

Explorations in the Russian Revolution

An Anarchist Interpretation By Ron Tabor

Part II – Historical and Political Background, the February Revolution and the Soviets

To properly understand the Russian Revolution, it is useful to know at least a little about the society in which it occurred.
Imperial Russia.

At the turn of the 20th century, Russian society was a sprawling empire covering thousands of square miles and ruling over millions of people and a multitude of subject nationalities, ethnic groups, and religious minorities. Straddling Europe and Asia, the Russian state was a brutal autocracy ruled by an absolute monarch, the Tsar, who governed through a vast bureaucracy, an enormous army, and a huge police apparatus, all of which were staffed by members of a hierarchically organized landed aristocracy. At the time of the revolution, the vast majority of the population consisted of extremely poor peasants who farmed tiny plots of land with primitive tools and were organized in village communes (mir or obshchina). Only recently freed from servile status (serfdom), the peasants were saddled with a heavy burden of



taxes and “redemption payments.” These payments were monies the peasants owed, according to the terms of their “liberation” in 1861, to the Russian state, which had compensated the landlords for the land taken from them and distributed to the peasants. (These landlords, of course, had mercilessly exploited the peasants for centuries.)

Aside from a narrow but increasingly influential stratum of intellectuals, the *intelligentsia*, and a small middle class of which the *intelligentsia* was a part, there was also a small but growing class of capitalists – industrialists, merchants, and bankers – many of foreign origin, who owned the industrial, financial, and commercial enterprises in the still-small but rapidly expanding capitalist economy. Not least was a class, also growing, of workers, most of whom had only recently arrived from the countryside. Ruthlessly exploited – poorly paid, compelled to work long hours, brutalized by their supervisors, and crammed into squalid housing – they were concentrated in a few cities and worked in enterprises ranging from tiny workshops to enormous industrial complexes employing tens of thousands. Because of this concentration, both geographic and economic, the workers had potential leverage far beyond their relatively small numbers. In the face of a rapidly industrializing Europe to the west and a comparably dynamic Japan to the east, the Russian state was attempting to modernize economically while retaining as much of its archaic social and political structure as it could. The result was a society waiting to explode. And explode it did, first in a revolution in 1905, which the autocracy was able to contain and eventually defeat by a combination



of (mostly) false promises of reform and brutal repression, and then, on a much greater scale, in 1917.

Beyond the social strains already mentioned, the immediate cause of the explosion in 1917 was World War I, an inter-imperialist conflict that the Russian Empire entered as part of the Triple Entente (Great Britain, France, and Russia), whose forces were later augmented by those of Italy, Japan, the United States, and other countries. Facing the most advanced military machine in the world, that of Germany, along with the armed forces of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, stood the decrepit Russian army, overwhelmingly manned by millions of poor and illiterate peasant conscripts (and some workers), at the bottom, and an incompetent and corrupt officer corps, at the top. Like all members of the lower classes in the Russian Empire, the rank and file soldiers were abused by their superiors, wretchedly fed, clothed, and housed, and poorly armed; many men were sent into combat without rifles. Often ordered into battles they were almost guaranteed to lose, the soldiers were slaughtered by the millions. (Nobody knows for sure, but estimates are 1.7 million killed, 4.9 million wounded, and 2.5 million POW's or missing, out of 12 million mobilized, for a horrifying casualty ratio of 76.3%) In stark contrast, the officers lived in luxury, well housed, well clothed, well fed, and liberally supplied with carnal pleasures (alcohol and prostitutes).

Meanwhile, the rest of the country, under the strains of mobilizing for the war effort, entered into an increasingly severe economic crisis, characterized by rampant inflation, the breakdown of the transportation system, and shortages of raw materials, spare parts,



heating fuel, and food. The economy ground virtually to a halt, and the lower classes, particularly in the urban areas, faced starvation. Beginning in July and escalating through December 1916, workers in the cities went out on

strike, while at the front, soldiers deserted by the thousands. The weak-willed Tsar, Nicholas II, manipulated by his wife, Alexandra, who was, in turn, mesmerized by her spiritual consort, the corrupt *starets* (holy man) Gregory Rasputin,

was incapable of addressing the mounting crisis or even of admitting that it existed. Even long-time supporters of the regime, including members of the royal family, began to conspire to oust the Tsar in order to sustain the war effort and save the country from an impending revolution. After two and a half years of slaughter at the front, political paralysis at the top, economic collapse, and threats of a palace coup, the people revolted.

Outline of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution, which began in mid-February (according to the old-style Julian calendar then in use in Russia, which was 13 days behind the western, Gregorian, calendar), went through a number of discrete stages: (1) the February Revolution, a spontaneous mass uprising in which the Tsar was overthrown and a provisional government established; (2) an interregnum characterized by "dual power," under which de facto sovereignty was shared by the official Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet (workers and soldiers council) and parallel arrangements around the country; (3) the October Revolution, in which the Bolshevik Party, riding a wave of peasant insurrections,



seized control of the state; (4) another interregnum during which the Bolsheviks began the process of consolidating their rule; (5) the first phase of a civil war, beginning in July 1918, during which the Bolshevik regime launched an all-out offensive against the peasantry, built the "Red" Army, and battled an array of military forces that included "White" counterrevolutionaries, imperialist invaders, and "Green" and "Black" (anarchist) peasant guerrillas; (6) the conclusion of the civil war, from March

through August 1921, during which the Bolsheviks completed the suppression of opposition political organizations and crushed all resistance on the part of the workers, soldiers, sailors to the consolidation of the Bolshevik/Communist dictatorship.

The February Revolution

The February Revolution was the culmination of a wave of strikes that began in July 1916 and increased in intensity through the end of the year and into 1917. On January 9, 142,000 workers struck to commemorate the 12th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday," (January 9, 1905, when the Tsar's troops fired on peacefully demonstrating workers led by the priest [and police agent] Father Gapon, killing over 100 people and wounding hundreds more; the massacre set off the revolution of that year). On February 14, 84,000 workers went out on strike, summoned by the Mensheviks (the moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party [RSDLP] - see below), to honor the convocation of the Duma, the country's largely advisory legislature. Four days later, after being locked out by management for demanding higher wages, the workers at the giant



(30,000 employees) Putilov Metal Workers called on workers in other factories to strike in sympathy. By February 22, 100,000 workers were out on strike. The movement took a giant step forward when, on February 23, International Women's Day, women workers, many employed in the city's textiles factories, struck and went into the streets, demanding bread and carrying banners: "Down with the Autocracy"; "Down with the War." The demonstrations mounted in size and built in intensity over several days. By February 25, 250,000 workers were out and virtually all of the city's factories were shut down. After a unit of Tsarist troops, called out to suppress the incipient insurrection, fired on the crowd, killing and wounding a number of people, the demonstrations erupted into riots, assaults on

policemen, police stations, and the courts. Demonstrators invaded the city's arsenal, seized weapons, and distributed them to their comrades. Eventually, in response to direct entreaties, particularly from the women, individual soldiers and eventually entire units mutinied, refusing to fire on the people and, instead, arresting and even shooting their officers.

As the movement in the streets built toward its climax, liberal and moderate socialist members of the Duma, which the Tsar had suspended ("prorogued"), moved to assume leadership of the revolt. On February 27, they set up a Temporary Committee of the Duma and a Military Commission, which managed to establish their authority over the rebelling soldiers. On the same day, leading Mensheviks called for a meeting that evening to organize a soviet of workers' deputies. At that gathering, a provisional executive



committee was chosen and calls for the election of delegates from the factories and the barracks went out. On the following day, a plenary session of the soviet (soon to be called the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies) was convened at the Tauride Palace (the site of meetings of the Duma Committee and the Military Commission), where, among other things, they selected a permanent executive committee.

The leaders of the soviet worked closely with the members of the Duma Committee and its Military Commission to establish and consolidate their power. Preventing the Tsar from reaching the capital by re-routing his train, they forced Nicholas to abdicate on March 3, convinced his brother, Grand Duke Michael, to refuse the throne, thus essentially abolishing the monarchy, and established a provisional government under the leadership of

Prince George Lvov. The government was provisional (that is, temporary) in that it was charged with organizing elections to, and the eventual convocation of, a constituent assembly, which would write a constitution for the country, call elections, and establish an official government.

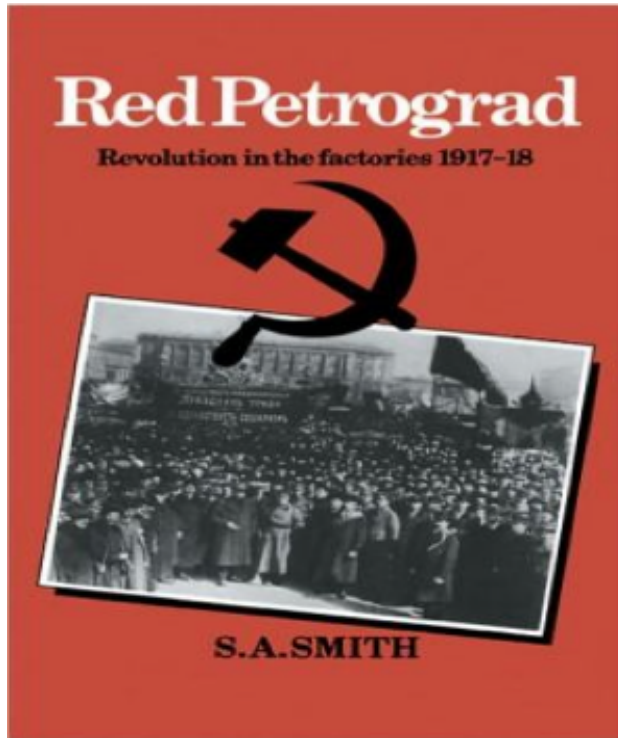
Following the lead of the capital, similar uprisings occurred in other cities, in military installations (most notably, the Kronstadt naval fortress located 20 miles west of Petrograd on an island at the mouth of the Neva River), and eventually even in small towns, throughout the country, during which workers, soldiers, and peasants established soviets and other democratic organizations, such as committees of soldiers in the barracks and at the front. Eventually, the soviets regularized their structure and procedures: workers in the factories, sailors on their ships and in their naval



bases, soldiers in the barracks, and peasants in the villages, elected delegates according to defined ratios, such delegates being subject to immediate recall by those who elected them. In turn, the soviets chose smaller executive committees, which selected even smaller bodies ("permanent bureaus") to manage their day-to-day affairs.

In addition to forming soviets, which were organized on a regional basis, the mobilized people formed other types of popular organizations. These included factory committees, through which workers in the factories watched over, in what they called *kontrol*, the foremen and other supervisory staff of the factory, but did not, at least initially, attempt to direct production. Cooperatives of many kinds were also formed, both among producers (often artisans and those operating small workshops) and among consumers. Throughout this process, large numbers of women began, for the first time, to participate in the political life of the country. On the periphery of the empire, members of oppressed nationalities declared and began to exercise their rights to speak, write, publish, and be educated in their own

languages; they also demanded autonomy and in some cases outright independence. In the same vein, persecuted religious minorities, among them Catholics, Lutherans, Old Believers, Muslims, and Jews, asserted their rights to worship as they pleased.

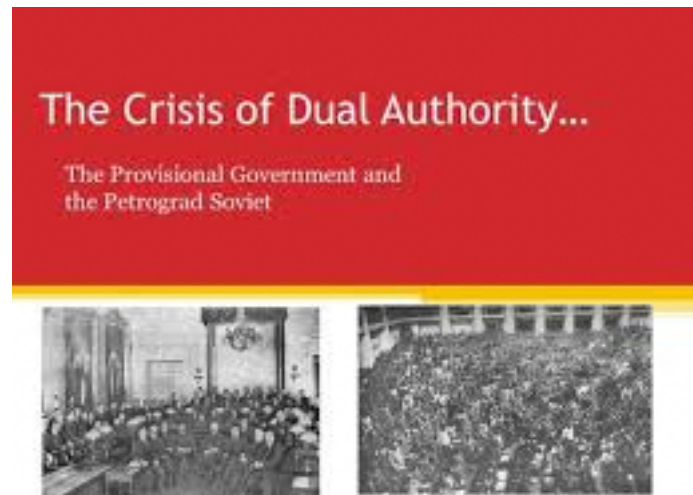


In the aftermath of the February Revolution, Russia, from having been one of the most oppressive societies in the world, became one of the freest, especially considering the wartime restrictions of even the most democratic of the western capitalist countries. Workers, soldiers, peasants, intellectuals and other members of the middle class, and all political organizations, had full rights to read what they wished, to speak their minds, to publish their thoughts, and to organize.

“Dual Power”

The nature of the revolution (particularly, the fact that the army had “gone over to the people” and the establishment of the soviets) led to a unique situation in Petrograd and throughout the country. While a provisional government had been established, it had limited power. Virtually all authority, as far as the masses of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants were concerned, rested with the soviets, particularly the Petrograd Soviet, to which the rest of the country looked for leadership. Most important, the Provisional Government did not have full control over the army. According to Order No. 1, promulgated by the soviet on March 1 at the behest of the

soldiers, the government was required to have its military directives countersigned by the executive committee of the soviet. Also, under the order, soldiers were urged to form committees in the barracks that would have control over their weapons and to elect delegates to the soviet. They were no longer required to salute officers when off duty, while officers were required to use the polite (rather than the familiar) form of address when speaking to them.



Not least, the Provisional Government was prohibited from disciplining the troops of the Petrograd garrison by sending them to the front. (The soldiers insisted on Order No. 1 because they feared retribution from the Provisional Government - and even more important, from their own officers - because of their "mutinous" actions during the uprising. The Provisional Government agreed to the order because it believed it was necessary to regain and maintain control over the troops, and simultaneously, to broaden their base of support.)

Although the soviets, particularly the Petrograd Soviet, had de facto power, they did not exercise it. This was because the leadership of the soviets was dominated by members of the largest of the socialist political parties, which, once the Tsar had been overthrown and the monarchy abolished, opposed the further development of the revolution. These were the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries

The Mensheviks represented the moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, founded in 1898, and since 1903, divided into two factions, which in 1912 had become two distinct parties. Committed to the mechanical and reformist Marxism of the Second International, the

Mensheviks believed that Russia, which they considered to have only recently emerged from "feudalism," had to undergo a long period of capitalist development before the socialist revolution was to be "on the agenda." During this epoch, the industrial working class or proletariat would grow to become the



majority of the population, while the peasants, whom the Mensheviks feared and viewed as instinctively counterrevolutionary, would be eliminated and replaced by capitalist farmers. As a result, the Mensheviks helped to establish, supported, and, increasingly over time, took positions in the Provisional Government, while attempting to prevent the further radicalization of the revolution. They also wished to continue the war effort, despite the slaughter at the front. Thus, while the Mensheviks saw themselves as socialists, they effectively acted as pro-capitalist liberals.

The Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR's), formed in 1903, were descendants of the Russian Populists of the late 19th century. The SR's, fervent believers in the unique historic role of Russia, believed that the country would follow its own, special path to socialism, different from that of Western Europe. This view was based on the fact that the Russian peasants, whom the SR's romanticized, were organized in the village communes. These were essentially councils of the male residents of the villages who met periodically to discuss and make decisions about village affairs, including and most importantly, the periodic assignment of land allotments to each family living in the village. While the SR's were not theoretically bound to a mechanical two-stage conception of the revolution (capitalism now, socialism later), their fervent Russian patriotism and their commitment to the Entente powers, particularly France (as the land of the French Revolution), led the majority of them to pursue essentially the same reformist strategy as the Mensheviks and to favor continuing the war.

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The Bolshevik Party

The dominant organized force in opposition to the Provisional Government was the Bolshevik Party, once the left-wing faction of the RSDLP, and since 1912, a distinct party. More than the Mensheviks and the SR's, the Bolsheviks were largely the creation of one man, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, aka Lenin. While the Bolsheviks were broadly committed to the same Marxian Social Democratic conception of socialism as the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks differed from the Mensheviks in several important respects.

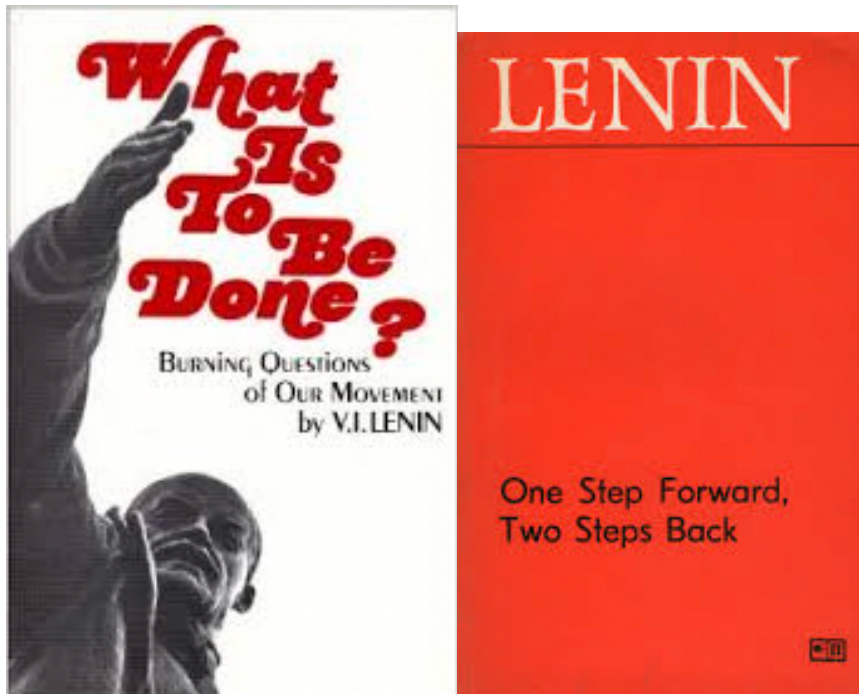
The first of these was organizational. The Mensheviks, looking to the Social Democratic parties of Western Europe, particularly Germany, as models, sought to create a mass working class political party, which would, once Russia had achieved capitalist democracy via the "bourgeois democratic revolution," elect candidates to parliament and constitute the leadership of trade unions that would eventually, they thought, embrace millions of workers. At some point, far in the future, they hoped to lead the workers to power, as peacefully as possible. Even under the repressive conditions of the Tsarist autocracy, the Mensheviks advocated and built their organization as a miniature version of the



mass social democratic party they envisioned: membership was relatively loosely defined and the party would be open to a variety of internal political tendencies, as long as they were in agreement with the general outlines of the Social Democratic program.

In contrast, the Bolsheviks looked to the “underground” conspiratorial organizations of the left wing of the Russian Populists, those who had carried out terrorist attacks on the Tsar and other officials of the autocracy, as an organizational model. As elaborated in Lenin’s books, *What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, party membership was defined narrowly, specifically, as open only to those willing to participate in the party’s illegal conspiratorial apparatus and to follow the directives of the party’s

leadership. The other side of this was an extreme centralization. Although the party’s leaders were to be democratically elected at, and party policy democratically determined by, periodic party congresses, in between such congresses, the party membership was to be subject to what was essentially the dictatorial control of the central committee. Party members, in other words, were conceived of as being “professional revolutionaries” who willingly subjected themselves to “iron discipline.” While this model (which came to be known as “democratic centralism”) was at first justified as necessary because of the repressive nature of the Tsarist state,



it eventually became, somewhat modified, a defining characteristic of Bolshevism, that is, the Bolshevik faction, the Bolshevik (later, Communist) Party, and, after 1919, the international Communist movement.

A second difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks was their respective attitudes towards the peasantry. This difference was primarily a question of strategy and tactics, not of theory and fundamental program. In terms of theory, both factions/parties shared the deep distrust of and hostility to the peasants that is virtually a defining characteristic of Marxism. This flowed, in part, from the Marxian conception of socialism as the collective (nation-wide) ownership of the means of production, including and especially the land, and the belief that socialism could only be established through a highly centralized state, which they called the "dictatorship of the proletariat." To all Marxists, the road to socialism, as described in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, lies through the "centralization of the means of production in the hands of the state." Marxists also believed that

the peasants would always be fervently attached to their individual plots of land, the soil they and their ancestors had farmed for centuries, and would use all their power to resist its seizure by the state, any state, even a "socialist" one. At best, Marxists felt that the peasants could be convinced of the benefits of collective and mechanized production only through a decades-long educational process. Finally, it flowed from the Marxian conviction that the logic of capitalist development would eventually lead to the destruction of the peasantry altogether, that is, the elimination of

peasant farming and its replacement by a much more efficient large-scale industrial



agriculture employing wage labor. Putting this all together, for Marxists, once capitalism was established, the peasants would inevitably constitute an economically and socially retrograde and a politically reactionary force.

However, where the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks disagreed was over what attitude to take toward the peasantry in the immediate struggle to overthrow Tsarism. For their part, the Mensheviks were so fearful of the peasants (whom they saw as illiterate, bigoted, and violent savages consumed with a blind hatred of all landowners and intellectuals) that they sought to ally with the capitalist class (the "bourgeoisie") and the liberal politicians who represented it in the political sphere. In the Mensheviks' view, then, the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia was to be led by the capitalists and supported by the working class (as led by the Menshevik Party), with the peasants playing as little role as possible (in fact, to be kept under control by the landowners and the state until the "agrarian question" would be "resolved" as legally and as peacefully as possible).

In contrast, the Bolsheviks looked to the peasants as potential allies (temporary and unreliable allies, to be sure) in the struggle to overthrow Tsarism. They recognized that a mass, elemental uprising (similar to the rebellions that had convulsed Tsarist Russia every 50-to-100 years for centuries), in which the peasants would seize the landowners' land, burn their estates, and repudiate the "redemption payments," would destroy one of the main social props of the Tsarist system and clear the way for the further development



of the revolution. As the other side of this, the Bolsheviks believed that the capitalist class was too small, too weak, and too tied up with and dependent on the autocracy to be a reliable ally in the fight to overthrow the Tsarist system. Thus, while both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks (until late-April 1917) saw the Russian Revolution as a "bourgeois-democratic" one, their precise conceptions of that revolution differed profoundly.


A third area of difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks was in their attitude toward state power. Consistent with their formalistic conception of Marxism, the Mensheviks believed that the bourgeois revolution in Russia meant, by definition, that the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, would seize state power and establish a "bourgeois-democratic" government. Meanwhile, the working class, under the (presumed) leadership of the Mensheviks, would serve as a prop to capitalist rule, defending the resulting "revolutionary" government against the forces of the counter-revolution while working to ensure that the regime would be as democratic and as "progressive" as possible. This explains why the Mensheviks helped establish the Provisional Government and launched the soviet in February 1917, and it foretells the political role the party played in the months that followed.

As opposed to the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks saw as their main strategic aim the seizure of state power by themselves, albeit in an alliance, which they believed would be temporary, with a party representing the interests of the peasants. The result would be what Lenin called the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the



proletariat and the peasantry." Thus, even though, according to their own theoretical conception, the Russian Revolution was to be a "bourgeois-democratic" one, the Bolsheviks sought political power for their own, presumably, proletarian, party. Or, at least this is how Lenin saw the revolution. Whether the rest of the Bolsheviks fully understood this is not clear. This position, most extensively outlined in Lenin's book, *"Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution"*, written and published in 1905, remained the fundamental strategic conception of the Bolshevik Party until late April 1917.

There are several things that are crucial to understand about this outlook: (1) As mentioned, even though the Bolsheviks considered the Russian revolution to be "bourgeois democratic," the strategic goal of the party during this revolution was the seizure of state power by *their* party, a party that, in their eyes, represented the proletariat, in an alliance with a party that represented the peasants; (2) the precise relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the presumed peasant party was not clearly sketched out, although it is reasonable to assume that, consistent with Marxist theory, the Bolsheviks believed that they, as representatives of the proletariat, in their eyes the only consistently revolutionary class, would play the leading role in the alliance; (3) what would happen after the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship" was established and the "bourgeois democratic tasks" of the revolution, particularly the overthrow of the autocracy and the resolution of the land question, were carried out, was left open, at least posing the possibility that, under certain circumstances, such as the outbreak of revolution in Europe, the revolution might go beyond the "bourgeois democratic" stage and enter into the "socialist" stage;



V.I.Lenin
Two Tactics of Social-
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(4) nowhere in *Two Tactics* (or anywhere else in Lenin's voluminous writings, as far as I am aware) is there any discussion of how the two parties which claim to represent the interests of the workers and the peasants, respectively, would be controlled by or held accountable to the masses of people who constituted those classes. In Lenin's view, popular social classes, such as the proletariat and the peasantry, are simply "represented" by political parties, who supposedly promote their interests, but do not in any way control those organizations. Thus, in this conception, the Bolshevik Party represents the proletariat simply because it claims, on the basis of its Marxist program, to do so.

An additional point needs to be made here. To Lenin, the question of power was not only a political one (e.g., which party represents which class, what is the precise relationship between those parties) but also an organizational one. Lenin, both as a man and as a politician, was first and foremost interested in power, and to him, a fundamental aspect, if not *the* fundamental aspect, of power, as a relationship between leaders and led, party and class, was organizational, specifically, the existence of a political apparatus to facilitate and ultimately secure that leadership/power. As an integral part of this, Lenin was a centralist; he generally wanted the apparatus (or apparatuses) he organized and led to be as centralized as possible, and he worked tirelessly to achieve this. The importance of centralized organizational control to Lenin's politics and methods is readily apparent from the time of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, which resulted in the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, to the Bolsheviks' seizure of state power in October 1917, and throughout the rest of his career. In the factional struggle within the RSDLP, for example, Lenin always strove to seize direct control of as much of the party apparatus and



resources—editorial boards of publications, central and local committees, armed squads, monies, personnel, etc.—as possible. And he pursued the same course when he seized control of the Russian state.

This emphasis on centralized organizational control flowed directly from key tenets (some explicit, some implicit) of Lenin's theoretical outlook (to paraphrase what I wrote in the first article in this series):

1. There is one, and only one, Truth.
2. That Truth is theoretically discernible.
3. Marxism is the (scientifically-demonstrated) theoretical embodiment of that Truth.
4. Those who interpret Marxism correctly have a privileged access to that Truth.
5. Marxism represents the true and historically appropriate consciousness of the working class, or proletariat, which is historically destined to lead humanity to its liberation through the world-wide socialist revolution.
6. The political and organizational embodiment of this "revolutionary proletarian consciousness" is a "vanguard" party, a centralized and hierarchical apparatus made up of "hardened" professional revolutionaries bound together by "iron discipline" under the leadership of theoretically-trained revolutionary Marxists.
7. Such an apparatus is the only guarantee that the pressures of daily life and struggle under Tsarism and capitalist conditions of production generally would not lead the majority of the workers to succumb to "false," that is, trade union or reformist, consciousness.
8. The only organization (faction or party) fitting that description in Russia is the Bolshevik faction/party, conceived, created, and led by Lenin himself.

9. He (Lenin) is the only person capable of devising the correct Marxist program, strategy, tactics, and organizational methods to

lead the revolutionary struggle in Russia (and, after 1914, the world).

(Points 1 – 5 have their roots in the Marxism of Marx and Engels. Points 6 – 9 are Lenin’s contributions.)

To sum this up, throughout his political life, and certainly from the time of the publication of *What Is To Be Done?* in 1902, Lenin evinced and articulated profound distrust of the spontaneous actions and thinking of the mass of workers. In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin explicitly argues that the workers, left to their own devices, are capable of raising themselves only to the level of trade union (that is, reformist) consciousness, and that revolutionary consciousness (meaning, Marxism, specifically, *his* version of Marxism) had to be brought to the working class “from the outside.” Thus, the revolutionary party, organized along Bolshevik lines and led by theoretically-armed Marxists, was the essential element in guaranteeing the construction of a truly revolutionary working class movement, carrying out a successful proletarian revolution, and thereby liberating humanity.

The Bolsheviks from the February Revolution to the Party’s April Conference

When Lenin returned to Russia on April 3, 1917, after 10 years of exile in Western Europe, the Bolshevik Party was following a conciliatory policy, essentially one of “critical support,” toward the Provisional Government. This was the doing of senior party leaders



Kamenev, Stalin, and Muranov, who, when they had arrived in Petrograd from exile some time earlier, had deposed less senior cadres, Molotov, Shliapnikov, and Zalutsky, who had been articulating a more militant line. However, Lenin shocked all those who heard him speak, both at the Finland railroad station, where he had arrived, and at various meetings at other locales over the next few days. To paraphrase parts of his famous "April Theses," written at the time, Lenin denounced the Provisional Government as "bourgeois" and urged no support for it; he condemned the war as "predatory" and "imperialist," and called for "revolutionary defeatism" rather than the "revolutionary defensism" being pursued

by the SR's and Mensheviks; he asserted that Russia was "passing from the first stage of the revolution, which, due to the insufficient class consciousness and organization of the proletariat, had placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, to the second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry"; and he called for a "republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Laborers', and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom."

In short, Lenin proposed to point the Bolsheviks in the direction of using the soviets as a springboard for the seizure of state power by the party, as the (supposed) leader of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasantry, and of utilizing the soviets as the institutional basis of his proposed state. He also called for the



nationalization of the land, whose local use would be put at the disposal of local soviets of peasants' and agricultural laborers' deputies, and for the unification of the banks under the control of the soviets of workers' deputies.

He wrote, "It is not our immediate task to 'introduce' socialism but only to bring social production and distribution at once under the control of the soviets of workers' deputies."

At a Bolshevik Party gathering, "The 7th All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP (B)," (the "April Conference"), held on April 24-29, Lenin, facing considerable initial opposition, managed to win over the party to his daring revolutionary policy. In effect, Lenin was proposing that the Bolshevik Party seize state power as the first step in a world-wide socialist revolution. He also stressed that, at least for the present, it was the job of the Bolsheviks, not to advocate the immediate overthrow of the Provisional Government, but to "patiently explain" to the masses of people the necessity of pursuing the course he proposed, with the goal of winning a majority in the soviets. Appropriately, the Bolsheviks' main agitational slogans during this period were: "Peace, Land, and Bread" and "All Power to the Soviets."

While this policy may be seen, as it was at the time, as a radical break with the Bolsheviks' past positions (and with the orthodox Marxism of the Second International), there was at least one crucial continuity. What remained central was Lenin's insistence that the Bolsheviks' strategic goal during the Russian Revolution was the seizure of state power by their party.



The Ambiguity of the Soviets

A certain mythology or mystique has grown up around the soviets since the Russian Revolution. This mystique has been promoted particularly by Trotskyists, who have been anxious to establish the democratic credentials of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in supposed contrast to the bureaucratic and dictatorial tendencies of Stalin and the later Communist Party. According to

this view, the soviets were spontaneous creations of the working class, forms of "self-organization" that were uniquely suited to provide an institutional basis for the self-emancipation and self-rule of the proletariat. The reality, however, is more complicated.

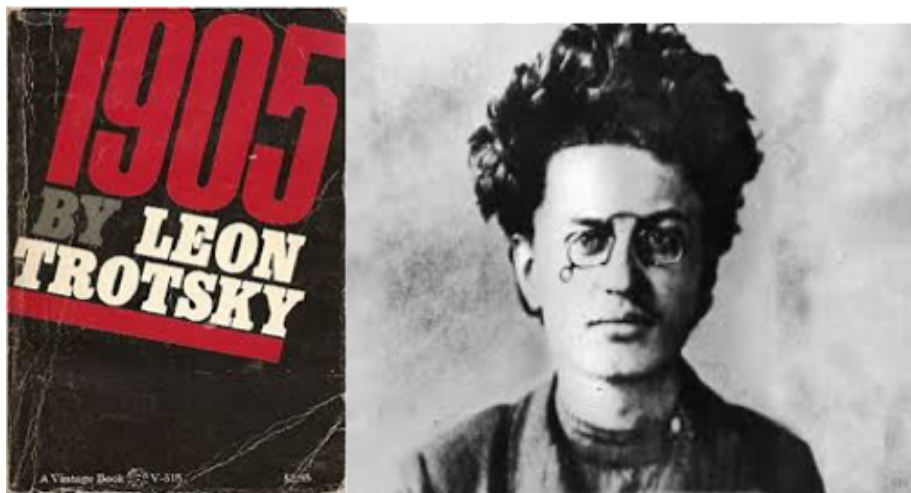
In the first place, the soviets did not always arise out of the spontaneous actions of rank and file workers. In his book, *The Unknown Revolution*, the anarchist Voline (Eichenbaum) insists that the idea of a soviet, as a committee to organize and lead strikes, first arose in meetings between him and politically-minded workers in his apartment in St. Petersburg (the capital's name until the outbreak of World War I) in January 1905 and that one was actually established and functioned for a time until it was later broken up by the Tsarist police. According to bourgeois historians, the first soviet on record was formed in Ivanovo-Voznosensk in May of 1905 during a general strike of textile workers, when the strike committee changed its name to *soviet* and began to take on broader, more political, functions. However, the soviet that was to achieve the most notoriety during the 1905 revolution, the one formed in



October also in St. Petersburg, was explicitly organized by a coalition of Mensheviks, SR's, and liberals, with the idea of directing the general strike that was then in progress. Consistent with this, the soviet's first chairman, the lawyer, Georgy Khrustalev-Nosar, was affiliated with the Mensheviks. The man who replaced him after he was arrested was Leon Trotsky (then going under the name Yanovsky), who was also affiliated with the Mensheviks at the time. (He was shortly to assume a position independent of both factions.)

We have also seen that during the February Revolution in 1917, the Petrograd soviet was called into existence by leaders of the Mensheviks with the purpose of simultaneously mobilizing the workers behind the Provisional Government while increasing the Mensheviks' and SR's' leverage over that government. Elsewhere, such as at the naval base at Kronstadt, revolutionary committees composed of militants from the various socialist organizations organized elections and convened the soviets, and I suspect that this was the case throughout the country.

In the second place, from an anarchist and libertarian socialist point of view, the soviets were by no means ideal. Specifically, they were hierarchical organizations. It is certainly true that they were nowhere nearly as hierarchical as were the organs of the Tsarist state or even the organizational structures of the socialist parties, but they were not models of libertarian organization either. They generally consisted of three layers. At the bottom were the delegates elected by the rank and file workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants, along with huge numbers of observers who came and



went, observing and participating in the proceedings for varying periods of time. Above them were members of the soviets' executive committees, who were usually not elected at all but were chosen by the various socialist parties and groups to represent them (according to an agreed-upon quota) on the committees. Moreover, these EC's often comprised large numbers of people, at times, as many as 100. As a result, the EC's selected still smaller committees ("permanent bureaus"), often comprising a mere handful of individuals, which carried on the day-to-day work of the soviets. For their part, the sessions of the soviets have been

described by various observers as virtually permanent and extremely chaotic mass meetings, essentially rallies attended by large numbers (as many as

several thousand) of workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants who flowed in and out over time, during which they were harangued by, and applauded or jeered at, orators representing the various socialist organizations, and voted on, by voice vote or by a show of hands, various motions and resolutions put to them. The meetings of the soviet were not, in other words, sessions of calm, carefully deliberating bodies operating according to democratic rules of procedure.

Beyond this, there was usually a vast economic, social, and cultural gap between the rank and file delegates and observers, on the one hand, and the soviet leaders, on the other. As I've already mentioned, the overwhelming majority of the peasants and the soldiers (who were mostly peasants in uniform) were illiterate. And, while a minority of the workers, usually those who were skilled and who had lived for some time in the cities, were literate, the



majority, more recent arrivals from the countryside, were not. Meanwhile, at the top, the members of the executive committees and the bureaus were overwhelmingly members of the *intelligentsia*—lawyers, journalists, university professors, engineers, physicians, functionaries of the socialist parties—whose origins were in a variety social strata but who were all characterized by the fact that they had been well educated in the Russian language (and in many cases, several European languages) and worked with their minds, not with their hands. To make matters worse, workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors, on the one hand, and *intelligenty*, on the other, were starkly differentiated in terms of dress, mannerisms, and speech.

The soviets, in other words, were ambiguous social phenomena. While they might, under certain conditions, become vehicles for the self-emancipation

of the masses of people and instruments of democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian self-rule, they might, under other circumstances, become instruments of the continued domination of the lower classes by an elite. To put this somewhat differently, the soviets, taken together, constituted an enormous political and organizational apparatus that might lend itself to the liberation of the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants via the elimination of social classes (the division between rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited), but might also become the vehicle of a new form of political, social, and economic domination.



It is my contention that when Lenin thought of and proposed the soviets as the basis for a "state of the workers and poor peasants", a "dictatorship of the revolutionary democracy," under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, he was thinking of them, not as politically deliberating, policy-proposing, and decision-making bodies, but instead as a nation-wide (and centralized) organizational structure, as, in fact, an alternative state bureaucracy (leaner, cheaper, and more efficient than the Tsarist bureaucracy), an administrative apparatus that would be staffed by workers and poor peasants, as opposed to Tsarist bureaucrats, and therefore less tied to the old order. To put this somewhat differently, when Lenin discusses the soviets, he never conceives of them as arenas in which the mass of workers, soldiers and sailors, and peasants discuss political ideas and propose, debate, and decide on the policy recommendations offered by different political currents, tendencies, and organizations. Instead, he always speaks

of them in administrative terms. In short, in Lenin's conception, the soviets are not politically deliberative bodies. The determination of policy is reserved for the party, the embodiment of the revolutionary proletarian consciousness of the workers. This is clear in *The State and Revolution* (which many readers, including some anarchists, naively interpret as a libertarian document), where Lenin describes as the key task of the soviets the "strictest accounting and control," ostensibly, of pro-Tsarist and/or pro-



capitalist elements of the population, including peasants and ideologically "backward" workers. But it does not take a particularly libertarian imagination to see that, to Lenin, a man who was, during his entire life, keenly focused on (and obsessed with) the seizure, retention, and exercise of state power and the use of centralized and hierarchical organizational means to secure that, the soviet apparatus is meant to serve as the vehicle for the "strictest" regimentation of the workers and peasants, and all other members of society.

This is confirmed by Lenin's writings of the time, among them, "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It," published at the end of September 1917, in which he makes specific proposals about how to address the deepening economic crisis engulfing the country. Virtually all of the measures he advocates involve the forcible centralization of the economy under the control of the state, among them: the compulsory nationalization of the banks; the compulsory organization of all industrial enterprises above a small size into a single syndicate; the compulsory unionization of the population; the compulsory organization of the population into consumers' societies; and, not least, the introduction of labor conscription, all of this,

supposedly, under the control of the workers and the poor majority of peasants.

In sum, I would argue, in Lenin's conception, the soviets were to act as the extension of the apparatus—hierarchical, centralized, and based on "iron discipline"—of the Bolshevik Party, in order to establish the Bolsheviks' direct organizational control over the entire economy and the entire population of Russia. Not surprisingly, after the Bolsheviks came to power, this is what they became.

In addition to the Mensheviks, SR's, and Bolsheviks, there were other left-wing tendencies active in the Russian Revolution. These included: Left SR's, who, beginning in late June-early July, formed a faction within the SR's and emerged as a distinct party at the time of the October Revolution; SR-Maximalists; and a variety of anarchist tendencies, organizations, and collectives. While they did not figure as prominent forces in the Petrograd soviet, they often played crucial roles on the ground, among the workers, sailors, soldiers, and peasants, and in key locales, such as at the Kronstadt naval fortress and in the Ukraine. These groups will figure in future articles in this series.