The Meaning of “Moderate Bolshevism”: A Book Review Essay

written by Samuel Farber | November 28, 2023



Tomsky in the 1920s as head of the trade union movement in Soviet Russia.

Charters Wynn, *The Moderate Bolshevik. Mikhail Tomsky from the Factory to the Kremlin, 1880-1936*. Chicago, IL.: Haymarket Books, 2023, 457 pages.

Mikhail Tomsky is far from a household name among left-wing activists except for those who have studied the history of the Russian Revolution in some depth. In a very thorough account of the life of Tomsky, the American historian Charters Wynn goes an appreciable distance in reversing that unfortunate situation. As Wynn shows, Tomsky was an important Bolshevik leader as the long-time head of the trade unions and for many years a member of the Political Bureau of the ruling Communist (Bolshevik) party. Wynn does well to emphasize that Tomsky was a working-class Bolshevik. A highly skilled worker who never had a formal higher education, he became an autodidact worker intellectual with a very self-confident presence, oratorical skills, and administrative abilities. (53) Generally considered as a hard-working, modest, and honest leader, party comrades such as Lenin himself appreciated his character and temper. (118)

What was the meaning of Tomsky’s “Moderate” Bolshevism”?

Charters Wynn makes a reasonable case in portraying Tomsky as a “moderate” Bolshevik referring most of all to Tomsky’s cautious political perspective on what the party could and should do as a revolutionary party. Accordingly, Tomsky was not among the Bolshevik leaders who supported Lenin’s revolutionary line vis a vis the provisional government as expressed in his “April Theses.” Similarly, Tomsky, like most Bolshevik leaders including Lenin, tried to avoid and restrain the premature insurrection of workers, soldiers, and sailors in July of 1917. The failure of that rebellion unleashed a great wave of repression that inflicted a very serious blow on the Bolsheviks. Tomsky, who was among the Bolshevik leaders arrested by the Provisional Government, wrote at the time that the success of the counter revolution was, in his opinion, “the direct result of the conciliations,

vacillation, and indecision" towards the premature insurrectionists of Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders. But possibly contradicting himself, he nevertheless considered the July uprising a praiseworthy attempt "to expand and deepen the revolution." (52) Moreover, on the eve of the revolutionary seizure of power in October 1917, Tomsky and other moderates feared that an attempt to seize power could either end in failure, like the July days, or if successful, could provoke a civil war. Like other moderate Bolsheviks, Left Mensheviks and Left SRs, Tomsky favored instead a broad socialist government including all these political parties. But unlike Kamenev and Zinoviev who went public with their criticisms of the planned insurrection, Tomsky only voiced his criticism at party gatherings, and followed Lenin's lead in the preparations for the seizure of power in Moscow, although without much enthusiasm. (54-55)

In this context, the author tends to downplay the revolutionary possibilities unleashed in several European countries by the imperialist war. Charters Wynn leaves us in the dark as to whether Tomsky had seriously considered it in weighing the possibility of a continent-wide socialist revolution like the wave of democratic revolutions that took place in Europe in 1848. If we follow the author's account, it seems that Tomsky did not think about the issue very much, other than to state without any further elaboration that he did not think the masses in the developed west European countries were interested in a socialist revolution.

How shall we then evaluate, in overall terms, Tomsky's "Bolshevik moderation" before the October revolution, which marked the seizure of power by a mass movement led by the Bolsheviks and Left SRs parties that had massively grown since they took the lead in defeating the right-wing coup led by General Kornilov in August? We can see, with the benefit of hindsight, that Tomsky and his political allies were correct in their fear that the revolution that took place in October might lead to a civil war. But we need to pose the question of whether that danger would have been significantly lower if the kind of all-socialist government advocated by Tomsky and others had come to power. General Kornilov's failed Coup in August was after all directed against the non-revolutionary government led by Kerensky as well as to groups and political parties to its left.

The Bolsheviks lost the necessary revolutionary gamble that they took in October of 1917, in great part determined by the objective nature and effects of the Civil War (1918-1920) and in great part, by the non-inevitable policy choices that the Bolsheviks made while in power. In that context, Tomsky's moderation sometimes acquired a different meaning based on the simple notion that a moderate version, let alone the opposition, to a bad revolutionary government policy, is preferable to an unmoderated application of the same. This was certainly the case with Tomsky's opposition, as a Bolshevik trade union leader, to Trotsky's advocacy of the militarization of labor during the Civil War, as well as to Stalin's brutal policies involved in the collectivization of agriculture. In other words, in these instances, Tomsky's "moderation" helped to oppose anti-socialist and anti-democratic policies.

However, there were several major questions where Tomsky's "moderation" had the opposite effect of helping to reduce rather than increase the prospects of working-class socialism and democracy. I am referring for example to his successful foreign policy effort, as the chair of the USSR's trade unions, to develop ties with the European unions, most of which, were under non-communist and anti-communist leadership, and particularly to his important contribution to the creation and development of the Anglo-Russian Committee bringing together the Russian and British unions. Tomsky's dedication to this task was clearly reinforced by Moscow's adoption of the United Front policy to organize joint action with working class forces to the right of the Communist parties. The defeat of the German revolution in 1923 had left no doubt that this was the right political course to follow.

The big problem was that the British TUC (Trade Union Council) was not predominantly militant or

leftist, let alone Communist in composition, a reality that could only add tremendous strains to Tomsky's agenda. This became most evident in the 1926 general strike in Great Britain that as Charters Wynn points out "would bring to the breaking point, not only the possibility of achieving international trade-union unity, but the continuation of the Anglo-Russian Committee as well." (195) Basing itself on totally false claims about the supposed decline of the strike, the TUC called it off after nine days, without even consulting the miners who were at the center of the strike dispute. This turned out to be a disaster with the TUC unions losing more than half a million members. Failing to take proper stock of the situation, Tomsky's initial reaction was to claim that the aborted strike constituted "the partial moral victory of the proletariat" and it would contribute "toward the ultimate success of the proletarian struggle" in conditions "more favorable than the current ones," (199-200) When the Russian leadership quickly changed course and even compelled Tomsky to denounce the actions of the TUC, this, as might have been expected, clearly outraged the Council. Upset by the hardening attitudes of the Soviet leadership towards the TUC, Tomsky sent the British union leaders a conciliatory letter hoping that the Anglo-Russian Committee would not let differences of opinion with the Soviet government "disturb our co-operative work." (204) Although Tomsky later denounced the General Council in September 1926, accusing them of "going over to the enemy" with its "bend the knee attitude towards the government," (207) he would later change his political posture once again at a meeting with the British delegation in Berlin in the spring of 1927 by accepting all the British demands including the stipulation that both sides refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs in order to ensure the survival of the Anglo-Russian Committee. (208) Leon Trotsky denounced the "Berlin capitulation" arguing that it was wrong for Tomsky to talk of "unanimity" and "cordial relations" with those who had betrayed, and would again betray, the working class. (209)

Charters Wynn argues that "the evidence indicates that Tomsky acted in good faith. He genuinely sought a working alliance with the Western non-communist left." (212) But Wynn clearly shows Tomsky's apparent lack of a long-term vision and his wavering responses to pressures as he was pushed "to and from" by the Russian leadership as well as by the British trade union bureaucracy. Thus, the least that can be said about the net effect of Tomsky's efforts as a leader of the Soviet cooperation with the British trade unions is that these did not contribute to the development of the militancy and class consciousness of the British labor movement and to the adoption of a cogent internationalist policy by the Soviet Union.

In the end, what is missing from Wynn's picture is the question of whether Tomsky had, as an important Russian Communist leader in his own right, a thought-out point of view on how his "moderate" political work, whether in terms of the alliance with Western trade union leaders or any other issues, fitted into his overall Communist politics. Tomsky was after all a worker-intellectual who had been an "insider" in the Bolshevik party for a long time and must have been thoroughly familiar with its leading politicians and their often divergent and conflicting politics. It is on this issue that I find the biggest weakness of this otherwise informative and often persuasive book by Charters Wynn. If Tomsky was indeed a "moderate" this surely did not refer only to tactical and even strategic issues but also to the more fundamental politics of the Bolshevik Party. The question then becomes as to how Tomsky concretely differed from and was similar to other Bolshevik tendencies. That is why Wynn repeatedly referring to Trotsky's "arrogance" and only substantively discussing Trotsky's advocacy of the militarization of labor during the Civil War – arguably the worst position Trotsky took on any important issue – will not do without at least a brief discussion of Trotsky's views on permanent revolution, internationalism, and NEP, in relation to which Tomsky may have been a "moderate." The same applies to Nikolai Bukharin. In spite of Tomsky's "moderation" and its similarity to Bukharin's "right-Bolshevik" politics, Wynn does not tell us about the policies Bukharin advocated, for example, towards the peasantry and what Tomsky's thought about them.

A more sociological class-based approach to Tomsky's politics is suggested by Wynn's brief citation of Leon Trotsky to the effect that as a trade-union leader Tomsky "had to deal not only with the vanguard of the working class [namely party members] but with the larger backward strata as well." (381) Even if brief, Trotsky's allusion to Tomsky's politics raises momentous issues regarding the prospects for working class revolution and working-class democratic rule. It assumes that while in opposition, the job of the conscious political minority organized in the revolutionary party is to push for a *revolutionary* program, and accordingly, conduct propaganda, agitation, and concrete actions to win over the largest possible number of oppressed and exploited people. In her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution written in prison in September 1918, Rosa Luxemburg sharply criticized the parliamentary cretinism of German Social Democracy that claimed that to carry out anything, you must first have a majority. But against that "principle," Luxemburg argued that "the true dialectic of revolutions, however, stands this wisdom of parliamentary moles on its head: not through a majority through revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority – that is the way the road runs."

One thing the revolutionary party does not have to do at this stage brilliantly analyzed by Rosa Luxemburg, is to *govern* a society composed of the advanced as well as the "backward" strata of the working class, let alone other social classes and strata supporting, opposing as well as vacillating on its support for the new order. Moreover, if this new order is to be democratic, the vanguard cannot simply act as a sovereign body, disregarding the wishes of other popular forces.

Tomsky and Socialist Democracy

Although generally sympathetic to Tomsky, Charters Wynn points out that the Bolshevik leader was "hardly a voice for pluralism and tolerance" in the power struggles within the party. Amid periods of extreme party infighting, Tomsky not only suggested that his party opponents should be expelled from the organization but also that they deserved to be arrested for such crimes as demoralizing non-party workers or spreading ideas that encouraged them to conspire against the party. Although Wynn tells us that Tomsky would later come to deeply regret such statements, they did undermine his ability, and that of his allies Bukharin and Rykov, to effectively oppose Stalin when the later violently brought the conciliatory policies of NEP to an end. (385) As Wynn explains, Tomsky's excesses were not limited to the inner party struggles since he also played an important role in the baseless attacks against the so-called bourgeois specialists that reached their peak in the infamous 1928 Shakhty trial conducted against them. (385-86)

Like other leaders of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party, Tomsky feared, in the twenties, that the opposition tendencies within the party ran the risk of splitting the party and even possibly provoking another civil war. Undoubtedly, this contributed to Tomsky caving in and repudiating his politics, particularly at the Sixteenth Party Congress that took place in the summer of 1930. At that Congress, Tomsky distanced himself from the open oppositionists like Trotsky and Zinoviev and denied that he had ever conspired to set up his own faction within the party since any long-term opposition inside the organization would inevitably lead to a struggle against the party itself by its enemies. Nevertheless, the Yugoslav anti-Stalinist Ante Ciliga who was present at the congress, noted that Tomsky's speech "contained a note of human dignity." For his part, Leon Trotsky pointed out that "the ruling clique was not mistaken when in the notes of Tomsky's repentance, it heard a discreet amount of hatred." (315-318). In the end, recognizing the grim future facing the Soviet Union and himself, Tomsky committed suicide in August of 1936, just as Stalin's famous "show trials" (1936-38) were beginning, leading to the execution of dozens of the "Old Bolsheviks." The show trials formed part of the Great Purge of the same years which scholars estimate to have killed 700,000 people.

It is important to note the similar actions of Nikolai Bukharin, a more prominent "moderate" who

was the leader of the "Right Opposition" to Stalin. For example, at a Central Committee plenum in January of 1933, Bukharin demanded that Party opposition factions "must be hacked off without the slightest mercy, without [our] being in the slightest troubled by any sentimental considerations concerning the past, personal friendships, relationships, respect for a person, and so forth." (350) It would be tempting to establish a causal connection between Tomsky's (and Bukharin's) "moderation" and their surrender to the calls for "party unity." However, few Bolshevik leaders seemed to have been immune to that tendency. Even Leon Trotsky, a much earlier and forthright opponent of the party bureaucracy in general and of Stalin in particular did also fall victim to similar party pressures for "unity." Thus, at the thirteenth Communist party congress in May 1924, Trotsky accepted the right of the party to discipline him, whether he was mistaken or not, and declared, "Comrades, none of us wants to be or can be right against the party. In the last analysis, the party is always right." (236)

Cold war scholarship maintained that none of this was surprising considering the supposedly totalitarian nature of Bolshevism both before and after it took power. But, until the early twenties, the Bolshevik party was faction ridden and hardly monolithic and Lenin, far from being the all-powerful and unchallenged chieftain, was only "primus inter pares" within the Bolshevik leadership and was defeated in inner party conflicts on many occasions, a phenomenon that any careful reading of this volume will clearly show.

I would argue that among the main causes for the very tragic developments in Bolshevik politics was the change that took place from the on the one a hand growing Bolshevik party at the head of a rising mass movement in the late summer and early fall of 1917 that encouraged the party to give free democratic rein to the working class and popular movements, particularly in the factories and among the peasant rank and file of the Tsarist army. But, on the other hand, and in contrast to that democratic openness, the Bolshevik leadership became something substantially different during the Civil War (1918-1920.) When faced with its enormous objective difficulties, the Civil War played a central role in in the abandonment and fall of soviet democracy as I showed in ample detail in the first chapter of my book *Before Stalinism. The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (19-61). We must also consider the disastrous policies of War Communism with its vast confiscations of peasant produce that went beyond a mere response to the necessity of feeding the working class and urban population and became what many Communist Party leaders and members saw as an opportunity to implement maximalist Communist goals. One clear effect of War Communism was the opposition of a large part of the same peasantry that had previously supported the October revolution less than a year earlier. It is important to note that the Bolsheviks, like their Menshevik rivals, never had a significant organizational presence among the peasant masses that accounted for approximately 80 percent of the population. At the same time, the working-class industrial base of the country and of the Bolshevik party was sharply reduced by the Civil War destruction and carnage. All these Civil War developments powerfully contributed to the isolation of the party from the great majority of the people of what became the USSR in 1922, and thus to the creation of a state of siege mentality that fatally led to the mainstream Bolshevik conversion of anti-democratic political necessity into virtue. Finally, by 1923, just a few years after the end of the devastating Civil War, the European revolutionary cycle clearly came to an end with the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923, thereby exacerbating the state of siege mentality in party circles.

In that context, Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP), established in 1921, and the substantial rise in strikes and industrial conflict that occurred under these new conditions, resulted in a relative improvement in the working-class and peasant standard of living. Although the NEP opened an important degree of economic and cultural liberalization, it was accompanied by a hardening of the political dictatorship with an important number of repressive actions such as the *permanent illegalization* of parties such as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries and even the

suppression of permanent factions inside the ruling Communist party itself.

Moreover, Lenin's implementation of the NEP shows that there is a qualitative difference between a revolutionary line insofar as it relates to the consciousness and politics of the working class and its allies, that it is in principle changeable through political education, agitation, and the transformative effects of revolutionary political action; but it is quite a different matter to argue that the same applies to objective circumstances such as the lack of economic development and material scarcity. By itself, revolutionary consciousness cannot create wealth and material well-being for most of the population except in the mind of hyper voluntarists such as Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and Ernesto (Che) Guevara. Looking back, Guevara even disregarded the reality of the economic crisis in Russia in the early twenties with the astonishing claim that at the time "there was nothing economically impossible." The only issue to be considered, Guevara added, is whether "something is compatible with the development of socialist consciousness." (Samuel Farber, *The Politics of Che Guevara. Theory and Practice*, Haymarket Books, 2016, 91-92)

Thanks are due to Haymarket Books that has performed an important service in publishing another volume of the Historical Materialism Book Series. This volume is considerably enriched by the beautiful cover art and design by David Mabb and includes a substantial number of photographs of the period, many of them new to this reviewer.