

Dictatorship and Democracy in the Russian Revolution

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One of the great consequences of Stalinism's downfall is the opportunity it has created to study the Russian revolution anew. The Stalinist lie machine, which tried so hard to bury this history, has disintegrated. Many of the lies against which generations of Trotskyists fought - that Trotsky was a counter-revolutionary agent, etc - have evaporated. Of course now the bourgeoisie insists, louder than ever, that the whole revolution led inevitably to Stalinism. But for those who want to study the revolution in the context of developing a truly communist outlook for the 21st century, there are welcome possibilities. Russia in general, and the historical archives in particular, are open to us. As a result, the body of serious scholarship on the revolution, and particularly its social history - to which the article *Beyond Kronstadt* refers - has swelled as a result. So the article's call to develop discussion on the left 'beyond the usual argument about the Kronstadt rebellion' is welcome. Here I suggest some directions in which the discussion could go.

How to approach the revolution

MK, author of *Beyond Kronstadt*, raises questions about the character of the Bolshevik dictatorship which, when raised in the past, provoked a knee-jerk reaction from many Trotskyists. They would refer to the unfavourable objective circumstances in which the Bolsheviks ruled ... and scurry back to Trotsky's writings in the hope of finding reference to the particular issue raised.

They rarely found anything helpful, of course. In his final exile, when he could view the Bolshevik regime with hindsight, Trotsky wrote very little about many particular issues of the type raised by MK. The reason is not hard to work out. Trotsky's priorities at that time were to elaborate the political and theoretical bases of the Fourth International and to defend himself and others against the Stalinist terror. As for Russia, Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* deals with broad outlines; in *The History of the Russian Revolution* he stops in October 1917; in *My Life* and *Stalin* he certainly deals with particular incidents, but mainly those which personally involved either himself or Stalin, mainly from the standpoint of answering Moscow's fantastic falsifications, and often avoiding, for obvious political reasons, one of the most interesting historical issues - his own disagreements with Lenin.

However Trotsky *did* indicate the basis of a theoretical approach to the Bolshevik dictatorship. Arguing against those who saw Stalinism as a continuation of Bolshevism,

he wrote: 'Bolshevism [...] is only [only!] a political tendency, closely fused with the working class but not identical with it. And aside from the working class there exist in the Soviet Union a hundred million peasants, various nationalities, and a heritage of oppression, misery and ignorance. The state built up by the Bolsheviks reflects not only the thought and will of Bolshevism but also the cultural level of the country, the social composition of the population, the pressure of a barbaric past and no less barbaric world imperialism.' (1)

In a letter to Margaret De Silver, companion of the Italian-American anarchist Carlo Tresca, Trotsky, specifically defending the imposition of a single-party dictatorship from 1920, returned to the theme of barbarism: 'The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history. [...] Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the "dictatorship" of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.' (2).

Comments such as these have been taken by 'Trotskyists' as the last word of a saint on the subject of dictatorship, and by anarchists as the self-justification of a sinner. I propose instead they should be taken as a starting-point. Barbarism, Bolshevism, international isolation ... all were factors in the revolution and its degeneration. We must untangle how they confronted each other and combined with each other.

How the Bolsheviks fell out with the Petrograd workers

MK, author of *Beyond Kronstadt*, focuses on the fact that ideals of mass democratic decision-making were never achieved in the Russian revolution, and indeed appeared to have been all but forgotten by the summer of 1918.

Even by the spring of that year, the explosion of revolutionary organisation that had made the Bolshevik seizure of power possible - the formation of factory committees, Red Guards and soviets, the revolt in the army and the

peasant seizures of land - had already receded. Industrial administration, to the extent that there was any, was being centralised under state control. The factory committees, as MK shows, never progressed from workers' control (in the sense of checking and accounting) to any system of self-management.

MK emphasises that the attitudes of both factory committees and of state officials 'degenerated' and became less democratic; 'the plans of the Bolshevik leadership were considerably less democratic than those of the factory committees'; 'the [Bolshevik] leadership failed to insist on democracy in the committees'. He mentions the collapse of Petrograd's industry in the winter of 1917-18, but the implications of this need further thought.

In Petrograd, the citadel of the revolution, the number of employed industrial workers fell from 406,312 (January 1917) to 339,641 (January 1918) and thence to 120,553 (September 1918). There was 'one of the most rapid and least controlled demobilisations [from the army] in history'. Bread supplies fell to one-third of what they had been in early 1917. There was malnutrition and then typhus. (3)

How on earth could the factory committees, or the Bolsheviks, build anything in these circumstances? The Petrograd workforce, which had been central to the seizure of power, was literally breaking up. The number of rank-and-file Bolsheviks in the city fell from 43,000 in October 1917 to 7,000 in August 1918. The factory committees had to use armed force to fetch the workers' wages and to protect goods, stores, railway lines and even their workforce from marauding bands from other factories (4).

Incidentally, it is in this context that Lenin's draft article of December 1917, *How To Organise Competition*, quoted by MK, should be placed. The article's theme is the development of the 'independent initiative of the workers, and of all working and exploited people generally'. The punitive measures Lenin advocates are to him 'practical successes our "communes" and our worker and peasant organisers should be proud of'; that is, Lenin thought of them as measures to be taken by the mass organisations. The 'rogues' against which Lenin advocates punishments are bracketed with 'the rich'. In referring to 'shirkers' and 'idlers' he probably meant the 'newcomers' who arrived in the factories during the war, whose backwardness he contrasts with the 'advanced, class-conscious workers' who made the revolution (5). What is unpleasant about such statements is the way that 'Leninists' subsequently made them a model of how to behave. On the contrary, they are evidence of how revolutionaries reacted when faced with trying to feed a starving population, i.e. the impact of barbarism on Bolshevism.

Could the factory committees, working under these conditions, have gone further in developing workers' self-management? It is hard to see how. In the debate in *Critique* mentioned by MK, the one thing that Chris Goodey

and Maurice Brinton agree on is that the committees 'were the most powerful institution in Russia by the end of 1917' (6). But neither of them address the crippling limitations imposed on this power by the appalling material deprivation.

The Bolshevik leadership's answer to these impossible circumstances was the centralisation of industry under the Supreme Economic Council. The factory committee leaderships supported this. Brinton's original pamphlet, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*, claims that the factory committees were subordinated to the unions, the unions to the Supreme Economic Council, and the latter to Lenin's closest supporters; at every stage the adversary of self-management 'appeared in the garb of the new proletarian power' (7). In fact centralisation was the response to chaos; within a few months it developed into ultra-centralisation as a response to civil war.

MK says that the problem was Bolshevik thinking, 'limited by the Marxism of the Second International'. Surely the point is that the seizure of power opened the door to developing the practice of workers' self-management and thereby the thinking on the subject - and such development began. But economic collapse, famine and civil war rapidly closed the door again. The damage has been done subsequently, by those who want to take Bolshevik responses of that period as a model for future socialist revolutions. In fact future revolutions will certainly be made on a higher material basis.

As MK states, by the spring of 1918 relationships between the centralised state power and the Petrograd working class, strained by devastating poverty, had to a large extent broken down. But does this tragic breach not underline just how unfavourable conditions were for the development of, and experimentation with, workers' self-management? (Arguments to the effect that for some reason it 'should not have been' developed must be consigned to the dustbin along with all arguments about what 'should' or 'should not' have been done).

What remained of the factory committees came together in the Assembly of Factory Representatives mentioned by MK. The most popular demands were for action on food supplies. Mensheviks and SRs became active in the assembly, linking these issues to their own calls for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. The movement was met by government repression, most notoriously on 7 May, 1918, when Red guards opened fire on a crowd of women who marched from their food queues to protest in the town square. Red guards were used to patrol workers' districts and to arrest SRs and other opposition forces (8).

War communism

MK presents the period 1917-21 as a series of dilemmas about workers' democracy. Few people saw it like that at the time. The dilemmas were more often posed in terms

of centralisation. The Bolshevik leaders tried to resist the centrifugal tendencies inevitably set in motion by the historical explosion of 1917; to the working-class rank-and-file, this often looked like treachery. Once the civil war broke out in earnest, the Bolsheviks regarded overcoming these tendencies as a matter of survival.

At this point (mid-1918), hopes of international revolution were receiving one setback after another. After the crippling Brest Litovsk treaty (March) came the bloodbath which drowned the Finnish communist uprising (April), Kamenev's return from a trip to western Europe from which he reported 'comrades, we are alone' (August) (9), and the defeat of the German revolution (November). Deprived of the support that international revolution might have provided, the Bolsheviks tried to defend what had been gained. The most centralising act was the formation of the Red Army. This itself was a break with the traditions of the left of the Second International; that left had championed the slogans of 'people's militia' and 'the armed nation' against social chauvinism. Now hopes of a people's militia vanished even more rapidly than those of workers' self-management. Trotsky's proposals to subsume autonomous Red guard units into the army, to scrap the election of officers and soldiers' committees (practices adopted in the course of the 1917 revolution) and to introduce military justice met with stringent opposition (10). Then came the more long-lasting dispute over the use of military specialists.

The economy was centralised to serve the needs of the centralised army. The government declared Russia 'a single military camp' and army requirements took first priority; forcible requisitioning of grain was introduced; there was widespread nationalisation; the currency devalued into oblivion and trade was widely replaced by rationing on one hand and barter on the other.

So communists who had certainly stood for the self-activity of the masses in 1917 now saw the only way forward as super-centralisation. The Left Communists, whose stand against the Brest-Litovsk treaty had won the support of many of the strongest Bolshevik party organisations, were effectively split down the middle by the issue of centralisation. The Left Communist leader Bukharin became its most enthusiastic advocate; his erstwhile Left Communist comrades Osinsky, Sapronov, Smirnov and others saw the bureaucratism which accompanied centralisation as the main danger, and formed the Democratic Centralist opposition to fight it (11).

The Democratic Centralist group continued to warn of the consequences of such bureaucratisation throughout the civil war. It is to be hoped that their documents (which, like those of most of the early opposition groupings, are not available in English) will now be studied. However, of equal interest may be the dilemma of 1920 when, having won the civil war with this highly-centralised state machine, the communists were faced with building the new world for which they had been fighting. Was the su-

per-centralised machine to be switched to peace-time use? Or did it need to be partly dismantled? Could it survive without retreating before the tide of peasant discontent? Could it be used to spread the revolution westwards?

At the end of the civil war most communists believed the world was truly at their feet. They had overwhelmed the Whites and defied the imperialist blockade. Now they convinced themselves that, by continuing the measures that had worked so well in wartime, they could find a shortcut to communism. As the country sank deeper into poverty, many of the communists and their allies became filled with an incredible revolutionary optimism. To the question, how had he managed to live with no money in 1920, the anarchist-minded modernist novelist, Boris Pilniak, replied that he had lived very well; 1920, he said, 'should be written about - not only for Russia, but for the entire world, because that year was the most wonderful in the history of humanity.' Those in communist circles who saw the wartime measures as temporary were 'regarded with disdain' (12).

The unreality of the situation was patent. However high the vanguard's hopes, Russia's industry and economy were wrecked. Peasant and workers were in revolt. In February 1920, Trotsky proposed to retreat out of the blind alley; he urged an abandonment of requisitioning and greater freedom of trade, to try to restart the economy; this was rejected by the Bolshevik central committee. He then returned with redoubled vigour to proposals he had made in December 1919 to militarise labour. This meant, principally, the mobilisation of Red Army units for civil construction projects. It was combined in industry with the replacement of collegial management by one-man management (13).

If Trotsky temporarily saw the Red Army as a shortcut to economic reconstruction, Lenin saw it as a shortcut to an even more basic goal: to spread the revolution to western Europe. In April 1920, the Polish nationalist leader Pilsudski invaded Ukraine and handed Lenin the chance to try this shortcut. The Red Army was ordered to pursue Pilsudski back into Poland. During the second Comintern congress in July that year, its progress was monitored by excited delegates on a map. But the Red army found little support from the Polish population and suffered a very serious defeat. Lenin's speech on the lessons of this defeat, buried in the secret archives by the Stalinists until 1992, makes fascinating reading.

Lenin's error in pressing for this offensive revolutionary war without the support of a movement in Poland had 'great historical consequences', Trotsky wrote later; it was a 'grave' mistake whose scale was 'in accord with the titanic scope of [Lenin's] work'. We would do well to develop this line of thinking, rather than emulating the 'ikon painters' and hero-worshippers of Lenin whom Trotsky derides in the same passage (14).

Making a virtue out of necessity

In 1920 some key Bolshevik leaders not only hoped that a shortcut to communism was possible but theorised about it in a manner which they largely repudiated within a few months. 'Ideology, which had taken on its own dynamic, very often transformed provisional, transitional measures into a system - which in its turn influenced the measures and prolonged them beyond what was necessary,' Karl Radek wrote, with reference to such theorising, in 1922.

The most worked-out theoretical justification of civil war centralisation was Bukharin's *The Economics of the Transitional Period*. Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* also contains an extensive defence of the militarisation of labour as a means for 'the transition to socialism'. Trotsky wrote that one-man management in industry was desirable *regardless* of the civil war - which implied that it was desirable out of principle, not out of necessity. 'The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property, [...] in the supremacy over the whole Soviet mechanism of the collective will of the workers, and not at all in the form in which individual economic enterprises are administered'. At this time workers' self-management could not have been further from his mind. (15)

What happened to all these ideological pronouncements when, virtually overnight, the 'war communist' policies were abandoned and replaced by the New Economic Policy? In a report to the Comintern in 1922, Trotsky critically surveyed 'war communism'; he said that the policy of confiscating peasant surpluses had lowered agricultural production; the policy of equal wages had lowered labour productivity and 'centralised bureaucratic management' had obstructed 'genuine centralised management'. Inherent in the assumptions of war communism, he said, had been the idea that 'the revolutionary development in western Europe would proceed more swiftly'; this would have enabled the backward Russian economy to overcome many of its problems (16).

In the early years of NEP, there were widespread discussions in the Bolshevik party about the mistakes of the previous period, and a study of these would no doubt deepen our understanding of the revolution's history (17). However it surely is already clear that *The Economics of the Transition Period*, *Terrorism and Communism* and also Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii's *ABC of Communism* are to be studied as records of socialism's past travails and in no sense as guidebooks for the future. (They certainly have been used as guidebooks. The *ABC of Communism* was treated as a manual for building socialism in the International Socialists in the 1970s. In the Workers Revolutionary Party, extensive analogies were drawn between the WRP, Trotsky in the civil war and Cromwell; both *Terrorism and Communism* and Trotsky's *Military Writings* were highly recommended reading.)

1921 - Lenin's Thermidor?

While in 1920 Pilniak was experiencing the most wonderful year in history, and communists were enthusing about rapidly building the new society, discontent was growing among both workers and peasants. A powerful strike movement swept through many industrial areas. The peasant revolts were on an even greater scale: that led by Antonov in Tambov province, starting in the autumn of 1920, was a miniature civil war; there were also uprisings on the Volga, in central Russia and in Siberia (18). It is the scale of this movement that makes the issue about the class background of the Kronstadt sailors who revolted - raised by Trotsky in 1938 in his dispute with Serge and argued about ever since - seem very much a secondary one. For it is indisputable that, having suffered the civil war, workers were now demanding improved living standards and peasants were now seeking an end to grain requisitioning. Kronstadt came at the height of a much wider movement. All this forced Lenin to the conclusions mooted by Trotsky a year earlier: that it was necessary to reverse centralisation, to allow private trade and to buy, rather than seize, the peasants' surplus product ... in other words, to retreat.

At this point, the Bolsheviks were in many respects stranded. The revolution had not expanded westwards; the Hungarian workers had been defeated, the Polish invasion and the 'March action' by German communists had proved disastrous. The debate in the Comintern now centred on the prospect of revolution in the west after a prolonged period of preparation rather than immediately.

In Russia the old ruling class was smashed, but the working class, in whose name the Bolsheviks ruled, was a shadow of its former self. MK writes: 'Even if the proletariat had disappeared, the idea of staying in power without a working class contradicts any principle of workers' self-emancipation.' The issue has been raised before. 'The Bolshevik party had the usurper's role thrust upon it [wrote Trotsky's biographer, Deutsch]. It had become impossible for it to live up to its principle once the working class had disintegrated. [...] Should it have thrown up its hands and surrendered power? A revolutionary government which has waged a cruel and devastating civil war does not abdicate on the day after its victory and does not surrender to its defeated enemies and to their revenge, even if it discovers that it can not rule in accordance with its own ideas and that it no longer enjoys the support it commanded when it entered the civil war.' (19)

Lenin was quite conscious of all this in 1921. In his notes for the article which heralded NEP, *The Tax In Kind*, he wrote (twice): '1794 versus 1921'. (In 1794 Robespierre, having tried to press forward with economic centralisation and terror, ended up himself being guillotined. This was the point, Thermidor, at which the French revolution began to recede.) Victor Serge reports Lenin saying in 1921: 'This is Thermidor. But we shan't let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make Thermidor ourselves.' (20)

What did Lenin mean? It seems that for him, 1921 was a Thermidor 'of a special type'. The turning-back of the revolution would be conducted by the revolutionaries themselves. Lenin outlined the direction of this 'disciplined retreat' in his report to the Bolsheviks' 11th party congress in 1922. The communists, he said, were a tiny minority atop a gigantic bureaucratic 'heap' in the state machinery; the heap was directing the communists, instead of the other way round. The communists were 'but a drop in the ocean' in peasant Russia; they were drowning in 'an alien culture' (21).

Here is Lenin at his most realistic and sanguine; he is also at his furthest from the ideas of working-class self-emancipation set out in *State and Revolution* and practiced in the October 1917. If in 1918-19, principles of workers' democracy inevitably took second place to the necessities of war, did it not follow in 1921 - once it had been accepted that a long-term struggle between working-class and bourgeois forces would ensue, in the context of NEP - that the reconstitution of workers' organisations and workers' democracy should be a central part of the Bolshevik strategy? Not for Lenin.

As he made the 'disciplined retreat' of 1921-22, far from reawakening alliances with revolutionary workers who opposed the Bolshevik majority's line (as he had for example with the Left Communists in late 1918), Lenin sought to silence them with disciplinary measures. In the above-quoted speech to the 1922 congress, he warned the Workers Opposition and others that indiscipline would be dealt with severely. Immediately after the congress, some of the Workers Oppositionists were expelled. The membership of Alexandr Shliapnikov, a Petrograd metalworkers' leader, key figure in the 1917 seizure of power and leader of the Workers Opposition, was saved by one vote. Another oppositionist who was expelled was Gavriil Miasnikov, a communist factory workers' leader from Perm, civil war hero who had organised the execution of the tsar's brother, and a polemicist against Lenin on issues of workers' democracy since 1918. After his expulsion in 1922 Miasnikov was arrested and briefly imprisoned by the Cheka (22). Furthermore, a ban on party activity - backed up with arrests, closures of newspapers, etc - was in place not only against the SRs and Mensheviks, who in the civil war had either supported the Whites or vacillated, but also against non-Bolshevik workers' organisations who had consistently sided with the Reds, such as left Mensheviks, some left SRs and anarchists.

As for the unions, Lenin had recognised during the 'trade union debate' of 1920-21 the need for their independence from the state, since the interests of the state and of workers could not at all points coincide. And yet a few months later, apparently with his agreement, dissident communists elected to the leadership of the metalworkers' trade union were removed and replaced by supporters of the CC majority. When the fourth congress of trade unions passed a resolution on workers' democracy, Lenin was

among those who descended on its presidium like a ton of bricks and removed Tomsy and others who had failed to ensure that it adhered to the CC majority line (23).

There had been one notable case during the civil war in which disciplinary measures were used against dissident communists: the summary disbanding in 1919 of the Ukrainian party central committee dominated by the Democratic Centralist faction. It was after the party congress in 1921, which formally adopted the ban on factions - of which Lenin was an enthusiastic proponent - that such disciplinary measures became the norm. In 1935 Trotsky wrote in a draft article: 'It is possible to regard the decision of the Tenth Congress [to ban factions] as a grave necessity. But in light of later events, one thing is absolutely clear: the banning of factions brought the heroic history of Bolshevism to an end and made way for its bureaucratic degeneration' (24). What, then, was the Russian Communist Party of the early NEP period, if its 'heroic history' had already ended?

Democracy and dictatorship

The use of disciplinary measures against communist dissidents was of course far from being the first issue of workers' democracy that came up in the revolution. MK's article raises many more. And yet although he refers both to the material conditions and the way that these were reflected in the Bolshevik leaders' attitudes, his approach remains normative, i.e. he sets up a standard of 'workers' democracy' (which also, presumably, reflects the material conditions in which he worked it out, i.e. late 20th century western Europe), and measures Russian events by this standard.

He argues that 'the priority is not to criticise individual policies [which led to repression] but to try and work out how revolutionaries could have avoided getting into this appalling situation in the first place.' But surely the point is that, like all attempted revolutions, the October revolution was a gamble. Once it had been carried through, both the Bolsheviks and the workers found themselves willy-nilly confronted by a series of 'appalling situations' which could presumably only have been avoided by not overthrowing the provisional government in the first place. In 1920, workers surely took no more pleasure from striking than the Bolsheviks took from quelling the strikes. But could either side have avoided this unwanted conflict?

MK argues that: 'If the Bolsheviks had respected workers' democracy they may well have lost power. Nevertheless this would have been a gamble, like the October revolution, that they would have been right to take.' Is MK here not doing what he himself counsels against: being wise after the event? In 1920-21 the question of workers' democracy was obviously never posed in the yes-or-no manner in which the question of seizing power was in October 1917.

This is not to deny the importance of the questions MK raises. But a more concrete approach is needed to deal with them. The beginnings of such an approach may be found in the writings of Victor Serge. I will mention two of these.

The first passage, from an article sent by Serge in 1920 to a French anarchist newspaper, deals with the question of centralisation referred to above (25). Serge had come from an anarchist background, travelled to Russia in 1919 to join the revolution and the Communist Party. His article sought to convince his anarchist comrades of the necessity of measures taken by the Bolsheviks during the civil war - in particular Red terror and the subordination of the economy to military requirements. The article also deals with more general theoretical questions including the 'danger of state socialism', about which Serge writes with great foresight: 'The socialist state, which has become omnipotent through the fusion of political and economic power, served by a bureaucracy which will not hesitate to attribute privileges to itself and to defend them, will not disappear of its own accord. [...] In order to uproot and destroy it, the Communists themselves may need to resort to profoundly revolutionary activity which will be long and difficult.'

Under the heading *Centralisation and Jacobinism*, Serge argues as follows ... The anarchist tradition is one of decentralisation. But should we not state aims more precisely, he asks. 'The pernicious form of centralisation, that which kills initiative, is *authoritarian centralisation*. [But] it is self-evident that even in the most libertarian communist society, at least certain industries (let us say by way of example) must be run on the basis of a single plan, according to an overall picture and on the basis of precise statistics. [...] the function of this centre will be to manage on the basis of science and not of authority [...] What is pernicious in the principle of centralisation [...] is the authoritarian spirit. If this spirit is set aside, all that remains is co-ordination. The future will doubtless eliminate, although not without great struggles, the authoritarian spirit, the last trace of the spirit of exploitation. To aspire towards this, in revolutionary periods, anarchists can no longer deny the need for a certain degree of centralisation. [...]

'What they must say is as follows: Centralisation, agreed. But not of the authoritarian type. We may have recourse to the latter *from necessity, but never from principle*. The only revolutionary form of organisation is: *free association, federation, co-ordination*. It does not exclude the centralisation of skills and information; it excludes only the centralisation of power, that is, of arbitrariness, of coercion, of abuse. It must spring from the masses and not be sent down to them in order to control them.

'[...] In Russia the dictatorship of the proletariat had to apply an authoritarian centralisation which became ever fuller. We may and should deplore this. Unfortunately I do not believe it could have been avoided. [...]

'The pitiless logic of history seems hitherto to have left very little scope for the libertarian spirit in revolutions. That is because human freedom, which is the product of culture and of the raising of the level of consciousness, can not be established by violence; [and yet] precisely the revolution is necessary to win - by force of arms - from the old world [...] the possibility of an evolution [...] to spontaneous order, to the free association of free workers, to anarchy. So it is all the more important throughout all these struggles to preserve the *libertarian spirit*.' Further on, Serge writes of the 'pernicious influence' of power expressed in 'professional deformations' and bureaucracy; the task of 'libertarian Communists' will be to 'recall by their criticisms and by their actions that at all costs the workers' state must be prevented from crystallising.'

We know with hindsight that the workers' state not only crystallised but degenerated. In examining its history, Serge's point that communism may have recourse to authoritarian centralisation '*from necessity, but never from principle*' is important. How did necessity manifest itself? When was centralisation imposed not 'from necessity', but 'from principle'? In other words, how did the 'authoritarian spirit', an inevitable legacy of the old world we seek to destroy, play its part? And when did necessity give rise in revolutionaries' minds to false (illusory) principle, in the way that Radek described with respect to the 'principles' of 'war communism'?

The second passage from Serge deals more directly with problems of dictatorship and democracy. It is from an article in the *New International* of July 1938, when he was debating Kronstadt with Trotsky: 'The question which dominates today the whole discussion is, in substance, this: When and how did Bolshevism begin to degenerate? When and how did it begin to employ towards the toiling masses, whose energy and highest consciousness it expressed, non-socialist methods which must be condemned because they ended by assuring the victory of the bureaucracy over the proletariat?

'[...] The first symptoms of the evil date far back. In 1920, the Menshevik social-democrats were falsely accused, in a communique of the Cheka, of intelligence with the enemy, of sabotage, etc. This communique, monstrously false, served to outlaw them. In the same year, the anarchists were arrested throughout Russia, after a formal promise to legalise the movement and after the treaty of peace signed with Makhno had been deliberately torn up by the CC which no longer needed the Black Army. The revolutionary correctness of the totality of a policy can not justify, in my eyes, these baneful practices. [...]

'Has not the moment come to declare that the day of the glorious year 1918, when the central committee of the party decided to permit the Extraordinary Commissions [i.e. the Cheka] to apply the death penalty on the basis of secret procedure, without hearing the accused who could

not defend themselves, is a black day? That day the CC was in a position to restore or not restore an inquisitional procedure forgotten by European civilisation. It committed a mistake. [...] The revolution could have defended itself better without that.

'[...] Out of the vast experience of Bolshevism, the revolutionary Marxists will save what is essential, durable, only by taking up all the problems again from the bottom, with a genuine freedom of mind, without party vanity, without irreducible hostility (above all in the field of historical investigation) towards the other tendencies of the labour movement. On the contrary, by not recognising old errors, whose gravity history has not ceased to bring out in relief, the risk is run of compromising the whole acquisition of Bolshevism.'

Replying to the article, Trotsky concentrated on an earlier section, not quoted here, in which Serge criticised the manner in which the Kronstadt rising was suppressed - and ignored these general questions. The polemic ended with a bad-tempered outburst by Trotsky against Serge. Much of it centred on a malicious introduction to the French edition of Trotsky's pamphlet *Their Morals and Ours*, which Trotsky assumed, wrongly, was Serge's work. Research has shown that the dispute between the two men may well have been deliberately stirred up by GPU agents in the Trotskyist movement at the time. (26)

That these two revolutionaries - exhausted, persecuted by the Stalinist murder machine, and grieving for Trotsky's son and other slaughtered comrades - did not pursue this discussion, was a tragedy. Not to do so now would be a farce.

Notes

1. Trotsky, 'Stalinism and Bolshevism', 1937.
2. Trotsky, *Writings 1936-37*, pp.513-4.
3. David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the Seizure of Power*, p.379. Rosenberg, in Kaiser (ed.) *The Workers Revolution in Russia: The View from Below*, p.110. Mandel, p.380.
4. Mandel, p.384. Rosenberg, in Kaiser, p.113.
5. Lenin, *Collected Works*, v.26, pp.404-415.
6. Goodey, *Critique* 3, p.36.
7. Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*, p.23.
8. Mandel, p.398.
9. Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, p.286.
10. Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, pp.25-52.
11. Daniels, pp.92-95.
12. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p.115. Pilniak quoted in Reck, Boris Pilnyak, p.78.
13. Nove, *Economic History of the USSR*, chap.4. Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p.497. Von Hagen p.117. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, p.108-9.

Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, p.82-92.

14. Lenin in Richardson (ed.), *In Defence of the Russian Revolution*, pp.134-158. Trotsky, *My Life*, pp.461-2.

15. Radek in Richardson, p.65. Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, pp.151-152, p.170.

16. Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, v.2, p.230.

17. Nove, chap.4, quotes from debates at the economics academy in 1922-24. See also Richardson, pp. 185-216. *The Economist*, April 19 1997, states that minutes of a party conference in May 1921 on NEP have recently been published in Russia for the first time.

18. Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*. Radkey, *The Unknown Civil War in Soviet Russia*. Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War*.

19. Deutscher, p.10-11.

20. Lenin, v.32, pp.326-7. Serge, *Memoirs*, p.131.

21. Lenin, v.33, pp.263-309.

22. Daniels, pp.162-5. Avrich, 'Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin', *Russian Review*, vol. 43, 1984, pp.1-29.

23. Daniels p.157.

24. Daniels, p.98-104. J. Borys, *Sovietization of the Ukraine*. Trotsky, *Writings 1935-36*, p.186.

25. 'The anarchists and the experience of the Russian revolution', in Serge, *Revolution in Danger*, pp. 81-120.

26. Cotterill (ed.), *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*, pp.171-2; pp. 151-161.

