

Defending the Bolsheviks or defending the truth?

A response to the IWG on the Russian Revolution

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Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Section headed Bolsheviks as 'self-appointed elite' | 5 |
| Section headed Did the Bolsheviks destroy Soviet democracy? | 6 |
| Section headed Elimination of rivals | 6 |
| Section headed Subordination of the Factory Committees | 7 |
| Section headed Privileges for Specialists | 9 |
| Section headed Building the new State apparatus | 9 |
| Section on Desperate measures | 9 |

We don't place any major priority on debating other small left groups but every now and again such an exercise becomes worthwhile. In particular decent defences of the Bolsheviks actions during the Russian revolution are hard to come by. That is ones that try and defend their actions rather than re-write history and slander opponents. This is a reply to one of the better defences of the Bolsheviks and is found in Class Struggle, No22, Spring 1994.

The Russian revolution was one of the most important events of the 20th century. Until recently the most important debate on the left was whether or not it had failed. Now with the collapse of the USSR a far more important debate is uncovered, why did it fail.

As revolutionaries we discount the right wing when they see the idea of communism itself to be blamed. A more difficult argument but one symptomatic of the dominance of Leninism is that revolution is itself to blame. This also will not be discussed here. What is the basis for discussion is whether the causes of the degeneration of the revolution included the policies and actions of the Bolshevik party under Lenin (as the anarchists claim and have claimed since about 1921) or whether the degeneration is explainable in terms of special circumstances and the rise of Stalin (as Trotskyism including the IWG claims).

This has been a difficult debate to have. When the USSR was popular with the vast bulk of the revolutionary left the Leninists avoided the debate all together. They dismissed the anarchists as petit bourgeoisie and counter-revolutionary. When the Leninists split into the Stalinist and Trotskyism factions they both made use of historical distortion to defend their respective leaders role in the events of 1917-21. Some Leninist groups including the SWP and the Spartacists continue in this tradition today, a debate with them soon turns to a pantomime of *oh yes they did, oh no they didn't* as historical facts are denied.

However with the collapse of the USSR, Leninism itself also collapsed. Huge numbers have deserted the revolutionary project, without even casting a glance behind them. Some however paused to try to explain where they went wrong but by questioning not only the Bolsheviks but also the project of revolution itself. The facts they put forward did however waken others who remained revolutionaries. Even if they were saying nothing new, most of these facts having been published by anarchists for 70 years. As long as it was just anarchists they could be ignored but the same facts coming out of their own movement could not. In trying to answer them many of them have jumped ship and decided all existing politics is dead and something entirely new needs to be constructed.¹ A few have remained bailing water in a ship whose bottom is about to drop out.

The article being replied to fits into the rare later category. In a way its more useful than those who jumped ship as inevitably they have said 'yes we were wrong but it didn't really matter because the Russian revolution was not as important as once thought'². Although the diving for the lifeboats of the earlier group may be sensible we should have some respect to those who choose to stick to their guns while aware that the ship is sinking³. What they put forward is an attempt to justify the anti workers democracy aspects of Leninism as being necessary to create socialism. It's a defence of the position of putting party before class that is central to Leninism and Marxism.

That is not to say the article under review has completely broken with the re-writing history approach. At particular sections the author falls back onto soft versions of this tradition, unwilling to face the otherwise inescapable logic of the facts.

IWG > *At the beginning of 1917 the Bolsheviks led tiny number, with roughly 2,000 members in Moscow and 23,000 nation-wide in a population of 160 million. By October they were the acknowledged leaders of the masses. They swept to power promising 'Land, bread and peace'. Immediately they prepared to fulfil that promise by nationalising the land and handing its cultivation over to the peasants, opening negotiations to end the war, offering self-determination to every nation within the old empire and instituting measures of workers control.*

This is how the October revolution is described, a description that right from the start recreates history in order to set up future defences. The class is removed from the historical process and instead the Bolsheviks are presented making the revolution and handing down gains to the peasants and workers. However far from sweeping to power, power fell into Bolshevik hands as the provisional government collapsed particularly in Petrograd without a significant fight. The Bolsheviks did not set a date for revolution until it was in progress (the day before the Winter palace fell). This was when the revolutionaries found themselves holding the rest of Petrograd after Kerenskys forces ordered on the offensive in the city instead melted away.

In addition for the most part the peasants had already seized the land, the workers had already seized the factories. This had been going on since February with a growing momentum. Not only had the workers already taken over the bulk of the factories but they had also organised regional and national co-ordination of this activity. No less than four Petrograd and region conferences of factory committees had been held as well as the national conference prior to the October revolution. Maurice Brinton, author of the *Bolsheviks and Workers control*¹ says *These...provisions in fact only listed and legalised what had already been achieved and implemented in many places by the working class in the course of the struggles of the previous months* [5]. So instead of the Bolsheviks seizing power and then handing out gains to grateful worker and peasants we have the reality of the Bolsheviks falling into power and listing and legalising the gains already won.

The significance of this difference is that later on the Bolsheviks and their defenders will repeatedly use this idea of them creating the October revolution, of their party being the vanguard as the justification for their later suppression of workers democracy. No one denies they were by far the largest working class organisation at the time of October² what is denied that this created a sort of transubstantiation that gave the Bolsheviks a permanent right to impose their will on the class. In October the Bolsheviks were the largest workers organisation but it was the class that made the revolution, the party played the role of spectator, participant and legislator after the fact.

The article then continues with an unstated attempt to justify the repressive measures the Bolsheviks took prior to the civil war. We are told by the IWG that *Russia was a deeply backward economy.. that the dislocation caused by the revolution and the ensuing period led to chaos in production and agriculture and a slump in output.* This does sort of beg the question of if the workers were capable of making a revolution in these backward conditions then why did the Bolsheviks think them incapable of maintaining and building on this revolution.

The destruction of workers democracy is not presented by the IWG as a coherent policy but rather as something that happened *At various points in time* so that the Bolsheviks *sometimes overturned soviet decisions and arrested oppositionists* all of which we are assured was *to defend*

¹ this is the main text I use for reference to what happened around the struggle for workers democracy in the factories. It's a vital read for anybody serious about this debate.

² Although in absolute terms the Socialist revolutionaries had much greater support, due to their far greater implementation in the peasantry.

the revolution against encirclement by enemies who had no intention of allowing this experiment in workers democracy to unfold. In this continued understated tone we are told that *undoubtedly, some innocents received rough treatment at the hands of the Cheka - the secret police.*

A cleverly worded section, if we did not know already we might not guess that this *rough* treatment included the imprisonment, torture and execution of tens of thousands of revolutionaries. We might be left with the impression that only the occasional soviet decision was overturned, only the occasional paper censored and even only the occasional oppositionist arrested. Of course the IWG are aware this is not the case, they are aware that we are aware of this. So who are these words being crafted for? Less cynically perhaps its an example of the phenomena described by the comic strip over the next couple of pages.

Its easy to lose what this *rough* treatment meant in the mist of history. An example of what it meant for an individual is seen in the faith of Bogush. He was one of the anarchists of Russian origin expelled from America to Russia in 1921 for his part in opposing the imperialist slaughter of world war one. Soon after arriving he went to see the area controlled by the Mhakovists at a time when they were in their third treaty with the Bolsheviks. He was a few hours there when the Bolsheviks for the third time betrayed this treaty, attacking the Mhakovists without warning. He immediately returned to Khrakov where he was arrested by the Cheka, and shot in March of 1921.³ Bogush was just one example among hundreds but those who speak of 'rough treatment' should first put themselves in his shoes. At the time of the third treaty between the Mhakovists and the Bolsheviks one of the provisions was that the Bolsheviks should release 'left' prisoners. The Mhakovists estimated their number at this time to be 200,000, mostly peasants who had fought with or been sympathetic to the Mhakovists but also the anarchist activists of every region and city. This is more than *some innocents* .

The suppression was anything but *occasional and sometimes rough*, but in fact complete, ultimately extending to the party itself in 1921 and brutal. I'll deal with the arguments section heading, by section heading.

Section headed Bolsheviks as 'self-appointed elite'

The heading of this section is in itself disingenuous. All revolutionary organisations are 'self-appointed', our problem was not the fact that the Bolsheviks controlled who could join the party but that the party controlled the state. We are told that *the Bolsheviks were a party rooted firmly in the working class, that they were a party of workers, that they were proven to be the leading party of the working class by their majority in the soviets.* None of this says anything beyond that the Bolsheviks were at one stage massively popular, a similar defence could no doubt be applied to the Mensheviks or Socialist revolutionaries. As long as the soviets agreed with the Bolsheviks then it would be right to expect Bolshevik policy to be implemented. But what happens when the Soviet takes a decision that the Bolshevik party disagree with. Does the fact that the Soviet agreed with the party yesterday give the party the right to crush the Soviet today?

We are told that *the claim that the Bolsheviks lacked faith in the working class's ability to manage power is absolutely without foundation.* We will go on to discuss the foundation of this charge but for a moment lets look at the IWG denial of it. We are told that *Lenin stated that the workers and*

³ Voline, The Unknown Revolution, Page 693-694.

peasants could and would seize power, hardly an issue they did indeed seize power but that is not the same as managing the future society (*manage power*).

Strangely Trotsky's steam engine analogy is used *Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses will dissipate like steam in a piston box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam*⁴

This suggests that again either the IWG do not understand the arguments being made or that they are being dis-ingenious. The accusation is precisely that the Bolsheviks saw the workers in terms of blindly moving steam in a box, something incapable of being creative unless an outside force gave them direction (instructions). Our steam box could equally well be an analogy for capitalism where the capitalists do the planning and the workers follow the plans to produce the goods. Our point is precisely that the Bolsheviks did not believe it possible for the working class to plan and co-ordinate production, in short to break down this distinction between steam and piston.

Finally another irrelevancy is thrown up. The Bolsheviks were willing to share the piston box with the left SR's. In short we are being told, look at this given moment the Bolsheviks had mass support so therefore they were the right 'managers' of the future society. They were even willing to share this with the left-SR's⁵. Somewhere one can't help but feel that the idea of a future society being constructed democratically by the workers themselves rather than through occasionally elected representatives passed them by.

Section headed Did the Bolsheviks destroy Soviet democracy?

This question receives a yes but... answer. The buts essentially break down to claiming it was only an exceptional measure. In fact the Bolsheviks closed all soviets that opposed them on any substantial issue and over a couple of years removed decision making power from the soviets altogether, so that they were only a talking shop, designed to transfer decisions down from the government to the working class. The IWG say *the subordination of direct democratic control by the worker soviets does not in itself prove the existence of inherently degenerative defects in the new regime*. Of course the soviets are only one example of the problem so the *in itself* does not apply, we are indeed talking about a broader picture. Even so can we really talk about building socialism if the organs of workers democracy are not allowed to operate freely. The IWG seem to treat workers democracy as a peripheral issue, icing on the cake. Anarchists argue it is the core to constructing a socialist society, it is not possible to progress without it.

The suppression of Soviet democracy reached its logical conclusion in 1921 when the Kronstadt soviet, heart of the 1917 revolution was stormed by Bolshevik forces, its leaders executed or forced into exile and the rank and file imprisoned, and scattered all over the USSR. Soviet democracy was not just an issue of debate but one many workers died in fighting for.

Section headed Elimination of rivals

This section is telling. We are told that the Bolsheviks did not wish to be a one party state, the example of their 'power' sharing with the left SR's is offered up as proof. This power sharing

⁴ L.Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto, p.19

⁵ Although in practise this was meaningless as decision making

consisted of the left SR's having 7 members out of 18 on the Council of Peoples Commissars, essentially the cabinet. Because the Bolsheviks decided policy in advance through their central committee and had a majority (the remaining 11 delegates) this was meaningless. In reality the Bolshevik central committee decided policy. This is also a distraction, the more important point is that its not a question of two parties 'sharing power' so that 18 rather than 11 voted on decisions but rather of the working class itself making decisions.

The meaningless of the power 'sharing' is shown by the treaty of Brest-Livtosk. This controversial treaty took the USSR out of the war but handed over massive areas to Germany. The Bolshevik CC was split over it but voted 4 against, 4 abstain and 5 for it. We don't intend to repeat the argument of the rights and wrongs of the treaty here, the point is that 13 people decided the future faith of Russia in this vote. It was at this point the SR's choose to revolt, power sharing was useless to them and they saw this decision as useless to the revolution. But the SR's offered no alternative and their revolt petered out. The Bolsheviks used this as a pretext to get rid of the last oppositional forces with the exception of those SR's who conformed to their policy or as the IWG put it *pledged support for the resolutions for the 5th all Russian congress of soviets*.

This section also mentions the crushing of the anarchist movement in Moscow and Petrograd in the spring of 1918. It attempts to lump these forces in with the Mensheviks, a familiar tactic of what the IWG like to call *Stalinism*. The anarchists were crushed at the moment their movement was starting to grow, the Confederation of anarchist syndicalists (KAS) claimed delegates representing 75,000 workers at the trade union conference that year. The anarchists formed the Black guards to protect their clubs and organisation from the Cheka, secret police. The Bolsheviks could tolerate no militia independent of their state control and so crushed them, killing 40 in the process and imprisoning hundreds.

This illustrates how meaningless the talk of power sharing was, once the ideas of the anarchist became popular they were crushed. This sort of democracy is meaningless. We are told that the Bolsheviks *did not always draw a fine line between counter revolution and those who on point of principle refused to endorse the new regime*. Again an attempt is made to suggest the whites and Anarchists shared similar positions, again the reality being that they held positions diametrically opposed, The difference in how to build socialism is elevated into a difference over defending socialism while the repression is downplayed into a *fine line*. This language again recalls the methods of the Stalinists who sought to confuse Trotskyism and fascism. The methods of Stalinism and Leninism lie next to each other, and the IWG make use of such methods but are seemingly unaware of this.

Section headed Subordination of the Factory Committees

This sections stands out in its attempt to mislead the ignorant. The suppression of the factory committee movement is presented as no more than a fusion to overcome localism and improve efficiency. It's three paragraph treatment is an attempt to deny the most important aspects of the Bolshevik crushing of socialism. The issue simply put was how would the economy be run, by the workers themselves, through delegates they choose and mandated or by bureaucrats and managers appointed by the state.

It is not just a moral objection to the Bolshevik destruction of workers democracy that comes into play, it is the fact that socialism could not be built by this state bureaucracy. The IWG might

consider the imposition of the dictatorship of the party a shortcut to socialism. In reality the last 75 years have demonstrated that it is a dead end. Earlier in their article the IWG cite the continued fall of production after the revolution as justification for the dictatorship. It is clear however from contemporary accounts and from the different pattern of the Spanish revolution that this drop was far from inevitable. It arose from the Bolsheviks removing all initiative from the workers and placing it in the hands of the state.

This section is also dishonest in claiming the transformation was simply from the factory committees to the trade unions. In fact on a local level it meant transfer to one man management. On a national level it meant transfer from delegates elected from the workers to state bodies with only a few appointed trade union officials. Even this was absorbed almost immediately by the VENSENKA comprised almost completely of appointees of the various government ministries (Commissariats). The transformation thus was factory committee to state control, even the union bureaucracy never really had any say in the running of the economy.

It is also dishonest to imply the factory committees were a sectional interest. The IWG are aware of the historical facts and these include that the committees had organised on a national basis before October and had rejected the idea that each factory could be seen as entitled to operate independently of the whole. Four national congresses had occurred before the factory committee movement was repressed, all concerned with organising the national economy. The sectional accusation is so transparently false that it is clearly thrown in as an attempt to confuse those who know little about these events.

The section ends with a red herring, we are told there was no conspiracy because the majority of delegates were Bolsheviks. Again this is the idea of the vanguard frozen in time. It is clear from reading what these delegates were saying that they were against what the party was doing. As yet they had not realised the danger and no break had been made, as such they represented those who had been fooled by the libertarian rhetoric of the Bolsheviks at the time of October. When they did raise the debate within the party in 1921 it was too little too late.

The last sentence it worth examining. We are told the destruction of the factory committees was *to eliminate organisational chaos and make best use of critically scarce resources*. A key idea of Leninism is that the minority of party intellectuals is more capable of organising production than the actual workers involved in production leaps out. In reality the party was incapable of improving on the situation. Resource wastage increased and it was only by the militarisation of labour that the Bolsheviks managed to prevent the complete collapse. This was not all that different from the 'improvements' created by Stalin's five year plans, also based on screwing the working class as hard as possible to pay for improvements in production.

Almost all the anarchist who wrote up their experiences of the Russian revolution demonstrate how the Bolsheviks crushed the initiative of local workers. Voline gives a long account of events in the Nobel oil refinery in 1918 when the Bolsheviks had ordered it closed as they were unable to organise the maintenance of production. A mass meeting was called at which the workers outlined how they could continue production using the skills and contacts they had acquired over the years working there. The Bolshevik response was simple, the workers were told the factory was closing and that if they made any attempt to keep it open they would lose their compensation and would be forced to close by the army. Far from dictatorship saving the economy it finished its destruction, both because it was unable to organise production and because it alienated workers and peasants alike.

Section headed Privileges for Specialists

This section is based on an unsubstantiated opinion, that *1917 showed that the immediate workers' management in year one of the revolution is a utopia*. This claim seems all the more bizarre when you consider that 20 years later workers management right up to regional level became the rule in many of the collectivised industries in northern Spain. And unlike Russia the civil war in Spain saw an increase in output. The historical evidence would seem to suggest that the opinion that this whole section is built around is false.

Section headed Building the new State apparatus

This section starts by telling us that *The process of building state institutions..was a haphazard one*. This process is also described as intricate and complex. To these anarchists might add unnecessary and counter revolutionary.

The Bolshevik state apparatus could not put the economy back on its feet because even at that stage the Russian economy was too complex to be ran by bureaucratic (state) plan. In the end this saw a return to the self-organising ability of capitalism in the form of the NEP.

The key flaw in this whole set up was where the Bolsheviks could see capitalism operated as a self organising system they thought socialism could not operate in this fashion. Anarchists argue that socialism can only be constructed through a self-organising system based on workers democracy. Instead of a single decision making point a multitude of interacting parts exist, each capable of judging their own capability and needs. The interaction between these forms a 'plan' from below. Self-organising systems are common in nature, indeed embryo development is one complex example, controlled not by any watch maker but by the interaction between the cells of the developing embryo.

The Bolshevik state may not have been capable of running the complex economy but it was capable of making sure that no one else could. The only successful intervention of the Bolsheviks was in preventing any form of self-organisation occurring, including examples like the Nobel oil factory. In their eagerness to control the economy the Bolsheviks throttled it.

The response to the resulting decline in output was the same as Stalin's at the end of the NEP period. To impose stricter and stricter factory discipline, to promote staknovitism (then called subbotniks), to cease goods and stamp out barter and to try and find better methods of bureaucratic control. The IWG describe the imposition of military discipline on sections of the labour force as *an appeal*. Military discipline was not something workers accepted after being appealed to, it was something imposed on them from above with the same consequences for them as soldiers at the time had for 'desertion' or refusing to obey orders.

Section on Desperate measures

The IWG find some criticisms that can be safely made of the Bolsheviks, the banning of party factions in 1921, and the statization of the trade unions. It is pretended that Lenin always opposed the second, he did not in fact, only coming to oppose it after Trotsky's worst excesses in 1920. Up to this he had supported it. The reason these two areas are 'safe' is because opposition to them came from within the party. No understanding is present however that these were not isolated

single issues but the culmination of the stamping out of debate and democratic control over the economy.

The rest of the article continues as a standard analysis of Stalin's rise to power although it repeats this curious idea that the Bolsheviks were given a *mandate* in October of 1917 that could not be later removed from them. This idea is key to the defence of the Bolshevik legacy, as it is clear they quickly lost this popularity. It seems strange (to say the least) that those who would claim to be for the right of recall in the context of a trade union would vigorously deny this right in a *workers state*.

Overall the impression that I am left with is of the author holding the line despite not being very confident that she is doing the right thing. Reading Victor Serge's account of these events you become aware of a similar emotional attachment, one similar to Lord Denning's statement about the consequences of considering that the Birmingham 6 were innocent. If the accusations the anarchists lay against the Bolsheviks is true then a terrible vista is indeed opened. For it follows that the Bolsheviks were not just wrong on one or two issues but their political outlook right down to the core was wrong. That those who had sacrificed much in the years before 1917 then went on to destroy the revolution they had desired with their own hands. A long attachment to a particular set of beliefs is something that is hard to break from. But if they are wrong then it is better to make this break then wasting time flogging a dead horse.

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