

Book Review:

John Eric Marot. *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect. Interventions In Russian and Soviet History.* Leiden/Boston, 2012.

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This is a very important book, one of the very few books published since 1991 on the “Russian question” that will compel people (this reviewer included) long wedded to different characterizations of the post-1917 or post-1929 Soviet regime to think through their commitments.

Those people most set for a rethink are those (*not* including this reviewer) committed to variants of “orthodox Trotskyism”. John Marot upends a lot of views long held to be commonplace. Among the most important are Marx’s and Lenin’s respective assertions (Marx ca. 1880, Lenin in his 1899 *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, that Tsarist Russia was irreversibly capitalist. Marot, to the contrary, argues that Russia up to 1917 was feudal, and thereafter, up to Stalin’s 1929 assault on the peasantry, it was a petty-producer economy with a household agriculture (where 85% of the population was employed) working not for a market but for private domestic consumption.

Assessments to the contrary, holding that the Russian countryside was capitalist already in Marx’s lifetime, were put forth in the latter’s correspondence with the Populists, after he initially, based on a long study of Russian agriculture, had concluded that the Russian peasant commune (or mir, or obschina) was alive and well, even mentioning it in the 1882 preface to a new edition of the *Communist Manifesto* as the possible point of departure for a direct transition to communism. Shortly thereafter, Marx reversed himself, and said it was too late: capitalism had triumphed in the Russian countryside, and Russia was condemned, like all capitalist countries before it, to the bloody road of capitalist accumulation. As he had written in the famous letter to Vera Zasulich "If Russia follows the path that it took after 1861¹, it will miss the greatest chance to leap over all the fatal alternatives of the capitalist regime that history has ever offered to a people. Like all other countries, it will have to submit to the inexorable laws of that system".

For Marot, however, the state-dominated agricultural exports of starting in the 1880’s did not make the Russian countryside capitalist either, as they were based on taxation-in-kind of the peasantry and designed to pay for imports of military hardware and industrial goods. He denies the capitalist character of the industrial sector under the Tsarist regime, seeing it rather as a kind of command economy aimed above all at military procurement.

¹ The year of the tepid, but much-trumpeted Tsarist land reform.

Lenin's *The Origins of Capitalism in Russia* is also wrong-headed, according to Marot, similarly missing the domestic/household character of peasant production, and conjuring up a stratification of peasants from kulaks to poor peasants which, in Marot's view, was a myth that missed the deeper unity among all strata of peasants in their commitment to the peasant way of life. For Marot, what changed in the countryside after 1917 was the liquidation of the manorial estates of the landlords, when the peasants finally got all the land, and embarked (after the Civil War and the famines, and until Stalin's collectivizations) on a sort of golden age of the Russian peasantry.

Marot also thinks that all 1920's factions of the Bolshevik Party, the Trotskyist left, the Bukharinist right, and the Stalinist "center", failed to understand this household, non-market driven nature of peasant production in the Russian countryside, and that hence all 1920's industrialization policies based on that misunderstanding were doomed to fail, and would inevitably lead to an agrarian crisis, as in fact it did in the late 20s, dooming all projects to industrialize the country on the basis of NEP. Somewhat like Amadeo Bordiga, but in a very different way, Marot sees the Stalinist counter-revolution coming not from the party-class relationship in urban industry in the period up to 1921 but from the post-1929 forced collectivization of agriculture, as well as Stalin's destruction of the trade unions and factory councils.

The politically-charged conclusion of Marot, with contemporary implications for the considerable number of remaining Trotskyists, is that Trotsky facilitated the triumph of Stalin by his wrong-headed view that the "main danger" of "capitalist restoration" was the Bukharinist right, thereby situating the most dangerous counter-revolutionary of all, Stalin, in a mythical "center". It is hard to see how anyone, after Marot's demonstration (in Ch. 2 of his book) of where Trotsky's analysis led strategically and tactically during the 20's, (i.e. in Marot's critique of Cliff's portrait of Trotsky in this period), can remain an "orthodox Trotskyist". (This also echoes Bordiga, by the way, who had the same assessment of the factions of the 20's.) This belief that Stalinism was a "center" between Trotsky and Bukharin is carried into politics even today, wherever Trotskyist groups survive. Most powerfully, Marot shows how the great majority of the Trotskyist "left opposition" signed on to Stalin's program in the late 20's. (A number of people of productivist inclinations still profess that kind of Preobrazhensky-Deutscherite "critical support" for Stalinism.) Finally, he shows how Trotsky himself, though he never capitulated politically, only started really talking about "workers' democracy" in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) and how his orientation was always top-heavy, oriented to factional struggle within the party, and not to the ongoing "anti-Stalinist" activity of the working class under the NEP.

Marot, for the record, holds the "bureaucratic collectivist" analysis of the Stalinist phenomenon, a stance which moreover seems to flow from his argument that Russia was not capitalist either before or after 1917.

My problem with Marot's book (and I will not be discussing the latter chapters on Bogdanov and Lenin's 1909 polemic with him) is in his silence about the events leading

up to 1921 in which the soviets and workers' councils—the heart of any meaningful workers' democracy coming out of the November revolution—were destroyed. Anton Ciliga's remarkable book *The Russian Enigma*²—echoes Marot's view of Trotsky's excessive focus on the intra-party faction fights, to the neglect of the ferment in the working class itself during the 1920's. Ciliga shows how, in the Siberian concentration camp where he was held from 1930 to 1932, the Trotskyist prisoners had exactly that same attitude; they had their bags packed, expecting to be recalled to Moscow any day when the factional tide shifted, and they treated all the other political prisoners— anarchists, SRs, Mensheviks— with the same arrogance they had shown them when in power. They, too, were solely oriented to what was happening “at the top” and utterly detached from any resistance from below. Ciliga points out how the workers in Petrograd were angered when Trotsky's autobiography *My Life* appeared in 1930 and they found the same intra-party preoccupations there, to the neglect of the broader working class.

Marot writes about the general Bolshevik agreement among all three factions during NEP on the need to preserve the worker-peasant alliance and to promote a “democratic”, non-coercive solution to the peasant question. This factional situation was thrown into disarray in 1927-28 by two successive bad harvests, which gave Stalin his opportunity. He destroyed the Bukharinist “right” with the help of the Trotskyist capitulationists, who missed their last chance, which would have been an alliance with Bukharin against Stalin. These people, amounting to most of the key figures in the left opposition except for Trotsky himself, argued that Stalin was implementing much of the left program, so why not support him against the dangers of “capitalist restoration” represented by Bukharin?

With their false sense of where the “restorationist danger” lay, they paid a very high price when Stalin turned on them as well.

But one must ask: what exactly was “democratic” about a country where, after 1921, there was no legal opposition, and which did not even permit factions in the ruling party itself? Marot doesn't openly quarrel with recent works by writers such as Simon Pirani that the soviets and workers' councils were dead by 1921; he merely does not take up the question. If there was any democracy—a debate about policy with real power to back it up-- to speak of in the Soviet Union in the 1920's, it was exercised by a numerically tiny group of people holding fragile state power above a sea of 150 million workers and above all peasants with no direct influence in their debates.

I have no quarrel (in Marot's critique, in Ch. 3, of the apolitical or anti-political new social historians) with either the idea that the October Revolution was not a coup d'état or (in Ch. 4) with the idea that party organization, and not some amorphous social movement, was central in influencing the social debate between February and October 1917, or finally with Marot's critique of the (at best) ahistorical Social Democratic and Menshevik argument that the Bolsheviks should not have seized power, predicated as their strategy was on the indispensable revolution in the western heartland of capitalism.

² Ciliga's book appeared in French in 1939 under the title *Dans le pays du grand mensonge*; the English translation appeared in 1979.

As Rosa Luxemburg tirelessly pointed out in the last months of her life, the German Social Democrats did everything in their power to prevent the international extension of the revolution and guaranteed that the Russian Revolution would be strangled in isolation.

I am not so sanguine, however, about Marot's denial of "Russian particularism" relative to the world ferment from 1917-1921. Russia was, after all, the "weak link" if there ever was one, as theorized in the Marx-Trotsky concept of permanent revolution (Germany in 1848, Russia in 1917). There is first of all the question, posed ever since then, of why the revolutionary left currents in the West (with the exception of the Dutch council communists), did not establish political organizations independent of Social Democracy well before 1914; one thinks first of all of Rosa Luxemburg. (Typical Trotskyist carping on this point quietly ignores the fact that Lenin supported Kautsky right up to August 1914, whereas Luxemburg had seen through him by 1911.) There is the question of Luxemburg's, and Trotsky's (*Our Tasks, Report of the Siberian Delegation*) critiques of Lenin before 1905. Lenin's role was undoubtedly brilliant at Zimmerwald and in the April Theses. But what about after the seizure of power? What about the testimonies of figures such as Victor Serge or Max Eastman? What of Lenin's refusal to allow working-class factions after the Civil War, as demanded by the impeccably Bolshevik Workers' Group or the Democratic Centralists? What of the anti-working class repression starting in 1918 detailed by historians such as Nicholas Werth, not to mention the experiences in 1920-21 detailed by Berkman and Goldman? What of Eastman's description of the military and police presence surrounding the site of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922, something like the police crowd control in Giuliani's New York, where no ordinary worker or peasant could come near the premises? What of the treatment of Makhno after his forces helped the Red Army defeat the Whites? What of the arrogance of the Bolshevik delegation to Kronstadt in March 1921, that tipped the Kronstadt soviet, which was prepared to negotiate, into open revolt against the regime? What of the frantic carrot-and-stick tactics of the party to quell the February-March strikes in Petrograd just before the Kronstadt uprising, of which Kronstadt can be seen as an extension? What of the party's inability to use Red Army units in Petrograd, deemed unreliable, against Kronstadt, and machine guns established in the rear of the charge across the ice to shoot deserters? What of Lenin's speech to the 10th Party Congress (March 1921) in which he said "the Russian proletariat has ceased to exist" and Shliapnikov shouted from the floor "So you exercise a dictatorship in the name of a class which no longer exists!"

I therefore question Marot's attempt to downplay the events of 1917-1921 and to focus on those after 1927-1928 in pinpointing the counter-revolution. There is no question that there is a "qualitative leap" after the latter date. But wasn't the Bolshevik regime that emerged from the Civil War, and which presided over the NEP at the very least a police state? We might recall Lenin's and Dzerzhinsky's special inquiry into the excesses of the Cheka: they were horrified. Or the Cheka officer, interviewed by Victor Serge after he had ordered the shooting of anarchists who had already been amnestied: "Lenin and Trotsky can indulge in all the sentimentalism they want- my job is to eradicate counter-revolution!"

There remains the question of Soviet foreign policy. The 1917 strategy of the Bolsheviks was unquestionably: foment world revolution to save soviet power. Yet there is hardly a foreign policy decision after 1917 after that remains uncontroversial, in terms of when the Soviet regime itself started acting like a nation-state with national interests to defend, at the expense of the world revolution. Historical analysis has not yet given adequate attention to Trotsky's secret memo of 1920 to Lenin, Zinoviev et al: "All information on the situation in Khiva, in Persia, in Bukhara and in Afghanistan confirm the fact that a Soviet revolution in these countries is going to cause us major difficulties at the present time...Until the situation in the West is stabilized and until our industries and transport systems have improved, a Soviet expansion in the east could prove to be no less dangerous than a war in the West...a potential Soviet revolution in the east is today to our advantage principally as an important element in diplomatic relations with England. From this I conclude that: 1) in the east we should devote ourselves to political and educational work...and at the same time advise all possible caution in actions calculated to require our military support, or which might require it; 2) we have to continue by all possible channels at our disposal to arrive at an understanding with England about the east."³

Is it wrong to see in the March 1921 conjuncture, of Kronstadt- the defeat of the March Action in Germany- the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement- and the NEP as the end of the revolutionary phase, on a world scale?

To conclude: I must say in all fairness that to dwell excessively on the domestic and international dimensions of Soviet power from 1917 to 1921 is to divert attention from the real focus of Marot's book and to criticize him for not treating subjects he did not intend to write about. His singular contribution is, as stated at the outset, to have reposed the whole question of Russian and then Soviet agriculture in a new way, and to have demonstrated in detail how the Trotskyist left opposition fell on its face in its preference for Stalin over Bukharin, a preference that still colors the political judgement of "orthodox Trotskyism" where it persists to this day.

This review is from the Break Their Haughty Power web site

<http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner>

³ From Jan M. Meijer (org.), The Trotsky Papers, 1917-1922, 2 vols., London, The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1964, 1971, vol. II, pag. 209. See also my article "Socialism in One Country" Before Stalin, and the Origins of Reactionary "Anti-Imperialism": The Case of Turkey, 1917-1925" (2009) at <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/turkey.html>

