

The Bolshevik Myth Reloaded

Anarcho

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*This is a write up of the talk I gave at the 2016 London Anarchist bookfair. I covered most of what I planned in my notes although some of it was summarised more than indicated here. It covers the basic myths and realities of the period and concentrates on non-Anarchist sources – academics and Leninists themselves. This is not because the anarchist critique is lacking, no far from it. It is done to show that the anarchist critique has the support of a substantial body of evidence. As indicated in the talk, all quotes are from section H of **An Anarchist FAQ**.*

2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution. We can expect a mountain of articles (although less than in 1967!) about how wonderful the Bolsheviks were and, of course, why we should seek to apply their ideas today.

So the time arrives when we must understand what actually happened in Russia. The reality – rather than the rhetoric – of Bolshevism, to expose, to use Alexander Berkman’s term, *The Bolshevik Myth*. To do this I will attempt to summarise the relevant information in *An Anarchist FAQ* (section H) and I am not going to quote a single anarchist – this account is based on work by historians and Leninists. I do this simply because they provide overwhelming evidence to support the anarchist critique – and *predictions* – of both Marxism and the Bolshevik revolution.

The Russian Revolution in 1917

The revolution in 1917 started spontaneously with protests and strikes over food shortages in Petrograd – protests which were opposed by the local Bolshevik leadership, so not the most auspicious of starts. It also quickly saw the recreation of the soviets which had first appeared during the 1905 near-revolution as well as the extension of demands from just political to social transformation – as argued by anarchists but rejected by Marxists in 1905 – which lead to the rise of factory committees, demands for “workers’ control”, expropriation of land by the peasants, etc.

It was only once Lenin had returned to Russia that the Bolsheviks started echoing anarchist arguments. Needless to say, Lenin came into conflict with his party bureaucracy but the mass influx of radicalised workers who were not Marxists and no concern over following “the party line” gave the edge to Lenin – who also continually violated the party’s own “*nature, structure and ideology*” to force it to play an important role in 1917.

The Party

So in 1917 “democratic centralism,” the leitmotiv of Bolshevism, was ignored to ensure the Bolsheviks had any impact on events. Indeed, 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 ... 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 ... 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 ... hardly a party committee existed which did not encounter problems in enforcing its will even upon individual activists.”

So unlike illusions of modern-day Bolsheviks, in 1917 party was a loose federation which was marked by an “*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 ... subordinate party bodies... 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 ... who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline.*” As one old-Bolshevik named Lashevich remarked: “*Frequently it is impossible to make out where the Bolshevik ends and the Anarchist begins.*”

However, it retained a bureaucracy. As Tony Cliff admitted, “*a certain conservatism arose*” within the party – so much so that it was a hindrance to the revolution: “*At 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 spent as much time fighting his own party machine as he did advocating revolution.

This is confirmed by Trotsky who admitted that “[w]ithout Lenin, no one had known what to make of the unprecedented situation” and the “*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.*” Indeed, in October Lenin “*could only impose his view by going over the head of his Central Committee*” and “*called for resolute confrontation of the sluggish Party machine with masses and ideas in motion.*” In short:

“the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen.”

All of which 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.

However, the party bureaucracy did not disappear and played a negative role once the party seized power – providing a structure and an ideological justification to introduce the centralised control upon which vanguardism was premised.

Lenin’s State and Revolution

This is the context within which Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* – the election manifesto, if you like, of Bolshevism. Let us compare it to the reality of Bolshevism in power

First off, it must be stressed that much of what passes for “Marxism” is actually anarchism. Workers councils as the framework of a socialist society is to be found in Bakunin, not Marx. It also distorts the anarchist position – Anarchists, regardless of Lenin’s claims, have always seen

need to defend the revolution (using federated workers' militias to defend the federated workers' councils) and never thought anarchism would appear "overnight."

So what does Lenin's book argue? 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*" by removing "*the division of labour between the legislative and the executive*"; "*All officials, without exception, to be elected and subject to recall **at any time***"; 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*" no "*privileged persons divorced from the masses and **superior to the masses***"; 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*"; "*abolition of the standing army*" by the "*armed masses*"; The new (workers) state would be "*the organisation of violence for the suppression of... the exploiting class... The toilers need a state only to overcome the resistance*" of "*the landlords and the capitalists.*" Their "*resistance must be broken by force: it is clear that where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.*"

Thus the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" would be "*the introduction of complete democracy for the people.*"

Let us look at each of these in turn.

Working Bodies

The promise of "working bodies" – the fusion of legislative and executive functions in the one body – was the swiftly broken for the very first body to be created was the "Council of People's Commissars". This was a government above the Central Executive Committee of the soviets congress and so separate from and above the national soviet congress.

So Lenin's *State and Revolution* did not last the night. As the Bolshevik Central Committee put it:

"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."

Perhaps it could be argued that Lenin's promises were kept as the new government simply gave itself legislative powers four days later? No, for the Paris Commune took executive power into its own hands, Lenin reversed this.

Nor was this process limited to the top: "*Effective power in the local soviets relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.*"

Election, Recall, etc.

By early 1918, there was a systematic campaign against the elective principle in all areas of social life.

In the military, Trotsky replaced elected officers with appointed ones in March 1918: *“the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree.”*

In the workplace, Lenin argued for and appointed one-man managers *“vested with dictatorial powers”* in April 1918. This was the elimination of factory committees by “one-man management” under centralised state control. Not, of course, that he ever supported *genuine* workers’ control but rather workers’ supervision of bosses – and it must be stressed that the demand for workers’ control was raised by workers, not the party, which again refutes the assumptions of vanguardism.

In the soviets, the Bolsheviks refused to hold elections because they *“feared that the opposition parties would show gains.”* When were finally elections held, *“Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results.”* In addition, the Bolsheviks *“pack[ed] local soviets”* with representatives of organisations they controlled *“once they could no longer count on an electoral majority”* so making direct elections from workplaces irrelevant (for example, in Petrograd *“[o]nly 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance”* and so the Bolsheviks *“contrived a majority”* before getting 127 of the 260 direct delegates).

Elimination of bureaucracy

In stark contrast to the *State and Revolution*, the new State spawned a bureaucracy which *“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.”* In short:

“The old state’s political apparatus was ‘smashed,’ but in its place a new bureaucratic and centralised system emerged with extraordinary rapidity... 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”

This soon became a source of inefficiency and waste – as well as *new* privileges and powers for the few.

Elimination of separate armed forces

In terms of arming the people and removing “special bodies” of armed men, this promise did not last two months. In December 1917 the Council of People’s Commissars decreed a political police force, the Cheka. Significantly, its first headquarters were those of the Tsar’s secret police.

As noted, elections in the armed forces eliminated by decree in March 1918 and so the Red Army was turned from a workers’ militia (i.e. an armed people) into a *“special body”*. Needless to say, this was soon used to disband soviets, break strikes, protests, etc.

Year One of the Revolution – Summation

All this was the period *before* the outbreak of the Civil War in late May 1918. By the anniversary of the October Revolution, the new regime had taken shape – and it bore little resemblance to *State and Revolution*.

Politically, it was in practice a Party Dictatorship. As well as the onslaught on the local soviets, the Bolsheviks packed the Fifth Congress of Soviets in July 1918 denying Left-SRs their majority (which, incidentally, explains why Leninists today are always so keen to control the credentials committee!).

Economically, it was State Capitalism with “one-man” management the official policy (and systematically imposed once victory was believed to be secure in 1920). It had a Statist and centralised economic structure which simply handed the economy to the bureaucracy. Significantly, the previous bosses mostly retained – they preferred state control to workers’ control.

The bureaucracy was firmly in place for “*in the soviets and in economic management the embryo of centralised and bureaucratic state forms had already emerged by mid-1918.*” By the end of 1920, there were five times more officials (5,880,000) than industrial workers!

The party finally saw democratic centralism imposed within it as “*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.*” The party itself saw a reduction in size reflecting working class alienation with regime and “*[a]s the proportion of working-class members declined... entrants from the middle-class rose*”

The reality – and necessity – of party dictatorship was soon openly acknowledged. Victor Serge noted that “*at the start of 1919 I was horrified to read an article by Zinoviev... on the monopoly of the party in power*” (he hid it well!). Zinoviev made this position clear to the world Second Congress of the *Communist International* in 1920:

“people... 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... the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.”

Lenin made similar comments. For example, in 1920 he explained to the Cheka that “*[w]ithout 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.*” Elsewhere he noted that “*in all capitalist countries... the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts*” that power “*can be exercised only by a vanguard... the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.*”

Trotsky argued likewise throughout the 1920s and held this position until his death. For example in 1938 he argued that the “*masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves ... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that*

the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.” Of course, everyone is “backward” compared to the “vanguard” and he repeated the conclusion he had drawn nearly twenty years previously:

“The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party... is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution”

So the state power is needed for the vanguard to rule the working class – to force the masses to be free.

Unlike in 1917 when Lenin had argued that the new (“workers”) state would repress only the exploiters, the Bolsheviks in power swiftly came to the conclusion that it must be used – and was used – to repress whoever opposed *Bolshevik* power – including workers and peasants. Significantly, of the 17,000 camp detainees in November 1920 with statistics, 39% peasants and 34% workers.

Let us recall Lenin’s words from 1917: *“where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.”* So, then, there cannot be *working class* freedom or democracy if the “workers’ state” is suppressing it.

Ideological Roots

This did not happen by accident – there are ideological roots to all this.

Lenin in *What is to be done?* had argued that “[c]lass political consciousness can be brought to the workers **only from without**” by middle class intellectuals and these *“intellectuals must talk to us, and tell us more about what we do not know and what we can never learn from our factory and ‘economic’ experience, that is, you must give us political knowledge.”*

This cannot help but create a privileged place for the party and its leadership. Moreover, the logical conclusion of this argument is that class consciousness is determined by how much the workers agree with the party leaders. It cannot help but substitute party power for workers’ power – particularly as the former was always the aim – and give that power an authoritarian, indeed dictatorial, aspect.

Thus, for example, in 1905 the Bolshevik Party demanded of the St. Petersburg Soviet that it *“immediately adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband”* and were rightly *“ignored”* Then, showing the efficiency of vanguardism, the party’s Central Committee made this wrong decision *“the binding directive for all other Bolshevik organisations.”* Two years later Lenin argued that the party should work in soviets but any such activity should be *“done on strict Party lines for the purpose of developing and strengthening”* the Party and he added *“if Social-Democratic activities among the proletarian masses are properly, effectively and widely organised, such institutions [as the soviets] may actually become superfluous.”*

This reflected *What is to be Done?* and so the Soviets were seen as instrumental for building the party, not managing society, and in 1918 the clash between soviet democracy and party rule was resolved in favour of latter – the soviets did indeed become “superfluous” even if they remained in formally existence.

Then there was the Bolshevik's vision of "Socialism." This was inherited from Marx and so was marked by nationalisation, centralisation and rooted in statist forms and prejudices. Lenin's position on "one-man management" clearly reflected Engels' anti-anarchist diatribe "On Authority" for a perspective which viewed the workplace as inherently authoritarian does not see the necessity for self-management. Likewise, the Bolshevik's attempts at the "militarisation of labour" reflects the "industrial armies" of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Given this ideological legacy, it comes as no surprise that centralisation was fetishized and implemented by the Bolsheviks. Equally unsurprising, in reality this meant that power concentrated into fewer and fewer hands – both political and economic power – and so the Bolsheviks had a vision of "workers' power" which systematically disempowered the workers.

Like the good Social-Democrat he was, Lenin saw socialism as being built on the economic structures inherited from capitalism rather than, as anarchists did, on workers' own organisations. Thus socialism was, for Lenin, the "*next step forward from state-capitalist monopoly ... socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly **which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly***" and "*the new means of control have been created **not** by us, but by capitalism.*" Thus "*the 'state apparatus' which we need to bring about socialism ... we **take ready-made** from capitalism; our task ... is merely to **lop off** what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it **even bigger**.*"

And so when the Supreme Council of the National Economy was created it utilised the *glavki* system from Tsarism (with a token number of representatives from workers' bodies, mostly from the trade union officialdom). This structure was, as one expert noted, "*an expression of the principle of centralisation and control from above which was peculiar to the Marxist ideology.*" Moreover, given the assumptions of *What is to be Done?*, the Party knew best rather than workers:

*"On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the [factory] committee leaders sought to bring their model into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The result was to vest both managerial **and** control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them."*

Unsurprisingly, the Bolshevik fetish for centralisation proved to be inefficient, wasteful and bureaucratic. One-man management produced "*a greater degree of confusion and indecision*" and the "*result ... was not directiveness, but distance, and increasing inability to make decisions appropriate to local conditions. Despite coercion, orders on the railroads were often ignored as unworkable.*" Indeed, there was a marked "*gulf between the abstraction of the principles on centralisation and its reality*" and inefficiencies grew with time wasted due to "*strict compliance of vertical administration*" and "*semi-finished products [were] transferred to other provinces for further processing, while local factories... were shut down*" (and given the state of the transport network, this was doubly inefficient). Local groups rightly complained that "*the centre had displayed a great deal of conservatism and routine thinking*" and they knew the grassroots situation better and "*proved to be more far-sighted than the centre.*"

Moreover, the "*shortcomings of the central administrations and **glavki** increased together with the number of enterprises under their control*" and "*the various offices of the Sovnarkhoz and commissariat structure literally swamped with 'urgent' delegations and submerged in paperwork.*" This led to numerous problems including:

“materials were provided to factories in arbitrary proportions... the length of the procedure needed to release the products increased scarcity... since products remained stored until the centre issued a purchase order on behalf of a centrally defined customer. Unused stock coexisted with acute scarcity. The centre was unable to determine the correct proportions... The gap between theory and practice was significant.”

However, *“the failure of **glavkism** did not bring about a reconsideration of the problems of economic organisation ... On the contrary, the ideology of centralisation was reinforced.”* This led to a clamping down on local initiatives as they would undermine central actions, the net effect of which was to ensure nothing was done as the centre was bureaucratic and inefficient. Bolshevik ideology and the prejudices it fostered also had its impact in other areas, for example:

“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 proportionately greater than those for smaller enterprises ... Not until 1919 were the regime’s leaders prepared to acknowledge that small enterprises... might be more efficient... 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 Bolshevik ideology, via the structures it favoured and decisions it shaped, made the economic crisis facing the revolution worse.

Then there are the structural issues due to statist organisations, namely the creation of a ruler/ruled division and that power corrupts – which the Bolsheviks seemed blind to. As an example, in April 1918 Trotsky argued that the government was *“better able to judge in the matter than”* the masses and that the people were expected to obey until they *“dismiss that government and appoint another.”* He raised the question of whether it were possible for the government to act *“against the interests of the labouring and peasant masses?”* Somewhat incredibly he answers no for *“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”*

As any trade unionist can tell you, this is simply naïve. And, of course, Trotsky eventually recognised that in any such *“antagonism”* it was the masses which were in the wrong and allowing them to *“dismiss”* government wrong. Ironically, he later acknowledged that the Bolshevik party itself had a bureaucratic caste within it.

“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. What, then, could be expected of these cadres when they became an all-powerful state bureaucracy?”

Indeed.

Excuses, excuses, excuses...

It will be here that the Leninist will object that that I have ignored the “objective” reality facing the Bolsheviks and so express the typical “idealism” associated with anarchism

Except Leninists *themselves* stress the importance of ideology as can be seen, for example, in their *extremely* superficial accounts of the Spanish revolution and the actions of the CNT which completely ignore objective circumstances and place *everything* on “anarchist ideology.” And best not mention their endless articles they produce on how Bolshevism is essential for a successful revolution...

So what, according to the Leninists, were the “objective” factors which derailed Bolshevism? There are usually four: civil war, economic disruption, the decline and “declassing” of the industrial working class; and isolation – the lack of revolution in Western Europe, specifically in Germany.

I will discuss each in turn.

Civil War

The key problem with the civil war excuse is that almost everything listed as examples of “re-treats” from socialism by modern-day Leninists occurred **before** civil war. Ignoring that awkward fact, the next problem is that Lenin argued civil war was inevitable:

“every great revolution, and a socialist revolution in particular, even if there is no external war, is inconceivable without internal war, i.e., civil war, which is even more devastating than external war”

And remember, he (falsely) proclaimed that anarchists ignored the danger of counter-revolution in *State and Revolution* – as such it is hardly a sound defence to blame the degeneration of the revolution on something you are meant to consider as inevitable and whose inevitability you (dishonestly) denounce anarchists for ignoring!

Moreover, the repression of internal socialist and working class opposition was inversely proportional to the threat – the closer the Whites were, the less the repression as the Bolsheviks needed everyone to defend the revolution and the socialist opposition preferred the Reds to the Whites; the safer the regime was from the Whites, the worse the repression. And this repression was directed against even those who worked within the official channels laid down by the Bolsheviks (that the “*Mensheviks were not prepared to remain within legal limits... does not survive an examination of the facts.*”).

Economic disruption

As with civil war, economic disruption is also meant to be considered as inevitable. Thus Lenin argued repeatedly that those “*who believe that socialism can be built at a time of peace and tranquility are profoundly mistaken: it will be everywhere built at a time of disruption*”. Moreover, there could be “*no civil war – the inevitable condition and concomitant of socialist revolution – without disruption*”

In addition, this excuse ignores how Bolshevik economic policies made the disruption of the economy worse – no wonder there was little to exchange with the peasants. Worse, while the

mobilised troops could not produce goods and had to be fed, the peasants also had to feed the troops stopping them trying to bring their crops to the towns and cities!

So blaming the very real economic disruption for Bolshevik policies when these very policies made a bad situation worse is not very convincing.

The Disappearing and Declassing of the working class

It is true that there was a decline in size of the industrial working class during this period however “*a substantial core of urban workers remained*” and these workers were more than capable of taking collective action. Indeed, “*each wave of unrest was more powerful than the last, culminating in the mass movement from late 1920*” – with corresponding Bolshevik repression of strikes and protests.

So this argument as unconvincing now as when Lenin originally raised it during the Civil War – in face of rising working class protests! 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.’”

This flows from *What is to Be Done?* where class consciousness is introduced into the masses by a few intellectuals from outside – so it logically flowed that if workers no longer agreed with the party they must be “declassed.” It would be hard to find a better (worse?) example of circular reasoning.

The Bolsheviks systematically repressed and rooted-out all expressions of collective protest. In *Left-wing Communism*, for example, Lenin pointed to “*non-Party workers’ and peasants’ conferences*” along with the congresses of soviets which were “**democratic** institutions, the like of which even the best democratic republics of the bourgeois have never known”. Yet if that were the case then why “*support, develop and extend*” these non-Party conferences “*to be able to observe the temper of the masses, come closer to them, meet their requirements, promote the best among them to state posts*”? Significantly, their fate reflected those of any soviet with non-Bolshevik majorities in 1918 for, as one historian recounts, “*during the [labour] disturbances*” of late 1920 “*they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies*” and “*were discontinued soon afterward.*”

Simply put, a “disappeared” working class does not produce strike waves nor need martial law to break them. The facts are the Russian workers were taking collective action against the so-called workers’ state. The Bolsheviks simply repressed any expressions of collective decision-making and action in order to maintain power – as any ruling class does.

Isolation

As for isolation, well the economic disruption in Germany was relatively the same as in Russia in 1917/18 and if that caused the “retreat” there then surely we can expect the same in Germany? Particularly given the same underlying vision of socialism as centralised nationalisation of production? Also given that Germany likewise faced civil war during this period. And it must be added that the notion of the objective necessity of party dictatorship was well embedded by this stage.

In short, if the German Revolution had “succeeded” it would have followed the same path as the Russian one for most of the objective and ideological factors were the same.

Latter-day rationales...

Most of these rationales were developed long after the event – along with at least a verbal admission that certain decisions were actually wrong from a socialist perspective (once more people were made aware of them by anarchists). Yet we must not forget that there is “*no evidence... 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... the very opposite is the case.*” This can be seen from the defence of party dictatorship and how both Lenin and Trotsky in 1920 argued that one-man management was introduced when, as the former admitted, “*there was no civil war*” in 1918.

So these latter-day rationales involve a very selective memory. Not least with Trotsky. For example, in *The Revolution Betrayed* 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.*” He forgot to mention who introduced the regime in the Red Army in 1918 and who wished to extend it to the militarisation of labour in 1920! Likewise, he opined that the Army’s “*commanding staff needs democratic control. The organisers of the Red Army were aware of this from the beginning, and considered it necessary to prepare for such a measure as the election of commanding staff.*” Strangely he failed to mention that his first act as head of the Red Army was precisely to abolish by decree the election of officers.

No Alternative?

Of course, Leninists can – and have! – proclaimed that the Bolsheviks had no choice to act as they did, that their actions were driven by events, not ideology and that anarchists would have been forced to do the same thing if they were in the same circumstances.

Yet this is obviously not true: Bolshevik ideology obviously influenced their decisions. This can be seen from how their prejudices for centralisation and long-standing visions of socialism were reflected in practice in terms of the structures they built, how the privileged position of party was reflected in authoritarian practice, and so on.

Moreover, the Makhnovists in Ukraine show that ideology placed its part. This anarchist influenced movement encouraged soviet democracy, while the Bolsheviks banned it; it encouraged election of officers within the armed forces, while Bolsheviks banned it; it promoted freedom of speech, etc., while the Bolsheviks banned all such elementary rights.

So we have the same civil war, same conditions (arguably worse) and yet different results.

Conclusions

Proudhon wrote that “every society declines the moment it falls into the hands of the ideologists” and this was mostly certainly the case with the Bolsheviks. Yet their failure was not

unexpected for Bakunin had argued that Marxism would lead to either reformism (due to Marxism's electioneering) or a new class system based on the state bureaucracy and state capitalism (due to its Statism). Other anarchists – like Kropotkin – echoed this analysis and denounced the obvious descent of Social-Democracy into reformism and warned that the dictatorship of the proletariat would become the dictatorship **over** the proletariat.

On both counts, *we were proven correct.*

Today, most Marxists recognise the first (but strangely seek to repeat it by following the same strategy!) but few recognise the second. They still urge us to read the manifesto and ignore the practice. Yet as one historian noted:

“To consider ‘State and Revolution’ as the basic statement of Lenin’s political philosophy... is a serious error... [It] never actually became official policy... the revived Leninism of 1902... prevailed”

So why the failure, why the rise of a new ruling class?

This was due to two factors, ideological and structural. Bolshevism's vision of socialism was flawed, its analysis/theory of the state was flawed, its theory of the party was flawed. In short, *Marxism* is flawed – as anarchists argued and we simply saw our predictions confirmed.

The Bolsheviks built a new system rooted in the structures developed to enforce *minority* rule and like all previous states it became the focus of minority power – first the party leadership (as was wanted) and then the rise of a bureaucracy around it (which was, for the Bolsheviks, an unexpected development). Given its social position, it is illusory to expect the Bolshevik party to act in any other way – yet much of the left prefer wishful thinking to empirical evidence...

A new society needs new structures, new social organisation. These must be based on mass participation, federalism, bottom-up decision-making – in short, all the things which the centralised, pyramid of the State was designed to exclude. Unsurprisingly, then, the Russian revolution confirmed anarchist theory both in terms of our critique of state socialism as first raised by Proudhon in the 1840s and our alternative vision of social transformation.

We need to understand *The Bolshevik Myth* so we learn from, rather than repeat, history. And what have we learned? In Kropotkin's words: “*how **not** to introduce communism.*”

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