

Four October Myths

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In 1922 Emma Goldman complained Soviet Russia, had become “the modern socialist Lourdes, to which the blind and the lame, the deaf and the dumb were flocking for miraculous cures”. And like most religious events that claim a historical validity many of the myths of the October revolution rather than being historical accounts are written instead to create a blind faith in the leadership of the party.

Here I am going to look at four myths, widely accepted by the left and right alike on the October revolution and its aftermath, these are

1. That the October revolution was a well planned coup carried out by the Bolshevik party that transformed Russia from a capitalism to communism
2. This subsequently the revolution failed due to the Civil War and imperialist intervention (Recently this has begun to replace the later myth that the failure was somehow due to Stalin rather than Trotsky being made the boss of all Russia in 1928.)
3. That the suppression of freedom and the introduction of a party dictatorship were a consequence of this Civil War
4. That in the face of all this the revolution had to fail and more specifically for us that the anarchist alternative was inevitably defeated by state terror alone

A well planned coup

Many of the photographs and film people believe they have seen of the Russian revolution are in fact taken from films by the Soviet Director Eisenstein after the event. For instance I've seen Socialist Worker (Ireland) use a still from his recreation of the storming of the Winter Palace alongside an article on the Russian Revolution. These along with rather glib accounts have created an entirely false view of what the Revolution was, one at odds even with the longer Bolshevik histories.

These accounts universally depict a few demonstrations between the February and October revolutions accompanied by a political debate which the Bolsheviks won by October and so launched a carefully planned series of military assaults on the government. Not only is this a completely inaccurate picture of this revolution, it's a completely inaccurate picture of any revolution. This example is typical

“the bolsheviks..in the hour of crisis put aside all their indignation at the governmental persecutions and concentrated on the task of saving the revolution. The victory before the gates of Petrograd set free the energies of the masses throughout the country. Peasants revolted against their landlords, and in far-away industrial centres Soviets took power.”

There are two ways in which this is wrong, the first and more fundamental is that October was not the culmination of a political debate alone but rather the culmination of several months of working class and peasant activity that drove such the debate.

In an article written in 1927, 10 years after the revolution Pitor Arshinov, an anarchist participant explains what was happening in the period before October

“it was well before October that the revolutionary workers destroyed the base of capitalism. All that was left was the superstructure. If there had not been this general expropriation of the capitalists by the workers, the destruction of the bourgeois state machine — the political revolution — would not have succeeded in any way. The resistance of the owners would have been much stronger. On the other hand, the objectives of the social revolution in October were not limited to the overthrow of capitalist power. A long period of practical development in social self-management was before the workers,

The big rural landowners began everywhere to evacuate the countryside, fleeing from the insurgent peasantry and seeking protection for their possessions and their persons in the towns. Meanwhile, the peasantry proceeded to a direct re-distribution of land, and did not want to hear of peaceful co-existence with the landlords. In the towns as well a sudden change took place between the workers and the owners of enterprises. Thanks to the efforts of the collective genius of the masses, workers’ committees sprang up in every industry, intervening directly in production, putting aside the admonishments of the owners and concentrating on eliminating them from production. Thus in different parts of the country, the workers got down to the socialisation of industry.

Simultaneously, all of revolutionary Russia was covered with a vast network of workers’ and peasant soviets, which began to function as organs of self management.

Therefore, in considering the evolution of the Russian socialist Revolution as a whole, October appears only as a stage — a powerful and decisive stage, it is true.”

By October all over Russia workers had either taken over or began to ‘interfere’ in the way there workplaces were run by setting up factory committees. These committees sought to compete with the boss in the management of the enterprise or as time went on replaced him altogether. These committees as they grew began to aim at running not just the local factory but creating a national way of administering the national economy.

In August 1917 the Second Conference of Factory Committees took this so seriously that they resolved to devote a quarter of their wages to support a central Soviet of Factory Committees.

They declared:

“The economic life of the country — agriculture, industry, commerce and transport must be subject to one unified plan, constructed so as to satisfy the individual and social requirements of the wide masses of the people”.

In short capitalism was considerably undermined before the October Revolution.

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 Kerensky’s forces, ordered on the offensive in the city, (to gain control of the city bridges) instead melted away. The Winter Palace far from being stormed in a massive military offensive was in fact taken as soldiers, workers and peasants entered through the basement only to be taken prisoner. However before long the ‘prisoners’ outnumbered the soldiers loyal to the government who recognising this surrendered to them. In fact the front of the Palace was so

quiet that Kerensky, the head of the government was able to escape by driving out in his car. Those revolutionary soldiers who did recognise him reacted not by arresting him (as they would if this was a planned procedure) but by saluting and standing aside for the car to pass.

After they came to power in October the Bolsheviks passed all sorts of decrees legalising aspects of workers control but as Maurice Brinton, author of the *Bolsheviks and Workers control* points out “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”

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.

Another account of the October revolution was given by Sergei Mstislavskii, a leader of the Left SR's (peasant-based party which briefly entered a coalition with the Bolsheviks). He describes being woken up on the morning before the revolution by the cheerful tapping of rifles. On waking he was told ‘Gird up your loins boss. There’s a smell of gunpowder in the city.’ Actually, he said “the city did not smell of gunpowder; power lay in the gutter, anyone could pick it up. One did not have to gird one’s loins, one needed only to stoop down and pick it up”

The Civil War and imperialist intervention

The Civil War and the intervention of 17 foreign armies is the next aspect of the myth to be tackled. This is not to deny that there was a long and bloody Civil War or that all the imperialist powers did get involved at some level. Rather what we need to be clear on is at what created the Civil War and to what extent it can be considered to have altered Bolshevik Policy.

It is true that the imperialists hated the revolution and that they harboured and equipped the white armies. But they actually stayed out of most of the fighting. Only limited numbers of imperialist troops were landed, the Japanese in Vladivostock, the US and Britain at Mumansk and the French and others in the Crimea. But huge areas of land were captured by whites during the Civil War, if the whites were just capitalists and former generals who are we to believe did the fighting for them. What force created the white armies.

We have already seen that before the revolution the peasants were seizing the land, and expelled and sometimes killed the landlords. They set up soviets and identified with the workers Soviets of Moscow and Petrograd even if they favoured the Socialist Revolutionaries while the workers backed the Bolsheviks. Yet it was these same peasants who were to form the backbone of the White armies.

This happened because the Bolsheviks refused to except that the mass of peasants could be pro-revolution. So right from the start they treated them as enemies of the revolution. In place of the collective ownership of land by the peasants they tried to take the land into state control. They sent armed detachments out into the countryside to seize the peasants food rather than allowing the workers and peasants to construct a mutual distribution system. They crudely tried to stir up internal conflict in the community between peasants with a little land and those with none. All of this had the effect of making the peasants hostile to Bolshevik rule.

The white on the other hand claimed to be against all this. So they were able to briefly recruit or conscript large numbers of dissatisfied peasants into the white armies. These were the soldiers

who fought with the two white interventions, those of Wrangel and Denkin that threatened to overwhelm the revolution. The Bolsheviks were saved because although the whites were clever enough to pretend to be on the side of the peasants as soon as they captured a piece of land the land lord would arrive and start demanding his back rent. As soon as this news got to the front the soldiers would lose all will to fight and start to desert in droves.

Bolshevik policy also led to the formation of what were called the green armies which were peasant movements that responded to Bolshevik and white repression by taking to the woods and attacking both sides. These bands in general had little political theory, some were little more than bandits, others were anti-semites but had the Bolsheviks not alienated them most would have been on the side of the revolution. Towards the end of the Civil War there were many large scale peasant uprisings against Bolshevik rule, again by peasants who a few years before had seized land and so should have been pro-revolution.

In the cities the situation was almost as bad. Bolshevik attacks on workers control resulted by 1919 in workers leaving the party in huge numbers showing the level of demoralisation most workers felt in the party. This demoralisation could not but effect the will of the Red Army to fight and more and more the army turned to execution and other mechanisms of bourgeois discipline to force its soldiers to fight. But this was only half the problem. Bolshevik attempts at one man management were not just demoralising workers in the Red Army had also destroyed production and created a Soviet bureaucracy where credit was based on ability to lie about how much you were producing.

The Civil War and the allied blockade meant desperate shortages but those trying to fix those shortages were bureaucrats. The war conducted by these bureaucrats against the peasants resulted in famine in many areas and a further reduction in food supplies of the cities. In many cases the workers tried to take the initiative, sometimes simply as when Peterograd was faced with a fuel shortage and Emma Goldman asked why far from being mobilised to do so workers were being stopped gathering fuel from the surrounding forests. But the following illustration from the anarchist Voline shows how with the creativity and knowledge which could have got production going and supplied the front was blocked even at the level of the individual workplace.

The Bolsheviks ordered the Nobel oil refinery closed in 1918 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.

Suppression and dictatorship as a consequence of the Civil War

Russia got out of WWI when it signed the Brest Litovsk treaty on March 3rd. The rights or wrongs of abandoning the revolutionary Ukraine aside it is significant that the decision to sign this controversial treaty was made at a Bolshevik Central Committee meeting by the narrowest of margins and not by the Soviets.

The start date of the Civil War is difficult to be exact but the earliest reasonable starting date is probably the revolt of the Czech legion who the Bolsheviks were transporting by train across Siberia to be sent back to the Western front to continue the war. This happened on May 25 and because this regiment was strung out all along the railway meant the Bolsheviks lost all control of the transport system East and allowed local white units to form, ally with the Czechs and attack the local revolutionaries. This is not to say there was no local fighting at all before this, but what there was did not appear to present any sort of real threat to the revolution.

Yet surprisingly in this 10 week interval of relative peace between these two events it is that we see the introduction of measures most Leninists now try and pretend were necessitated by the Civil War itself.

For instance on March 30th Trotsky as Commissar of Military Affairs set about reorganising the army. The death penalty for disobedience under fire was reintroduced, as was saluting officers, special forms of address, separate living quarters and privileges for officers. Officers were no longer elected. Trotsky wrote “The elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree”

It was also in this time period that the Bolsheviks first used the secret police to attack the anarchists, killing or wounding 40 and jailing 500 in raids on April 11 and 12 in Moscow and Petrograd. In May Burevestnik, Anarkhia, Golos Truda and other leading anarchist periodicals closed down.

Again it in this period that Lenin advocates that the revolution was his dictatorship, as least we presume it was himself he had in mind from the following quote from “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government” published April 28.

“The irrefutable experience of history has shown that the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes”. In the same article he advocates the use of Taylorism and says that in the factories the way forward is not collective management by the workers but that “..the masses unquestioningly obey the single will (emphasis in original) of the leaders of the labour process”.

On May 5 he identifies state capitalism as the immediate goal of the revolution in “Left wing childishness and petty bourgeois mentality” when he says the major aim must be “to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort at copying it”. and furthermore that they shouldn’t “shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it”.

In the light of this it is bizarre that some later day Leninists claim that the Bolsheviks only introduced one man management because of the Civil War. All the more bizarre when Trotsky spelled out the effects the Civil War had actually had on the introduction of state capitalism for them in 1920 when he wrote in “War, Communism and terror”

“I consider that if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent. most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully”.

Yet Tony Cliff, leader of the SWP can claim

Lenin certainly did not call for a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat, even less for that of a bureaucratised party over a decimated proletariat. But fate — the desperate condition of a backward country besieged by world capitalism — led to precisely this.

[Tony Cliff, Lenin, Vol.3, page 111]

Even here though Lenin already answered this excuse for had he had written

“...those who believe that socialism will be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistaken: it will everywhere be built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine.”

Lenin, Collected Works, Vol.27 page 517.

The anarchists were defeated by state terror alone

The final myth I want to cover is for anarchists the most harmful. That is that faced with such ruthless repression the anarchists were doomed to defeat. To often anarchists talk of the Bolshevik repression in terms of the failure of the Bolsheviks alone but there success was also a measure of our failure.

That the anarchists were repressed in undeniable, it started on April 11 and 12 1918 when armed detachments of Cheka raid 26 anarchist centres in Moscow and Petrograd. Forty anarchists were killed or wounded, over 500 taken prisoner. At the start of May 1918 Burevestnik, Anarkhia, Golos Truda and other leading anarchist periodicals were closed down. Documents dating from the 13th June outlined that the department for counter revolution investigative section and intelligence unit had sections allocated to dealing with anarchists.

Thousands of anarchists ended up jailed, exiled or executed. Tens of thousands of workers and peasants who fought alongside them suffered the same faith. At the time of the third treaty between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks in 1920 one of the provisions was that the Bolsheviks should release ‘left’ prisoners. The Makhnovists estimated their number at this time to be 200,000, mostly peasants who had fought with or been sympathetic to the Makhnovists but also the anarchist activists of every region and city.

But was this inevitable or was the fact the Bolsheviks were put in a position to crush the anarchists due in part to the anarchists allowing them to get there. At the beginning of 1917 the Bolsheviks were tiny, with roughly 2,000 members in Moscow and 23,000 nation-wide in a population of 160 million. There were probably fewer anarchists, typical estimates are for 5,000 to 10,000 but not all that many fewer.

In addition while the Bolsheviks had to pretend to support the slogans of the masses as when they took up the slogan of all power to the Soviets, this slogans were in fact the slogans many anarchists had been using since 1905.

At the begining I quoted Piotor Arshinov and it is to him that I now return for an explanation

“Revolutionary Anarchism was the only politico social-current to extol the idea of a social revolution by the workers and peasants, as much during the 1905 Revolution as from the first days of the October Revolution. In fact, the role they could have played

would have been colossal, and so could have been the means of struggle employed by the masses themselves. Likewise, no politico-social theory could have blended so harmoniously with the spirit and orientation of the Revolution. The interventions of the Anarchist orators in 1917 were listened to with a rare trust and attention by the workers. One could have said that the revolutionary potential of the workers and peasants, together with the ideological and tactical power of Anarchism could have represented a force to which nothing could be opposed. Unhappily, this fusion did not take place. Some isolated anarchists occasionally led intense revolutionary activity among the workers, but there was not an Anarchist organisation of great size to lead more continuous and co-ordinated actions. Only such an organisation could have united the Anarchists and the millions of workers. During such an important and advantageous revolutionary period, the Anarchists limited themselves to the restricted activities of small groups instead of orientating themselves to mass political action. They preferred to drown themselves in the sea of their internal quarrels, not attempting to pose the problem of a common policy and tactic of Anarchism. By this deficiency, they condemned themselves to inaction and sterility during the most important moments of the Revolution.

The causes of this catastrophic state of the Anarchist movement resided in the dispersion, the disorganisation and the absence of a collective tactic — things which have nearly always been raised as principles among Anarchists, preventing them making a single organisational step so that they could orientate the social revolution in a decisive fashion. There is no actual advantage in denouncing those who... contributed to create this situation. But the tragic experience: which led the working masses to defeat, and Anarchism to the edge of the abyss, should be assimilated as from now.”

Arshinov points out that the Makhnovist movement proved the anarchists could have acted differently. Over the four years 1918–1921 the anarchist Makhno commanded militias who fought against the forces of the Hetman, White Generals Denikin and Wrangel, nationalists like Petliura and Grigor’ev and, of course, the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine. At its height it had 30,000 volunteer combatants and liberated an area of some seven million people.

The Russian Revolution was one of the most vital moments of working class history. It showed what was possible. We should celebrate this but in our celebration we must ditch the myths and instead look at ways to avoid the mistakes made so that the next time things will be different.

Some further notes I prepared but didn’t use

According to John Rees at the end of the civil war Bolshevik party members were 10% factory workers, 25% army and 60% in “the government or party machine”. A note at the back says even of those classed as factory workers “most were in administration”.

Rees also attempts blame the decline in the number of Bolshevik party members in Kronstadt to the Civil war but in fact the fall in numbers in 1920 was due to purges and resignations from the party. The attitude of the remaining party members is demonstrated by the fact that during the rising three veteran Kronstadt Bolsheviks formed a Preparatory Committee of the Russian

Communist party which called upon local communists not to sabotage the efforts of the Revolutionary committee. A further 497 members of the party resigned from the party².

Socialism is merely the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. Or, in other words, 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 Lenin, *Ibid*, Vol. 25 page 358.

The Cheka was meant to be a temporary organisation, at first it was an administrative body designed to carry out investigative functions. It was not initially judicial and had no powers of arrest, however it grew up quickly. Nine days after its birth, it was granted the power of arrest. In January 1918 it was being assigned armed units, in February it was granted the power of summary trials and execution of sentences (which included the death sentence). At the end of 1917 it had 23 personnel, by mid 1918 it had over 10,000.

On 17th January 1920, The Bolshevik government abolished the death penalty except in districts where there were military operations taking place. To circumvent this order, the Cheka routinely transferred prisoners to the military areas for execution. In the following passage, the Bolshevik Victor Serge, describes how the Chekas reacted to the abolition of the death penalty while the newspapers were printing the decree, the Petrograd Chekas were liquidating their stock! Cartload after cartload of suspects had been driven outside the city during the night, and then shot, heap upon heap. How many? In Petrograd between 150 and 200; in Moscow it was said between 200 and 300.

There are many other examples but lets next look at the faith of one anarchist revolutionary who left the USA to join the revolution in Russia. This was 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 Makhnovists 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 Makhnovists without warning. He immediately returned to Khrakov where he was arrested by the Cheka, and shot in March of 1921.

In *Can the Bolsheviks retain State Power?* Lenin outlined his conception of ‘workers control’:

When we say workers control, always associating that slogan to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and always putting it after the latter, we thereby make plain what state we have in mind.. if it is a proletarian state we are referring to (i.e. dictatorship of the proletariat) then workers control can become a national, all-embracing, omnipresent, extremely precise and extremely scrupulous accounting (emphasis in the original) of the production and distribution of goods.

Comments made by Trotsky in “*Terrorism and Communism*” (1918)

“The very principle of compulsory labour is for the Communist quite unquestionable ... the only solution to economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power — an almost inexhaustible reservoir — and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation”. (p. 135)

“The introduction of compulsory labour service is unthinkable without the application, to a greater or lesser degree, of the methods of militarisation of labour”. (p. 137)

In 1919, 10.8% of enterprises were under one-man management, by December 1920, 2,183 out of 2,483 factories were no longer under collective management.

The paper of the Red Army wrote after an assassination attempt against Lenin; Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands, let them

drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritskii...let there be floods of blood of the bourgeois — more blood, as much as possible.

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