

One Hundred Years of the Russian NEP – Lessons for Cuba

Author's Note – This article originally appeared in Spanish in La Joven Cuba (Young Cuba), one of the most important critical blogs in the island, where the Internet remains the principal vehicle for critical opinion because the government has not yet succeeded in controlling it. The article elicited some strong reactions including that of a former government minister who called it a provocation.



The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by the revolutionary government in 1921 was in fact an attempt to reduce the widespread discontent among the Russian people with measures designed to increase production and popular access to consumer goods. Even though the Civil War (1918-1920) caused great hardship among the rural and urban populations, it was the politics of War Communism, introduced by the Bolshevik government during that period, that significantly worsened the situation. This led to a profound alienation among those who had been the pillars of the October Revolution in 1917: the industrial workers, and the peasantry that constituted 80 percent of the population.

In the countryside, the urban detachments, organized to confiscate from the peasantry their agricultural surplus to feed the cities, ended up also confiscating part of the already modest peasant diet in addition to the grain needed to sow the next crop. The situation worsened when under the same

policy the government, based on an assumed class stratification in the countryside that had no basis in reality, created the poor peasant committees (*kombedy*) to reinforce the functions of the urban detachments. Given the arbitrary informal and formal methods that characterized the operations of the *kombedy*, these ended up being a source of corruption and abuse, frequently at the hands of criminal elements active in them, who ended up appropriating for their own use the grain and other kinds of goods they arbitrarily confiscated from the peasantry.

Moreover, during the fall of 1920, symptoms of famine began to appear in the Volga region. The situation became worse in 1921 after a severe drought ruined the crops, which also affected the southern Urals. Leon Trotsky had proposed in February 1920, to substitute the arbitrary confiscations of War Communism with a tax in kind paid by the peasantry as an incentive to have them grow more surplus grain. However, the party leadership rejected his proposal at that time.

The politics of War Communism was also applied to the urban and industrial economy through its total nationalization, although without the democratic control by the workers and the soviets, which the government abolished when the civil war began and replaced with the exclusive control from above by state administrators. Meantime, the workers were subjected to a regime of militarized compulsory labor. For the majority of the Communist leaders, including Lenin, the centralized and nationalized economy represented a great advance towards socialism. That is why for Lenin, the NEP was a significant step back. Apparently, in his conception of socialism, total nationalization played a more important role than the democratic control of production from below.

The elimination of workplace democracy was only one aspect of the more general clampdown on soviet democracy that the Bolshevik government launched in response to the bloody and destructive civil war. Based on the objective circumstances

created by the war, and on the urgent need to resolve the problems they were facing, like economic and political sabotage, the Bolshevik leadership not only eliminated multiparty soviets of workers and peasants, but also union democracy and independence, and introduced very serious restrictions of other political freedoms established at the beginning of the revolution.

The working class, decimated by the civil war—it had drastically shrunk to just one third of what it had been at the beginning of 1918—and profoundly affected by the scarcity of basic goods in the cities, did not have the strength to oppose the new top-down organization of work, and to try to restore the role it had played in the democratic direction of production. By the end of the civil war, the soviets and the unions were on their way to become mere transmission belts for the policies of the Communist Party. Later on, with the onset of the New Economic Policy, workers began to resist and engaged in a good number of strikes, but this came to an end by the late twenties, when Stalin began to consolidate his power.

The New Economic Policy (1921-1928)

The Bolshevik leadership promoted a series of market concessions to increase production and popular access to basic consumer goods. Thus, for example, it allowed the peasants to freely sell their products in exchange for their payment of a tax in kind. That was how the hated policy of the arbitrary confiscations of War Communism came to an end. The government also permitted the operation of national and international capital in the production and distribution of consumer goods.

The economic concessions of the government were accompanied by the liberalization and flourishing of cultural activities. This liberalization was restricted shortly afterwards in 1923, after Lenin retired from politics due to his precarious health, when the government imposed the censorship of books

and other materials oriented to popular culture, especially those of a religious nature. Ironically, this censorship contradicted the only right mentioned as such in the revolutionary Constitution of 1918, establishing the right to the dissemination of atheist as well as religious propaganda.

As the Bolshevik government liberalized the economy and the cultural arena, it clamped down, at the same time, on the political rights of freedom of thought and organization. Lenin, along with other party leaders, decided to counteract what for them was the NEP's great retreat from socialism with the hardening of the political control of the society by the party they led.

The suppression of political rights, which could have been considered as necessary under the objective conditions of the war, was not only maintained, but systematized and turned into political virtue. Thus, for example, the episodic tolerance that the Communist Party showed during the civil war to parties such as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries by allowing them to function, came to an end at the beginning of the NEP when the Bolshevik leadership decided to permanently declare those organizations illegal. And the Tenth Communist Party Congress celebrated in March of 1921 – the same congress that established the NEP – banned the existence of permanent factions inside the party.

The persecution and jailing for opposition political activities increased, even when these were peaceful in nature. This included the suppression of the massive rebellion of the sailors in the Kronstadt naval base (near Petrograd) in March of 1921, who were demanding the return to soviet democracy and the adoption of economic reforms similar to those implemented by the NEP, which the Party congress approved shortly thereafter. It was this political hardening led by Lenin that undermined the political strength and culture that would have been necessary to resist the Stalinist totalitarianism that began at the end of the twenties.

In my book *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Verso) I argue that the establishment of the NEP should have been accompanied by a New Political Policy (NPP) that would have reestablished the multiparty revolutionary system that existed at the beginning of the revolution. This would have involved the reestablishment of the freedom to organize political parties and groups committed to a peaceful functioning within the original framework of the soviet democracy that took power in October 1917. Such political system could have revitalized the political life and culture of the country and create the necessary organizational conditions to resist the Stalinist offensive. It is clear that for the Bolshevik leadership and the revolution itself, such a political opening would have represented a great risk given the desperate situation facing the USSR – the new name adopted by the country in 1922 – and the complete isolation of the Communist Party. But at that moment in time, there was no such thing as a risk-free policy that could promise positive results.

Even more important was the fact that in 1921 there was still a possibility for the USSR to have followed a more democratic political course. In spite of the dictatorial tendency that began to rear its ugly head among the revolutionary leadership during the civil war, and which was consolidated with the NEP, the memory of the Bolshevik democratic and pluralist traditions preceding the civil war was still alive. Only three years earlier, in 1918, a great polemic had gripped the whole country over the conditions under which a peace treaty with Germany should be signed. Several tendencies intervened in the discussion that took place inside and outside the Communist Party and actively and openly went out to promote popular support for their respective positions. This included the free circulation of newspapers and pamphlets published by different Party factions as well as by groups outside the party.

This was one of the many occasions when Lenin and the other

Bolshevik leaders could not count even with a majority, much less with the unanimous support of the party, and had to struggle very hard to defend their political positions. This shows the existence, at that time, of an open and egalitarian political climate in Russia. Lenin was not the “caudillo” who imposed his ideas; he was an authority, but within a group of equals; a *primus inter pares*. And even later, during the early years of NEP, there were various important tendencies inside the Communist Party still fighting for democratic reforms inside as well as outside the Party. Not for nothing Stalin had to physically eliminate the majority of the Party’s historic leadership in order to become who he wanted to be: the *Vozhd*, the chief of the USSR and of the world proletariat, in accordance with the cult of Stalin.

The Situation in Cuba

Since the decade of the nineties, and especially since Raúl Castro assumed the maximum leadership of the country in 2006 – formally in 2008 – economic reform has been one of the central concerns of the government. The logic of that economic reform points to the Sino-Vietnamese model – which combines an anti-democratic one-party state with a state capitalist system in the economy – and not to the compulsory collectivization of agriculture and the five-year plans brutally imposed on the USSR by Stalinist totalitarianism after the NEP. The Cuban government’s decision to authorize the creation of the PYMES (small and medium private enterprises), a decision frequently promised but not yet implemented, would constitute a very important step towards the establishment of state capitalism in the island. This state capitalism will very probably be headed by the current powerful political, and especially military, leaders who would become private capitalists.

Until now, the Cuban government has not specified the size that would define the small and especially the mid-size enterprises under the PYMES concept. But we know that several

Latin American countries (like Chile and Costa Rica) have defined the size in terms of the number of workers. Chile, for example, defines the micro enterprises as those with less than 9 workers, the small-size with 10 to 25 workers, the medium-size with 25 to 200 workers, and the big size with more than 200 workers. Should Cuba adopt similar criteria, its mid-size enterprises would end up as capitalist firms ran by their corresponding administrative hierarchies. If that happens, it is certain that the official unions will end up “organizing” the workers in those medium size enterprises and, as in the case of Chinese state capitalism, do nothing to defend them from the new private owners.

Regarding political reform, there has been much less talk and nothing of great importance has been done. As in the case of the Russian NEP, the social and economic liberalization in Cuba has not been accompanied by political democratization but, instead, by the intensification of the regime’s political control over the island. Even when the government has adopted liberalizing measures in the economy, like the new rules increasing the number of work activities permitted in the self-employed sector, it continues to ban private activities such as the publication of books that could be used to develop criticism or opposition to the regime. This is how the government has consolidated its control over the major means of communication – radio, television, newspapers and magazines – although it has only partially accomplished that with the Internet.

The government is also using its own socially liberalizing measures to reinforce its political control. For example, at the same time that it liberalized the rules to travel abroad, it developed a list of “regulated” people who are forbidden to travel outside of the island based on arbitrary administrative decisions, without even allowing for the right of appeal to the judicial system it controls. Similar administrative practices lacking in means for judicial review control have

been applied to other areas such as the missions organized to provide services abroad. Thus, the Cuban doctors who have decided not to return to the island once their service abroad has concluded, have been victims of administrative sanctions – eight years of compulsory exile – without any possibility of lodging a judicial appeal.

Still pending is the implementation of the arbitrary rules and the censorship of artistic activities of Decree 349, that allows the state to grant licenses and censor the activities of self-employed artists. The implementation of the decree has been postponed due to the numerous and strong protests that it provoked. All of these administrative practices highlight the fact that the much discussed rule of law proclaimed by the Constitution is but a lie. Let us not forget that the Soviet constitution that Stalin introduced in 1936 was very democratic ... on the paper it was written. Even so, Cubans in the island should appeal to their constitutionally defined rights to support their protests and claims against the Cuban state whenever it is legally and politically opportune.

At the beginning of the Cuban revolutionary government there was a variety of political voices heard within the revolutionary camp. But that disappeared in the process of forming the united party of the revolution that established the basis for what Raúl Castro later called the “monolithic unity” of the party and country. That is the party and state model that emulates, along with China and Vietnam, the Stalinist system that was consolidated in the USSR at the end of the twenties, consecrating the “unanimity” dictated from above by the maximum leaders, and by so-called “democratic centralism” which in reality is a bureaucratic centralism.

The Cuban Communist Party (CCP) is a single party that does not allow the internal organization of tendencies or factions, and that extends its control over the whole society through its transmission belts with the so-called mass organizations (trade unions, women’s organization), institutions such as the

universities, as well as with the mass media that follow the "orientations" they receive from the Department of Ideology of the Central Committee of the CCP. These are the ways in which the one-party state controls, not necessarily everything, but everything it considers important.

The ideological defenders of the Cuban regime insist in its autochthonous origins independent from Soviet Communism. It is true that Fidel Castro's political origin is different, for example, from that of Raúl Castro, who was originally a member of the Socialist Youth associated with the PSP (Partido Socialista Popular), the party of the pro-Moscow orthodox Communists. But Fidel Castro developed his "caudillo" conceptions since very early on, perhaps as a reaction to the disorder and chaos he encountered in the Cayo Confites expedition in which he participated against the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic in 1947, and with the so-called Bogotazo in Colombia in 1948.

In 1954, in a letter he wrote to his then good friend Luis Conte Aguero, Fidel Castro proclaimed three principles as necessary for the integration of a true civic movement: ideology, discipline and especially the power of the leadership. He also insisted in the necessity for a powerful and implacable propaganda and organizational apparatus to destroy the people involved in the creation of tendencies, splits and cliques or who rise against the movement. This was the ideological basis of the "elective affinity" (to paraphrase Goethe) that Fidel Castro showed later on for Soviet Communism.

So, what can we do? The recent demonstration of hundreds of Cubans in front of the Ministry of Culture to protest the abuses against the members of the San Isidro Movement and to advocate for artistic and civil liberties, marked a milestone in the history of the Cuban Revolution. There is plenty of room to reproduce this type of peaceful protest in the streets against police racism, against the tolerance of domestic

violence, against the growing social inequality and against the absence of a politically transparent democracy open to all, without the privileges sanctioned by the Constitution for the CCP. At present, this seems to be the road to struggle for the democratization of Cuba from below, from the inside of society itself, and not from above or from the outside.

The lesson of the Russian NEP is that economic liberalization does not necessarily signify the democratization of a country, and that it may be accompanied by the elimination of democracy. In Cuba there has been economic and social liberalization but without any advance on the democratic front.