly in the vision of socialism (centralised planning), perspectives on the peasantry, the role of the party and the vanguard’s (self-proclaimed) embodiment of proletarian aspirations.

Such discussions are difficult to condense and such issues are somewhat outside the scope of the pamphlet. Given its aim, namely indicating peasant and worker resistance to the Bolsheviks, it does its task well. It gives a taste of popular movements during the Russian Revolution, movements which could have been the base of a socialist alternative to Bolshevik state-capitalism. It leaves you wanting to find out more and that raises an issue, namely that references are not as full as they could be. Given a reference as “in Skirda” makes it difficult to track them down, particularly when it’s the original French edition being pointed to! It would have been helpful to give page numbers to the AK Press translation in such cases.