

Freedom and Revolution

The Bolshevik experience

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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. The Russian Revolution was the first occasion where decades of revolutionary ideas could be applied to real life. What was theory was now practice. The struggle between the two concepts of revolution — the statist-centralist and the libertarian federalist — moved from the realm of the abstract to the concrete.*

The question thrown up by the October revolution is fundamental. Once capitalism has been defeated, how is communism to be achieved? While there are certainly faults to be found with aspects of the anarchist movement, at least it cannot be criticised for getting the basics wrong. Anarchists have consistently argued that freedom and democracy are not optional extras. Rather they form part of the conditions necessary for the growth of communism.

What is socialism?

How does one create a communist society? The answer lies in our conception of socialism. What is meant by ‘socialism’? The classic definition is that of society run according to the dictum “*from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her needs.*” To anarchists, material equality is one dimension to socialism, but there is another of equal importance, that of freedom.

The world has enough wealth to provide for all our material comforts. Socialism seeks to liberate people from the constant worries about mortgages or landlords, the rising cost of living and the numerous other issues, trivial yet vital that grind us down in our daily life. What’s more, socialism must also give us the power to control our own lives, power to take control of our own destinies.

For our entire lives, from school to the workplace, we are forced to obey somebody else’s order, treated like children or bits of machinery. Human beings have great potential but for most of us, only in a socialist society, will this potential be realised.

So though socialism is about material equality it is also about freedom. Furthermore it is impossible to maintain one without the other. As long as power is distributed unequally, a section of society will continue to have privileges leading to material advantage. Ultimately society will again be divided into classes, into those who have and those who have not. Furthermore the experience of those attempts to manage the economy through an undemocratic centralised state has also shown that it is unfeasible to manage and control a complex system without democracy and accountability.

The revolution must achieve a number of things. It must defeat the ruling class, removing from them their economic and political dominance. In place of the bosses, the working class must in every sphere of activity make the decisions that ultimately affect them; in factories, communities, schools, universities, newspapers, television and film studios.

This is the sort of society that is worth fighting for. However it not the sort of society that can be achieved through the dictatorship of a minority over the majority. Even some Marxists such as Rosa Luxembourg recognised this. She said,

“Socialist practice demands a total spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule. Social instincts in place of egoistic ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which overcomes all suffering, etc. etc... The only way to a

*rebirth is the school of public life itself, the broadest and the most unlimited democracy, and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralises.*¹

The questions that face us are: what does revolution mean? Once capitalism has been overthrown how is society to be run? Who will control the factories, how will production be managed? How will the population be fed, how will the economy be organised? And finally, how will the revolution be defended against opposition and its survival ensured? If communism is to become a reality, answers must be found.

¹ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, (1918)

1. Who's in charge?...running the revolution.

On midnight 25/26th of October, the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), following the directions of the Petrograd Soviet (workers council), started the confused process of seizing the Winter Palace where Kerensky's cabinet was in session. The October Revolution had taken place. In contrast to the dramatic portrayal of the storming of the winter place by the Soviet film maker Eisenstien, there was practically no opposition to the take-over and hardly any bloodshed. Sergei Mstislavskii, a leader of the Left SR's (peasant-based party which briefly entered a coalition with the Bolsheviks) describes being woken up on the morning of the 25th by the

“cheerful tapping of rifles... ‘Gird up your loins boss. There’s a smell of gunpowder in the city.’ Actually, 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”¹

The Bolshevik Myth is that the Bolsheviks, under the logical and scientific leadership of Lenin, guided the revolution over hurdle after hurdle. They argue that objective circumstances forced them to make difficult but ultimately correct decisions. Descriptions of the revolution like the following passage are frequently found:

“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. The decisive hour was approaching. Would there be a force capable of directing the chaotic mass movements into one channel towards the correct aim?”²

Here it is implied that without the Bolshevik leadership the revolution would not have happened. The masses are portrayed as incapable of running a new society. The creative ability of the working class to build a new society is not present in the Leninist conception of a working class capable of only ‘trade union consciousness’. The October Revolution was “*not really so much a bold stroke by the Bolsheviks under Lenin as is it was a culmination of months of progressive social revolution throughout the country, The ubiquitous growth of peasants and workers’ committees and soviets sapped the power from the hands of Kerensky and the bourgeois provincial government, which surrendered without a fight as it’s capacity to govern had completely dissolved*”³.

¹ Sergei Mstislavskii, Five Days which Transformed Russia, (1923)

² Paul Frolich in his book Rosa Luxemburg , (1933)

³ Maurice Brinton, The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, (1970)

Bourgeois Democracy.

After the October Revolution, the Second Congress of Soviets elected an interim government (the Sovnarkom), pending the holding of elections to the Constituent Assembly. This provisional government on the 3rd of March undertook in a solemn declaration to summon a Constituent Assembly. Following elections the SR's had an overall majority, with the Bolsheviks winning only 175 out of the 707 seats.

It is with the decision to call for elections to the Constituent Assembly that the anarchists first diverged from the Bolsheviks. What led them to take this decision and why did anarchists oppose it?

The western model of parliamentary democracy could more accurately be characterised as a '4-year dictatorship'. The crucial difference between 'representative' democracy and 'direct' democracy is that under the former, voters have no part in deciding policy and are unable to recall their representatives. Instead they have nothing more than the illusion that by voting they are in some way able to control the political process.

Once power lay in the hands of the Soviets, the Constituent Assembly became a redundant institution. Here was a country where control had been finally wrenched from the ruling class and was organised in the hands of the workers. The Bolsheviks decision to call for new elections was a step backwards. In terms of fighting for socialism, it made no sense to be supporting the authority of the Constituent Assembly over that of the masses. As anarchists said shortly afterwards:

"To continue the Revolution and transform it into a social revolution, the Anarchists saw no utility in calling such an assembly, an institution essentially political and bourgeois, cumbersome and sterile, an institution which, by its very nature, placed itself 'above the social struggles' and concerned itself only, by means of dangerous compromises, with stopping the revolution, and even suppressing it if possible....so the Anarchists tried to make known to the masses the uselessness of the Constituent Assembly, and the necessity of going beyond it and replacing it at once with economic and social organisations, if they really wanted to begin a social revolution

*.....We believe, in fact, that in a time of social revolution, what is important for the workers is for them to organise their new life themselves, from the bottom, and with the help of their immediate economic organisations, and not from above, by means of an authoritarian political centre"*⁴

The party

One of the main differences between the anarchist and the Leninist tendency is in their differing attitudes to power and control. While both agree that the revolution should be made by the working class, they disagree on who hold the reigns of power afterwards. Leninists believe it is the job of the party to exercise control of society on behalf of the ruling class and like a parent, the party interprets what the best interests of the working class are. In contrast, anarchists believe

⁴ Voline, The Unknown Revolution, (1953)

that it is the working class who should run society, making and implementing decisions from the bottom up, through a system of organisations similar to the factory committees and the soviets.

Often Leninists will counter this argument by saying, the party is made up of the best elements, the vanguard, of the working class. Although at the time of October the Bolsheviks were the largest working class party this was because of what they claimed to stand for (*All power to the soviets* etc.). There were still many advanced workers outside the party, so even then the 'vanguard' and the party were not identical. In the years that followed as the party came to be increasingly composed of bureaucrats, the advanced workers were often as not in opposition. The mistake the Leninists make is to assume October froze the 'vanguard' in one organisation for all time.

Leninists and anarchists agree that, unlike most others in the working class, they have both an analysis of how society works and practical experience drawn from involvement in struggles. These are the tools needed to effect a complete transformation of society. However anarchism and Leninism diverge on the ability of the working class to run society. They have differing estimations of how aware the working class are of their revolutionary potential. Anarchists believe that it is possible to convince the mass of the working class of our ideas. In contrast, Lenin said that most workers are capable only of *trade union consciousness*. Naturally therefore, Leninists believe that since the working class is sensible only to its short term interests, it is vital that the Leninists are in power, in order for the revolution to succeed.

It was this line of thinking that led the Bolsheviks to initially call for elections to the Constituent Assembly and then, once it had been held, to call for its dissolution, as Alexander Berkman commented in 1921;

"They (the Bolsheviks) had advocated the Constituent Assembly, and only when they were convinced they could not have a majority there, and therefore not be able to take state power into their own hands, they suddenly decided on the dissolution of the assembly"

Lenin, in a signed Pravda article published on 22 December 1918, quoted approvingly from Plekhanov's speech at the Second RSDRP⁵ Congress in 1903;

*"If in a burst of enthusiasm the people elected a very good parliament...then we ought to make it a very long parliament and if the elections have not proved a success, then we should seek to disperse parliament not after two years but, if possible, after two weeks."*⁶

Their opposition wasn't based, unlike the anarchists, on the essentially anti-democratic nature of the Constituent Assembly, instead it was on whether or not the Bolsheviks were the controlling force.

In a revolutionary situation the anarchists are alone in arguing that society should be organised from the bottom up, through a freely federated system of workers' councils. Decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level. Delegates are elected solely to represent the view of those who elected them, receive no more pay than the average worker, may act as a delegate for only a fixed amount of time and are recallable. If the working class has the power to overthrow capitalism, it certainly is capable of organising a socialist society afterwards.

⁵ The RSDLP was the name of the party that was to split into the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

⁶ George Leggett, *The Cheka, Lenins Political Police*, (1981)

2. Fighting the Counter Revolution

Once the capitalist power structure has been dismantled, the next immediate issue on the revolutionaries' agenda is to ensure the defence of the revolution while also fostering its growth. It is a mistake to characterise revolutions as inherently bloody. In the October Revolution itself there were only 500 casualties. Many were surprised by the speed and ease with which the eastern European regimes fell in the 1980's. Similarly the dictatorship was bloodlessly toppled in Portugal in 1974. Bloodbaths, such as those which occurred following the Paris Commune, Chile in 1973 or Indonesia in 1965¹, are products of failed revolutions or more accurately, successful counter revolutions.

There is likely to be violent opposition to any attempt by the working classes to take power from the bosses. After all, the masses have everything to gain while the minority ruling class have everything to lose. The danger this poses depends on the relative strength of the bosses' reaction. However, whether the threat is large or small, it will be necessary to physically defend the revolution from opposition, both internally and externally.

This raises a number of issues. The corner stone of any justical system is access to open and fair trials, a full appeal process and sentence proportional to the gravity of the crime. While these are easily attainable in peace, in war, particularly civil war, curtailment of rights and civil liberties are more likely to occur. This should not be glorified (as Lenin tended to do), short term expediency is likely to lead to long term damage. The questions revolutionaries must ask is, are our actions necessary and 'objectively unavoidable' or can they be avoided? Furthermore, what effect will they have on the process of introducing socialism? Again, the answer given will depend on what socialism is considered to be.

The Secret Police

Only two months after the revolution (well before the start of the civil war) a secret police force known as the Cheka was founded, initially to inherit the security functions of the MRC². There were no external controls on its operation. No judicial process was involved in assessing the guilt or innocence of any of its prisoners. Punishments, including the death penalty, were arbitrarily applied. 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

¹ Where the US Government aided in the massacre of over half a million Communist Party supporters.

² Military Revolutionary Committee. This group was initially set up by the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet on the 12th Oct 1917 to organise for the October revolution. After the revolution the newly formed Second Congress of Soviets elected two interim bodies; the Sovnarkom (the government) composed only of Bolsheviks and the VTsLK (a legislative body). The Sovnarkom transferred the functions of the MRC to the Cheka.

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.

The Cheka was a police force. The role of a police force is to defend the interests of a ruling minority. These days the government will always defend the actions of the police, seen for example in the whitewashing of police involved in the Birmingham Six case in England. The same was true of the Bolshevik party's relationship to the Cheka. This is Lenin speaking to a rally of Chekists on 7th November 1918.

“It is not at all surprising to hear the Chekist’s activities frequently attacked by friends as well as enemies. We have taken a hard job. When we took over the government of the country, we naturally made many mistakes, and it is only natural that the mistakes of the Extraordinary Commissions [the Cheka] strike the eye most. The narrow-minded intellectual fastens on these mistakes without trying to get to the root of the matter. What does surprise me in all these outcries about the Cheka’s mistakes is the manifest inability to put the question on a broad footing. People harp on individual mistakes the Chekas made, and raise a hue and cry about them. We, however, say that we learn from our mistakes...When I consider its activities and see how they are attacked, I say this is all narrow minded and futile talk...What is important for us is that the Chekas are implementing the dictatorship of the proletariat, and in this respect their role is invaluable. There is no other way to liberate the masses except by crushing the exploiters by violence.”

The quote begs quite a few questions; what are the mistakes being talked about? What has been learnt from these mistakes? And was the Cheka activity aimed solely at the old ruling class?

Revolutionary Terror

The Bolshevik policy of Red Terror began shortly after the beginning of the Civil War in the summer of 1918, and was mirrored by the White Terror. The policy promoted the use of mass execution and fear as a tactic to be implemented ruthlessly. Acts of violence, rather than being viewed as regrettable and destructive were glorified. Latsis, the head of the Cheka on the Eastern front, wrote *“In civil war there are no courts of law for the enemy. It is a life or death struggle. If you do not kill, you will be killed. Therefore kill, that you may not be killed”*³. 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.”*⁴ It's hard to see what this frenzied call for destruction and retribution could contribute to the task of building a new and freer society.

Collective punishments, categorical punishments, torture, hostage taking and random punishments — aimed at providing lessons — were all applied in the name of the revolution. Categorical punishments were punishments based not on what someone actually did, but on what class or political background they belonged to. On the 3rd of September 1918, Ivestia announced that over

³ George Leggett, *The Cheka, Lenins Political Police*, (1981)

⁴ George Leggett, *The Cheka, Lenins Political Police*, (1981)

500 hostages had been shot by the Petrograd Cheka, these were people convicted not because they had committed a crime but because they were unfortunate enough to come from the wrong background.

There are two interpretations that may be applied to the use of revolutionary terror; on the one hand, it may be aimed against counter-revolution, on the other it may be used to compensate for the regimes declining popularity. As Emma Goldman wrote in 1922, *"..an insignificant minority bent on creating an absolute State is necessarily driven to oppression and terrorism"*⁵. The policy of revolutionary terror is in direct opposition to obtaining mass participation in the running of the society. While these tactics certainly consolidated the Bolshevik's power base, they undermined the socialism the revolution had been about in the first place.

In the countryside the Bolsheviks became the 'occupying army' instead of the 'liberating army', alienating the very population they should have been trying to convince. Terror is a doubled edged sword, it may be expedient but its use also discredits any regimes claim to fairness.

Furthermore as Malatesta the Italian anarchist wrote in 1919

*"Even Bonaparte helped defend the French Revolution against the European reaction, but in defending it he strangled it. Lenin, Trotsky and comrades are certainly sincere revolutionaries, and they will not betray what they take as revolution, but they are preparing the governmental apparatus which will help those who follow them to profit by the revolution and destroy it. They will be the first victims of their methods, and with them, I fear, the revolution will collapse. History repeats itself, mutatis mutandis: and the dictatorship of Robespierre brought Robespierre to the guillotine and prepared the way for Napoleon."*⁶

Perhaps Trotsky should have heeded Malatesta's words.

The Death Penalty

One of the first acts of the 2nd Congress of Soviets in October was the repeal of the death penalty that had been introduced by Kerensky. This was restored on the 16th June 1918. 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."*⁷

Neither of these actions can be justified by the necessities of civil war as they occurred well behind friendly lines. Nor were these actions the product of random events, they weren't mistakes, rather, as explained above, they were part of the policy of revolutionary terror

⁵ Emma Goldman, My Disillusionment with Russia, (1922)

⁶ For Anarchism, edited by David Goodway, pp73 (1989)

⁷ Samuel Farber, Before Stalinism, the rise and fall of Soviet democracy, (1990)

The Anarchists

On the 11th December Cheka and Lettish troops surrounded 26 anarchist strongholds in Moscow. The anarchists suffered 40 casualties and 500 were taken prisoner. On the 26th April similar raids were carried out in Petrograd. At this stage Dzershinsky (head of the Cheka) justified his action on the grounds that the anarchists had been preparing an insurrection and that in any event, most of those arrested proved to be criminal riff raff. He stressed that the Cheka had neither the mandate nor the desire to wage war on *ideological anarchists*. Yet documents⁸ dating from the 13th June outlined that the department for counter revolution investigative section and intelligence unit had sections allocated to dealing with anarchists. The fact that 'ideological' Anarchists were under Cheka surveillance gives lie to the Bolshevik claim that they were only opposed to a 'criminal' element within the anarchist movement rather than anarchism itself.

While Leon Trotsky was saying in July 1921 "*We do not imprison real anarchists. Those whom we hold in prison are not anarchists, but criminals and bandits who cover themselves up by claiming to be anarchists*"⁹, 13 anarchists were on hungerstrike in Moscow. Fortunately a French Syndicalist trade union delegation in the city heard of their plight and the prisoners were released (all but three were expelled from the USSR). Not so lucky was Fanyan Baron, a young anarchist woman, shot without trial, along with several others, on trumped up charges of counterfeiting Soviet bank notes (it was later proven that the counterfeiting was done by the Cheka itself). Unlucky also were the 30 or 40 anarchists living near Zhmirink who according to the soviet press in 1921 had been "*discovered and liquidated*". The last great mobilisation of anarchists occurred at the funeral of Kropotkin in February 1921 when 20,000 marched with placards and banners demanding, among other things, the release of anarchists from prison. From then on the suppression of anarchists became thorough and complete.

While there was opposition to the Cheka abuses from within the Bolshevik party, there was no institutional attempt to change its mode of operation. In any organisation, there is both a human and a structural element. Perhaps it could be argued that the abuses of Cheka were due to individual mistakes. If individuals are given unlimited power, including power over life and death, with no accountability, it's inevitable that a measure of excess and corruption will occur. Where this occurs it is up to the revolutionary organisation to make changes to prevent the same mistakes from being repeated. This is not what the Bolshevik party did. They continued to entrust individuals with unchecked power. They did not make any structural changes to the Cheka. Instead they occasionally rooted out the rotten human element, closing down certain branches, while leaving the edifice that engendered these abuses untouched.

Emma Goldman said, on escaping from Russia in 1921,

*"I have never denied that violence is inevitable, nor do I gainsay it now. Yet it is one thing to employ violence in combat as a means of defence. It is quite another to make a principle of terrorism, to institutionalise it, to assign it the most vital place in the social struggle. Such terrorism begets counter-revolution and in turn becomes counter-revolutionary."*¹⁰

⁸ George Leggett, *The Cheka, Lenins Political Police*, p40 (1981)

⁹ quoted by Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*, (1953)

¹⁰ Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment with Russia*, (1922)

3. Defending the revolution

The other side to defending the revolution is that of defending it from outside military attack. Here there are two forms of organisation open to the revolutionary; employing either a conventional military army or employing a militia. Again the Russian Revolution provides a concrete example, though initially a militia structure was adopted, by 1918 the conventional army structures had returned. The difference between the two is not, as is so often stated, one of efficiency or organisation (with the army being characterised as organised, while the militia is characterised as chaotic). The difference between the two is one of democracy.

Following the Brest-Litovsk treaty, 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”*¹. Why did Bolsheviks feel there was a need to reintroduce military discipline? Why then was there a need for military discipline in Russia 1917 but not in the anarchist front lines in Spain in 1936?

The conventional army structure evolved when feudal kings or capitalist governments required the working class to fight its wars for them. These had to be authoritarian institutions, because although propaganda and jingoism can play a part initially in encouraging enlistment, the horrors of war soon expose the futility of nationalism. A large part of military organisation is aimed at ensuring that soldiers remain fighting for causes they do not necessarily believe in. Military discipline attempts to create an unthinking, unquestioning body of soldiers, as fearful of their own side as of the other.

But, there is another way of organising armies, that of the Militia. The only difference between the two is that in Militias, officers and generals are elected, and soldiers fighting are fighting out of choice rather than fear. This structure removes the necessity for the creation of a division between officers and soldiers that is reinforced artificially by measures such as saluting and differential privileges. These measures are no longer necessary because there is no need to frighten or order soldiers to fight when they believe in the cause they are about to risk their lives for. There are many examples of militias successfully operating; the Boers fought with a volunteer army against the British. During the Spanish Revolution of 1936, militias in Anarchist controlled areas fought Franco. In 1936 the CNT declared:

*“We cannot defend the existence of nor see the need for, a regular army, uniformed and conscripted. This army must be replaced by the popular militias, by the People in Arms, the only guarantee that freedom will be defended with enthusiasm and that no new conspiracies will be hatched from the shadows”*².

¹ Leon Trotsky, *Work, Discipline, Order*, pp171-172

² Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*, (1983)

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 under arms. Makhno and his commanders won against odds of 30:1 and more, on occasion. The insurgent army was a democratic military formation. Its recruits were volunteers drawn from peasants and workers. Its officers were elected and codes of discipline were worked out democratically. Officers could be, and were, recalled by their troops if they acted undemocratically.

Those supporting conventional army structures argue that they are necessary because without them, in the heat of battle, soldiers will turn and rout. History has shown that people will give their lives in defence of a cause if it is great enough and if they believe in it.

Of course there are many more examples of operation of conventional military armies (W.W.I, W.W.II., Vietnam etc. etc.). These were conflicts where it was not necessary to obtain the consent of soldiers. The role of military discipline is to prevent conscripts from mutineering when faced with the horror of wars in which they had no interest in fighting. These were conflicts where human life was lost in great numbers. The generals directing the war effort were able to make mistake after mistake, wasting lives, with no accountability (see any military history of the Battle of the Somme, Galipoli, etc.). These many examples give lie to the excuse that it is more efficient and that it is necessary, to organise along authoritarian lines. The function of hierarchies of rank and decision making is to ensure that the power of an army is directed and controlled by a minority.

4. Factories in Revolution

After the revolution there were two choices available to those running the economy, either to organise production in the hands of the state or in the hands of the workers. In order to achieve the former the Bolsheviks had to move against the latter. The factory committees were groups of workers elected at most factories before, during and after the October revolution. The delegates to these committees were mandatable and recallable. They were elected initially to prevent the individual bosses from sabotaging equipment. They quickly expanded their scope to cover the complete administration of the workplace and displaced the individual managers. As each workplace relied on many others, to supply raw materials, for energy and to transport their products, the Factory Committees tried to federate in November 1917.

They were prevented from doing so by the Bolsheviks through the trade union bureaucracy. The planned 'All Russian Congress of Factory Committees' never took place. Instead the Bolshevik party decided to set up the 'All Russian Council of Workers Control' with only 25% of the delegates coming from the factory committees. In this way the creative energy of Russian workers, co-ordinated outside Bolshevik control, was blocked in favour of an organisation the party could control. This body was in itself stillborn, it only met once. It was soon absorbed by the Supreme Economic Council set up in November 1917 which was attached to the Council of Peoples Commissars, itself made up of Bolshevik party members.

In November 1917 Golas Truada (the official organ of the Union for Anarchist Propaganda) warned:

“Once their power is consolidated and ‘legalised’, the Bolsheviks who are Social Democrats, that is, men of centralist and authoritarian action will begin to rearrange the life of the country and of the people by governmental and dictatorial methods, imposed by the centre. Their seat in Petrograd will dictate the will of the party to all Russia, and command the whole nation. Your Soviets and your other local organisations will become little by little, simply executive organs of the will of the central government. In the place of health, constructive work by the labouring masses, in place of free unification from the bottom, we will see the installation of an authoritarian and statist apparatus which would act from above and set about wiping out everything that stood in its way with an iron hand.”

This is indeed what happened. The factory committees were merged with the Bolshevik controlled Trade Union movement. In a decree in March 1918 workers' control was supposed to return to the conception of monitoring and inspection rather than management, *“in nationalised enterprises, worker's control is exercised by submitting all declarations or decisions of the Factory or shop committee.. to the Economic Administrative Council for approval...Not more than half the members of the administrative council should be workers or employees.”* Also in March 1918, Lenin began to campaign in favour of one-man management of industry. 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.

Control of the Economy

So within a few short months of October, the Bolsheviks had taken control of the economy out of the hands of the working class and into the hands of the Bolshevik party. This was before the civil war, at a time when the workers had shown themselves capable of making a revolution but according to the Bolsheviks, incapable of running the economy. The basis of the Bolshevik attack on the factory committees was simple, the Bolsheviks wanted the factories to be owned and managed by the state, whereas the factory committees wanted the factories to be owned and managed by the workers. One Bolshevik described the factory committee's attitude: "*We found a process which recalled the anarchist dreams of autonomous productive communes.*"

Partly they did this to remove the threat of any opposition to Bolshevik rule, but partly, these decisions were a result of the Bolshevik political perspective. These policy decisions were not imposed on them by external objective factors such as the civil war. With or without the civil war their strategic decisions would have been the same, because they arise out of the Leninist conception of what socialism is and what workers control means. Their understanding of what socialism means is very different from the anarchist definition. At the root of this difference is the importance given to the *relations of production*. In other words the importance of the relationship between those who produce the wealth and those who manage its production. In all class societies, the producer is subordinate and separate from those who manage production. The workplace is divided into the boss and the workers. The abolition of the division in society between 'order-givers' and 'order-takers' is integral to the Anarchist idea of socialism, but is unimportant to the Leninist.

The phrase '*workers control of the means of production*' is often used. Unfortunately it represents different things to different tendencies. To the anarchist it means that workers must have complete control over every aspect of production. There must be workplace democracy. They must have the power to make decisions affecting them and their factory, including hours worked, amount of goods manufactured, who to exchange with. As Maurice Brinton, author of *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control* explains:

*"Workers management of production — implying as it does the total domination of the producer over the productive process — is not for us a marginal matter. It is the core of our politics. It is the only means whereby authoritarian (order-giving, order-taking) relations in production can be transcended, and a free, communist or anarchist, society introduced. We also hold that the means of production may change hands (passing for instance from private hands into those of a bureaucracy, collectively owning them) without this revolutionising the relations of production. Under such circumstances — and whatever the formal status of property — the society is still a class society, for production is still managed by an agency other than the producers themselves"*¹

¹ Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*, (1970)

In contrast, the Leninist idea of socialism has more to do with the nationalisation of industry or State Capitalism than the creation of a society in which workers have control over their own labour power.

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.”

By ‘accounting’ Lenin meant the power to oversee the books, to check the implementation of decisions made by others, rather than fundamental decision making.

The Bolsheviks saw only the necessity for creating the objective conditions for socialism. That is, without a certain level of wealth in society, it is impossible to introduce all those things that socialism requires; free healthcare, housing, education and the right to work. Lenin said

“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 monopoly² or also State capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no gaps”³.

The introduction of Taylorism and one man management in the factories in 1918 and 1919 displays a fixation with efficiency and productivity at the expense of workers’ rights. They didn’t see that without control over your own working life, you remain a cog in someone else’s wheel. Workers’ democracy at the point of production is as important as material wellbeing is to the creation of a socialist society.

However, there is yet another problem with the Bolshevik vision of a planned economy. The Bolsheviks thought centralising the economy under state control would bring to an end the chaos of capitalistic economies. Unfortunately they didn’t consider that centralisation without free exchange of information leads to its own disasters. The bureaucratic mistakes of Stalin and Mao are legendary. Under Mao, the sparrows of China were brought to the brink of extinction to prevent them from eating the crops. Unfortunately this led to an explosion in the insect population (previously the sparrows ate the insects so keeping the numbers down) and resultant destruction of the harvest. In Russia huge unusable nuts and bolts were manufactured so quotas could be met. Industrial democracy did not exist. Plans were imposed on the population. It was not possible to question or criticise. Any opposition to the state was counter revolutionary, no matter how stupid or blind the state decisions were. Only with workers democracy can there be free exchange of ideas and information. Planning an economy in ignorance is like playing football blind, difficult if not impossible to do successfully. In short, it was bad politics, perhaps motivated by wishful thinking, that led the Bolsheviks to believe that holding the reins of state power could possibly be a short cut to socialism.

² Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 25 page 358

³ Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 24 page 259

5. Learning the lessons of history

What unites all Leninist traditions (Stalinism, Maoism, Trotskyism) against the anarchists is their defence of the Bolsheviks in the period 1917–1921. It is this Bolshevik blueprint which they seek to recreate. The reasons variously given for the collapse of the revolution are the backwardness of Russia (either industrially or socially), the Civil War and the isolation of Russia. What Leninists argue is that the fault didn't lie with the politics of the Bolsheviks or with the policies they implemented but rather with conditions that were beyond their control. Even those who were critical of the Bolsheviks suppression of democracy, such as Victor Serge and the Workers Opposition group, ultimately defended the Bolsheviks' position. Their argument is that without the measures the Bolsheviks took, the revolution would have fallen to a White reaction and a return to the monarchy.

Our argument is that no matter what the objective factors were or will be, the Bolshevik route always and inevitably leads to the death of the revolution. More than this, defeat by revolutionaries is much worse than defeat by the Whites, for it brings the entire revolutionary project into disrepute. For seventy years socialism could easily be equated with prison camps and dictatorship. The Soviet Union became the threat of a bad example. Socialists found themselves defending the indefensible. Countless revolutions were squandered and lost to Leninism and its heir, Stalinism.

Freedom and utopia

In the following passage Engels outlines how revolution will lead to mankind's freedom;

“Proletarian Revolution — [is the] solution of the contradictions [of capitalism]. The proletariat seizes the public power, and by means of this transforms the socialised means of production, slipping from the hands of the bourgeoisie, into public property. By this act the proletariat frees the means of production from the character of capital they have thus far borne and gives their socialist character complete freedom to work itself out. Socialised production upon a predetermined plan becomes henceforth possible. The development of production makes the existence of different classes in society henceforth an anachronism. In proportion anarchy [chaos] in social production vanishes, the political authority of the state dies out. Man, at last the master of his own form of organisation, becomes at the same time lord over nature, his own master — free.”¹

In power, the Bolsheviks followed this program. They centralised production, removing from it 'the character of capital', yet the existence of different classes did not die out. Bolshevik party officials got better rations, accommodation and privileges. In time they were able to transfer their

¹ Engels, Socialism — Utopian and Scientific, (1880)

privileges to their offspring, acting just as the ruling class in the West. Chaos in social production didn't vanish, chaos in Stalin's time led to famine. The political authority of the state did not die out and the soviet people were not free.

The 'character of capital' is not the only force underpinning the structure in society. Power relations also have a part to play, and contrary to Engel's assumptions, power does not only come from ownership of capital. The members of the central committee may not have owned the deeds to the factories per se but they were in charge.

Freedom isn't just a goal, a noble end to be achieved but rather a necessary part of the process of creating socialism. Anarchists are often accused of being 'utopian'. Beliefs are utopian if subjective ideas are not grounded in objective reality. Anarchists hold that part of the subjective conditions required before socialism can exist is the existence of free exchange of ideas and democracy. To believe that revolution is possible without freedom, to believe those in power can, through their best and genuine intentions, impose socialism from above, as the Bolsheviks did, is indeed utopian. As Sam Faber puts it in Before Stalinism:

*"determinism's characteristic and systemic failure is to understand that what the masses of people do and think politically is as much part of the process determining the outcome of history as are the objective obstacles that most definitely limit peoples' choices"*²

The received wisdom is that there was no alternative open to the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks could have followed a more democratic route, but they chose not to. They were in the minority and their goal was to have absolute power. Their failure to understand that socialism and democracy are part of the same process destroyed the prospect for socialism in the Soviet Union. Next time there are revolutionary upheavals in society, it is to be hoped that the revolutionary potential of the working class will not be so squandered.

Leaving the last word to Alexander Berkman;

*"No revolution has yet tried the true way of liberty. None has had sufficient faith in it. Force and suppression, persecution, revenge, and terror have characterised all revolutions in the past and have thereby defeated their original aims. The time has come to try new methods, new ways. The social revolution is to achieve the emancipation of man through liberty, but if we have no faith in the latter, revolution becomes a denial and betrayal of itself."*³

² Sam Faber, Before Stalinism, pp198

³ Alexander Berkman, ABC of Anarchism, (1929)

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Aileen O'Carroll
Freedom and Revolution
The Bolshevik experience
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