Explorations in the Russian Revolution

By Ron Tabor

Part V – The Bolsheviks, Victor Serge, and the Myth of the Commune-State

A. Introduction

There is a view held among some sections of the left that when the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia on October 25, 1917, they established and attempted to maintain a "commune-state." The term "commune-state" is a reference to the quasi-state structure the plebian rebels of Paris set up when, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, they seized control of the city and held it from March 18 to May 28, 1871.

As I discussed in the previous article, the Paris Commune was the occasion for a major revision of Marx's and Engels' conception of the state the workers were to establish in the aftermath of a proletarian

revolution, what they called the "dictatorship of the proletariat." For 23 years, they had insisted to their followers, to other socialists, and, in effect, to the entire working class that the chief strategic goals of the workers in the socialist revolution were: (1) to seize control of the existing (capitalist) state; and (2) to centralize the means of production in the hands of that state. This position was the chief bone of contention between Marx and Engels, on the one hand, and anarchist theorists, such as Proudhon and Bakunin, on the other. (The anarchists warned that Marx's and Engels' strategy would result in the establishment of an authoritarian society, what they called "state socialism.") In the wake of the Paris Commune, however, Marx and Engels revised their views. They declared that instead of seizing control of the existing state, the workers had to smash it, particularly its bureaucratic and military apparatuses. In its place, they had to build a new (semi-) state that would be modeled on the Paris Commune. Such a state, which would immediately begin to "wither away," would no longer be a state "in the proper sense of the term."

This was the conception on which Lenin claimed to base the state the Bolsheviks would establish in Russia in the event of their seizure of power. He raised the idea, and the term "commune-state", in his "April Theses," presented to the Bolshevik Party shortly after his return to Russia on April 3, 1917, and significantly elaborated it in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, written in the summer of 1917 (but not published until early 1918). In the context of Russia in 1917, Lenin's proposal meant basing the revolutionary state on the mass democratic

organizations, such as the soviets, factory committees, and raion (local district) committees, which had emerged in the aftermath of the February Revolution. These organizations, taken together, were referred to at the time as the "revolutionary democracy." It has been argued, and believed by some groups on the left, that the Bolsheviks intended to, and did, maintain these organizations in their revolutionary-democratic form after they seized power on October 25, 1917; or, to put this differently, that the Bolsheviks planned to utilize these organizations as the institutional framework within which they would facilitate an on-going discussion among the workers and poor peasants over the policies, strategy, and tactics of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia.

This claim is a myth, a fantasy that completely obscures: (1) the kind of state Lenin and his allies in the Bolshevik Party intended to establish in the event of their seizure of state power in Russia; and (2) the nature of the regime the Bolsheviks actually established when they did take power.

B. Victor Serge

One of the first promoters of this myth was the revolutionary and writer, Victor Serge. (I say "revolutionary and writer," as opposed to "revolutionary writer," because Serge was as much a revolutionary as he was a writer.) Because of his role in the promotion of the idea that the early Bolshevik regime was a "commune-state" and his overall effort

to justify the Bolshevik strategy in libertarian terms, it is worth looking at some length at Serge's life and political views. To this day, the fact that Victor Serge, an erstwhile anarchist, joined the Bolshevik Party and defended the early Bolshevik regime, is still used by apologists of that regime, and of Leninism and Trotskyism generally, to justify their position.

Serge was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich to left-wing Russian exiles in Brussels in 1890. On his own at the age of 15, Serge was active in the youth group of the Belgian Workers Party, but soon became discontented with the party's reformist and pro-imperialist politics and got involved in the anarchist movement. After moving to Paris, he associated with a group of "individualist" anarchists, the "Bonnot Gang," who engaged in robbing banks as their chosen form of political activity. Although Serge's participation seems mostly or even entirely to have been writing propaganda for them under the pseudonym of Le Retif ("The Ungovernable" or "The Rebel"), he was arrested when they were. Refusing to testify against them, he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to five years in solitary confinement in 1912. Released in 1917, Serge went to Spain, where he participated in preparations for (an ultimately abortive) anarcho-syndicalist uprising in Barcelona. Determined to get to Russia after the February Revolution, he left Spain but was interned for 15 months in France. Eventually, Serge made it to Russia in January 1919, in the midst of the Civil War, and soon joined the Communist Party. After the founding of the Comintern (the "Communist" or "Third International") in March 1919, Serge worked for that organization, primarily as an editor and translator, under the leadership of Gregory Zinoviev.

At this time, Serge chose as one of his main tasks attempting to convince anarchists in Russia and abroad to support and, if possible, participate in the Bolshevik project, up to and including joining the Communist Party. To this end, he wrote three pamphlets that were published by the libertarian press in France. (In 1997, they were translated into English and compiled into a single volume under the title, *Revolution in Danger, Writings from Russia*, *1919-1921*, by Ian Birchall [Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2011]). During the uprising of the sailors and workers at the Kronstadt naval fortress at the mouth of the Neva River just west of Petrograd in March 1921, Serge, along with Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman (both recently deported from the United States because of their anti-war activities), and other anarchists, offered to negotiate between the rebels and the Bolsheviks. But since the Kronstadters' main demand was for free elections to the soviets, which would have required granting full rights to the political parties the Bolsheviks had suppressed during the Civil War and would most likely have led to the Bolsheviks' ouster, there was no basis for compromise.

Determined to defend their hold on state power, the Bolsheviks crushed the uprising, mercilessly slaughtering the Kronstadters, and continued to execute them, in batches, in the weeks and months after the revolt. Despite his sympathies for the rebels, Serge took the side of the Bolsheviks. Overall, while Serge supported the regime, he was critical of the bureaucratic and repressive policies of the Bolshevik state and attempted to intervene on behalf of anarchists, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and other dissidents whom the Bolsheviks had imprisoned.

Demoralized by the evolution of the Bolshevik government, Serge in 1922 requested to be sent to Germany, where he worked as an agent of the Comintern. He also wrote periodic reports on the tumultuous events in that country (since published as *Witness to the German Revolution*), where he remained until November 1923. Although he was critical of the analyses, policies, and methods of the Comintern under Zinoviev's leadership, he did not make this public. After spending some time in Vienna, Serge returned to Russia/the Soviet Union in 1926. Already sympathetic to the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky (in his *Notebooks*, he claimed to have joined it secretly in 1923), Serge publicly affiliated with the Joint Opposition, a political bloc led by Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Leo Kamenev, which was attempting to resist Josef Stalin's consolidation of power. Along with other oppositionists, Serge was expelled from the party in 1928 and briefly imprisoned. Attempting to keep in touch with those other expelled oppositionists who had refused to recant and support Stalin, Serge and his family were spied on and harassed by the secret police (then the GPU). During this period, he concentrated on his writing. Rearrested in 1933, Serge was exiled to Orenburg, Siberia, where he lived in dire conditions. Protests by writers in Europe, particularly in France, led to Serge's release in 1936, after which he and his family wound up first in Belgium and then in France. There, Serge engaged in correspondence with Trotsky, but political differences soon led to a political and personal break between the two men.

Specifically, Serge objected to Trotsky's decision to found a Fourth International, which he believed would inevitably be sterile in a period in which the working class was suffering so many defeats. Serge was also critical of the policies and methods of the national sections of the International, whose politics and methods he considered to be scholastic and sectarian. Serge particularly disagreed with Trotsky's strategy for Spain, especially his attempts to split the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista) and what Serge saw as unjust attacks on the POUM's leaders and its supporters outside of Spain, whom Serge considered to be comrades. Beyond this, Serge attempted to set the record straight on the Kronstadt uprising. He defended the rebels as well-intentioned but misguided revolutionary militants, as against Trotsky's contention that the sailors were pampered ("dandified") replacements of the original Kronstadt revolutionaries (the "pride and joy" of the revolution, as Trotsky had called them), most of whom had died defending the Bolshevik government during the Civil War.

(According to Israel Getzler, in his book, *Kronstadt 1917- 1921*, 80% of the sailors who revolted in March 1921 had been at Kronstadt in 1917.) Trotsky also insisted that their insurrection, whatever the rebels' declared intentions, would have paved the way for the victory of the counterrevolution.

In March 1941, Serge and his son, Vlady, managed to get out of France, departing by boat from Marseille. (Serge's wife, Liuba, suffered a nervous breakdown in the early 30s and was confined to an asylum in Aix-en-Provence, where she remained until her death in 1982.) After being interned by Vichy government officials in Martinique, a stay in the Dominican Republic, and a brief imprisonment in Cuba, Serge and Vlady arrived in Mexico in September 1941, about a year after Trotsky had been assassinated by a Stalinist agent there. They were soon joined by Serge's companion, Laurette Sejeurne, and his daughter, Jeannine. In Mexico, Serge, along with other anti-Stalinist socialist exiles, formed a group, Socialism and Freedom, which sought to reconstruct an internationalist workers' movement that would transcend the differences among anarchists, socialists, and communists. Serge also befriended Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, with whom he collaborated on a biography of Trotsky. Living in difficult circumstances, suffering from poor health, and unable to get his work published, Serge was assaulted by Stalinist thugs, threatened with assassination, and vilified as a "Trotskyite counterrevolutionary" and a "Nazi fifth-columnist" by the influential Stalinist milieu in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere. He died of a heart attack in 1947.

During the course of his eventful life, Serge wrote voluminously - novels, poetry, essays, reportage, political pamphlets, a memoir, and historical studies. Overall, his work is characterized by great artistic verisimilitude,

a lyrical appreciation of nature, a deep empathy for the people he met, and a passion for the causes he championed.

In the articles he wrote during 1919-1921, Serge attempted to portray the on-the-ground reality of the areas under Bolshevik/Communist control, particularly Petrograd, during Russia's Civil War. He described the horrific conditions under which the workers and communists lived: the near-collapse of the economy; the severe shortages of food, housing, and heating fuel; the seething but passive hostility of the non-proletarian classes; the ever-present threat of counterrevolutionary plots; and the imminent danger of conquest by the counterrevolutionary White and imperialist forces. In this context, Serge emphasized the heroism, idealism, and discipline of the members of the Communist Party as they fulfilled their party tasks, which included carrying out house-to-house searches for illegal weapons. Serge admitted that the Communist government was a dictatorship of a small minority. (At one point, he describes Petrograd as being run by 6,000 Communists who were backed by 60-80,000 workers, all of whom constituted one-eighth of the population of the city.) He also conceded that the regime was utilizing brutal and arbitrary methods, such as the arrest and subsequent execution of innocent people as hostages, and forced labor, which demoralized some party militants. However, he insisted that these measures were necessary to save the revolution. "The success of a revolution requires the implacable severity of a Dzerzhinsky (the head of the Cheka, the Bolsheviks' secret police – RT)." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 102.) In any case, Serge insisted, they were less severe and resulted in fewer deaths than the atrocities committed by the counterrevolutionaries.

Serge also described, rather triumphantly, how news of the October Revolution had inspired him to undertake the political journey from anarchism to communism. He praised IWW veteran Bill Shatov and other anarchists who, while remaining anarchists, had embraced the Bolshevik cause and thrown themselves into the struggle. In the same vein, Serge was dismissive, even derisive, of those anarchists who refused to follow this course: "In order to preserve their purity of principle, they abandoned the attempt to control events and turned down historic responsibilities." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 52) As justification of this attitude, Serge argued that the party and the workers who supported it were doing the work of History (Serge capitalized the word), in a struggle that would ultimately lead to the liberation of

humanity. Echoing Lenin's conception of an "epoch of wars and revolutions," Serge proffers his own vision:

> "From the point of view of those making it, it is a rough and dangerous task, sometimes a dirty task for which you have to wear knee-length boots and roll up your sleeves, not fearing things that will make you sick. The earth has to be cleansed of the decay of the old world. Filth has to be carried away by the spadeful, and in that filth there is plenty of blood." (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 127.)

Of particular note is Serge's articulation (and endorsement) of the elitist assumptions that underlay the Bolsheviks' strategy:

> "The apathetic and hostile inhabitants (of Petrograd – RT), even if ten times more numerous than the Communist proletariat, scarcely count because they represent the past, for they have no ideal. We – the Reds – despite hunger, mistakes, and even crimes

> – we are on our way to the city of the future.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 81.)

In the third and last of these pamphlets, Serge sought to lay out a more elaborate, theoretical defense of the revolution. His aim was to convince anarchists and other libertarian socialists that, in light of the “new reality in history,” they needed to overcome their qualms (“revise our ideas”) about the centralist, authoritarian, and even immoral (Serge’s word) methods of the Bolsheviks and support the regime. His premises are four:

1. “The Russian Revolution is opening up a new epoch. It is only the first episode of the great revolution which is going to transform the civilized world.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 124.)
2. “Such as it is, the social revolution in Russia – and everywhere it has begun – is in large part the work of Bolshevism.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 124.)
3. History is “irreversible… one cannot go against the stream.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 80.) Thus:
4. “Bolshevism is no more than the (inevitable) result of the action of laws which govern the development of any revolution (so that no room is left for alternative methods).” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 142.)

With this as his starting point, Serge discusses the key “lessons of the revolution,” all of which, he insists, must be accepted or rejected as a package:

> “Now it seems to me that we anarchists must either accept or reject as a whole the set of conditions necessary for the social revolution: dictatorship of the proletariat, principle of soviets, revolutionary terror, defence of the revolution, strong organizations. (Serge writes that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is to be exercised by the “most advanced minority of the proletariat.” [*Revolution in Danger*, p. 128.])
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> “Nothing can be subtracted from the whole without the edifice collapsing. That is how the revolution is. It is a fact. It is not how we dreamed of it, nor what we wanted it to be. Here it is. Are you against it – or with it? The question is posed in this brutal fashion.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 133.)

In this discussion, Serge implies, but does not explicitly state, that the soviets continued to exist in their pre-October form:

> "The soviets in Russia were formed spontaneously during the first days of the February revolution. Elsewhere they may be formed in a different manner. But it nonetheless remains true that, from the very first hours of the social war, councils freely formed by the representatives of the revolutionary workers will be the only bodies to have the moral and material authority necessary to manage production and take the responsibility for action." (*Revolution in Danger*, pp. 129-130.)

The other side of Serge's literary effort was a detailed critique of the ideas, methods, and actions of the anarchists in Russia. His conclusions are three-fold: (1) Bolsheviks and anarchists agree on the ultimate aims of the revolution; (2) however, only the Bolsheviks' methods, in contrast to the disorganized, utopian, ineffectual, and often "disastrous" efforts of the anarchists, are capable of achieving victory; (3) anarchists have a crucial role to play within the revolution, opposing the regime's excesses and centralizing tendencies and working to ensure that the revolution does, after all, result in the creation of a free society and not in the establishment of "state socialism."

Despite the seeming honesty of Serge's presentation, there is evidence that the positive, even laudatory, picture of the Bolshevik regime that he paints did not represent his true assessment and feelings. One such indication was related by the Italian anarcho-syndicalist, Armando Borghi.

Borghi represented the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) at the founding conference of the "Red" International of Labor Unions in July 1920 (to which the USI did not ultimately affiliate). Having met Serge in Paris in 1912, Borghi arranged to see him in Petrograd. Out of fear of the Cheka, Serge took elaborate measures to make sure Borghi visited him unaccompanied. (When Borghi and a Spanish comrade first appeared at his apartment, Serge pretended not to know them. Later, he telephoned Borghi and insisted he come alone). Here is Borghi's summary of what Serge said to him when they met:

> "(H)e (Serge - RT) went through a rosary: The Soviets have been swallowed up by the Communist Party. The leaders use them as a means of spying. Any dissent is a betrayal, and every betrayal has to be met with some 'elimination.' In the factories, the discipline is ruthless. Trotsky is a perfect tyrant. There is neither communism here, nor socialism, nor anti-communism, but Prussian military discipline…. He (Serge) had remained an anarchist, but what would have been the use committing suicide by working in an opposition that would be worth less than nothing? No one would have understood. No one would have followed. No one would have known. He would have only been taken for a spy…. This was the horrible logic of totalitarianism." (From *Anarchist Encounters, Russia in Revolution*, ed. by AW Zurbrugg, Annares Editions, an imprint of The Merlin Press, London, 2017, p. 85.)

Another hint of Serge's private views comes from the account of the anarchist Gaston Leval of when he and a comrade met Serge in the summer of 1921:

> "Everything that Victor Serge told us 'in confidence' (being convinced that, given our friendship, we would not betray him) contradicted what was affirmed, or what one might infer, from his writings.
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> "As for the Cheka – the mother of the GPU, the grandmother of the NKVD, and the great-grandmother of the NVD – he declared: it is an institution which at first rendered great services but it has become very inconvenient; it is now so strong that no one knows how to get rid of it. About the Communist Party: more and more it is invaded by revolutionary opportunists (parvenus), it no longer exercises the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is on top of the proletariat. On trade unions: It's very simple! One day I received official forms with an order to fill them in. I get forms all the time – and throw them in the wastepaper basket. As for new forms, the same: they get the same treatment. So, I received the forms a third time, and with a final warning: if I did not return them properly filled in, my *payok* and that of my family would be stopped. The *payok* is the monthly food ration which the state provides for us. I would do anything not to lose that. I filled in the forms and sent them off. At the end of the month dues are deducted from my salary, and there you are, I have joined up! Every month, the same dues – that's the only contact I have with my trade union." (*Anarchist Encounters*, p. 91.)

In private Serge explicitly admitted that his public portrayal and assessment of the Bolshevik government were not honest:

> "[A] number of those who knew Serge during the early years of the revolution – the anarchists Gaston Leval and Mauricius, or the French Communist Marcel Brody who worked closely with Serge – testify to the fact that while his writings were solidly in support of the revolution, in private conversations with those he thought he could trust he made sharp criticisms of the Bolshevik regime. Leval quotes him as saying: 'We are obliged to lie to save what can be saved of the revolution.'" (Ian Birchall, Introduction to *Revolution in Danger*, p. 9.)

(All of this raises a bunch of questions about Victor Serge, among them: What were his real opinions about the Bolsheviks, their methods, and the Bolshevik regime as a whole? What does his ambivalent—one might say "two-faced"—stance say about his political, artistic, and personal

integrity? If Serge did lie about the Bolshevik regime, why? And, what are we to make of Serge's tactical/strategic attitude toward the Russian Revolution, Bolshevism, and Marxism today, one hundred years after the events he described took place? I will return to these issues in the second part of this article.)

The picture of the Bolshevik regime during the Civil War that emerges from Serge's private admissions to Borghi and Leval is amply confirmed by the reports of Emma Goldman (in her contribution to *Anarchist Encounters* and in *My Disillusionment in Russia*), Alexander Berkman (in *The Bolshevik Myth* and *The Russian Tragedy*), and the other contributors to *Anarchist Encounters*, as well as the accounts of Voline (Vsevolod Eichenbaum) (in *The Unknown Revolution*) and Gregory Maximoff (in *The Guillotine at Work*), and since substantiated by a myriad of academic studies.

So, what happened? How did the supposedly "commune-state," based on the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" of 1917, turn into the dictatorship of a single party that was supported, at best, by a tiny minority of the people and that could maintain its rule only through the "Red Terror," that is, by vicious repression? By early 1921, vast sectors of the populations of Russia and of the other countries the Bolsheviks had conquered by the end of the Civil War – peasants in the countryside, workers in the cities, sailors at Kronstadt, and members of the oppressed nationalities -- were in revolt against the Communist regime. Even supporters of the government, such as Serge, admitted that the Communists were hated and despised by the overwhelming majority of the people, for their brutality and ruthlessness, for their dishonesty, and for their corruption.

Apologists for the Bolsheviks often claim that the dictatorial actions they took were forced on them by the objective conditions in which they found themselves in the aftermath of the October Revolution: a collapsing economy, social disintegration, imperialist invasions, and an armed counter-revolution. But this merely begs the question: why, under those circumstances, did the Bolsheviks, a political party that claimed to be fighting for the liberation of humanity, choose to seize state power and then defend their hold on that power by every and any means at their disposal, no matter how brutal, ruthless, and dishonest?

C. Theoretical Background

Let's try to put some pieces of the puzzle on the table.

1. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, they were well aware of the circumstances under which they were doing so: they knew they would be launching a civil war, which, while some Bolsheviks feared, Lenin and his allies in the party welcomed. "Not a single great revolution in history has taken place without a civil war," he wrote. (V.I. Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" *Collected Works, Volume 26*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 119.) In fact, Lenin based his revolutionary strategy on the notion that the transition from capitalism to socialism would require an entire historical era that he described as an "epoch of wars and revolution", and that this required the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship. Writing after the seizure of power, Lenin put it this way:

> “We have always known, said and emphasised that socialism cannot be “introduced”, that it takes shape in the course of the most intense, the most acute class struggle – which reaches heights of frenzy and desperation – and civil war; we have always said that a long period of ‘birth-pangs’ lies between capitalism and socialism, that violence is always the midwife of the old society; that a special state (a special system of organised coercion of a definite class) corresponds to the transitional period between the bourgeois and the socialist society, namely the dictatorship of the proletariat. What dictatorship implies and means is a state of simmering war, a state of military measures of struggle against the enemies of the proletarian power. The Commune was a dictatorship of the proletariat, and Marx and Engels reproached it for what they considered to be one of the causes of its downfall, namely, that the Commune had not used its armed force with *sufficient* vigour to suppress the resistance of the exploiters.” (Lenin, “Fear of the Collapse of the Old and the Fight for the New,” *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 401. Emphasis in the original.)

Relying on his analysis of what he called the “latest” or the “highest” form of capitalism (“imperialism”), Lenin believed that world capitalism was entering into a profound crisis that would inevitably lead to its overthrow and the establishment of socialism on a global scale. This

was his justification for the Bolshevik Party seizing power in a country in which, in the Marxian view, the conditions for the establishment of socialism -- a developed capitalist economy and a large working class -- were completely lacking. To make matters worse, this was a country in which a considerable majority (80%) of the population – the peasantry – was understood to be hostile to socialism, at least as the Bolsheviks understood the term, that is, as an economy based on the complete nationalization of property and directed by a central plan. Lenin was convinced that the Bolsheviks' conquest of state power in Russia would serve as the spark for the inevitable outbreak of proletarian revolutions in Europe, particularly in Germany. (Lenin's writings of the period are replete with claims that the revolution in Germany was inevitable, although he admitted that it was impossible to predict precisely when it would occur.)

2. As I discussed in the last article, Lenin insisted that to carry out the revolution, the workers needed their own bureaucratic apparatus, that is, a state, whose key tasks were to suppress the capitalists and the other oppressing classes and to take the initial steps towards the establishment of socialism. In the circumstances of Russia after the February Revolution, this state would be based primarily on the soviets and the other organs of the "revolutionary democracy." This structure, in turn, would administer an economy that would, to the greatest extent possible, be centralized in the hands of the state. The specific measures Lenin proposed to address the economic and social disintegration of Russia were hierarchical and authoritarian in the extreme – among

them, the nationalization of the banks, the compulsory syndication of all economic enterprises above a certain size and their eventual nationalization, the compulsory membership of the entire population in consumer cooperatives, and compulsory labor. He envisioned such an apparatus as being able to direct, through the "strictest accounting and control", all economic activity in the country, down to the "last pood of grain." If we are to believe what he wrote in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin was convinced that this enormous and highly centralized political and economic structure could be kept under the control of the working class via the soviets and would not require the establishment of a professional bureaucracy. In this, Lenin, and the Bolshevik Party as a whole, were to find themselves deeply mistaken.

3. As mentioned, Lenin's conception of socialism (like that of Marx and Engels) was of an economy that was completely centralized in the hands of the state, which would, through central planning, direct the entire economic process. Contrary to the beliefs of many Marxists, the direct and immediate control of the factories, mines, railroads, and other economic enterprises by the workers employed in them had never been a feature of either the Bolshevik or, more broadly, the Marxian program. This idea had been associated with anarchists, syndicalists, and anarcho-syndicalists and had been denounced by virtually all Marxists as a "petty bourgeois" legacy of peasants', artisans', and semi-proletarians' commitment to private property. Thus, the Bolsheviks did not advocate the formation of factory committees prior to their emergence (although it is possible that Bolshevik workers participated, and perhaps played leading roles, in this process). By all accounts, the committees were formed spontaneously during and after the February Revolution, first by "defensist" workers in the war-related industries who were concerned to maintain war production during the chaos of the revolutionary events, and then by workers in other sectors. While Bolshevik workers were elected to and were active in these committees (the Bolsheviks won majorities in these organizations by June 1917, three months before they won majorities in the soviets), the Bolshevik leaders saw workers' control (which, at the time, meant mostly oversight and inspection of the capitalist directors, supervisors, and foremen, rather than direct management) of the factories as a transitional phenomenon, that is, as a stepping-stone to full state ownership and management. This was reflected in the resolution Bolshevik delegates presented to the all-Russia conference of the

factory committees held in early October. (Neither the factory committees nor the concept of workers control had been mentioned in Lenin's "April Theses"; nor were they discussed in the resolutions passed at the Bolshevik Party's Seventh All-Russian Conference held at the end of April-beginning of May.)

4. Lenin's attitude toward the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" was instrumentalist, not substantive. In his view, they were means to an end, the conquest and maintenance of state power by the Bolshevik Party. In other words, Lenin saw such organizations as: (1) organizational vehicles through which the Bolshevik Party would seize power; and (2) as the organizational and administrative basis of the Bolshevik-led state they intended to establish, that is, as organs of state power. The Bolsheviks did not see such organizations as vehicles for the "self-determination" of the working class. To the Bolsheviks, such a notion was an absurdity. Separate from the Bolshevik Party, there was not and could not be working-class "self-determination." In the Bolsheviks' conception, the soviets and the other organizations of what had been the

“revolutionary democracy” were to be transformed into a centralized and hierarchical combat apparatus under the control and direction of the Bolshevik Party. In effect, they were to become the organizational structure of a proletarian army, with the Bolshevik Party acting as its general staff and officer corps.

That Lenin’s conception of the soviets was instrumental or tactical, rather than substantive, is suggested by his and the other Bolsheviks’ attitude to those bodies prior to 1917, specifically, when they first emerged during the 1905 revolution. Although, while in Stockholm on his way to Russia, Lenin wrote an article that expressed an openness to the St. Petersburg soviet, seeing it as a possible organizational basis for a revolutionary government, once he arrived in the capital, his attitude became distinctly hostile. According to most reports, the St. Petersburg soviet, which was organized at the time of the general strike in October 1905, was convened on the initiative of the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP (the Bolsheviks were the other faction of the party) and politically dominated by them; three of the soviet’s leaders, including a young Leon Trotsky (then using a different pseudonym), were either affiliated with the Mensheviks or joined the faction shortly afterward. The Bolsheviks were particularly derisive toward the Mensheviks’ view of the soviet as “non-partisan” and their concern to establish it as a vehicle for working class “self-government.” Lenin and the other leaders of the Bolshevik faction counterposed to the soviet the need for an armed uprising to establish a revolutionary dictatorship, and toward this end, urged the formation and training of squads of armed workers to overthrow the Tsar and seize power. And in Moscow in December (that is, after the St. Petersburg soviet had been dissolved and its leaders arrested by the

Tsarist government), the Bolsheviks led the Mensheviks and other revolutionaries in an attempt to carry out such an insurrection. Outmanned and outgunned, the insurrection was crushed by Tsarist troops.

Lenin’s utilitarian attitude toward the soviets is also revealed by the policies he proposed the Bolsheviks follow during 1917. Lenin’s strategy went through two distinct phases. Initially, given the weakness of the Provisional Government and the fact that the revolutionary workers, soldiers, and sailors looked to the Petrograd soviet, not the government, for leadership, Lenin argued that it would be possible for the Bolsheviks to take power peacefully, in what he called the “peaceful development of the revolution.” This involved mobilizing the workers, sailors, and soldiers in mass demonstrations (often armed) to force the reformist leaders of the soviet to oust the government and assume full power themselves. Hence the Bolsheviks’ key slogans during this period (mid-April through June): “Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers” and “All Power to the Soviets.” Once this had occurred, the Bolsheviks would wage a political campaign within the soviets to win a majority, and in so doing, take power themselves.

After the July Days (if not sooner), Lenin’s strategy underwent a decisive shift. When the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders of the Petrograd Soviet first got wind of the revolutionary workers’, soldiers’, and sailors’ plans for armed demonstrations under the slogan, “All Power to the Soviets,” they vehemently opposed the actions and tried to prevent them from taking place. Initially, the Bolshevik central committee also opposed the actions; however, once

they were underway, the committee decided that party militants should join the demonstrations and attempt to give them a peaceful character. In the aftermath of the revolt, the soviet leaders condemned the quasi-insurrection (as an attempted Bolshevik coup), supported the repression of the Bolshevik Party (along with disarming revolutionary workers and disbanding revolutionary units of the Petrograd garrison), and actively promoted the charges that the party was being funded by the Germans and that Lenin was a German agent. At this point, the Bolsheviks withdrew the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." (See "The Political Situation," and "On Slogans," Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 25*, pp. 176-178 and pp. 183 – 190, respectively.) Lenin, now in hiding, argued that in light of political developments after the July Days, the peaceful development of the revolution was no longer possible and that, instead, the Bolsheviks should aim to seize state power through an armed insurrection.

When, after the collapse of Kornilov's attempted counter-revolutionary coup in late August, the Bolsheviks won majorities in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities around the country, they revived the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." Beyond that, however, the party was divided over how to proceed. Some members of the Bolshevik leadership, led by Kamenev, proposed reviving the Bolsheviks' earlier strategy of attempting to establish a purely "soviet" government, that is, a government made up of a coalition of all the socialist parties,

rather than a coalition made up of these parties and the pro-capitalist liberals. Opposed to this, Trotsky and some other members of the Bolshevik leadership proposed to organize an armed uprising through the Petrograd soviet's newly-established Military-Revolutionary Committee, which they controlled. They meant to disguise what was, in fact, the seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party as the assumption of power by the soviets, justifying it under the call to defend the soviets and the other organizations of the "revolutionary democracy" from the threat of another counterrevolutionary attempt.

Lenin, who was still in hiding, advocated yet another approach. After briefly considering reviving his pre-July Days strategy, by mid-September, Lenin advocated the open and direct seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party through an armed insurrection. Lenin was particularly concerned that the party, by not acting decisively at that moment, might let pass an opportune time, one that might not recur, to seize power. As a result, he wrote letter after letter to the Bolshevik Central Committee, to other leading bodies, and to individual Bolsheviks insisting that they begin preparations for an uprising immediately and not wait for the convening of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, scheduled for the end of October. (So desperate was he that he threatened to resign from the central committee.)

> "The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, can and *must* take state power into their own hands." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 19.)

> "The present task must be an *armed uprising* in Petrograd and Moscow (with its region), the seizing of power and the overthrow of the government." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 20.)

Several weeks later (on October 8), Lenin spelled out precisely what he had in mind: "a simultaneous offensive on Petrograd, as sudden and as rapid as possible, which must without fail be carried out from within and without, from the working-class quarters and from Finland, from Revel, and from Kronstadt, an offensive of the *entire* navy, the concentration of a *gigantic superiority* of forces…." (Lenin, "Advice of an Onlooker," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 180.)

For their part, Trotsky and other radical Bolsheviks involved in the Petrograd soviet were concerned that an insurrection launched in the name of the Bolshevik party might fail for lack of popular support. Instead, they opted to carry it out under the cover of and in the name of the soviets, timing it to occur at the time of the convening of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets.

My point in discussing all this is to demonstrate that, from Lenin's standpoint, the strategic goal was the seizure of political power by the Bolshevik Party and the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship under the party's control. The soviets, to him, were of interest only instrumentally, that is, as a means to an end: establishing and maintaining the dictatorship of the party.

This is suggested by comments Lenin made about the soviets shortly before the insurrection.

> "All the experience of both revolutions, that of 1905 and that of 1917, and all the decisions of the Bolshevik Party, all its political declarations for many years, may be reduced to the concept that the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies is a reality only as an organ of insurrection, as an organ of revolutionary power. Apart from this, the Soviets are a meaningless plaything that can only produce apathy, indifference and disillusion among the masses…." (Lenin, "Theses for a Report at the October 8 Conference, also for a Resolution and Instructions to Those Elected to the Party Congress," *Collected Works, Volume 26,* p. 143.)

5. To repeat, Lenin saw the Bolsheviks' strategic goal in 1917 to be the seizure of state power by the Bolshevik Party, supported by the working class. This flows from his view of the relationship of political parties to social classes. In Lenin's view, all social classes are led by political parties (and all political parties are led by leaders). Here's how he put it in his pamphlet, "'Left-wing' Communism - An Infantile Disorder," written in April-May 1920:

> "It is common knowledge… that as a rule and in most cases - at least in present-day civilised countries - classes are led by political parties; that political parties, as a general rule, are run by more or less stable groups composed of the most authoritative, influential and experienced members, who are elected to the most responsible positions, and are called leaders." (Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 31*, p. 41.)

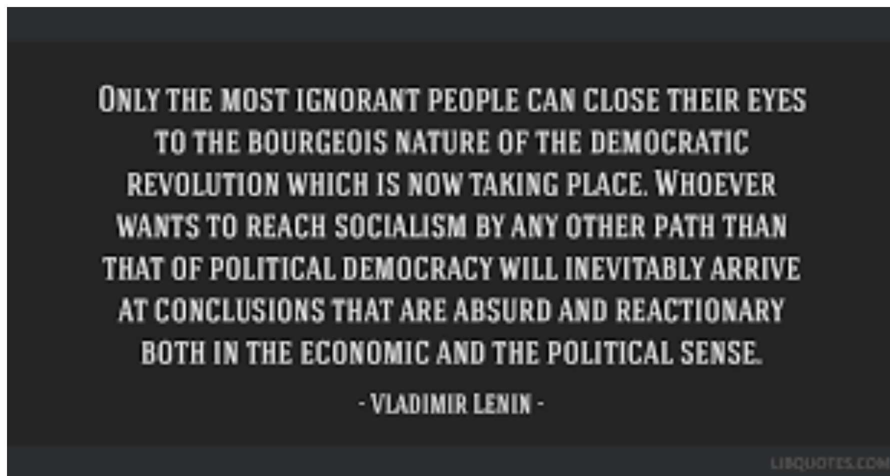
More narrowly, Lenin contended:

> "It is clear that the proletarian revolutionary movement is represented by the Bolshevik Party…." (Lenin, "The Russian Revolution and Civil War," *Collected Works*, Volume 26, p. 32.)

It follows that Lenin's notion of a successful revolution is that of a seizure of state power by one or more political parties. This is true of both the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution and the "proletarian socialist" revolution. (This is entirely consistent with the Social Democratic orthodoxy of the time, although, beneath the revolutionary rhetoric, the Social Democratic Parties in Western Europe believed they could gain power peacefully, that is, by winning majorities in parliament via elections.)

In his major strategic publication written during the 1905 revolution, "Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Russian Revolution," Lenin discussed his perspective for the revolution in Russia, which at the time he saw, as almost all Marxists did, as a "bourgeois-democratic" one. In this revolution, as he saw it, the chief strategic goal of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) was to establish the "Revolutionary Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry." In contrast to Marxist orthodoxy, then advocated by the Mensheviks, Lenin considered the Russian capitalist class to be too small, too politically

weak, too entangled with foreign capital, and too dependent on the Tsarist state to be able to lead the popular classes in the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Ironically, then, in Lenin's conception, the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia would be carried out by the workers and the peasants *against* the capitalist class and the Tsarist state.



In "Two Tactics," as in all his writings of the period, Lenin left vague two questions. One was: What was the precise relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry? Although Lenin assumed that, as the only consistently revolutionary class, the proletariat would take the lead in this alliance, he did not spell out precisely what this meant. Despite this, it is clear: (1) the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" would be a dictatorship of political parties, one representing the proletariat, another representing the peasantry; (2) the dominant element in this dictatorship would be the party of the working class, the RSDLP; and (3) this dictatorship would carry out what Marxists considered to be the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution; these included overthrowing the monarchy, establishing (bourgeois) democratic rights, nationalizing the land (and thus dispossessing the landlord class), establishing an eight-hour workday, granting self-determination to the oppressed nationalities in the Russian Empire, and convening a constituent assembly.

The second question Lenin left unclear was: what would happen once these bourgeois-democratic tasks had been carried out? In some writings (such as those on the agrarian question), he suggested that once this had been done, the way would be open for the fullest and most

democratic development of a capitalist society in Russia. Elsewhere, Lenin left open the possibility (depending on the international situation, specifically, successful working-class revolutions in Europe) of going beyond the bourgeois-democratic stage of the revolution and moving toward the establishment of socialism. In other words, Lenin raised the possibility that the revolutionary dictatorship that would be established during the bourgeois-democratic revolution would not cede power to a bourgeois-democratic government (that would be established by a constituent assembly) but would, instead, hold onto power and proceed toward constructing socialism. From all this, we can see clearly that, for Lenin, a successful socialist revolution was one that resulted in the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship dominated by the political party that represented the proletariat: in 1905, the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party; in 1917, the Bolshevik Party.

That Lenin's strategic goal in 1917 was the seizure of state power by the Bolshevik Party and not by the soviets is also suggested by various things he said and wrote during the period from February to October of that year:

(a) During the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which convened in Petrograd on June 3, Lenin had the opportunity to clarify his position:

> "The citizen Minister of Posts and Telegraphs (the Menshevik leader, H.G. Tsereteli - RT) has declared that there is no political party in Russia that would agree to take the entire

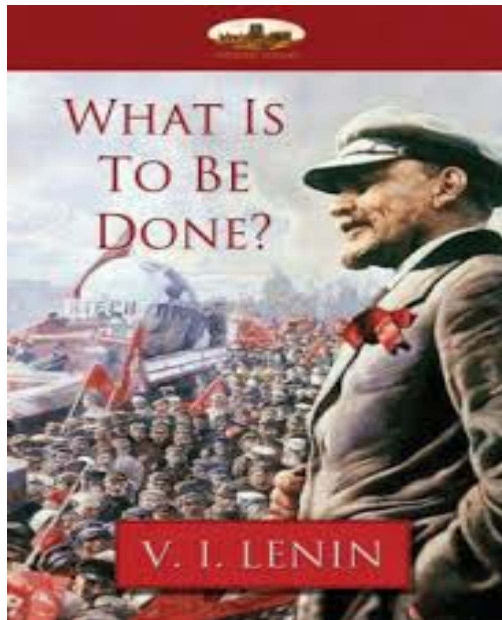
> power on itself. I answer: There is. No party can refuse to do this, all parties are contending and must contend for the power, and our party will not refuse it. *It is ready at any moment to take over the Government*." (N.N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917: An Eyewitness Account, Volume II*, edited, abridged, and translated by Joel Carmichael, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1962, p. 380. Emphasis in the original.)

The comments by N.N. Sukhanov, who was an eyewitness, are significant:

> "In general this fragment of Lenin's speech is unusually rich in content; it comprises a complete political system that now replaced, developed, and interpreted Lenin's original schema of April. At *that* time the Bolshevik leader had enjoined his party to learn how to be in the minority, to have patience, to win over the Soviets, to get majorities in them and transfer all power to *them*. Now Lenin, without patience, without having got a majority or won over the Soviets, was demanding all power against their will, and a dictatorship for his party alone. It's possible that in the recesses of Lenin's mind there had never been any other interpretation of the April slogans, and that only now for the first time he thought it appropriate to proclaim them." (Sukhanov, pp. 380-381. Emphasis in the original.)

(b) On August 30, in his letter "To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P", Lenin wrote: "The development of this war (a revolutionary war against Kornilov - RT) alone can lead *us* to power, but we must *speak* of this as little as possible in our propaganda (remembering very well that even tomorrow events may put power into our hands, and then we shall not relinquish it"). (Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 25*, p. 289. Emphasis in original.)

The last point is crucial in that it reveals that what Lenin had in mind was a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party which, once established, the Bolsheviks would not allow, to the best of their ability, to be voted out of, or otherwise removed from, power. At one point, Lenin did suggest that he would be willing to share power with other parties, but only if those groups were in a subordinate position. In other words, he was ready to use such groups for tactical purposes, to win over their supporters and as political cover.



6. Lenin's understanding of the proletarian revolution in Russia as one involving the seizure of state power by, and the establishment of a dictatorship of, the Bolshevik Party, flows from his conception of the revolutionary party and its relation to the working class. In his pamphlet, *"What Is To Be Done?,"* generally recognized to be the founding document of the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP and, later, the Bolshevik/Communist Party, Lenin contended that the working class, by its own efforts, that is, through its own independent struggles, is able to achieve only trade-union, or reformist, consciousness. In other words, as Lenin saw it, the day-to-day struggles of the workers under capitalism - such as for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and the right to organize trade unions - do not automatically engender socialist consciousness in the working class. In consequence, he argued, socialist consciousness had to be brought to the workers "from the outside", specifically, by socialist intellectuals. This was the key task of the revolutionary party. (In fact, Lenin generally distrusted intellectuals, whom he considered weak and indecisive, insufficiently

tough or “hard.” As a result, he sought to build an underground apparatus which, while perhaps led by intellectuals, would be made up of working-class, lower middle-class, and even lumpen-proletarian [criminal] elements.)

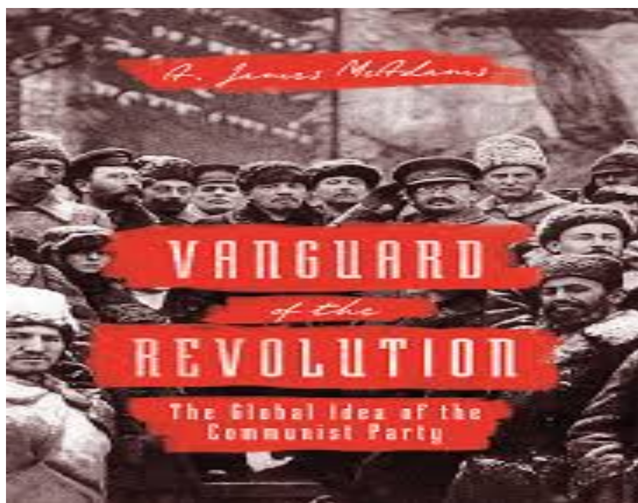
Lenin’s conception of the party was the result of his attempt to connect what we can now see to be two contradictory claims -- one theoretical, the other empirical -- both of which he considered to be valid. On the one hand, as a committed Marxist, Lenin believed that Marxism was scientific and thus true. He was also aware that a fundamental tenet of Marxism is that the “laws of motion” of capitalism will inevitably impel the working class to carry out the socialist revolution, and that for this to happen, the working class must possess revolutionary socialist consciousness. On the other hand, when Lenin observed the actual working class in Russia and in Europe, he could see that the workers, at the time and at most times, were not in fact revolutionary; instead, they were reformist. In his attempt to square these claims, Lenin deduced that it was the specific job of Marxists, organized in a revolutionary party, to bridge the gap between theoretical truth and empirical reality. The logical implication of this view is that the revolutionary party is the ideological, political, and organizational embodiment of the conscious-ness of the proletariat. Without it, the working class is not capable of attaining or sustaining revolutionary socialist consciousness. Despite the fact that, on occasion, Lenin did praise the workers for being spontaneously revolutionary, he believed that, without the leadership of a revolutionary party, such consciousness could only be diffuse, vacillating, and temporary.

Here’s how Victor Serge put it:

> “The party is in a sense the nervous system of the class. Simultaneously the consciousness and the active, physical organization of all the dispersed forces of the proletariat, which are often ignorant themselves and often remain latent or express themselves contradictorily.” (*Revolution in Danger*, p. 99.)

Lenin’s conception of the revolutionary party has deep elitist and authoritarian (even totalitarian) implications, which become clear when we ask a few questions: What happens if/when, after the seizure of power by this party, the working class (or substantial sections of it) no

longer wishes to support it? Does the working class (or sections of it) have the right to remove that party from power? Elementary notions of democracy would lead to the conclusion that the workers do indeed have that right. But if, under Lenin's conception, that party, by definition, embodies the true, revolutionary consciousness of the working class, then, also by definition, such a desire to evict the party from power can only be counterrevolutionary, and the workers who hold such a desire and act on it would be either counterrevolutionaries or, at the very least, under the influence of counterrevolutionaries. This point can be put the other way around. Does the revolutionary party, once it has seized state power, have the right, or even the obligation, to repress workers who struggle against the party's policies and (even more extreme) seek to eject it from power? Lenin's conception of the party as the organized embodiment of the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness and, in fact, the sole guarantee of that consciousness and therefore of the proletarian nature of the state, implies that the party does indeed have the right, and even the duty, to do whatever it has to do to stay in power, even if this entails the repression of specific groups of workers and even of the entire working class.



As long as a Bolshevik-style party is out of power, as long as it is merely attempting to lead the working class via propaganda and agitation, the elitist implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party remain hidden. But once that party achieves control of the state and hence has the power to repress those who disagree with it and act against it, the stage is set for the elitist and authoritarian implications of Lenin's view to come to the fore. This is, in fact, what happened in the aftermath of the October Insurrection. Three and a half years later

-- that is, after the conclusion of the Civil War and the war with Poland, after the Bolsheviks had repressed the mass strikes of workers in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities, after they had drowned the sailors' revolt at Kronstadt in blood, and while they were in the process of suppressing massive peasant uprisings in various parts of the country, Trotsky was to draw just this conclusion. At the Tenth Party Congress of the Communist Party, held in March 1921, he said: "It is necessary to comprehend, so to speak, the revolutionary historical primacy of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship despite temporary, spontaneous wavering, even amongst workers." (Quoted in Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin: Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London and New York, p. 107.) (How does Trotsky know that the workers' wavering is only "temporary"? Because Marxism says so?)

As I have written elsewhere, it is my view that the elitist, authoritarian, and totalitarian implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party have their roots in Marxism, specifically, in Marxism's claims: (1) that it (and only it) embodies the Truth; (2) that it (and only it) represents the true and appropriate consciousness of the working class, even (and especially) when the working class does not have revolutionary consciousness, as Marxism defines it; and (3) that socialism can be established only by means of a state that has centralized the means of production in its hands. As long as Marxist parties do not have control over a state and therefore do not have the power to repress workers' struggles, these implications are obscured. But when such parties do gain possession of a state, the logic of the

theory is that they do have the right - indeed, the obligation - to repress workers' struggles against its policies and against the states they control. This is true not only of Leninist parties but also of reformist Social Democratic parties, as revealed by the German Social Democrats' brutal repression of the Spartacist uprising in January 1919 that led to the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Leo Jogisches. Sadly, we have seen this logic play itself out all too many times since 1917.

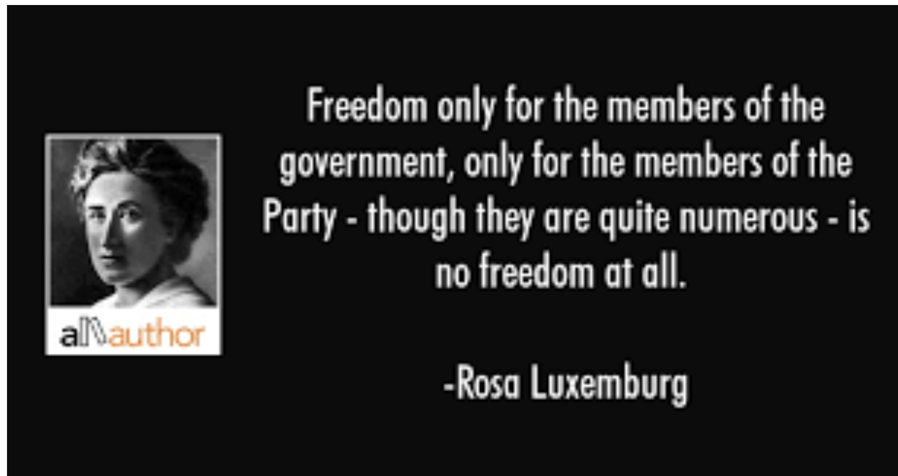
There are additional elitist and authoritarian implications of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party. One is a distrust of the spontaneous actions of the workers and peasants, especially after the seizure of state power by the party. To repeat, in Lenin's view, the working class, by its own efforts (that is, spontaneously), is able to attain only trade-union, aka reformist, consciousness. But trade union or reformist consciousness is, in fact, capitalist consciousness; it is thinking that accepts the existing, capitalist, system as the framework for struggle. Thus, the spontaneous actions of the working class, that is, workers' struggles that are not under the leadership of the revolutionary party, are objectively pro-capitalist. This is even more the case with peasants. According to Marxism, the peasants' spontaneous activity, based as it is on the tilling of small plots of land, coupled with their desire to sell what surpluses they produce on the free market in order to buy tools, clothing, and other manufactured items, can engender in them only a petty capitalist mentality. Such activity and such a mentality, left to themselves, will spontaneously generate capitalism. Thus, according to Lenin's conception, the spontaneous activity of both popular classes, proletariat and peasantry, works in the

same direction, namely, toward the generation or regeneration of capitalism.
The other side of this hostility to the spontaneous activity of the workers and peasants is a strong commitment to centralism. As Lenin put it:

> "The effort to prove the necessity for centralism to the Bolsheviks who are centralists by conviction, by their programme and by the entire tactics of the party, is really like forcing an open door." (Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 116.)

Marxism itself is strongly centralist. This commitment reflects Marx's and Engels' belief that the logic of capitalist development is to concentrate and centralize capital in the hands of a few monopolists and ultimately of the state. Indeed, one of Marx's and Engels' main criticisms of capitalism is that, because it is founded on private property, it is incapable of carrying out this tendency to its logical conclusion. As a result, it is left to the socialist revolution to complete this process of centralization. Hence the Marxist conception of socialism as an economy in which all the means of production have been nationalized (that is, taken over by the state) and in which all economic activity is carried out according to a central plan. Lenin's conception of workers' consciousness and the role of the revolutionary party is thus not only consistent with the Marxian commitment to centralism but even strengthens it. This is because, in Lenin's view, a centralized party structure is the only way to guarantee the revolutionary character of the party's program and its actual practice. Lacking such centralization, the party will be subject to the pressure of the workers' spontaneous activity and to the reformist/pro-capitalist consciousness it generates. This pressure will be felt most strongly on the lower levels of the party, that is, on those members of the party who are in direct contact with the workers, including those who are workers themselves. As a result, Lenin considered the appropriate structure of the revolutionary party to be what he called "democratic centralism." Although such centralism is supposed to be democratic, the reality is that centralism gives, and is designed to give, extraordinary power to the people who sit at the party's center, that is, the party leadership. Ultimately, then, this leadership is the chief guarantor of the revolutionary character of the party, and when it is established, the revolutionary character of the (supposedly) "proletarian" state. Moreover, the instinct of the party's leadership will be to strengthen that centralism, that is, to "circle the

wagons," when the party and its control of the state are threatened. The concrete practice of all "democratic centralist" parties, during 1917 and since, bears this out.



All these implications lead to yet another. This is a tendency for a Leninist-style revolutionary party, once it has gained control of a state, to use that state to attempt to direct all economic, social, political, and ideological activity (that is, thought) that is within its grasp, and conversely, to discredit (denounce, malign, and slander) any economic, social, political, and ideological activity that is spontaneous, that is, that is not (yet) under its direct control. That all becomes, by definition, "counterrevolutionary," whatever the subjective intentions of those who carry out such activity; thus, the concept: "objectively counter-revolutionary."

What holds for the revolutionary party also holds for the state. In the Bolsheviks' view, the "dictatorship of the proletariat," in all its facets, is to be as centralized as possible. Lenin was adamant about this:

> "I repeat: the experience of the victorious dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has clearly shown even to those who are incapable of thinking or have had no occasion to give thought to the matter that absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline of the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie." (Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder," *Collected Works, Volume 31*, op. cit., p. 24.)

D. Lenin's Goal: Dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, Not a Soviet State

To sum all this up, in order to understand what happened in Russia after the October Revolution, it is essential to recognize that when the Bolsheviks seized state power on October 25, their fundamental aim was to establish a "revolutionary dictatorship" of the Bolshevik Party, which would represent, under Russian conditions, the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In the Bolsheviks' view, the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, supported by the working class and poor peasants, was, in fact, a "proletarian government." (Lenin, "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 127.) Or, as Lenin put it,

> "[P]roletarian revolutionary power (or Bolshevik power – which is now one and the same thing)." (Lenin, "Advice of an Onlooker," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 179.)

Although the Bolsheviks called the regime they set up a "soviet government," this was a deception. In fact, they did not see themselves as being in any way legally bound by, or otherwise "responsible" to, the soviets. They did not recognize the soviets as having any political authority over them, authority of any kind to which they were obliged to submit. In their view, the soviets did not have the right either to control their actions or to remove them from power. From their standpoint, the soviets, along with other popular organizations, constituted simply a *state apparatus* under their control. As Lenin put it, "There is no apparatus? There is an apparatus – the Soviets and the democratic organizations." (Lenin, "The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power," *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 21.)

In fact, the Bolsheviks did not consider themselves bound by any legal or conventional moral considerations whatsoever. To them, the supreme value (law) was the health of the revolution, as they understood it. This is what it meant to establish a "revolutionary dictatorship." After the seizure of power, Lenin and Trotsky were explicit about this. In the words of Geoffrey Swain, in his *The Origins of the Russian Civil War*:

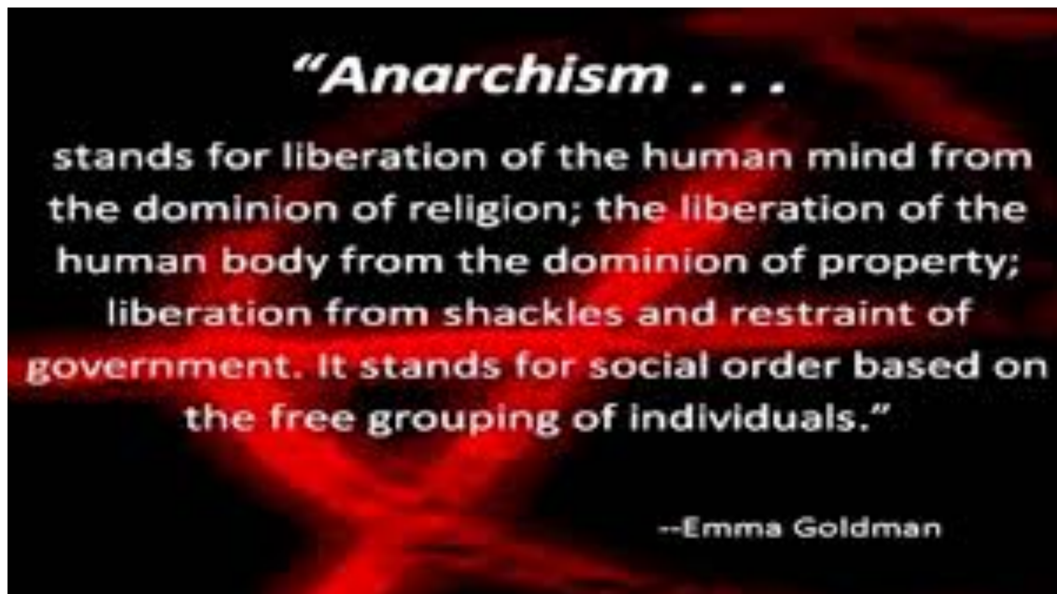
> "On 4 November Lenin and Trotsky appeared at the Soviet Executive not simply to justify one incident of arbitrary rule, in this case the closure of the 'bourgeois press', but to institutionalize arbitrary rule. They came to explain that the Soviet Executive, this soviet parliament, was not a 'bourgeois parliament' and therefore

> had only a very vague and general brief to oversee the government which could issue decrees in its own name as often as it liked. Lenin's final remark summed up his attitude: 'you call us extremists, but you are nothing other than apologists for parliamentary obstruction.'" (Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War,* Longman Publishing, New York, 1996, p. 68.)

Lenin put the main point bluntly:

> "Power is in the hands of our party, which enjoys the confidence of the broad masses." (Meeting of the All-Russia C.E.C., November 4, 1917, Speeches Concerning the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries' Questions, Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 26*, p. 289.)

As this reveals, once in power, the Bolshevik Party ruled by decree, using the soviet structure, at best, as a rubber stamp. The Bolshevik government, formally, the Council of People's Commissars, simply implemented the decisions of the party's Central Committee. In sum, the government established by the Bolsheviks' seizure of state power on October 25, 1917 was not, in truth, a "soviet" government; it was, and it was meant to be, a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.



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