This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Crisis and critique on 20th December 2024, available at: https://www.crisiscritique.org/storage/app/media/2025-02-07/peter-hallward.pdf

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Lenin and the Demands of 1917

Reference to the express 'will of the people' was widespread and emphatic in both the run-up to October 1917 and its aftermath.[1] Repeated calls for a government that respects the people's will were among the single most consistent appeals made by the Bolsheviks over the months that separate April from November. The famous demand to transfer 'all power to the Soviets' was not *itself* unconditional, it should be stressed, since it was always possible that the councils themselves might fail this key test of legitimacy. Lenin underlined this point in an editorial in *Pravda* on 23 April, and never wavered from it: 'We shall favour the transfer of power to the proletarians and semi-proletarians only when the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies adopt our policy and are willing to take the power into their own hands.'[2] As far as Lenin was concerned, by siding more with the moderates than the Bolsheviks during the July days the Petrograd soviet had clearly lost its way, and for a few weeks he argued that the time for merely soviet power was already past, leading the Sixth Party Congress officially to drop the slogan in late July (though party activists in more direct contact with their local members soon persuaded Lenin to return to the familiar programme[3]).

The Bolsheviks' real and abiding priority was always 'to ensure that all state power passes into the hands of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies or other bodies directly expressing the will of the people,' whatever these bodies might be.[4] When the Bolshevik party gathered for its April 1917 conference it thus threw itself into preparation of 'the second stage of the revolution, which must transfer all state power to the Soviets or to other organs directly expressing the will of the majority of the nation (organs of local self-government, the Constituent Assembly, etc.).'[5] Outlining his party's response to the challenge posed by a divided or dual power, in April, if Lenin identified soviet rule as 'the only possible revolutionary government' this affirmation again remained conditional – soviet rule was the priority insofar as, and only insofar as, it 'directly expresses the mind and will of the majority of the workers and peasants.'[6] Any organisation that might fall short of such direct expression, be it a council or an assembly, would thereby lose its claim to legitimacy as well – and given Lenin's own insistence on this criterion, clearly his party too should be included in this list of expressive organisations. (It would also easy to show, of course, that in 1917-18 such reference to the people's will was not unique to the Bolsheviks, but served as a general criterion of legitimacy common to socialist parties across the spectrum.[7] For instance, when in early March the Left SR Sergei Mstislavskii was dispatched by the Petrograd Soviet to discuss the arrest of the tsar with restive members of the garrison, he could explain his mission in uncontroversial terms: 'Peacefully, without bloodshed, comrades. But firmly: our sole criterion is the will of the people. Petrograd is depending on you...'[8]).

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[1] This long article consists of the central quarter or so of a book-length study, forthcoming from Communis Press in 2025, entitled *Lenin and Mass Sovereignty*. Another, shorter extract will be published in December 2024 on the Communis website, under the title 'Lenin and Political Will.'

[2] Lenin, 'How a Simple Question Can Be Confused,' *Pravda* 23 April 1917, CW24, p. 211.

[3] Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 312-3.

[4] Lenin, 'Speech at Bolshevik Petrograd city conference', 18 April 1917, CW24, p. 155.

[5] Lenin, 'Resolution on the Soviets', 2 May 1917, CW24, p. 295.

[6] Lenin, 'The Dual Power', 9 April 1917, CW24, p. 40.

[7] By way of illustration, the collection of documents assembled by Bunyan and Fischer exemplify this point with respect to the SRs (Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 198, 364), the Ukrainian Rada (p. 435), the Kadets (''no matter what tricks and deceptions Lenin and Trotsky make use of they cannot crush the will of the Russian people,' p. 354), and so on, as well as the Committee to Save the Country and Revolution which was hastily formed by the SRs and other groups who denounced the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October as 'nothing but a dictatorship directed against the will of the proletariat' (p. 146).

[8] Mstislavskii 1988, p. 97.

On this essential principle of popular sovereignty Lenin was as clear as can be. 'We want to turn the state into an institution enforcing the will of the people,' and insofar as such enforcement requires coercion then 'we want to institute coercion in the working people's interests.'[9] Ever since the soviets had made it possible for workers, soldiers and peasants to 'meet and arrange matters,' 'there has been no force that can break the will of the people, the will of the peasants and workers.'[10] If the Soviets will now prove themselves 'superior to any parliament,' Lenin argued a few weeks after taking power, it's because they 'were not formed on the initiative of any individual, but from below, by the will of the masses. There can be no restrictions and no red tape, for they have been formed by the will of the people, and the people are free to recall their representatives at any moment' (CW26, p. 358).

A few further examples should be enough to confirm the point, starting with the famous opening declaration of the Second Congress of Soviets, late on 25 October 1917: 'The Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies has opened. [...] Backed by the will of the vast majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants, backed by the victorious uprising of the workers and the garrison which has taken place in Petrograd, the Congress takes power into its own hands.'[11] Within a week of taking power, the new government was beginning to take stock of the dizzying series of developments that were already under way.

> The peasants are being emancipated from the power of the landowners, for there is no longer the landowner's property right in the land – it has been abolished. The soldiers and sailors are being emancipated from the power of autocratic generals, for generals will henceforth be elective and subject to recall. The workingmen are being emancipated from the whims and arbitrary will of the capitalists, for henceforth there will be established the control of the workers over mills and factories. Everything living and capable of life is being emancipated...[12]

The 'people,' however, is of course a loose and indeterminate category, one as easily co-opted by bourgeois-nationalist propaganda as by a genuinely social-democratic party. From a Marxist perspective, everything depends on the people's class composition, and in particular on the question of which class is in charge or *command*. Which class, in any given situation, has commanding or sovereign power over others? 'Which class holds power decides everything,' writes Lenin in mid-September 1917, and in every political situation 'the whole question of control boils down to who controls whom, i.e., which class is in control and which is being controlled.'[13] Even if Lenin himself used the signature formulation less often and in a less emphatic way than Zinoviev or Stalin after him, for both of them all political conflict is oriented by the stark binary: who, whom?[14]

What Does a Class Want?

[9] Lenin, 'Report on the Right of Recall,' 24 November 1917, CW26, p. 339.
[10] Lenin, 'Speech delivered at the Second Congress of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies', 2 December 1917, CW26, p. 357.
[11] Lenin, 'To Workers, Soldiers, and Peasants!', 25 October 1917, CW26, p. 247, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/25b.htm.
[12] 'Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia,' 2 November 1917, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm.
[13] Lenin, 'One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution', 14 September 1917, CW25, p. 370, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/27.htm; Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe', September 1917, CW25, p. 346, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/ichtci/06.htm. 'The Soviets will be able to develop properly, to display their potentialities and capabilities to the full only by taking over *full* state power [...]. "Dual power" means paralysis for the Soviets' (Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 104, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm).
[14] For more on this *kto-kovo* formula, see Lih 2023, pp. 55-9, pp. 277-8.

In keeping with his Marxist inspiration, what is perhaps most consistent in Lenin's profiling of class actors is the 'psychopolitical' orientation he attributes to them. The bourgeoisie is of course characterised by their ruthless pursuit of profits and domination, and can be predicted to do all they can to retain a firm grip on the levers of power required to secure these things. The proletariat is characterised for Lenin by an equally determined refusal of all exploitation, by a steadfast refusal of all social hierarchy, by their discipline, their dedication to socialist principles, and so on. As Marx had explained, the pertinent political 'question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat *is*, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.'[15] By the same token and for the same kinds of reason, 'the proletariat does not ask what the bourgeoisie merely *wishes* to do, but what it *must* do.'[16]

Lenin himself paid strikingly little attention to Marx's further class, or non-class, the so-called 'lumpen-proletariat' – as far as I can tell there are only half a dozen or so scattered references to them in the 33 volumes of his published work, and next to none during or after 1917. Insofar as the category concerns him at all the lumpen-proletariat seems to pose no significant problems for Lenin, since from his perspective it clearly falls to the proletariat to lead and discipline the wider working population as a whole, including those disparate and more 'casual' groups that might be derided as mere 'riff-raff.'[17] Lenin's apparent lack of interest in the possible political challenges posed by the lumpen – a category that, as Marx observed, can include 'discharged soldiers,'[18] a group that would play no small role in 1917 and after – is itself a suggestive symptom of his rock-solid confidence in the hegemonic class-mission of the proletariat *proprement dit*.

For most of Lenin's life his model of class psychopolitics left room for only one genuine question. This question concerns the peasantry or petty-bourgeoisie, as it forever wavers between its two opposing poles. In the case of open conflict between the exploiting and the exploited classes, which way will they go – will they make common cause with the bourgeoisie or with the workers? For obvious reasons, the peasant question was especially important in Russia – a fact that Marx himself had recognised, as he began to study the country in more detail in the 1870s. Although he is often treated as a political leader obsessively preoccupied with the position and capacities of the urban workers, Lenin devoted much of his time and attention to an analysis of Russia's peasantry. Several of his most substantial and important works engage with it in detail, including *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), *To the Rural Poor* (1903) and *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy 1905-1907* (1908); this last was perhaps his main theoretical priority during the years that followed the suppressed revolution of 1905. All of these texts developed a Marxist account of class differentiation and class formation, and paid particular attention to the way that the consolidation of commodity production, market dependence and capitalist class relations were transforming rural society. 'The system of social-economic relations existing among the peasantry (agricultural and village-community),' as Lenin concludes the second chapter of his 1899 book, 'shows us the presence of all those contradictions which are inherent in every commodity economy and every order of capitalism: competition, the struggle for economic independence, the grabbing of land (purchasable and rentable), the

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[15] Marx, *The Holy Family* [1845], SW, p. 149; cf. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, SW, p. 177.
[16] Marx, 'The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*,' 12 September 1847, https://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/marx/works/1847/09/12.htm.
[17] Perhaps the most substantial reference is itself ironic, and confirms Lenin's confidence in the hegemonic status and mission of the proletariat (Lenin, 'Guerrilla Warfare,' 30 September 1906, CW11, pp. 216, 219, 221). Elsewhere, Lenin observes in passing that 'lumpen-proletarians are sometimes distinguished for their sharp conflicts, and sometimes for their amazing instability and inability to fight....' (CW15, p. 384). There are no references to the lumpen, moreover, in the most substantial studies of Lenin's political thought, for instance the books by Harding, Le Blanc, Lih, or Krausz.
[18] Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, ch. 5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch05.htm. For Marx himself, perhaps the most suggestive case of a possible blurring of the lines between proletariat and lumpen-proletariat is provided by the role of the Parisian *Garde Mobile* in 1848 (*ibid*., ch. 5). Cf. Traugott 1980, pp. 710-12.

concentration of production in the hands of a minority, the forcing of the majority into the ranks of the proletariat, their exploitation by a minority through the medium of merchant's capital and the hiring of farm labourers.'[19]

The main outcome of this process is or will be 'the utter dissolution of the old, patriarchal peasantry and the creation of *new types* of rural inhabitants.' 'The peasants themselves,' Lenin adds, 'very aptly and strikingly characterise this process with the term "*depeasantising*".' In place of its old peasants and their communal solidarity Russia has or will instead have only two starkly opposed classes: exploited workers and an exploiting bourgeoisie. 'The old peasantry is not only "differentiating," it is being completely dissolved, it is ceasing to exist, it is being ousted by absolutely new types of rural inhabitants – types that are the basis of a society in which commodity economy and capitalist production prevail. These types are the rural bourgeoisie (chiefly petty bourgeoisie) and the rural proletariat – a class of commodity producers in agriculture and a class of agricultural wage-workers.'[20]

In brief, most Russian peasants are turning into, or will soon turn into, proletarians. In 1899 as again in 1903 and 1908 Lenin documents this development in exhaustive detail. While the urban workers might remain a small minority in the country overall, as capitalism dissolves the feudal bonds of rural society they can expect the natural alliance among proletarians to transcend the differences separating town and country. Just as the workers can be trusted to embrace the 'good news' of scientific socialism, so can the peasants be trusted, more and more, to follow the lead of their more concentrated and better educated urban comrades. To the extent that the Bolsheviks can persuade the rural proletariat or semi-proletariat to follow where the urban workers lead they could be expected to play a vital indeed 'exalted' role in the first, bourgeois stage of the revolution. 'Heroic leaders,' as Lih puts it, 'require heroic followers.'[21]

Whether it's a matter of pursuing their own immediate interests as a class, of transferring land to the peasants or of securing an immediate peace for the benefit of the 'whole nation,' Lenin knows that 'only the proletariat will dare take genuinely *revolutionary* measures.'[22] Like Luxemburg (who saw how 'a Social Democratic tactic that is consistent, resolute, and progressive elicits feelings of security, self-confidence, and combativeness in the masses'[23]), Lenin also knows that, in the midst of widespread hesitation 'a firm party line, its unyielding resolve, is also a mood-creating factor, particularly at the sharpest revolutionary moments.'[24] More than any of his contemporaries, Lenin sought to build on Engels' famous reflections about 'the art of insurrection,' and to develop them as general strategic principles. It's by 'acting with the greatest determination, and on the offensive,' that a party can maintain the initiative and preserve its 'moral ascendancy.' A daring and resolute party can both force its enemies to retreat and also 'rally in this way to your side those vacillating elements which

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[19] Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), ch. 2, CW3, p. 172, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/dcr8ii/ii8xiii.htm.

[20] Lenin, 'The Differentiation of the Peasantry,' *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), ch. 2, CW3, p. 174. An emphasis on the ongoing and irreversible division of the peasantry into the opposing classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat is a recurring feature of Lenin's earliest work, for instance 'On the So-Called Market Question' (1893), CW1, p. 109; *What the "Friends of the People" Are* (1894), CW1, pp. 197, 223, 230, and 'The Economic Content of Narodism' (1894), CW1, pp. 422, 431). On the resonances (and differences) between Lenin's work on the agrarian question, and that of Kautsky and Plekhanov, see Shandro 2014, pp. 46-7, 90.

[21] Lih 2011, p. 97; cf. p. 39.

[22] Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, pp. 87-136, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm. On the other hand, as Lukács notes, 'if the proletariat hesitates, if it lacks a sustaining faith in its own mission to rule, it can drive [petty-bourgeois] groups back into the arms of the bourgeoisie and even to open counter-revolution' (Lukács 1971, p. 267).

[23] Luxemburg 1906, 540/1348.

[24] Lenin, 'Letter to Comrades,' 17 October 1917, CW26, p. 209, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/17.htm. 'It is impossible to stand still in history in general, and in war-time in particular. We must either advance or retreat' (Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe,' 10 September 1917, CW26, p. 362).

always follow the strongest impulse.'[25] Lenin was acutely aware that a revolution is by definition a period of profound anxiety and uncertainty, and that to hesitate for too long in the face of political complexity or complication is a sure-fire way to abandon revolutionary politics altogether. Responding to critics who urged caution and delay, Lenin reminded them that

> the development of the revolution itself *always* creates an *exceptionally* complicated situation. A revolution, a real, profound, a people's revolution, to use Marx's expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old and birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people. Revolution is a most intense, furious, desperate class struggle and civil war. [...] If the situation were not exceptionally complicated there would be no revolution. If you are afraid of wolves don't go into the forest.[26]

Again, if 'the history of revolutions is always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious' than the history and practice of even the most militant political organisations, this is because, 'at moments of great upsurge and the exertion of all human capacities, revolutions are made by the class-consciousness, will, passion and imagination of tens of millions, spurred on by a most acute struggle of classes.'[27]

When Lenin returned to these questions in early 1918 he amplified the old distinction between proletarian resolve and petty-bourgeois vacillation up a couple of notches. Under revolutionary pressure, the two classes will tend to fall back on their reflexes or 'class instincts.' The peasants are liable to panic and retreat:

> the small proprietor, who has been driven to frenzy by the horrors of war, by sudden ruin, by unprecedented torments of famine and devastation, who hysterically rushes about seeking a way out, seeking salvation, places his confidence in the proletariat and supports it one moment and the next gives way to fits of despair. We must clearly understand and firmly remember the fact that socialism cannot be built on such a social basis. The only class that can lead the working and exploited people is the class that unswervingly follows its path without losing courage and without giving way to despair even at the most difficult, arduous and dangerous stages. Hysterical impulses are of no use to us. What we need is the steady advance of the iron battalions of the proletariat.[28]

The peasants might be reliable in some situations, unreliable in others. Permanent hesitation defines them. Only proletarian reflexes were consistent. Lenin had learned early on that 'the workers have a class instinct, and given a little political experience they fairly quickly become staunch Social Democrats.'[29] When the political opportunity arose to assert the revolutionary will of the people, in the winter of 1917-18, Lenin was ready with his prescription: 'Iron

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[25] Engels, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany* [1852], ch. 17, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/germany/ch17.htm; and cited by Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, p. 132, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm.
[26] Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, pp. 118-9.
[27] Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism*, CW31, p. 95, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm.
[28] Lenin, *Immediate Tasks* (April 1917), CW27, pp. 276-7, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm. Trotsky likewise refers to class instincts, and to the initially 'unconscious Bolshevism of the mass' – which then developed, 'reflecting the logic of evolution,' into a 'conscious sympathy for the Bolshevik Party' (Trotsky 1932, ch. 21, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch21.htm).
[29] Lenin, 'Speech on the Question of the Relations Between Workers and Intellectuals,' 20 May 1905, CW8, p. 408, cf. p. 112. 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic' ('Reorganisation of the Party,' 5 November 1905, CW10, p. 32). 'Only in the class consciousness of the proletariat,' as Lukács will put it, 'do we find that the correct view of revolutionary action is so deeply anchored and so deeply rooted in the instincts that this attitude need only be made conscious, for it to provide a clear lead. Action will then advance of itself along the right road.' The petty-bourgeois and peasant strata will remain forever unreliable, and no amount of 'consciousness raising' is enough to ensure their support for the revolution – pending their subsumption within the proletariat. (Lukács 1971, p. 304).

discipline and the thorough exercise of proletarian dictatorship against petty-bourgeois vacillation – this is the general and summarising slogan of the moment.'[30]

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There is space here to consider only five of the specific ways this general psychopolitical orientation informed Lenin and the Bolsheviks' key political decisions in and after 1917. The simplest way to frame them is again in terms of political actors and their objectives, i.e. in terms of *who* wanted what, and why? Who wanted an insurrection in October? Who wanted a constituent assembly? Who wanted peace, and on what terms? Who wanted to redistribute land, and to what end? And most profoundly, who wanted to move on from Lenin's initially cautious 'steps towards socialism' through to the actual 'socialist reconstruction of society'?

In principle it should be possible to propose a distinct answer to each of the questions – either the party wanted these things, or the working class, or the wider people as a whole, or some combination of these three. It should be possible in each case to work out who wanted what, and why, and when. The most essential and consistent aspect of Lenin's approach, however, is that he saw these three political actors as figures or expressions of a single political continuum. For Lenin, to worry too much about any actual *who* or *when* – to worry too much about the question 'whose will?,' or to get overly hung up about the timing or 'stages' of their willing – was only a distraction from the more essential certainty that, properly understood, party, class and people could all come to will only one and the same thing. They were (or would be) all aligned on a common trajectory. In theory, they needed to be understood as facets of one and the same 'who,' as facets of one and the same actor that shared, across one and the same extended 'when', in one and the same political will.

The problem is that, in reality, such a self-same *who* did not exist. By late 1917, party, class and people did indeed align in support of several imperative demands, but across the Russian people in general this short-term convergence did not extend over the coming years into a common mass project for social transformation.

Who wants an insurrection?

The first case to consider is the issue that long obsessed Cold War and liberal historians determined to treat October as a putsch that inaugurated a new despotic regime, rather than as an intervention that completed the revolution which had begun back in February. It's clearly absurd to pretend that, despite the relatively small number of soldiers and workers directly involved, the seizure of power on 25 October didn't enjoy widespread public support. For both the Bolsheviks and their socialist rivals, however, the widely assumed fact of a popular mandate didn't by itself resolve the issue of who precisely should act on it. Nor did it decide the question of who would benefit from it. Did 'all power to the soviets' really mean what it said: all power to (all) the soviets? Or did it mean, in practice, all power to one party – the one party that was able first to transfer power to the soviets, and then exercise it on their behalf?

25 October wasn't a repetition of 3 and 4 July. The great Petrograd demonstrations of June and July had indeed been mass demonstrations, decided and organised by huge gatherings of workers and soldiers and workers in key parts of the city. It's clear that in October, by contrast, the Bolshevik party itself had to play more of a leading role. Bettelheim makes the point in characteristically emphatic terms:

> All revolutions are due to the resolute action and heroism of the masses, [and...] this was so in the case of the revolution of February 1917, in which the working classes of Petrograd, Moscow, and other towns

[30] 'Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,' 3 May 1918, CW27, pp. 314-317, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/30.htm

> played the determining role; yet this revolution did not lead to the establishment of proletarian rule. The October Revolution was unlike all previous revolutions (excepting the Paris Commune), by virtue of the fact that it was carried through under the guidance of proletarian ideas. The Bolshevik Party was the organized carrier of these ideas, and it was this that [in October] enabled the Russian proletariat to make itself the dominant class. Thanks to the ties of coincidence established between it and the most combative sections of the proletariat, the party served as the instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat.[31]

It's equally clear that, in the run-up to October, this remained a form of leadership that the party exercised from below, notably via local party organisers. If the Bolsheviks dominated the Soviet military committees that prepared and executed the actual seizure of power in the days leading up to 25 October, as Ferro notes 'the Bolshevisation of these, as of other institutions, was possible only because it was accompanied by a wide popular consensus.'[32] As Mandel and Rabinowitch have likewise shown, though opinions varied 'only the pressure of the party's lower and middle strata forced the reluctant Central Committee majority to act in October.'[33]

At the same time it's also true, as Lenin himself recognised, that the popular mood in the capital was more reserved and more complex than it had been back in June. Any 'absenteeism and indifference on the part of the masses,' as he suggested in a closed meeting, is presumably 'due to their being tired of words and resolutions': now only 'decisive action' could clarify where people stand.[34] Sukhanov's evocative recollections of this fraught moment are also illuminating, and worth citing at length. As things came to a head in October,

> it may be asked whether the Petersburg proletariat and garrison was ready for dynamic action and bloody sacrifice, just as it was for the acceptance of a Soviet Government and all its blessings? Was it capable not only of passing a menacing resolution, but also of really going into battle? Was it burning, not only with hate, but with a real longing for revolutionary exploits? Was its mood firm?
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> There are various answers to all this. It is quite fundamental. Not because the outcome of the movement depended on it – the success of the overturn was assured because there was nothing to oppose it. But the mood of the masses who were to act is important because in the eyes of history this is what determined the *character* of the overturn.
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> Personally, as a witness and participant in the events, I have no single answer. *There were various moods*. The only common ones were hatred for 'Kerenskyism,' fatigue, rage, and a desire for peace, bread, and land [...]. During just these weeks I, more than ever before, made the rounds of the factories and spoke to the 'masses.' I had the definite impression that the mood was ambiguous, conditional. The Coalition and the status quo could no longer be endured; but whether it was necessary to come out, or necessary to pass through an uprising, was not clearly known. Many well remembered the July Days. What if once again nothing came of it?
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> I'm speaking of the mood of the average rank-and-filer. That doesn't mean that the Bolsheviks could not have assembled, summoned, and launched into battle as many revolutionary battalions as they wanted. On the contrary: they had a sufficient number of advanced, active cadres ready for sacrifice. The most reliable were the workers and their Red Guard; then the sailors. There was enough fighting material. But good-quality fighting material made up a small part of the Bolshevik following at this time. On the average, the mood was strongly Bolshevik, but rather slack and wavering with respect to action and a rising.[35]

The question, then, is how best to understand the relation between the party's membership and the wider mass of the population. What kind of mandate did the party enjoy, when it made its decisive push for sovereign power?

This question divided the Bolshevik Central Committee itself, during and after its decisive meeting on 10 October. Arguing against Lenin and the majority's push for an

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[31] The party 'remained such', Bettelheim adds, 'as long as it maintained these ties and also continued to be the carrier of proletarian ideology and practice' – which is to say, as long as it prioritised mass participation and proletarian egalitarianism over top-down managerialism (Bettelheim 1976, p. 92).
[32] Ferro 1980, p. 205.
[33] Mandel 2016; Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 173, 195-201; cf. pp. 212-3.
[34] Lenin, 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Central Committee,' 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 188, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm.
[35] Sukhanov 1962, p. 558.

immediate uprising, Kamenev and Zinoviev thought it was essential to delay any decision about a further attempt at insurrection until the question could be openly discussed and decided by the full Second Congress of Soviets, if not by the Constituent Assembly. So momentous a decision shouldn't just be *for* the people, it should be decided and undertaken *by* the people, or at least by their most representative organisations. In the letter they wrote soon after they lost this argument with their comrades, their rejoinder turned precisely on the question of majority support: 'We are told [by Lenin]: (1) that the majority of the people of Russia is already with us, and (2) that the majority of the international proletariat is with us. Alas! – neither the one nor the other is true, and this is the crux of the entire situation.' Kamenev and Zinoviev persisted, in other words, with the strategy the party had adopted back in April: until they had won a sufficiently clear popular or majoritarian mandate to rule, the priority should remain one of persuasion and patient explanation. As they saw it, the people were not yet ready and willing to make a decisive push.

> The forces of the proletarian party are, of course, very substantial, but the decisive question is, is the sentiment among the workers and soldiers of the capital really such that they see salvation only in street fighting, that they are impatient to go into the streets? No. There is no such sentiment. Even those in favour of the uprising state that the sentiment of the masses of workers and soldiers is not at all even like their sentiments upon the eve of July 3.[36]

Pinning their hopes instead on the combined legitimacy of the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly, their short-term outlook remained remarkably modest, anticipating that with energetic work and 'correct tactics we can get a third and even more of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.'[37] This was not at all a recipe for imminent one-party rule.

After reviewing the range of grassroots political opinion in September, anti-Bolshevik historians like Ferro and Anweiler broadly corroborate the Kamenev-Zinoviev assessment of the situation. Anweiler concludes that 'resistance against immediate insurrection continued strong. No one wanted to risk another defeat like that in July; every one believed in peaceful transfer of power to the soviets from the bankrupt Provisional Government. [...] Powerful forces, such as the [Bolshevik] Petrograd Committee, were against rebellion, pointing out that organisational and psychological preparations were insufficient and that the masses were not ready to fight. Hesitance prevailed also in many provincial party committees.'[38] By October the growing Left faction of the Socialist Revolutionary party firmly supported calls to transfer sovereignty from the provisional government to the soviets, but nevertheless opposed Bolshevik plans for a military insurrection or 'revolt' as unnecessary and counter-productive.

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[36] Kamenev and Zinoviev, letter to the Petrograd and regional party committees, 11 October 2017, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 60-1. 'Kamenev and Zinoviev clearly wanted transition from the bourgeois-democratic republic to the proletarian-socialist state to proceed by way of an intermediary stage, the workers and peasants republic. For the coalition with the left-wing Social Revolutionaries could have no other meaning. They relied on the objective laws of universal suffrage, which in Russia would give peasants and workers an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly, and they also counted on the attractiveness of the Bolshevik program for the masses [...]. The idea of a truly democratic popular revolution was still so potent in Kamenev's mind that he exclaimed in opposition to Lenin: "Two tactics are at war here: the tactic of conspiracy against that of faith in the driving force of the Russian revolution"' (Anweiler 1974, p. 187).

[37] Kamenev and Zinoviev, 16 October 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 60. A dispute around the party's claim to enjoy majority support was also the principle that informed Kamenev and Zinoviev's next major act of defiance – their decision (taken together with some prominent party leaders in Moscow), some ten days after the successful seizure of power in Petrograd, to resign from the new government and the party's central committee in protest against its (initial) decision to establish 'a purely Bolshevik government [...] *We cannot assume responsibility for this ruinous policy of the Central Committee*, carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers who are most eager for an early cessation of blood-shedding by the different wings of the democracy' (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Nogin et al., 'Resignations from the Bolshevik Central Committee,' 4 November 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 204, https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1917/11/04.htm).

[38] Anweiler 1974, pp. 185-6, cf. pp. 190-1. 'Kamenev not only judged that violence and insurrection were risky; his democratic susceptibilities were shocked by Lenin's ideas. At bottom, he was against any single-party dictatorship, and from this point of view he was closer to the Menshevik Martov than to Lenin' (Ferro 1980, p. 270).

'We were so sure of the utter inability of the Provisional Government to offer any resistance to the transfer of power to the labouring masses,' recalled the Left SR Mstislavskii,

> that despite our official October 7th coalition with the Bolsheviks [...], we stepped forward in unambiguous and absolute opposition to Lenin's doctrine of revolt. Revolt – an 'appearance,' a highly visible violent takeover – seemed from our point of view to complicate the whole situation needlessly. Such a takeover would rupture all ties with the bourgeoisie, including its most radical elements (i.e. the Right Socialist parties), and would inevitably carry us from the sphere of class (i.e. social struggle) into that of a civil (i.e. political) war. This would once and for all drive our movement back into the blind alley of the old form of government, [...indeed] government of the most far-reaching sort.[39]

By contrast, by the time his party's leaders gathered for their decisive 10 October meeting Lenin had already spent a full month insisting that it was the party's specific responsibility to prepare and undertake the transfer of power. From 12 September onwards, he did everything he could to persuade his comrades that '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.'[40] Since his letters of mid- to late-September stood in sudden and marked contrast to the more cautious proposals Lenin had been making earlier in the month, they provoked some consternation within his inner circle. 'We were all aghast,' Bukharin was to recall a few years later,' before admitting that 'the Central Committee considered burning the letters and, indeed, unanimously agreed to do so.'[41]

Lenin now devoted particular effort to refuting the widespread assumption, among the 'political classes,' that even if the Bolsheviks could perhaps trigger a successful uprising they themselves surely wouldn't be able to govern the resulting chaos. Lenin countered these presumptions in a long article written over the last days of September, devoted to the question 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?'[42] Lenin had already publicly declared his party's readiness to take power, in principle, back on 4 June, and here he re-affirmed his conviction 'that a political party – and the party of the advanced class in particular – would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party, would be a nonentity in any sense, if it refused to take power when opportunity offers.' In a context defined by crises and contradictions so far-reaching that they exceed the political capacities of the existing government,

> we must not allow ourselves to be frightened by the screams of the frightened bourgeoisie. We must bear firmly in mind that we have never set ourselves 'insoluble' social problems, and as for the *perfectly* soluble problem of taking immediate steps towards socialism, which is the only way out of the exceedingly difficult situation, that will be *solved only* by the dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasants. Victory, and lasting victory, is now more than ever, more than anywhere else, assured for the proletariat in Russia if it takes power.

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[39] Mstislavskii 1988, 115. Compared to the alluring simplicity of Bolshevik calls to 'rise up!,' however, Mstislavskii admits that the Left SRs could offer no compelling alternative. Under the circumstances 'the logical thing was to make a definite stand against Lenin's appeal for an immediate uprising. Our speeches seemed "doomed", however, even to ourselves. [...] What chance did all our discussions on the "governmental system", "the social priorities", and "transitional periods" have [....], when contrasted with the simplicity and sonorous power of Lenin's battle cry? As I myself wrote in the *Banner of Labour* of 21 October, only four days before the revolt – "It is difficult for the masses, for the masses in their current state, utterly exhausted by their consciousness of a "dead end", to stand firm against the temptations of a slogan which so simply, so radically offers to solve all our problems, all our difficulties, all our vexed questions. You want peace? – Rise up! And tomorrow you'll have peace. You want a world revolution? – Rise up! And tomorrow the world revolution will flare up in an awesome firestorm. [etc.]" We, the Left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, had nothing with which to outbid these slogans. And so the Bolsheviks became the undisputed masters of the situation' (Mstislavskii 1988, pp. 116-7).

[40] Lenin, 'The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power,' 14 September 1917, CW26, p. 18, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/14.htm.

[41] Rabinowitch 2017, p. 181; cf. Serge 1937, p. 23.

[42] Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', 1 October 1917, CW26, pp. 87-136, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm.

The daunting circumstances of autumn 1917 might make the taking of these steps difficult, but at the same time and for the same reason 'the question of the Bolsheviks taking full power is becoming really *urgent*.' After rejecting arguments made in Gorky's paper *Novaya Zhizn'* about the alleged 'isolation' of the urban proletariat, Lenin addressed in some detail 'the most common and most frequent' argument made against a Bolshevik government. This was the claim 'that the proletariat "will not be able technically to lay hold of the state apparatus",' notably its army, police, and bureaucracy. If nationalising the banks and de-facto capitalist monopolies in steel and other essential commodities might seem to pose only technical problems, Lenin concedes that 'the proletariat *cannot* "lay hold of" the "state apparatus"' and its coercive instruments as they currently exist. But nor need it try to lay hold of these instruments, for instead 'it can *smash* everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its *own*, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies are exactly this apparatus.' Lenin's reassertion of his commitment to the Soviets as a vehicle for mass sovereignty is worth citing at length:

> The Soviets are a new state apparatus which, in the first place, provides an armed force of workers and peasants; and this force is not divorced from the people, as was the old standing army, but is very closely bound up with the people. From the military point of view this force is incomparably more powerful than previous forces; from the revolutionary point of view, it cannot be replaced by anything else. Secondly, this apparatus provides a bond with the people, with the majority of the people, so intimate, so indissoluble, so easily verifiable and renewable, that nothing even remotely like it existed in the previous state apparatus. Thirdly, this apparatus, by virtue of the fact that its personnel is elected and subject to recall at the people's will without any bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus. Fourthly, it provides a close contact with the most varied professions, thereby facilitating the adoption of the most varied and most radical reforms without red tape. Fifthly, it provides an organisational form for the vanguard, i.e., for the most class-conscious, most energetic and most progressive section of the oppressed classes, the workers and peasants, and so constitutes an apparatus by means of which the vanguard of the *oppressed* classes can elevate, train, educate, and lead *the entire vast mass* of these classes, which has up to now stood completely outside of political life and history. Sixthly, it makes it possible to combine the advantages of the parliamentary system with those of immediate and direct democracy, i.e., to vest in the people's elected representatives both legislative *and executive* functions. Compared with the bourgeois parliamentary system, this is an advance in democracy's development which is of world-wide, historic significance (CW26, p. 104).

Lenin's ringing endorsement of the soviets as the site of popular sovereignty did not mean, however, that the decision to invest them with sovereign authority should be left to the soviets themselves. Everyone expected the vast majority of delegates to the Second Congress to vote in favour of Soviet power, and in principle it would have been perfectly feasible to wait for this Congress to convene on 25 October, to let them debate the issue, and only then act on or enforce their decision. Lenin was instead emphatically determined to confront the Congress with a *fait accompli*. 'The Bolsheviks have no right to wait for the Congress of Soviets, they must *take power at once*. By so doing they will save the world revolution [...] Delay is criminal. To wait for the Congress of Soviets would be a childish game of formalities, a disgraceful game of formalities, and a betrayal of the revolution.'[43] To wait for the Constituent Assembly would be even more irresponsible, not least since Lenin knew perfectly well that his party would not command a majority in such an assembly.[44] By deciding things this way, Ferro argues, Lenin both aligned the Bolsheviks with 'the most progressive section of the popular movement' and *also* demonstrated that it was the party, rather than the Soviet itself, that was the fundamental initiator and authority of the new regime.[45]

Lenin asked: as the party of the proletariat, are the Bolsheviks ready to address the substance of mass demands, when it comes to peace, land, housing, food, control over production, a national system of accounting? Yes, he answered, since only the Bolsheviks can

[43] Lenin, 'Letter to the Central Committee,' 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 141.
[44] Lenin, 'Minutes', 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 189, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm.
[45] Ferro 1980, p. 257-8.

launch and control a new state apparatus, and only a genuinely new apparatus might rise to the challenges posed by the present crisis. A '*revolutionary* democracy is needed,' one capable of taking '*revolutionary measures*' that serve the immediate 'interests of the poor. [...] For the administration of the state in *this* spirit we can *at once set in motion a state* apparatus consisting of ten if not twenty million people, an apparatus such as no capitalist state has ever known. We alone can create such an apparatus, for we are sure of the fullest and devoted sympathy of the vast majority of the population.'[46]

Confidence in this capacity and this sympathy answers the further and final question bound up in the argument about whether the Bolsheviks might prove able to retain state power. As Lenin pointed out, since the stifling of the 1905 revolution, 'Russia has been governed by 130 thousand landowners who have perpetrated endless violence against 150 million people [... and] condemned the vast majority to inhuman toil and semi-starvation. Yet we are told that the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party will not be able to govern Russia, govern her in the interests of the poor and against the rich. These 240,000 are already backed by no less than a million votes of the adult population,' with more and more people being won over to the cause every day. 'We therefore already have a "state apparatus" of *one million* people devoted to the socialist state for the sake of high ideals,' and not merely for the sake of a decent salary. More importantly, as Lenin anticipates things, 'in addition to that we have a "magic way" to enlarge our state apparatus *tenfold* at once, at one stroke, a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration.'[47]

As these long quotations suggest, what links Lenin's preference for an insurrection planned and executed by his party to his anticipation of support from 'the vast majority of the population' is his assumption that the latter could be trusted to provide, retrospectively, clear and enthusiastic justification for the former. As Lih notes, 'Lenin sometimes talked about the party leading the insurrection and sometimes the Petrograd and/or Moscow Soviets, without noting the distinction. In his mind, the party had been elected to leadership in these crucial institutions, and it therefore had the right and the duty to implement their expressed will in the most expedient way.'[48] Simply to wait for *another* political organisation to seize the moment and act while the party deliberated would be an abject dereliction of duty. In particular, to wait for another organisation (say, a constituent assembly) that might present itself as a genuine rival to the party's claim to govern in the name of the people or of the majority would be nothing less than a betrayal of the party's essential role, as the most conscious and most resolute vanguard force helping to organise and anticipate that majority. As Lenin said in response to Kamenev and Zinoviev, 'it is senseless to wait for the Constituent Assembly, which will obviously not be on our side, for this will only make our task more involved.'[49] As things stood, whatever numerical 'majority' might be represented by this Assembly, Lenin knew very well – both before its elections had taken place, and after – that it was unlikely to align yet with that active or *anticipatory* majority upon which he staked his party's claim to legitimacy.

At the same time that he urged his fellow Bolshevik leaders to take and retain state power on their own initiative, Lenin thus also urged them – without any apparent tension let alone contradiction in his urgings – to trust the people and their grassroots priorities. A properly Marxist (rather than merely 'Blanquist') 'insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*' at large.[50] Following the rapid mass mobilisation in defence of the revolution that was provoked by Kornilov's revolt in late August, Lenin sought to generalise the point. 'Let all sceptics learn from this example from history. [...] Don't be afraid of the

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[46] Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', CW26, p. 114.
[47] Lenin, CW26, p. 112. 'The class-conscious workers must lead, but for the work of administration they can enlist the vast mass of the working and oppressed people' (p. 114).
[48] Lih, 'Bolshevism in 1917.'
[49] Lenin, 'Minutes', 10 October 1917, CW26, p. 189, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10a.htm.
[50] Lenin, 'Marxism and Insurrection,' 13-14 September 1917, CW26, p. 22.

people's initiative and independence. Put your faith in their revolutionary organisations, and you will see *in all* realms of state affairs the same strength, majesty and invincibility of the workers and peasants as were displayed in their unity and their fury against Kornilov.'[51] On the very eve of the insurrection, as members of his party finished their preparations for an assault on the Winter Palace, Lenin again treated party and people as facets of one and the same revolutionary force:

> With all my might I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by peoples, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed people. [...] It would be a disaster, or a sheer formality, to await the wavering vote of October 25. The people have the right and are in duty bound to decide such questions not by a vote, but by force; in critical moments of revolution, the people have the right and are in duty bound to give directions to their representatives, even their best representatives, and not to wait for them.[52]

For the same reason, in the tense and uncertain weeks that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October, Lenin will rally his supporters by reminding them of their numbers. 'Let all the toilers be calm and firm. Our Party, the Party of the Soviet majority, stands resolute and united in defence of their interests, and behind our Party, as formerly, stand millions of workers in the towns, soldiers in the trenches, peasants in the villages, ready to achieve at any cost the victory of peace and the victory of socialism.'[53] We are the party of the majority, and the majority supports us – or is at least sure to support us in the future.

Trotsky, meanwhile, was (or would later be) even more explicit about the configuration of agency that led up to the October dénouement. As the party's central committee met in mid October to consider the timing of an insurrection, according to Trotsky Lenin was entirely opposed to any proposal that might give some initiative to the Second Congress of Soviets. 'We must seize the power, but not bind ourselves to the Congress. It would be the best thing to let the 25th of October be a masquerade, but the rising must be begun absolutely before and independent of the Congress. The party must seize the power with armed hand and then we would discuss the Congress. We must immediately get into action.'[54] Reconstructing the sequence of events in his *History*, Trotsky's attribution of responsibility remained clear: although after the failed July Days insurrection the party leadership had distanced itself from its earlier calls for Soviet power, in the wake of Kornilov's failed own uprising 'the phrase "Power to the soviets" was not again removed from the order of the day, but received a new meaning: All power to the Bolshevik soviets.'[55] Looking back on October, Trotsky was satisfied that as far as the 'broad masses were concerned, Bolshevik slogans and the soviet organisations [...] both merged completely

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[51] 'Lack of faith in the people,' Lenin continued, 'fear of their initiative and independence, trepidation before their revolutionary energy instead of all-round and unqualified support for it – this is where the SR and Menshevik leaders have sinned most of all. This is where we find one of the deepest roots of their indecision, their vacillation,' etc. (Lenin, 'One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution,' CW25, p. 374, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/27.htm).

[52] Lenin, 'Letter To Central Committee Members,' 24 October 1917, CW26, p. 234, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/24.htm.

[53] Lenin, cited in Chamberlin 1992a, p. 353.

[54] Trotsky 1925, ch. 3, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1925/lenin/03.htm.

[55] Trotsky 1932, ch. 36, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch36.htm. As compared with Trotsky, Fitzpatrick confirms, 'Lenin seems clearly to have wanted the Bolsheviks to take power, not the multi-party soviets. He did not even want to use the soviets as camouflage, but would apparently have preferred to stage an unambiguous Bolshevik coup. In the provinces, certainly, the immediate result of the October Revolution was that the soviets took power; and the local soviets were not always dominated by Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks' attitude to the soviets after October is open to different interpretations, it is perhaps fair to say that they had no objection in principle to the soviets exercising power at a local level, as long as the soviets were reliably Bolshevik. But this requirement was difficult to square with democratic elections contested by other political parties' (Fitzpatrick 2017, 142/459).

during September and October. The people expected the soviets to decide when and how the Bolshevik program would be realised.'[56]

Having won the argument inside the Bolshevik central committee in mid October, Lenin and Trotsky went on to win it again at decisive meetings of the Petrograd Soviet in the run up to the convening of the Second Congress of Soviets on 25 October. On 23 October, John Reed attended a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet and heard Trotsky respond to the question:

> We are asked if we intend to come out. I can give a clear answer to that question. The Petrograd Soviet feels that at last, the moment has arrived when the power must fall into the hands of the Soviets. The transfer of government will be accomplished by the All-Russian Congress. Whether an armed demonstration is necessary will depend on those who wish to interfere with the All-Russian Congress. [...] We hope that the all Russian Congress will take into its hands that power and authority which rests upon the organised freedom of the people. If, however, the government wants to utilise the short period it is expected to live – twenty-four, forty eight, or seventy-two hours – to attack us, we shall answer with counter-attacks, blow for blow, steel for iron![57]

When Kerensky attempted such an attack on the Bolshevik party, raiding and temporarily shutting down its presses on the morning of 24 October, the party duly responded by launching its threatened insurrection. When the Petrograd Soviet met for an emergency session the following afternoon, Trotsky rose to declare, as leader of its Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), that 'the provisional government no longer exists.' Confronted by accusations from the floor that 'you are anticipating the will of the second Congress of Soviets,' Trotsky had a ready answer. 'The will of the second Congress of Soviets has already been predetermined by the fact of the workers' and soldiers' uprising. Now we have only to develop this triumph.'[58] When the full Second Congress met that evening, Martov proposed a further motion that censured the Bolsheviks for pre-empting the will of the Congress, and again called for all parties to unite in an inclusive socialist government. By this stage, however, both Martov's own shrinking Menshevik party, and the larger Socialist Revolutionary party, were themselves no longer united.

According to Krupskaya's calculations, of the 670 delegates who attended the Second Congress on 25 October, 300 were Bolsheviks, 68 were Mensheviks, and 193 were Socialist-Revolutionaries. (It's worth remembering that this Second Congress didn't include any peasant delegates per se, as the SR-dominated congress of peasants' soviets had earlier refused to send it any representatives). Confronted that evening with the Petrograd Soviet's insurrection as a *fait accompli*, the Mensheviks, Bundists and a minority of the SRs denounced this 'seizure of power engineered by the Bolsheviks behind the backs of the other parties,' and left the Congress. Krupskaya estimates that around fifty delegates altogether walked out; for his part Mstislavskii saw only 'a trickle of Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks leave the room.'[59] Of the 193 SRs, 169 remained in place, endorsed the transfer

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[56] Trotsky, cited in Anweiler 1974, p. 189. For Anweiler this configuration of agency, all by itself, distils 'the problematic nature of the Bolshevik soviet system: the party seized power in Russia in October 1917 and formally handed it to the soviets. The soviets did not initiate the reach for power – as did, for example, the French National Assembly in 1789. The Bolshevik insurrection, cloaked by soviet legality and nominal soviet power, was carried out behind the back of most soviets. Usurpation of power just before convocation of the highest soviet organ implied the Bolsheviks' break with soviet democracy. This fusion of new soviet power and the Bolshevik insurrection proved disastrous for the soviets themselves; after this, they were merely servants of the party and a cover-up for Bolshevik dictatorship – a role they never had contemplated, and for which they were unsuited. On the very day of their greatest triumph the soviets' decline began, and the banner of Red October, "All power to the soviets," soon proved itself a bitter illusion' (Anweiler 1974, pp. 192-3).

[57] Trotsky, 23 October 1917, in Reed 1997, ch. 3, epub 177/658, https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch3.htm.

[58] China Miéville, 'The Day that Shook the World,' *Jacobin*, 7 November 2017, https://jacobin.com/2017/11/october-revolution-china-mieville-bolsheviks.

[59] Mstislavskii 1988, p. 130. According to William Rosenberg, 154 loosely-affiliated SR delegates were elected to attend the Congress, and of these 'sixteen were from the right, forty were from Chernov's rather tenuous

of power, and then voted with their Bolshevik counterparts in support of the new government's first decrees. Rising to defend the principle of soviet power, Trotsky summarised the whole logic of this most decisive day. 'What has taken place is an insurrection, not a conspiracy. An insurrection of the popular masses needs no justification. [...]. When the downtrodden masses revolt, it is their right.' The masses and the party had aligned in a single force. Led by Bolshevik partisans, members of the Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee 'have tempered and hardened the revolutionary energy of the Petrograd workers and soldiers. We have openly forged the will of the masses to insurrection, and not conspiracy [...] The masses gathered under our banner, and our insurrection was victorious.'[60] The time for agreements and compromises with those parties that had always resisted such insurrection had come to a definitive end.

The actual longer-term relation between party and soviets was further anticipated, however, by what happened on the very day that the Bolsheviks invested the latter with sovereign power. As the news of the insurrection spread out across the provinces, the Bolsheviks were careful to insist – perhaps especially as a result of Trotsky's insistence – that it was the soviets (and not their party) that were now in charge. As Fitzpatrick summarises things,

> at the Congress, the Bolsheviks called for the transfer of power to workers', soldiers', and peasants' soviets throughout the country. As far as central power was concerned, the logical implication was surely that the place of the old Provisional Government would be taken by the standing Central Executive Committee of the soviets, elected by the Congress and including representatives from a number of political parties. But this was not so. To the surprise of many delegates, it was announced that central governmental functions would be assumed by a new Council of People's Commissars, whose all-Bolshevik membership was read out to the Congress on 26 October by a spokesman for the Bolshevik Party.[61]

Led by Lenin and Trotsky, this new 15-person Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, constituted itself as the new government. Given what would happen over the following year, it's easy to see this (as Fitzpatrick and other like-minded historians imply) as an immediate anticipation of Russia's future as a one-party state.

To be fair to the Bolsheviks, however, this was not their actual priority in October. Certainly they would never collaborate with the despised collaborationist or 'agreementist' parties, and the feeling was mutual: by leaving the Congress and then forming their 'Committee of Salvation' in the hope of overthrowing the new government before it could find its feet, it's obvious that the Right SRs and Mensheviks also never contemplated collaboration with the Bolsheviks. Lenin was more hopeful about the Left SRs, however, and clearly went into the Congress hoping that his land decree in particular might serve as the basis for a coalition. As Krupskaya remembers it, he considered the model mandate compiled by peasant delegates earlier in the summer to be 'a ready-made agreement with the Left SRs. [...] We shall use it as the basis for our law concerning the land and see if the Left SRs dare to reject it.'[62]

When the Congress opened, it began by electing a new executive committee, to reflect the current balance of delegates. It included fourteen Bolsheviks and seven Left SRs; the Mensheviks and Right SRs were also offered seats but, in keeping with their general modus operandi, refused to take them. Once it was clear that most of the SR delegates would not abandon the Congress, the Bolsheviks hoped their more militant leaders could be persuaded to accept some of the new government positions. To Lenin's disappointment these Left SRs

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Centre, and the remaining ninety-eight were [pro-Bolshevik] Leftists' (Rosenberg, 'Introduction,' Mstislavskii 1988, p. 7).

[60] Trotsky, Speech of 25 October 1917, in Trotsky 1932, ch. 47; cf. Rabinowitch 2017, pp. 292-3; Miéville 2017, epub 545/654. When in 1924 an embattled Trotsky came to emphasise the ways the insurrection was had been organised, under his direct guidance, 'under the cover' or behind the back of the *soviets* he had a new and distinct agenda in mind (Trotsky, *Lessons of October*, ch. 7, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch7.htm).

[61] Fitzpatrick 2017, 141-2/459.

[62] Krupskaya 1959, p. 391.

initially remained aloof, explaining that their priority was 'to act as mediators between the Bolsheviks and the parties who had left the congress,' and thereby bring about a 'united democratic government.' Since Lenin was already convinced that such efforts must come to naught, no immediate agreement could be reached and at least for the time being a Bolshevik-only government was the only option left.[63]

Kamenev, Zinoviev and three other Bolshevik members of Sovnarkom were sufficiently worried by both the principle and the prospects of one-party rule that they resigned scarcely a week after taking up their new posts, on 4 November. '*We cannot assume responsibility for this ruinous policy of the [Bolsheviks'] Central Committee*,' they explained, one 'carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers who are most eager for an early cessation of blood-shedding by the different wings of the democracy.'[64] Their colleagues Nogin and Rykov simultaneously issued a further and more prophetic statement: 'We take the stand that it is vital to form a socialist government from all parties [represented in] the soviets. [...] We consider that a purely Bolshevik government has no choice but to maintain itself by political terror. This is the course on which the Council of People's Commissars has embarked. We cannot follow this course, which will lead to the proletarian mass organisations becoming estranged from those who direct our political affairs, to the establishment of an irresponsible government, and to the annihilation of the revolution [and] the country.'[65]

As the new lines of political division were clarified, however, Kamenev and his associates again soon returned to the fold, and on 10 December, once they had completed their separation from the main party (and had given up trying to persuade their adversaries to follow them), members of the Left SR faction finally did accept seven positions in the new government. Over several pivotal months these Left SR allies played an important role in rallying cross-party support for Lenin's administration, in implementing the decree on land redistribution, and in integrating the peasant soviets into a single executive soviet framework. It's also true, though, that this Left SR presence had little demonstrable impact on the two key decisions the Bolsheviks took in the spring of 1918 – acceptance of Germany's punitive peace terms in early March, followed by deliberate fomentation of class divisions in the countryside. As we'll soon see, neither decision would be popular in SR circles, and the Bolshevik-Left SR

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[63] Krupskaya 1959, pp. 392-4. As Trotsky narrated the sequence, a few months later, 'the Central Committee of our party made an effort to come to an agreement with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. They were invited to take part in the formation of a Soviet Government. But they were undecided: they thought that the new Government ought to be formed from all the parties in the Soviet, on the basis of a coalition. The Mensheviks and the Right Socialist Revolutionaries, however, had broken off relations with the Congress of the Soviets, considering imperative a coalition with anti-Soviet parties. We could do nothing else than suggest that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries should endeavour to get their neighbours on the right to rejoin the revolutionary fold. And whilst they were busying themselves with this hopeless task, we considered ourselves bound to take the whole responsibility of government on our own shoulders. The list of People's Commissioners was consequently made up exclusively of Bolsheviks. There was undoubtedly a certain amount of political danger in this. The transformation was really a bit too sudden. Just to think of it: the leaders of this party had but yesterday lain under an accusation provided by Article 108 of the Code, that is to say, accused of high treason! But there was no other choice for us' (Trotsky 1918, ch. 3, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/ch03.htm). Cf. Mstislavskii 1988, pp. 116-7, 130-1. Along similar lines, Lih cites an account of Lenin's attempt to win over the Left SR delegate Petr Bukhartsev. According to Bukhartsev's recollection, 'Lenin greeted me by asking "Are you with us or against?", practically in my ear [...]. Ilyich grabbed me by the sleeve and pushed me into a corner [...]. Why are the Left SRs against the uprising while at the same time staying in the VRK? He demanded a straight answer: "Is this some kind of trick? [...] There are moments when any party disagreements are wiped out … Now or never… I'm a Bolshevik, you're an SR, but we march together toward a definite goal. Remember the mandates [*nakazy*] of the people who sent you… We're right at the finish line!"' (Lih, email to the author, 13 November 2024, citing Vladlen Loginov's biography of Lenin, book 2, chapter 30).

[64] Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Nogin et al., 'Resignations from the Bolshevik Central Committee,' 4 November 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 204, https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1917/11/04.htm.

[65] Nogin et al, 'Debate on Censorship,' Soviet Central Executive Committee, 4 November, 1917, in Keep 1979, pp. 68-9, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/organs-of-the-press/organs-of-the-press-texts/bolshevik-debates-on-censorship/ .

alliance broke down after a few tense months. After July 1918 the Bolsheviks never again seriously considered sharing power with another party.

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By late October, then, the Bolshevik membership as well as the wider mass of the people who had come to see the party as a vehicle for pressing their demands were both prepared to sanction an insurrection, if not to participate in it. Anti-Bolshevik historians like Oskar Anweiler and John Keep argue that 'the majority of soviets and the masses they represented welcomed the overthrow of the Provisional Government, but they rejected sole rule by the Bolsheviks,'[66] and it's easy to cite evidence that many soviet deputies continued to hope that 'soviet power' might mean a government made up of all the main socialist tendencies. 'It bears repeating,' Rabinowitch writes,

> that the Petrograd masses, to the extent that they supported the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the Provisional Government, did so not out of any sympathy for strictly Bolshevik rule but because they believed the revolution and the congress to be in imminent danger. Only the creation of a broadly representative, exclusively socialist government by the Congress of Soviets, which is what they believed the Bolsheviks stood for, appeared to offer the hope of insuring that there would not be a return to the hated ways of the old regime, of avoiding death at the front and achieving a better life, and of putting a quick end to Russia's participation in the war.[67]

Such analyses, however, downplay the fact that, with the substantial exception of the Left SRs, the other socialist parties or tendencies themselves all staunchly refused any sort of collaboration with the Bolsheviks. The Right SRs and Mensheviks would soon make a habit of walking out of any forum that they could not dominate. Confident that an all-Bolshevik administration couldn't possibly govern the country, when discussions about a possible trans-party socialist government began in the immediate wake of October their Menshevik and SR rivals, and their allies in the railway workers' union, insisted on conditions that Lenin and Trotsky (and even Kamenev and Zinoviev) couldn't possibly accept – the transfer of all military authority to the city's Duma, the return of Kerensky, dissolution of the Soviet's MRC, the disarming of all workers, and so on. Why negotiate with an incompetent government that was bound to capitulate in a matter of days? By contrast, as Rabinowitch himself adds, in the immediate aftermath of October, 'ignoring the principle that all government power should be transferred to local soviets, Petrograd's new authorities did not dissolve the Petrograd City Duma until it became apparent that it had become a national centre for opposing them [...], and even then they sought to retain much of the city Duma's administrative infrastructure and professional personnel.' By the end of the year, 'district soviets were also left with no choice but to dissolve antagonistic district dumas.'[68] Bourgeois resistance to Bolshevik rule was unrelenting, and by the end of the year residual calls for some kind of multi-party government, of the kind initially urged by Gorky, Martov or Sukhanov, had become wishful thinking pure and simple. Temporary Left SR support made the Bolsheviks' job easier, but in late 1917 the consolidation of soviet sovereignty simply wasn't possible without their leadership.

It's also true, as David Mandel admits, that 'most workers in October were not rushing to join battle. Most adopted a cautious, wait-and-see attitude, preferring to leave the initiative to others.' Most seem to have understood what a transfer of power would involve, and the kinds of opposition it would immediately face. Many worried about the economic implications of a 'premature' seizure of power. 'For that reason, the initiative in the October Revolution fell to the most determined section of the working class, members of the Bolshevik party or workers close to it.' But, Mandel adds,

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[66] Anweiler 1974, 206; cf. Keep 1976, p. 339.
[67] Rabinowitch 2017, p. 314.
[68] Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 390-1.

> the other workers almost unanimously welcomed their initiative. And most continued to support Soviet power in the spring of 1918, despite the serious deterioration of their material situation and coercive measures against opposition protest adopted by the Soviet government. The alternative to Soviet power that the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries were proposing – an all-class, 'all-national' government to be created by the Constituent Assembly, a government, so they argued, that could avert civil war, was indeed tempting. And yet most workers did not consider that option realistic. They saw the alternatives in the same way as the Bolsheviks: Soviet power and civil war imposed by the propertied classes, or a victory of the counterrevolution.[69]

Diane Koenker's study of Moscow's workers discerns similar tendencies. 'It seems clear from the wording of October soviet-power resolutions, from studies of working-class and Bolshevik activist attitudes in Petrograd, that many politically active workers fought for soviet power only as a defensive reaction to the perceived attack on the soviets by the Kerensky government. I would guess, in fact, that most of the Red Guards in Moscow, especially the older, urbanised, experienced ones, fought primarily for defensive reasons.' Even the most militant Bolsheviks in the city, for instance V.A. Avanesov, accepted that there would have been no need to seize power by force if Kerensky hadn't himself forced the issue by going on the offensive against the Bolsheviks in Petrograd. Only an insurrection could now defend soviet power. 'Once battle had begun,' however, a wide range of workers could agree with the Bolshevik position that 'it must be carried out to the end; this meant terror, confiscation of food, and martial law in the cities.' In the debates that then divided socialist groupings among Moscow's workers over the course of the insurrection Avanesov spoke for the majority when, responding to Menshevik denunciations of his party's recourse to political terror, 'he exclaimed to loud applause, "We do not have a policy of terror, but we do have a policy of carrying out the will of the people, and this policy we will not disavow. If this policy means that we will have to send ten or twenty factory owners to prison, then so we will send them."'[70]

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Before the autumn of 1917, it seems likely that few of the growing number of people committed to the establishment of Soviet sovereignty thought that it would require armed insurrection, would result in one-party rule, or would necessarily drive the country into a prolonged civil war. As Fitzpatrick suggests, citing the recollections of a member of the Petrograd Bolshevik committee, perhaps very few party members, let alone non-party members, thought that a transfer of power from the Provisional Government to the soviets would require 'an armed seizure of all the institutions of government at a specific hour [...]. We thought of the uprising as the simple seizure of power by the Petrograd Soviet. The Soviet would cease complying with the orders of the Provisional Government, declare itself to be the power, and remove anyone who tried to prevent it from doing this.'[71]

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[69] Mandel 2017, p. 3. 'The working class of Petrograd was virtually unanimous in welcoming the October insurrection and the formation of a Soviet government. But most workers, including Bolsheviks, hoped that, now that the Rubicon had been crossed, it would be possible to restore the unity of revolutionary democracy. They overwhelmingly supported negotiations among all the socialist parties with a view to the formation of a coalition government. But when it became clear that the moderate socialists, the Mensheviks and SRs, would not participate in a government responsible solely to the soviets, that they continued to insist on inclusion, in one way or another, of representatives of the propertied classes, worker support for a coalition evaporated. In addition, their fear of isolation was assuaged when the Left SRs decided to join the Bolsheviks in a coalition government and when the peasant TsIK joined with the workers' and soldiers' TsIK a few weeks later' (p. 5).

[70] Cited in Koenker 1981, p. 334. John Keep proposes a more one-sided reading of the workers' motivations in 1917. He stresses their panic and 'near-despair' in the face of approaching economic ruin, and consequent tendency to 'respond uncritically to the appeals of a party that promised untold blessings once "soviet power" had been achieved' (Keep 1976, p. 95).

[71] Fitzpatrick 2017, 138/459, citing Robert V. Daniels, *Red October* (New York, 1967), p. 82.

It's likewise clear, however, that if of course few people ever 'want' a civil war, nevertheless in 1917-18 there was a widespread readiness to confront the prospect once it could no longer be avoided. Anyone with any experience of being ruled can see that no ruling class yields power without a struggle. The lesson that Engels drew from his own political experience, and from the fate of the Paris Commune, is one that Lenin's generation of socialist leaders saw as self-evident. 'A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon – authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeoisie? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?'[72]

Nevertheless, despite the stark lessons of 1871, far from launching an immediate crackdown on their most obvious adversaries, Lenin's government initially treated them with remarkable leniency. To replace Kornilov, Kerensky had appointed Nikolay Dukhonin to be the new head of Russia's army; even after declaring his intention to resist the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, the new government left him in post for several weeks – before his own mutinous troops abruptly ended his command, and then his life, on 3 December. Openly hostile generals like Kornilov and Denikin were left essentially unguarded, and on 18 November they rode off unmolested with their staff, to begin the task of mobilising their White armies. As Krupskaya remembered,

> At the beginning of the October Revolution there had been far too much forbearance of this kind. Kerensky and a number of ministers had been allowed to escape, the cadets who had defended the Winter Palace had been set free on parole, and General Krasnov, who commanded Kerensky's advancing troops, had been left under domiciliary arrest. [...] Released by the Pskov comrades, Kerensky had engineered an attack on Petrograd; set free on parole, the cadets had revolted on November 11, and Krasnov, escaping from under domiciliary arrest, had organised a hundred-thousand-strong White army in the Don with the aid of the German Government. The people were tired of the imperialist carnage and wanted a bloodless revolution, but the enemies compelled them to fight.[73]

In the immediate wake of October, it was obvious to everyone that the industrialists, the landowners, the officer corps, the old imperial administrators, the civil servants in general, would resist Soviet power by all available means. Even a strong critic of the new regime's subsequent lapse into authoritarianism like Victor Serge was struck by its initial moderation in the face of implacable enemies. 'It took ten months of bloodier and bloodier struggles, of plots, sabotage, famine, assassinations; it took foreign intervention, the White terror in Helsinki, Samara, Baku and the Ukraine; it took the blood of Lenin, before the revolution decided finally to let the axe fall! This in a country where over a whole century the masses had been brought up by the autocracy in the school of persecutions, flogging, hangings and shootings!'[74] Serge himself quickly learned first-hand, in revolutionary Petrograd, that any 'revolution implies violence' and 'all violence imposes the power of a will by breaking resistance' to it. Once committed to this path, a revolutionary party owes it to its followers to do all it can to win. Defeat means not less but more violence. In a situation like Paris 1871 or Petrograd 1919, 'defeat means White terror, a hundred times more terrible than Red terror.'[75]

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[72] Engels, 'On Authority' (1872), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm.
[73] Krupskaya 1959, pp. 399-400. As for Lenin, Krupskaya records his reaction to Krasnov's escape: 'Krasnov was treated leniently. He was merely put under domiciliary arrest. We are against civil war. But if, nevertheless, it continues, what are we to do?' (p. 399).
[74] Serge 2015, p. 308.
[75] Serge 1988, 176-9/248. 'I confess that I cannot imagine how anyone could be a revolutionary (other than in a purely individualist fashion) without recognizing the necessity for the dictatorship of the proletariat. There has never been, in history, a revolution without revolutionary dictatorship. Never. Cromwell's England had the dictatorship of the Roundheads. France between 1789 and 1793 had that of the Commune of Paris, then that of the Jacobins. From the day when working-class militants of any tendency, leading the masses, overthrow the power of the bourgeoisie, then even if they are libertarians they will immediately have to organize supplies for

On this point Arno Mayer's detailed demonstration that any revolution is inextricably bound up with violent counter-revolution remains an essential point of orientation. In both the Russian and French revolutions, he points out, 'the forces of the old order were at least as aggressive as those of the new.' The Jacobin government of 1793 had to cope with foreign and civil war while faced with more or less widespread resistance in no less than sixty of the country's eighty-three departments. By comparison, 'Russia's crisis of disorganisation was even more far-reaching and severe than France's [...], indeed the "objective" facts of its imperilment, both domestic and international, were so formidable that there was little need for the Bolsheviks to overestimate and overdramatize them.'[76] They confronted these facts, furthermore, in a context already scarred by war to an almost unimaginable degree:

> The unprecedented slaughter of the Very Great War merely reinforced [the Bolsheviks] in their conceptual and existential engagement with naked violence, especially since they considered Europe's governors to have unleashed this monstrous conflict as a diversion to unnerve and divide the rising and restive forces of reform and revolution. [...] Be that as it may, in the quagmire of 1917–18 there was no governing without recourse to violence. Abroad Russia faced a catastrophic situation, compounded by centrifugal pulls in its non-Russian peripheries, while at home polity, economy, judiciary, police, and army were in headlong decomposition. [...] Considering this extreme situation, and especially allowing for Russia's ingrained historical-political traditions, the choice was never really between democracy and despotism, but between different forms of authoritarian rule. Any Russian government was bound to be a severe emergency government prone and indeed obliged to resort to violence as a provisional instrument of rule.[77]

As a general rule, adds McAuley, 'in any revolution the struggle for power will involve a struggle for control over the means of coercion [...]. The greater the breakdown in authority, the greater the need for social groups to defend their position against others, and the greater the weight of those who possess weapons.'[78] No-one can dispute the obvious fact that, in 1917 Russia, state authority had broken down to a truly exceptional degree.

Anyone more directly acquainted with the kinds of resistance that confronted them understood that 'the use of the strong hand is the essential characteristic of Bolshevik activity' – 'this is not ideal,' admitted Clara Zetkin, but so long as such resistance obstructs mass empowerment it remains 'unavoidable. It may be contrary to the prescriptions of democracy, and yet it subserves the interests of democracy.'[79] Responding to the pressures of civil war, Lenin's readiness to resort to the kinds of spectacular violence and summary executions that might make opposition to the regime unthinkable 'for decades to come' is well-documented, and some of his tactical instructions during the civil war make for chilling reading.[80] Perhaps it's impossible, from this distance, to judge how far recourse to such violence might be justified as the only viable means of avoiding still greater violence. What should be less controversial is that Lenin's immediate adversaries were a good deal less preoccupied by such questions. In March 1919, for instance, the White admiral Kolchak urged one of his generals to 'exterminate the local population,' while early in the conflict general Kornilov went so far as to declare a readiness to 'shed the blood of three-fourths of all Russians.'[81] So long as the outcome of the war was in doubt the revolutionary party was surely obliged to do everything in its power to defend its supporters against such antagonists. 'When rifles were raised against the Soviet power,' notes Shachtman, it's true that 'the Soviets replied with rifles. No

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the great cities, internal and external defence against the counter-revolution, in short, all the complex mechanisms of modern society. And they cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often unaware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past. On pain of death, that is, at risk of being immediately put to death by the victory of a reactionary dictatorship, revolutionaries will have to take on the dictatorship without any delay' (176/248).

[76] Mayer 2000, p. 49; cf. Serge 2015, p. 308.

[77] Mayer 2000, p. 233-4.

[78] McCauley 1991, p. 48.

[79] Zetkin, 'Through Dictatorship to Democracy' (1919), https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1919/xx/dictdem.htm.

[80] See for instance some of the documents and instructions gathered in Pipes 1996, e.g. pp. 50, 152-3.

[81] Cited in Mayer 2000, p. 254.

revolutionary government in history worthy of the name has ever acted differently. The criticisms of the Bolsheviks in this case are made by people who never seem to have heard of the Great French Revolution or even the American Revolution and the Civil War. Every revolution has its traducers and its detractors [...] who complain because it acted like a revolution and did not deal with its opponents the way you deal with them at a game of bridge. The Bolshevik revolution is no exception.'[82]

In the years that followed October, insurgent proletarian projects in Germany, Hungary and Italy were all crushed by counter-revolutionary repression. In late 1918, Luxemburg's Sparkatist League proclaimed its principled aversion to political violence. 'The proletarian revolution does not require any terror for its aims – it despises and abhors the killing of human beings. It has no need of this weapon because its battle is not with individuals but with institutions.'[83] Such fine principles, however, were not enough to prevent Luxemburg and her comrades from being killed themselves, by paramilitary units following orders given by an ostensibly Social Democratic government.

For precisely this same reason, when in the early 1970s Walter Rodney came to study the Russian Revolution in a context marked by Tanzania's own ongoing revolution, he was not surprised or disappointed to learn about the Bolsheviks' recourse to political violence. If a revolution waged by the less powerful against the more powerful is to survive then it will obviously have to protect itself by forceful measures. There can be no talk of peace so long as the internal and external enemies of a revolution remain determined to reverse it – in such conditions, the only options are either to continue the revolution, or retreat from it. Given the prevailing balance of class forces, Rodney knows very well that 'every time that a socialist state comes into existence, it is likely to find that its survival comes into conflict with some of the principles of justice it would ideally like to espouse. Who can guarantee that every citizen's rights will be fully protected when the security forces take justifiable action in the interests of the state and citizens as a whole? It is well to recognize that the Soviet state was operating in a real world and had first to guarantee its existence.' Any and all violence is regrettable, but if 'Soviet transformation departed from the socialist norms in many ways, it remains a superior alternative to capitalism and bourgeois democracy from the viewpoint of workers and peasants.'[84]

More generally, as José Martí recognised, if 'it is criminal to promote a war that can be avoided' it is just as criminal 'to fail to promote an inevitable one,' and to do everything required to win it.[85] On balance, judges Lih, if the initial survival of the Bolsheviks' new government 'was ensured by a combination of loyalty to properly constituted soviet authorities, hatred and suspicion of those who aimed at overthrowing the decisions of the Congress, and fervent support of the decrees passed by Congress [...], victory in the titanic civil war that followed was determined ultimately by the same forces.'[86]

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The October insurrection had fulfilled the clear will of the people, and if the old ruling class responded with recourse to civil war then the party had a responsibility to do everything necessary to win that war. People who had grown up in the shadow of tsarist oppression, people who had some experience of the first world war and in particular some memory of 1905 and the punitive campaigns that followed it, weren't likely to dispute Lenin's observation that 'major questions in the life of nations are settled only by force' and 'the

[82] Shachtman 1948, https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1948/11/bolshdem.html.
[83] Luxemburg, 'What Does the Spartakist League Want?,' 14 December 1918, LCW5, 598/1100; cf. Linhart 1976, p. 13.
[84] Rodney 2018, p. 182.
[85] Martí, 'Our Ideas' (14 March 1892), in Martí 1977, p. 272.
[86] Lih 2025.

reactionary classes themselves are usually the first to resort to violence, to civil war.'[87] I think it's safe to assume that most of the people directly involved in the life-and-death struggles that began in 1917 would have agreed with Serge's call to prioritise the creation of 'strong and flexible combat organisations.' As Rousseau once put it in a different context, 'the people's force acts only when concentrated, it evaporates and is lost as it spreads, like the effect of gunpowder scattered on the ground and which ignites only grain by grain.'[88] Serge knew that this essential point applies all the more directly to revolutionary force. If it's to prevail, 'revolutionary energy, which by its very nature is multiple and diverse, must be organised, concentrated, coherent and conscious in battle. [...] The grim reality of revolutions is that half-measures and half-defeats are not possible, and that victory means life, defeat means death.'[89]

Lenin and Trotsky had themselves accepted (indeed embraced) the link between revolution and civil war well before the latter broke out in 1918. 'The stark necessity to break, ruthlessly and decisively, the resistance of the propertied classes was self-evident in the eyes of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who for this very reason thought it superfluous to prove the matter theoretically.'[90] It also seems fair to imagine that most people, if put in Lenin's shoes, could have understood the urgency of those desperate appeals for food and supplies that he sent out to local party activists after a few months in power.[91] It likewise seems fair to suppose that many of the people who applauded the establishment of a *narodnaia vlast* in 1917 would also have read Lenin as merely stating the obvious, when in 1920 he wrote that 'The dictatorship of the proletariat means a persistent struggle – bloody and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative – against the forces and traditions of the old society. The force of habit in millions and tens of millions is a most formidable force.' Given the circumstances many would have agreed, again, when Lenin went on to insist that

> without a party of iron that has been tempered in the struggle, a party enjoying the confidence of all honest people in the class in question, a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, such a struggle cannot be waged successfully. It is a thousand times easier to vanquish the centralised big bourgeoisie than to 'vanquish' the millions upon millions of petty proprietors [...]. Whoever brings about even the slightest weakening of the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat (especially during its dictatorship), is actually aiding the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.[92]

As Lenin's party confronted the daunting challenges facing them in 1918 they could nevertheless draw on the much-debated precedents of the French Revolution, and in particular the extraordinary resolve and achievements of the Jacobin government that faced down the comparable challenges of 1793 – food shortages, a war on all fronts, federalist revolt, openly treasonous generals, a bloody insurrection in the Vendée, mass unrest in Paris and the other major cities, etc.[93] The famous *levée en masse* that began in August 1793 and that sought to mobilise the entire population to win the war and secure the revolution, showed what a sufficiently concentrated and determined government could do – if it was indeed sufficiently determined to do it. If in 1917-18 as in 1792-93 the most basic question remained, 'do you want a revolution?' with all that a revolution entails, then in Lenin's Russia as in

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[87] Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy* (1905), CW9, p. 132, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/ep-s3.htm; reprinted by Lenin in https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/oct/20.htm.
[88] Rousseau 1762a, 3:8.
[89] Serge 1988, 181-4/248.
[90] Serge 2015, p. 309.
[91] For example, 15 January 1918: 'For god's sake, take the most energetic and revolutionary measures to send grain, grain and more grain!!! Otherwise Petrograd may perish. Special trains and detachments. [...] Report daily. For god's sake!' (CW44, pp. 57-8). Cf. Molyneux 2017, pp. 204-5.
[92] Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism* (1920), ch. 5, CW31, pp. 44-5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm.
[93] Cf. Mayer 2000, pp. 231-2.

Robespierre's France the answer was not unanimous, of course, but it was decisive. Yes, we do – at least enough of us do.

As Lih shows in his detailed study of Bolshevik strategies for supplying food to the cities and the army, the Bolsheviks came to realise that in some contexts 'the confident use of force attracted support.'[94] Their desperate efforts to mobilise the population in defence of the revolution 'only make sense when seen in the context of the all-embracing disaster of the world war. What reasonable worker or peasant would refuse the sacrifices needed to put into practice the only possible escape from a recurrence of this tragedy?'[95] If wanting a revolution meant a *levée en masse*, if it meant labour armies and forced requisitioning, then for a time many people – and in political terms, *enough* people – accepted these things as regrettable but necessary. Lih is again careful to insist, nevertheless, that both these terms carried equal weight. They were necessary, in the absence of any practicable alternatives. They were also profoundly regrettable and undesirable, since of course they delayed (rather than fulfilled) the construction of a new socialist order, and obliged even its most devoted partisans to settle temporarily for 'deferred dreams.'[96] In 1918-19 the Bolshevik food detachments laboured under the further difficulty that the massive transfers of land that had been so fundamental to gaining and retaining peasant support for the revolution also complicated the party's 'efforts to consolidate power and restore sovereignty on a revolutionary basis. The vast redistribution and levelling of landholdings entailed a decline in productivity fatal for a broken nation caught up in foreign and civil war.' The break-up of the large and more market-oriented estates and their redistribution via the peasant communes among more locally-oriented subsistence farmers dealt an immediate blow to the country's capacity for surplus food production. On this score the circumstances of 1918-21 in Russia were even more challenging than those of 1792-93 in France. 'Like the Jacobins at the time of the French Revolution,' Mayer adds, 'the Bolsheviks were confronted with the difficult problem of provisioning the cities and armies – but unlike the Jacobins, they had to face it all at once, on a huge scale, and with uncertain access to vital breadbaskets such as Ukraine. Given the Bolsheviks' resolve to fight to the death to hold on to power, they had no other recourse than to stiffen the war economy inherited from the tsarist regime which had aimed to make grain a state monopoly.'[97]

As several historians have pointed out, if in the prosecution of the civil war the Bolsheviks obviously resorted to coercive measures – armed insurrection, press censorship, a political police force, suppression of other political parties, etc. – so did their various antagonists, including the SRs and Ukrainian anarchists as well as the reactionary Whites.[98] It's also important to remember that the war-time recourse to terror, which began in earnest

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[94] Lih 1991, 197. For more recent accounts of the food detachments and *razverstka* [assessment] system, see Lih 2023, pp. 141-5; Smith 2018, pp. 224-9, Le Blanc 2017, ch. 7. How we evaluate the Bolsheviks' reliance on forced requisitioning, Lih notes, depends on how we understand the options available to them. 'If we believe that the Bolsheviks had the option of relying on a trained professional bureaucracy, adequate information, or fully equivalent exchange, then we are bound to condemn them for choosing the worse way. Some such reasoning seems to be the majority view among Western scholars. If we believe that the *razverstka* system was not itself the cause of these basic realities but rather an adjustment to them, then we are bound to condemn it less severely' (Lih 2023, p. 142).

[95] Lih 2023, p. 54.

[96] Lih 2023, part two.

[97] Mayer 2000, 375. 'In a reflex comparable to the one that had prompted the Jacobins to adopt the maximum in September 1793,' Mayer continues, 'the Bolsheviks arbitrarily fixed prices and delivery targets, which they soon backed by hard-driving requisitioning brigades and harsh penalties for speculators and black marketeers. Marxist scorn for the free market's regulation of supply and demand probably inclined them to resort to administered prices and quotas, enforced by the cudgel, but [...] clearly it was less the Bolshevik leaders' preexistent Marxist intentions than their preconceptions about rural and peasant Russia that disposed them to consider the mandatory extraction of grain from the villages the most promising way to relieve the starvation stalking the cities. [...] Once the Bolsheviks met with peasant resistance, they were confident that the mere threat of force could break it. The principal fuel for all the peasant revolts, without exception, was indignation and protest against the imposition of seemingly unjust prices and exorbitant quotas, compounded by the forced collection of food and impressment for occasional hard labour' (375-6).

[98] See for instance Sedgwick, Editor's Introduction, to Serge 2015, p. 14.

after the reckless Left SR rising in July 1918 and Lenin's near-assassination the following month, was intended to be a temporary response to an emergency situation, and duly tapered off as the war's crisis atmosphere subsided. Already by early 1920 Dzerzhinsky, the zealous founder and head of the Cheka, recommended – with Lenin's support – abolition of the death penalty for political offenses. 'It goes without saying,' Lenin declared in February 1920, 'that the Soviet government will not keep the death penalty longer than is absolutely necessary, and by doing away with it, has taken a step that no democratic government of any bourgeois republic has ever taken.'[99]

It seems fair to say, then, that both party and people wanted to force the transfer of power to the soviets by autumn 1917, and that a sufficiently imposing portion of the people were also willing to do what this transfer required. But the question remains, and will return: did they want these things for the same reasons?

Who wants a constituent assembly?

Again drawing on the great French antecedents of 1789 and 1792, by 1917 demands for a Constituent Assembly had been a fixture of socialist politics in Russia since for decades. 'Such an assembly had been the goal of revolutionaries since the 1870s,' Koenker notes, and on the eve of the revolution 'all parties now unanimously supported the idea.'[100] In 1905, when the soviets first emerged as a means of organising popular political participation, their 'basic political proclamations always demand a constituent assembly and a democratic republic. The soviets did not consider it their job to replace the constituent assembly but to convene it.'[101]

All through 1917 this remained one principle that all factions could still agree on, and the February promise to hold such an assembly is of course what made the provisional government provisional in the first place. Month after month, notes Rex Wade,

> resolutions from soldiers, workers and peasants consistently, almost ritualistically, included calls for speedy convocation of the Constituent Assembly. [...] The Bolshevik Party had been especially vociferous in attacking the Provisional Government for its slowness in organizing the election, accusing it of attempting to foil the opportunity of the people to express their will though the Constituent Assembly. On October 3 the main Bolshevik newspaper wrote that 'In order for the Constituent Assembly to take place [...] in order for decisions of the Constituent Assembly to be fulfilled [...] the Congress of Soviets [... must] take into its hands both power and the fate of the Constituent Assembly.'[102]

When some of the party's most radical militants gathered in mid-October for their Northern Region Congress, they again ended it by issuing a public appeal to the masses stressing the importance of the imminent All-Russian Congress of Soviets, noting that the transfer of power to this Congress was now 'the sole means of assuring that a properly elected Constituent Assembly would be convened without further delays.'[103]

The decision to hold immediate elections for the assembly was widely considered to be so important that it was included as one of the four pivotal decrees (along with decrees on peace, land and the formation of a new government) duly pronounced by this Second Congress on 26 October. Until then, Ferro argues, 'the leading groups of the Bolshevik party had no plan for their own metamorphosis into an apparatus of state,' and though the initial list of people's commissars were all Bolsheviks 'this was universally thought to be provisional,

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[99] Lenin, 'Speech at the Fourth Conference of Gubernia Extraordinary Commissions,' 6 February 1920, CW42, p. 167, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/feb/06.htm; cf. CW30, pp. 327-8.
[100] Koenker 1981, p. 240.
[101] Anweiler 1974, p. 63.
[102] Wade 2017, 276.
[103] Rabinowitch 2017, p. 214.

because the constituent assembly, as sovereign body, would oblige the victors to form a representative socialist regime.'[104] During the week of street fighting that decided the outcome of October in Moscow, Koenker likewise shows that 'most participants joined the fighting out of a conviction that the very revolution depended on it.' Victory for the right, for Kerensky and the army generals, 'would certainly destroy any chance for a democratic government of soviets or anything else that the Constituent Assembly might create. What was to be done with the victory won in the streets was something else entirely, and many participants believed this question was for the Constituent Assembly to decide.' Announcing the seizure of power in Petrograd on 26 October, the main headline of the Bolsheviks' Moscow paper again insisted on the point: 'The Convocation of the Constituent Assembly Is Guaranteed: Power has been Transferred to the Soviets.'[105] Back in Petrograd, when the city's Bolshevik Committee met on 8 November it was agreed that questions about possible conflicts between the Assembly and the Soviets should be put to one side, and that 'mounting the strongest possible campaign and holding the elections as scheduled were essential and deserved highest priority. Therefore, attention turned to maximizing the Bolshevik vote so that it would, in V. Volodarskii's words, "reflect the will of workers, soldiers, and peasants."'[106] 'If the Constituent Assembly should go against the will of the people,' Volodarskii warned, 'the question of a new insurrection would arise.'[107]

Conducted over the second half of November, the elections to this long-awaited assembly were the most inclusive in Russian history. Of the votes cast, on a turn-out of 64%, the great majority were won by socialist parties (with 38% going to the SRs, 24% to the Bolsheviks, 13% to a Ukrainian socialist party and only 3% to the Mensheviks); the once-eminent liberal-bourgeois Kadet party won a mere 4.6%.[108] It's obvious that the SR's overall plurality resulted from their relative popularity in the countryside, but as Fitzpatrick recognises 'there was a certain ambiguity in this. The peasants were probably single-issue voters, and the SR and Bolshevik programmes on the land were virtually identical.'[109] The most thorough study of the election shows, among other things, that while on balance the peasants tended to vote SR, the more they knew about Bolshevik proposals (i.e. the closer they lived to garrisons, cities, and railway stations) the more likely they were to split their vote between the two parties. The general result was consistent with the 'thoroughly revolutionary character of the country,' Oliver Radkey concludes, and it also anticipated the eventual outcome of the civil war. 'It reflected no momentary aberration on the part of the population but rather the broadness, depth, and power of the revolution set off against the weakness of its foes.'[110] The allocation of 38% support to the SRs is further complicated by the fact that, by late October but before many of the electoral lists were published, the party had split into a majority Left (or Bolshevik-supporting) faction and a minoritarian Right or anti-Bolshevik faction. (As Smith calculates things, incidentally, the Bolsheviks' tally of 24% may also have 'represented the peak of popular support for the party. Hereafter they lost support as soldiers returned to their villages and as worker disaffection grew.'[111])

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[104] Ferro 1980, p. 212
[105] Koenker 1981, pp. 240, 332.
[106] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 63.
[107] Volodarskii, speech of 8 November 1917, cited in Steinberg 2001, p. 262.
[108] Cf. Radkey 1989, pp. 148-60; the pertinent *Wikipedia* page has a detailed summary of the results, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1917_Russian_Constituent_Assembly_election. In Petrograd turnout was close to 80%, and the clear winners were the Bolsheviks with 45% of the vote (and total domination in the main working class districts), followed by the Kadets with 26%, the SRs with 16%, and the Mensheviks with 5%. Commenting on the city's electoral results, a disappointed correspondent for Gorky's paper *Novaia Zhizn'* recognised that, 'however we may feel about it, we cannot but admit one thing: even with respect to the Constituent Assembly, the workers of Petrograd recognize the Bolsheviks as their leaders and spokesmen for their class interests' (cited in Rabinowitch 2008, p. 69; cf. McCauley 1991, pp. 76-81).
[109] Fitzpatrick 2017, 147/459.
[110] Radkey 1989, pp. 102, 114.
[111] Smith 2002, p. 44.

As late as 20 November Alexei Rykov, speaking for the Bolsheviks in the Moscow soviet, confirmed that 'the Bolsheviks guaranteed free elections and would surrender power to the constituent assembly.'[112] On 26 October Lenin himself had assured murmuring voices in the Second Congress that 'even in the peasants continue to follow the Socialist-Revolutionaries, even if they give this party a majority in the Constituent Assembly, we shall still say – what of it?'[113]

When this long-awaited assembly duly met a couple of months later, however, it was immediately denounced as an intolerable threat to the new government and only allowed to meet for a single futile day. By that stage the Kadet party had already been outlawed and its leaders arrested for helping to organise a demonstration for the defence of the Constituent Assembly, back on 28 November.[114] Lenin had by now already devoted a good deal of effort to exposing the ways a necessarily oligarchic class like the bourgeoisie might try to dress up as 'democratic' those electoral forms that merely disguise 'the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the dictatorship of the exploiters over the working people.' Confronted with the enticing but deceitful facades of 'the democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, general elections, etc.,' the party's responsibility was to expose the 'frank and straightforward truth,' and show how these electoral forms are no substitute for 'the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital.' The real priority remained, by all means necessary, the replacement of 'democracy for the rich by democracy for the poor. This means replacing freedom of assembly and the press for the minority, for the exploiters, by freedom of assembly and the press for the majority of the population, for the working people. This means a gigantic, world-historic extension of democracy, its transformation from falsehood into truth.'[115]

Lenin conceded that 'in relation to the [openly oligarchic] provisional government the Constituent Assembly represented, or might have represented, progress.' Such an assembly would have been a step forward in the stifled spring or summer of 1917. But now, as 1917 drew to a close, and 'in relation to the regime of the Soviets, and with the existing electoral lists, it will inevitably mean retrogression.'[116] As Lenin had explained back in 1912, no-one who truly 'understands the tasks of the class' should ever agree to restrict the struggle for its hegemony 'to an arena, the bounds, forms and shape of which are determined or permitted by the liberals.'[117] The point was always to win the struggle for proletarian hegemony on its own terms, and this is precisely what the transfer of power to the soviets in October 1917 was intended to accomplish.

Given the now-established fact and achievement of Soviet power, the Constituent Assembly was doomed as soon as the results of its elections were announced. Why? Because nothing less than the principle of sovereign i.e. *undivided* power was now at stake, along with its zero-sum logic. In the weeks before the assembly was due to meet, notes Mark Steinberg, 'the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* had been regularly putting forward the argument that "democracies never unconditionally bow before representative assemblies," and that "the Russian labouring classes cannot and will not hand over their rights and their power to any parliament, even if it calls itself the Constituent Assembly." The true "sovereign of the Russian land," according to this view, was not the assembly "but the labouring people itself," which would recognize the authority of the assembly "only insofar as it carries out the will of

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[112] Rykov, paraphrased in Anweiler 1974, pp. 212-3.

[113] https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm. Here again Lenin remained broadly consistent with his earlier positions. As he wrote back in 1903, 'the peasants will never receive anything good until they take their affairs into their own hands, until they obtain complete equality of rights and complete liberty. If the peasants want their land to be communal, no one will dare to interfere with them [...]; let no official dare poke his nose into the communal affairs of the peasants' (Lenin, *To the Rural Poor*, ch. 6, CW6, p. 412, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1903/rp/6.htm).

[114] Figes 1997, pp. 509-10; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 65ff.

[115] Lenin, '"Democracy" and Dictatorship', December 1918, CW28, pp. 370-1; cf. CW28, p. 249.

[116] Trotsky 1925, pp. 105–6, cited in Cliff 1978, p. 31.

[117] Lenin, 'Fundamental Problems of the Election Campaign' §7, January 1912, CW17, p. 422, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/fuprelca/vii.htm.

the working people, serves their interests, and defends their conquests.'"[118] Though the convening of such an assembly had been 'the dream of revolutionary democracy for such a long time,' observed the Left SR leader Mstislavskii, by the time it met it was 'helpless' and 'already quite "dead" [...]: how could one have expected any "surprises" from a corpse?' It was dead because it had no means of bridging the naked class conflict that now defined Russian politics. The working class had taken power in October, and by doing so had *already* resolved the issue of constituent power. Whatever it might promise, by the very fact of its convening, a would-be constituent assembly could only serve to challenge this outcome – but it had no effective means of doing so.

> If the Assembly should decide, contrary to all expectations, in favour of labour, the bourgeoisie would protest, while if it should favour the bourgeoisie, the labouring people would reject its decision. There was no 'middle ground' here; the abyss separating the classes had opened up too radically to be bridged. [...] Is it any wonder then that those very same workers and soldiers who ten months ago demanded the immediate convocation of the Constituent Assembly as the surest, and least harmful means for the reconstruction of a new Russia – as one of their basic revolutionary aims – should now turn, and with equal conviction, in the name of that same revolution, tell the adherents of the Assembly: 'You're too late.'[119]

As Mary McAuley explains, the question came down to a simple choice between a workers' government on the one hand and restoration of aristocratic or bourgeois rule on the other. In a situation as polarised as that of Russia in the autumn of 1917,

> the hope that democratic elections could resolve the struggle for power, could harmonize the demands coming from the poor and from the privileged, proved illusory. The former were demanding equality, an end to privilege, the guarantee of work, a decent wage, a share in decision-making; the latter, even those anxious to see an end to the poverty and suffering, wanted a society in which, at the very least, the educated retained their social and material privileges. [...] While we may wish it could have been otherwise, we must recognize that at such a time there was no way a democratically elected Assembly could have agreed upon a constitution, let alone one that guaranteed a democratic future.[120]

In January 1918 the most essential question remained the same as October or August 1917: which class was to rule Russia? In January this question was now posed, moreover, in a context marked by life-and-death debates over a separate peace with Germany and escalation of conflict with Kornilov, Kaledin and the other counter-revolutionary generals. 'Given this primacy of absolute enmity between Reds and Whites,' notes Arno Mayer, 'the peremptory dismissal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 was of marginal consequence' for *both* sides of the brewing civil war.[121] Lenin knew this very well, and at a meeting of the Soviet's Central Executive Committee on 14 December he anticipated the dénouement:

> If the Constituent Assembly is considered [in the abstract] and apart from the atmosphere of class struggle which has reached the point of civil war, then there is no institution expressing more perfectly the will of the people. But to do that is to live in a dream-world. The Constituent Assembly will have to act in the midst of civil war. We are asked to call the Constituent Assembly as originally conceived. This will never happen. It was conceived against the people and we carried out the insurrection to make certain that it will not be used against the people. [...] When a revolutionary class is struggling against the propertied classes which offer resistance, that resistance has to be suppressed, and we shall suppress it by the same methods by which the propertied classes suppressed the proletariat. New methods have not been invented yet.[122]

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[118] *Izvestiia* no. 242, 2 December 1917, cited in Steinberg 2001, p. 267.
[119] Mstislavskii 1988, 135-6, citing Mstislavskii, 'From the February Revolt to the Constituent Assembly,' *The Banner of Labour* no. 3, 5 January 1918.
[120] McCauley 1991, pp. 75, 83. 'To choose a government on the basis of open, free elections is a practice to be desired, an aim to be pursued, but, at a time of revolution-when the fight for control over the means of coercion is in full swing, and when the demands from within society are irreconcilable-it cannot but become a discarded dream' (p. 75).
[121] Mayer 2000, pp. 231-2.
[122] Lenin, 14 December 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 361-2.

When it finally met in Petrograd on 5 January 1918, Lenin's strategy for eliminating the assembly as a rival to soviet sovereignty worked perfectly. Soon after the session convened his party proposed a motion calling on the assembly to recognise 'The Rights of the Working People.' This began by proclaiming Russia to be a 'republic of Soviets of workers, soldiers and Peasants Deputies,' in which 'all power centrally and locally is vested in the Soviets'; it concluded by asserting that 'power must be vested wholly and entirely in the working people and their authorised representatives.' Since to accept these principles would effectively reduce the status of the assembly from 'constituent' to 'advisory,' the SR majority rallied to defeat the Bolshevik motion 237 to 146. This in turn allowed the Bolshevik leadership, in the name of their Soviet republic, to denounce the assembly as counter-revolutionary and walk out. 'In its endeavour to carry out the will of the great majority of Russia's labouring classes,' declared Raskonikov on behalf of the Bolsheviks, 'the All-Russian Central Executive Committee has recommended to the Constituent Assembly that it accept the expression of this will as law. This, however, the majority of the Constituent Assembly, influenced by the bourgeoisie, has refused to do and has thereby challenged the Russian toilers. [...] We do not intend to shield the enemies of the people in their criminal acts, and we hereby [...] withdraw from this Constituent Assembly so as to leave it to the Soviet Government to decide finally what attitude it shall take toward the counter-revolutionary section of the Constituent Assembly.'[123]

Thus authorised, the Soviet Government duly decided to shutter the assembly with immediate effect. Shachtman summarises the gist of what happened: 'The Bolsheviks, along with the Left SR, did indeed disperse the Constituent Assembly. But *this means that they refused to disperse or dissolve the revolutionary workers' and peasants' Soviet government* in favour of a counter-revolutionary and unrepresentative parliament.'[124] Defending this momentous decision later in the year, Lenin invoked a 'truth [that...] forms the essence of socialism. The exploited and the exploiter cannot be equal,' and 'there can be no real, actual equality until all possibility of the exploitation of one class by another has been totally destroyed.'[125]

While the Bolsheviks stormed forwards with implacable determination, the hapless SR leaders, notes Serge with derision, 'dominated by a parliamentary obsession hard to match in history, seemed to have lost all contact with reality.' Assuming their rivals would never dare violate the principles of something so sacred as a constituent assembly, they 'would not hear of any plans for resistance against possible Bolshevik violence.' Their 'fundamental impotence' condemned them to irrelevance.[126] From the workers' perspective, adds McAuley, 'the enthusiasm, or desperation, with which privileged Petrograd took up the cause of the Constituent Assembly made the Assembly increasingly suspect: it became "theirs", a symbol of "bourgeois" opposition to Soviet power, something to be pushed out of the way if it refused to recognize the workers' government.'[127] After an unarmed public demonstration held in favour of the assembly on the morning it opened was dispersed by soldiers (who killed at least ten people), there was little organised resistance to its dissolution.

The fate of the Constituent Assembly confirmed the outcome of a struggle between two competing conceptions of democracy. Partisans of the assembly defended their respect political rights and liberal freedoms, and affirmed the delegation of political authority to suitably qualified representatives, the sort of pragmatic 'civic leaders' who might be trusted to arrive at sensible compromises for the benefit of a wide range of social groups and economic interests. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, emphasised 'the participation by the poor in the decisions that governed their lives; their theoreticians held no brief for parliamentary talking-

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[123] 'The Constituent Assembly, 5 January 1918, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, pp. 376-7.
[124] Shachtman, 'Soviets and the Constituent Assembly', *Under the Banner of Marxism* (1949), §9, https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1949/xx/constituent.html.
[125] Lenin, *The Renegade Kautsky* (November 1918), CW28, p. 252, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/equality.htm.
[126] Serge 2015, pp. 129-31; Anweiler 1974, p. 216.
[127] McCauley 1991, p. 82.

shops, rather they advocated abolishing the distinction between legislators and executives, and introducing delegate assemblies and collective decision-making in factories and institutions. Equality, participation, and control were key aspects of their democracy; parliamentary procedures, checks and balances, constitutional safeguards for minorities did not figure.'[128]

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Leaving aside arguments about voting lists and the confusing division (after the electoral arrangements had been settled) of SR candidates into left and right tendencies, it's obvious that dissolution of the assembly marks the end of any lingering Bolshevik respect for the rules and norms of a merely 'formal democracy.' The elections had proved, as Radkey puts it, 'that the Bolsheviks were strong but not strong enough to govern democratically, even had they so desired' – and in this the vote again 'showed the situation as it was, with indications of what would come later.'[129] Perhaps the most influential line of historical interpretation continues to see this dissolution of the assembly as providing definitive proof of the Bolsheviks' *real* intentions and priorities, i.e. their ruthless determination to govern against rather than with the people. John Keep, for instance, takes the point as self-evident: 'There had of course never been any question of the Bolsheviks abiding by the will of the entire people as expressed through the ballot-box. Such an idea was foreign to their political philosophy, based as this was on the notion of unremitting class struggle.'[130]

Lenin's allies, then and now, can always argue that officially-organised electoral politics have often exerted a 'paralysing or breaking force' on insurgent revolutionary momentum, for instance in France 1848 or early 1871 – and also in Germany in late 1918, or in France again in May 1968.[131] Lenin's immediate critics on the left (to say nothing of the right), by contrast, were scandalised that so clear and so long-standing a commitment could be so abruptly abandoned. Gorky, Martov, Kautsky and Luxemburg were all prominent in the chorus of disapproval.

'For almost a hundred years the finest Russians have lived by the idea of a Constituent Assembly,' raged Gorky – a writer whom Victor Serge disparaged at the time but later came to laud as 'the supreme, the righteous, the relentless witness of the Revolution.'[132] 'Rivers of blood have been spilled on the sacrificial altar of this idea, and now the "People's Commissars" have given the orders to shoot the democracy which demonstrated in honour of this idea. [...] Do they understand that [...] they will inevitably end up by strangling the entire Russian democracy and ruining all the conquests of the revolution?'[133]

After the Bolsheviks took power in October, Martov's little group of Menshevik Internationalists made free elections and immediate convocation of the assembly one of their primary demands. 'It was not the task of the Constituent Assembly to build socialism, Martov argued, but to establish a democratic republic, which its majority of Socialist Revolutionaries, representing the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie, was perfectly capable of doing.'[134] When on 11 January 1918 Lenin renewed his familiar evocations of the Paris Commune as a model for the Soviet state, Martov reminded him that 'in the period of the Paris Commune, in the very heat of revolution, all without exception were given the right to participate in

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[128] McCauley 1991, p. 74.
[129] Radkey 1989, p. 114. For the historian Rex Wade, as for the philosopher Etienne Balibar, 'the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly effectively marked the end of the revolution, now to be followed by civil war. By this action the Bolsheviks announced that they would not be voted from power. If they could not be voted from office, then political struggle was no longer an option and the only alternative was armed opposition. Only by force could they be removed ' (Wade 2017, p. 281; cf. Balibar, 'October 1917 After One Century' [2017], p. 28).
[130] Keep 1976, pp. 324-5. For Keep, then, dissolution of the assembly should be understood as a cause rather than as a dimension of Russia's brewing civil war (pp. 337-8).
[131] Liebman 1975, p. 236.
[132] Serge 2012, p. 85 – but compare with Serge 1937, p. 18.
[133] Gorky, cited in Figes 1997, p. 514.
[134] Getzler 1967, p. 172.

elections.' A government that aimed 'to execute the wishes of the majority against the vested interests of minorities' did not have to resort to terror, and since 'elections to the Soviets were neither universal, direct or equal, nor always secret, it followed that the form of Soviet organisations was in all respects inferior to democracy' on the Commune model.[135]

For Kautsky, a duly elected Constituent Assembly should have offered a clear way of establishing the Bolsheviks' entitlement to rule. As an organisation the party had grown enormously in the months after February, 'but did they have the masses of the population behind them? This should have been revealed by the Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks, like other revolutionaries, had demanded, and for a period even violently demanded: the Constituent Assembly, to be chosen by universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage.' But then the results of the elections were announced, and

> suddenly quite another song was heard in the other proposition of Lenin, with which we are here concerned. After he had shown us that the Assembly just elected was not suitable, because it did not express the real voice of the whole people, he declared that any assembly elected by the masses by general suffrage was not suitable: 'The Soviet Republic represents not only a higher form of democratic institutions (in comparison with the bourgeois republic and the Constituent Assembly as its consummation) it is also the sole form which renders possible the least painful transition to Socialism.' It is only a pity that this knowledge was arrived at after one had been left a minority in the Constituent Assembly.[136]

For her part Luxemburg recognised that any form of democratic representation has its limits, but she judged the decision to dissolve (rather than simply postpone) the assembly a direct attack on 'political life of the masses [...]. The remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure, for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.'[137]

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Closure of the assembly marks the moment when the principle of Lenin's 'active' or anticipatory majority rule irrevocably displaced any concern for merely numerical or formal majoritarian support.[138] By contrast with a merely bourgeois or parliamentary republic, the Russian Soviet Republic will be one 'in which all workers can express their will through the soviets.'[139] But does this decision to close the assembly expose Lenin's professed respect for the 'will of the people' as a cynical sham? By the time it convened, and was then dispersed, did the people as a whole much care about this ill-fated assembly? Did they truly *want* it to meet, to deliberate, and to draw up a new constitution? By all accounts: no, not really.

Between the Kadets and SRs' abstract call for 'all power to the Assembly' and the Bolsheviks actually-accomplished transfer of 'all power to the soviets,' the people's majoritarian preference seems perfectly clear. By the time it convened, Zetkin observed,

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[135] Martov, January 1918, cited and paraphrased in Getzler 1967, pp. 173-4.
[136] Kautsky, The Dictatorship of the Proletariat (1918), https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918/dictprole/ch06.htm.
[137] 'While they did not permit themselves to be imposed upon in the slightest by the plebiscite for the Constituent Assembly in Russia,' added Luxemburg, 'a plebiscite on the basis of the most democratic suffrage in the world, carried out in the full freedom of a popular republic [...] still they championed the "popular vote" of the foreign nationalities of Russia on the question of which land they wanted to belong to, as the true palladium of all freedom and democracy, the unadulterated quintessence of the will of the peoples and as the court of last resort in questions of the political fate of nations' (Luxemburg 1918, 467/1100).
[138] Lenin, 'The Constituent Assembly Elections and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,' 16 December 1919, CW30, pp. 253-275, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/dec/16.htm
[139] Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1919), §65.

> the Constituent Assembly could not possibly be regarded as an unfalsified expression of the opinions and the will of the workers. In so far as in Russia we can speak of a popular will, that will was indubitably incorporated in the decisions of the soviets. Was the provisional soviet government to abdicate its real power in favour of the will-o'-the-wisp democracy of the Constituent Assembly? Was the soviet government to entrust the work of revolution to bourgeois hands, to hands that were itching to fetter, nay to strangle, this unruly intruder? [...] To take such a step would have been no less foolish than criminal.[140]

Both at the local and the national level (confirmed by the simultaneous convening of a third all-Russian Congress of Soviets in January), by early 1918 the workers' and peasants' councils were accepted as legitimate by the great majority of their constituents. Turn-out for the emphatically un-armed demonstration in support of the Assembly when it met on 5 January was lower (and altogether more genteel) than its SR organisers had anticipated, in the low tens of thousands of people all told; following its violent repression protests remained notably muted.

Closure of the assembly itself provoked scarcely a whisper of indignation beyond the narrow ranks of its immediate supporters among the privileged classes, and subsequent attempts to revive the assembly elsewhere, by the ineffectual *Komuch* (Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly) in Samara, and then under White military auspices in Siberia, produced laughable results. Though Martov's Mensheviks protested closure of the assembly in January within a few months they dropped their calls to re-open it. If the question is considered in terms of the class forces that mobilised for and against it, argues Marcel Liebman, 'no doubt is possible: the industrial proletariat and the masses it led were against the Constituent Assembly and for the soviets; the bourgeoisie and the conservative or reactionary elements were, on the contrary, against the soviets and for the Constituent Assembly.'[141] Concretely, Shachtman adds, 'the Assembly became the program of every counter-revolutionary inside and outside of Russia – from the Cossack generals to Winston Churchill [...]. Nowhere did the cry for the Constituent Assembly appeal successfully to the workers and peasants. They understood who championed it and why.'[142] Bourgeois opponents to Soviet rule could appeal to constitutional procedures and liberal legalities till they were blue in the face; as far as most working-class people in the cities and garrisons were concerned, to prioritise such concerns was itself a clear marker of class affiliation.

It's easy to see why the soldiers and workers represented by the large urban soviets might resist the calls put out by White generals like Denikin and Kornilov to restore the Assembly, and their insistence that (as Kornilov put it) a White government would be 'responsible only to the Constituent Assembly' as the sole legitimate 'sovereign of the Russian land.' But dissolution of the assembly was met with 'an even more profound indifference among the peasantry,' admits Figes, 'the traditional base of support of the SR Party':

> The SR intelligentsia had always been mistaken in their belief that the peasants shared their veneration for the Constituent Assembly [...]. The village Soviets were much closer to the political ideals of the mass of the peasants, being in effect no more than their own village assemblies in a more revolutionary form. Through the village and *volost* Soviets the peasants were already carrying out their own revolution on the land, and they did not need the sanction of a decree by the Constituent Assembly (or, for that matter, the Soviet Government itself) to complete this. The Right SRs could not understand this fundamental fact: that the autonomy of the peasants through their village Soviets had, from their point of view, reduced the significance of any national parliament, since they had already attained their *volia*, the ancient peasant ideal of self-rule.[143]

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[140] Zetkin, 'Through Dictatorship to Democracy' (1919), https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1919/xx/dictdem.htm

[141] Liebman 1975, p. 235.

[142] Shachtman, 'On Bolshevism and Democracy', 15 November 1948.

[143] Figes 1997, p. 519. According to Smith, by prioritising Soviet over parliamentary representation, when the Bolsheviks dissolved the assembly they 'doomed the chances of democracy in Russia for 70 years' and 'signalled that they were ready to wage war in defence of their regime not only against the exploiting classes, but against the socialist camp.' Smith also notes, however, that while some 70% of the peasants had voted in the Assembly elections they had done so 'less out of enthusiasm for democratic politics than out of a desire to see

The Bolsheviks, it should also be stressed, were not the only party who by late 1917 had concluded that the time for a Constituent Assembly had already come and gone. A similar judgement was a matter of consensus across the range of partisan affiliation in the Kronstadt soviet, for instance, and the Left SRs in particular adopted a similar position. On 23 November Ekaterina Kats, a member of the Petrograd Left SR committee, 'spoke for a majority of delegates [to her party's congress] when she declared that "the Constituent Assembly must take account of the will and tactics of the soviets. In so far as the Constituent Assembly opposes their will, we will not support it and no fetishes will change us.'[144] A few weeks later, speaking in a spirit of self-criticism at the Third Congress of Soviets in January 1918, Left SR leader Maria Spiridonova confessed that her faction too 'had long believed in the assembly as "the crown of the revolution" and that therefore they were equally guilty "of deluding the masses by the belief that the constituent assembly would be their salvation."' By contrast, since the soviets had come into existence as true mass organisations they were now entitled 'to confirm a genuine workers constituent assembly that possesses all executive and legislative power.'[145]

By this logic, the soviets were already more representative and more 'constituent' than any rival assembly could be. They were also, more immediately, more powerful, more capable, more coercive – and thus more sovereign, in all the decisive senses of that word. The Hobbesian argument in favour of the assembly's dissolution in early 1918 is certainly hard to contest. Drawing on witnesses as different as Trotsky, Zinoviev and Stalin, Lih has no trouble showing that, beyond Lenin's own particular emphasis on soviet democracy as superior to any merely formal or bourgeois alternative, the pivotal argument that prevailed in the winter of 1917-18 again turned on the material fact of commanding power.[146]

After the Right SR leader Victor Chernov was elected to chair the Assembly when it met on 5 January, in his opening speech he tried to refute Bolshevik claims that it was unrepresentative by proposing a series of national referenda to ensure alignment with popular opinion. He further 'challenged the Bolsheviks to request an immediate nationwide plebiscite on attitudes toward the Constituent Assembly if they had doubts about its right to express the will of the people.'[147] Such proposals fell on deaf ears. Bukharin instead summarised the real issue with perfect clarity when he asked, in a stinging rejoinder to the Right SRs who dominated the discussion, 'which side are you on: with [the White general] Kaledin and the bourgeoisie, or with the workers, soldiers and peasants? Who is to have the power now? Is what you want a miserable little bourgeois parliamentary republic? In the name of the great Soviet republic of labour, we declare war to the death on such a government!'[148] (Writing in December, Martov understood the basic question in exactly the same way but answered it differently. Responding to Bolshevik claims that their new role as a governing vanguard eclipsed any need for a Constituent Assembly, Martov focused on the relation between vanguard on the one hand and a more inclusive assembly on the other. Should the former aim to influence and lead the latter – or instead merely overrule it, from a position 'above the Constituent Assembly and independent of it'? Should the vanguard aim 'to stimulate more energetic and radical means to the ends which the majority approved,' or instead 'impose on the majority of the Constituent Assembly objectives which it did not want at all'?[149]).

Having closed the assembly, on behalf of the Bolsheviks Yakov Sverdlov confirmed the new state configuration at the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets when it met five

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the Assembly legalize their title to the land. Once it became clear that they had no reason to fear on that score, they acquiesced in the Assembly's dissolution' (Smith 2002, pp. 44-5).

[144] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 73. 'Obviously we cannot and should not lay down our arms and give state power back to the Constituent Assembly,' added another delegate, and 'if the Constituent Assembly starts off by attempting to organise state authority [...] we won't allow it' (p. 73).

[145] Spiridonova, cited in Anweiler 1974, p. 216.

[146] Lih 2018, pp. 73-6.

[147] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 115.

[148] Cited in Serge 2015, pp. 133-4.

[149] Martov, December 1917, cited and paraphrased in Getzler 1967, p. 173.

days later, on 10 January 1918. 'Dissolution of the constituent assembly has to be compensated for by the congress of soviets, the sole sovereign organ that genuinely represents the interests of the workers and peasants.' Undivided commanding power was now well and truly established. In the absence of any significant opposition from the SRs or Mensheviks this third congress was free to proclaim the official formation of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic.[150]

In Hobbesian terms, if not the Bolsheviks, who now had the actual capacity to govern the country, and in particular *actually* to command the use of coercive force? As Lih shows, Trotsky's early account of the revolution through to February 1918 offers a perfectly clear answer to this question. Trotsky candidly admits that October was initially meant, among other things, to secure 'the salvation of the Constituent Assembly.' He insists that 'when we argued that the road to the Constituent Assembly lay not through Tsereteli's Provisional Parliament but through the seizure of power by the Soviets, we were absolutely sincere.'[151] But like the Right SRs, Tsereteli's Mensheviks were now hopelessly compromised by their commitment to cross-class 'agreementism' or conciliation with the bourgeoisie. They had lost all popular credibility in the places where coercive power was most concentrated. Consequently, any government set up by an agreementist Constituent Assembly 'would have been completely deprived of the material apparatus of power. In the centres of political life, like Petrograd, it would have met at once with an uncompromising resistance.' Had their attempt to transfer all power to the assembly succeeded, in the Petrograd of January 1918, it would have been rejected out of hand. Trotsky is surely right to argue that,

> If the Soviets had, in accordance with the formal logic of democratic institutions, handed over their power to the party of Kerensky and Chernov, the new government, discredited and impotent, would have only succeeded in temporarily confusing the political life of the country, and would have been overthrown by a new rising within a few weeks. The Soviets decided to reduce this belated historical experiment to a minimum, and dissolved the Constituent Assembly on the very day when it assembled [...].
>
> The material class-contents of the Revolution came into an irreconcilable conflict with its democratic forms. Thereby the fate of the Constituent Assembly was decided in advance. Its dissolution appeared as the only conceivable surgical way out of the contradictory situation which was not of our making, but had been brought about by the preceding course of events.

Though a regrettable violation of general democratic principles, given the actual balance of material power dissolution of the assembly was an 'inevitable and necessary act.'[152]

The problem with both Lenin and Trotsky's arguments in favour of closing the assembly, however, is that while they might apply perfectly well to 1918 and the wider context of the civil war, it's less obvious why, on their own terms, either should prevail after that. Lih admits that Lenin's attempt to portray the soviets as more genuinely democratic than any body elected via universal suffrage immediately exposed his party to 'the charge of blatant hypocrisy.' He concedes that 'the record of the Russian soviets as vehicles either for democratic consent of the governed or for genuine rule by the proletariat as a whole was hardly such as to convince anyone that they were preferable to parliamentary democracy.'[153] The problem with relying instead on Trotsky's (or Stalin's) more 'realist' or neo-Hobbesian argument, however, is that it effectively replaces any appeal to democratic principles with a more hard-nosed insistence on the 'material apparatus of power.' As things stand, our party rules – so we should rule. Or rather, as things stand, it seems that only our party *can* rule – so our party *must* rule. Indefinitely.

Perhaps such an argument may indeed secure something like 'the democratic consent of the governed' during a bitterly divisive civil war, but once the war is won we're entitled to assess the steps the party took, or failed to take, to solicit mass or majoritarian consent. If the revolution was enabled by the establishment of a *narodnaia vlast*, what becomes of the role of

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[150] Anweiler 1974, p. 217.
[151] Trotsky 1918, ch. 3, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/ch03.htm, cited in Lih 2020.
[152] Trotsky 1918, ch. 3.
[153] Lih 2018, p. 73.

the *narod* in the exercise of sovereign power? If the will of the people was the guiding norm of the revolution, in what ways were Russia's people, having resolved their civil war, enabled freely to gather, to deliberate, and to assert their will? The Paris Commune championed by socialists of all stripes in 1917 was not averse to universal suffrage, on the contrary. If by definition socialism was based on the demands and expectations of the great majority of the people, once peace had been established why should a properly elected constituent assembly pose any threat to a socialist government? If the Bolsheviks had indeed been sincere in calling for such an assembly then, in principle, why not simply delay its convocation until the conditions were right?

In February 1918 Trotsky gives no clear response to these questions, and he refers instead to transitional matters of timing. Confronted by Kautsky's indignant insistence that 'observance of the principle of democracy was always, in the last resort, advantageous to the working class,' he admits that 'of course, in a general way, and on the whole, that is true.' Just not yet. Appealing to Marx's evocation of revolution as 'the locomotive of history,' Trotsky points out that before universal suffrage might accurately reflect 'the will of the labouring masses' they needed some time to catch up. 'The open and direct struggle for power enables the labouring masses to acquire in a short time a wealth of political experience and thus rapidly to pass from one, stage to another in the process of their mental evolution. The ponderous mechanism of democratic institutions cannot keep pace with this evolution – and this in proportion to the vastness of the country and the imperfection of the technical apparatus at its disposal.' Such plodding institutions can express the true realities of class struggle even less adequately 'in time of revolution.'[154] In that case, though, it should indeed be only a matter of time and of timing. If it applied in 1918, *this* line of argument could only apply temporarily. To accept an effectively permanent suspension of 'the ponderous mechanism of democratic institutions' implies something more far-reaching than understandable doubts about the exercise of 'formal democracy' under bourgeois hegemony: it implies that the people's 'mental evolution' might *never* advance far enough to entitle them to exercise sovereign power themselves. 'From the special inadequacy of the Constituent Assembly which came together in October,' Luxemburg notes, 'Trotsky draws a general conclusion concerning the inadequacy of any popular representation whatsoever which might come from universal popular elections during the revolution.'[155]

Responding to Kautsky at greater length in 1920 Trotsky returned to the matter of timing more directly, but again only in order to dismiss it. Inside Russia the question of 'postponing [the assembly] to better times in the future' now no longer comes up, as there will clearly be no need for it:

> When the civil war is over, the dictatorship of the working class will disclose all its creative energy, and will, in practice, show the most backward masses what it can give them. By means of a systematically applied universal labour service, and a centralised organisation of distribution, the whole population of the country will be drawn into the general Soviet system of economic arrangement and self-government. The Soviets themselves, at present the organs of government, will gradually melt into purely economic

[154] Trotsky 1918, ch. 3.

[155] Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' LCW5, 480/1100. It's important to add, however, that Luxemburg herself, only a few short but transformative weeks after finishing her text on the Russian revolution, soon came to reconsider her own position. Confronted by conservative calls for a constituent or National Assembly in the tense and confused atmosphere of the German revolution that began on 9 November 1918, Luxemburg didn't hesitate. Almost immediately she concluded that Germany's own version of a provisional government, led by the SPD 'centrists' like Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske, was only calling a constituent assembly in order to create a reactionary counter-weight to the worker's councils, thereby seeking 'to defraud the proletarian revolution of its socialist goals and to reduce it to a bourgeois-democratic revolution' (Luxemburg, 'The National Assembly,' 20 November 1918, LCW5, 541/1100). Rather than invest sovereign power in such an Assembly ('an outmoded legacy of bourgeois revolutions'), when faced with this choice Luxemburg again lined up more with Lenin than with Martov: if the revolution was to continue, 'the workers' councils must possess all state power. [...] All the powers of the state must be torn away from the bourgeoisie bit by bit and transferred to the workers' and soldiers' councils' (Luxemburg, 'Speech to the Founding Congress of the German Communist Party,' 31 December 1918, LCW5, 714/1100).

> organisations. Under such conditions it is doubtful whether any one will think of erecting, over the real fabric of Socialist society, an archaic crown in the shape of the Constituent Assembly, which would only have to register the fact that everything necessary has already been 'constituted' before it and without it.[156]

When Shachtman takes up this question a couple of decades later he expands on Trotsky's logic and runs into the same problem. After dismissing the Assembly elected in November as unrepresentative, he asks: 'why didn't the Bolsheviks call for new elections which would have made possible the convocation of a parliament corresponding democratically to the political division in the country?' Drawing on Lenin's *State and Revolution*, Shachtman's answer to this question invokes perfectly clear criteria, i.e. the criteria of genuine mass democracy and inclusive participation. The Soviets were more democratic than any parliamentary alternative, he argues, not least because as an institution their popular origins made them independent of party control. 'The Bolsheviks did not invent the Soviets, they did not create them. The Soviets developed spontaneously among the masses and, without asking anybody's approval, became organs for the defence of the demands of the masses *and organs of power*. The wisdom and superiority of the Bolsheviks consisted in understanding the full meaning and social potentiality of these democratic organs,' and 'among the Bolsheviks, it was Lenin who understood them best.' More precisely, the great virtue of Soviet power, as compared to parliamentary representation, is that it is more truly and directly expressive of the will of the masses. For a soviet or Commune-type government, 'the source of power is not a law previously discussed and enacted by parliament, but the direct initiative of the masses from below, in their localities.' And just as the standing army and police are replaced with 'the direct arming of the whole people,' so too state 'officials and bureaucrats are either replaced by the direct rule of the people itself or at least placed under special control; they not only become elected officials, but are also *subject to recall* at the first demand of the people; they are reduced to the position of simple agents [etc...]. This, and this alone, constitutes the *essence* of the Paris Commune as a specific type of state.' Having now established such a principled state, calls for a Constituent Assembly simply masked calls to turn the clock back. 'To have tried to bring into life a "good" bourgeois parliament when life had already made a reality of a *far more democratic form of government* established by the masses themselves and enjoying their support and confidence, would have meant a victory for reaction.' In any case, Shachtman concludes, any lingering doubts about the Assembly's demise can be dispelled by reference to what happened next – 'and what *actually* happened, that is, the way the social and political forces actually meshed and drew apart and clashed in Russia during the revolution, shows that the Bolsheviks acted as revolutionary socialists in the struggle around the Constituent Assembly and not like political science professors drawing diagrams on a high school blackboard.'[157]

If those are the two available options then it would be hard to disagree, but Shachtman's account invites two obvious rejoinders. If we are to prefer soviet government over a constituent assembly because the former is clearly more democratic and inclusive than the latter, how well does this argument hold up once the soviets have become mere vessels for an unpopular party with a monopoly grip on political participation? And if 'what actually happened' is to decide the issue then the question of timing again returns as unavoidable, since needless to say the story doesn't end with the end of the civil war.

A few days before the elections to the assembly took place, the Bolshevik party newspaper addressed the problem the party would have to resolve. 'We are confronted with the question of the relations of the Soviets to the Constituent Assembly, and we consider the former more truly represents the will of the proletariat than any other assembly, for if the Soviets lose the confidence of the electors they are re-elected at once.'[158] This argument offered one clear criterion for the superiority of one form over another. Lenin offered other

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[156] Trotsky 1920, ch. 3, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1920/terrcomm/ch03.htm.
[157] Shachtman, 'Soviets and the Constituent Assembly' §8, https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1949/xx/constituent.html.
[158] *Pravda*, 11 November 1917, cited in Price 1921, p. 173.

criteria, when in December he urged his comrades to 'tell the workers and the working people in general this frank and straightforward truth: the democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, general elections, etc., are, in practice, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and for the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital there is no other way but to replace this dictatorship with the dictatorship of the proletariat [...] and establish democracy for the poor.' The equally straightforward question for Lenin and his party is simply this: if these criteria indeed applied in 1917, did they still apply in the wake of the civil war? If not, then what?

Who wants peace?

The answer to this question might seem especially obvious. By October virtually everyone in Russia wanted peace. Peace is one thing, though, and a punitive separate peace is another; an effectively unconditional surrender is another thing altogether.

In the wake of August 1914, Lenin's relentless attacks on 'revolutionary defencism' had become well-known in émigré circles, but once he returned to Russia in April 1917 his comrades persuaded him to make some adjustments. Simplistic slogans like 'down with the war!' didn't go over well in Petrograd's working class neighbourhoods that spring.[159] The war was very unpopular, but so were positions perceived to be pro-German, and given the circumstances of their arrival in Russia the Bolsheviks needed to be sensitive to such perceptions. In the spring Lenin repeatedly insisted that 'this criminal war must be brought to a speedy end, *not* by a separate peace with Germany, but by a *universal peace*.'[160] He is indignant that 'socialists who remain true to the fraternal alliance of the workers of the world against the capitalists of the world are accused of being inclined towards a separate peace treaty with the Germans, or of virtually serving such a peace treaty. Under no circumstances can these socialists (and hence the Bolsheviks) agree to a separate peace treaty between the capitalists.' 'We say: No separate peace treaty with any capitalists [...]. We recognise no separate peace treaty with the German capitalists, and we shall not enter into any negotiations' with Germany.[161] When Lenin came to summarise the 'Tasks of the Revolution' in late September he reiterated his demand that a Soviet government must propose 'an immediate general peace on democratic terms' – but he added that 'the main condition for a democratic peace is the renunciation of annexations (seizures). [...] If the least probable thing happens, i.e., if not a single belligerent state accepts even a truce, then as far as we are concerned the war becomes truly forced upon us, it becomes a truly just war of defence.'[162]

When it came time to make a judgement about just such an improbable situation, in January-February 1918, Lenin instead concluded that acceptance of whatever terms Germany might dictate had become the only feasible way forward. The official decree on peace passed by the Second Congress on 26 October had called for 'an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign nations) and without indemnities.'[163] However, not only did Germany refuse to renounce its annexationist war aims, it expanded them in ways that couldn't have been imagined the previous autumn. After some 700,000 German troops advanced further into Russia on 18 February 1918, Lenin persuaded his reluctant delegates to accept the invaders' terms at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March. Given what happened next, it's impossible to avoid wondering how far Lenin's acceptance of the sweeping annexations and other humiliating

[159] Mandel 2017, p. 85.
[160] Lenin, 'An Open Letter to the Congress of Peasants' Delegates,' 7 May 1917, CW24, p. 373.
[161] Lenin, 'The Foreign Policy of the Russian Revolution,' 14 June 1917, CW25, p. 86; 'Speech on the War,' 9 June 1917, CW25, p. 38.
[162] Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Revolution,' 26 September 1917, CW26, p. 63; cf. Read 2005, p. 181.
[163] Lenin, 'Decree on Peace,' 26 October 1917, CW26, p. 249, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26b.htm.

conditions imposed by the Brest treaty might have helped to undermine that international 'will of the peoples' that figured so prominently in his calculations over 1917-18.

A socialist revolution could only succeed in Russia, as Lenin and Trotsky regularly insisted, if it began as the first phase of a political transformation that then spread to those places that were (economically) ready for socialism, most notably Germany itself. 'Our whole hope is that our revolution will kindle a European revolution,' declared Trotsky at the Second Congress on 26 October. 'If the rising of the people does not crush imperialism, then we will surely be crushed. There is no doubt about that. The Russian Revolution will either cause a revolution in the West, or the capitalists of all countries will strangle ours.'[164] Lenin put it even more categorically on 7 March 1918: 'At all events and under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come we are doomed.'[165] In emphasising this point, both Trotsky and Lenin were simply reiterating arguments they had been making for more than a decade – back in 1907, as the last embers of the 1905 revolution were snuffed out by Stolypin's repression, Lenin had already recognised that 'the only guarantee against restoration is a socialist revolution in the West.' If the Russian workers could initiate the revolution, only western workers could complete it. 'The Russian revolution can achieve victory by its own efforts, but it cannot possibly hold and consolidate its gains by its own strength. It cannot do this unless there is a socialist revolution in the West. Without this condition restoration is inevitable.'[166]

The first question to ask of the surrender at Brest-Litovsk, then, is how far it served to advance or undercut the prospects of this all-important revolution in Europe. The least that can be said is that the treaty severely limited any prospect of the revolution spreading west. By signing it, Russia immediately abandoned a precariously established socialist regime in Finland to a German-backed counter-revolution, and left Germany in de facto control of Ukraine and Estonia (with all their precious grain and coal supplies) and everything in between. Elimination of one of its two principal enemies left Germany itself in a much stronger military position, of course, so strong that the massive western offensive it launched in March 1918 almost forced an evacuation of Paris. Although the over-stretched German war effort did then collapse over the summer its army still remained strong and cohesive enough, thanks in part to such total victory on its eastern front, to see off any prospect of revolution at home during the critical winter of 1918-19. Setbacks in and around Germany, moreover, weren't the only international price of Brest. In addition to costing Russia any temporary material and military support from its old wartime allies (support that, given the circumstances, Lenin and Trotsky were perfectly willing to accept[167]), the treaty also antagonised the formidable Czechoslovak Legion, whose revolt in turn greatly expanded the initial scope and violence of the civil war.

Luxemburg's internationalist critique of the Bolsheviks' separate peace was scathing. 'The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk,' she wrote, 'was in reality nothing but the capitulation of the revolutionary Russian proletariat to German imperialism.' Though Lenin and Trotsky were honest enough to 'candidly admit their capitulation,' nevertheless they underestimated its world-historical cost. 'They did not reckon with the fact that the capitulation of Russia at Brest-Litovsk meant a tremendous strengthening of the imperialist Pan-German policy and thus, precisely, a lessening of the chances for a revolutionary uprising in Germany. [...] The

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[164] Trotsky, 26 October 1917, in Bunyan and Fischer 1934, p. 136.
[165] Lenin, 'Seventh Party Congress,' 7 March 1918, CW27, p. 98, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/7thcong/01.html.
[166] Lenin, 'The Unity Congress of the R.S.D.L.P., §1, May 1906, CW10, p. 280 https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/ucong/1.htm. For his part, writing in the wake of 1905 Trotsky believed that 'if the Russian proletariat, having temporarily obtained power, does not on its own initiative carry the revolution on to European soil, it will be *compelled* to do so by the forces of European feudal-bourgeois reaction [...] Left to its own resources, the working class of Russia will inevitably be crushed by the counter-revolution the moment the peasantry turns its back on it. It will have no alternative but to link the fate of its political rule, and, hence, the fate of the whole Russian revolution, with the fate of the socialist revolution in Europe' (Trotsky 1906, §9, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp09.htm).
[167] Cf. Serge 1937, p. 29.

occupation of Ukraine, Finland, Livonia, Estonia, the Crimea, the Caucasus, larger and larger tracts of southern Russia – this is the result of the "state of peace" since Brest-Litovsk.' Brest thus meant 'the strangulation of the revolution and the victory of the counterrevolution in all the revolutionary strongholds of Russia,' along with 'the isolation of the Greater Russian part of the revolutionary terrain from [...] the most important and vital economic sources of the revolution [...]. The end result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is that the Russian Revolution is thus encircled, starved, and strangled from all sides.'[168]

Further questions need to be asked about the spirit and direction of the revolution at home. It's certainly true that, by the end of 1917, the soldiers conscripted into Russia's battered imperial army were no longer willing or able to continue the old imperialist war with Germany. The Bolshevik promise of immediate peace was one of the main things that had made them so popular both at the front and in the barracks. The Bolsheviks campaigned for peace without indemnities or annexations, however, whereas what they in fact accepted in February 1918 was one of the most punitive transfers of territory in diplomatic history. Like the dissolution of the much-promised Constituent Assembly, in some quarters the treaty raised questions about the Bolsheviks' integrity and priorities. In Petrograd the intensity of these arguments was greatly exacerbated by the government's abrupt and locally unpopular decision, on 26 February, in the face of apparently imminent German advance (and in the midst of an already calamitous drop in industrial production), to relocate to Moscow. As Mayer notes, 'on Brest-Litovsk the Bolsheviks stood all but alone. The entire non-Bolshevik left, along with the liberal centre and the conservative right, opposed them.'[169]

The party was itself profoundly divided on the question of peace with Germany. Initially it split three ways. Bukharin, Radek and other 'left Communists' argued against settling for a separate peace and in favour of converting the old imperialist war into a new revolutionary-internationalist war. 'We have to look at the socialist republic from the international point of view,' argued Bukharin in the Central Committee when it met to debate the question in January. Lenin (along with Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin), by contrast, prioritised consolidation of the fragile bastion of socialism in Russia at all costs, and called for immediate acceptance of Germany's punitive terms. 'If one has no army,' Lenin argued, 'it is merely quixotic to refuse to sign even a disgraceful peace treaty like this.'[170] Trotsky, finally, advocated a sort of compromise position of 'neither war nor peace' – a position which, by taking Russia unilaterally out of the war, would again soon amount to unconditional acceptance of German terms. Trotsky's evasive position won out in a close vote of the party's central committee on 12 January. A month later, however, Germany renewed offensive operations in Russia and a demoralised Russia army let them advance almost unopposed. Faced with this onslaught Lenin insisted that the regime's survival now depended on surrender, and arguably the stakes of this decision were as high as any he would ever make.

When they again debated the question in the emergency circumstances of early March, at the Seventh Party Congress in Petrograd, the Left Communists argued that a mere respite or 'breathing space' would not be enough by itself to renew Russia's military capacity. The

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[168] Luxemburg, 'The Russian Tragedy,' September 1918, LCW5, 508/1100; cf. 'Handwritten Fragments on the History of the International [etc.],' 1918, LCW5, 408/1100.

[169] Mayer 2000, p. 270; cf. Le Blanc 2017, 444/1105.

[170] Cited in Steinberg 1935, p. 199. As Linhart suggests, the central question in these debates about Brest-Litovsk boils down to the relative importance of preserving the now-established Soviet state, in the light of the wider interests of world revolution. On this question the opposition of Bukharin and the Left Communists 'was consistent: they accepted "the loss of Soviet power" in the interests of the world revolution. In other words, they openly said that they expected more effect from a martyrdom that could not be challenged on principle than from a victory secured by compromise. "This is a strange and monstrous thing," Lenin replied: if the power of the soviets disappears, we lose something real, and there is no proof that this will accelerate the course of the World Revolution. The massacre of the Communards [in 1871] did not have an immediately encouraging effect on the development of class struggles [...]. A resolute break with the tradition of revolutionary martyrdom is another of the essential aspects of Leninism's novelty with respect to the revolutionary thought of his time' (Linhart 1976, pp. 122-3).

revolution's longer-term survival instead squarely rested, Bukharin insisted, on a bold commitment to revolutionary war and international solidarity. 'As German forces drove deeper into Russia,' said Bukharin (according to Rabinowitch's summary),

> ever increasing numbers of workers and peasants, battered and oppressed by the invaders, would rise. At the outset, inexperienced partisan detachments would suffer setbacks, but in this struggle the working class, which was disintegrating in the face of economic chaos, would unite behind the slogan of a holy war against militarism and imperialism. Workers and peasants would learn to use weapons, they would build an army, and, ultimately, they would triumph. To Bukharin, the fate of the Russian revolution and of the revolution internationally depended on adopting this strategy.

However unpalatable these domestic prospects must have seemed, it's quite possible that Bukharin was right about the fate of the wider international revolution. But this argument failed to persuade those more concerned with the immediate imperatives of survival, and Lenin's position prevailed by 30 votes to 12; when a Fourth Congress of Soviets was hastily convened in Moscow on 13 March to discuss the treaty the rules of party discipline applied, so national ratification was already a foregone conclusion.[171]

By contrast, as Mandel notes, during these same weeks Petrograd's local party activists saw things rather differently.

> In the Petrograd Bolshevik organisation, sentiment was much more strongly opposed to the treaty. [...] A conference of the party *aktiv* on 7 January voted 32 to 15 against the separate peace, and on 18 January the Petrograd Committee formally adhered to the platform of the Left Communists [...]. The Red Guards, as one might expect, were also strongly opposed to the separate peace. Attitudes among rank-and-file workers are more difficult to gauge, because meetings became less frequent as the economic conditions deteriorated. Nevertheless, the resolutions of meetings that were published opposed the separate peace [... and some] condemned the treaty as a betrayal of the Finnish and Baltic working classes.

In Moscow, likewise, after the party's central committee voted to sign the treat, the local party bureau passed a resolution 'declaring that it would no longer recognize the authority of the CC until an extraordinary party congress had been held and a new CC elected.'[172]

The workers' initial opposition to the treaty was backed up, Mandel shows, by a readiness to renew and reinvent the war effort. By now the old imperial army was depleted by mass desertions and low morale, but all through January and February it's clear that 'a significant part of Petrograd's workers were prepared to take up arms. Meetings in numerous factories responded to the offensive with calls to enlist in the Red Guards. Some even called for universal enlistment. Summarising reports from the districts, the Petrograd Soviet concluded on 22 February: "revolutionary enthusiasm, readiness to fight, the Red Guard is being organised."' In the last days of February at least 10,000 people in Petrograd enlisted in the Red Army, joining the 15,000 people who were already signed up with the Red Guards. 'Various observers from different political vantage points contrasted the workers' fighting

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[171] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 198. Since the Left Communists now submitted to party discipline and withdrew from the debate, it was left to their SR allies to continue the argument at this Fourth Congress. The Russian army was clearly in no position to resist the German advance, admitted the Left SR Boris Kamkov, but the revolution could instead rely on 'partisan warfare and on the probability that imminent decisive socialist revolutions abroad would come to revolutionary Russia's rescue unless they were undermined by her capitulation to German imperialism. By ratifying the Brest treaty, Soviet Russia would not only destroy itself, it would commit a profoundly treacherous act toward the revolutionary proletariat abroad. It would suppress the popular international upsurge that would ensue at the sight of a struggling, perhaps dying, but undefeated revolutionary Russia rather than the defeated, suppressed, grovelling, and trampled one that would be the inevitable result of the capitulation Lenin proposed' (ibid, 205-6). Speaking for the Mensheviks, Martov also denounced the capitulation at this Fourth Congress and urged '"a nation-wide call-up" to resist the advance of German imperialism. [...] Brest-Litovsk, Martov said, was the price which Lenin paid "to retain the support of the ignorant soldier masses" who, war-weary, helped the Bolsheviks to power 'in the name of peace at any price"' (Getzler 1967, p. 192).

[172] Bettelheim 1976, p. 372-3. A year later, Bettelheim notes, Lenin could still draw 'a positive conclusion from this crisis, saying: "The struggle that flared up in our Party during the past year was extremely useful. It gave rise to numerous sharp collisions, but there are no struggles without sharp collisions."' (ibid).

spirit with its absence among the soldiers of the garrison, who wanted only to return home to their villages.'[173]

More immediately, the 'obscene peace' cost the government the support of the Left SRs and their hard-won organisational links with the peasantry. Left SR outrage at the treaty would soon be compounded by their opposition to the Bolsheviks' coercive food procurement strategies of early 1918, and their recourse that summer to divisive Committees of the Village Poor (or *kombedy*, to which I'll return in the next section). 'In their eyes,' notes Rabinowitch, all 'these measures were incompatible with revolutionary ethics, the international character of social revolution, definitions of class and class struggle, and the democratic-populist principles underlying Soviet power.'[174] After losing a vote to reject the treaty (724 to 276) at the Fourth Congress of Soviets in mid-March, the Left SRs withdrew from the Soviet government. 'We regard the ratification of the peace treaty,' they said, 'as a denial of the international programme of the Socialist revolution which has begun in Russia. We regard it as a capitulation to world imperialism.'[175] The end of this important alliance between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs had an immediate and far-reaching effect on both parties, not least in Petrograd.[176] It would not only soon confirm the Bolshevik regime as a one-party state – it also suggested that it might be the kind of state that preferred to put its own interests above those of international solidarity and domestic democracy. Like the Left Communists grouped around Bukharin and Radek, the Left SRs despised the treaty, but unlike Bukharin's group they were prepared to stake their entire political future on its repudiation.

Emma Goldmann's (admittedly partisan) recollections of her discussions of this point in 1920 with the Left SR leader Maria Spiridonova remain suggestive. Apart from the Bolsheviks, Goldmann found that 'nearly everyone considered the Brest agreement as much a betrayal of the Revolution as the role of the German Socialists in the war – a betrayal of the spirit of internationalism.' Lenin's party defended the peace as a military necessity, but as Goldmann remembers it, Spiridonova spoke for the dissenting majority:

> It is true that Russia had no disciplined army to meet the German advance, but it had something infinitely more effective: it had a conscious revolutionary people who would have fought back the invaders to the last drop of blood. As a matter of fact, it was the people who had checked all the counter-revolutionary military attempts against Russia. Who else but the people, the peasants and the workers, made it impossible for the German and Austrian army to remain in the Ukraine? Who defeated Denikin and the other counter-revolutionary generals? Who triumphed over Koltchak and Yudenitch? Lenin and Trotsky claim that it was the Red Army. But the historic truth was that the voluntary military units of the workers and peasants – the *povstantsi* – in Siberia as well as in the south of Russia – had borne the brunt of the fighting on every front [...]. 'The trouble with the Bolsheviki,' continued Spiridonova, 'is that they have no faith in the masses. They proclaimed themselves a proletarian party, but they refused to trust the workers.' [...] The simple peasant mind could not understand the complete reversal of the former Bolshevik slogans of 'no indemnity and no annexations.' But even the simplest peasant could understand that his toil and his blood were to pay the indemnities imposed by the Brest conditions. The peasants grew bitter and antagonistic to the Soviet regime. Disheartened and discouraged they turned from the Revolution. As to the effect of the Brest peace upon the German workers, how could they continue in their faith in the Russian Revolution in view of the fact that the Bolsheviki negotiated and accepted the peace terms with the German masters over the heads of the German proletariat ? The historic fact remains that the Brest

[173] Mandel 2017, pp. 436-8. In the end, in the face of German advances, 'workers who had been consistently on the left in 1917 ended up approving the treaty, while many of the more moderate workers continued to oppose it, following the example of the other socialist parties' (439). Rabinowitch's more recent study of these debates is a little more sceptical of such revolutionary resolve, and stresses the 'utterly confused military and political situation.' Across the capital's district soviets, 'opposition to acceptance of Germany's peace terms was initially high,' and it was especially high in the Bolshevik's own municipal organisations. This opposition faded away, however, once the life-and-death severity of the military situation at the front become more widely known. (Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 183-5, 208-9).
[174] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 283.
[175] Cited in Steinberg 1935, p. 201.
[176] Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 395-6.

> peace was the beginning of the end of the Russian Revolution. No doubt other factors contributed to the debacle, but Brest was the most fatal of them.[177]

As the spring of 1918 turned to summer, and in the face of enormous challenges, the Bolsheviks did of course start to organise a new Red Army to wage and then win the civil war they could not avoid. They instituted universal military training in April, and called up a first levy of conscripts in May. Were similar measures impossible back in February, against a foreign invader? Given how much depended on the revolution spreading west, we're left to speculate whether more could have been done, from the end of 1917, to organise such an army to defend the revolution against the Kaiser instead.

Who wants the land?

'Any formation of a national-popular collective will is impossible,' Gramsci observes, 'unless the great mass of peasant farmers bursts simultaneously into political life. That was Machiavelli's intention through the reform of the militia, and it was achieved by the Jacobins in the French Revolution.'[178] How should we understand the Bolsheviks' own approach to this recurring question, during the formative stages of Russia's revolution? In particular, how should we assess this approach given the fact that, as Lars Lih explains, for the Bolsheviks proletarian leadership or '"hegemony" does not mean ideological dominance à la Gramsci: the proletariat is not attempting to get the peasantry to accept the proletarian view of the world. Rather, the proletariat helps the peasantry realize its own perceived interests. Precisely because of their growing sophistication and awareness, the peasants will accept proletarian rather than liberal leadership as the most rational way to achieve their own goals.'[179]

Over the course of 1917, as Arno Mayer summarises things, 'the petty peasantry seized some 108 million acres from 110,000 large landlords, and 140 million acres from two million smaller landowners. Large landed property was liquidated in favour of small peasant farms, increasing the average peasant holding by about 20 percent and cutting in half – from 16 to 8 percent – the number of landless peasant households by 1920.'[180] While Kerensky's

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[177] Emma Goldman 1923, ch. 16, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1920s/disillusionment/ch16.htm; cf. Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 395-6. As you might expect, the Left SR Steinberg's retrospective judgement accords with Spiridonova's. 'Lenin had been in favour of signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk because he believed it would give the Revolution a breathing-space. The breathing-space, however, did not occur. German and Austrian troops began encircling and crushing the Soviet Republic from all sides. [...] The occupied territories were systematically plundered under military supervision. The peasants' bread and cattle were taken away. Sugar, coal, and metals were confiscated. Thousands of railway wagons crossed the German and Austrian frontiers loaded with weapons and munitions to serve the ends of imperialism at war. It was a remarkable "breathing-space." All over the country men were shot or hanged, villages disappeared in smoke and flame, railways were blown up. The Turks murdered thousands of people in Armenia. Rumania took advantage of the opportunity to announce the annexation of Bessarabia. [...] It seemed obvious that the capitalist countries were trying to encircle revolutionary "Greater Russia," deprive it of the granary of the Ukraine and the coal of the Donetz basin, and bring it to its knees by unceasing moral pressure. Tendencies no less dangerous made themselves manifest within the state itself. The government of Lenin, free now from the check of the Left SRs, tended more and more to become a centralized autocracy. This was the opposite of what the Soviet system was intended to be. The state that now started growing up was on the old pattern, with a centralized machinery of government, and a strong hand ruling over field and workshop. This state did not concern itself with the task of developing international revolution, but restricted itself to building up socialism within its own boundaries. The Left SR Party denied that this had been the purpose of the October Revolution. Since the party's secession from the Government, its opponents had prophesied its rapid decline. The very opposite, however, took place. In every province the strength of the party grew' (Steinberg 1935, pp. 202-3).

[178] Gramsci 1971, p. 132.

[179] Lih, 'Biography of a Slogan,' part 2 (2017), https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/04/26/the-proletariat-and-its-ally-the-logic-of-bolshevik-hegemony/

[180] Mayer 2000, p. 374.

coalition government hesitated about what to do the peasants increasingly took matters into their own hands, and by autumn were seizing and redistributing aristocratic estates on their own initiative – Stephen Smith cites a participant who explained that 'the peasants are destroying the squires' nests so that the little bird will never return.'[181] There's no question that, for the vast majority of the peasantry, this massive redistribution of land was *the* essential gain of the revolution, and it was one that many of them were prepared to defend – against all comers – with their lives.

The land decree that Lenin proposed to the Second Congress on 26 October was directly based on a composite resolution that had emerged from the SR-dominated Peasant Congress held back in May. Lenin studied this resolution carefully, over the summer, and urged his party to adopt it wholesale. SR delegates to the Congress were indignant that Lenin had so brazenly 'stolen' their flagship policy, and in response Lenin dismissed the question of authorship as irrelevant. 'Does it matter who drew up [the decree]? As a democratic government, we cannot ignore the decision of the masses of the people, even though we may disagree with it. In the fire of experience, applying the decree in practice, and carrying it out local, the peasants will themselves realise where the truth lies.' Since Lenin had no doubts about his own grasp of this truth he could afford to proclaim his 'trust that the peasants themselves will be able to solve the problem correctly, properly, better than we could do it.[...] The point is that the peasants themselves must decide all questions, and that they themselves must arrange their own lives. (Loud applause).'[182]

Left to themselves, the village communes duly proceeded to parcel out the land among local families in keeping with their long-established egalitarian principles. As Smith notes, the land decree 'was a hugely popular measure. In the central black-earth provinces three-quarters of landowners' land was confiscated between November 1917 and January 1918,' and in rough national terms 'the average allotment expanded by about an acre.' At the same time, and with ominous implications for the future, the largest, 'most commercialised and technically sophisticated estates and farms were broken up, thereby exacerbating the already lamentable productivity of agriculture.'[183]

Confronted by SR critics at a raucous meeting of the Petrograd Soviet a few days later, Lenin was perfectly happy to concede their point. The SRs 'charge us with stealing their land program. If that is so we bow to them. It is good enough for us.'[184] Lenin's apparent indifference to the authors and origins of a law was not at all typical of his approach to political decisions, however. When Lenin condemned a policy he rarely left its proponents and their priorities unscathed. Anyone familiar with his polemics knew that Lenin was the last person to believe that a Menshevik, for instance, could be trusted to take a reliable political stand, let alone that a bourgeois government might be capable of sincerely proposing socialist measures. As Lenin put it in the fourth of his March 1917 'Letters from Afar,' for a socialist to urge a provisional government led by the likes of Guchkov and Milyukov 'to conclude a speedy, honest, democratic and good-neighbourly peace is like the good village priest urging the landlords and the merchants to "walk in the way of God", to love their neighbours and to turn the other cheek. The landlords and merchants listen to these sermons, continue to oppress and rob the people and praise the priest for his ability to console and pacify the *muzhiks*.' Only the workers and peasants can be trusted to end the war, for the simple reason that they

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[181] Smith 2002, p. 31.

[182] Lenin, 'Decree on Land,' 26 October 1917, CW26, p. 261, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm. After citing these words, Krupskaya characterises them as expressive of essential priorities, rather than as a concession to temporary circumstances: 'We have all of Ilyich in those words – an Ilyich free from petty conceit (it does not matter who said it, so long as it says the right thing), taking into consideration the opinion of the rank and file, appreciating the power of revolutionary creative work, clearly understanding that the masses are best convinced by practice and experience, and that the hard facts of life would show them that the Bolsheviks' point of view had been correct' (Krupskaya 1959, p. 393).

[183] Smith 2002, 42-3; cf. Wade 2017, p. 269.

[184] Lenin, 30 October, cited in Reed 1997, ch. 7, epub 441/658, https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch8.htm.

indeed '*can* and sincerely want to end the war': they make up 'the *vast* majority of the population,' and far from profiting from the war they fear and despise it with all their might.[185] Lenin had long taken it as self evident, for example, that 'liberal democrats, being bourgeois democrats, can never identify themselves with "our" demands, can never uphold them sincerely, consistently, and resolutely. Even if the liberals gave, and gave "voluntarily", a formal promise to present our demands, it is a foregone conclusion that they would fail to keep that promise, would betray the proletariat'[186] In other words, for Lenin, to understand *who* proposes a measure is already to understand the main reason *why* they are proposing it.

The question arises, then, as to how far the peasants could in turn be expected to trust the Bolsheviks when they so loudly declared that 'they themselves must arrange their own lives.' A comparable question would arise a few years later when, implementing the New Economic Policies of 1921, the party leadership would effectively adopt proposals urged by rebels at Kronstadt, in Tambov and eastern Siberia, and so on – while simultaneously destroying these rebels as a political force. (It would arise again in 1928-29, of course, when Stalin abruptly adopted economic priorities long recommended by his Left Opposition critics – after first expelling them from the party).

As all of Lenin's rivals and opponents knew, before the summer 1917 he had never agreed with SR-style proposals to transfer all land to the peasants. For reasons explained at length in texts like *To the Rural Poor* (1903) and *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy 1905-1907* (1908), the Bolsheviks generally preferred the apparent efficiency of large estates over peasant small-holdings. They hoped to replace the villages' traditional ways of working and parcelling out the land with a more centrally coordinated scheme of national ownership. Should revolutionary pressure 'bring about the complete sovereignty of the people,' Lenin promised in 1906 that 'the party will seek the abolition of private ownership of land and the transfer of all the land to the whole people as common property.'[187] When he returned to Russia in April 1917, Lenin continued to press (in line with Marx's own recommendations) for 'confiscation of all landed estates' and their conversion into model collective farms, along with 'nationalisation of *all* lands in the country.' 'Farming on individual plots,' he explained in May, 'even if it is "free labour on free soil," is no way out of the dreadful crisis, it offers no deliverance from the general ruin. A *universal labour service* is necessary,' together with collective ownership and national management of large-scale farms.[188] As Read notes, at this point Lenin still thought that 'the peasants' desire to take over estates should be resisted. Their land, too, should be taken over – in order to equalize "rich" "*kulak*" and poor peasant holdings. [...] Lenin certainly did not envisage peasant farming as anything other than a brake on Russia's progress.'[189] A year after he passed the famous land decree, Lenin himself would tell a peasant congress, with perfect candour, that 'we Bolsheviks were opposed to this law. Yet we signed it, because we did not want to oppose the will of the majority of peasants' (CW28, p. 175).

Only national ownership and centralised management aligned with Lenin's own abiding assumptions about what people *really* wanted, or would necessarily come to want. The party program adopted in 1919 was prepared in keeping with these anticipatory priorities, and although it had to acknowledge that 'small peasant farming will exist for a long time to come', it duly prioritised 'a whole series of measures towards the organisation of large-scale socialist agriculture. The following are the most important of these measures: (1) the

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[185] Lenin, 'Letters From Afar,' 12 March 1917, CW23, p. 336, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lfafar/fourth.htm.
[186] Lenin, 'The Zemstvo Campaign and *Iskra*'s Plan,' November 1904, CW7, p. 503, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/nov/30a.htm.
[187] Lenin, 'Revision of the Agrarian Program of the Workers' Party, March 1906, CW10, pp. 194-5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/revagpro/v.htm.
[188] Lenin, 'Speech on the Agrarian Question,' 22 May 1917, CW24, p. 504; cf. p. 429.
[189] 'There were also concerns, spread across the whole political spectrum, that the large estates produced most of the surplus that fed the army and towns. To allow the peasants to take it over would endanger the food supply to the non-rural population since peasants would use much of the extra capacity to raise their own living standards rather than market the surplus.' (Read 2005, p. 148; cf. Read 1996, pp. 160-1).

organisation of state farms, i.e., big socialist farms; (2) support to societies and co-operatives for the collective cultivation of land [...] (5) support to agricultural communes, the latter being absolutely voluntary associations of farmers for the purpose of joint farming on a big scale,' and so on.[190]

From first to last, Lih notes, 'a basic premise of Lenin's heroic scenario was that capitalist transformation of Russia was absolutely inevitable,' and a necessary stage in its prolonged transition to socialism.[191] On this score Lenin remained faithful to the classical-Marxist orientation he picked up via Plekhanov's *Our Differences* (1885), and which he adapted in his own early polemics with Narodnik (or proto-SR) activists.[192] Both before and after 1905, Lenin was firmly convinced that 'the idea of seeking salvation for the working class in anything save the further development of capitalism is *reactionary*. In countries like Russia the working class suffers not so much from capitalism as from the insufficient development of capitalism.'[193] Whether they like it or not, in Russia as anywhere else, capitalist development will inexorably transform most peasants into landless proletarians or semi-proletarians, while allowing a few of the more wealthy or exploitative peasants to make the transition from petty-bourgeois to bourgeois pure and simple. As a proletarian party the Bolsheviks tended to privilege the specific interests of the poor or landless i.e. (semi-)proletarianised agricultural workers over the more collective (and thus more unredeemably petty-bourgeois) interests of the peasantry as a whole. Though Lenin had little patience with 'idiotic' Menshevik arguments that portrayed the capitalist bourgeoisie as inherently more progressive than Russia's actual peasant movement,[194] nevertheless some peasants were indeed more worthy of trust and alliance than others. If the landless peasants could be trusted to follow the lead of their natural proletarian allies, the wealthier *kulaks* were more likely to align with the bourgeoisie, and to defend the rights of private property. Left unchecked, the 'petty-bourgeois element – the element of petty proprietors and unbridled selfishness – acts as the determined enemy of the proletariat' and is likely to resist the sacrifices required for 'building an organised, socialist economy.'[195]

As Marx had explained back in 1850, 'the relation of the revolutionary workers' party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it marches together with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing, it opposes them in everything whereby they seek to consolidate their position in their own interests.' Still enthused by the revolutionary energies stirred up in 1848, Marx added a recommendation that would prove full of consequence for his future Russian followers: the proletarians must do everything necessary to prevent their bourgeois enemies from rallying the peasants against them, even if this means attacking the traditional institutions of peasant solidarity. 'Least of all is it to be tolerated that a form of property, namely, communal property, which still lags behind modern private property and which everywhere is necessarily passing into the latter [...] should be perpetuated by a so-called free communal constitution. As in France in 1793 so today in Germany it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralisation.'[196]

In keeping with Marx's recommendation, Lenin had long anticipated a two-stage plan for Russia's worker-peasant alliance. As he explained in 1903, and repeatedly re-affirmed after that, so long as a neo-feudal aristocracy dominated the countryside, both rich and poor peasants would need to combine their forces in a shared campaign to overcome them, and thereby secure political and economic rights for everyone. This would require nothing less

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[190] 'Political Program of the CPSU,' 22 March 1919, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1919/03/22.htm .
[191] Lih 2011, 99; cf. Harding 1977, pp. 297-8, 305; vol. 2, pp. 311-12.
[192] See Read 2005, pp. 24, 38; Lih 2011, pp. 32-9.
[193] Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy* (1905), CW9, pp. 49-50.
[194] See for instance Lenin's Letter to I. I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, 16 December 1909, CW16, pp. 117-122, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/dec/16.htm.
[195] Lenin, 'Session of the All-Russia C.E.C.', 29 April 1918, CW27, p. 285, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/29.htm.
[196] Marx and Engels, 'Address to the Communist League', March 1850, SW, pp. 305, 310.

than 'abolishing the old regime,' along with its bureaucracy and standing army.[197] Then, in a second moment, and guided by proletarian leadership, the workers and the poorer peasants 'shall take all the land and all the factories from the landlords and the bourgeoisie and set up a socialist society.' Lenin had always recognised that this second or 'final step will never be taken by all the peasants together,' since in order to retain their property 'all the rich peasants will turn against the farm labourers.' Although there could be no avoiding 'the great struggle between the rural poor and the rich peasants' in due course, it was essential to proceed one step at a time.[198] In short, as Lenin put it in the autumn of 1905, 'at first we support the peasantry *en masse* against the landlords,' and then, once the landlords' property has been confiscated, 'we support the proletariat against the peasantry *en masse*.'[199] Although Lenin was never as emphatic about this as Trotsky, in 1918 as in 1905 he was clear that the consolidation of proletarian rule would involve first a general alliance with the peasantry as a whole and then direct conflict with its richer or more propertied members.

The October insurrection could be conducted in the spirit of Lenin's first step, but a few months later it the party leadership decided it was time to move on to the second and more abrasive phase of social transformation. Now that the bourgeois revolution had been accomplished, the time had come to foment 'class war in the villages.' 'We are sure,' Lenin predicted in February 1918, 'that the working peasants will declare a ruthless war against the kulaks, their oppressors, and will help us in our struggle for the people's better future and for socialism.'[200] In April 1918, Lenin's indefatigable associate Yakov Sverdlov, now serving as President of the Central Soviet Executive Committee, summarised the party's most pressing priority: 'We must place before ourselves most seriously the problem of de-classifying the village, of creating in it two opposing hostile camps, setting the poorest layers of the population against the kulak elements. Only if we are able to split the village into two camps, to arouse there the same class war as in the cities, only then will we achieve in the villages what we have achieved in the cities.'[201]

To that end, in early June, all over the country, the Bolshevik government set out to organise and empower new 'Committees of the Rural Poor,' the *kombedy*, both to undermine pre-revolutionary forms of village solidarity and to mobilise a force that might help the government to extract grain from the less impoverished villagers. These kombedy, Carr explains, 'were to be instruments for the extraction of grain surpluses from "the kulaks and the rich," for the distribution of grain and articles of prime necessity and in general for the execution on the spot of the agricultural policies of the Soviet Government.'[202] They were to give the party an institutional foothold in villages whose own councils or soviets were still dominated by the SRs. Lenin applauded the creation of these committees as 'a turning-point of gigantic importance in the whole course of development and building of our revolution.' They would soon enable it to cross that all-important 'boundary which separates the bourgeois from the socialist revolution.' It had taken the urban workers several months, from February to October, to move from the bourgeois to the socialist stages of their revolution, and as Lenin observed later in the year, 'it is only in the summer and autumn of 1918 that our countryside is itself experiencing its October (i.e. proletarian) revolution.'[203]

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[197] Lenin, *The Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907* (1908), CW13, p. 349, cited in Lih 2011, pp. 98-9.
[198] Lenin, *To the Rural Poor* (1903), CW6, pp. 417-8, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1903/rp/6.htm. 'If the rural poor do not form their own union separately from the rich peasants they will be deceived by the rich peasants, who will become landlords themselves, while the landless poor will not only remain poor and without land but will not even be granted freedom to unite' (p. 407).
[199] Lenin, 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement,' 14 September 1905, CW9, pp. 236-7, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/sep/05e.htm.
[200] Lenin, 'Speech at a Meeting of the Land Committee Congress,' 15 February 1918, CW26, p. 519.
[201] Sverdlov, 3 May 1918, cited Chamberlin 1992a, pp. 426-7.
[202] Carr 1952, p. 54; cf. Chamberlin, 1992b, pp. 43-5.
[203] Lenin, 1918, cited in Carr 1952, p. 55.

For their part, drawing on their much longer and deeper history of organisation in the countryside, the Left SRs condemned these new policies as misguided and counterproductive. 'You in the capital cannot possibly know what is called "bourgeoisie" in the villages. Beware of what will follow if armed dictators descend upon the villages.'[204] Attuned as he is to the delicate rapport between mass and party initiatives in the countryside, Linhart likewise sees in the creation of the kombedy a fateful shift in Bolshevik priorities. These committees were not instituted as the result of mass pressure from below but rather as an instrument to be manipulated from above. 'From this moment on, Soviet agrarian policy is no longer based on the revolutionary movement of the rural masses.' The kombedy were instituted in June 1918 as one of several components of the party's general strategy for requisitioning grain and combatting famine: they 'did not emerge from the development of the class struggle in the countryside' and so remained an 'artificial organisation, not a mass creation. From this first attempt in 1918, the revolution in the countryside was a revolution from above, an imported revolution. This characteristic was to be repeated during the collectivisation of 1929.'[205]

In the summer of 1918, of Russia's fifteen million peasant families, Lenin estimated that around two thirds could be classified as 'poor peasants who live by selling their labour power, or who are in bondage to the rich, or who lack grain surpluses and have been most impoverished by the burdens of war. About three million must be regarded as middle peasants, while barely two million consist of kulaks, rich peasants, grain profiteers.' Lenin castigated the latter 'as rabid foes of the Soviet government' and called the struggle 'against the kulaks the last, decisive fight.' As this fight intensified he derided them as 'bloodsuckers who have grown rich on the want suffered by the people in the war,' 'spiders who have grown fat at the expense of the peasants ruined by the war,' 'leeches who have sucked the blood of the working people and grown richer as the workers in the cities and factories starved,' etc. 'Ruthless war on the kulaks! Death to them! Hatred and contempt for the parties which defend them – the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and today's Left Socialist-Revolutionaries!'[206]

In other words, confronted with the question of how best to square the particular (subsistence-oriented) priorities of the peasantry with the entitlements and obligations entailed by membership in a wider national community, in 1918 the Bolsheviks relied on the logic of class struggle and tendential class alignment to solve the problem. The rural quasi-proletariat would soon align with the urban workers to keep the country supplied and fed. The poor peasants would band together to extract the surpluses hoarded by their richer neighbours. Rather than levy a tax on the producers and rely on pre-revolutionary market incentives to encourage the production and sale of surplus food, an alliance of the workers with the poor peasants could move directly to more socialist methods of distribution.

Calls for a 'union of the hungry against the well-fed' culminated in a draconian new law, published on 14 May, that urged 'all toiling and unpropertied peasants [... to] unite immediately for pitiless struggle with the kulaks.' It granted the Commissariat for Food the right to use whatever force might be needed to overcome local resistance to their requisitioning detachments. The Left SRs bitterly condemned these detachments as 'punishment units,' and once the Soviet's CEC accepted the decree instituting the kombedy, in mid-June the Left SR leader Vladimir Karelin proclaimed his party's determination to prevent its enforcement.[207] As Chamberlin notes, the Bolsheviks knew what they were doing.

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[204] As far as Spiridonova and the Left SR leadership were concerned, 'the policy on which Lenin was now recklessly embarked showed Bolshevism in an entirely new light. The freedom of the peasants, their co-operation with the workers, the freedom of the Soviets, were all imperilled. What Spiridonova had prophesied six months before was now coming to pass. Her attitude to the Bolsheviks underwent a fundamental change. [...] She saw how the various links – the food shortage, the requisition parties, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk – were being built up into a diabolical chain. This chain, she decided, must be broken at all costs,' and by late June the Left SRs had resolved to oppose Lenin's government with all the means at their disposal (Steinberg 1935, pp. 206-8).

[205] Linhart 1976, pp. 39-43.

[206] Lenin, 'Forward to the Last Decisive Fight!,' August 1918, CW28, pp. 56-8.

[207] Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 273, 285.

‘That this policy of setting the landless farm labourer and the utterly poverty-stricken small holder of the Russian village against their neighbours who perhaps had a horse and one or two cows apiece and who would themselves have been considered wretchedly poor by West European or American standards would lead to civil war of the most ferocious and sanguinary kind was obvious.’ The party leadership embraced the prospect. ‘Long live civil war,’ Trotsky told the Moscow Soviet in June, if civil war is required to unite the urban and the rural poor, to secure bread for the cities, and to wage ‘direct and merciless struggle with counterrevolution.’ To ensure the outcome of this struggle, continues Chamberlin, ‘Russia was to be churned up with internal strife as it had not been since the Time of Troubles [in the early seventeenth century].’[208]

Once they learned that any surpluses they happened to produce would simply be expropriated by their poorer neighbours or by visiting food detachments the peasants quickly stopped producing them, and the result would be chronic shortages and then catastrophic famine. And once they had been contaminated by the divisive machinations of the kombedy, ‘for years to come the peasantry distrusted the soviets.’ In both the short and medium term the result would be mass disaffection. When nationwide soviet elections were held in 1922, only 22% of rural voters participated in them.[209]

Reviewing the progression of this class war in the villages a few months after launching it, in November 1918, Lenin was still optimistic. In a discussion with peasant delegates, he recalled the Soviet’s adoption of ‘the SR-sponsored law on the socialisation of the land’ and reiterated his own party’s position. ‘We Bolsheviks were opposed to this law. Yet we signed it, because [...] we did not want to impose on the peasants the idea that the equal division of the land was useless, an idea which was alien to them. Far better, we thought, if, by their own experience and suffering, the peasants themselves come to realise that equal division is nonsense.’ Now everyone is starting to see that ‘the solution lies only in socialised farming. You did not realise this at the time, but you are coming round to it by force of experience.’[210] As Lenin conceived it, the guiding framework for understanding this experience remained a transition from the bourgeois to the socialist phases of the revolution. ‘Having completed the bourgeois-democratic revolution in alliance with the peasants as a whole [in October 1917], the Russian proletariat finally passed on to the socialist revolution [in the summer of 1918] when it succeeded in splitting the rural population, in winning over the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, and in uniting them against the kulaks and the bourgeoisie, including the peasant bourgeoisie.’ In a riposte to Kautsky, Lenin went on to make the principled basis of his position crystal clear:

> Now, if the Bolshevik proletariat in the capitals and large industrial centres had not been able to rally the village poor around itself against the rich peasants, this would indeed have proved that Russia was ‘unripe’ for socialist revolution. The peasants would then have remained an ‘integral whole,’ i.e., they would have remained under the economic, political, and moral leadership of the kulaks, the rich, the bourgeoisie, and the revolution would not have passed beyond the limits of a bourgeois-democratic revolution. [...] On the other hand, if the Bolshevik proletariat had tried at once, in October–November 1917, without waiting for the class differentiation in the rural districts, without being able to *prepare* it and bring it about, to ‘decree’ a civil war or the ‘introduction of socialism’ in the rural districts, had tried to do without a temporary bloc with the peasants in general, without making a number of concessions to the middle peasants, etc., that would have been a *Blanquist* distortion of Marxism, an attempt by the *minority* to impose its will upon the majority; it would have been a theoretical absurdity, revealing a failure to understand that a general peasant revolution is *still* a bourgeois revolution, and that without *a series of transitions*, *of transitional stages*, it cannot be transformed into a socialist revolution in a backward country.[211]

[208] Chamberlin 1992a, pp. 426-7; cf. Carr 1952, pp. 160-1; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 270-1.
[209] Anweiler 1974, p. 237; cf. Chamberlin 1992b, p. 61; Smith 2002, p. 119.
[210] Lenin, ‘Speech at a Meeting of Delegates from the Poor Peasants’ Committees,’ 8 November 1918, CW28, p. 175, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/08.htm.
[211] Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (November 1918), CW28, p. 304, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/prrk/subservience.htm.

In a speech delivered to another peasant congress on 11 December 1918, Lenin again stuck to his guns, defending the ongoing revolution in the countryside as 'incomparably deeper and greater' than that of the previous autumn. Spurred on by the kombedy, the peasants had now duly 'split into two camps – the camp of the more prosperous peasants and the camp of the poor peasants who, side by side with the workers, continued their steadfast advance towards socialism.' This most far-reaching phase of the class struggle has at last 'cut the property-owning and exploiting classes off from the revolution completely; it definitely put our revolution on the socialist road which the urban working class had tried so hard and vigorously to put it on in October, but along which it will not be able to direct the revolution successfully unless it finds firm, deliberate and solid support in the countryside.'[212]

Within weeks of giving this speech, however, Lenin's party had to bring its divisive kombedy experiment to an end. Though their institution was based on long-standing Bolshevik assumptions about supposedly ineluctable class conflict between bourgeois-tending and proletarian-tending peasants, in reality, Lih observes, 'the Committees of the Poor of 1918 proved to be an almost catastrophic disappointment: they came closer to uniting the village against the Bolsheviks than splitting it to their advantage.'[213] Hopes invested in new collective farms were also disappointed. By the end of 1920 some 16,000 new state farms had been established, worked by around a million people on close to ten million acres of land. This land was mostly taken from some of the old landed estates that the peasants had wanted to claim for themselves; impoverished and inefficient, most of these new state farms failed to set the desired example and instead provoked more local resentment than enthusiasm. Speaking against this initiative at the Fifth Congress of Soviets on 5 July 1918, Spiridonova warned Lenin's government against going through with it. 'You may have a majority in this Congress, but you have not a majority in the country. You want to transform the property of the landlords into state-controlled economic units controlled by your commissars, but unfortunately the working peasants of Russia see in that nothing but a return to slavery.'[214] 'The peasant thinks that if there is a big farm,' Lenin recognised in March 1919, 'that means he will again be a farm-hand. That, of course, is a mistake. But the peasant's idea of large-scale farming is associated with a feeling of hatred and the memory of how landowners used to oppress the people. That feeling still remains, it has not yet died,' and it will take years to overcome it.[215] In the face of sustained resistance, by early 1921 there could no avoiding a retreat back to the New Economic Policies.[216] (Of course it could then be said that, by accepting a degree of free trade in grain and by adopting the other more peasant-friendly priorities of the NEP, the Bolsheviks had themselves 'learned from their own experience'. I think it would be more accurate to say that they had indeed learned, the hard way, that for now the peasants would not be moved – but not that they *should* not move, or would not move at some point in the future. NEP was a retreat, not a surrender, it was a compromise not a renegation. Dreams deferred are not dreams abandoned. The final aims of socialism and of a collective agrarian economy remained the same, but Lenin and Bukharin now recognised, along with the Stalin of the 1920s, that it would take longer to implement them).

As Le Blanc acknowledges, 'the Bolshevik understanding of "the peasant question" oversimplified realities better grasped by the SRs and Left SRs, their sometime allies. [...]

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[212] Lenin, 'Speech to Congress of Land Departments,' 14 December 1918, CW28, p. 340.
[213] Lih 2023, p. 146.
[214] Cited in Steinberg 1935, pp. 212-3.
[215] Lenin, speech at Eighth Party Congress, March 1919, CW29, p. 210, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/rcp8th/06.htm.
[216] Anweiler 1974, p. 237; cf. Read 1996, pp. 226-38; Rabinowitch 2008, pp. 283-6. Even after it abandoned the kombedy per se, the general thrust of party priorities remained clear. 'In all its work in the villages,' stipulates the 1919 party programme, 'the Communist Party of the Soviet Union continues, as before, to rely on the proletarian and semi-proletarian strata of the village; it organizes, first of all, these strata into an independent force in the villages, by setting up Party nuclei, organisations of poor peasants, special types of trade unions of rural proletarians and semi-proletarians, etc., brings them into closer contact with the town proletariat and wrests them from the influence of the village bourgeoisie and the small property interests' ('Political Program of the CPSU,' 22 March 1919, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1919/03/22.htm).

Bolshevik-turned-Communist policy as it unfolded in 1918 generated hundreds of desperate uprisings among the peasantry, at various moments, throughout Russia.' Peasant rebels killed tens of thousands of people, including government officials and Soviet food detachments; many more peasants were killed when these rebellions were in turn crushed by the Cheka and Red Army. Le Blanc cites a candid Cheka analysis of peasant discontent, prepared by V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko (the Bolshevik commander who had led the final assault on the Winter Palace back in October):

> The peasant uprisings develop because of widespread dissatisfaction, on the part of small property-owners in the countryside, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, which directs at them its cutting edge of implacable compulsion, which cares little for the economic peculiarities of the peasantry and does the countryside no service that is at all perceptible [...]. The peasantry, in their majority, have become accustomed to regarding the Soviet regime as something extraneous in relation to themselves, something that issues only commands, that gives orders most zealously but quite improvidently [...;] in the eyes of the peasants it is tyrannical and not a system that, before all else, organizes and ministers to the countryside itself.[217]

Christopher Read's analysis of rural Russia in 1918 likewise shows how, 'in the face of the chronic weakness of the party among the peasants' the new authorities had to resort to coercive means of control. If the kombedy enabled them forcibly to impose 'a virtual one-party system' in the countryside, 'the medium-term political and economic costs were incalculable. [...] Taken together the agrarian initiatives of 1918 had been an unmitigated disaster.'[218] As you might expect, Figes' judgement is even more scathing: the dismal failure of the kombedy marks a point

> where Marxist dogma collapsed under the weight of peasant reality. Most villages thought of themselves as farming communities of equal members related by kin: they often called themselves a 'peasant family.' That was the basic idea (if not the reality) of the peasant commune. As such, they were hostile to the suggestion of setting up a separate body for the village poor. Didn't they already have the Soviet? Most village communes either failed to elect a *kombed*, leaving it to outside agitators, or else set up one which every peasant joined on the grounds, as they often put it, that all the peasants were equally poor. [...] The Bolshevik agitators were quite unable to split the peasants on class lines. The poor peasants were simply not aware of themselves as 'proletarians.' Nor did they think of their richer neighbours as a 'bourgeoisie.' They all thought of themselves as fellow villagers and looked at the efforts of the Bolsheviks to split them with suspicion and hostility.

Failing to draw in local recruits, many kombedy were instead dominated by demobilised soldiers and migrants fleeing urban poverty. A study of '800 kombedy in Tambov province,' continues Figes, 'found that less than half their members at the *volost* level had ever farmed the land. [...] Disconnected from the peasant commune, upon which all rural government depended, the kombedy were unable to carry out their tasks without resorting to violence. They requisitioned private property, made illegal arrests, vandalised churches and generally terrorised the peasants. They were more like a local mafia than an organ of the Soviet state.' The result was a 'huge wave of peasant revolts.'[219] One Bolshevik Central Committee member, sent in November to report on the revolts in Tula, concluded that 'the peasants are beginning to feel as if they are being ruled by the arbitrary will of an alien set of masters; they no longer believe in the promises of Soviet Power and only expect bad from it.'[220]

The poor peasants had failed to live up to their anticipated mission, so Lenin's future steps toward socialism would now depend on 'enticing the middle peasant – the peasant as peasant – to follow the lead of the proletariat' (notably via alluring demonstrations of what could be achieved via the developments of electricity and industry).[221] Lenin may have pushed for socialist transformation 'by assault,' but he still recognised that something so

[217] Le Blanc 2017, 635/1105, citing Cliff 1978, pp. 141, 142.
[218] Read 1996, p. 236.
[219] Figes 1997, pp. 619-20; cf. Figes 2001, pp. 188-99.
[220] Cited in Figes 1997, p. 621.
[221] Lih 2011, p. 172.

enormous as a change in the mode of production cannot be coerced. 'By the very nature of the case,' Lenin argued in March 1919, when it comes to something like farming methods 'coercive methods can accomplish nothing [...]. Nothing is more stupid than the very idea of applying coercion in economic relations with the middle peasant.'[222] By late 1920, notes Lih, 'the Bolsheviks were openly relying on the economic exertions of the kulak, although he had been rechristened for this purpose as "the industrious owner".'[223]

After persecuting the kulak as parasites and exploiters, it must have been galling to rely on their exertions to restore some life to Russia's agrarian economy. Worse, it might now be only a matter of time before these industrious peasant proprietors began to contaminate proletarian political psychology itself. 'They surround the proletariat on every side with a petty-bourgeois atmosphere,' worried Lenin in 1920, 'which permeates and corrupts the proletariat and causes constant relapses among the proletariat into petty-bourgeois spinelessness, disunity, individualism, and alternate moods of exaltation and dejection [...]. Millions upon millions of small producers, by their ordinary, everyday, imperceptible, elusive, and demoralising activities produce the very results which the bourgeoisie need and which restore the bourgeoisie.'[224]

In its first years in office, for all its emphatic concern with majority support and the will of the people, the new government had demonstrably failed to understand the simple but far-reaching question: what do the peasants really want? They had underestimated the traditional solidarity of the village, and the peasants' collective commitment to their time-sanctioned ways of working and sharing. They misunderstood peasant resistance to collectivisation as a sort of hesitation or fear, rather than as a reasoned preference in constrained circumstances. They tended to interpret adamant rejection as just another expression of that 'vacillation' which was supposed to characterise the peasantry as a class.

Lenin again devoted a good deal of time to these questions, which became all the more complicated when, as Russia took its first difficult steps towards socialism after October, the old tendencies of 'normal' capitalist development could no longer be trusted to prepare the ground for revolutionary change.[225] Lenin certainly recognised that the peasants wanted control over the land, and he considered the establishment of such control an essential part of the first, democratic or anti-feudal, anti-autocratic phase of the revolution. But he also believed that, more profoundly, whatever the peasants might currently *seem* to want would be overtaken by the tendency that capitalist development and class conflict would in any case inevitably force on them: proletarianisation and its consequences. 'Depeasantisation' must come sooner or later. In brief, a socialist i.e. future-oriented peasant should want to become a worker. The rural poor should want unity with the urban proletariat, and together they could then share in truly collective ownership and control over agrarian production.

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[222] Lenin, speech at Eighth Party Congress, March 1919, CW29, pp. 210-11, cited in Lih 2011, p. 176. 'As he watched his hopes for state farms and *kommuny* crumble Lenin only became more insistent on the inadmissibility of using force – a fundamental contrast with Stalin' (Lih 2011, p. 176; cf. p. 203). As Lenin explained to the Tenth Congress, 'so long as there is no revolution in other countries, only agreement with the peasantry can save the socialist revolution in Russia. [...] We must satisfy the middle peasantry economically and go over to free exchange; otherwise it will be impossible – economically impossible – in view of the delay in the world revolution, to preserve the rule of the proletariat in Russia. We must clearly realise this and not be afraid to say it' (Lenin, speech of 15 March 1921, CW32, pp. 215, 225, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch03.htm).

[223] Lih 2011, p. 175; cf. Carr 1952, pp. 160-1. 'Whenever forced to choose between socialist ideals and peasant support,' Lih argues, 'the Bolsheviks chose peasant support. Immediately after the October revolution, they gained peasant support by letting the peasants break up large estates (much to the scorn of Western socialists, who saw the breakup of large production units as economic regression). In 1919, they moved away from "class war in the villages" to an accommodation with "middle peasants." In 1920, they based long-term agricultural policy on small-scale peasant agriculture rather than socialist experiments. In 1921, they retreated further by allowing free trade in grain' (Lih 2017a, part 2; Lih 2011, p. 203).

[224] Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder* (1920), CW31, pp. 44-5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch05.htm, cited in Lih 2011, p. 181.

[225] Cf. Harding 1980, p. 313ff.

After October 1917 Russia's actual peasants, however, still wanted what they had wanted before October. They still wanted what had led them to accept the revolution, and then to support the Reds over the Whites: they wanted the consolidation of local village control over all the local land. They still wanted what they had consistently wanted, for generations. They wanted, in other words, the wrong thing at the wrong time: rather than willingly become agrarian workers, too many peasants still stubbornly wanted to remain... peasants. As long as this remains the case, Lenin admitted to the Eighth Congress of Soviets in December 1920, the government might need to fall back on coercive measures. 'In a country of small peasants, our chief and basic task is to be able to resort to state compulsion in order to raise the level of peasant farming [...]. We shall be able to achieve this only when we are able to convince millions more people who are not yet ready for it. We must devote all our forces to this and see to it that the apparatus of compulsion, activated and reinforced, shall be adapted and developed for a new drive of persuasion.'[226]

From here it's a very short step to the conclusion that peasants, as long as they remain peasants, so long as they remain petty-bourgeois, simply do not and cannot know what they want. The problem is structural:

> The petty-bourgeois is in such an economic position, the conditions of his life are such that he cannot help deceiving himself, he involuntarily and inevitably gravitates one minute towards the bourgeoisie, the next towards the proletariat. It is economically impossible for him to pursue an independent 'line.' His past draws him towards the bourgeoisie, his future towards the proletariat. His better judgement gravitates towards the latter, his prejudice (to use a familiar expression of Marx's) towards the former.[227]

Given the conditions of peasant life in Russia in particular, writes Lenin, 'it could not be expected that the rural proletariat would be clearly and firmly conscious of its own interests. Only the working class could be, and every proletarian, conscious of the great prospects, should feel himself to be a leader and carry the masses with him.'[228] Proletarians know their own mind, peasants do not. 'The proletariat expresses economically and politically the real interests of the overwhelming majority of the working people under capitalism.' This is why, in any capitalist country, 'the strength of the proletariat is far greater than the proportion it represents of the total population.' This is also why the proletariat alone can lead a successful revolutionary struggle for socialism. Left to themselves 'the petty bourgeoisie never declare in advance in favour of the rule of the proletariat, [they] do not understand the conditions and aims of that rule, and only by their subsequent experience [do they] become convinced that the proletarian dictatorship is inevitable, proper and legitimate.'[229]

By the time the party met for its tenth congress in March 1921, however, Lenin was forced to recognise that 'the relations between classes, between the working classes and the peasantry [...] are not what we thought they were.' It turns out that 'the interests of these two classes are different, the small landowner does not want what the worker wants.' Given this awkward but undeniable fact, we should not try 'to hide anything; we must plainly state that the peasantry is dissatisfied with the form of our relations [...]. The peasantry has expressed its will in this respect definitely enough. It is the will of the vast masses of the working population. We must reckon with this, and we are sober enough politicians to say frankly: let us re-examine our policy in regard to the peasantry.'[230] What to do?

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[226] Lenin, report of 22 December 1920, CW31, p. 505, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/8thcong/ch02.htm.
[227] Lenin, 'Constitutional Illusions,' 26 July 1917, CW25, pp. 202-3.
[228] Lenin, 'Report on the Economic Condition of Petrograd Workers,' 7 December 1917, CW26, p. 364-5. And Trotsky: 'Historical experience shows that the peasantry are absolutely incapable of taking up an *independent* political role' (Trotsky 1906, ch. 5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp05.htm).
[229] Lenin, 'The Constituent Assembly Elections and The Dictatorship of the Proletariat' (16 December 1919), CW30, pp. 253-275, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/dec/16.htm.
[230] Lenin, 'Report on the Substitution of a Tax in Kind', tenth party congress, 15 May 1921, CW32, pp. 215-6, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch03.htm. Cf. Bettelheim 1976, p. 234.

As things stood in Russia after the civil war, it was obvious to everyone that the class of peasants or small producers could not simply be 'expropriated or expelled'; they had to be won over.[231] At least in the short term, the government had no choice but to make concessions to the peasants. In the longer term, the work of reorienting the relations between proletarian government and peasant producers would require nothing less than a prolonged process 'to remake the landowner, to remake all his psychologies.' Though deferred, the socialist goal must still be to 'remake the peasant' – and 'as long as we have not remade [the peasant], as long as large-scale machinery has not remade him, we have to assure him the possibility of being his own boss.'[232] The longer-term mission of the party with regard to the peasantry had become nothing less than 'to cure, so to speak, its entire psychology.'[233] Failure to accomplish this, as Lenin recognised in one of his last articles, would doom the Soviet Union. 'In the final analysis, the fate of our republic will depend on whether the peasant masses will stand by the working class, loyal to their alliance, or whether they will permit the "NEPmen", i.e. the new bourgeoisie, to drive a wedge between them and the working class.'[234]

Though there isn't space for them here, on this point comparisons with Mao – to say nothing of Zapata, Fanon or Cabral – would be instructive.[235]

Who wants socialism?

The simple yet consequential question of 'what do the peasants want' is inextricably bound up with a still more momentous question, which for any revolutionary socialist remains perhaps the most basic question of all: who wants socialism itself? This question might seem so basic, in fact, as to require no explicit formulation of any kind. As Kautsky observed in his commentary on his party's 1891 programme, 'the class struggle of the proletariat has socialist production as its natural goal; it cannot end before this goal is reached. Just as the proletariat will with certainty come to be the ruling class in the state, so equally is the victory of

[231] Bettelheim 1976, pp. 480-1.
[232] Lenin, CW32, pp. 188-9, cited Lih 2011, p. 178.
[233] Lenin, speech at Tenth Party Congress, March 1921, cited in Patenaude 1995, p. 570; cf. Read 2005, p. 218.
[234] Lenin, 'How We Should Reorganise the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection,' 23 January 1923, CW33, p. 486.
[235] See for example cf. Bettelheim 1978, pp. 558-9 and Linhart 1976, p. 43. Meisner's brief sketch of one of these comparisons is worth citing. 'Unlike Lenin in 1917, Mao in 1949 was not burdened by any utopian expectations of a global revolutionary upheaval, and thus the postponement of socialist goals was easily accomplished – indeed, taken for granted from the beginning. Nor did Mao harbor any of Lenin's anguished doubts about the historical viability and moral validity of attempting to build a socialist society in conditions of economic and social backwardness. For Mao and the Chinese Communists, the overcoming of backwardness was viewed as an enormous practical task to be undertaken; it did not present them with any Marxist theoretical dilemmas to be resolved, partly because they were far less firmly tied than their Russian counterparts to orthodox Marxist assumptions on the economic, social, and cultural prerequisites for socialism.' By contrast, 'what is unique and extraordinary about the postrevolutionary history of China is the emergence of a powerful revolutionary utopianism long *after* the new order had become consolidated, routinised, and seemingly institutionalised. [...] In Russia, the Bolsheviks had come to power with highly utopian expectations – hopes and expectations which soon faded and died as Soviet society underwent a familiar and presumably inevitable process of what Robert Tucker has termed "deradicalisation." In China, by contrast, the Communists came to power as rather sobered realists, determined to achieve the mundane goals of political unity and modem economic development. And they found on hand – and quickly took into their hands – the ready-made Soviet model of development that was so eminently suited to the pursuit of these eminently nationalist goals. It was entirely in keeping with Chinese Communist theoretical perspectives of the time that the adopted foreign model came with built-in ideological rationalisations for the postponement of Marxist social goals. It was not until almost a decade after the revolutionary victory that what came to be known as "the Maoist vision" appeared on the historical scene to divert China from the Soviet path and to create a unique (and turbulent) Chinese pattern of postrevolutionary history. More precisely, it was only with the Great Leap Forward campaign of 1958-60 that observers of contemporary China discovered "the Maoist vision," and it was during that profoundly utopian episode that the vision received its fullest and most pristine expression' (Meisner 1982, pp. 187-90).

socialism certain.'[236] Membership in the SPD or its Russian counterpart presupposed acceptance of this assumption as a matter of course. The German party in particular had set their Russian counterparts an inspiring example by successfully building up, on a mass scale, over the last decades of the nineteenth century, a whole 'alternative culture' based on socialist values, media and institutions.[237]

It's also essential to remember that, in early twentieth-century Russia (far more than in, say, the early nineteenth-century England studied by E.P. Thompson), Russian working-class political culture was 'overwhelmingly socialist. This was the legacy both of a socialist revolutionary movement that predated the rise of a working class and of the influence of Marxist analysis on that emerging working class.'[238] This point is amply confirmed by the most substantial social histories of Russia's urban workers: the various socialist parties had no significant rivals in working-class neighbourhoods during the years of world war. 'Marxist analytical categories were [also] widely accepted in the Russian intelligentsia,' observes Fitzpatrick, 'and the Bolsheviks were not exceptional, but representative of a much broader socialist group, when they interpreted the Revolution in terms of class conflict and assigned a special role to the industrial working class.'[239] When the outbreak of imperialist war in 1914 seemed to herald the imminent self-destruction of capitalism, Lenin could further argue that Social Democracy might secure proletarian hegemony in Russia by leading not only a democratic but also a socialist revolution. As the highest and thus most unsustainable or 'moribund' form of capitalism, 'imperialism is the eve of socialist revolution.'[240]

In early twentieth-century Russia, moreover, unlike nineteenth-century France or Germany, the peasantry too were more responsive to socialist than to conservative or national-chauvinist political organisations. As the elections to the Constituent Assembly had confirmed, in Russia in 1917 there was negligible mass support, in either the countryside or the cities, for the sort of 'God and Fatherland' ideologies promoted by people like Bismarck or Napoleon III. During the revolutionary year 1917 itself, the relatively fluid 'discourse of democracy put into circulation by the French Revolution', notes Smith, was rapidly 'overtaken by a discourse of class' and the more polarised language of us and them, the toiling masses vs. the pampered few. 'The discourse of class served to cement two contending power blocs and to articulate fundamentally opposed sets of values and visions of the social order. It was at the root of the process of political polarisation that escalated from late summer.'[241]

By the time Bukharin and Preobrazhensky were tasked with writing what came to serve as the party's popular handbook, the 1919 *ABC of Communism*, they could take it as self-evident (notes Lih) that 'the Bolsheviks had the right and the duty to begin constructing socialism in Russia.' 'Our party sees its task,' they wrote, 'as getting down to the job of building socialism right away.'[242] However critical she might have been of their incipient authoritarianism, Luxemburg went out of her way to praise the party's determination to press ahead with precisely this construction:

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[236] Kautsky 1892, pp. 230-1, cited in Lih 2005, p. 80.
[237] See Lidtke 1985; Steenson 1981; Guttsman 2021.
[238] Koenker 1981, p. 364. Smith likewise notes, in 1917, 'the huge popularity of socialism. All kinds of groups pinned their colours to the socialist mast' (Smith 2018, p. 134).
[239] Fitzpatrick 2017, 29/459.
[240] Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), CW22, pp. 302, 187; cf. Shandro 2014, pp. 257ff.
[241] Smith 2002, pp. 31-2; cf. Smith 2018, pp. 133-5; Steinberg 2001, 1p. 7; Steinberg 2017, pp. 85-7.
[242] Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1919), §41; translated in Lih 2023, p. 89. The English translation of this section by Eden and Cedar Paul reads: 'Provided that the whole of Europe were to be under the authority of the proletariat, there would be such a development of production as would provide amply for all needs. Since, however, the proletariat will inevitably rise to power everywhere, it is obvious that the mission of the Russian working class is to do its utmost on behalf of the transformation to communism. It is for this reason, as we have learned in Part One, that our party has made the prompt establishment of communism its definite aim' (§41, p. 160).

> The Bolsheviks immediately established as the goal of their seizure of power a complete and extremely far-reaching revolutionary program: this program consisted not in the securing of bourgeois democracy, but in the dictatorship of the proletariat for the purpose of realizing socialism. In historic terms, it is thereby to their eternal credit that they were the first to proclaim the ultimate goals of socialism as the immediate program of practical politics. Lenin, Trotsky, and their comrades have fully accomplished all that a party could possibly muster in the hour of revolution in the way of courage, forcefulness of action, revolutionary far-sightedness and consistency.[243]

The question remains, however: how far does the construction of socialism as the immediate program of practical politics line up with actual mass or majoritarian priorities during and after 1917? How far did the emphatically 'social' demands that dominated mass politics all through 1917 – including demands for land to the peasants, for an eight-hour working day, for workers' participation in managerial decisions, etc. – translate into demands for socialism per se? If the Bolsheviks could announce, on the day that they took power, that 'the cause for which the people have fought has been secured, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landed proprietorship, workers control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power,'[244] how exactly did this cause extend into a struggle for socialism? What was socialism expected to involve? Would it require a certain level of economic development, or could it be forced through by state power? Would it mean multi-party pluralism or rule by a single integrated party-state? Would it mean the kinds of mass participation and local autonomy anticipated by the Paris Commune, and then embraced by many of the early Soviets that emerged to govern Russia in 1917-18? Or would it mean something more like a centrally coordinated command economy?

Given their insistence on the primacy of mass democracy and majority rule these questions were as unavoidable for Lenin and his party as they were for Luxemburg herself. They are also unavoidable for sympathetic historians who, like Lih, seek to show that on balance 'the core insight of Lenin and the Bolsheviks about the driving forces of the revolution was vindicated.'[245]

There's no way to do proper justice to such a tangled issue here, but can at least try to address its three most elementary dimensions. First, when in 1917 the Bolsheviks proposed taking initial 'steps towards socialism,' did they see this as a matter of government policy, i.e. as the imposition of measures by top-down decree, or rather as a matter of empowering mass aspirations conditioned by the general consequences of capitalist development? Second, insofar as the construction of socialism was indeed a matter of popular political choice rather than of imperious decree or sub-voluntary necessity, did a clear majority of the people (i.e. a sufficiently preponderant mass of the people by Lenin's own criteria) demonstrably want to adopt a socialist mode of production at this apparent stage in the country's political and economic development? And third, if socialism was indeed what a substantial portion of Russia's people wanted to pursue, in the circumstances of 1917-21 was this a matter of political *will* or merely utopian *wish*? In other words, given the constraints of the situation, was it a practicable project or a premature adventure?

(a) 'Who can say anything establishing socialism against the will of the majority?'[246]

In principle the first question is easily answered. Like any classical Marxist, Lenin always recognised that 'socialism cannot be decreed from above. [...] Living, creative socialism is the

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[243] Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' LCW5, 456/1100.
[244] Lenin, 'To the Citizens of Russia!', 25 October 1917, CW26, p. 236, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25.htm.
[245] Lih 2025.
[246] Responding to Plekhanov in April 1917, Lenin had asked: if in Russia the peasants or 'small proprietors constitute the majority of the population and if the objective conditions for socialism are lacking, then how *can* the majority of the population declare in favour of socialism? Who *can* say anything or who says anything about establishing socialism against the will of the majority?' (Lenin, 'A Basic Question,' 20 April 1917, CW24, p. 193).

product of the masses themselves.'[247] He insisted on this point all through 1917. 'Everybody agrees that the immediate introduction of socialism in Russia is impossible' (CW25, p. 68), and 'no party or individual has had any intention of "introducing socialism" by decree.' All legitimate measures would require 'the full approval of the mass of the poor, i.e., the majority of the population' (CW25, p. 303; cf. p. 474). Luxemburg too will echo this, of course: 'socialism has not been made, and cannot be made, by decrees, and can also not be made by a socialist government, however excellent. Socialism has to be made by the masses, and by every proletarian.'[248] So will Kollontai and other members of the Workers Opposition that coalesced in 1921. 'It is impossible to decree Communism. It can be treated only in the process of practical research, through mistakes, perhaps, but only by the creative powers of the working class itself.'[249]

If Russian economic development had proceeded according to classical Marxist expectations there would never have been any need even to consider the possibility of introducing socialism by decree. Ordinarily the consolidation and intensification of capitalist exploitation, operating with a force 'independent of the will,' could be relied upon to proletarianise the bulk of the peasantry whether they liked it or not. Whatever their own initial aims might be, the peasants' conversion into landless workers would then in due course align them with the socialist agenda of the urban workers and their vanguard party. A desire for socialism, so to speak, would result as an effectively natural consequence of this inevitable historical development. In that case proletarian demands, whether urban or rural, could be deduced more or less automatically from their 'class instincts.' But the October revolution had interrupted the predictable course of history. From now on, whatever steps Russia might take towards socialism would have to be taken either in keeping with the apparent will of the people or against it.

As we've just seen, the party's whole agrarian strategy for 1918 rested on an assumption that the poorer peasants surely *did* or at least *would* want socialism, and would be willing to implement it via the coercive powers that their new committees invested in them. Lenin was very much aware that everything turned on how far these *kombedy* might indeed enable a rural semi-proletariat to prevail in the face of a vacillating petty bourgeoisie. 'Those who doubted the socialist character of our revolution,' he noted in December 1918, 'prophesied that this is where we were bound to slip up'; today's 'socialist construction in the countryside depends entirely on this step.'[250] If they operated as expected the kombedy would vindicate themselves as the real 'turning point' of the revolution, one that turned precisely at the level of political will. They would show how Russia's working people had moved on from the relatively easy victories of October to

> the more difficult and historically more noble and truly socialist task – that of carrying the enlightening socialist struggle into the rural districts, and reaching the minds of the peasants as well. The great agrarian revolution – proclamation in October of the abolition of private ownership of land, proclamation of the socialisation of the land – would have inevitably remained a paper revolution if the urban workers had not stirred into action the rural proletariat, the poor peasants, the working peasants, who constitute the vast majority (CW28, p. 340).

By the same token, Lenin's confident assumptions about 'the minds of the peasants' led him to accept the obvious challenge to his heroic scenario. If the kombedy were to fail, 'if the Bolshevik proletariat in the capitals and large industrial centres had not been able to rally the village poor around itself against the rich peasants, this would indeed have proved that Russia was "unripe" for socialist revolution.' This possible outcome might in turn have vindicated,

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[247] Lenin, 'Meeting of the C.E.C.,' 4 November 1917, CW26, p. 289.
[248] Luxemburg, 'Speech to the Founding Congress of the Communist Party,' 31 December 1918, LCW5, 700/1100.
[249] Kollontai, 'Individual or Collective Management?' §7, *The Workers' Opposition*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/workers-opposition/ch01.htm.
[250] Lenin, Speech of 11 December 1918, CW28, p. 340, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/dec/11.htm.

up to a point, those who – like Kautsky, Martov or Sukhanov – regularly accused the Bolsheviks of utopian adventurism. Lenin knew better than anyone that 'the working class will not be able to direct the revolution successfully along this road unless it finds firm, deliberate and solid support in the countryside' (CW28, p. 340).

It didn't take long, however, before the unequivocal failure of the kombedy confirmed that this support didn't yet exist. However attached he might have been to his sense of a heroic class mission, Lenin was enough of a realist to recognise that this apparent lack of rural support posed a serious problem.

(b) Steps towards socialism?

On then to our second and related question: if the only legitimate version of socialism must be 'the product of the masses themselves,' is socialism what the Russian masses actually wanted in 1917? For starters, is it what the Bolsheviks themselves proposed?

For most of 1917 itself, as we've already seen, the historical record is unequivocal: through to late summer, relatively few of the workers and none of the competing parties in the soviets saw socialism as 'the goal of the revolution.'[251] Although Lenin never denied his belief that, over the longer term, given the self-destructive dynamics of capitalism, 'outside of Socialism there is no deliverance,'[252] he also consistently stressed that 'it is not our immediate task to "introduce" Socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.' The first texts he writes upon his return to Russia in April are categorical. 'I not only do not "build" on the "immediate transformation" of our revolution into a *Socialist* one, but I actually warn against it.'[253] All through 1917, as Lih has shown in convincing detail, Lenin's own focus was firmly on the need to overcome dual or divided power in favour of a *single* popular sovereignty or *narodnaia vlast*, i.e. the one sort of power that might actually and promptly fulfil the actual will of the people regarding peace, land, bread and so on. Transition to a socialist society was not yet the explicit priority. 'Contrary to widespread assumptions,' writes Lih, in 1917

> the Bolshevik message did not 'proclaim the socialist character of the revolution.' In his memoir, Nikolai Sukhanov asked 'was there any socialism in the [Bolshevik] platform? No. I maintain that in a direct form the Bolsheviks never harped to the masses on Socialism as the object and task of a Soviet Government, nor did the masses, in supporting the Bolsheviks, even think about Socialism.' His assertion is borne out by Bolshevik literature from 1917. Indeed, one receives the impression that the whole issue of direct socialist transformation in Russia was consciously avoided in Bolshevik agitation. When socialism was discussed, it was almost always in the context of the impending socialist revolution in Western Europe.[254]

[251] Mandel 2017, 131, cf. 2-3; Eric Blanc 2017, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/did-the-bolsheviks-advocate-socialist-revolution-in-1917/ (and the rejoinder by Paul Le Blanc, at https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/re-arming-the-party-bolsheviks-and-socialist-revolution-in-1917/). For a contrasting view, see Harding 1980, p. 319.
[252] Lenin, 'Blancism,' 8 April 1917, CW24, p. 37.
[253] Lenin, 'Letters on Tactics,' 8 April 1917, CW24, p. 52; cf. 'The Tasks of the Proletariat', §8, 7 April 1917, CW24, p. 24.
[254] Lih, 'Bolshevism in 1917', citing Sukhanov 1962, pp. 554-5. Lih addressed this point again in his contribution to the *Leninist Days* lecture series (2024). '"Land to the peasants" had always been regarded as a central plank in the *democratic* revolution. And so, Lenin did not need to make any mention of socialism in order to account for and justify the October revolution. On the contrary: the mission of the October revolution as presented here was to complete the unfinished democratic revolution. In actuality, however, the whole "what type of revolution?" framework was hardly relevant. Of course, Lenin believed that in many ways the October revolution was indeed a socialist revolution. Nevertheless, the label "socialist revolution" was completely unnecessary either to explain or justify the October revolution. The October revolution saved Russia from the disastrous effects of a misbegotten government policy: 'nuff said."' (Lih, '1917: Lenin and the Bolshevik Adjustment,' *Leninist Days*, 30 March 2024).

Through most of 1917 Lenin was careful to limit any discussion of a change in Russia's mode of production to the modest and preliminary 'steps towards socialism' that a suitably resolute government might take here and now. In particular he had in mind measures that could be understood first and foremost as continuing in the direction already taken by the capitalist war economies themselves (most notably in Germany), i.e. as an extension of already-centralised planning and control, combined with incremental nationalisation of the banks and the main monopoly industries or syndicates. In 1917, since Lenin took it for granted that such steps would gain public approval once they were taken, he repeatedly attacked the provisional government for failing to take them, and for failing to satisfy mass demands in general. Once in a position to do so, Lenin's party duly nationalised the banks and railways, along with some large-scale factories and utilities.[255] That doesn't mean, however, as Shachtman recognised, that once they came to power Bolsheviks immediately set about 'confiscating all capitalist property and nationalizing all industry. On the contrary, they opposed it. They knew the backwardness of Russia.' They knew that the Russian workers weren't yet in a position simply to take over their factories and to supply and run them efficiently. The subsequent transition from calls for more 'workers' control' to outright nationalisation in 1918 was instead forced on the government by its class affiliation. In the months following October, it became perfectly clear that

> the Russian capitalist class could not reconcile itself with the idea of a Soviet state ruled by the workers and peasants. They sabotaged their own plants; they refused to co-operate in any way; they fled from the revolutionary centres and immediately launched a counter-revolutionary civil war to overturn the Soviet power. They outlawed themselves; they placed themselves, voluntarily and even eagerly, outside of Soviet legality, and nobody, least of all the Bolsheviks did that for them. Confronted with this situation, with the fact that complete economic chaos threatened the already chaotic country, the Bolsheviks proceeded to take over industry, to nationalize it, or more accurately, to legalize the seizures of the industries which the workers themselves were spontaneously carrying out, on their own initiative.[256]

What then about the workers themselves? These questions are more complicated to address in a compressed space, of course, but perhaps the main finding to have emerged from the most detailed studies of working class organisations in Petrograd and Moscow is that what most concerned them in 1917 was keeping their jobs and preserving the gains they had wrested from their employers in the early spring. For example, Diane Koenker's patient study of Moscow workers indicates, among other things, that 'the overwhelming majority of strikes in Moscow in 1917 centred on economic issues,' with a focus first on higher wages and then on job security and 'workers' rights in the factory.'[257] After noting the strongly socialist inflection of Russian working class culture, Koenker goes on to show that, for many of the workers most influenced by Marx, 'a democratic socialist political and economic order seemed the logical next step for Russia, where the state had always been closely involved in economic activity and where the activity of public organisations during the war had legitimised popular participation in economic administration.' In Moscow, in the spring of 1917, 'of the three socialist parties, the Bolsheviks offered the most class-oriented position, and they were relatively less popular during this period than the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, who stood for compromise and solidarity with all elements of revolutionary Russia. Strikes during the period almost all were called to demand wage increases, an indication that workers were willing to function within a multiclass framework.'

What then focused the pervading socialist consciousness along less compromising, more forceful and more pro-Bolshevik lines over the summer of 1917, Koenker argues, was indeed intensification of the sort of class struggle a Marxist perspective helped to predict:

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[255] Serge 2015, p. 123.

[256] Shachtman 1948. 'In 1917 and at the beginning of 1918,' Bettelheim acknowledges, 'the party rightly considered that to try to rapidly attain socialist objectives, except in relation to certain points, would be utopian and therefore extremely dangerous. This necessary momentary restriction of the party's tasks was the theme of many reminders issued by Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders' (Bettelheim 1976, p. 95).

[257] Koenker 1981, p. 293.

> Economic strikes became less successful, and capitalists seemed less willing to treat workers as equal partners in labour-management relations. The coalition government failed to enact the minimal socialist demands of workers, and the onus fell first on the capitalists, who were seen to be sabotaging the revolution as well as the factories. That the revolutionary unity of March fell apart along class lines can be attributed to economic conditions in Russia but also to the fact that the class framework was after all implicit in socialist consciousness. Capitalists began to behave as Marx said they would: no concessions to the workers, no compromise on the rights of factory owners. Mensheviks and SRs tried to straddle both sides of the class split; this appeal can be seen in the mixed social composition of their supporters. The Bolsheviks, however, had offered the most consistent class interpretation of the revolution, and by late summer their interpretation appeared more and more to correspond to reality [...]. By October, the soviets of workers' deputies, as the workers' only class organ, seemed to class-conscious workers to be the only government they could trust to represent their interests. The combination of theory and experience had produced Moscow's class consciousness.

Koenker also goes on to stress, however, that this process of political radicalisation was both complex, uneven and specific to its 'particular historical moment. Once the theoretically articulate workers left the city with the Red Army, once the dictatorship of the proletariat had eliminated the sense of struggle against the ruling capitalist class, the set of circumstances which had produced class consciousness in 1917 would change.' It's clear that a large part of the Bolsheviks newfound popularity resulted from their promises to encourage mass political participation, to respect mass demands, and to provide economic security. The incremental 'Bolshevisation of Moscow workers' was likewise complex. 'The process by which the majority of workers identified their interests with the Bolshevik party program was a product of rational, logical choices that corresponded to the changing political and economic nexus,' resulting in many different configurations. Overall, 'Soviet power was supported by Moscow workers for the practical results they expected it to bring: economic management the workers could trust, honest attempts to make peace, and a guaranteed convocation of the Constituent Assembly. By October, a wide spectrum of workers favoured soviet power; but since only the Bolshevik party advocated this power as part of their political program, support for soviet power inevitably translated into support for the Bolshevik party.'[258]

Once the Bolsheviks took power conflicts with employers intensified further, and many industrialists simply closed or abandoned their enterprises. As Smith's study of Petrograd likewise shows, workers then did whatever they could to keep their factories running, and desperate experiments in self-management soon gave way to calls for outright national ownership and coordination. 'It was this drive towards what Milyutin called "nationalisation from below" which compelled the Bolshevik government to undertake full-scale nationalisation in June 1918. This did indeed spell the end of workers' self-management, but its demise was more the result of an intractable economic situation than of Bolshevik opposition.'[259] More broadly, adds Smith,

> the revolutionary process of 1917 can only be understood in the context of a growing crisis of the economy. Western historians have been so mesmerised by the astonishing political developments of this *annus mirabilis*, that they have failed to see the extent to which a crisis in the economy underpinned the crisis in politics, or the extent to which the struggle to secure basic material needs provided the motive force behind the radicalisation of the workers and peasants.[260]

Building on these and related studies, Christopher Read doesn't downplay the importance of class conflict and a growing if not obsessive 'awareness of the much more fundamental cleavages in Russian society which was at the heart of the revolution,' and which temporarily 'swept the internal divisions among workers far into the background. Instead, a broader consciousness of the unity of all workers, indeed of all the ordinary, exploited people

[258] Koenker 1981, pp. 361-5.
[259] Stephen Smith, review of Ferro 1980, in *Soviet Studies* 33:3 (July 1981), p. 456; cf. Smith 1983, p. 210.
[260] Smith 1983, p. 145.

including peasants, rushed to the surface.'[261] Read questions, however, the extent to which this unity might be understood as an implicit endorsement of socialist transformation. 'Keeping factories running, and thereby preserving their wages and, ultimately, their jobs, was the concern that came to dominate the outlook of Russian workers in 1917, and beyond.' For all its scale and speed, Read argues that 'the undoubted movement towards Bolshevism among the troops as well as among the wider population was transient,' and was motivated less by some kind of sudden mass conversion to longer-term Bolshevik goals than by the clear appeal of their immediate commitments. 'The Bolshevik programme did contain a great deal of small print and wide-ranging dreams that were not obvious to those coming to its support,' not least the fact that 'the Bolshevik leaders did not fully share peasant aims on land.'[262] Rabinowitch likewise notes that as the Bolshevik party massively and suddenly expanded in the months after February, 'the newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers from among the most impatient and dissatisfied elements in the factories and garrison who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline,' a problem that brought to party to the brink of disaster in early July.[263] If a large majority of people wanted peace with Germany, peace at any price was less popular. If a large majority of people wanted Soviet power, transfer of *all* power to the Bolsheviks was a harder sell. If a large number of workers wanted to exercise more control over their jobs and more oversight factories, only a minority supported the idea of directly taking them over and running them themselves. 'Where the people thought they were taking power for themselves,' Read concludes, 'they were actually handing it over to a new, authoritarian leadership with almost unlimited aims.'[264]

Again, what's striking about Lenin's own position here is the way he conceived of an immanent continuity between the party's immediate commitments and the more expansive aims of world revolution. The palpable popularity of the former surely anticipated the incipient popularity of the latter; if for the time being the party remained out in front of the people on this score, the people would soon catch up. The axiomatic presumption of continuity was sufficiently strong that, once Lenin's party had secured majority support in the Soviet Congress in October (and then once they had dispatched the 'unrepresentative' Constituent Assembly in January), they did not feel constrained by a need, beyond the forms of popular participation enabled by the soviets, expressly to confirm or reaffirm majoritarian support for their socialist agenda in the future.

Since he wants to acknowledge both the integrity of Lenin's heroic scenario of proletarian class leadership and his readiness to adjust that scenario in the face of recalcitrant realities, Lih proposes a reading of October that foregrounds a basic transition from one goal to another. 'One essential task for historians is to distinguish Bolshevik attitudes toward two very different challenges: the imperative of establishing and defending a worker-peasant *vlast*, and the imperative of *transforming society in a socialist direction*.'[265] The first was the immediate and explicit priority, the second a longer-term aspiration. The first was either-or, the second would be more-or-less. The first was achieved more quickly than anyone had expected, the second proved slower and more challenging. Along the same lines, Lih emphasises that once in power, 'whenever forced to choose between socialist ideals and peasant support, the Bolsheviks chose peasant support.'[266] Contrary to their own expectations,

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[261] Read 1996, p. 78. As Read notes, Mark Steinberg's analysis of the 'moral community' sustained by printers and print workers in the early twentieth century foregrounds their demands for dignity and respect, along with a general 'ethic of love, goodness, truth and justice that they had taken from religion as well as the more widely noted characteristics of suffering in silence and self-abnegation. This culture is very close to that of the peasants' (p. 78, referring to Mark Steinberg, *Moral Communities; The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry*, 1992).

[262] Read 1996, p. 161.

[263] Rabinowitch 2017, p. 312.

[264] Read 1996, pp. 160-1.

[265] Lih 2023, p. 16; cf. Lih 2011, p. 137.

[266] Lih, 'Biography of a Slogan' (2017), part 2. Drawing on his detailed account of the Volga region, Figes approaches the question very differently. 'The "battle for grain", the Bolsheviks' civil war against the

and most especially contrary to Trotsky's expectations, 'the Bolsheviks stayed in power *by explicitly renouncing any socialist measures in the countryside that might alienate the peasantry*. They remained a worker/peasant *vlast* that could move toward socialism *only to the extent* that the peasants remained on board.'[267]

Although Lih's approach helps to differentiate Bolshevik priorities before October from those that dominated their agenda after October, I think his emphasis on a relative discontinuity is exaggerated. Back in 1905, Lenin had already anticipated his party's project in 1917. 'From the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half-way.'[268] In 1917 Lenin certainly privileged the question of state power, but he also consistently framed this question of state power *within* an expected transition from capitalism to socialism. Compared to many of his comrades, admits Krupskaya, Lenin was unusually explicit – as early as April – in emphasising the need to accelerate the transition from the democratic to the socialist phases of the revolution. When Lenin returned to Russia that month, 'many of the comrades thought that Ilyich was presenting the case in much too blunt a manner, and that it was too early yet to speak of a socialist revolution.'[269] Several Bolsheviks who met Lenin at Finland Station on 3 April remember his first words as 'a call to struggle for the socialist revolution.'[270] In the last of his 'letters from afar,' written on 26 March, Lenin had called for taking 'steps towards control of the production and distribution of basic products, towards the introduction of "universal labour service", etc.,' noting that taken together 'these steps will mark the transition to socialism, which cannot be achieved in Russia directly, at one stroke, without transitional measures, but is quite achievable and urgently necessary as a result of such transitional measures.'[271] As usual Lenin was clear about his priorities. 'In taking power,' Lenin wrote a couple of weeks before his party indeed took it, 'we are not at all afraid of stepping beyond the bounds of the bourgeois system; on the contrary, we declare clearly, directly, definitely, and openly that we shall step beyond those bounds, that we shall fearlessly march towards socialism, that our road shall be through a Soviet Republic, through nationalisation of banks and syndicates, through workers' control, through universal labour conscription, through nationalisation of the land, confiscation of the landowners' livestock and implements, etc.' All these long-anticipated policies were intended, as ever, as a 'programme of measures for transition to socialism.'[272]

If it's true that Lenin didn't foreground his party's socialist agenda in the run up to October, as soon as he was in a position to act it moved straight to the top of his list of priorities. On the momentous afternoon of 25 October itself, Lenin announced to the Petrograd Soviet that 'we must now set about building a proletarian socialist state in Russia.' Having accomplished the workers' and peasants' revolution, this next phase in the 'Russian revolution should in the end lead to the victory of socialism.'[273] According to John Reed's memory of the event (which has been challenged by some and corroborated by others), Lenin's first words to the cheering delegates of the full Second Congress, that same night, were: 'We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order.'[274] A week or so later, defending

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countryside, was rooted in a fundamental mistrust – bordering on hatred – of the peasantry. As Marxists, they had always viewed the peasantry with something akin to contempt' (Figes 1997, p. 616; cf. Figes 2001, pp. 355-6).

[267] Lih, 'On Some Needed Distinctions' (unpublished, December 2017).

[268] Lenin, 'Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement,' 14 September 1905, CW9, pp. 236-7, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/sep/05e.htm.

[269] Krupskaya 1959, p. 348.

[270] Löwy 2012, p. 85, citing F. Somilov and Bonch-Bruevich.

[271] Lenin, 'Fifth Letter from Afar,' 26 March 1917, CW23, p. 341.

[272] Lenin, 'Revision of the Party Programme,' 6-8 October 1917, CW26, p. 170.

[273] Lenin, 'Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet,' 25 October 1917, CW26, pp. 239-40; cf. Ferro 1980, pp. 252-3.

[274] As recorded by Reed 1997, ch. 5, https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch5.htm, repeated by Trotsky 1932, ch. 47, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch47.htm. As Trotsky notes, 'the minutes of the Congress are not preserved. The Parliamentary stenographers, invited in to record the

his decision to close some right-wing newspapers, Lenin reiterated that 'we are moving at full speed to socialism' (CW26, p. 286). The day after that Lenin confirmed again that, 'with the consent and approval of the majority of the peasants, in keeping with their practical experience and that of the workers, we shall go forward firmly and unswervingly to the victory of socialism.'[275] In the months that followed October Lenin would regularly refer to it as

> a socialist revolution. The abolition of private property in land, the introduction of workers' control, the nationalisation of the banks – all these were measures that would lead to socialism. They were not socialism, but they were measures that would lead to socialism by gigantic strides. The Bolsheviks did not promise the workers and peasants milk and honey immediately, but they did say that a close alliance between the workers and the exploited peasantry, a firm, unwavering struggle for the power of the Soviets would lead to socialism, and any party that really wanted to be a people's party would have to state clearly and decisively that the revolution was a socialist revolution.[276]

By the time his government convened the Third Congress of Soviets in early January 1918 (as a de-facto substitute for the doomed Constituent Assembly), he confirmed that 'the Russian Revolution has been confronted with the unheard-of task of a socialist reconstruction of society.'[277] 'We shall now proceed to build, on the space cleared of historical rubbish, the airy towering edifice of the socialist society. A new type of state power is being created for the first time in history, a power that the will of the revolution has called upon to wipe out all exploitation, oppression and slavery the world over.'[278] Proclaiming Russia to be a Republic of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, Lenin's party said its 'fundamental aim' would now be 'to abolish all exploitation of man by man, to completely eliminate the division of society into classes, to mercilessly crush the resistance of the exploiters, to establish a socialist organisation of society and to achieve the victory of socialism in all countries.'[279] Three months further into 1918, Lenin already was confident that 'the essence of the present situation is that the task of convincing the working people of Russia that the programme of the socialist revolution is correct' and has now largely 'been carried out.'[280]

No doubt part of Lenin's readiness to embrace this daunting challenge can be traced to his assumption, reinforced by his study of Germany's war-time economy, that much of the foundational work had already been accomplished by capitalism itself, notably through the consolidation of industrial monopolies and ever larger banks. Under the remorseless pressure of imperialist war, 'state-monopoly capitalism inevitably and unavoidably implies a step, and more than one step, towards socialism!' Properly understood, Lenin argues, 'socialism is merely the next step forward from state-capitalist monopoly. Or, in other words, socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people.' Under the accelerating pressure of war, 'socialism is now gazing at us from all the windows of modern capitalism.'[281] If pushed through by a sufficiently vigorous centralised power, perhaps then the essential first steps in a transition from capitalism to socialism need involve

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debates, had abandoned Smolny, along with the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. [...] That initial statement which John Reed puts in the mouth of Lenin does not appear in any of the newspaper accounts. But it is wholly in the spirit of the orator. Reed could not have made it up. Just in that way Lenin must surely have begun his speech at the Congress of Soviets – simply, without unction, with inflexible confidence: "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order."'

[275] Lenin, 'To the Population,' 5 November 1917, CW26, pp. 298-9, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/05.htm.

[276] Lenin, 'Concluding Speech on the Agrarian Question,' 18 November 1917, CW26, pp. 331-2.

[277] Lenin, Speech of 6 January 1918, cited from *Izvestiia*, 7 January 1918, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/constituent-assembly/constituent-assembly-texts/newspapers-on-the-constituent-assembly/.

[278] Lenin, 'Summing-up Speech at the Congress,' 18 January 1918, CW26, p. 480. https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm.

[279] Lenin, 'Declaration Of Rights Of The Working And Exploited People,' 3 January 1918, CW26, pp. 423-4, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/03.htm.

[280] Lenin, 'Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,' 3 May 1918, CW27, pp. 314-317, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/30.htm.

[281] Lenin, 'The Impending Catastrophe,' 10 September 1917, CW25, p. 363.

little more than a change in ownership, ownership of means of production and distribution that already exist. The nationalisation of all banking operations, he anticipated in September, would be transformative all by itself. Since 'the big banks *are* the "state apparatus" which we *need* to bring about socialism, and which we *take ready-made* from capitalism, our task here is merely to lop off what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it *even bigger*, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality.' Lenin was confident that, once established, 'a single State Bank, the biggest of the big, with branches in every rural district, in every factory, will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the *socialist* apparatus. This will be country-wide *book-keeping*, country-wide *accounting* of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the *skeleton* of socialist society.' As this skeleton already exists, the party need only lay hold of it 'at one stroke, by a single decree.'[282]

In addition to these centralised mechanisms of accounting and control, Lenin anticipates (along distinctly neo-Hobbesian lines) that consolidation 'in the hands of sovereign Soviets [of... the] grain monopoly, bread rationing and labour conscription' – 'means and instruments [that] have been placed in our hands by the capitalist state in the war' – would lend the new government state 'a force unprecedented in history [...] for overcoming the resistance of the capitalists, for subordinating them to the proletarian state. These means of control and of *compelling people to work* will be more potent than the laws of the [French Revolutionary] Convention and its guillotine. The guillotine only terrorised, only broke *active* resistance. *For us*, *this is not enough*.' For the first time in history, a workers' government would be strong enough not only to confront its class enemies with 'the omnipotence of the proletarian state' and thereby overcome their resistance to it; it would also have all the means required 'to *compel the capitalists to work* within the framework of the new state organisation' (CW26, p. 109). It would have the means, in other words, to convert resistant capitalists into willing workers.

What's most distinctive about Lenin's approach to this imminent transition is again his reliance on an anticipated and deliberate but effectively 'sub-voluntary' continuity of purpose. Here is a characteristic passage from January 1918:

> Having overthrown tsarism, the Russian revolution was bound to go farther; it could not stop at the victory of the bourgeois revolution; for the war, and the untold sufferings it caused the exhausted peoples, created a soil favourable for the outbreak of the social revolution. Nothing, therefore, is more ludicrous than the assertion that the subsequent development of the revolution, and the revolt of the masses that followed, were caused by a party, by an individual, or, as they vociferate, by the will of a 'dictator.' The fire of revolution broke out solely because of the incredible sufferings of Russia, and because of the conditions created by the war, which sternly and inexorably faced the working people with the alternative of taking a bold, desperate and fearless step, or of perishing, of dying from starvation.[283]

This way of formulating things allowed the passage from bourgeois to socialist stages of the revolution to be understood as *both* inevitable and deliberate. Based on their own experience, the people are sure to learn that socialism is the only way forward in the same way they learned that only soviet power could end the war and transfer land from the gentry to the peasants. Did confirmation of this point require detailed investigation of what the actual mass of Russian people wanted in or after 1918? Not really, so long as such questions could be addressed via evocation of 'the will of the revolution' itself, a figure of speech that started to creep into Bolshevik discourse soon after October.

The logic of Lenin's whole orientation allowed him, precisely, to transition rapidly and smoothly from references to 'the will of the people' (in October) to 'the will of the

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[282] Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?,' 1 October 1917, CW26, p. 106, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm. Cf. Harding 1980, pp. 51-4.
[283] Lenin, 'Speech on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly,' 6 January 1918, CW26, p. 438, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/06b.htm.

revolution' (in January) to arrive (by June) at nothing less than 'the will of history' *tout court*.[284]

Whereas Lih draws attention to the distance that might separate the transfer of sovereign power to the soviets on the one hand from the party's subsequent steps towards socialism on the other, I'm struck by the way Lenin frames October as the hinge connecting both of these stages of the revolution in a single continuous process. Once in power, what's most remarkable about the way Lenin conceived the unprecedented project of socialist reconstruction is how he presented it as emerging directly from the main and explicit popular demand of October itself, i.e. from the very fact of investing the soviets themselves with sovereign power. As Lenin explained in December, Russia's new 'Republic of Soviets (of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies) is not only a higher type of democratic institution' than any bourgeois alternative, it is also 'the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism.'[285] Lenin's emphasis on an underlying continuity of necessity and demand presents the transition from October to January as part of a seamless development:

> When I hear the opponents of the October Revolution shouting about the unpractical and utopian ideas of socialism, I usually ask them a simple and plain question: How about the Soviets? [...] The Soviets receive one and all, anyone who, not wishing to remain inactive, is ready to enter upon the path of creative work. The entire country is covered with their network, and the tighter this net of people's Soviets is drawn the less will be the exploitation of the toiling masses, because the existence of the Soviets is incompatible with the flourishing of the bourgeois system [...]. The Russian People accomplished a tremendous leap, a jump from tsarism to the Soviets. This is an undeniable and hitherto unparalleled fact. And while the bourgeois parliaments of all nations and states within the confines of capitalism and private property have nowhere and at no time given any support to the revolutionary movement, the Soviets, fanning the flame of revolution, imperatively command the people: Fight, take everything into your own hands, organize yourselves![286]

The very institution of the soviets, Lenin argues, has itself 'impelled us on to the path that has led the people to organise their own lives' – and thereby to pursue the socialist revolution.[287] By the same token, soviet sovereignty can also be understood as transformative on account of its anticipated socialist agenda. We know the bourgeoisie will do all they can to resist this agenda, 'but henceforth we have nothing to fear, because we have established our own new state power and because we hold the reins of government [...;] the chief pillar of the new system is the organisational measures we shall be implementing for the sake of socialism.'[288] Lenin could thus reassure his comrades that 'the victory of Soviet power is being achieved because right from the outset it began to realise the age-old aspirations of socialism, while consistently and determinedly relying on the people and considering it to be its duty to awaken the most oppressed and downtrodden sections of society to active life, to raise them to socialist creative work.'[289]

Once fully established, Lenin further anticipates that Soviet power should complete that transformation of the state anticipated and to some extent exemplified by the Paris Commune. The old coercive apparatus would wither away, and the advent of genuine democracy would empower mass participation in government as a matter of course. Given

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[284] These last two quotations are from Lenin, 'Summing-Up Speech At The Congress,' 18 January 1918, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm and Lenin, 'Report On Combating The Famine,' 4 June 1918, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jun/04.htm. Trotsky's early history of the revolution also refers to both 'the will of the revolution' and 'the will of History' (Trotsky 1918, parts 2 and 4, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/index.htm).

[285] Lenin, 'Theses On The Constituent Assembly,' 11 December 1917, CW26, p. 379, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/dec/11a.htm.

[286] Lenin, Speech announcing dissolution of the Assembly, 6 January 1918, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/constituent-assembly/constituent-assembly-texts/newspapers-on-the-constituent-assembly/.

[287] Lenin, 'Speech on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly,' 6 January 1918, CW26, pp. 439-40.

[288] Lenin, 'Summing-Up Speech At The Congress,' 18 January 1918, CW26, p. 480, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm.

[289] Lenin, 'Report on the Activities of the Council of People's Commissars,' 11 January 1918, CW26, p. 462.

this prospect, why should critics of the new government accuse them of pre-empting the will of the people on the one hand, or of yielding to 'utopian' adventurism on the other?

(c) Utopian wish or political will?

Our third and final question regarding the Bolsheviks' transition to socialism concerns this perennial accusation of utopianism. If we accept that socialism in Russia would be a matter of deliberate institution rather than of economic necessity, and further accept (for the sake of argument) that a sufficient majority of people did indeed want to institute socialism, the further question remains: did they have the material resources and capacities required to make a reality of that choice?

Marx had found his distinctive voice, of course, by distinguishing what became his 'scientific' project for socialism from all merely utopian or wishful longings for a better society. As his canonical formulation put it, 'mankind inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.'[290] It's futile to take on a task before its time has come, and it's futile to try to build socialism in a country that isn't ready for it. Like Luxemburg and following Plekhanov, the young Lenin had fully embraced Marx's scientific path. As Harding notes, through to 1914 Lenin's understanding of the necessary development of capitalism in Russia routinely shut down 'any talk of skipping phases': any premature push for socialism, before the economic circumstances might enable it, would be counter-productive at best and downright reactionary at worst.[291] The great imperialist war that began in 1914 was sure to accelerate and intensify the final crisis of capitalism, but like any scientific socialist, Lenin was always acutely sensitive to charges of utopianism.

Such charges rained down on Lenin and his party all through 1917, and then all the more forcefully in 1918. Martov, Sukhanov, Kautsky and many others pressed the point, and neo-Menshevik critics like Paresh Chattopadhyay continue to draw on their arguments to this day.[292] From a Menshevik perspective, Lenin's reliance on the transformative power of state power was squarely at odds with his own early appreciation of Marxist science. In his first major work, Lenin had recognised how 'Marx put an end to the view of society being a mechanical aggregation of individuals which allows of all sorts of modification at the will of the authorities (or, if you like, at the will of society and the government),' in favour of a quasi-Darwinian analysis of the actual development and modification of 'production relations,' understood as 'a process of natural history.'[293] Lenin's critics accused the Bolshevik party of recklessly trying to bypass the unavoidable stages of this process, of disregarding the slow and necessary phases of economic 'maturation,' and of ignoring Marx's warning that 'no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed.'[294]

As capital consolidated its grip on society, Marx had expected that the contradiction between the general development of production on the one hand and the increasingly narrow and constricting ownership of the means of production on the other would become more and more unsustainable. In order for this contradiction to explode into a successful revolution against capitalism, however, the general level of production first needed to advance far beyond the limits of pre-capitalist subsistence. Without the affluence and leisure made possible by capitalist innovations, without adequate material progress, 'want is merely made general and, with destitution, the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business is

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[290] Marx, *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* (1859), SW, p. 426, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm
[291] Harding 1977m vol. 2, p. 311.
[292] See for instance Chattopadhyay 1991 and 2016.
[293] Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are* [1894], CW1, p. 142.
[294] Marx, *Preface* (1859), SW, p. 426.

necessarily reproduced.'[295] Any attempt merely to return to a state of 'savage' or primitive communism, added Engels, any effort to restore a state *prior* to class distinctions, could by definition never actually overcome such distinctions (since they would only emerge once again, 'as the social productive forces develop' over time). The condition for the abolition of class is the full expansion of productive capacity. 'Only at a certain level of development of these social productive forces, even a very high level for our modern conditions, does it become possible to raise production to such an extent that the abolition of class distinctions can constitute real progress, can be lasting without bringing about stagnation or even decline in the mode of social production.'[296]

To wage a revolutionary struggle for socialism in conditions of acute scarcity or 'under-development,' the Mensheviks argued, could only backfire. Marx and Engels' related warnings about the dangers of a premature role in government became another familiar point of reference for socialist critics of October. In a situation like that which prevailed over the summer and autumn of 1850, Marx told his rivals in the Communist League, even if somehow the party of 'the proletariat could gain control of the government the measures it would introduce would be those of the petty bourgeoisie and not those appropriate to the proletariat. Our party can only gain power when the situation allows it to put its own measures into practice' – which in turn means a level of economic development consistent with mass expropriation of the means of the production.[297] 'The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party,' echoed Engels, 'is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents.' In such circumstances such a leader 'will find himself 'compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination. [...] Whoever puts himself in this awkward position is irrevocably lost.'[298] In his haste to take power in 1917, had Lenin put himself in such a position?

The Bolsheviks had made the mistake, argued Sukhanov a few years after the event, of concentrating their grip on revolutionary means before deciding on their revolutionary ends. They had recklessly taken power before working out

> what they were going to do with their victory and the State they would win. They were acting against Marx, against scientific Socialism, against common sense, against the working class, when by way of an insurrection, under the slogan of 'Power to the Soviets' they attempted to hand over to their own Central Committee the totality of state power in Russia. The power of a single isolated proletarian vanguard, though it was based on the confidence of millions of the masses, obliged the new Government and the Bolsheviks themselves to perform tasks they knew to be beyond their strength. This was the core of the problem. The Bolshevik Party was utopian in undertaking to perform these tasks. It made a fateful error when it started an insurrection without thinking about them.[299]

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[295] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, in SW, p. 187. As Smith notes, after citing this same passage: 'With this in mind, it is possible to understand the cruel dilemma in which the Bolsheviks found themselves in 1918. They were intent on creating democratic socialism, but their priority had to be the reconstruction of the productive forces, especially, the revival of labour-discipline. In the short term, the limited use of forms of compulsion, in particular, the application of capitalist methods of labour-discipline and labour-intensification, was probably unavoidable. Yet most of the Bolshevik leadership seemed unaware of the dangers posed to the goal of democratic socialism by the long-term use of methods which undermined workers' self-activity in production' (Smith 1983, pp. 263-4).

[296] Engels, 'On Social Relations in Russia' (1875), MECW24, pp. 39-40; cf. Bernstein 1993, p. 206.

[297] Marx, 'Speech to the Communist League,' September 1850, SW, p. 327.

[298] Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), ch. 6, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war-germany/ch06.htm.

[299] Sukhanov 1962, pp. 570-1. Rabinowitch likewise shows how the abrupt conversion of the Bolshevik party from insurgent organisation to government apparatus had to be rushed through 'without benefit of an advance plan or even a concept' Rabinowitch 2008, p. 390). Introducing Serge's history of 1917-18, Peter Sedgwick makes a similar point regarding debates over post-October industrial policy, noting that 'the polarity between "centralism" and "democracy," "Leninism" and "libertarianism," is wholly inadequate to encompass the diverse tendencies of this crucial economic debate. [...] An excess of improvisation rather than of ideological rigidity was the real weakness of Russian Communism in the critical Year One' (Sedgwick, Editor's Introduction to Serge 2015, p. 14).

Martov likewise worried that Russia far from ready for a transition to a new mode of production. The 'pseudo-socialism of "trenches and barracks"' might have been forceful enough to win the political battle of October, but it could be no substitute for a socially 'mature' and politically sophisticated proletariat. All through 1917 and its aftermath Martov voiced his 'deep conviction that to impose socialism on an economically and culturally backward country is a senseless Utopia.' A successful transition to socialism, as he put it more systematically in January 1918, would need to meet at least four conditions:

> 1. The existence of a numerous and influential working class with little hope or expectation of moving out of their class condition. [...] 2. The proletariat must have acquired a certain level of managerial and organisational experience and maturity which would enable it to run an economy in the process of socialisation [...]. 3. The non-proletarian labouring masses, i.e. the peasantry and other petty producers, must willingly accept a socialist type of economy as being demonstrably superior to production in small units [...]. 4 Economic life must centre around a nucleus of heavy industry in the towns.

None of these conditions, Martov concluded, yet applied in Russia. He threw Lenin's earlier denunciation of maximalism back at him – 'We declare,' Lenin had said in 1905, that 'whoever strives to use state power for the realisation of socialism in backward Russia is an *agent provocateur*.'[300] In the absence of a majoritarian class willing and able to establish it from below, Martov predicted that the distinctively Bolshevik path to socialism could only be ordered from above, and thus imposed through terror and clientelism.[301] 'One shudders to think how far the very idea of socialism will be discredited in the minds of the people,' he confessed to a friend a couple of months after October. 'We are undoubtedly moving through anarchy towards some sort of Caesarism, founded on the entire people's having lost confidence in their ability to govern themselves.'[302]

Luxemburg, finally, qualified her approval of the Bolshevik drive towards socialism with her usual critique of their methods:

> The tacit presupposition underlying the theory of dictatorship as formulated by Lenin and Trotsky is that the revolutionary party has, in its pocket, a ready-made formula for socialist transformation, and that this formula merely needs to be assiduously implemented. This is unfortunately – or perhaps, fortunately – not the case. Far from being an aggregation of ready-made prescriptions that have merely to be applied, the practical realisation of socialism as an economic, social, and legal system is something that lies in the mists of the future. [...] We know approximately what we have to eliminate at the very outset in order to clear the path for the socialist economy; by contrast, there is no socialist party program nor any socialist textbook that can instruct us as to the quality of the innumerable concrete measures, both major and minor, that are needed in order to introduce basic socialist features into the economy, the legal system and all social relations. This constitutes no defect; on the contrary, it is precisely herein that the advantage of scientific vis-à-vis utopian socialism consists. The socialist system of society shall – and can only – be a historical product: it is born of its own school of experience, in the hour of fulfilment; it emerges from the becoming of living history.[303]

Lenin's response to such accusations, in all their many variations, was again based squarely on his understanding of sovereign power and popular self-government. If authorised by the sovereign will of the people, if upheld by a demonstrable majority of the people, why couldn't a soviet regime or *narodnaia vlast* effectively *command* a transition to socialism? Insofar as this was the *people*'s will and the people's command, there would be no risk of trying to force this transition by decree. Lenin's whole argument, in 1918, rested on the presumption that it's the people themselves who would force the transition, via their soviets, because this is indeed what they most wanted to do. They no longer merely wished for

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[300] Getzler 1967, pp. 174-5.
[301] Martov develops these points in his debate with Zinoviev in Halle in October 1920 (Martov 2011, pp. 167-180).
[302] Martov, letter to Nadezhda Kristi, 30 December 1917, in Getzler 1967, p. 172. Cf. Martov 2022, pp. 43-5; Savel'ev and Tiutiukin 2006, pp. 69-70.
[303] Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution,' LCW5, 494/1100.

socialism: having taken over the state, they now they had the political power required to bring it about. Admittedly they would need assistance from the more advanced working classes of western Europe to complete the job, but thanks to soviet power they could make a winning start.

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In January 1918 Lenin had an answer ready to silence his Menshevik critics. 'When we are told that the Bolsheviks have invented this utopian idea of introducing socialism in Russia, which is an impossible thing, we reply: How did it happen that utopians and dreamers enjoy the sympathy of the majority of the workers, peasants and soldiers? Did not the majority of the workers, peasants and soldiers side with us because they had acquired a first-hand knowledge of the war and its effects?' Hadn't they come to realise that 'we are faced with the alternative of perishing or demolishing the old bourgeois society'[304]? A majority of the people had made a clear choice, and they had duly instituted a government to do what they most truly willed.

By these criteria, however, it's easy to show that Lenin himself would soon have to write off his ambitions of 1918 as undeniably utopian. A couple of years after the fact, Lenin had to admit that 'we made the mistake of deciding to go over directly to Communist production and distribution,' of trying 'introduce the socialist principles of production and distribution by "direct assault", i. e., in the shortest, quickest and most direct way.'[305] Perhaps the peasants didn't yet want socialism after all, and as it turned out the new soviet sovereign didn't yet have the capacities and resources to command what it wished. The kombedy had failed to win the class struggle in the villages, and the anticipated path to agrarian socialism had proved – at least so far – a dead-end. As Mario Tronti would later observe, with respect to a socialist future 'the Bolshevik October, the conquest of power' had to be understood as the embattled 'start of a long process, of the construction of the material conditions and subjective presuppositions, [...] of another way of being together in the social relation of human persons. An enormous project [...]. The error was not the revolution right away. The error was socialism right away.'[306]

Most worrying of all, the psycho-political foundation of the whole project – the resolute political will of the proletariat itself – had now itself been thrown into question. By the time peace was signed with Germany in February 1918, the socio-economic conditions that had encouraged the growth of a militant urban workforce no longer applied. The population of Petrograd had begun to fall with almost unimaginable speed, from around 2.5 million in early 1917 to scarcely 700,000 four years later.[307] Over these same years Moscow's population was cut in half. Both cities' formerly substantial and cohesive communities of workers and soldiers were scattered across the country. In their absence the government became the only organised force with the capacity to keep the economy afloat, and it was compelled to do so in the absence of suitably developed forces of production. By the early 1920s, in other words, 'the Russian proletariat had suffered a terrible bloodletting. It had literally melted away during the civil war, and this process was continuing at the outset of the NEP. Thus, in 1922, the number of employed workers was less than half the prewar figure – 4.6 million instead of 11 million in 1913, within the same frontiers, and of these 4.6 million, only 2 million were employed in industry.'[308]

In 1918 Lenin could still combine government calls for 'iron discipline' with references to the proletariat as itself the class embodiment of discipline and will – but by the time the party was forced to retreat to the state-capitalist New Economic Policies adopted in

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[304] Lenin, 'Report at Extraordinary All-Russia Railwaymen's Congress,' 13 January 1918, CW26, p. 494.
[305] Lenin, 'Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the Russian Communist Party,' 29 October 1921, CW33, p. 93, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/29.htm; cf. CW33, pp. 86, 114.
[306] Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero* (2015), p. 24, cited in Basso 2024, pp. 126-7.
[307] Koenker 1985, p. 424.
[308] Bettelheim 1976, p. 172.

1921 there was no denying that 'since large-scale capitalist industry has been destroyed, since the factories are at a standstill, the proletariat has disappeared.'[309] The economic foundations of working class rule were now crumbling beneath their party's feet, and 'proletarians are obliged to earn a living by methods which are not proletarian and are not connected with large-scale industry. [...] Instead of large, continuously running factories, the proletarian sees something quite different, and is compelled to enter the economic sphere as a profiteer, or as a small producer. We must spare no sacrifice in this transitional period to save the proletariat from this.'[310] Even where factory production persists, Lenin told the Eleventh Party Congress in 1922, many of the people now working in factories don't qualify as proper proletarians at all. 'Are the social and economic conditions in our country today such as to induce real proletarians to go into the factories? No. It would be true according to Marx; but Marx did not write about Russia [...]. It held true over a period of six hundred years, but it is not true for present-day Russia. Very often those who go into the factories are not proletarians; they are casual elements of every description.'[311] In other words, to return to Marx's old distinctions, perhaps even some of these factory workers might now be better described as 'lumpen-proletariat.'

In such circumstances Lenin could take no comfort in Marx's own prediction that, if and when the proletariat might prevail in its struggle against the bourgeoisie, it would 'only be victorious by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.'[312] By imposing collective ownership of the means of production, Engels had anticipated, the proletariat would thereby 'abolish itself as proletariat, [and] abolish all class distinctions and antagonisms.'[313] In post-civil war Russia, however, the fact that the proletariat's old class enemies had disappeared even more fully than the proletariat itself offered only small consolation. Within a year of the revolution the political influence of the former factory- and property-owning elites had indeed vanished without trace – as Smith notes, 'the centuries-old division between propertied Russia and the toiling masses was wiped out in a matter of months. Seldom has history seen so precipitate and so total a destruction of a ruling class.'[314] By itself, though, this wasn't enough to re-orient or re-vitalise the proletariat itself as an active political force.

Now that the civil war was over the main threat facing the soviet republic no longer came from capitalists, landowners or the White armies. The new and more insidious challenge was posed by that enormous class of people who had always been supposed to *follow* the proletariat, rather than threaten it. Proletarian Russia now had to confront the persistent peasant or 'petty-bourgeois element which surrounds us like the air, and penetrates deep into the ranks of the proletariat. And the proletariat is declassed, i.e., dislodged from its class groove. The factories and mills are idle – the proletariat is weak, scattered, enfeebled.'[315] Thus declassed, how could Russia's demoralised proletariat continue to fulfil its historical mission as the hegemonic leader of the people as a whole? By 1922, rather than guiding a proletarian revolution of the kind Marx had anticipated, Lenin found himself at the head of

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[309] Lenin, 'The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments,' 17 October 1921, CW33, p. 65, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm; cf. McAuley 1991, pp. 373, 412.
[310] Lenin, 'Tenth Party Conference,' 26 May 1921, CW32, p. 411, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/may/26.htm ; cf. Harding 1980, pp. 279-82.
[311] Lenin, 'Political Report,' Eleventh Party Congress, 27 March 1922, CW33, p. 299.
[312] Marx, *The Holy Family*, SW, p. 149.
[313] Engels, Anti-Dühring (1877), ch. 24, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm; cited Lenin, *State and Revolution*, ch. 1, CW25, p. 400, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch01.htm.
[314] Smith cites *Pravda*'s editorial for New Year's Day 1919: 'Where are the wealthy, the fashionable ladies, the expensive restaurants and private mansions, the beautiful entrances, the lying newspapers, all the corrupted "golden life"? All swept away"' (Smith 2002, p. 85).
[315] Lenin, 'New Times and Old Mistakes in a New Guise,' 20 August 1921, CW33, pp. 23-4; cf. 65. In his study of the Baku Soviet in 1917-18, Ronald Suny shows in detail how 'a viable Bolshevik government in Baku could not exist without a united working class,' but such a class was dissolved by 'nationalism and self-interest [...]. The Bolsheviks of Baku lost power when they lost the workers. They lost the workers because they could no longer respond to the workers' demands' (Suny 1972, pp. 349-53).

what might better be described as a plebeian dictatorship. Speaking for what remained of the Workers' Opposition, a jaded Shliapnikov told a closed session of the eleventh congress, on 2 April 1922, that Lenin 'said yesterday that the proletariat as a class, in the Marxian sense, did not exist [in Russia]. Permit me to congratulate you on being the vanguard of a non-existing class.'[316]

It was then all the more incumbent on the party of the proletariat to compensate for this weakness, and to reinforce proletarian rule with the kinds of force and authority that its own ranks could apparently no longer provide.[317] Addressing his party's Petrograd conference in 1921, Zinoviev acknowledged that dissipation of the local proletariat left the Bolsheviks with no option but to operate as a 'monopoly party' that might 'act on behalf of the workers.'[318] In the early 1920s, like other members of the Bolsheviks' 'old guard,' Zinoviev remained confident that the party should and could continue to sustain 'the soviets as organs where the masses learned at one and the same time to legislate and to carry out their own laws.' In particular, urged Zinoviev, 'effort should be made to revitalize the soviets and extend party influence within them'[319] – perhaps without appearing to see that these two efforts were often proving themselves to be mutually incompatible.

This difficult balancing act was made all the more difficult after October, moreover, as a result of what Rabinowitch calls the 'colossal attrition' of experienced party members and cadre as they moved from manufacturing jobs into political, military or administrative roles. Given its demographic collapse, Petrograd, the original home and bastion of the revolution, was especially affected by this development. Over the year that followed the Bolshevik insurrection, the party lost no less than 90% of its Petrograd membership. Combined with the transfer of the seat of government from Petrograd to Moscow in March 1918, this hollowing out of the local party naturally had a profoundly demoralising and atomising effect on the previously close-knit association of workers, soldiers and sailors who had seized and retained the political initiative in 1917.[320]

Lenin never retreated from the characterisation of post-October Russia as 'a dictatorship of the proletariat,' but as time went on the relation between party and class, in the actual exercise of this dictatorship, was clearly being stretched thinner and thinner. Although it's important not to read too much into Lenin's acknowledgement that (as the result of a temporary collapse in industrial production) 'the proletariat has disappeared,' nevertheless the questions raised by veteran militants like Shliapnikov, Kollontai and Dune were unavoidable. To the extent that the proletariat has been eclipsed as a social and thus political force, Dune asked, 'is not the existing party of a non-existent class no longer a vanguard but something separate and apart? If Lenin's' argument was true, that the victory over the counterrevolution was marked by the disappearance of the class in whose name we triumphed, then had not the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat become only a myth?' Pending a world revolution, for all our efforts had we only 'given birth to a classless, starving collection of people, with silent factories and mills?'[321]

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[316] Shliapnikov, cited in Allen 2022, p. 524.

[317] 'In this situation,' as Harding summarises it, 'in order to keep some flicker of the project for socialism burning, however fitfully, until the European revolution arrived, Lenin turned to the Party. The Party, uniting the advance guard of the conscious workers, would have to act as proxy for the exhausted and scattered proletariat' (Harding 1980, pp. 325-6).

[318] Zinoviev, September 1921, cited in McAuley 1991, p. 412.

[319] Zinoviev, 1920-21, cited in Lih 2023, pp. 267-9.

[320] Rabinowitch 2008, p. 392. McAuley summarises the central conflict of interest, the 'wall' that Bolshevik administration erected between the party and its most committed partisans: 'To the Bolsheviks [of 1921], particularly the leading activists, the working class was woefully weak, and its actions during the following months revealed its backwardness all too clearly, whereas to the workers [...], for whom deprivation and privilege were associated with the actions of the "bourgeoisie", further job and ration cuts by a workers' government, and the continued existence of privileges for commissars and party members, were arbitrary and unjustified. The expectations of each other were proving impossible to meet' (McAuley 1991, p. 401).

[321] Dune 1993, pp. 229-30.

In place of an insurgent proletariat, and as a substitute for the people's councils, what now rose above these silent factories was a new state apparatus, one that would soon complete the usurpation of sovereign authority by government power. Smith summarises the coming conundrum: 'Having eliminated private ownership of the means of production with astounding ease, Lenin became convinced that the state alone was the guarantor of progress to socialism. Proletarian power was guaranteed exclusively by the state and had nothing to do, for example, with the nature of authority relations in the workplace. Lenin thus had no inkling that the state itself could become an instrument of exploitation and little insight into how the Bolsheviks themselves could be "captured" by the apparatus they notionally controlled.'[322]

The Bolsheviks had secured their grip on power but in the process they also secured the grip of the state's power over them. Having built up a new government in the most challenging circumstances, they remained unable or unwilling to confront that 'dialectic of sovereignty' anticipated by Rousseau, when he warned that any government, once it has been 'invested with the public force, [will] sooner or later usurp the Sovereign authority.'[323]

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[322] Smith 2002, pp. 98-9; cf. Smith 1983, pp. 264-5.

[323] Rousseau 1762a, 3:18.

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