

# What happened during the Russian Revolution?

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# What happened during the Russian Revolution?

This appendix of the FAQ is not a full history of the Russian Revolution. The scope of such a work would simply be too large. Instead, this section will concentrate on certain key issues which matter in evaluating whether the Bolshevik revolution and regime were genuinely socialist or not. This is not all. Some Leninists acknowledge that that Bolshevik policies had little to do with socialism as such were the best that were available at the time. As such, this section will look at possible alternatives to Bolshevik policies and see whether they were, in fact, inevitable.

So for those seeking a comprehensive history of the revolution will have to look elsewhere. Here, we concentrate on those issues which matter when evaluating the socialist content of the revolution and of Bolshevism. In other words, the development of working class self-activity and self-organisation, workers' resistance to their bosses (whether capitalist or "red"), the activity of opposition groups and parties and the fate of working class organisations like trade unions, factory committees and soviets. Moreover, the role of the ruling party and its ideals also need to be indicated and evaluated somewhat (see ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#) for a fuller discussion of the role of Bolshevik ideology in the defeat of the revolution).

This means that this section is about two things, what Alexander Berkman termed "*the Bolshevik Myth*" and what Voline called "*the Unknown Revolution*" (these being the titles of their respective books on the revolution). After his experiences in Bolshevik Russia, Berkman came to the conclusion that it was "*[h]igh time the truth about the Bolsheviki were told. The whitened sepulchre must unmasked, the clay feet of the fetish beguiling the international proletariat to fatal will o' wisps exposed. The Bolshevik myth must be destroyed.*" By so doing, he aimed to help the global revolutionary movement learn from the experience of the Russian revolution. Given that "*[t]o millions of the disinherited and enslaved it became a new religion, the beacon of social salvation*" it was an "*imperative to unmask the great delusion, which otherwise might lead the Western workers to the same abyss as their brothers in Russia.*" Bolshevism had "*failed, utterly and absolutely*" and so it was "*incumbent upon those who have seen though the myth to expose its true nature . . . Bolshevism is of the past. The future belongs to man and his liberty.*" [**The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 318 and p. 342]

Subsequent events proved Berkman correct. Socialism became linked to Soviet Russia and as it fell into Stalinism, the effect was to discredit socialism, even radical change as such, in the eyes of millions. And quite rightly too, given the horrors of Stalinism. If more radicals had had the foresight of Berkman and the other anarchists, this association of socialism and revolution with tyranny would have been combated and an alternative, libertarian, form of socialism would have risen to take the challenge of combating capitalism in the name of a **genuine** socialism, rooted in the ideals of liberty, equality and solidarity.

However, in spite of the horrors of Stalinism many people seeking a radical change in society are drawn to Leninism. This is partly to do with the fact that in many countries Leninist parties have a organised presence and many radicalised people come across them first. It is also partly to do with the fact that many forms of Leninism denounce Stalinism for what it was and raise the possibility of the "genuine" Leninism of the Bolshevik party under Lenin and Trotsky. This current of Leninism is usually called "Trotskyism" and has many offshoots. For some of these parties, the differences between Trotskyism and Stalinism is pretty narrow. The closer to orthodox Trotskyism you get, the more Stalinist it appears. As Victor Serge noted of Trotsky's "Fourth International" in the 1930s, *"in the hearts of the persecuted I encountered the same attitudes as in their persecutors [the Stalinists] . . . Trotskyism was displaying symptoms of an outlook in harmony with the very Stalinism against which it had taken its stand . . . any person in the circles of the 'Fourth International' who went so far as to object to [Trotsky's] propositions was promptly expelled and denounced in the same language that the bureaucracy had employed against us in the Soviet Union."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 349] As we discuss in [section 3](#) of the appendix on ["Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?"](#), perhaps this is unsurprising given how much politically Trotsky's "Left Opposition" had shared with Stalinism.

Other Trotskyist parties have avoided the worse excesses of orthodox Trotskyism. Parties associated with the **International Socialists**, for example portray themselves as defending what they like to term *"socialism from below"* and the democratic promise of Bolshevik as expressed during 1917 and in the early months of Bolshevik rule. While anarchists are somewhat sceptical that Leninism can be called *"socialism from below"* (see [section H.3.3](#)), we need to address the claim that the period between February 1917 to the start of the Russian civil war at the end of May 1918 shows the real nature of Bolshevism. In order to do that we need to discuss what the Russian anarchist Voline called *"The Unknown Revolution."*

So what is the *"Unknown Revolution"*? Voline, an active participant in 1917 Russian Revolution, used that expression as the title of his classic account of the Russian revolution. He used it to refer to the rarely acknowledged independent, creative actions of the revolutionary people themselves. As Voline argued, *"it is not known how to study a revolution"* and most historians *"mistrust and ignore those developments which occur silently in the depths of the revolution . . . at best, they accord them a few words in passing . . . [Yet] it is precisely these hidden facts which are important, and which throw a true light on the events under consideration and on the period."* This section of the FAQ will try and present this *"unknown revolution,"* those movements *"which fought the Bolshevik power in the name of true liberty and of the principles of the Social Revolution which that power had scoffed at and trampled underfoot."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 19 and p. 437] Voline gives the Kronstadt rebellion (see the appendix on ["What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"](#)) and the Makhnovist movement (see the appendix on ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#)) pride of place in his account. Here we discuss other movements and the Bolshevik response to them.

Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution, to a surprising extent, fall into the official form of history -- a concern more with political leaders than with the actions of the masses. Indeed, the popular aspects of the revolution are often distorted to accord with a predetermined social

framework of Leninism. Thus the role of the masses is stressed during the period before the Bolshevik seizure of power. Here the typical Leninist would agree, to a large extent, with summarised history of 1917 we present in [section 1](#). They would undoubtedly disagree with the downplaying of the role of the Bolshevik party (although as we discuss in [section 2](#), that party was far from the ideal model of the vanguard party of Leninist theory and modern Leninist practice). However, the role of the masses in the revolution would be praised, as would the Bolsheviks for supporting it.

The real difference arises once the Bolsheviks seize power in November 1917 (October, according to the Old Style calendar then used). After that, the masses simply disappear and into the void steps the leadership of the Bolshevik party. For Leninism, the "*unknown revolution*" simply stops. The sad fact is that very little is known about the dynamics of the revolution at the grassroots, particularly after October. Incredible as it may sound, very few Leninists are that interested in the realities of "workers' power" under the Bolsheviks or the actual performance and fate of such working class institutions as soviets, factory committees and co-operatives. What is written is often little more than vague generalities that aim to justify authoritarian Bolshevik policies which either explicitly aimed to undermine such bodies or, at best, resulted in their marginalisation when implemented.

This section of the FAQ aims to make known the "*unknown revolution*" that continued under the Bolsheviks and, equally important, the Bolshevik response to it. As part of this process we need to address some of the key events of that period, such as the role of foreign intervention and the impact of the civil war. However, we do not go into these issues in depth here and instead cover them in depth in the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#). This is because most Leninists excuse Bolshevik authoritarianism on the impact of the civil war, regardless of the facts of the matter. As we discuss in the appendix on ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#), the ideology of Bolshevism played its role as well -- something that modern day Leninists strenuously deny (again, regardless of the obvious). As we indicate in this section, the idea that Bolshevism came into conflict with the "*unknown revolution*" is simply not viable. Bolshevik ideology and practice made it inevitable that this conflict erupted, as it did **before** the start of the civil war (also see [section 3](#) of the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#)).

Ultimately, the reason why Leninist ideas still have influence on the socialist movement is due to the apparent success of the Russian Revolution. Many Leninist groups, mainly Trotskyists and derivatives of Trotskyism, point to "Red October" and the creation of the first ever workers state as concrete examples of the validity of their ideas. They point to Lenin's **State and Revolution** as proving the "democratic" (even "libertarian") nature of Leninism while, at the same time, supporting the party dictatorship he created and, moreover, rationalising the utter lack of working class freedom and power under it. We will try to indicate the falseness of such claims. As will become clear from this section, the following summation of an anonymous revolutionary is totally correct:

*"Every notion about revolution inherited from Bolshevism is false."*

In this, they were simply repeating the conclusions of anarchists. As Kropotkin stressed in 1920:

*"It seems to me that this attempt to build a communist republic on the basis of a strongly centralised state, under the iron law of the dictatorship of one party, has ended in a terrible fiasco. Russia teaches us how not to impose communism."* [Peter Kropotkin, quoted by Guerin, **Anarchism**, p. 106]

Ultimately, the experience of Bolshevism was a disaster. And as the Makhnovists in the Ukraine proved, Bolshevik ideology and practice was **not** the only option available (see the appendix on ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#)). There **were** alternatives, but Bolshevik ideology simply excluded using them (we will discuss some possibilities in this various sub-sections below). In other words, Bolshevik ideology is simply not suitable for a real revolutionary movement and the problems it will face. In fact, its ideology and practice ensures that any such problems will be magnified and made worse, as the Russian revolution proves.

Sadly many socialists cannot bring themselves to acknowledge this. While recognising the evils of the Stalinist bureaucracy, these socialists deny that this degeneration of Bolshevism was inevitable and was caused by outside factors (namely the Russian Civil War or isolation). While not denying that these factors did have an effect in the outcome of the Russian Revolution, the seeds for bureaucracy existed from the first moment of the Bolshevik insurrection. These seeds where from three sources: Bolshevik politics, the nature of the state and the post-October economic arrangements favoured and implemented by the ruling party.

As we will indicate, these three factors caused the new "workers' state" to degenerate long before the out break of the Civil war in May of 1918. This means that the revolution was **not** defeated primarily because of isolation or the effects of the civil war. The Bolsheviks had already seriously undermined it from within **long before** the effects of isolation or civil war had a chance to take hold. The civil war which started in the summer of 1918 did take its toll in what revolutionary gains survived, not least because it allowed the Bolsheviks to portray themselves and their policies as the lessor of two evils. However, Lenin's regime was already defending (state) capitalism against genuine socialist tendencies before the outbreak of civil war. The suppression of Kronstadt in March 1921 was simply the logical end result of a process that had started in the spring of 1918, at the latest. As such, isolation and civil war are hardly good excuses -- particularly as anarchists had predicted they would affect every revolution decades previously and Leninists are meant to realise that civil war and revolution are inevitable. Also, it must be stressed that Bolshevik rule was opposed by the working class, who took collective action to resist it and the Bolsheviks justified their policies in ideological terms and **not** in terms of measures required by difficult circumstances (see the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#)).

One last thing. We are sure, in chronicling the "excesses" of the Bolshevik regime, that some Leninists will say "they sound exactly like the right-wing." Presumably, if we said that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West we would also "sound like the right-wing." That the right-wing also points to certain **facts** of the revolution does not in any way discredit these facts. How

these facts are used is what counts. The right uses the facts to discredit socialism and the revolution. Anarchists use them to argue for libertarian socialism and support the revolution while opposing the Bolshevik ideology and practice which distorted it. Similarly, unlike the right we take into account the factors which Leninists urge us to use to excuse Bolshevik authoritarianism (such as civil war, economic collapse and so on). We are simply not convinced by Leninist arguments.

Needless to say, few Leninists apply their logic to Stalinism. To attack Stalinism by describing the facts of the regime would make one sound like the "right-wing." Does that mean socialists should defend one of the most horrific dictatorships that ever existed? If so, how does that sound to non-socialists? Surely they would conclude that socialism **is** about Stalinism, dictatorship, terror and so on? If not, why not? If "sounding like the right" makes criticism of Lenin's regime anti-revolutionary, then why does this not apply to Stalinism? Simply because Lenin and Trotsky were not at the head of the dictatorship as they were in the early 1920s? Does the individuals who are in charge override the social relations of a society? Does dictatorship and one-man management become less so when Lenin rules? The apologists for Lenin and Trotsky point to the necessity created by the civil war and isolation within international capitalism for their authoritarian policies (while ignoring the fact they started **before** the civil war, continued after it **and were justified at the time** in terms of Bolshevik ideology). Stalin could make the same claim.

Other objections may be raised. It may be claimed that we quote "bourgeois" (or even worse, **Menshevik**) sources and so our account is flawed. In reply, we have to state that you cannot judge a regime based purely on what it says about itself. As such, critical accounts are required to paint a full picture of events. Moreover, it is a sad fact that few, if any, Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution actually discuss the class and social dynamics (and struggles) of the period under Lenin and Trotsky. This means we have to utilise the sources which **do**, namely those historians who do not identify with the Bolshevik regime. And, of course, any analysis (or defence) of the Bolshevik regime will have to account for critical accounts, either by refuting them or by showing their limitations. As will become obvious in our discussion, the reason why latter day Bolsheviks talk about the class dynamics post-October in the most superficial way is that it would be hard, even impossible, to maintain that Lenin's regime was remotely socialist or based on working class power. Simply put, from early 1918 (at the latest) conflict between the Bolsheviks and the Russian working masses was a constant feature of the regime. It is only when that conflict reached massive proportions that Leninists do not (i.e. cannot) ignore it. In such cases, as the Kronstadt rebellion proves, history is distorted in order to defend the Bolshevik state (see the appendix on ["What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"](#) for details).

The fact that Leninists try to discredit anarchists by saying that we sound like the right is sad. In effect, it **blocks** any real discussion of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism (as intended, probably). This ensures that Leninism remains above critique and so no lessons can be learnt from the Russian experience. After all, if the Bolsheviks had no choice then what lessons **are** there to learn? None. And if we are to learn no lessons (bar, obviously, mimic the Bolsheviks) we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes -- mistakes that are partly explained by the objective

circumstances at the time and partly by Bolshevik politics. But given that most of the circumstances the Bolsheviks faced, such as civil war and isolation, are likely to reappear in any future revolution, modern-day Leninists are simply ensuring that Karl Marx was right -- history repeats itself, first time as tragedy, second time as farce.

Such a position is, of course, wonderful for the pro-Leninist. It allows them to quote Lenin and Trotsky and use the Bolsheviks as the paradigm of revolution while washing their hands of the results of that revolution. By arguing that the Bolsheviks were "*making a virtue of necessity*," (to use the expression of Leninist Donny Gluckstein [**The Tragedy of Bukharin**, p. 41]), they are automatically absolved of proving their arguments about the "democratic" essence of Bolshevism in power. Which is useful as, logically, no such evidence could exist and, in fact, there is a whole host of evidence pointing the other way which can, by happy co-incidence, be ignored. Indeed, from this perspective there is no point even discussing the revolution at all, beyond praising the activities and ideology of the Bolsheviks while sadly noting that "fate" (to quote Leninist Tony Cliff) ensured that they could not fulfil their promises. Which, of course, almost Leninist accounts **do** boil down to. Thus, for the modern Leninist, the Bolsheviks cannot be judged on what they did nor what they said while doing it (or even after). They can only be praised for what they said and did **before** they seized power.

However, anarchists have a problem with this position. It smacks more of religion than theory. Karl Marx was right to argue that you cannot judge people by what they say, only by what they do. It is in this revolutionary spirit that this section of the FAQ analyses the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik role within it. We need to analyse what they did when they held power as well as the election manifesto. As we will indicate in this section, neither was particularly appealing.

Finally, we should note that Leninists today have various arguments to justify what the Bolsheviks did once in power. We discuss these in the appendix on "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)". We also discuss in the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)" the ideological roots of the counter-revolutionary role of the Bolsheviks during the revolution. That the politics of the Bolsheviks played its role in the failure of the revolution can be seen from the example of the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement which applied basic libertarian principles in the same difficult circumstances of the Russian Civil War (see "[Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?](#)" on this important movement).

## **1 Can you give a short summary of what happened in 1917?**

## **2 How did the Bolsheviks gain mass support?**

### 3 Surely the Russian Revolution proves that vanguard parties work?

No, far from it. Looking at the history of vanguardism we are struck by its failures, not its successes. Indeed, the proponents of "*democratic centralism*" can point to only one apparent success of their model, namely the Russian Revolution. However, we are warned by Leninists that failure to use the vanguard party will inevitably condemn future revolutions to failure:

*"The proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. . . Without the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power . . . The Soviets are the only organised form of the tie between the vanguard and the class. A revolutionary content can be given this form only by the party. This is proved by the positive experience of the October Revolution and by the negative experience of other countries (Germany, Austria, finally, Spain). No one has either shown in practice or tried to explain articulately on paper how the proletariat can seize power without the political leadership of a party that knows what it wants."*

[Trotsky, **Stalinism and Bolshevism**]

To anarchist ears, such claims seem out of place. After all, did the Russian Revolution actually result in socialism or even a viable form of soviet democracy? Far from it. Unless you picture revolution as simply the changing of the party in power, you have to acknowledge that while the Bolshevik party **did** take power in Russian in November 1917, the net effect of this was **not** the stated goals that justified that action. Thus, if we take the term "*effective*" to mean "an efficient means to achieve the desired goals" then vanguardism has not been proven to be effective, quite the reverse (assuming that your desired goal is a socialist society, rather than party power). Needless to say, Trotsky blames the failure of the Russian Revolution on "*objective*" factors rather than Bolshevik policies and practice, an argument we address in detail in ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#) and will not do so here.

So while Leninists make great claims for the effectiveness of their chosen kind of party, the hard facts of history are against their positive evaluation of vanguard parties. Ironically, even the Russian Revolution disproves the claims of Leninists. The fact is that the Bolshevik party in 1917 was very far from the "*democratic centralist*" organisation which supporters of "*vanguardism*" like to claim it is. As such, its success in 1917 lies more in its divergence from the principles of "*democratic centralism*" than in their application. The subsequent degeneration of the revolution and the party is marked by the increasing **application** of those principles in the life of the party.

Thus, to refute the claims of the "*effectiveness*" and "*efficiency*" of vanguardism, we need to look at its one and only success, namely the Russian Revolution. As the Cohen-Bendit brothers argue, "*far from leading the Russian Revolution forwards, the Bolsheviks were responsible for holding*



back the struggle of the masses between February and October 1917, and later for turning the revolution into a bureaucratic counter-revolution -- in both cases because of the party's very nature, structure and ideology." Indeed, "[f]rom April to October, Lenin had to fight a constant battle to keep the Party leadership in tune with the masses." [**Obsolete Communism**, p. 183 and p. 187] It was only by continually violating its own "nature, structure and ideology" that the Bolshevik party played an important role in the revolution. Whenever the principles of "democratic centralism" were applied, the Bolshevik party played the role the Cohen-Bendit brothers subscribed to it (and once in power, the party's negative features came to the fore).

Even Leninists acknowledge that, to quote Tony Cliff, throughout the history of Bolshevism, "a certain conservatism arose." Indeed, "[a]t practically all sharp turning points, Lenin had to rely on the lower strata of the party machine against the higher, or on the rank and file against the machine as a whole." [**Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 135] This fact, incidentally, refutes the basic assumptions of Lenin's party schema, namely that the broad party membership, like the working class, was subject to bourgeois influences so necessitating central leadership and control from above.

Looking at both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, we are struck by how often this "conservatism" arose and how often the higher bodies were behind the spontaneous actions of the masses and the party membership. Looking at the 1905 revolution, we discover a classic example of the inefficiency of "democratic centralism." Facing in 1905 the rise of the soviets, councils of workers' delegates elected to co-ordinate strikes and other forms of struggle, the Bolsheviks did not know what to do. "*The Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks*," noted Trotsky, "was frightened at first by such an innovation as a non-partisan representation of the embattled masses, and could find nothing better to do than to present the Soviet with an ultimatum: immediately adopt a Social-Democratic program or disband. The Petersburg Soviet as a whole, including the contingent of Bolshevik workingmen as well ignored this ultimatum without batting an eyelash." [**Stalin**, vol. 1, p. 106] More than that, "[t]he party's Central Committee published the resolution on October 27, thereby making it the binding directive for all other Bolshevik organisations." [Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77] It was only the return of Lenin which stopped the Bolshevik's open attacks against the Soviet (also see [section 8](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)").

The rationale for these attacks is significant. The St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were convinced that "only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent." [quoted by Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 77] In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers' interests because they were elected by the workers! The implications of this perspective came clear in 1918, when the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and disbanded soviets to remain in power (see [section 6](#)). That the Bolshevik's position flowed naturally from Lenin's arguments in **What is to be Done?** is clear. Thus the underlying logic of Lenin's vanguardism ensured that the Bolsheviks played a negative role with regards the soviets which, combined with "democratic centralism" ensured that it was spread far and wide. Only by ignoring their own party's principles and staying in the Soviet did rank and file Bolsheviks play a positive role in the revolution. This

divergence of top and bottom would be repeated in 1917.

Given this, perhaps it is unsurprising that Leninists started to rewrite the history of the 1905 revolution. Victor Serge, a "Left Oppositionist" and anti-Stalinist asserted in the late 1920s that in 1905 the Petrograd Soviet was "*led by Trotsky and inspired by the Bolsheviks.*" [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 36]. While the former claim is correct, the latter is not. As noted, the Bolsheviks were initially opposed the soviets and systematically worked to undermine them. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky at that time was a Menshevik, not a Bolshevik. After all, how could the most revolutionary party that ever existed have messed up so badly? How could democratic centralism faired so badly in practice? Best, then, to suggest that it did not and give the Bolsheviks a role better suited to the rhetoric of Bolshevism than its reality.

Trotsky was no different. He, needless to say, denied the obvious implications of these events in 1905. While admitting that the Bolsheviks "*adjusted themselves more slowly to the sweep of the movement*" and that the Mensheviks "*were preponderant in the Soviet,*" he tries to save vanguardism by asserting that "*the general direction of the Soviet's policy proceeded in the main along Bolshevik lines.*" So, in spite of the lack of Bolshevik influence, in spite of the slowness in adjusting to the revolution, Bolshevism was, in fact, the leading set of ideas in the revolution! Ironically, a few pages later, he mocks the claims of Stalinists that Stalin had "*isolated the Mensheviks from the masses*" by noting that the "*figures hardly bear [the claims] out.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 112 and p. 117] Shame he did not apply this criteria to his own claims.

Of course, every party makes mistakes. The question is, how did the "*most revolutionary party of all time*" fare in 1917. Surely that revolution proves the validity of vanguardism and "democratic centralism"? After all, there was a successful revolution, the Bolshevik party did seize power. However, the apparent success of 1917 was not due to the application of "democratic centralism," quite the reverse. While the myth of 1917 is that a highly efficient, democratic centralist vanguard party ensured the overthrow of the Provisional Government in November 1917 in favour of the Soviets (or so it seemed at the time) the facts are somewhat different. Rather, the Bolshevik party throughout 1917 was a fairly loose collection of local organisations (each more than willing to ignore central commands and express their autonomy), with much internal dissent and infighting and no discipline beyond what was created by common loyalty. The "democratic centralist" party, as desired by Lenin, was only created in the course of the Civil War and the tightening of the party dictatorship. In other words, the party became more like a "democratic centralist" one as the revolution degenerated. As such, the various followers of Lenin (Stalinists, Trotskyists and their multitude of offshoots) subscribe to a myth, which probably explains their lack of success in reproducing a similar organisation since. So assuming that the Bolsheviks did play an important role in the Russian revolution, it was because it was **not** the centralised, disciplined Bolshevik party of Leninist myth. Indeed, when the party **did** operate in a vanguardist manner, failure was soon to follow.

This claim can be proven by looking at the history of the 1917 revolution. The February revolution started with a spontaneous protests and strikes. As Murray Bookchin notes, "*the Petrograd organisation of the Bolsheviks opposed the calling of strikes precisely on the eve of*

*the revolution which was destined to overthrow the Tsar. Fortunately, the workers ignored the Bolshevik 'directives' and went on strike anyway. In the events which followed, no one was more surprised by the revolution than the 'revolutionary' parties, including the Bolsheviks.*" [Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 194] Trotsky quotes one of the Bolshevik leaders at the time:

*"Absolutely no guiding initiative from the party centres was felt . . . the Petrograd Committee had been arrested and the representative of the Central Committee . . . was unable to give any directives for the coming day."* [quoted by Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 147]

Not the best of starts. Of course rank and file Bolsheviks took part in the demonstrations, street fights and strikes and so violated the principles their party was meant to be based on. As the revolution progressed, so did the dual nature of the Bolshevik party (i.e. its practical divergence from "democratic centralism" in order to be effective and attempts to force it back into that schema which handicapped the revolution). However, during 1917, "democratic centralism" was ignored in order to ensure the the Bolsheviks played any role at all in the revolution. As one historian of the party makes clear, in 1917 and until the outbreak of the Civil War, the party operated in ways that few modern "vanguard" parties would tolerate:

*"The committees were a law unto themselves when it came to accepting orders from above. Democratic centralism, as vague a principle of internal administration as there ever has been, was commonly held at least to enjoin lower executive bodies that they should obey the behests of all higher bodies in the organisational hierarchy. But town committees in practice had the devil's own job in imposing firm leadership . . . Insubordination was the rule of the day whenever lower party bodies thought questions of importance were at stake.*

*"Suburb committees too faced difficulties in imposing discipline. Many a party cell saw fit to thumb its nose at higher authority and to pursue policies which it felt to be more suited to local circumstances or more desirable in general. No great secret was made of this. In fact, it was openly admitted that hardly a party committee existed which did not encounter problems in enforcing its will even upon individual activists."* [Robert Service, **The Bolshevik Party in Revolution 1917-1923**, pp. 51-2]

So while Lenin's ideal model of a disciplined, centralised and top-down party had been expounded since 1902, the operation of the party never matched his desire. As Service notes, "*a disciplined hierarchy of command stretching down from the regional committees to party cells*" had "*never existed in Bolshevik history.*" In the heady days of the revolution, when the party was flooded by new members, the party ignored what was meant to be its guiding principles. As Service constantly stresses, Bolshevik party life in 1917 was the exact opposite of that usually considered (by both opponents and supporters of Bolshevism) as its normal mode of operation. "*Anarchist attitudes to higher authority,*" he argues, "*were the rule of the day*" and "*no Bolshevik leader in his right mind could have contemplated a regular insistence upon rigid standards of hierarchical control and discipline unless he had abandoned all hope of establishing a mass socialist party.*" This meant that "*in the Russia of 1917 it was the easiest thing in the world for*

lower party bodies to rebut the demands and pleas by higher authority." He stresses that "[s]uburb and town committees . . . often refused to go along with official policies . . . they also . . . sometimes took it into their heads to engage in active obstruction." [Op. Cit., p. 80, p. 62 p. 56 and p. 60]

This worked both ways, of course. Town committees did "snub their nose at lower-echelon viewpoints in the time before the next election. Try as hard as they might, suburb committees and ordinary cells could meanwhile do little to rectify matters beyond telling their own representative on their town committee to speak on their behalf. Or, if this too failed, they could resort to disruptive tactics by criticising it in public and refusing it all collaboration." [Op. Cit., pp. 52-3] Even by early 1918, the Bolshevik party bore little resemblance to the "democratic centralist" model desired by Lenin:

*"The image of a disciplined hierarchy of party committees was therefore but a thin, artificial veneer which was used by Bolshevik leaders to cover up the cracked surface of the real picture underneath. Cells and suburb committees saw no reason to kow-tow to town committees; nor did town committees feel under compulsion to show any greater respect to their provincial and regional committees than before."* [Op. Cit., p. 74]

It is this insubordination, this local autonomy and action in spite of central orders which explains the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917. Rather than a highly centralised and disciplined body of "professional" revolutionaries, the party in 1917 saw a "significant change . . . within the membership of the party at local level . . . From the time of the February revolution requirements for party membership had been all but suspended, and now Bolshevik ranks swelled with impetuous recruits who knew next to nothing about Marxism and who were united by little more than overwhelming impatience for revolutionary action." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Prelude to Revolution**, p. 41]

This mass of new members (many of whom were peasants who had just recently joined the industrial workforce) had a radicalising effect on the party's policies and structures. As even Leninist commentators argue, it was this influx of members who allowed Lenin to gain support for his radical revision of party aims in April. However, in spite of this radicalisation of the party base, the party machine still was at odds with the desires of the party. As Trotsky acknowledged, the situation "called for resolute confrontation of the sluggish Party machine with masses and ideas in motion." He stressed that "the masses were incomparably more revolutionary than the Party, which in turn was more revolutionary than its committeemen." Ironically, given the role Trotsky usually gave the party, he admits that "[w]ithout Lenin, no one had known what to make of the unprecedented situation." [Stalin, vol. 1, p. 301, p. 305 and p. 297]

Which is significant in itself. The Bolshevik party is usually claimed as being the most "revolutionary" that ever existed, yet here is Trotsky admitting that its leading members did not have a clue what to do. He even argued that "[e]very time the Bolshevik leaders had to act without Lenin they fell into error, usually inclining to the Right." [Op. Cit., p. 299] This negative opinion of the Bolsheviks applied even to the "left Bolsheviks, especially the workers" whom we are informed "tried with all their force to break through this quarantine" created by the

Bolshevik leaders policy "of waiting, of accommodation, and of actual retreat before the *Compromisers*" after the February revolution and before the arrival of Lenin. Trotsky argues that "they did not know how to refute the premise about the bourgeois character of the revolution and the danger of an isolation of the proletariat. They submitted, gritting their teeth, to the directions of their leaders." [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 273] It seems strange, to say the least, that without one person the whole of the party was reduced to such a level given that the aim of the "revolutionary" party was to develop the political awareness of its members.

Lenin's arrival, according to Trotsky, allowed the influence of the more radical rank and file to defeat the conservatism of the party machine. By the end of April, Lenin had managed to win over the majority of the party leadership to his position. However, as Trotsky argues, this "April conflict between Lenin and the general staff of the party was not the only one of its kind. Throughout the whole history of Bolshevism . . . all the leaders of the party at all the most important moments stood to the **right** of Lenin." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 305] As such, if "democratic centralism" had worked as intended, the whole party would have been arguing for incorrect positions the bulk of its existence (assuming, of course, that Lenin was correct most of the time).

For Trotsky, "Lenin exerted influence not so much as an individual but because he embodied the influence of the class on the Party and of the Party on its machine." [**Stalin**, vol. 1, p. 299] Yet, this was the machine which Lenin had forged, which embodied his vision of how a "revolutionary" party should operate and was headed by him. In other words, to argue that the party machine was behind the party membership and the membership behind the class shows the bankruptcy of Lenin's organisational scheme. This "backwardness," moreover, indicates an independence of the party bureaucracy from the membership and the membership from the masses. As Lenin's constantly repeated aim was for the party to seize power (based on the dubious assumption that class power would only be expressed, indeed was identical to, party power) this independence held serious dangers, dangers which became apparent once this goal was achieved.

Trotsky asks the question "by what miracle did Lenin manage in a few short weeks to turn the Party's course into a new channel?" Significantly, he answers as follows: "Lenin's personal attributes and the objective situation." [**Ibid.**] No mention is made of the democratic features of the party organisation, which suggests that without Lenin the rank and file party members would not have been able to shift the weight of the party machine in their favour. Trotsky seems close to admitting this:

*"As often happens, a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines. Even the Bolshevik Party cadres, who enjoyed the benefit of exceptional revolutionary training, were definitely inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown."* [**Stalin**, vol. 1, p. 298]

Thus the party machine, which embodied the principles of "democratic centralism" proved less than able to the task assigned it in practice. Without Lenin, it is doubtful that the party membership would have over come the party machine:

*"Lenin was strong not only because he understood the laws of the class struggle but also because his ear was faultlessly attuned to the stirrings of the masses in motion. He represented not so much the Party machine as the vanguard of the proletariat. He was definitely convinced that thousands from among those workers who had borne the brunt of supporting the underground Party would now support him. The masses at the moment were more revolutionary than the Party, and the Party more revolutionary than its machine. As early as March the actual attitude of the workers and soldiers had in many cases become stormily apparent, and it was widely at variance with the instructions issued by all the parties, including the Bolsheviks."* [Op. Cit., p. 299]

Little wonder the local party groupings ignored the party machine, practising autonomy and initiative in the face of a party machine inclined to conservatism, inertia, bureaucracy and remoteness. This conflict between the party machine and the principles it was based on and the needs of the revolution and party membership was expressed continually throughout 1917:

*"In short, the success of the revolution called for action against the 'highest circles of the party,' who, from February to October, utterly failed to play the revolutionary role they ought to have taken in theory. The masses themselves made the revolution, with or even against the party -- this much at least was clear to Trotsky the historian. But far from drawing the correct conclusion, Trotsky the theorist continued to argue that the masses are incapable of making a revolution without a leader."* [Daniel & Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, Op. Cit., p. 188]

Looking at the development of the revolution from April onwards, we are struck by the sluggishness of the party hierarchy. At every revolutionary upsurge, the party simply was not to the task of responding to the needs of masses and the local party groupings closest to them. The can be seen in June, July and October itself. At each turn, the rank and file groupings or Lenin had to constantly violate the principles of their own party in order to be effective. The remoteness and conservatism of the party even under Lenin can be constantly seen.

For example, when discussing the cancellation by the central committee of a demonstration planned for June 10th by the Petrograd Bolsheviks, the unresponsiveness of the party hierarchy can be seen. The *"speeches by Lenin and Zinoviev [justifying their actions] by no means satisfied the Petersburg Committee. If anything, it appears that their explanations served to strengthen the feeling that at best the party leadership had acted irresponsibly and incompetently and was seriously out of touch with reality."* Indeed, many *"blamed the Central Committee for taking so long to respond to Military Organisation appeals for a demonstration."* [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 88 and p. 92]

During the discussions in late June, 1917, on whether to take direct action against the Provisional Government there was a *"wide gulf"* between lower organs evaluations of the current situation and that of the Central Committee. [Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 129] Indeed, among the delegates from the Bolshevik military groups, only Lashevich (an old Bolshevik) spoke in favour of the Central Committee position and he noted that *"[f]requently it is impossible to make out where the Bolshevik ends and the Anarchist begins."* [quoted by Rabinowitch, Op. Cit., p. 129]

In the July days, the breach between the local party groups and the central committee increased. As we noted in the [section 1](#), this spontaneous uprising was opposed to by the Bolshevik leadership, in spite of the leading role of their own militants (along with anarchists) in fermenting it. While calling on their own militants to restrain the masses, the party leadership was ignored by the rank and file membership who played an active role in the event. Sickened by being asked to play the role of "fireman," the party militants rejected party discipline in order to maintain their credibility with the working class. Rank and file activists, pointing to the snowballing of the movement, showed clear dissatisfaction with the Central Committee. One argued that it "was not aware of the latest developments when it made its decision to oppose the movement into the streets." Ultimately, the Central Committee appeal "for restraining the masses . . . was removed from . . . *Pravda* . . . and so the party's indecision was reflected by a large blank space on page one." [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 150, p. 159 and P. 175] Ultimately, the indecisive nature of the leadership can be explained by the fact it did not think it could seize state power for itself. As Trotsky noted, "the state of popular consciousness . . . made impossible the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in July." [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 2, p. 81]

The indecision of the party hierarchy did have an effect, of course. While the anarchists at Kronstadt looked at the demonstration as the start of an uprising, the Bolsheviks there were "wavering indecisively in the middle" between them and the Left-Social Revolutionaries who saw it as a means of applying pressure on the government. This was because they were "hamstrung by the indecision of the party Central Committee." [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187] Little wonder so many Bolshevik party organisations developed and protected their own autonomy and ability to act!

Significantly, one of the main Bolshevik groupings which helped organise and support the July uprising, the Military Organisation, started their own paper after the Central Committee had decreed after the failed revolt that neither it, nor the Petersburg Committee, should be allowed to have one. It "angrily insisted on what it considered its just prerogatives" and in "no uncertain terms it affirmed its right to publish an independent newspaper and formally protested what is referred to as 'a system of persecution and repression of an extremely peculiar character which had begun with the election of the new Central Committee.'" [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 227] The Central Committee backed down, undoubtedly due to the fact it could not enforce its decision.

As the Cohn-Bendit brothers argue, "five months after the Revolution and three months before the October uprising, the masses were still governing themselves, and the Bolshevik vanguard simply had to toe the line." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 186] Within that vanguard, the central committee proved to be out of touch with the rank and file, who ignored it rather than break with their fellow workers.

Even by October, the party machine still lagged behind the needs of the revolution. In fact, Lenin could only impose his view by going over the head of the Central Committee. According to Trotsky's account, "this time he [wa]s not satisfied with furious criticism" of the "ruinous Fabianism of the Petrograd leadership" and "by way of protest he resign[ed] from the Central Committee." [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 131] Trotsky quotes Lenin as

follows:

*"I am compelled to request permission to withdraw from the Central Committee, which I hereby do, and leave myself freedom of agitation in the lower ranks of the party and at the party congress."* [quoted by Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 131]

Thus the October revolution was precipitated by a blatant violation of the principles Lenin spent his life advocating. Indeed, if someone else other than Lenin had done this we are sure that Lenin, and his numerous followers, would have dismissed it as the action of a *"petty-bourgeois intellectual"* who cannot handle party *"discipline."* This is itself significant, as is the fact that he decided to appeal to the *"lower ranks"* of the party. Simply put, rather than being *"democratic"* the party machine effectively blocked communication and control from the bottom-up. Looking at the more radical party membership, he *"could only impose his view by going over the head of his Central Committee."* [Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187] He made sure to send his letter of protest to *"the Petrograd and Moscow committees"* and also made sure that *"copies fell into the hands of the more reliable party workers of the district locals."* By early October (and *"over the heads of the Central Committee"*) he wrote *"directly to the Petrograd and Moscow committees"* calling for insurrection. He also *"appealed to a Petrograd party conference to speak a firm word in favour of insurrection."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 131 and p. 132]

In October, Lenin had to fight what he called *"a wavering"* in the *"upper circles of the party"* which lead to a *"sort of dread of the struggle for power, an inclination to replace this struggle with resolutions protests, and conferences."* [quoted by Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 132] For Trotsky, this represented *"almost a direct pitting of the party against the Central Committee,"* required because *"it was a question of the fate of the revolution"* and so *"all other considerations fell away."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 132-3] On October 8th, when Lenin addressed the Bolshevik delegates of the forthcoming Northern Congress of Soviets on this subject, he did so *"personally"* as there *"was no party decision"* and the *"higher institutions of the party had not yet expressed themselves."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 133] Ultimately, the Central Committee came round to Lenin's position but they did so under pressure of means at odds with the principles of the party.

This divergence between the imagine and reality of the Bolsheviks explains their success. If the party had applied or had remained true to the principles of *"democratic centralism"* it is doubtful that it would have played an important role in the movement. As Alexander Rabinowitch argues, Bolshevik organisational unity and discipline is *"vastly exaggerated"* and, in fact, Bolshevik success in 1917 was down to *"the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character -- in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model."* In 1917, he goes on, *"subordinate party bodies with the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organisation were permitted considerable independence and initiative . . . Most importantly, these lower bodies were able to tailor their tactics and appeals to suit their own particular constituencies amid rapidly changing conditions. Vast numbers of new members were recruited into the party . . . The*



*newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers . . . who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline.*" For example, while the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" was "officially withdrawn by the Sixth [Party] Congress in late July, this change did not take hold at the local level." [**The Bolsheviks Come to Power**, p. 311, p. 312 and p. 313]

It is no exaggeration to argue that if any member of a current vanguard party acted as the Bolshevik rank and file did in 1917, they would quickly be expelled (this probably explains why no such party has been remotely successful since). However, this ferment from below was quickly undermined within the party with the start of the Civil War. It is from this period when "democratic centralism" was actually applied within the party and clarified as an organisational principle:

*"It was quite a turnabout since the anarchic days before the Civil War. The Central Committee had always advocated the virtues of obedience and co-operation; but the rank-and-filers of 1917 had cared little about such entreaties as they did about appeals made by other higher authorities. The wartime emergency now supplied an opportunity to expatiate on this theme at will."* [Service, **Op. Cit.**, p. 91]

Service stresses that *"it appears quite remarkable how quickly the Bolsheviks, who for years had talked idly about a strict hierarchy of command inside the party, at last began to put ideas into practice."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 96]

In other words, the conversion of the Bolshevik party into a fully fledged "democratic centralist" party occurred during the degeneration of the Revolution. This was both a consequence of the rising authoritarianism within the party and society as well as one of its causes. As such, it is quite ironic that the model used by modern day followers of Lenin is that of the party during the decline of the revolution, not its peak. This is not surprising. Once in power, the Bolshevik party imposed a state capitalist regime onto the Russian people. Can it be surprising that the party structure which it developed to aid this process was also based on bourgeois attitudes and organisation? Simply put, the party model advocated by Lenin may not have been very effective during a revolution but it was exceedingly effective at prompting hierarchy and authority in the post-revolutionary regime. It simply replaced the old ruling elite with another, made up of members of the radical intelligentsia and odd ex-worker or ex-peasant.

This was due to the hierarchical and top-down nature of the party Lenin had created. While the party base was largely working class, the leadership was not. Full-time revolutionaries, they were either middle-class intellectuals or (occasionally) ex-workers and (even rarer) ex-peasants who had left their class to become part of the party machine. Even the delegates at the party congresses did not truly reflect class basis of the party membership. For example, the number of delegates was still dominated by white-collar or others (59.1% to 40.9%) at the sixth party congress at the end of July 1917. [Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 2, p. 160] So while the party gathered more working class members in 1917, it cannot be said that this was reflected in the party leadership which remained dominated by non-working class elements. Rather than being a genuine working class organisation, the Bolshevik party was a hierarchical group headed by non-working class

elements whose working class base could not effectively control them even during the revolution in 1917. It was only effective because these newly joined and radicalised working class members ignored their own party structure and its defining ideology.

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks saw their membership start to decrease. Significantly, *"the decline in numbers which occurred from early 1918 onwards"* started happening *"contrary to what is usually assumed, some months before the Central Committee's decree in midsummer that the party should be purged of its 'undesirable' elements."* These lost members reflected two things. Firstly, the general decline in the size of the industrial working class. This meant that the radicalised new elements from the countryside which had flocked to the Bolsheviks in 1917 returned home. Secondly, the lost of popular support the Bolsheviks were facing due to the realities of their regime. This can be seen from the fact that while the Bolsheviks were losing members, the Left SRS almost doubled in size to 100,000 (the Mensheviks claimed to have a similar number). Rather than non-proletarians leaving, *"[i]t is more probable by far that it was industrial workers who were leaving in droves. After all, it would have been strange if the growing unpopularity of Sovnarkom in factory milieu had been confined exclusively to non-Bolsheviks."* Unsurprisingly, given its position in power, *"[a]s the proportion of working-class members declined, so that of entrants from the middle-class rose; the steady drift towards a party in which industrial workers no longer numerically predominated was under way."* By late 1918 membership started to increase again but *"[m]ost newcomers were not of working-class origin . . . the proportion of Bolsheviks of working-class origin fell from 57 per cent at the year's beginning to 48 per cent at the end."* It should be noted that it was not specified how many were classed as having working-class origin were still employed in working-class jobs. [Robert Service, **Op. Cit.**, p. 70, pp. 70-1 and p. 90] A new ruling elite was thus born, thanks to the way vanguard parties are structured and the application of vanguardist principles which had previously been ignored.

In summary, the experience of the Russian Revolution does not, in fact, show the validity of the "vanguard" model. The Bolshevik party in 1917 played a leading role in the revolution only insofar as its members violated its own organisational principles (Lenin included). Faced with a real revolution and an influx of more radical new members, the party had to practice anarchist ideas of autonomy, local initiative and the ignoring of central orders which had no bearing to reality on the ground. When the party did try to apply the top-down and hierarchical principles of "democratic centralism" it failed to adjust to the needs of the moment. Moreover, when these principles were finally applied they helped ensure the degeneration of the revolution. As we discussed in [section H.5](#), this was to be expected.

## 4 Was Lenin's "State and Revolution" applied after October?

In a nutshell, no. In fact the opposite was the case. Post-October, the Bolsheviks not only failed to introduce the ideas of Lenin's **State and Revolution**, they in fact introduced the exact opposite. As one historian puts it:

*"To consider 'State and Revolution' as the basic statement of Lenin's political philosophy -- which non-Communists as well as Communists usually do -- is a serious error. Its argument for a utopian anarchism never actually became official policy. The Leninism of 1917 . . . came to grief in a few short years; it was the revived Leninism of 1902 which prevailed as the basis for the political development of the USSR."* [Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, pp. 51-2]

Daniels is being far too lenient with the Bolsheviks. It was not, in fact, "a few short years" before the promises of 1917 were forgotten. In some cases, it was a few short hours. In others, a few short months. However, in a sense Daniels is right. It did take until 1921 before all hope for saving the Russian Revolution finally ended. With the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion, the true nature of the regime became obvious to all with eyes to see. Moreover, the banning of factions within the party at the same time did mark a return to the pattern of "What is to be Done?" rather than the more fluid practice Bolshevism exhibited in, say, 1917 (see [section 3](#)). However, as we discuss in the appendix "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)", the various Bolshevik oppositions were, in their own way, just as authoritarian as the mainstream of the party.

In order to show that this is the case, we need to summarise the main ideas contained in Lenin's work. Moreover, we need to indicate what the Bolsheviks did, in fact, do. Finally, we need to see if the various rationales justifying these actions hold water.

So what did Lenin argue for in **State and Revolution**? Writing in the mid-1930s, anarchist Camillo Berneri summarised the main ideas of that work as follows:

*"The Leninist programme of 1917 included these points: the discontinuance of the police and standing army, abolition of the professional bureaucracy, elections for all public positions and offices, revocability of all officials, equality of bureaucratic wages with workers' wages, the maximum of democracy, peaceful competition among the parties within the soviets, abolition of the death penalty."* ["The Abolition and Extinction of the State," **Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review**, no. 4, p. 50]

As he noted, "[n]ot a single one of the points of this programme has been achieved." This was, of course, under Stalinism and most Leninists will concur with Berneri. However what Leninists tend not to mention is that in the 7 month period from November 1917 to May 1918 none of these points was achieved. So, as an example of what Bolshevism "really" stands for it seems strange to harp on about a work which was never implemented when the its author was in a position to do so (i.e. before the onslaught of a civil war Lenin thought was inevitable anyway!).

To see that Berneri's summary is correct, we need to quote Lenin directly. Obviously the work is a wide ranging defence of Lenin's interpretation of Marxist theory on the state. As it is an attempt to overturn decades of Marxist orthodoxy, much of the work is quotes from Marx and Engels and Lenin's attempts to enlist them for his case (we discuss this issue in [section H.3.10](#)). Equally, we need to discount the numerous straw men arguments about anarchism Lenin inflicts on his reader (see sections [H.1.3](#), [H.1.4](#) and [H.1.5](#) for the truth about his claims). Here we simply

list the key points as regards Lenin's arguments about his "workers' state" and how the workers would maintain control of it:

- 1) Using the Paris Commune as a prototype, Lenin argued for the abolition of "parliamentarianism" by turning "representative institutions from mere 'talking shops' into working bodies." This would be done by removing "the division of labour between the legislative and the executive." [Essential Works of Lenin, p. 304 and p. 306]
- 2) "All officials, without exception, to be elected and subject to recall **at any time**" and so "directly responsible to their constituents." "Democracy means equality." [Op. Cit., p. 302, p. 306 and p. 346]
- 3) The "immediate introduction of control and superintendence by **all**, so that **all** shall become 'bureaucrats' for a time and so that, therefore, **no one** can become a 'bureaucrat'." Proletarian democracy would "take immediate steps to cut bureaucracy down to the roots . . . to the complete abolition of bureaucracy" as the "essence of bureaucracy" is officials becoming transformed "into privileged persons divorced from the masses and **superior to the masses**." [Op. Cit., p. 355 and p. 360]
- 4) There should be no "special bodies of armed men" standing apart from the people "since the majority of the people itself suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' is no longer necessary." Using the example of the Paris Commune, Lenin suggested this meant "abolition of the standing army." Instead there would be the "armed masses." [Op. Cit., p. 275, p. 301 and p. 339]
- 5) The new (workers) state would be "the organisation of violence for the suppression of . . . the exploiting class, i.e. the bourgeoisie. The toilers need a state only to overcome the resistance of the exploiters" who are "an insignificant minority," that is "the landlords and the capitalists." This would see "an immense expansion of democracy . . . for the poor, democracy for the people" while, simultaneously, imposing "a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. . . their resistance must be broken by force: it is clear that where is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy." [Op. Cit., p. 287 and pp. 337-8]

This would be implemented after the current, bourgeois, state had been smashed. This would be the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and be "the introduction of complete democracy for the people." [Op. Cit., p. 355] However, the key practical ideas on what the new "semi-state" would be are contained in these five points. He generalised these points, considering them valid not only for Russia in 1917 but in all countries. In this his followers agree. Lenin's work is considered valid for today, in advanced countries as it was in revolutionary Russia.

Three things strike anarchist readers of Lenin's work. Firstly, as we noted in [section H.1.7](#), much of it is pure anarchism. Bakunin had raised the vision of a system of workers' councils as the framework of a free socialist society in the 1860s and 1870s. Moreover, he had also argued for the election of mandated and recallable delegates as well as for using a popular militia to defend the revolution (see [section H.2.1](#)). What is not anarchist is the call for centralisation, equating the

council system with a state and the toleration of a "new" officialdom. Secondly, the almost utter non-mention of the role of the party in the book is deeply significant. Given the emphasis that Lenin had always placed on the party, its absence is worrying. Particularly (as we indicate in [section 5](#)) he had been calling for the party to seize power all through 1917. When he does mention the party he does so in an ambiguous way which suggests that it, not the class, would be in power. As subsequent events show, this was indeed what happened in practice. And, finally, the anarchist reader is struck by the fact that every one of these key ideas were not implemented under Lenin. In fact, the opposite was done. This can be seen from looking at each point in turn.

The first point as the creation of "working bodies", the combining of legislative and executive bodies. The first body to be created by the Bolshevik revolution was the "Council of People's Commissars" (CPC) This was a government separate from and above the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the soviets congress. It was an executive body elected by the soviet congress, but the soviets themselves were not turned into "working bodies." Thus the promises of Lenin's **State and Revolution** did not last the night.

As indicated in [section 5](#), the Bolsheviks clearly knew that the Soviets had alienated their power to this body. However, it could be argued that Lenin's promises were kept as this body simply gave itself legislative powers four days later. Sadly, this is not the case. In the Paris Commune the delegates of the people took executive power into their own hands. Lenin reversed this. His executive took legislative power from the hands of the people's delegates. In the former case, power was decentralised into the hands of the population. In the latter case, it was centralised into the hands of a few. This concentration of power into executive committees occurred at all levels of the soviet hierarchy (see [section 6](#) for full details). Simply put, legislative and executive power was taken **from** the soviets assemblies and handed to Bolshevik dominated executive committees.

What of the next principle, namely the election and recall of all officials? This lasted slightly longer, namely around 5 months. By March of 1918, the Bolsheviks started a systematic campaign against the elective principle in the workplace, in the military and even in the soviets. In the workplace, Lenin was arguing for appointed one-man managers "*vested with dictatorial powers*" by April 1918 (see [section 10](#)). In the military, Trotsky simply decreed the end of elected officers in favour of appointed officers (see [section 14](#)). And as far as the soviets go, the Bolsheviks were refusing to hold elections because they "*feared that the opposition parties would show gains.*" When elections were held, "*Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results*" in provincial towns. Moreover, the Bolsheviks "*pack[ed] local soviets*" with representatives of organisations they controlled "*once they could not longer count on an electoral majority.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22, p. 24 and p. 33] This gerrymandering was even practised at the all-Russian soviet congress (see [section 6](#) for full details of this Bolshevik onslaught against the soviets). So much for competition among the parties within the soviets! And as far as the right of recall went, the Bolsheviks only supported this when the workers were recalling the opponents of the Bolsheviks, not when the workers were recalling them.

In summary, in under six months the Bolsheviks had replaced election of "*all officials*" by appointment from above in many areas of life. Democracy had simply being substituted by appointed from above (see [section 4](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)" for the deeply undemocratic reasoning used to justify this top-down and autocratic system of so-called democracy). The idea that different parties could compete for votes in the soviets (or elsewhere) was similarly curtailed and finally abolished.

Then there was the elimination of bureaucracy. As we show in [section 7](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)", a new bureaucratic and centralised system quickly emerged. Rather than immediately cutting the size and power of the bureaucracy, it steadily grew. It soon became the real power in the state (and, ultimately, in the 1920s became the social base for the rise of Stalin). Moreover, with the concentration of power in the hands of the Bolshevik government, the "*essence*" of bureaucracy remained as the party leaders became "*privileged persons divorced from the masses and superior to the masses.*" They were, for example, more than happy to justify their suppression of military democracy in terms of them knowing better than the general population what was best for them (see [section 4](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)" for details).

Then there is the fourth point, namely the elimination of the standing army, the suppression of "*special bodies of armed men*" by the "*armed masses.*" This promise did not last two months. On the 20th of December, 1917, the Council of People's Commissars decreed the formation of a political (secret) police force, the "*Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-Revolution.*" This was more commonly known by the Russian initials of the first two terms of its official name: The Cheka. Significantly, its founding decree stated it was to "*watch the press, saboteurs, strikers, and the Socialist-Revolutionaries of the Right.*" [contained in Robert V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, p. 133]

While it was initially a small organisation, as 1918 progressed it grew in size and activity. By April 1918, it was being used to break the anarchist movement across Russia (see [section 23](#) for details). The Cheka soon became a key instrument of Bolshevik rule, with the full support of the likes of Lenin and Trotsky. The Cheka was most definitely a "*special body of armed men*" and not the same as the "*armed workers.*" In other words, Lenin's claims in **State and Revolution** did not last two months and in under six months the Bolshevik state had a mighty group of "*armed men*" to impose its will.

This is not all. The Bolsheviks also conducted a sweeping transformation of the military within the first six months of taking power. During 1917, the soldiers and sailors (encouraged by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries) had formed their own committees and elected officers. In March 1918, Trotsky simply abolished all this by decree and replaced it with appointed officers (usually ex-Tsarist ones). In this way, the Red Army was turned from a workers' militia (i.e. an armed people) into a "*special body*" separate from the general population (see [section 15](#) for further discussion on this subject).

So instead of eliminating a "*special force*" above the people, the Bolsheviks did the opposite by

creating a political police force (the Cheka) and a standing army (in which elections were a set aside by decree). These were special, professional, armed forces standing apart from the people and unaccountable to them. Indeed, they were used to repress strikes and working class unrest, a topic we now turn to.

Then there is the idea of that Lenin's "workers' state" would simple be an instrument of violence directed at the exploiters. This was not how it turned out in practice. As the Bolsheviks lost popular support, they turned the violence of the "worker's state" against the workers (and, of course, the peasants). As noted above, when the Bolsheviks lost soviet elections they used force to disband them (see [section 6](#) for further details). Faced with strikes and working class protest during this period, the Bolsheviks responded with state violence (see [section 5](#) of the appendix on "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)" for details). We will discuss the implications of this for Lenin's theory below. So, as regards the claim that the new ("workers") state would repress only the exploiters, the truth was that it was used to repress whoever opposed Bolshevik power, including workers and peasants.

As can be seen, after the first six months of Bolshevik rule not a single measure advocated by Lenin in **State and Revolution** existed in "revolutionary" Russia. Some of the promises were broken in quiet quickly (overnight, in one case). Most took longer. For example, the democratisation of the armed forces had been decreed in late December 1917. However, this was simply acknowledging the existing revolutionary gains of the military personnel. Similarly, the Bolsheviks passed a decree on workers' control which, again, simply acknowledged the actual gains by the grassroots (and, in fact, limited them for further development -- see [section 9](#)). This cannot be taken as evidence of the democratic nature of Bolshevism as most governments faced with a revolutionary movement will acknowledge and "legalise" the facts on the ground (until such time as they can neutralise or destroy them). For example, the Provisional Government created after the February Revolution also legalised the revolutionary gains of the workers (for example, legalising the soviets, factory committees, unions, strikes and so forth). The real question is whether Bolshevism continued to encourage these revolutionary gains once it had consolidated its power. Which they did not. Indeed, it can be argued that the Bolsheviks simply managed to do what the Provisional Government it replaced had failed to do, namely destroy the various organs of popular self-management created by the revolutionary masses. So the significant fact is not that the Bolsheviks recognised the gains of the masses but that their toleration of the application of what their followers say were their real principles did not last long and was quickly ended. Moreover, when the leading Bolsheviks looked back at this abolition they did not consider it in any way in contradiction to the principles of "communism" (see [section 14](#)).

We have stressed this period for a reason. This was the period **before** the out-break of major Civil War and thus the policies applied show the actual nature of Bolshevism, it's essence if you like. This is a significant date as most Leninists blame the failure of Lenin to live up to his promises on this even. In reality, the civil war was **not** the reason for these betrayals -- simply because it had not started yet (see [section 16](#) on when the civil war started and its impact). Each of the promises were broken in turn months before the civil war happened. *"All Power to the*

*Soviets*" became, very quickly, "All Power to the Bolsheviks." In the words of historian Marc Ferro:

*"In a way, **The State and Revolution** even laid the foundations and sketched out the essential features of an alternative to Bolshevik power, and only the pro-Leninist tradition has used it, almost to quieten its conscience, because Lenin, once in power, ignored its conclusions. The Bolsheviks, far from causing the state to wither away, found endless reasons for justifying its enforcement."* [October 1917, pp. 213-4]

Where does that leave Lenin's **State and Revolution**? Well, modern-day Leninists still urge us to read it, considering it his greatest work and the best introduction to what Leninism really stands for. For example, we find Leninist Tony Cliff calling that book "*Lenin's real testament*" while, at the same time, acknowledging that its "*message . . . which was the guide for the first victorious proletarian revolution, was violated again and again during the civil war.*" Not a very good "*guide*" or that convincing a "*message*" if it was not applicable in the very circumstances it was designed to be applied in (a bit like saying you have an excellent umbrella but it only works when it is not raining). Moreover, Cliff is factually incorrect. The Bolsheviks "*violated*" that "*guide*" before the civil war started (i.e. when "*the victories of the Czechoslovak troops over the Red Army in June 1918, that threatened the greatest danger to the Soviet republic,*" to quote Cliff). Similarly, much of the economic policies implemented by the Bolsheviks had their roots in that book and the other writings by Lenin from 1917 (see [section 5](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)"). [Lenin, vol. 3, p. 161 and p. 18]

Given this, what use is Lenin's **State and Revolution**? If this really was the "*guide*" it is claimed to be, the fact that it proved totally impractical suggests it should simply be ignored. Simply put, if the side effects of a revolution (such as civil war) require it to be ripped up then modern Leninists should come clean and admit that revolution and workers' democracy simply do not go together. This was, after all, the conclusion of Lenin and Trotsky (see [section H.3.8](#)). As such, they should not recommend Lenin's work as an example of what Bolshevism aims for. If, however, the basic idea of workers' democracy and freedom are valid and considered the only way of achieving socialism then we need to wonder **why** the Bolsheviks did not apply them when they had the chance, particularly when the Makhnovists in the Ukraine did. Such an investigation would only end up by concluding the validity of anarchism, **not** Leninism.

This can be seen from the trajectory of Bolshevik ideology post-October. Simply put, it was not bothered by the breaking of the promises of **State and Revolution** and 1917 in general. As such, Cliff is just wrong to assert that while the message of **State and Revolution** was "*violated again and again*" it "*was also invoked again and again against bureaucratic degeneration.*" [Cliff, **Op. Cit.**, p. 161] Far from it. Lenin's **State and Revolution** was rarely invoked against degeneration by the mainstream Bolshevik leadership. Indeed, they happily supported party dictatorship and one-man management. Ironically for Cliff, it **was** famously invoked against the state capitalist policies being implemented in early 1918. This was done by the "Left Communists" around Bukharin in their defence of workers' self-management against Lenin's policy! Lenin told them



to reread it (along with his other 1917 works) to see that "state capitalism" was his aim all along! Not only that, he quoted from **State and Revolution**. He argued that "*accounting and control*" was required "*for the proper functioning of the first stage of communist society.*" "*And this control,*" he continued, "*must be established not only over 'the insignificant capitalist minority, over the gentry . . .', but also over the workers who 'have been thoroughly corrupted by capitalism . . .'*" He ended by saying it was "*significant that Bukharin did **not** emphasise **this**.*" [Collected Works, vol. 27, pp. 353-4] Needless to say, the Leninists who urge us to read Lenin's work do not emphasize that either.

As the Bolsheviks lost more and more support, the number of workers "*thoroughly corrupted by capitalism*" increased. How to identify them was easy: they did not support the party. As historian Richard summarises, a "*lack of identification with the Bolshevik party was treated as the absence of political consciousness altogether.*" [Soviet Communists in Power, p. 94] This is the logical conclusion of vanguardism, of course (see [section H.5.3](#)). However, to acknowledge that state violence was also required to "control" the working class totally undermines the argument of **State and Revolution**.

This is easy to see and to prove theoretically. For example, by 1920, Lenin was more than happy to admit that the "workers' state" used violence against the masses. At a conference of his political police, the Cheka, Lenin argued as follows:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Collected Works, vol. 42, p. 170]

This was simply summarising Bolshevik practice from the start. However, in **State and Revolution** Lenin had argued for imposing "*a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists.*" In 1917 he was "*clear that where is suppression there is also violence, there is no freedom, no democracy.*" [Op. Cit., pp. 337-8] So if violence is directed against the working class then, obviously, there can be "*no freedom, no democracy*" for that class. And who identifies who the "*wavering and unstable*" elements are? Only the party. Thus any expression of workers' democracy which conflicts with the party is a candidate for "*revolutionary coercion.*" So it probably just as well that the Bolsheviks had eliminated military democracy in March, 1918.

Trotsky expands on the obvious autocratic implications of this in 1921 when he attacked the Workers' Opposition's ideas on economic democracy:

*"The Party . . . is . . . duty bound to retain its dictatorship, regardless of the temporary vacillations of the amorphous masses, regardless of the temporary vacillations even of the working class. This awareness is essential for cohesion; without it the Party is in danger of perishing . . . At any given moment, the dictatorship does not rest on the formal principle of workers' democracy . . . if we look upon workers' democracy as something unconditional . . . then . . . every plant should elect its own administrative organs and so*

*on . . . From a formal point of view this is the clearest link with workers' democracy. But we are against it. Why? . . . Because, in the first place, we want to retain the dictatorship of the Party, and, in the second place, because we think that the [democratic] way of managing important and essential plants is bound to be incompetent and prove a failure from an economic point of view . . ."* [quoted by Jay B. Sorenson, **The Life and Death of Soviet Trade Unionism**, p. 165]

Thus the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik regime confirmed anarchist theory and predictions about state socialism. In the words of Luigi Fabbri:

*"It is fairly certain that between the capitalist regime and the socialist there will be an intervening period of struggle, during which proletariat revolutionary workers will have to work to uproot the remnants of bourgeois society . . . But if the object of this struggle and this organisation is to free the proletariat from exploitation and state rule, then the role of guide, tutor or director cannot be entrusted to a new state, which would have an interest in pointing the revolution in a completely opposite direction. . .*

*"The outcome would be that a new government - battenning on the revolution and acting throughout the more or less extended period of its 'provisional' powers - would lay down the bureaucratic, military and economic foundations of a new and lasting state organisation, around which a compact network of interests and privileges would, naturally, be woven. Thus in a short space of time what one would have would not be the state abolished, but a state stronger and more energetic than its predecessor and which would come to exercise those functions proper to it - the ones Marx recognised as being such - 'keeping the great majority of producers under the yoke of a numerically small exploiting minority.'*

*"This is the lesson that the history of all revolutions teaches us, from the most ancient down to the most recent; and it is confirmed . . . by the day-to-day developments of the Russian revolution . . .*

*"Certainly, [state violence] starts out being used against the old power . . . But as the new power goes on consolidating its position . . . ever more frequently and ever more severely, the mailed fist of dictatorship is turned against the proletariat itself in whose name that dictatorship was set up and is operated! . . . the actions of the present Russian government [of Lenin and Trotsky] have shown that in real terms (and it could not be otherwise) the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' means police, military, political and economic dictatorship exercised over the broad mass of the proletariat in city and country by the few leaders of the political party.*

*"The violence of the state always ends up being used AGAINST ITS SUBJECTS, of whom the vast majority are always proletarians . . . The new government will be able to expropriate the old ruling class in whole or in part, but only so as to establish a new ruling class that will hold the greater part of the proletariat in subjection.*

*"That will come to pass if those who make up the government and the bureaucratic, military and police minority that upholds it end up becoming the real owners of wealth when the property of everyone is made over exclusively to the state. In the first place, the failure of the revolution will be self evident. In the second, in spite of the illusions that many people create, the conditions of the proletariat will always be those of a subject class." ["Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism", in **The Poverty of Statism**, pp. 13-49, Albert Meltzer (ed.), pp. 26-31]*

The standard response by most modern Leninists to arguments like this about Bolshevism is simply to downplay the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks by stressing the effects of the civil war on shaping their ideology and actions. However, this fails to address the key issue of why the reality of Bolshevism (even before the civil war) was so different to the rhetoric. Anarchists, as we discuss in ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#), can point to certain aspects of Bolshevik ideology and the social structures its favoured which can explain it. The problems facing the revolution simply brought to the fore the limitations and dangers inherent in Leninism and, moreover, shaping them in distinctive ways. We draw the conclusion that a future revolution, as it will face similar problems, would be wise to avoid applying Leninist ideology and the authoritarian practices it allows and, indeed, promotes by its support of centralisation, confusion of party power with class power, vanguardism and equation of state capitalism with socialism. Leninists, in contrast, can only stress the fact that the revolution was occurring in difficult circumstances and hope that "fate" is more kind to them next time -- as if a revolution, as Lenin himself noted in 1917, would not occur during nor create "difficult" circumstances! Equally, they can draw no lessons (bar repeat what the Bolsheviks did in 1917 and hope for better objective circumstances!) from the Russian experience simply because they are blind to the limitations of their politics. They are thus doomed to repeat history rather than make it.

So where does this analysis of Lenin's **State and Revolution** and the realities of Bolshevik power get us? The conclusions of dissent Marxist Samuel Farber seem appropriate here. As he puts it, *"the very fact that a Sovnarkom had been created as a separate body from the CEC [Central Executive Committee] of the soviets clearly indicates that, Lenin's **State and Revolution** notwithstanding, the separation of at least the top bodies of the executive and the legislative wings of the government remained in effect in the new Soviet system."* This suggests *"that **State and Revolution** did not play a decisive role as a source of policy guidelines for 'Leninism in power.'" After all, "immediately after the Revolution the Bolsheviks established an executive power . . . as a clearly separate body from the leading body of the legislature. . . Therefore, some sections of the contemporary Left appear to have greatly overestimated the importance that **State and Revolution** had for Lenin's government. I would suggest that this document . . . can be better understood as a distant, although doubtless sincere [!], socio-political vision . . . as opposed to its having been a programmatic political statement, let alone a guide to action, for the period immediately after the successful seizure of power."* [Farber, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 20-1 and p. 38]

That is **one** way of looking at it. Another would be to draw the conclusion that a *"distant . . . socio-political vision"* drawn up to sound like a *"guide to action"* which was then immediately

ignored is, at worse, little more than a deception, or, at best, a theoretical justification for seizing power in the face of orthodox Marxist dogma. Whatever the rationale for Lenin writing his book, one thing is true -- it was never implemented. Strange, then, that Leninists today urge use to read it to see what "Lenin really wanted." Particularly given that so few of its promises were actually implemented (those that were just recognised the facts on the ground) and **all** of were no longer applied in less than six months after the seize of power.

The best that can be said is that Lenin did want this vision to be applied but the realities of revolutionary Russia, the objective problems facing the revolution, made its application impossible. This is the standard Leninist account of the revolution. They seem unconcerned that they have just admitted that Lenin's ideas were utterly impractical for the real problems that any revolution is most likely to face. This was the conclusion Lenin himself drew, as did the rest of the Bolshevik leadership. This can be seen from the actual practice of "Leninism in power" and the arguments it used. And yet, for some reason, Lenin's book is still recommended by modern Leninists!

## **5 Did the Bolsheviks really aim for Soviet power?**

It seems a truism for modern day Leninists that the Bolsheviks stood for "soviet power." For example, they like to note that the Bolsheviks used the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets*" in 1917 as evidence. However, for the Bolsheviks this slogan had a radically different meaning to what many people would consider it to mean.

As we discuss in [section 25](#), it was the anarchists (and those close to them, like the SR-Maximalists) who first raised the idea of soviets as the means by which the masses could run society. This was during the 1905 revolution. At that time, neither the Mensheviks nor the Bolsheviks viewed the soviets as the possible framework of a socialist society. This was still the case in 1917, until Lenin returned to Russia and convinced the Bolshevik Party that the time was right to raise the slogan "*All Power to the Soviets.*"

However, as well as this, Lenin also advocated a somewhat different vision of what a Bolshevik revolution would result in. Thus we find Lenin in 1917 continually repeating the basic idea: "*The Bolsheviks must assume power.*" The Bolsheviks "*can and **must** take state power into their own hands.*" He raised the question of "*will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?*" and answered it: "*I have already had occasion . . . to answer this question in the affirmative.*" Moreover, "*a political party . . . would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party . . . if it refused to take power when opportunity offers.*" [**Selected Works**, vol. 2, p 328, p. 329 and p. 352]

He equated party power with popular power: "*the power of the Bolsheviks -- that is, the power of the proletariat.*" Moreover, he argued that Russia "*was ruled by 130,000 landowners . . . and they tell us that Russia will not be able to be governed by the 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party -- governing in the interest of the poor and against the rich.*" He stresses that the Bolsheviks "*are not Utopians. We know that just any labourer or any cook would be incapable*

*of taking over immediately the administration of the State."* Therefore they *"demand that the teaching should be conducted by the class-consciousness workers and soldiers, that this should be started immediately."* Until then, the *"conscious workers must be in control."* [**Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?** p. 102, pp. 61-62, p. 66 and p. 68]

As such, given this clear and unambiguous position throughout 1917 by Lenin, it seems incredulous, to say the least, for Leninist Tony Cliff to assert that *"[t]o start with Lenin spoke of the **proletariat**, the **class** -- not the Bolshevik Party -- assuming state power."* [**Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 161] Surely the title of one of Lenin's most famous pre-October essays, usually translated as *"Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?"*, should have given the game away? As would, surely, quoting numerous calls by Lenin for the Bolsheviks to seize power? Apparently not.

This means, of course, Lenin is admitting that the working class in Russia would **not** have power under the Bolsheviks. Rather than "the poor" governing society directly, we would have **the Bolsheviks** governing in their interests. Thus, rather than soviet power as such, the Bolsheviks aimed for "party power through the soviets" -- a radically different position. And as we discuss in the [next section](#), when soviet power clashed with party power the former was always sacrificed to ensure the latter. As we indicate in [section H.1.2](#), this support for party power before the revolution was soon transformed into a defence for party dictatorship after the Bolsheviks had seized power. However, we should not forget, to quote one historian, that the Bolshevik leaders *"anticipated a 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' and that concept was a good deal closer to a party dictatorship in Lenin's 1917 usage than revisionist scholars sometimes suggest."* [Sheila Fitzpatrick, *"The Legacy of the Civil War,"* pp. 385-398, **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 388]

While modern-day Leninists tend to stress the assumption of power by the soviets as the goal of the Bolshevik revolution, the Bolsheviks themselves were more honest about it. For example, Trotsky quotes Lenin at the first soviet congress stating that it was *"not true to say that no party exists which is ready to assume power; such a party exists: this is our party."* Moreover, *"[o]ur party is ready to assume power."* As the Second Congress approached, Lenin *"rebuked those who connected the uprising with the Second Congress of the Soviets."* He protested against Trotsky's argument that they needed a Bolshevik majority at the Second Congress, arguing (according to Trotsky) that *"[w]e have to win power and not tie ourselves to the Congress. It was ridiculous and absurd to warn the enemy about the date of the rising . . . First the party must seize power, arms in hand, and then we could talk about the Congress."* [**On Lenin**, p. 71, p. 85]

Trotsky argued that *"the party could not seize power by itself, independently of the Soviets and behind its back. This would have been a mistake . . . [as the] soldiers knew their delegates in the Soviet; it was through the Soviet that they knew the party. If the uprising had taken place behind the back of the Soviet, independently of it, without its authority . . . there might have been a dangerous confusion among the troops."* Significantly, Trotsky made no mention of the proletariat. Finally, Lenin came over to Trotsky's position, saying *"Oh, all right, one can proceed in this fashion as well, provided we seize power."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 86 and p. 89]

Trotsky made similar arguments in his **History of the Russian Revolution** and his article **Lessons of October**. Discussing the July Days of 1917, for example, Trotsky discusses whether (to quote the title of the relevant chapter) *"Could the Bolsheviks have seized the Power in July?"* and noted, in passing, the army *"was far from ready to raise an insurrection in order to give the power to the Bolshevik Party."* As far as the workers were concerned, although *"inclining toward the Bolsheviks in its overwhelming majority, had still not broken the umbilical cord attaching it to the Compromisers"* and so the Bolsheviks could not have *"seized the helm in July."* He then lists other parts of the country where the soviets were ready to take power. He states that in *"a majority of provinces and county seats, the situation was incomparably less favourable"* simply because the Bolsheviks were not as well supported. Later he notes that *"[m]any of the provincial soviets had already, before the July days, become organs of power."* Thus Trotsky was only interested in whether the workers could have put the Bolsheviks in power or not rather than were the soviets able to take power themselves. Party power was the decisive criteria. [**History of the Russian Revolution**, vol. 2, p. 78, p. 77, p. 78, p. 81 and p. 281]

This can be seen from the October insurrection. Trotsky again admits that the *"Bolsheviks could have seized power in Petrograd at the beginning of July"* but *"they could not have held it."* However, by September the Bolsheviks had gained majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. The second Congress of Soviets was approaching. The time was considered appropriate to think of insurrection. By in whose name and for what end? Trotsky makes it clear. *"A revolutionary party is interested in legal coverings,"* he argued and so the party could use the defending the second Congress of Soviets as the means to justify its seizure of power. He raises the question: *"Would it not have been simpler . . . to summon the insurrection directly in the name of the party?"* and answers it in the negative. *"It would be an obvious mistake,"* he argued, *"to identify the strength of the Bolshevik party with the strength of the soviets led by it. The latter was much greater than the former. However, without the former it would have been mere impotence."* He then quotes numerous Bolshevik delegates arguing that the masses would follow the soviet, not the party. Hence the importance of seizing power in the name of the soviets, regardless of the fact it was the Bolshevik party who would in practice hold *"all power."* Trotsky quotes Lenin as asking *"Who is to seize power?"* *"That is now of no importance,"* argued Lenin. *"Let the Military Revolutionary Committee take it, or 'some other institution,' which will declare that it will surrender the power only to the genuine representatives of the interests of the people."* Trotsky notes that *"some other institution"* was a *"conspirative designation for the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks."* And who turned out to be the *"genuine representatives of the interests of the people"?* By amazing co-incidence the Bolsheviks, the members of whose Central Committee formed the first "soviet" government. [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 3, p. 265, p. 259, p. 262, p. 263 and p. 267]

As we discuss in [section H.3.11](#), Trotsky was simply repeating the same instrumentalist arguments he had made earlier. Clearly, the support for the soviets was purely instrumental, simply a means of securing party power. For Bolshevism, the party was the key institution of proletarian revolution:

*"The party set the soviets in motion, the soviets set in motion the workers, soldiers, and to*

*some extent the peasantry . . . If you represent this conducting apparatus as a system of cog-wheels -- a comparison which Lenin had recourse at another period on another theme -- you may say that the impatient attempt to connect the party wheel directly with the gigantic wheel of the masses -- omitting the medium-sized wheel of the soviets -- would have given rise to the danger of breaking the teeth of the party wheel." [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 264]*

Thus the soviets existed to allow the party to influence the workers. What of the workers running society directly? What if the workers reject the decisions of the party? After all, **before** the revolution Lenin *"more than once repeated that the masses are far to the left of the party, just as the party is to the left of the Central Committee."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 258] What happens when the workers refuse to be set in motion by the party but instead set themselves in motion and reject the Bolsheviks? What then for the soviets? Looking at the logic of Trotsky's instrumentalist perspective, in such a case we would predict that the soviets would have to be tamed (by whatever means possible) in favour of party power (the real goal). And this is what did happen. The fate of the soviets after October prove that the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, seek soviet power without doubt (see [next section](#)). And as we discuss in [section 4](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)", the peculiar Bolshevik definition of "soviet power" allowed them to justify the elimination of from the bottom-up grassroots democracy in the military and in the workplace with top-down appointments.

Thus we have a distinctly strange meaning by the expression *"All Power to the Soviets."* In practice, it meant that the soviets alienate its power to a Bolshevik government. This is what the Bolsheviks considered as "soviet power," namely party power, pure and simple. As the Central Committee argued in November 1917, *"it is impossible to refuse a purely Bolshevik government without treason to the slogan of the power of the Soviets, since a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . handed power over to this government."* [contained in Robert v. Daniels (ed.), **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, pp. 128-9] Lenin was clear, arguing mere days after the October Revolution that *"our present slogan is: No Compromise, i.e. for a homogeneous Bolshevik government."* [quoted by Daniels, **Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 65]

In other words, "soviet power" exists when the soviets hand power over to someone else (namely the Bolshevik leaders)! The difference is important, *"for the Anarchists declared, if 'power' really should belong to the soviets, it could not belong to the Bolshevik party, and if it should belong to that Party, as the Bolsheviks envisaged, it could not belong to the soviets."* [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 213]

Which means that while anarchists and Leninists both use the expression *"All Power to the Soviets"* it does not mean they mean exactly the same thing by it. In practice the Bolshevik vision simply replaced the power of the soviets with a "soviet power" above them:

*"The success of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution -- that is to say, the fact that they found themselves in power and from there subordinated the whole Revolution to*

*their Party is explained by their ability to substitute the idea of a Soviet power for the social revolution and the social emancipation of the masses. A priori, these two ideas appear as non-contradictory for it was possible to understand Soviet power as the power of the soviets, and this facilitated the substitution of the idea of Soviet power for that of the Revolution. Nevertheless, in their realisation and consequences these ideas were in violent contraction to each other. The conception of Soviet Power incarnated in the Bolshevik state, was transformed into an entirely traditional bourgeois power concentrated in a handful of individuals who subjected to their authority all that was fundamental and most powerful in the life of the people -- in this particular case, the social revolution. Therefore, with the help of the 'power of the soviets' -- in which the Bolsheviks monopolised most of the posts - they effectively attained a total power and could proclaim their dictatorship throughout the revolutionary territory . . . All was reduced to a single centre, from where all instructions emanated concerning the way of life, of thought, of action of the working masses." [Peter Arshinov, **The Two Octobers**]*

Isolated from the masses, holding power on their behalf, the Bolshevik party could not help being influenced by the realities of their position in society and the social relationships produced by statist forms. Far from being the servants of the people, they become upon the seizing of power their masters. As we argue in [section 7](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)", the experience of Bolshevism in power confirmed anarchist fears that the so-called "workers' state" would quickly become a danger to the revolution, corrupting those who held power and generating a bureaucracy around the new state bodies which came into conflict with both the ruling party and the masses. Placed above the people, isolated from them by centralisation of power, the Bolsheviks pre-revolutionary aim for party power unsurprising became in practice party dictatorship.

In less than a year, by July 1918, the soviet regime was a **de facto** party dictatorship. The theoretical revisions soon followed. Lenin, for example, was proclaiming in early December 1918 that while legalising the Mensheviks the Bolsheviks would "*reserve state power for ourselves, and for ourselves alone.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 28, p. 213] Victor Serge records how when he arrived in Russia in the following month he discovered "*a colourless article*" signed by Zinoviev on "*The Monopoly of Power*" which said "*Our Party rules alone . . . it will not allow anyone . . . The false democratic liberties demanded by the counter-revolution.*" [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 69] Serge, like most Bolsheviks, embraced this perspective wholeheartedly. For example, when the Bolsheviks published Bakunin's "confession" to the Tsar in 1921 (in an attempt to discredit anarchism) "*Serge seized on Bakunin's passage concerning the need for dictatorial rule in Russia, suggesting that 'already in 1848 Bakunin had presaged Bolshevism.'*" [Lawrence D. Orton, "*introduction,*" **The Confession of Mikhail Bakunin**, p. 21] At the time Bakunin wrote his "confession" he was not an anarchist. At the time Serge wrote his comments, he was a leading Bolshevik and reflecting mainstream Bolshevik ideology.

Indeed, so important was it considered by them, the Bolsheviks revised their theory of the state to include this particular lesson of their revolution (see [section H.3.8](#) for details). As noted in [section H.1.2](#), all the leading Bolsheviks were talking about the "*dictatorship of the party*" and



continued to do so until their deaths. Such a position, incidentally, is hard to square with support for soviet power in any meaningful term (although it is easy to square with an instrumentalist position on workers' councils as a means to party power). It was only in the mid-30s that Serge started to revise his position for this position (Trotsky still subscribed to it). By the early 1940s, he wrote that "*[a]gainst the Party the anarchists were right when they inscribed on their black banners, 'There is no worse poison than power' -- meaning absolute power. From now on the psychosis of power was to captive the great majority of the leadership, especially at the lower levels.*" [Serge, **Op. Cit.**, p. 100]

Nor can the effects of the civil war explain this shift. As we discuss in the [next section](#), the Bolshevik assault on the soviets and their power started in the spring of 1918, months before the start of large scale civil war. And it should be stressed that the Bolsheviks were not at all bothered by the creation of party dictatorship over the soviets. Indeed, in spite of ruling over a one party state Lenin was arguing in November 1918 that "*Soviet power is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic.*" How can that be when the workers do not run society nor have a say in who rules them? When Karl Kautsky raised this issue, Lenin replied by saying he "*fails to see the **class** nature of the state apparatus, of the machinery of state . . . The Soviet government is the **first** in the world . . . to **enlist** the people, specifically the **exploited** people in the work of administration.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 28, p. 247 and p. 248]

However, the key issue is not whether workers take part in the state machinery but whether they determine the policies that are being implemented, i.e. whether the masses are running their own lives. After all, as Ante Ciliga pointed out, the Stalinist GPU (secret police) "*liked to boast of the working class origin of its henchmen.*" One of his fellow prisoners retorted to such claims by pointing out they were "*wrong to believe that in the days the Tsar the gaolers were recruited from among the dukes and the executioners from among the princes!*" [**The Russian Engima**, pp. 255-6] Simply put, just because the state administration is made up of bureaucrats who were originally working class does not mean that the working class, as a class, manages society.

In December of that year Lenin went one further and noted that at the Sixth Soviet Congress "*the Bolsheviks had 97 per cent*" of delegates, i.e. "practically all representatives of the workers and peasants of the whole of Russia." This was proof of "*how stupid and ridiculous is the bourgeois fairy-tale about the Bolsheviks only having minority support.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 355-6] Given that the workers and peasants had no real choice in who to vote for, can this result be surprising? Of course not. While the Bolsheviks **had** mass support a year previously, pointing to election results under a dictatorship where all other parties and groups are subject to state repression is hardly convincing evidence for current support. Needless to say, Stalin (like a host of other dictators) made similar claims on similarly dubious election results. If the Bolsheviks were sincere in their support for soviet power then they would have tried to organise genuine soviet elections. This was possible even during the civil war as the example of the Makhnovists showed.

So, in a nutshell, the Bolsheviks did not fundamentally support the goal of soviet power. Rather, they aimed to create a "soviet power," a Bolshevik power above the soviets which derived its legitimacy from them. However, if the soviets conflicted with that power, it were the soviets

which were repudiated **not** party power. Thus the result of Bolshevik ideology was the marginalisation of the soviets and their replacement by Bolshevik dictatorship. This process started before the civil war and can be traced to the nature of the state as well as the underlying assumptions of Bolshevik ideology (see ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#)).

## 6 What happened to the soviets after October?

As indicated in the last question, the last thing which the Bolsheviks wanted was *"all power to the soviets."* Rather they wanted the soviets to hand over that power to a Bolshevik government. As the people in liberal capitalist politics, the soviets were "sovereign" in name only. They were expected to delegate power to a government. Like the "sovereign people" of bourgeois republics, the soviets were much praised but in practice ignored by those with real power.

In such a situation, we would expect the soviets to play no meaningful role in the new "workers' state." Under such a centralised system, we would expect the soviets to become little more than a fig-leaf for party power. Unsurprisingly, this is **exactly** what they did become. As we discuss in [section 7](#) of the appendix on ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#), anarchists are not surprised by this as the centralisation so beloved by Marxists is designed to empower the few at the centre and marginalise the many at the circumference.

The very first act of the Bolshevik revolution was for the Second Congress of Soviets to alienate its power and hand it over to the "Council of People's Commissars." This was the new government and was totally Bolshevik in make-up (the Left SRs later joined it, although the Bolsheviks always maintained control). Thus the first act of the revolution was the creation of a power **above** the soviets. Although derived from the soviet congress, it was not identical to it. Thus the Bolshevik "workers' state" or "semi-state" started to have the same characteristics as the normal state (see [section H.3.7](#) for a discussion of what marks a state).

The subsequent marginalisation of the soviets in the "soviet" state occurred from top to bottom should not, therefore be considered an accident or a surprise. The Bolshevik desire for party power within a highly centralised state could have no other effect. At the top, the Central Executive Committee (CEC or VTsIK) was quickly marginalised from power. This body was meant to be the highest organ of soviet power but, in practice, it was sidelined by the Bolshevik government. This can be seen when, just four days after seizing power, the Bolshevik Council of People's Commissars (CPC or Sovnarkom) *"unilaterally arrogated to itself legislative power simply by promulgating a decree to this effect. This was, effectively, a Bolshevik **coup d'etat** that made clear the government's (and party's) pre-eminence over the soviets and their executive organ. Increasingly, the Bolsheviks relied upon the appointment from above of commissars with plenipotentiary powers, and they split up and reconstituted fractious Soviets and intimidated political opponents."* [Neil Harding, **Leninism**, p. 253] Strange actions for a party proclaiming it was acting to ensure "All power to the soviets" (as we discussed in the [last section](#), this was always considered by Lenin as little more than a slogan to hide the fact that the party would be in power).

It is doubtful that when readers of Lenin's **State and Revolution** read his argument for combining legislative and executive powers into one body, they had this in mind! But then, as we discussed in [section 4](#), that work was never applied in practice so we should not be too surprised by this turn of events. One thing is sure, four days after the "soviet" revolution the soviets had been replaced as the effective power in society by a handful of Bolshevik leaders. So the Bolsheviks immediately created a power **above** the soviets in the form of the CPC. Lenin's argument in **The State and Revolution** that, like the Paris Commune, the workers' state would be based on a fusion of executive and administrative functions in the hands of the workers' delegates did not last one night. In reality, the Bolshevik party was the **real** power in "soviet" Russia.

Given that the All-Russian central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK) was dominated by Bolsheviks, it comes as no surprise to discover it was used to augment this centralisation of power into the hands of the party. The VTsIK (*"charged by the October revolution with controlling the government,"* the Sovnarkom) was *"used not to control but rather extend the authority and centralising fiat of the government. That was the work of Iakov Sverdlov, the VTsIK chairman, who -- in close collaboration with Lenin as chairman of the Sovnarkom -- ensured that the government decrees and ordinances were by the VTsIK and that they were thus endowed with Soviet legitimacy when they were sent to provincial soviet executive committees for transmission to all local soviets . . . To achieve that, Sverdlov had to reduce the 'Soviet Parliament' to nothing more than an 'administrative branch' (as Sukhanov put it) of the Sovnarkom. Using his position as the VTsIK chairman and his tight control over its praesidium and the large, disciplined and compliant Bolshevik majority in the plenary assembly, Sverdlov isolated the opposition and rendered it impotent. So successful was he that, by early December 1917, Sukhanov had already written off the VTsIK as 'a sorry parody of a revolutionary parliament,' while for the Bolshevik, Martin Latsis-Zurabs, the VTsIK was not even a good rubberstamp. Latsis campaigned vigorously in March and April 1918 for the VTsIK's abolition: with its 'idle, long-winded talk and its incapacity for productive work' the VTsIK merely held up the work of government, he claimed. And he may have had a point: during the period of 1917 to 1918, the Sovnarkom issued 474 decrees, the VTsIK a mere 62."* [Israel Getzler, **Soviets as Agents of Democratisation**, p. 27]

This process was not an accident. Far from it. In fact, the Bolshevik chairman Sverdlov knew exactly what he was doing. This included modifying the way the CEC worked:

*"The structure of VTsIK itself began to change under Sverdlov. He began to use the presidium to circumvent the general meeting, which contained eloquent minority spokesmen . . . Sverdlov's use of the presidium marked a decisive change in the status of that body within the soviet hierarchy. In mid-1917 . . . [the] plenum had directed all activities and ratified bureau decisions which had a 'particularly important social-political character.' The bureau . . . served as the executive organ of the VTsIK plenum . . . Only in extraordinary cases when the bureau could no be convened for technical reason could the presidium make decisions. Even then such actions remained subject to review by the plenum."* [Charles Duval, *"Yakov M. Sverdlov and the All-Russian Central*

*Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK)*", pp. 3-22, **Soviet Studies**, vol. XXXI, no. 1, January 1979, pp. 6-7]

Under the Bolsheviks, the presidium was converted "*into the **de facto** centre of power within VTsIK.*" It "*began to award representations to groups and factions which supported the government. With the VTsIK becoming ever more unwieldy in size by the day, the presidium began to expand its activities.*" The presidium was used "*to circumvent general meetings.*" Thus the Bolsheviks were able "*to increase the power of the presidium, postpone regular sessions, and present VTsIK with policies which had already been implemented by the Sovnarkon. Even in the presidium itself very few people determined policy.*" [Charles Duval, **Op. Cit.**, p.7, p. 8 and p. 18]

So, from the very outset, the VTsIK was overshadowed by the "Council of People's Commissars" (CPC). In the first year, only 68 of 480 decrees issued by the CPC were actually submitted to the Soviet Central Executive Committee, and even fewer were actually drafted by it. The VTsIK functions "*were never clearly delineated, even in the constitution, despite vigorous attempts by the Left SRs . . . that Lenin never saw this highest soviet organ as the genuine equal of his cabin and that the Bolsheviks deliberated obstructed efforts at clarification is [a] convincing*" conclusion to draw. It should be stressed that this process started before the outbreak of civil war in late May, 1918. After that the All-Russian Congress of soviets, which convened every three months or so during the first year of the revolution, met annually thereafter. Its elected VTsIK "*also began to meet less frequently, and at the height of the civil war in late 1918 and throughout 1919, it never once met in full session.*" [Carmen Sirianni, **Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy**, pp. 203-4]

The marginalisation of the soviets can be seen from the decision on whether to continue the war against Germany. As Cornelius Castoriadis notes, under Lenin "*[c]ollectively, the only real instance of power is the Party, and very soon, only the summits of the Party. Immediately after the seizure of power the soviets as institutions are reduced to the status of pure window-dressing (we need only look at the fact that, already at the beginning of 1918 in the discussions leading up to the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, their role was absolutely nil).*" [**The role of Bolshevik Ideology in the birth of the Bureaucracy**, p. 97] In fact, on the 26th of February, 1918, the Soviet Executive "*began a survey of 200 local soviets; by 10 March 1918 a majority (105-95) had come out in favour of a revolutionary war, although the soviets in the two capitals voted . . . to accept a separate peace.*" [Geoffrey Swain, **The Origins of the Russian Civil War**, p. 128] This survey was ignored by the Bolshevik Central Committee which voted 4 against, 4 abstain and 5 for it. This took Russia out of the Great War but handed over massive areas to imperialist Germany. The controversial treaty was ratified at the Fourth Soviet Congress, unsurprisingly as the Bolshevik majority simply followed the orders of their Central Committee. It would be pointless to go over the arguments of the rights and wrongs of the decision here, the point is that the 13 members of the Bolshevik Central Committee decided the future faith of Russia in this vote. The soviets were simply ignored in spite of the fact it was possible to consult them fully. Clearly, "soviet power" meant little more than window-dressing for Bolshevik power.

Thus, at the top summits of the state, the soviets had been marginalised by the Bolsheviks from day one. Far from having "all power" their CEC had given that to a Bolshevik government. Rather than exercise real power, it's basic aim was to control those who did exercise it. And the Bolsheviks successfully acted to undermine even this function.

If this was happening at the top, what was the situation at the grassroots? Here, too, oligarchic tendencies in the soviets increased post-October, with "*[e]ffective power in the local soviets relentlessly gravitated to the executive committees, and especially their presidia. Plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual.*" The party was "*successful in gaining control of soviet executives in the cities and at **uezd** and **guberniya** levels. These executive bodies were usually able to control soviet congresses, though the party often disbanded congresses that opposed major aspects of current policies.*" Local soviets "*had little input into the formation of national policy*" and "*[e]ven at higher levels, institutional power shifted away from the soviets.*" [C. Sirianni, **Op. Cit.**, p. 204 and p. 203] The soviets quickly had become rubber-stamps for the Communist government, with the Soviet Constitution of 1918 codifying the centralisation of power and top-down decision making. Local soviets were expected to "*carry out all orders of the respective higher organs of the soviet power*" (i.e. to carry out the commands of the central government).

This was not all. While having popular support in October 1917, the realities of "Leninism in power" soon saw a backlash develop. The Bolsheviks started to lose popular support to opposition groups like the Mensheviks and SRs (left and right). This growing opposition was reflected in two ways. Firstly, a rise in working class protests in the form of strikes and independent organisations. Secondly, there was a rise in votes for the opposition parties in soviet elections. Faced with this, the Bolsheviks responded in three ways, delaying elections, gerrymandering or force. We will discuss each in turn.

Lenin argued in mid-April 1918 that the "*socialist character of Soviet, i.e. **proletarian**, democracy*" lies, in part, in because "*the people themselves determine the order and time of elections.*" [**The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government**, pp. 36-7] However, the reality in the grassroots was somewhat different. There "*the government [was] continually postponed the new general elections to the Petrograd Soviet, the term of which had ended in March 1918*" because it "*feared that the opposition parties would show gains. This fear was well founded since in the period immediately preceding 25 January, in those Petrograd factories where the workers had decided to hold new elections, the Mensheviks, SRs, and non-affiliated candidates had won about half the seats.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22] In Yaroslavl, the more the Bolsheviks tried to postpone the elections, the more the idea of holding new elections became an issue itself." When the Bolsheviks gave in and held elections in early April, the Mensheviks won 47 of the 98 seats, the Bolsheviks 38 and the SRs 13. ["*The Mensheviks' Political Comeback: The Elections to the Provincial City Soviets in Spring 1918*", **The Russian Review**, vol. 42, pp. 1-50, p. 18] The fate of the Yaroslavl soviet will be discussed shortly. As Geoffrey Swain summarises, Menshevik and SR "*successes in recalling Bolshevik delegates from the soviets had forced the Bolsheviks increasingly to delay by-elections.*" [**The Origins of the Russian Civil War**, p. 91]

As well as postponing elections and recall, the Bolsheviks also quickly turned to gerrymandering the soviets to ensure the stability of their majority in the soviets. In this they made use of certain institutional problems the soviets had had from the start. On the day which the Petrograd soviet was formed in 1917, the Bolshevik Shlyapnikov *"proposed that each socialist party should have the right to two seats in the provisional executive committee of the soviet."* This was *"designed, initially, to give the Bolsheviks a decent showing, for they were only a small minority of the initiating group."* It was agreed. However, the *"result was that members of a dozen different parties and organisations (trades unions, co-operative movements, etc.) entered the executive committee. They called themselves 'representatives' (of their organisations) and, by virtue of this, they speedily eliminated from their discussions the committee members chosen by the general assembly although they were the true founders of the Soviet."* This meant, for example, Bolshevik co-founders of the soviet made way for such people as Kamenev and Stalin. Thus the make-up of the soviet executive committee was decided upon by *"the leadership of each organisation, its executive officers, and not with the [soviet] assembly. The assembly had lost its right to control."* Thus, for example, the Bolshevik central committee member Yoffe became the presidium of the soviet of district committees without being elected by anyone represented at those soviets. *"After October, the Bolsheviks were more systematic in their use of these methods, but there was a difference: there were now no truly free elections that might have put a brake to a procedure that could only benefit the Bolshevik party."* [Marc Ferro, **October 1917**, p. 191 and p. 195]

The effects of this can be seen in Petrograd soviet elections of June 1918. In these the Bolsheviks *"lost the absolute majority in the soviet they had previously enjoyed"* but remained its largest party. However, the results of these elections were irrelevant. This was because *"under regulations prepared by the Bolsheviks and adopted by the 'old' Petrograd soviet, more than half of the projected 700-plus deputies in the 'new' soviet were to be elected by the Bolshevik-dominated district soviets, trade unions, factory committees, Red Army and naval units, and district worker conferences: thus, the Bolsheviks were assured of a solid majority even before factory voting began."* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 45] To be specific, the number of delegates elected directly from the workplace made up a mere third of the new soviet (i.e. only 260 of the 700 plus deputies in the new soviet were elected directly from the factories): *"It was this arbitrary 'stacking' of the new soviet, much more than election of 'dead souls' from shut-down factories, unfair campaign practices, falsification of the vote, or direct repression, that gave the Bolsheviks an unfair advantage in the contest."* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Petrograd First City District Soviet during the Civil War**, p. 140]

In other words, the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and packed soviets to remain in power, so distorting the soviet structure to ensure Bolshevik dominance. This practice seems to have been commonplace. In Saratov, as in Petrograd, *"the Bolsheviks, fearing that they would lose elections, changed the electoral rules . . . in addition to the delegates elected directly at the factories, the trade unions -- but only those in favour of soviet power, in other words supporters of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs -- were given representation. Similarly, the political parties supporting Soviet power automatically received twenty-five seats in the soviets. Needless to say,*

*these rules heavily favoured the ruling parties" as the Mensheviks and SRs "were regarded by the Bolsheviks as being against Soviet power." [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 30]*

A similar situation existed in Moscow. For example, the largest single union in the soviet in 1920 was that of soviet employees with 140 deputies (9% of the total), followed by the metal workers with 121 (8%). In total, the bureaucracies of the four biggest trade unions had 29.5% of delegates in the Moscow soviet. This packing of the soviet by the trade union bureaucracy existed in 1918 as well, ensuring the Bolsheviks were insulated from popular opposition and the recall of workplace delegates by their electors. Another form of gerrymandering was uniting areas of Bolshevik strength *"for electoral purposes with places where they were weak, such as the creation of a single constituency out of the Moscow food administration (MPO) and the Cheka in February 1920."* [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 179 and p. 178]

However, this activity was mild compared to the Bolshevik response to soviet elections which did not go their way. According to one historian, by the spring of 1918 *"Menshevik newspapers and activists in the trade unions, the Soviets, and the factories had made a considerable impact on a working class which was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime, so much so that in many places the Bolsheviks felt constrained to dissolve Soviets or prevent re-elections where Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had gained majorities."* [Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 179] This is confirmed by other sources. *"By the middle of 1918,"* notes Leonard Schapiro, *"the Mensheviks could claim with some justification that large numbers of the industrial working class were now behind them, and that for the systematic dispersal and packing of the soviets, and the mass arrests at workers' meetings and congresses, their party could eventually have won power by its policy of constitutional opposition. In the elections to the soviets which were taking place in the spring of 1918 throughout Russia, arrests, military dispersal, even shootings followed whenever Mensheviks succeeded in winning majorities or a substantial representation."* [**The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 191]

For example, the Mensheviks *"made something of a comeback about Saratov workers in the spring of 1918, for which the Bolsheviks expelled them from the soviet."* [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, p. 187] Izhevsk, a town of 100,000 with an armaments industry which was the main suppliers of rifles to the Tzar's Army, experienced a swing to the left by the time of the October revolution. The Bolsheviks and SR-Maximalists became the majority and with a vote 92 to 58 for the soviet to assume power. After a revolt by SR-Maximalist Red Guards against the Bolshevik plans for a centralised Red Army in April, 1918, the Bolsheviks became the sole power. However, in the May elections the Mensheviks and [right] SRs *"experienced a dramatic revival"* and for *"the first time since September 1917, these two parties constituted a majority in the Soviet by winning seventy of 135 seats."* The Bolsheviks *"simply refused to acquiesce to the popular mandate of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries."* In June, the Bolshevik leadership *"appealed to the Karzan' Soviet . . . for assistance."* The troops sent along with the Bolshevik dominated Red Guards *"abrogated the results of the May and June elections"* and imprisoned the SR and Menshevik soviet delegates. The summer of 1918 also saw victories for the SRs and Mensheviks in the soviet elections in Votkinsk, a steel town near Izhevsk. *"As in Izhevsk the Bolsheviks voided the elections."*

[Stephan M. Merk, *"The 'Class-Tragedy' of Izhevsk: Working Class Opposition to Bolshevism in 1918"*, pp. 176-90, **Russian History**, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 181 and p. 186]

However, the most in depth account of this destruction of soviet is found in the research of Vladimir Brovkin. According to him, there *"are three factors"* which emerge from the soviet election results in the spring of 1918. These are, firstly, *"the impressive success of the Menshevik-SR opposition"* in those elections in all regions in European Russia. The second *"is the Bolshevik practice of outright disbandment of the Menshevik-SR-controlled soviets. The third is the subsequent wave of anti-Bolshevik uprisings."* In fact, *"in all provincial capitals of European Russia where elections were held on which there are data, the Mensheviks and the SRs won majorities on the city soviets in the spring of 1918."* Brovkin stresses that the *"process of the Menshevik-SR electoral victories threatened Bolshevik power. That is why in the course of the spring and summer of 1918, the soviet assemblies were disbanded in most cities and villages. To stay in power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets. . . These steps generated a far-reaching transformation in the soviet system, which remained 'soviet' in name only."* Brovkin presents accounts from numerous towns and cities. As an example, he discusses Tver' where the *"escalation of political tensions followed the already familiar pattern"* as the *"victory of the opposition at the polls"* in April 1918 *"brought about an intensification of the Bolshevik repression. Strikes, protests, and marches in Tver' lead to the imposition of martial law."* [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 46, p. 47, p. 48 and p. 11] Thus Bolshevik armed force not only overthrew the election results, it also suppressed working class protest against such actions. (Brovkin's book **The Mensheviks after October** contains the same information as his article).

This Bolshevik attack on the soviets usually started with attempts to stop new elections. For example, after a demonstration in Petrograd in favour of the Constituent Assembly was repressed by the Bolsheviks in mid-January 1918, calls for new elections to the soviet occurred in many factories. *"Despite the efforts of the Bolsheviks and the Factory Committees they controlled, the movement for new elections to the soviet spread to more than twenty factories by early February and resulted in the election of fifty delegates: thirty-six SRs, seven Mensheviks and seven non-party."* However, the Bolsheviks *"unwillingness to recognise the elections and to seat new delegates pushed a group of Socialists to . . . lay plans for an alternative workers' forum . . . what was later to become the Assembly of Workers' Plenipotentiaries."* [Scott Smith, *"The Social-Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Civil War"*, **The Bolsheviks in Russian Society**, pp. 83-104, Vladimir N. Brovkin (Ed.), pp. 85-86] This forum, like all forms of working class protest, was crushed by the Bolshevik state. By the time the elections were held, in June 1918, the civil war had started (undoubtedly favouring the Bolsheviks) and the Bolsheviks had secured their majority by packing the soviet with non-workplace "representatives."

In Tula, again in the spring of 1918, local Bolsheviks reported to the Bolshevik Central Committee that the *"Bolshevik deputies began to be recalled one after another . . . our situation became shakier with passing day. We were forced to block new elections to the soviet and even not to recognise them where they had taken place not in our favour."* In the end, the local party leader was forced to abolish the city soviet and to vest power in the Provincial Executive Committee. This refused to convene a plenum of the city soviet for more than two months,



knowing that newly elected delegates were non-Bolshevik. [Smith, **Op. Cit.**, p. 87]

In Yaroslavl', the newly elected soviet convened on April 9th, 1918, and when it elected a Menshevik chairman, *"the Bolshevik delegation walked out and declared the soviet dissolved. In response, workers in the city went out on strike, which the Bolsheviks answered by arresting the strike committee and threatening to dismiss the strikers and replace them with unemployed workers."* This failed and the Bolsheviks were forced to hold new elections, which they lost. Then *"the Bolsheviks dissolved this soviet as well and places the city under martial law."* A similar event occurred in Riazan' (again in April) and, again, the Bolsheviks *"promptly dissolved the soviet and declared a dictatorship under a Military-Revolutionary Committee."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 88-9]

The opposition parties raised such issues at the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK), to little avail. On the 11th of April, one *"protested that non-Bolshevik controlled soviets were being dispersed by armed force, and wanted to discuss the issue."* The chairman *"refus[ed] to include it in the agenda because of lack of supporting material"* and such information be submitted to the presidium of the soviet. The majority (i.e. the Bolsheviks) *"supported their chairman"* and the facts were *"submitted . . . to the presidium, where they apparently remained."* It should be noted that the *"same fate befell attempts to challenge the arrests of Moscow anarchists by the government on 12 April."* The chairman's *"handling of the anarchist matter ended its serious discussion in the VTsIK."* [Charles Duval, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 13-14] Given that the VTsIK was **meant** to be the highest soviet body between congresses, the lack of concern for Bolshevik repression against soviets and opposition groups clearly shows the Bolshevik contempt for soviet democracy.

Needless to say, this destruction of soviet democracy continued during the civil war. For example, the Bolsheviks simply rejected the voice of people and would refuse to accept an election result. Emma Goldman attended an election meeting of bakers in Moscow in March, 1920. *"It was,"* she said, *"the most exciting gathering I had witnessed in Russia."* However the *"chosen representative, an Anarchist, had been refused his mandate by the Soviet authorities. It was the third time the workers gathered to re-elect their delegate . . . and every time they elected the same man. The Communist candidate opposing him was Semashko, the Commissar of the Department of Health . . . [who] raved against the workers for choosing a non-Communist, called anathema upon their heads, and threatened them with the Tcheka and the curtailment of their rations. But he had no effect on the audience except to emphasise their opposition to him, and to arouse antagonism against the party he represented. The workers' choice was repudiated by the authorities by the authorities and later even arrested and imprisoned."* After a hunger strike, they were released. In spite of chekists with loaded guns attending union meetings, the bakers *"would not be intimidated"* and threatened a strike unless they were permitted to elect their own candidate. This ensured the bakers' demands were met. [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, pp. 88-9]

Unsurprisingly, *"there is a mass of evidence to support the Menshevik accusations of electoral malpractice"* during elections in May 1920. And in spite of Menshevik *"declaration of support*

for the Soviet regime against the Poles" the party was "still subject to harassment." [Skawa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 178]

This gerrymandering was not limited to just local soviets. The Bolsheviks used it at the fifth soviet congress as well.

First, it should be noted that in the run up to the congress, "on 14 June 1918, they expelled Martov and his five Mensheviks together with the Socialist Revolutionaries from the Central Executive Committee, closed down their newspapers . . . and drove them underground, just on the eve of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets in which the Mensheviks were expected to make significant gains." [Israel Getzler, **Martov**, p. 181] The rationale for this action was the claim that the Mensheviks had taken part in anti-soviet rebellions (as we discuss in [section 23](#), this was not true). The action was opposed by the Left SRs, who correctly questioned the legality of the Bolshevik expulsion of opposition groupings. They "branded the proposed expulsion bill illegal, since the Mensheviks and SRs had been sent to the CEC by the Congress of Soviets, and only the next congress had the right to withdraw their representation. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks had no right to pose as defenders of the soviets against the alleged SR counter-revolution when they themselves has been disbanding the peasants' soviets and creating the committees of the poor to replace them." [Brovkin, **The Mensheviks After October**, p. 231] When the vote was taken, only the Bolsheviks supported it. Their votes were sufficient to pass it.

Given that the Mensheviks had been winning soviet elections across Russia, it is clear that this action was driven far more by political needs than the truth. This resulted in the Left Social Revolutionaries (LSRs) as the only significant party left in the run up to the fifth Congress. The LSR author (and ex-commissar for justice in the only coalition soviet government) of the only biography of LSR leader (and long standing revolutionary who suffered torture and imprisonment in her fight against Tsarism) Maria Spiridonova states that "[b]etween 900 and 100 delegates were present. Officially the LSR numbered 40 percent of the delegates. They own opinion was that their number were even higher. The Bolsheviks strove to keep their majority by all the means in their power." He quotes Spiridonova's address to the Congress: "You may have a majority in this congress, but you do have not a majority in the country." [I. Steinberg, **Spiridonova**, p. 209]

Historian Geoffrey Swain indicates that the LSRs had a point:

*"Up to the very last minute the Left SRs had been confident that, as the voice of Russia's peasant masses, they would receive a majority when the Fifth Congress of Soviets assembled . . . which would enable them to deprive Lenin of power and launch a revolutionary war against Germany. Between April and the end of June 1918 membership of their party had almost doubled, from 60,000 to 100,000, and to prevent them securing a majority at the congress Lenin was forced to rely on dubious procedures: he allowed so-called committees of poor peasants to be represented at the congress. Thus as late as 3 July 1918 returns suggested a majority for the Left SRs, but a Congress of Committees of Poor Peasants held in Petrograd the same day 'redressed the balance in favour of the Bolsheviks,' to quote the **Guardian's** Philips-Price, by deciding it*

*had the right to represent the all those districts where local soviets had not been 'cleansed of kulak elements and had not delivered the amount of food laid down in the requisitioning lists of the Committees of Poor Peasants.' This blatant gerrymandering ensured a Bolshevik majority at the Fifth Congress of Soviets." [The Origins of the Russian Civil War, p. 176]*

Historian Alexander Rabinowitch confirms this gerrymandering. As he put it, by the summer of 1918 "popular disenchantment with Bolshevik rule was already well advanced, not only in rural but also in urban Russia" and the "primary beneficiaries of this nationwide grass-roots shift in public opinion were the Left SRs. During the second half of June 1918, it was an open question which of the two parties would have a majority at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets . . . On the evening of 4 July, virtually from the moment the Fifth Congress of Soviets opened in Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, it was clear to the Left SRs that the Bolsheviks had effectively 'fabricated' a sizeable majority in the congress and consequently, that there was no hope whatever of utilising it to force a fundamental change in the government's pro-German, anti-peasant policies." While he acknowledges that an "exact breakdown of properly elected delegates may be impossible to ascertain" it was possible ("based on substantial but incomplete archival evidence") to conclude that "it is quite clear that the Bolshevik majority was artificially inflated and highly suspect." He quotes the report of one leading LSR, based on data from LSR members of the congress's Credentials Committee, saying that the Bolsheviks "conjured up" 299 voting delegates. "The Bible tells us," noted the report's author, "that God created the heavens and the earth from nothing . . . In the twentieth century the Bolsheviks are capable of no lesser miracles: out of nothing, they create legitimate credentials." ["Maria Spiridonova's 'Last Testament'", *The Russian Review*, pp. 424-46, vol. 54, July 1995, p. 426]

This gerrymandering played a key role in the subsequent events. "Deprived of their democratic majority," Swain notes, "the Left SRs resorted to terror and assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach." [Swain, *Op. Cit.*, p. 176] The LSR assassination of Mirbach and the events which followed were soon labelled by the Bolsheviks an "uprising" against "soviet power" (see [section 23](#) for more details). Lenin "decided that the killing of Mirbach provided a fortuitous opportunity to put an end to the growing Left SR threat." [Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 427] After this, the LSRs followed the Mensheviks and Right SRs and were expelled from the soviets. This in spite of the fact that the rank and file knew nothing of the plans of the central committees and that their soviet delegates had been elected by the masses. The Bolsheviks had finally eliminated the last of their more left-wing opponents (the anarchists had been dealt with the in April, see [section 24](#) for details).

As discussed in [section 21](#), the Committees of Poor Peasants were only supported by the Bolsheviks. Indeed, the Left SRs opposed them as being utterly counter-productive and an example of Bolshevik ignorance of village life. Consequently, we can say that the "delegates" from the committees were Bolsheviks or at least Bolshevik supporters. Significantly, by early 1919 Lenin admitted the Committees were failures and ordered them disbanded. The new policy reflected Left SR arguments against the Committees. It is hard not to concur with Vladimir Brovkin that by "establishing the committees of the poor to replace the [rural] soviets . . . the

*Bolsheviks were trying to create some institutional leverage of their own in the countryside for use against the SRs. In this light, the Bolshevik measures against the Menshevik-led city soviets . . . and against SR-led village soviets may be seen as a two-pronged attempt to stem the tide that threatened to leave them in the minority at the Fifth Congress of Soviets." [The Mensheviks after October, p. 226]*

Thus, by July 1918, the Bolsheviks had effectively secured a monopoly of political power in Russia. When the Bolsheviks (rightly, if hypocritically) disbanded the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, they had claimed that the soviets (rightly) represented a superior form of democracy. Once they started losing soviet elections, they could find no better way to "secure" workers' democracy than to destroy it by gerrymandering soviets, disbanding them and expelling opposition parties from them. All peaceful attempts to replace them had been destroyed. The soviet CEC was marginalised and without any real power. Opposition parties had been repressed, usually on little or no evidence. The power of the soviets had been replaced by a soviet power in less than a year. However, this was simply the culmination of a process which had started when the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917. Simply put, the Bolsheviks had always aimed for "all power to the party via the soviets" and once this had been achieved, the soviets could be dispensed with. Maurice Brinton simply stated the obvious when he wrote that "*when institutions such as the soviets could no longer be influenced by ordinary workers, the regime could no longer be called a soviet regime.*" [The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, p. xiii] By this obvious criteria, the Bolshevik regime was no longer soviet by the spring of 1918, i.e. before the outbreak of civil war. While opposition groups were not finally driven out of the soviets until 1923 (i.e. three years **after** the end of the civil war) their presence "*does not indicate the existence of a multi-party system since they in no way threatened the dominating role of the Bolsheviks, and they had not done so from mid-1918.*" [Richard Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 168]

Tony Cliff, leader of the British Leninist party the SWP, justified the repression of the Mensheviks and SRs on the grounds that they were not prepared to accept the Soviet system and rejected the role of "*constitutional opposition.*" He tries to move forward the repression until after the outbreak of full civil war by stating that "*[d]espite their strong opposition to the government, for some time, i.e. until after the armed uprising of the Czechoslovakian Legion [in late May, 1918] -- the Mensheviks were not much hampered in their propaganda work.*" If having papers banned every now and then, members arrested and soviets being disbanded as soon as they get a Menshevik majority is "*not much hampered*" then Cliff does seem to be giving that phrase a new meaning. Similarly, Cliff's claim that the "*civil war undermined the operation of the local soviets*" also seems lacking based on this new research. [Lenin: Revolution Besieged, vol. 3, p. 163, p. 167 and p. 150]

However, the Bolshevik assault on the soviets started during the spring of 1918 (i.e. in March, April and May). That is **before** the Czech rising and the onset of full scale civil war which occurred in late May (see [section 3](#) of the appendix on "[What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?](#)" on Bolshevik repression before the Czech revolt). Nor is it true that the Mensheviks rejected constitutional methods. Though they wished to see a re-convocation of the Constituent Assembly they believed that the only way to do this was by winning a majority of

the soviets (see [section 23](#)). Clearly, attempts to blame the Civil War for the elimination of soviet power and democracy seems woefully weak given the actions of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1918. And, equally clearly, the reduction of local soviet influence cannot be fully understood without factoring in the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation (as codified in the Soviet Constitution of 1918) along with this direct repression.

The simple fact is that the soviets were marginalised and undermined after the October Revolution simply because they **did** reflect the wishes of the working class, in spite of their defects (defects the Bolsheviks exploited to consolidate their power). The problem was that the workers no longer supported Lenin. Few Leninists would support such an obvious conclusion. For example, John Rees states that "[i]n the cities the Reds enjoyed the fierce and virtually undivided loyalty of the masses throughout the civil war period." ["In Defence of October", pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 47] Which, of course, explains the vast number of strikes and protests directed against the Bolshevik regime and the workers' resolutions calling it end! It also explains why the Bolsheviks, in the face of such "*undivided loyalty*", had to suppress opposition parties and impose a party dictatorship!

Simply put, **if** the Bolsheviks did have the support Rees states they did then they had no need to repress soviet democracy and opposition parties. Such "*fierce*" loyalty would not have been amenable to opposition arguments. Strange, then, that the Bolsheviks continually explained working class unrest in terms of the influence of Mensheviks, Left SRs and so on during the civil war. Moreover, Rees contradicts himself by arguing that if the Kronstadt revolt had succeeded, then it would have resulted in "*the fall of the Bolsheviks.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 63] Now, given that the Kronstadt revolt called for free soviet elections (and **not** "*soviets without parties*" as Rees asserts), why did the Bolsheviks not agree to them (at least in the cities)? If, as Rees argues, the Reds had the fierce loyalty of the city workers, then why did the Bolsheviks not introduce soviet democracy in the cities after the end of the Civil War? Simply because they knew that such "loyalty" did not, in fact, exist. Zinoviev, for example, declared that the Bolsheviks' support had been reduced to 1 per cent in early 1920. [Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 188]

So much for working class "loyalty" to the Bolsheviks. And, needless to say, Rees' comments totally ignore the election results **before** the start of the civil war which prompted the Bolsheviks to pack or disband soviets. As Bertrand Russell summarised from his experiences in Lenin's Russia during the civil war (in 1920): "*No conceivable system of free elections would give majorities to the Communists, either in the town or country.*" [**The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism**, pp. 40-1] Thus we have a major contradiction in the pro-Leninist argument. On the one hand, they stress that the workers supported the Bolsheviks wholeheartedly during the civil war. On the other, they argue that party dictatorship had to be imposed. If the Bolsheviks had the support they claimed they had, then they would have won soviet elections easily. They did not and so free soviet elections were not held.

This fact also explains the fate of the so-called "*non party*" conferences favoured by the Bolsheviks in late 1920. In spite of praising the soviets as "*more democratic*" than anything in the "*best democratic republics of the bourgeois world,*" Lenin also argued that non-Party

conferences were also required "to be able to watch the mood of the masses, to come closer to them, to respond to their demands." [**Left-Wing Communism** p. 33 and p. 32] If the soviets were as democratic as Lenin claimed, then the Bolsheviks would have no need of "non-party" conferences. Significantly, the Bolsheviks "responded" to these conferences and "their demands" by disbanding them. This was because "[d]uring the disturbances" of late 1920, "they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies." Their frequency was decreased and they "were discontinued soon afterward." [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 203] In other words, they meet the same fate as the soviets in the spring and summer of 1918.

Perhaps we should not be too surprised by these developments. After all, as we discuss in [section 8](#) of the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)", the Bolsheviks had long had a distinctly undemocratic political ideology. Their support for democratic norms were less than consistent. The one thing they **were** consistent was their hypocrisy. Thus democratic decisions were to be binding on their opponents (even if that majority had to be manipulated into being) but not upon them. Before the revolution Lenin had openly espoused a double standard of discipline. "We will not permit," he argued, "the idea of unity to tie a noose around our necks, and we shall under no circumstances permit the Mensheviks to lead us by the rope." [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, **The Conscience of the Revolution**, p. 17] Once in power, their political perspectives had little trouble ignoring the will of the working class when it clashed with what they, as that class's self-proclaimed vanguard, had decided what was in its best interests. As we discussed in [section H.5](#), such an autocratic perspective is at the heart of vanguardism. If you aim for party power, it comes as no surprise that the organs used to achieve it will wither under it. Just as muscles only remain strong if you use them, so soviets can only work if it is used to run society, not nominate the handful of party leaders who do. As Kropotkin argued in 1920:

*"The idea of soviets . . . of councils of workers and peasants . . . controlling the economic and political life of the country is a great idea. All the more so, since it necessarily follows that these councils should be composed of all who take part in the production of natural wealth by their own efforts.*

*"But as long as the country is governed by a party dictatorship, the workers' and peasants' councils evidently lose their entire significance. They are reduced to . . . [a] passive role . . . A council of workers ceases to be free and of any use when liberty of the press no longer exists . . . [and they] lose their significance when the elections are not preceded by a free electoral campaign, and when the elections are conducted under pressure of a party dictatorship . . . It means the death-knell of the new system."*

[**Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets**, pp. 254-5]

Clearly, the fate of the soviets after October shows the dangers of Bolshevism to popular self-management and autonomy. We should be try and learn the lessons from the experience rather than, as pro-Bolsheviks do, rationalise and justify the usurpation of power by the party. The most obvious lesson to learn is to oppose the creation of any power **above** the soviets. This was not lost on Russian anarchists active in the revolution. For this reason, anarcho-syndicalists resolved,

in August 1918, that they "were for the soviets but categorically against the Soviet of People's Commissars as an organ which does not stem from the soviet structure but only interferes with its work." Thus they were "for the establishment of **free soviets** of workers' and peasants' representatives, and the abolition of the Soviet of People's Commissars as an organisation inimical to the interests of the working class." [contained in Paul Avrich, **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 118 and p. 117] This resolution was driven by the experience of the Bolshevik dominated "soviet" regime.

It is also worth quoting Rudolf Rocker at length on this issue:

*"Let no one object that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' cannot be compared to run of the mill dictatorship because it is the dictatorship of a class. Dictatorship of a class cannot exist as such, for it ends up, in the last analysis, as being the dictatorship of a given party which arrogates to itself the right to speak for that class. Thus, the liberal bourgeoisie, in their fight against despotism, used to speak in the name of the 'people'. . .*

*"We already know that a revolution cannot be made with rosewater. And we know, too, that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously. On the day of victorious revolution the workers will have to impose their will on the present owners of the soil, of the subsoil and of the means of production, which cannot be done -- let us be clear on this -- without the workers taking the capital of society into their own hands, and, above all, without their having demolished the authoritarian structure which is, and will continue to be, the fortress keeping the masses of the people under dominion. Such an action is, without doubt, an act of liberation; a proclamation of social justice; the very essence of social revolution, which has nothing in common with the utterly bourgeois principle of dictatorship.*

*"The fact that a large number of socialist parties have rallied to the idea of councils, which is the proper mark of libertarian socialist and revolutionary syndicalists, is a confession, recognition that the tack they have taken up until now has been the product of a falsification, a distortion, and that with the councils the labour movement must create for itself a single organ capable of carrying into effect the unmitigated socialism that the conscious proletariat longs for. On the other hand, it ought not to be forgotten that this abrupt conversion runs the risk of introducing many alien features into the councils concept, features, that is, with no relation to the original tasks of socialism, and which have to be eliminated because they pose a threat to the further development of the councils. These alien elements are able only to conceive things from the dictatorial viewpoint. It must be our task to face up to this risk and warn our class comrades against experiments which cannot bring the dawn of social emancipation any nearer -- which indeed, to the contrary, positively postpone it.*

*"Consequently, our advice is as follows: Everything for the councils or soviets! No power above them! A slogan which at the same time will be that of the social revolutionary."*  
**[Anarchism and Sovietism]**

The validity of this argument can be seen, for example, from the expulsion of opposition parties from the soviets in June and July 1918. This act exposes the hollowness of Bolshevik claims of their soviet system presented a form of "higher" democracy. If the Bolshevik soviet system was, as they claimed, based on instant recall then why did they, for example, have to expel the Mensheviks and Right SRs from the soviet CEC in the first place? Why did the electors not simply recall them? It was two weeks after the Czech revolt before the Bolsheviks acted, surely enough time for voters to act? Perhaps this did not happen because the CEC was not, in fact, subject to instant recall at all? Being nominated at the quarterly soviet congress, they were effectively isolated from popular control. It also means that the Bolshevik government was even more insulated from popular control and accountability. To "recall" it, electors would have to either wait for the next national soviet congress or somehow convince the CEC to call an emergency one. As an example of workers' running society, the Bolshevik system leaves much to be desired.

Another obvious lesson to learn was the use of appointments to the soviets and their executives from other organisations. As seen above, the Bolsheviks used the "representation" of other bodies they control (such as trade unions) to pack soviet assemblies in their favour. Similarly, allowing political parties to nominate representatives in soviet executives also marginalised the soviet assemblies and those delegates actually elected in the workplaces.

This was obvious to the Russian anarchists, who argued *"for effective soviets organised on collective lines with the direct delegation of workers and peasants from every factory, workshop, village, etc., and not political chatterboxes gaining entry through party lists and turning the soviets into talking shops."* [contained in Paul Avrich, **The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 118] The Makhnovists, likewise, argued that *"[o]nly labourers who are contributing work necessary to the social economy should participate in the soviets. Representatives of political organisations have no place in worker-peasant soviets, since their participation in a workers' soviet will transform the latter into deputies of the party and can lead to the downfall of the soviet system."* [contained in Peter Arshinov's **History of the Makhnovist Movement**, p. 266] As we discuss in [section 15](#) of the appendix on ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#), Leninists sometimes distort this into a claim that the Makhnovists opposed members of political standing for election.

This use of party lists meant that soviet delegates could be anyone. For example, the leading left-wing Menshevik Martov recounts that in early 1920 Bolsheviks in a chemical factory *"put up Lenin against me as a candidate [to the Moscow soviet]. I received seventy-six votes he-eight (in an open vote)." [quoted by Israel Getzler, Martov, p. 202]* How would either of these two intellectuals actually know and reflect the concerns and interests of the workers they would be "delegates" of? If the soviets were meant to be the delegates of working people, then why should non-working class members of political parties be elected to a soviet?

However, in spite of these problems, the Russian soviets were a key means of ensuring working class participation in the revolution. As recognised by all the socialist oppositions to the Bolsheviks, from the anarchists to the Mensheviks. As one historian put it:



*"Small wonder that the principal political demand of Mensheviks, Left SRs, SR Maximalists, Kronstadt sailors and of many oppositionists . . . has been for freely elected soviets which would this be restored to their original role as agents of democratisation."*  
[Israel Getzler, **Soviets as Agents of Democratisation**, p. 30]

The sad fate of the soviets after the Bolshevik seizure of power simply confirms the opinion of the left Menshevik Martov who had *"rubbed it in to the Bolsheviks . . . at the first All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions [in January 1918], that they who were now extolling the Soviets as the 'highest forms of the socialist development of the proletariat,' had shown little love of them in 1905 or in 1917 after the July days; they loved Soviets only when they were 'in the hands of the Bolshevik party.'"* [Getzler, **Martov**, p. 174] As the next few months showed, once the soviets left those hands, then the soviets themselves were destroyed. The civil war did not start this process, it just gave the latter-day supporters of Bolshevism something to use to justify these actions.

## **7 How did the factory committee movement develop?**

## **8 What was the Bolshevik position on "workers' control" in 1917?**

## **9 What happened to the factory committees after October?**

## **10 What were the Bolshevik economic policies in 1918?**

## **11 Did Bolshevik economic policies work?**

## **12 Was there an alternative to Lenin's "state capitalism" and "war communism"?**

**13 Did the Bolsheviks allow independent trade unions?**

**14 Was the Red Army really a revolutionary army?**

**15 Was the Red Army "filled with socialist consciousness"?**

**16 How did the civil war start and develop?**

**17 Was the civil war between just Reds and Whites?**

**18 How extensive was imperialist intervention?**

**19 Did the end of the civil war change Bolshevik policies?**

**20 Can the Red Terror and the Cheka be justified?**

**21 Did Bolshevik peasant policies work?**

**22 Was there an alternative to grain requisition?**

**23 Was the repression of the socialist opposition justified?**

**24 What did the anarchists do during the revolution?**

**25 Did the Russian revolution refute anarchism?**