

Early Criticism of the October Revolution

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Simon Pirani has collected and edited five documents written between 1920 and 1922 by little known (even to Pirani) critics of the Communist Party and its policies. The collection is valuable—if only to show that the dissidents offered no reasonably realistic policy alternative.

Midway in this period, in March 1921, the Bolsheviks executed a great turn. The 10th Party Congress decreed an end to War Communism and the beginning of the New Economic Policy, a sea change in policy, opening a new chapter in post-October history. This is the key event that one must bear in mind to assess the larger significance of these five, largely hostile, interventions against Bolshevik leadership of the Communist Party—one written shortly before the NEP went into vigor; four written shortly after.

Unfortunately, Pirani does not do enough to make clear to the non-specialist reader what the transition from War Communism to the NEP meant to millions of ordinary workers and, above all, to the peasantry, on the one hand, and what it meant to a pocketful of “communist dissidents,” chosen by Pirani, on the other. The changeover meant very different things to each. Acknowledging the distinction is vital to maintain a sense of proportion and historical perspective.

In a nutshell, the mass of the Russian people wholeheartedly welcomed the NEP. Responding somewhat belatedly to popular protest, the Bolsheviks demilitarized the economy, ended compulsory labor, abolished merciless requisitioning of grain from the peasantry restoring “free trade” between town and country, curbed the Cheka, and implemented a host of other popular measures. In sharp contrast, Pirani’s handpicked dissidents either opposed the new orientation, seeing it as a regressive restoration of “state capitalism,” or pined for a mysterious “Third Revolution” to transcend the October Revolution, or simply cried out in desperation.

The nadir of the October Revolution’s domestic fortunes came in 1922. That year, famine carried off the last tranche of victims—nearly 10 million men, women, and children—arising from seven consecutive years of World War, Revolution, and Civil War. The following year was the great turnaround. Moscow and St. Petersburg, two-thirds of whose inhabitants had fled into the

countryside, regained their pre-1914 populations. Workers went back to work, and peasants tilled the land largely without hindrance.

Soon, the “daily face” of NEP Bolshevism meant three square meals a day for millions, warm milk and clean diapers for hundreds of thousands of abandoned or parentless children, free literacy classes for the illiterate, and other improvements. Such were the benefits brought by the economic revival to most inhabitants of the former Tsarist Empire—modest benefits to be sure—but benefits all the same. But neither Pirani nor his chosen dissidents have much to say about the progressive dimension of NEP Russia, one that catered above all to the immediate material interests of the immediate producers.

Pirani concedes “communist dissidents” made “little impact” on the course of events. He explains this solely in terms of police repression by the Cheka. Certainly, there were many cases of surplus repression. But what more persuasively explains the dissidents’ lack of popular appeal, I would argue, was precisely the NEP’s popularity, together with the renewed support garnered by the Bolshevik leadership for launching it, not intimidation by the Cheka. Ordinary people looked favorably on the NEP because it went a long way to remove their well justified grievances. And so, it was difficult for any of Pirani’s chosen dissidents and *groupuscules* to gain traction and attract workers because their calls for reform or revolution were not allied with a realistic policy alternative to the NEP. The dissidents didn’t see matters this way, of course.

The author of the first document, a certain Anton Vlasov, served as an officer in the Red Army—presumably a very low-level one since no historian has been able to identify who he was or what, if anything, he represented.

In an unpublished letter to the Russian Communist Party (RCP) leadership, Vlasov declared that the RCP had been “completely torn away from the masses,” a “sentiment,” Pirani affirms, “widespread among rank-and-file communists at the time.” “I have seen depravity among our responsible communist officials,” Vlasov wrote, “and I have seen the free-for-all they have created being encouraged by the Central Committee. I have seen how a petty-bourgeois lifestyle is completely predominant among domesticated communists.”

Vlasov went on to recite flagrant instances of wrongdoing by party officials, vilifying, denouncing, and mocking the perpetrators. In the end, Vlasov made a hail-Mary appeal to the “only real revolutionary” left to sort matters out—Lenin.

I appeal to the Central Committee of the RCP, as the leading body, and to you, dear comrade Lenin, to you, the only real revolutionary who lives in a spartan manner: think, help, sort out whoever needs sorting out. If you can’t do it yourself, tell us, we will help. Act quickly, before it’s too late. Winter will be here soon: the Army will run out of boots, of clothing, it will clear off. It will rise in revolt. Hurry, Il’ich!

Vasilii Paniushkin penned the next document, “Declaration of the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party.” Paniushkin served in the Civil War as special military commissar and member of the collegium of the Cheka.

His declaration addressed the 1,128 delegates attending meetings of the Moscow Soviet in May, 1922. According to Pirani, Paniushkin’s “tiny” group—it counted fewer than 28 delegates—represented the “workers,” the “ranks”; the rest were (all?) “bureaucrats” who, presumably, represented only themselves, the “tops.”

Paniushkin denounced the party leadership for betraying the October Revolution. Transitioning to

the NEP and decreeing a tax in kind on the peasantry (as opposed to forced requisitioning) and “freer trade” only benefitted “capitalists, landowners, and bourgeoisie” and nobody else. Indeed, the bourgeoisie was back in power and the workers’ state was no longer a workers’ state. And that was that.

Paniushkin ultimately returned to the Communist Party, holding responsible political or administrative offices in Stalin’s terror-state until 1937. He died in 1960.

The next documents are “We Are Collectivists,” author(s) unknown, and “Appeal of the Workers Truth” group. Pirani says both “strike a contrast with the others in content and style.” Indeed they do because both take readers on a magical mystery tour, inspired by the visionary Alexander Bogdanov, theoretician of “proletarian culture.”

Pirani, not quite sure about his Russian language skills for a proper English translation of Bogdanovite lexicon, called for assistance from a native speaker of Russian. He did not have to. To those who read Bogdanov for the first time, or have little familiarity with certain “philosophical” aspects of Marx’s theory that Bogdanov hypostasized to create a theory of his own, the ex-Bolshevik remains very difficult to understand in any language.

Like Bogdanov himself, his aficionados opposed the October Revolution because the working class had not developed, prior to the revolution, a “proletarian culture” incubated in “proletarian universities” to make workers fitted to run the new, socialist, society. Owing to the historically premature Soviet seizure of power in 1917, it was inevitable that the “technical intelligentsia” should rule over a “state capitalist” society instead. This technical intelligentsia would unleash a “technological revolution,” creating the material prerequisites for socialism. In the meantime, We Collectivists would organize in the Communist Party, clandestinely if necessary, to explain why state capitalism—the NEP—was an inevitable but progressive phase toward socialism. For all practical intents and purposes, Bogdanov’s followers here supported the NEP, and it is unclear why Pirani thinks the collectivists wrote an “oppositional” document.

The Workers’ Truth group chimed in with a similar diagnosis—flanked by a political conclusion opposite that of the collectivists. It was formed by a score or so Red Army veterans, including several who had been invited to take university courses in advanced Marxist theory.

Adopting a stringently “workerist” outlook, common to many sects and micro-sects of the time—and standard among rank-and-file “proletcultists”—the group peremptorily declared the Communist Party had “increasingly, irretrievably, lost its relationship ... with the proletariat”; the “chasm” dividing it from the working class was “getting ever deeper.”

The Bolsheviks, they said, were now in the grip of the “technical organizing intelligentsia” and needlessly prolonging the very rule of a social element utterly alien to the working class. Only a new party, representing the proletariat and not the technical intelligentsia, could guarantee safe passage to socialism.

Pirani bookends his collection with a lengthy extract from Iosif Litvinov’s diary. A Latvian Jew, Litvinov, too, was a Red Army veteran. He wrote in his diary while studying at the Institute of Red Professors in Moscow.

Disillusioned communists were committing suicide on a “daily basis” reads, disturbingly, the first entry, cited by Pirani. It is not known how widespread this phenomenon was—at least I have not come across any study of it. But one, I think, can reasonably argue that “Old Bolsheviks”—militants who had joined Lenin’s partisans before 1917—were more likely to take their lives than recent

recruits: The old-timers, numbering a few thousand, recognized how vast the chasm between the dream and the reality was, whereas, for late-comers, enchanting visions of the socialist Elysium were a subsidiary motive for revolutionary action. Food, shelter, the eight-hour day, and peace—pressing material necessities in 1917 and after—were more likely the prime motivation for hundreds of thousands to rally to the Bolsheviks.

In any event, Litvinov felt that the NEP had extinguished any hope for progress toward socialism. The “New Exploitation of the Proletariat” as some called it, was, in Pirani’s words, “the bonfire of their hopes for changing society; at most, a betrayal.” Nevertheless, Litvinov, contradicting Pirani, could declare in his July 10, 1922, diary entry,

The harvest will be terrific. I could travel to Crimea, to Yalta, for two months. The ruble has stabilized. Prices of foodstuffs are falling every day. Soviet power is solid as never before.

Finally, in his commentary, Pirani highlights Bolshevik “encroachments” on “soviet democracy,” a major, perhaps exclusive theme in all his writings, where Pirani makes Lenin’s partisans ultimately responsible for the victory of Stalinism.

No doubt, the Bolsheviks played fast and loose with due process on many occasion. But soviet democracy, however limited, was for the working class, not the peasantry. The vehicle the peasantry used instead to regulate their daily affairs on the land was their centuries-old institution, the *mir*. Here, the peasants enjoyed their own form of democracy under the NEP, something most Marxists, Pirani included, do not acknowledge because they do not tie definite political forms to definite relations of property and class. As a consequence, they end up with a misleading, ahistorical conception of “democracy” that doubles as the solution to all political problems, no matter the context.

Pirani concludes,

Revolutions often raise hopes they cannot fulfill, and the documents in the collection are striking ... for the way that they react to the collision between the hopes of 1917 and the civil war, and the harsh economic and political facts of the NEP.

If taken as more than a literary flourish, Pirani’s conclusion raises questions, these two at least: If the October Revolution *sic et simpliciter* could not “fulfill hopes,” why put the onus of responsibility for cruelly deceived expectations on the Bolsheviks alone, giving lip service to objective constraints on the range of possible Bolshevik policies, as Pirani seems predisposed to do throughout his commentary, prejudicing the reader against “Leninism”? And if the dissident communists’ “hopes” collided with the realities of the NEP—as they undoubtedly did—does a sincere, genuinely felt “reaction,” whether couched in “scientific” terms or in the cries of tormented souls, constitute an adequate explanation for the collision? Or is something a bit more analytically coherent and empirically grounded required? Pirani’s intervention raised these issues in my mind. If they were raised in other people’s minds as well, Pirani will have accomplished his purpose—and mine too.

[See Simon Pirani’s reply and John Marot’s rejoinder.]