The Tragic Fate of Workers' Russia

written by Thomas Harrison | July 7, 2017



[This is the second of three articles commemorating the Russian Revolution of 1917 and analyzing its fate under Stalin. The first part, "Glorious Harbinger of a New Society: the Bolshevik Revolution," was published in the previous issue of *New Politics*, number 62, winter 2017. The text below is slightly expanded from what appeared in the print issue.]

Soon after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918, the Soviet republic was under siege. Various anti-Bolshevik forces, some supported by the Allies or the Central Powers, were gathering. If these forces succeeded in reversing the October Revolution, what would be the result?

A terrifying glimpse of what a counterrevolution would mean was provided by events in nearby Finland. In January 1918 Finnish socialists, inspired by the Bolsheviks, took power, unleashing a fierce backlash by the Finnish bourgeoisie, supported by German troops. Heavily armed counterrevolutionary White Guards recaptured Helsinki, street by street; workers' wives and children were forced to walk in front of them as human shields. After other unimaginable cruelties, the socialists were crushed, and at a fearful cost: 20-30,000 workers were massacred or died of starvation and disease in concentration camps. This and subsequent events made it quickly apparent that counterrevolution would mean not a restoration of the pre-October status quo, but a monstrous bloodbath.

Soviet Russia: The Early Years

In his pamphlet, *State and Revolution*, written in 1917 before the October Revolution, Lenin had called for a radically democratic system, under which Russia would be ruled directly by the workers and peasants through their councils — the soviets — with free elections and several competing political parties. And for about six months after the Bolsheviks came to power on November 7, the Soviet state functioned more or less as Lenin had envisioned. The Council of People's Commissars, elected by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, governed; its members included Left SRs as well as Bolsheviks. The Right SRs had withdrawn from the Soviets, but the Mensheviks had returned; they and smaller parties, such as the anarchists, operated freely within the Soviets as outspoken opponents of Bolshevik policies. The Bolsheviks' coalition partners, the Left SRs, often disagreed with Lenin and Trotsky, and the Bolshevik – now Communist – Party itself was frequently divided over issues such as the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In the Communist Party and in the Soviets, differences were decided by democratic votes.

Every party, and every faction within a party, had its own newspaper. Socialists had always regarded "freedom of the press" under capitalism as a sham: even if everyone had the theoretical right to publish a newspaper, the cost of production and printing meant that mass-produced and widely distributed papers were all owned by the rich. The Bolsheviks tried to make press freedom a reality. All printing presses and paper supplies were nationalized; the government then distributed them free to political parties in proportion to the size of their vote and to any group with at least

10,000 members.

Personal freedom was also greatly expanded. In December 1917 the Soviet government repealed all laws against homosexuality. As one Bolshevik commented, the new policy established "the absolute non-interference of the state and society in sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured and no one's interests are encroached upon – concerning homosexuality, sodomy and various forms of sexual gratification, which are set down in European legislation as offenses against morality – Soviet legislation treats these exactly the same as so-called 'natural' intercourse."

In religious matters, a strict separation of church and state was instituted. This was directed particularly against the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been the state religion under the Tsars. The government seized all the Church's property, which was vast. All remaining restrictions on non-Orthodox religions were abolished. Special protection was given to Jews: anti-Semitic writings were made illegal, and people convicted of fomenting pogroms were severely punished. The teaching of religious doctrine in schools was banned. The Bolsheviks regarded all religions as superstitious and conservative ideologies, so, while citizens were free to practice any faith, the government opposed religion in its propaganda and educational policy, although this was not made a priority.

Major steps were taken to achieve equality for women. Among the Bolshevik leaders, Alexandra Kollontai, commissar of public welfare, was the most prominent advocate for women's rights. Kollontai argued that a workers' state must liberate women from enslavement to continuous childbearing and to the drudgery of endless cooking, cleaning and childcare. She predicted that freeing women from these burdens would give rise to a "new woman" – tough, independent, as free as a man to lead an active life outside the home, to experience love outside of marriage, and to pursue her talents through work. At Kollontai's urging, communal restaurants and laundries were set up and childcare facilities created for working women. In addition, all laws against abortion were repealed, and contraception was made available to all. Women who did the same jobs as men had to be paid the same wages.

Women could divorce their husbands by simply notifying the authorities, and men could do the same. A parent's – meaning in most cases a man's – responsibility for children born out of wedlock was the same as that required for children of a marriage. In fact, the very status of illegitimacy was abolished. Blood, not marriage, became the basis for assigning parental responsibility for maintenance, education, and supervision of children. And this responsibility was not affected by divorce.

Another important reform that especially benefited women was mass education. Illiteracy was widespread in Russia, but almost universal among peasant women. According to one observer, the typical peasant woman "dragged through life, working as hard as men in the fields, having and losing her babies [in some rural areas infant mortality was as high as 70 percent], cooking and carrying water, washing the clothes in the river, making the fires, spinning and weaving through the winter months, milking the cows, and for all this getting nothing but abuse and beatings from her husband."[1] If women were ever to be treated as anything more than beasts of burden, they had to learn to read and write.

The literacy campaign was led by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar of enlightenment, whose staff was mostly women, including Nadezhda Krupskaya and Natalia Sedova, the partners, respectively, of Lenin and Trotsky. Thousands and thousands of dedicated teachers fanned out through the length and breadth of Soviet Russia, working to stamp out illiteracy. Even in the Red Army, soldiers took literacy classes during lulls in the fighting. The results were dramatic: within two years, 60 percent of the population could read and write, at least at a rudimentary level.

Apart from literacy, however, the government's efforts to liberate women were limited by a desperate lack of resources. So, for example, some of the childcare centers sought by Kollontai were set up, but they were bleak institutions full of malnourished children cared for by half-starved attendants. Communal restaurants serving watery cabbage soup were not appealing alternatives to a working woman's kitchen, where she might at least be able, occasionally, to cook an egg or a piece of bacon obtained on the black market. One consequence of poverty that was especially degrading to women was prostitution. Women who worked in factories, for example, earned so little that they frequently took money for sex. Widespread prostitution, moreover, led to an epidemic of venereal disease. The only solution was to raise women's standard of living, but under the circumstances, this was impossible.

"War Communism"

The bitter reality was that the Russian economy had almost ceased to function. By 1921, the country's total production was one-third of what it had been before the World War. In retaliation for the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Allies had imposed a blockade on Soviet Russia in 1918. Until it was lifted two years later, no food, medicine, or anything else, even mail, could enter the country. For nearly three years, wheat, coal and iron from Ukraine were cut off, first because of German occupation and then because most of the province was controlled by White armies. With no fuel, the bitter winter of 1919 was a nightmare: people froze to death on the streetcars, in hospitals, in their homes. Supplies of oil and cotton from other parts of the former Russian Empire were also severed by the Civil War (see below). Russia's cities were depopulated as workers left to scavenge for food in the countryside. The working class was reduced in size by half. Workers who remained in the factories that still functioned frequently fainted from hunger at their machines; many survived only by stealing what they produced and bartering it for food.

Because the factories were producing so few goods, there was nothing for peasants to buy in exchange for their crops. Consequently, they hoarded their surplus grain, hoping for better times to come. But this meant starvation for the cities. To prevent complete disaster the Soviet government initiated a policy of requisitioning grain. Armed battalions were sent out to the countryside, and peasants were compelled to surrender all they produced in excess of what was needed for their families' survival. Naturally, this policy was bitterly resented by the peasants.

As far as industry was concerned, the Bolsheviks had originally planned only a very gradual taking over of the economy while awaiting revolution in Germany. After the October Revolution, factories were left under private ownership. But workers immediately began taking matters into their own hands, seizing control of factories and driving out the bosses – just as the peasants had earlier seized the land. As a result, the Soviet government began nationalizing industries. The stock market was shut down, and banks and stores were also taken over by the state. Housing was nationalized too. In the cities and towns, economic life was now largely controlled by the government. These policies, together with grain requisitioning, were essentially an emergency response to food shortages, low productivity and industrial chaos. In 1921, when the Party ended requisitioning and suspended nationalizations, Lenin referred to them after the fact as "War Communism," a term that has been used by historians ever since. Despite the fact that it was Lenin himself who coined the term, however, it was something of a misnomer; in the minds of most Bolshevik leaders, hyper-centralization, authoritarianism, and the coercion of workers and peasants had nothing to do with communism.[2]

The Civil War

By the time the October Revolution took place, there were few Russians who were willing to fight for the Provisional Government. The old ruling classes – the generals, businessmen,

landowners, etc. — were thoroughly demoralized. Many went into exile, and the ones who remained in Russia had no idea what to do. General Alexei Kaledin, one of the first to organize a White Army, said, right before he committed suicide early in 1918: "Our situation is hopeless. The population not only does not support us – it is definitely hostile. We have no strength, and resistance is useless."[3] But support soon came from abroad. After the Bolsheviks signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Allies sent troops, military advisers, guns and ammunition to the Whites; by supporting the counterrevolution, they hoped to bring Russia back into the War.

Now the Whites began to revive, but essentially as mercenary forces financed by the imperialist powers. The United States funneled millions of dollars to Cossack warlords and then to the White generals in the belief that Russia would only return to the Eastern Front under a military dictatorship; there was no pretense to "restoring democracy." Without the support of the United States and other imperialists, the Whites would likely have collapsed in less than a year, thus obviating the necessity for the harsh, repressive policies of War Communism and perhaps short-circuiting the authoritarian degeneration of the Bolshevik regime, at least for a time – time that might have a made a critical difference in the prospects for international revolution.

The first serious blow came to the Soviets in June 1919. The Czech Legion consisted of 30,000 prisoners-of-war, who had been captured earlier from the Austro-Hungarian army and organized by the Provisional Government to fight for Czech independence on the side of the Allies. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Bolsheviks had agreed to expel them from Russia. As they were being taken east, the Czechs mutinied and took over the Trans-Siberian Railway, thus severing a vital line of communication. The Legion then proceeded to occupy vast areas of the country, overthrowing local soviets wherever they went. The Russian Civil War had begun.

The Czechs joined forces with Admiral Alexander Kolchak, who, with the support of Japanese and U.S. troops, seized control of Siberia and proclaimed himself "Supreme Ruler of Russia." Kolchak's army sped westward toward Moscow, where the Bolsheviks had transferred the Soviet capital. From southern Russia a second White army, under the command of General Anton Denikin and backed by French and British forces, headed north toward Moscow as well. And in Estonia General Nikolai Yudenich, also with British support, was getting ready to march on Petrograd. With three White armies advancing toward the Russian heartland from the east, south and west, Bolshevik control was soon reduced to a mere 25 percent of the country.

As commissar of war, Trotsky had to build up a Red Army almost from scratch. There were a few thousand Red Guards, but these were primarily factory workers with only the most elementary military training. At first Trotsky appealed to the Soviets and the Bolshevik Party for volunteers; thousands answered his call, and they became the dedicated core of the Red Army. Then peasants were drafted; they were much less reliable and committed than working-class soldiers, and desertions were a constant problem. Since military expertise was desperately needed, and there was no time to create a big enough corps of trained Bolshevik officers, Trotsky used large numbers of officers from the Tsarist army; eventually 30,000 of them served in the Red Army. There were surprisingly few cases of treason, largely because every commanding officer was assigned a Bolshevik commissar, who kept him under surveillance and had to approve his every order. In addition to the commissars, all Party members were expected to educate and inspire their fellow soldiers – to explain the aims of the war and set an example of courage under fire.

Like any large army under combat conditions, the Red Army was a strictly hierarchical command organization. At the same time, unlike capitalist armies, discipline was extraordinarily lenient. Relatively few deserters were executed; most were simply fined or assigned to work in rear units. Intense efforts were made to educate soldiers, with literacy classes and even libraries and reading rooms. The goal was to prepare soldiers to participate in the institutions of the workers state once

peace was restored – not to create professional soldiers.

In July 1918 Kolchak's forces approached the town of Ekaterinburg, where the former Tsar and his family were being held prisoner. Plans had been made to eventually stage a public trial of Nicholas II, similar to the trials of Charles I by the British Parliament and Louis XVI by the French Convention. But now the Bolsheviks feared the imperial family might be rescued by the Whites and used to strengthen the counterrevolution, which had so far lacked a unifying leader. For this reason, the local Bolsheviks made a hasty decision to execute the whole family. Early in the morning of July 17, Nicholas, Alexandra and their five children were taken down to the basement of the house in which they were being held, and shot.

By August, Kolchak had reached the city of Kazan, 400 miles from Moscow. In the city of Samara, in central Russia, Victor Chernov, leader of the Right Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), and some other members of the former Constituent Assembly had established an anti-Soviet government, hoping for Kolchak's protection. But Kolchak rudely crushed this would-be government and executed some of its leaders. Neither he nor any of the other White generals were interested in replacing Soviet rule with a parliamentary democracy. Instead they planned either to restore the Tsarist autocracy or become dictators themselves.

At Svyazhk, across the river from Kazan, the Red Army seethed with panic and confusion. If it failed to stop Kolchak here, the road would be open to Moscow and, probably, the end of the Soviet state. In the nick of time, Trotsky arrived on a special train and rallied the dispirited soldiers. One of the Red Army's strengths was that it fought for ideals. A gifted speaker and writer, Trotsky knew how to inspire soldiers and urge them on to greater risks and sacrifices. His train was equipped with a printing press for producing pamphlets and reprinting his speeches, which were then distributed en masse. Trotsky also proved to be a brilliant military strategist, a remarkable accomplishment for an intellectual with no military experience.

Kolchak was defeated at Svyazhk and turned back, but this was only the beginning. For the next two years and more, the Reds fought the Whites. The Russian Civil War was extremely cruel; terrible atrocities were committed by both sides. Back in December 1917, the Bolsheviks had created a special police force to deal with those who supported the Whites – the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counterrevolution and Sabotage, known by its acronym as the Cheka. The Cheka had the power to arrest suspected counterrevolutionaries and imprison or execute them without trial. When the Civil War broke out, it launched the Red Terror, a policy of mass arrests and executions designed to intimidate – to "terrorize" – the counterrevolution and break its will to fight. This was seen by the Bolsheviks as an emergency measure, necessitated by the Whites' own ferocity and the need to win the Civil War at any cost. One official of this new political police himself declared that the Cheka "has no place in our constitutional system. The time of civil war, the time of extraordinary conditions of existence of Soviet power, will pass, and the Cheka will become superfluous." Nonetheless, by the time the Civil War ended, an estimated 50,000 people had been executed by the Cheka. About 25,000 prisoners were held in concentration camps — though these were not Nazi-style death camps, and half the prisoners were released when the war was over.

The White Terror was more disorganized than the Red Terror, but it was far more brutal and cost far more lives. The Cheka was not supposed to use torture on prisoners,[4] and Red Army soldiers who were caught looting or raping women were shot; these practices, on the other hand, were typical of the White armies. General Lavr Kornilov, who led the first White army before he was killed in combat, once declared that Russia must be saved from the Bolsheviks "even if we have to set fire to half of it and shed the blood of three-fourths of all the Russians."[5] In Siberia, Kolchak's troops hanged men and women from miles of telegraph poles and machine-gunned them by the hundreds in boxcars and open fields. Denikin's army had occupied Ukraine when German troops were withdrawn

after the armistice; there his men launched a pogrom against the Jewish population that far exceeded those of Tsarist times. Vowing death to "Jew-Communists," the Whites massacred 150,000 Jews. Whole communities of Jews fled to the Red Army for protection. As fervent Russian nationalists, the White generals also dealt harshly with the other non-Russian nationalities that inhabited the territories they occupied – Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians and others. Had the Whites won the Civil War, it is fair to say that Russia would have seen something very like fascism.

During 1919 Trotsky's Red Army managed to defeat the Whites on all fronts. Kolchak's troops were overcome and pushed back into Siberia; Kolchak himself was finally captured and shot. Denikin was driven out of Ukraine. And in the fall, Yudenich came close to capturing Petrograd before he too was defeated. The Whites' principal weakness was that they lacked significant popular support. Urban workers were generally pro-Bolshevik. Peasants, the most numerous class, had little love for the Bolsheviks, especially after the forced requisitioning of grain got underway, but they regarded the Whites as an even greater evil. Wherever the White armies went, they were followed by the remnants of the old regime, and above all by the landowners. Peasants understood clearly that victory for the Whites would mean the restoration of the landlords' estates and the loss of all the land they had just won.

Still, if the Whites had acted simultaneously, under unified command, and if they had received stronger support from foreign governments, they might have won. Instead, the three main White armies attacked separately, at different times, and they were led by men who were bitter rivals. On the other hand, the Reds, even though they had virtually no army when the Civil War began, possessed the advantages of centralized leadership.

The imperialist powers, as we have seen, gave crucial assistance to the Whites, but mostly in the form of money and munitions, not vast numbers of troops. This was mainly because of a great upsurge of sympathy and support for the Revolution among Western workers. In France, Britain, the United States and elsewhere, dockworkers refused to load ships with weapons and supplies destined for the Whites. Western statesmen quickly realized that a large-scale intervention was too dangerous. Troops were unreliable and might mutiny. When Winston Churchill demanded that more British soldiers be sent to Russia, Prime Minister David Lloyd George replied, "If Great Britain undertakes military action against the Bolsheviks, Great Britain herself will become Bolshevik and we will have soviets in London."[6] In retrospect this seems wildly alarmist, but it reflects the fears of contemporary European elites. The British Labour Party finally succeeded in ending their country's intervention, and in January1920 the blockade was lifted.

The year 1920 saw the last gasp of the counterrevolution in Russia. In March Polish troops invaded Ukraine from the west, but they were driven back by the Red Army almost to the outskirts of Warsaw.[7] In the fall, Baron Peter Wrangel landed on the Black Sea coast, accompanied by French troops, and pushed into Ukraine from the south. The French soldiers mutinied, however, and Wrangel was quickly defeated by the Reds, thus ending the last significant military threat from the Whites.

One consequence of the Civil War was the re-incorporation into Russia of several border regions. When the Bolsheviks took power they declared the right of all non-Russian nationalities to separate if they wished and establish independent states. Poland, Finland and the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – did so successfully. Ukraine also declared its independence, as did the peoples inhabiting the Caucasus Mountain region in the south – Georgians, Azeris and Armenians. But during the Civil War, Ukraine and the Caucasus became bases for the White armies, and in the course of the war they were reconquered. In 1922 Russia was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and several areas in Central Asia became, supposedly, autonomous republics within the larger Soviet federation, but they were not in fact self-

governing.

A One-Party State

Another casualty of the Civil War was workers' democracy. Soon after taking power, the Bolsheviks suppressed all the other political parties. But, as historian E.H. Carr observed, "If it was true that the Bolshevik regime was not prepared after the first few months to tolerate an organized opposition, it was equally true that no opposition was prepared to remain within legal limits."[8]

After walking out of the Congress of Soviets in November 1917, the Mensheviks and Right SRs joined forces with the Cadets and industrialists to form a counterrevolutionary committee, which called on the troops to overthrow the Soviet government; not one regiment responded. They then fomented a mutiny of the "junkers" – officer cadets – in alliance with monarchists, while simultaneously supporting Kaledin, who was marching on Petrograd.

Because the Cadets and the Right SRs supported the Counterrevolution, either through their newspapers and other writings, or by active participation on the side of the Whites, they were banned as political parties, their leaders were arrested, and by the summer of 1918, all their newspapers had been suppressed.

Many of the Mensheviks joined the Bolshevik Party, others retreated into silence or left the country, but some remained in opposition and a few joined the Right SRs in advocating the forcible overthrow of the Bolshevik regime. As a result, the Menshevik Party, too, was eventually outlawed. Many of the Left SRs also drifted into the Bolshevik ranks, but others became more and more hostile to Bolshevik policies. As members of the Council of People's Commissars, the Left SR leaders had vehemently opposed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and they objected strongly to the forcible requisitioning of peasants' grain.

Finally, at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in July 1918, the Left SRs broke their coalition with the Bolsheviks. Amid the splendor of the Bolshoi Theater, a dramatic confrontation took place between Lenin and Maria Spiridonova, the Left SRs' chief spokesperson. Spiridonova was, like Alexandra Kollontai, a revolutionary of noble birth. A terrorist since the age of 20, she had suffered many years of imprisonment and brutal beatings under the Tsar. Now, she denounced the Bolsheviks for betraying the peasantry. Lenin replied that the government had no choice but to seize the peasants' grain; to do otherwise would mean starvation for the cities. On the final day of the Congress, Spiridonova strode into the theater dressed in black, with a red carnation pinned to her breast; raising a pistol above her head, she shouted "long live the revolt!"

The Left SRs tried to seize power in Moscow. In addition, they carried out terrorist attacks on the Bolsheviks. Several Bolshevik leaders were assassinated, and Lenin was shot in the chest by a young woman, Fanya Kaplan; he recovered. The revolt was suppressed, and the Left SRs were outlawed as well. Now the Bolsheviks – the Russian Communist Party — were the only legal party in Soviet Russia.

The Bolsheviks themselves were transformed by the Civil War. A great many Party members served in the Red Army. They were usually in the forefront of the fighting, urging on the others, trying to inspire by their example. But as a result, casualties were particularly high among the Communists, and many of the dead had been the most experienced and dedicated members of the Party. Thus the Party was depleted of some of its most idealistic elements, and these were replaced by new, inexperienced members, many of whom were more interested in a job than in socialist principles.

But even among veteran Bolsheviks, the hardship and cruelty of the Civil War had a coarsening, even a brutalizing, effect. The Red Army, like any army, was not run in a democratic fashion. Officers gave orders, and expected them to be obeyed without question — when the enemy is bearing down, there is no time for discussions and votes. But after two or three years of this experience, Communists got used to military ways, became accustomed to commanding instead of persuading – a habit that was hard to break after the war was over.

The Communist Party itself became more authoritarian. Prior to the Civil War, it was a fairly free-wheeling organization, within which there were often strong differences of opinion and fierce debates. Party members never felt afraid to challenge the leaders if they disagreed with them, and the leaders often disagreed among themselves. When the Party was divided over an issue – say, whether to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, or even whether to take power in November 1917 — organized factions formed around each of the different positions and tried to get the support of a majority of the members. But the need to hold a disintegrating country together during the Civil War convinced most Communists that it was more important to present a united front to those outside the Party and not to be seen as divided and indecisive, which might encourage the counterrevolutionaries.

Debates within the Party continued, but they tended to take place among the leaders; the membership became more passive. Contributing to this passivity was the increasing centralization of the Party. The Bolshevik Party had always been led by a Central Committee, elected by the delegates to the yearly Party congresses, who were in turn elected by the Party members in their local branches, which were called cells. In 1919 a new, smaller body was created – the Political Bureau, or "Politburo." The Central Committee, which had dozens of members, met only once every two months, but the Politburo, consisting of only five to seven men, met every week; here was where the important decisions were made.

Once the Politburo made a decision, members were expected to carry it out in a disciplined way, much as soldiers have to carry out orders. Since Communist Party members held leading positions in factories, banks, universities, the army and navy, these institutions all came under the Party's control. Most Party members were no longer factory workers, as was true prior to the Revolution; most were now officials, bureaucrats, bosses of the new Soviet state. Officially, the Russian government was still in the hands of the elected Soviets; but since the Communists had become the only legal party, political decisions were made by the Party's leaders, and then rubber-stamped by the Soviet "government." The Soviets met less and less frequently. The Communist Party had become a tightly-organized control network.

Meanwhile, the economy was going from bad to worse. The Civil War had wreaked complete havoc. Terrible famines broke out in several parts of the country, followed by epidemics of typhus and other deadly diseases. An estimated seven million people died of starvation and disease during the Civil War. Requisitioning drove down grain production; peasants cultivated only enough land to feed their families, refusing to produce any surplus that might be seized. In the cities, the working class was decimated.

War Communism imposed sacrifices on everyone, including Communists. In Moscow's Kremlin, a fortress in the center of the city that now housed the Soviet government, Lenin, Trotsky (when he was not at the front) and the other leaders slept on folding cots in their offices and ate bad food in the cafeteria. A stern equality prevailed. But Marxists had always assumed that socialism would be built in a highly developed economy capable of producing an abundance of goods. Inequality would be abolished by bringing *up* the standard of living for everyone. War Communism, instead, was based on a disastrously scarce supply of goods; inequality was abolished, but by reducing everyone to roughly the same *low* standard of living. Now all were poor.

This dismal state of affairs could be remedied only by revolution in the West, the Bolsheviks believed. But the success of socialist revolution in Germany and other countries depended in turn on the ability of the Bolsheviks to hold onto power in Russia. If the counterrevolution triumphed here, all would be lost, they thought. So the banning of parties, the suppression of freedom of the press, the death penalty, the use of a secret police, all were seen as necessary, if temporary, expedients, means of clinging to power while awaiting revolution in Europe. The trouble was, the Bolsheviks could not cling to power without some popular support, and this was fast eroding. The most acute danger came from the peasantry. Once the Whites had been defeated and the Civil War was over, the peasants were no longer in danger of losing their land. Now they saw no reason to tolerate grain requisitioning, and many saw no reason to tolerate the Bolsheviks at all.

In 1920 peasant uprisings began to break out. There were strikes in factories, where harsh wartime conditions had imposed regimentation and strict discipline on the workers. Then in March 1921 sailors at the Kronstadt naval base, on an island that guarded the approach to Petrograd, revolted, demanding the legalization of other political parties and free elections to the Soviets. Among the rebellious sailors were men who had been ardent Bolsheviks back in 1917, but now, influenced by the anger that was spreading through the peasant villages from which they came, they turned against the Bolsheviks. After negotiations failed, the government believed it had no choice but to crush the revolt by force. To do nothing would mean losing most of the Soviet navy, allowing the revolt to spread, and opening the door to the return of the Whites. To give in to the sailor's demands would mean the end of Bolshevik rule – they would probably lose the elections because of the immense peasant vote – and this too would render Russia helpless against a bloody restoration of the old order in some form.

The Kronstadt revolt prompted the Bolsheviks to take two drastic measures. Until the Party could win back the support of the peasants and workers, Lenin believed that it must stay united. So, to prevent any splits in the Party's ranks, organized factions were banned. Vigorous discussion did not disappear from the Party, and members with different opinions continued to argue for them in the Party's publications. Lenin considered the ban to be temporary, and he hoped it could be lifted in a short time. But in fact the ban on factions was never lifted, and during the next half-decade it played a crucial role in strengthening the forces of authoritarianism within the Party.

The second measure was an attempt to repair the government's relations with the peasants. In 1921 the grain requisitions were ended. Peasants were now encouraged to grow as much surplus grain as they could, and they were permitted to sell their surpluses on the open markets. This was the New Economic Policy (NEP), which will be discussed in more detail below.

The Prospect of International Revolution

Before and during the Civil War, the Bolsheviks saw many signs of an approaching worldwide revolution. Indeed, leaders of the capitalist countries saw the same signs and were deeply troubled. In 1919 Lloyd George wrote:

> "The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent, but of anger and revolt amongst the workmen against pre-war conditions. The whole existing order, in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population, from one end of Europe to the other. In some countries, like Germany and Russia, the unrest takes the form of open rebellion, in others, like France, Great Britain and Italy, it takes the shape of strikes and of general disinclination to settle down to work, symptoms which are just as much concerned with the desire for political and social change as

with wage demands."[9]

In 1919, revolution was in the air, and not only in Europe. China's cities were shaken by violent demonstrations against imperialism. In India, a campaign of mass civil disobedience led by Mohandas Gandhi, brought the country to the very brink of revolution. Even in the United States – which had the most conservative labor movement of any industrialized country, and with a working class bitterly divided by racial and ethnic hatreds – thousands of steelworkers fought pitched battles with police and national guard troops, and the entire city of Seattle was paralyzed by a general strike.

By 1919, conditions in Germany and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire had become especially unstable, so it was there, in Central Europe, that the Bolsheviks believed the workers would follow their example and seize power. Afterward, revolution could be expected to spread to France, Italy, Britain – eventually, perhaps, even to the United States.

In November 1918, the German monarchy was overthrown and power was in the hands of workers,' sailors' and soldiers' councils. But the counterrevolutionary leadership of the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD, having seen what happened in Russia the year before (forewarned is forearmed), were determined to prevent the November Revolution from becoming radicalized and following Russia's pattern. They did this by allying with the Army and provoking a premature insurrection in January 1919 – the so-called Spartakus Uprising – which enabled them to decapitate the infant German Communist Party; its leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered.

This defeat was a serious setback for the Bolsheviks, but only a temporary one, they hoped. They were convinced, reasonably enough, that Central Europe was in the midst of a revolutionary situation. The old ruling groups – the capitalists, landowners, generals, etc. — were weak and unpopular. The masses were in a combative mood. The only thing lacking was a trained revolutionary party capable of leading the workers. But how were revolutionary parties to be created? In 1917 the Bolsheviks had already had the benefit of 14 years of experience as an independent revolutionary organization. Elsewhere in Europe, by contrast, some revolutionary socialists had only just formed Communist parties, which were generally small and amateurish, while others were still members of the established socialist parties and had no organization of their own. The need for *effective* Communist parties was urgent. If they did not emerge in time, the workers would lose hope, the revolutionary moment would pass, and the old rulers, with the help of the rightwing social democrats, would regain their self-confidence and recapture their power – as had already begun to happen in Germany. And then Soviet Russia would be truly isolated, thrown back on it own resources – who could tell for how long?

The Communist International

On March 2, 1919, a group of revolutionary socialists from several European countries gathered in Moscow to form a new International. To distinguish it from the Socialist, or "Second" International (The First dated back to Marx and Engels' day in the mid-19th century), it was called the Communist, or Third, International – Comintern for short. The group was small – only 19 delegates had managed to get through the blockade; together with the Russian representatives, the meeting was attended by a grand total of 35. But it set up an executive committee and published a manifesto, written by Trotsky. The Comintern Manifesto was a call to workers and peasants throughout the world to revolt against capitalism and colonialism. It repudiated the reformism of the established socialist parties and declared that workers' councils – soviets – should be set up everywhere as the basis for revolution.

In July 1920, the second congress of the Communist International was held. This time, 200 delegates attended, representing organizations in 40 countries. The Bolsheviks drew up 21 Conditions for membership. All parties wishing to join the Comintern had to make serious preparations for revolution. All had to declare their total opposition to colonialism and to support freedom for the colonial subjects of their own countries. The Comintern was organized in a highly centralized fashion. Once the congress of the International, which was to meet every year in Moscow, made a decision, all member parties were expected to pursue essentially the same policies. The Russians, as the leaders of the only successful socialist revolution so far, naturally predominated, and Grigori Zinoviev was elected president of the Comintern. But delegates from other countries also had a say, and there were intense debates over strategy.

By 1921, however, the first wave of revolutionary ferment had receded in Europe. The Bolsheviks now had to find a way to maintain control of Russia until the next wave – which they expected soon. The October Revolution was still a beacon of hope to millions of European workers, but at home the Bolsheviks had lost much of the popularity they achieved in 1917, particularly among Russia's peasants. Lenin knew full well that without the peasants' support or, at least, toleration, his government could not last more than a few more years. So he proposed the New Economic Policy. The Bolsheviks' ultimate goal remained the same: the overthrow of capitalism in at least one major capitalist country – most likely Germany — as the basis for creating a socialist society in Russia. But in the meantime, there would have to be a temporary compromise with capitalism.[10]

The NEP Period: 1921-1928

The first thing the NEP did was to abolish grain requisitioning and institute an agricultural tax in its place. Now, instead of turning over all their surplus to the state, peasants only had to surrender a fixed percentage of it. This was called a tax "in kind," but in 1923 it was transformed into a tax in money. Since peasants could now keep most of their surplus, they had an incentive to increase the size of that surplus. This was especially true because the NEP also permitted free trade in agricultural produce. Peasants could bring their surplus grain – or cabbages, beets, apples, chickens, pigs, what have you – to markets and charge whatever price buyers were willing to pay. Soon a class of merchants emerged that bought up the peasants' goods and re-sold them in the towns and cities. These middlemen were called "Nepmen." They were essentially capitalists, and many began to accumulate small fortunes from the new opportunities provided by the NEP. Among the peasants, the *kulaks* – the better-off peasants who owned more land and possessed horses for plowing and other livestock – were able to take greater advantage of the NEP than other peasants. Eventually the kulaks were permitted to rent state-owned land and to hire farm workers. In agriculture the new policy brought immediate results: farm production began to increase and within a few years had recovered from the effects of the World War and the Civil War.

The NEP also allowed a limited amount of private ownership in retail trade and manufacturing. Here too enterprising Nepmen went into business, establishing stores and small factories – workshops, really, since the NEP only permitted privately-owned plants with 20 or fewer employees. The government was careful to retain control of what were called the "commanding heights" of the economy – banking, transportation (railways and shipping), foreign trade, mining, oil production and large-scale industry (iron and steel, machinery, vehicles, textiles, etc.). All the big factories and major businesses that had been nationalized in 1918 remained state property.

The NEP now meant that Russia had a mixed economy – part capitalist and part socialist, though the socialist sector was clearly dominant. On the other hand, could even the state-owned part of the economy be called "socialist" in reality? Marxists, and especially the Bolsheviks, had always defined a socialist economy as one that is controlled democratically by the working class itself. But in a one-

party state, could democracy be said to exist? Lenin quite frankly admitted that it could not. He said that the Bolshevik regime was a workers' state only in an extremely "deformed" way: the only thing that made it "socialist" was that it was led by a Party – the Communists – that had socialist *intentions*. These intentions could be fulfilled only when help arrived from successful revolutions in the West.

Meanwhile, the Bolshevik dictatorship was somewhat liberalized under the NEP. With the end of the Civil War, there was no more need for the Red Terror. Non-Communists were allowed to speak and write with considerable freedom – although they were still not permitted to form political parties. The death penalty had been abolished even before the Civil War was over. The Cheka, with its power to arrest and execute suspects without trial, had been seen as a temporary necessity, in order to combat the counterrevolution. In 1922 it was abolished and replaced by a new political police force called the State Political Directorate Administration – to be known by its Russian initials, GPU. Later, under Stalin, the GPU became a lawless instrument of mass terror, but under the NEP it had to turn over the people it arrested for counterrevolutionary activity to the regular courts. The vast majority of those held in prisons and labor camps were common criminals, not political prisoners.

Also under the NEP there was a flourishing of the arts, especially modern art. Artists involved in more traditional forms – opera and ballet, representational painting – tended to be hostile to the Revolution, and many of them went into exile. But many younger artists – for example painters of non-representational, or "abstract," pictures and architects who wanted to design modern, light-filled housing for the masses – rallied to the Bolsheviks, and were in turn supported by government funds. Film was an especially important medium, and Soviet film-makers of the 1920s – Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and others – had an enormous influence on the development of cinema throughout the world.

Problems of the NEP

The NEP proved to be highly unstable, and it soon ran into problems. By 1923 agriculture was doing so well that there was actually a glut of farm produce on the market, which brought down agricultural prices. At the same time, however, industry was recovering much more slowly than agriculture. This meant that manufactured goods – especially consumer goods such as clothing, furniture, soap, tools and cooking utensils – were still scarce and their prices high. Consequently, peasants could buy less and less with the money they were making from their crops and livestock; there were too few consumer goods, and they were too expensive. Peasants began to grumble; what was the point of growing more if there was so little to buy with the profits?

Industry lagged behind because there were so few resources for investment. In the "socialist" sector of the economy there was no overall coordination, no planning. State-owned industries competed with each other, and they had to finance themselves. That is, each factory had to make a profit or else it went out of business. Since factory managers were desperate to make as much profit as possible, so as to have funds for investment and to keep from going under, they charged high prices for their products and paid low wages to their workers. And since many industries could not compete, they had to lay off their workers or shut down altogether, so there was high unemployment.

The problem of investment was especially acute in heavy industry – metals, machinery, vehicles, mining. Light industry – consumer goods like clothing and furniture – grew slowly, but heavy industry hardly grew at all and was producing far less than before the War. Textile factories needed machinery, however; as mechanical spinners and looms broke down, they had to be replaced. Where were the new machines to come from? What about the steel and rubber to make the machines? And

how could even light industry expand without a corresponding growth in the heavy industries that produced the fuel to power the machines – coal and oil?

The Struggle to Succeed Lenin

In May 1922 Lenin suffered a serious stroke. He recovered, but in December he had a second stroke which left him partially paralyzed. Lenin could no longer write — he now had to dictate all his articles – or speak in public, and he stopped attending meetings of the Politburo. Within the Politburo there had always been friction between the "Old Bolsheviks" – individuals who had worked with Lenin since before the 1905 Revolution – and Trotsky, who had not joined the Bolshevik Party until 1917 but had nevertheless played a role second only to Lenin's ever since. Now that Lenin's health was jeopardized, the leading Old Bolsheviks – Grigori Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Josef Stalin – formed a secret faction calling itself the "Troika," a Russian word for a sled pulled by three horses. The aim of the Troika was to isolate Trotsky and prevent him from succeeding Lenin as the Party leader.

Trotsky's most implacable enemy was Stalin. A good part of the latter's hatred was based on envy. Trotsky was a supremely gifted writer, a passionate and spellbinding orator and a profound Marxist thinker. Stalin was utterly pedestrian and uncouth. His writings were dull and leaden, his personality coarse and abrasive. He had no talent for public speaking and in fact rarely appeared in public. He was incapable of producing an original idea. He was secretive to the point of paranoia. But Stalin did not lack talent. He was an extremely skillful organizer – patient, meticulous and hard working – and it was this that enabled him to rise in the Party's ranks.

Like many of Russia's revolutionaries, Stalin was not ethnically Russian. He was born Iosif Vissarionovich Djugashvili in the Georgian town of Gori, the son of a poor shoemaker. Young Iosif's mother wanted him to be a priest in the Georgian Orthodox Church, but he was expelled from the seminary and became a professional revolutionary. Joining the Bolshevik Party, he changed his name to Stalin, meaning "man of steel."[11] Stalin played a very minor role in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, but after the Bolsheviks took power he was entrusted with the day-to-day administration of the Party.

In 1922 Stalin was given the post of General Secretary. The Russian Communist Party had, by this point, become a vast and complex organization that, as we have seen, essentially ran the Soviet government. The Party Secretariat, of which Stalin was now the head, consisted of thousands of full-time officials who prepared meetings, collected information, transmitted decisions and kept files on all Party members. As General Secretary, Stalin had the authority to appoint, promote and fire all of them. Because he worked behind the scenes, few ordinary Russians had any inkling of how much power the General Secretary possessed, and most did not even know his name.

Meanwhile, in 1923 Trotsky, who was not yet aware of the conspiracy against him, became an outspoken critic of the NEP and the growing authoritarianism of the Party and the Soviet state. He stressed four points: (1) a plan was needed to speed up the pace of industrialization, (2) workers' democracy should be revived, (3) the growth of bureaucracy must be reversed, and (4) a greater effort must be made to spread the revolution internationally. Every one of these points was a challenge to the Troika, and especially to the Party bureaucracy headed by Stalin.

Trotsky warned that the shortage of manufactured goods was embittering the peasants and turning them against the Soviet state. The kulaks and the Nepmen were getting richer and more powerful, and they might soon constitute a counterrevolutionary force. More and cheaper goods must be produced as soon as possible. Industry must become more productive, but for that the workers themselves needed to be drawn into factory management. This proposal directly threatened

the bureaucracy – the factory managers and Party officials who preferred to manage the economy in a totally authoritarian, top-down manner, with no participation by ordinary workers. Trotsky called on the state to encourage workers to criticize the way things were done and to offer new ideas. With input from the workers, a rational plan could be put together.

Trotsky deplored the bureaucratic condition of the Communist Party, most of whose members had been reduced to a mass of passive, silent hand-raisers. In theory the Party was supposed to be controlled by its members, and Party officials were supposed to be elected. In reality, elections were a farce — officials were, in effect, appointed by the Party secretaries. At Party meetings, the members were given the names of candidates selected beforehand by the secretaries, one for every position, and then they were asked, "who is against?" Most members were afraid to oppose the secretaries' choice, especially since it might mean losing their jobs. Trotsky wanted to see real elections, with debates and competing candidates.

Trotsky angrily denounced the bureaucracy's mismanagement of the Communist International. It was imperative for the Comintern to help prepare revolutions in the West – in principle, all the Bolsheviks still agreed on this point. But Zinoviev, as president of the Comintern, was more concerned to make sure foreign Communist parties were controlled by leaders who were loyal to him, even if they were incompetent. In fact, Trotsky believed that the bureaucracy in Russia was losing interest in the risky business of promoting revolutions elsewhere, even if it still paid lip service to the idea. A successful revolution in Germany, say, would establish a much more democratic socialist state than Russia's had become, and this might threaten the bureaucracy's dominance.[12]

Lenin too had become alarmed by the growing power of the bureaucracy in general and Stalin in particular. He and Trotsky made an agreement to work together on this issue. In December 1922 and January 1923, after his second stroke, Lenin dictated a series of suggestions to the Party – his *Testament*. He made several proposals for combating bureaucracy and explicitly called for the removal of Stalin. The Troika, however, refused to allow Lenin's *Testament* to be published, so the public was unaware of its existence. Feeling isolated within the Politburo, Trotsky counted on Lenin's recovery before making a public challenge to this suppression. But in March Lenin had a third stroke that left him almost totally incapacitated. Trotsky now stood alone against the four other members of the Politburo: Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin – the Troika – and Nikolai Bukharin, a strong supporter of the NEP and another enemy of Trotsky.

The Left Opposition

Despite the jealousy and hostility of the Troika, Trotsky had many supporters outside the Politburo among idealistic younger Party members and among the older generation of Bolshevik leaders, who were as appalled as he was by the degeneration of Soviet Russia. In October 1923, 46 well-known Old Bolsheviks signed a letter addressed to the Politburo declaring their agreement with Trotsky. The Platform of the Forty-Six, as it became known, denounced the stifling of internal democracy within the Communist Party; it demanded a plan for rapid industrialization and the lifting of the ban on organized Party factions.[13] There was now an informal grouping of critics under Trotsky's leadership that called itself the Left Opposition. It included prominent Bolsheviks such as Karl Radek, a leader of the Comintern, Christian Rakovsky, a Soviet diplomat, Ivan Smirnov, a hero of the Civil War, and the economist Yuri Pyatakov.

When vigorous discussion of the Opposition's proposals began to break out among Party members, Trotsky's enemies launched a powerful counter-attack. The Troika controlled the press, so for every article by an Oppositionist there were ten or more by Zinoviev, Stalin, Kamenev, Bukharin and their supporters. Trotsky was attacked as a latecomer to Bolshevism, a former semi-Menshevik

who had always been against Lenin; the Troika, on the other hand, posed as Lenin's true heirs. The program of the Left Opposition was dismissed as reckless and impractical. Its leaders were accused of trying to destroy the unity of the Party by their insistence on permitting factions. The Opposition's criticisms of the NEP were branded as "anti-peasant." Stalin, who by now controlled an extensive network of Party secretaries, factory mangers and other bureaucrats, expertly choreographed Party meetings so that the Opposition was always outnumbered.

During these debates, as luck would have it, Trotsky himself was unable to participate because he too was felled by serious illness. On a duck-hunting expedition in a marshy area near Moscow, he caught malaria. To recuperate, he was sent to the warmer climate of the Black Sea coast, far from Moscow. Then, on Jan. 21, 1924, Lenin suffered a fourth stroke and died. The Troika organized an elaborate funeral ceremony. As a member of the Politburo, Trotsky should have been a prominent participant, but Stalin sent him a telegram saying that the funeral would take place too soon for him to return to Moscow by train. In fact, the telegram was a lie. The ceremony was to occur a day later than Stalin claimed, but the Troika considered it important to exclude Trotsky so that they could present themselves to the public as Lenin's only successors.

Spectators were amazed when Trotsky did not appear among Lenin's pallbearers; it seemed to confirm the Troika's claim that he was not a real Leninist. The funeral ceremony was the first step in the creation of a Lenin cult. A massive mausoleum was built in Red Square, next to the Kremlin. In it, Lenin's embalmed body was put on display under glass. Every day, for years afterwards, long lines of Soviet citizens filed past, like pious Christians viewing the body of a saint. Lenin's brain was sent to a special clinic for analysis and preservation. All his writings and speeches were collected and treated henceforth as sacred writ. The city of Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. All this would have horrified Lenin himself, who was an extremely modest, almost self-effacing man. His widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya objected strenuously, but her complaints were disregarded. Stalin, whose foul-mouthed rudeness to Krupkskaya had provoked Lenin to cut off all personal relations with him some months before his death, is rumored to have threatened her: "If you don't shut up, we'll find somebody else to be Lenin's widow."

Immediately after Lenin's death, the Troika admitted 240,000 new members – the so-called Lenin Levy — to the Russian Communist Party, doubling the Party's membership. For the most part, these new recruits were young, inexperienced and ambitious; admission to the Party was a ticket to a successful career, and they could be relied on to support the bureaucracy. Sure enough, within a few weeks, the Party voted officially to condemn the Left Opposition.

The Troika Breaks Up

Despite this setback, the Left Opposition did not disband, although it was clearer every day that it was swimming against the stream. Within the Party its isolation grew. Outside the Party, among ordinary workers and other citizens, there was a certain amount of sympathy for the Opposition and Trotsky was still widely admired, but most people were too intimidated by the bureaucracy and the GPU – which the Troika controlled – and too exhausted by years of turmoil and hardship. To publicly support the Opposition took courage, and by 1924 courage in Russia was a scarce commodity.

Meanwhile, the Left Opposition continued to warn that the NEP might lead to the complete restoration of capitalism unless Russia embarked on a program of rapid industrialization. But the problem was, without aid from the West, how was the Soviet state going to obtain the capital and machinery needed to invest in industry? Evgeny Preobrazhensky, an economist who belonged to the Opposition, argued that the resources for industrialization had to come from agriculture. He called for increasing taxes on the peasantry, especially the kulaks, and channeling this money into a government fund for industrial investment. At the same time, agricultural productivity would have to

be significantly increased. Most of Russia's peasants farmed small plots of land with primitive tools; they were extremely inefficient. If landholdings could be consolidated into larger units, equipped with modern tools and fertilizers, and if peasants could be induced to work cooperatively instead of competing with each other, Russia's farmlands could be made to yield far more produce. A larger agricultural surplus, especially grain, could be exported. With the foreign currency Russia would earn, it could purchase machinery and technological know-how from the West and use these to promote industrialization at home.

This was the idea of "collectivizing" agriculture as a way of bringing industrial-style efficiency to farming. Instead of millions of separate, minuscule peasant plots, Russia would have a far smaller number of large, government-owned farms on which the peasants would work as employees, like workers in a factory. Moreover, since far fewer peasants would be needed, many of them could move to the cities and swell the ranks of the urban working class, which would contribute further to industrialization. But Preobrazhensky was against using force to bring this about. Peasants would never give up their customary way of life unless they could actually see that life on a collective farm was better. So Preobrazhensky proposed setting up model collective farms in the countryside. As peasants were shown the advantages of using modern farm machinery rather than horse-plows and scythes, as they saw the benefits of living in new houses with electricity rather than their dilapidated hovels, they would voluntarily join the new collective farms.

Nevertheless, this program was seen by the Left Opposition as no more than a temporary solution to the problems of the NEP. Even by collectivizing agriculture and speeding up the pace of industrialization, Russia could not achieve socialism. For that, help from workers' governments in the West was still needed. Spreading the revolution remained, for Preobrazhensky and the other members of the Opposition, a question of life or death.

All the members of the Troika, as well as their myriad supporters in the bureaucracy, joined in ridiculing Preobrazhensky's analysis. The NEP, while not without problems, was still working well on the whole, they insisted; as long as the Soviet state controlled the "commanding heights" of the economy, and as long as the Communist Party held a monopoly of political power, there was no reason to fear that the kulaks and Nepmen might get the upper hand. As for the Left Opposition's schemes for rapid industrialization, they branded these as totally unrealistic.

Nikolai Bukharin went even further. He regarded the NEP not as a necessary evil, an unavoidable compromise with capitalism, but as a positive good. Bukharin openly encouraged the kulaks to enrich themselves, believing that if they did so the peasantry as a whole would prosper. The result would be greater and greater demand among the peasants for the goods produced by state-owned industries. The "socialist" sector of the economy would grow, even if very slowly; Russia, he said, would achieve socialism "at a snail's pace" – even without aid from socialist revolutions in the West. The program of the Left Opposition, Bukharin said, was a direct threat to the peasantry that would insure they would turn against the Soviet state. Bukharin and his supporters – who included Alexei Rykov, the prime minister of the Soviet Union, and Mikhail Tomsky, the head of the trade unions — were known as the Right, though they were not in opposition to the Troika (the "Center") and were in fact in league with them in their efforts to get rid of Trotsky.

In December 1924 Stalin published an article that seemed to agree with Bukharin. In it he put forward the theory of "socialism in one country." Attacking the idea that full-scale socialism could not be achieved in a backward country like Russia, Stalin insisted that Soviet Russia *could* build socialism without help from the outside. To many older Bolsheviks, this was heresy, since Stalin appeared to be abandoning world revolution. But to much of the younger generation of Party officials, to the bureaucracy, "socialism in one country" made sense. It appealed to their nationalism

and pride in Soviet achievements.

It was all too much for Zinoviev and Kamenev, however. Alarmed by Stalin's repudiation of internationalism and acceptance of Bukharin's pro-kulak position, they broke off their alliance with him. Zinoviev and Kamenev now began to sound like Trotsky: they criticized the NEP, warned that the kulaks and Nepmen were getting too powerful, denounced the growth of bureaucracy, and demanded a revival of workers' democracy. They admitted that Trotsky had been right all along. In Politburo meetings, they even revealed some of the plots against Trotsky in which they had been involved since 1923. In April 1926 Zinoviev and Kamenev, along with Krupskaya, joined forces with the Left Opposition to form the United Opposition.

Crushing the Opposition

The United Opposition looked impressive at first glance, including as it did so many prominent Bolsheviks. But by 1926 Stalin and his supporters in the bureaucracy were much stronger than in 1923. The leaders of the Opposition soon learned how weak and isolated their position had become. Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev could not get their articles published in the Party's newspapers. The Opposition drew up a program, but it was banned; when Oppositionists tried to print it on secret duplicating machines, the GPU found the machines and smashed them, confiscated copies, and arrested all those involved. When Opposition leaders tried to speak at Party meetings, they were booed and interrupted constantly. In July 1926 Zinoviev and Kamenev were removed from the Politburo (Trotsky had been ousted seven months earlier).

Nov. 7, 1927, marked the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Massive parades were scheduled for Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. The Opposition planned to participate, but also to appeal peacefully to the marchers with signs and slogans; Stalin made sure they would be silenced, however. Police and Party activists broke up the Opposition's demonstrations, tore down their signs and beat them up. In Moscow, when Trotsky tried to give a speech to the crowd from an open car, Stalin's thugs smashed the car's windshield and fired gunshots; one of them shouted: "Down with Trotsky, the Jew, the traitor!" Fearfully, the parading workers filed past and did nothing.

A few days later, the Opposition was expelled from the Party, charged with trying to start an "insurrection." Zinoviev and Kamenev panicked: they had always been Bolsheviks and could not imagine life outside the Party. Besides, they reasoned, the time would come when the Party's cowed membership would revive and turn against Stalin, and they needed to be on hand when that moment arrived. So they "capitulated" – repudiated their oppositional views as "anti-Leninist," proclaimed the correctness of Stalin and Bukharin's policies, and begged to be readmitted. Under these humiliating conditions, the two were allowed back into the Party. Thousands of other members of the Opposition did the same. Others – Radek, Rakovsky, Pyatakov, most of the leaders of the original Left Opposition – refused and were deported to remote corners of the Soviet Union. Within a few years, however, they too capitulated. Only a small core stood firm.

Trotsky would not give in. In January 1928 he was sentenced to exile at Alma-Ata, a town in Soviet Central Asia, near the Chinese border. Trotsky declined to go voluntarily: in an act of symbolic civil disobedience, he forced the GPU to literally carry him out of his Moscow apartment and put him on a train. A year later he and Natalia Sedova were deported from the Soviet Union.[14]

Towards the Second Russian Revolution

Almost immediately after the expulsion of the Opposition, the Soviet Union faced a serious crisis. In January 1928 peasants throughout the country went on a "grain strike" – refusing to sell grain to the government unless they were paid much higher prices. The government's grain supplies were

low, and Russia's cities were now faced with a real threat of starvation.

The Right, led by Bukharin, favored giving in to the peasants' demands by raising grain prices. Stalin at first didn't know what to do, then dramatically turned against his former allies on the Right, calling for decisive measures against the peasants. Armed detachments were sent out to force the peasants to surrender their grain. But Stalin wanted to go further than that. He now began to take up some of the Opposition's economic program. He demanded increasing the pace of industrialization, a gradual collectivization of agriculture and an overall plan for the economy. After several months of tussling with the Right, Stalin emerged triumphant. Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov were driven from power, and, ultimately, forced to capitulate just as most of the Opposition had done. Stalin was now completely in control.

By the end of 1929, it was clear that Stalin intended something quite different from the Opposition's economic program. To collectivize agriculture, he initiated a full-scale violent assault on the entire peasantry. Simultaneously, he launched a Five-Year Plan for industrialization at breakneck speed that devastated workers' living standards and imposed on them the most draconian working conditions. Terrorized by a brutal system of prisons, secret police and forced-labor camps, the Soviet masses were transformed into something like state serfs. Finally, to sever the last remaining tie to the workers state, even in its degenerated form and even if by this point it was a symbolic tie, almost every living representative of the October Revolution was killed or disappeared into the Gulag. A new society, neither socialist nor capitalist, was born, a society dominated by a new ruling elite of party officials, factory officials and other bureaucrats, who were in turn dominated by an all-powerful, semi-deified dictator, a mass murderer with few equals in history: Stalin himself.[15]

Conclusion

Just as Lenin and Trotsky feared, the result of Soviet Russia's isolation was counterrevolution. What they had not foreseen was that this counterrevolution would come not from foreign imperialism or from the domestic forces of capitalist restoration, but from within the Party itself. And they could not have known that many of their own policies would pave the way for the horrors of Stalinism, a system that became the deadly enemy of everything they had fought for in 1917. Since then, however, socialists have no excuse for ignoring or belittling the dangers of a one party state, a state based on coercion rather than democratic consent, simply because it is anti-capitalist or even calls itself socialist.

We still need to ask, however: what could the Bolsheviks, lacking foreknowledge of the nightmare that was Stalinism, have done differently? In terms of specific policies, this is a question that is extremely difficult to answer. Should they have refrained from suppressing the Kronstadt rebellion, or even acceded to the sailors' demands, for example? To do so would, in all likelihood, have led within a very short time to the Bolsheviks' loss of power. One-party rule is deplorable in principle, but a strong case can be made, in my opinion, that under the conditions of Civil War, economic chaos and ruin, and a mostly hostile peasantry that was fundamentally anti-socialist and moreover incapable as a class of itself governing Russia, the Bolshevik Party was the only one that possessed the experience, discipline, tactical flexibility, and foresight to prevent a bloody, fascist-style counterrevolution. It was a unique, tested crucible of socialist consciousness, even as that consciousness became distorted and attenuated by the experience of authoritarian rule. Moreover, Russia's fate was far from the only thing at stake. Through at least the first six years after 1917, while European revolutions remained objective possibilities, the Bolsheviks had to hold on, the Comintern had to exist. I think it is not too much to say that the fate of humanity hung in the balance. Counterfactuals are obviously problematic, but had revolution succeeded in Germany, for example, there is a good chance that the world would have been spared the horrors of Stalinism, the Gulag, Nazism, World War II, the Holocaust – indeed, we might be living in a socialist world today.

Even if this premise is accepted, however, and even if one agrees that most of the Bolsheviks' policies were the result of harsh necessity, it is true, as Rosa Luxemburg warned, that the "danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forces upon them by these fatal circumstances."[16] In part, the Bolsheviks did succumb to this danger, for example when Trotsky and Lenin took the position that one-party rule was not just a temporary necessity, but the *only* way a workers' state can function. Although Trotsky's life was cut short, he did live long enough, unlike Lenin, to repudiate this idea, fortunately.

It does seem clear that most of the Old Bolsheviks, the leaders of 1917, did not consider the harsh, undemocratic policies of War Communism – again, except for the idea of a one-party state – to be part of a transitional form of socialism; or if they were tempted to think so under the extreme tensions of the Civil War, they came to their senses afterwards. The basic question remains: were they right to try to hold onto power while awaiting – and, of course, promoting – international revolution? I think the answer is yes, mainly because, except for renegades such as Stalin, the Bolsheviks' ultimate goal – socialism as a system of equality and mass participatory democracy based on the soviets – did not change fundamentally.

Footnotes

1. Jessica Smith, *Woman in the Soviet Union* (Vanguard Press,1928). Quoted in W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, 1918-1921* (Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 340.
2. Many historians have claimed that the Bolsheviks regarded the policies of War Communism as intrinsically progressive, even as a "leap into socialism." On the contrary, these measures were considered justifiable only as a temporary, emergency response to the conditions of Civil War and economic collapse.
3. Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921* (Verso, 2003), p. 477.
4. There were, nevertheless, many instances of extreme brutality in Cheka prisons, and the organization, like any police force, attracted a fair number of thugs and sadists. But these practices were often criticized in Bolshevik newspapers and were opposed by the Party's leaders. The trouble was, the Cheka grew so large and amassed so much power that it was difficult – though, arguably, not impossible — to monitor and control.
5. Quoted in Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terrorism in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2002), P. 254.
6. Quoted in David Mandel, "The Russian Revolution, Ninety Years On," *Canadian Dimension*, October 10, 2007.
7. The initial success of the Red Army in Poland provoked a sharp debate among the Bolsheviks. Lenin was persuaded that Polish workers would welcome the Red Army and that the appearance of Soviet troops on the Polish-German border would inspire the German working class, which had just crushed a rightwing coup d'etat, the Kapp Putsch, with a massive general strike, to carry out a full-scale revolution. Trotsky argued that, on the contrary, a Soviet invasion would inflame Polish nationalism and that socialism could not be brought "on the point of a bayonet." The debate was resolved when Polish forces eventually routed the Red Army and forced the Soviet Russia to sue for peace.
8. Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Trotsky: The Sword of the Revolution, 1917-1923* (Bookmarks, 1990), p. 193.
9. Quoted in E.H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, Vol. 3 (W.W. Norton, 1985), pp. 135-136.
10. In fact, the NEP was essentially the same as the Bolsheviks' economic program in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, the transitional program they planned to implement while awaiting revolutions in Central Europe. War Communism can thus be seen as a temporary and

unanticipated interruption to these plans.
11. It was customary for Russian revolutionaries to adopt new names, both to shield their identities for underground work and to symbolize a break from their pasts. Thus Lenin was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov; he took the name “Lenin” from the Lena River in Siberia, where he was first exiled as a political prisoner. Trotsky’s original name was Lev Davidovich Bronstein; he named himself “Trotsky” after a guard in the jail in which he was first imprisoned.
Georgians were disproportionately numerous among Russian Social Democrats, particularly the Mensheviks (Chkheidze and Tseretelli).
12. It was at this point that Russian predominance in the Comintern began to turn into Russian control. Once Stalin was in power, the Comintern ceased to be an instrument for promoting workers’ revolutions from below and instead functioned as a cynically-manipulated instrument of Soviet – that is, Stalinist – foreign policy.
13. Neither the Fourteen nor Trotsky, however, advocated legalizing opposition parties. It was only in the 1930s, while reflecting in exile on the degeneration of the Revolution, that Trotsky returned to an understanding of the necessity of a multi-party soviet system.
14. For the next 11 years, Trotsky and his family were forced to move from country to country – first Turkey, then France, then Norway. Few governments were willing to allow a notorious revolutionary to live on their soil, and those that granted him a visa soon cancelled it and expelled him under pressure from Stalin. In exile, Trotsky tried to gather supporters and wrote steadily, producing a stream of books and articles on history and world affairs, but mostly critical analyses of Stalin and the fate of the Soviet system. Wherever he went he was hounded by agents of Stalin’s secret police, who operated undercover throughout the world. On Stalin’s orders, they harassed and murdered his supporters and members of his family. Trotsky’s older son, left behind in the Soviet Union, was executed during the Great Purges. His younger son was killed in Paris, and his daughter was driven to suicide in Berlin.
Finally, in 1937 the government of Mexico offered Trotsky asylum. But there, in 1940, he was murdered by an agent of Stalin as he sat at his writing desk.
15. This new Stalinist social system will be the subject of a forthcoming third article.
16. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor, 1961), p. 79. Despite her criticism, Luxemburg was an ardent champion of the Bolshevik Revolution.