Defending the dictatorship of the proletariat

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After the Russian revolution the Bolsheviks tried to establish the ‘dictatorship of the Proletariat’ in Russia. History shows us that this degenerated terribly, leading to Stalinism - so were the Bolsheviks right in what they did?

Drawing on the work of Marx and Engels, Lenin recognised the state as the product of irreconcilable class antagonisms, the mechanism by which a ruling class applies repressive force in order to defend its property relations from hostile classes. Ridiculing Menshevik and Kautskyite notions of a ?classless democracy?, Lenin emphasised that, in the period of the transition from capitalism to socialism, the working class would need to exercise a ruthless dictatorship over the bourgeoisie.

In The State and Revolution, published in September 1917, Lenin wrote:

?... the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of suppressing the oppressors, cannot result merely in an expansion of democracy. Simultaneously with an immense expansion of democracy, which for the ?rst time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags, the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force; it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence.?

As the division of society into classes was progressively undermined by the defeat of capitalist resistance and the development of the socialist economy, so the need for any special apparatus of repression would gradually disappear.

The workers’ state established in October 1917 represented an enormous extension of democracy to the toiling masses of Russia. Through the Soviet system workers, soldiers and peasants were able directly to elect their representatives and, through the recallability of Soviet delegates, hold them to account, in a manner impossible under the bourgeois parliamentary system.

The Bolsheviks, with an estimated 250,000 members by October, held a majority of the posts in the government established by the Second Soviet Congress, but did not rule alone. Initially they shared power with the left wing of the SRs who had supported the Soviet seizure of power. Authority in the factories was transferred to committees of the workers. In the army power was granted to soldiers? committees which could elect and dismiss of?cers. The former Czarist courts were abolished and a system for the election of judges was instituted.

Yet the hoped-for norms of the ?semi-state?, involving a plurality of working class parties within the Soviets and the maximum extension of proletarian democracy, were subsequently undermined. The root causes of this were the tremendous material backwardness of Russia in 1917, the crippling effects of the ensuing Civil War and the failure of the proletarian revolution to succeed in advanced Western Europe, most cruelly
of all in Germany.

The Bolsheviks saw the overthrow of capitalism in Russia as the first blow in a series of revolutionary overturns that would be necessary if working class power were to survive. This was so well-established a tenet of Bolshevism that even Stalin could write in 1924 (though these writings were subsequently withdrawn):

"For the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the efforts of one country are enough?to this the history of our own revolution testifies. For the final victory of socialism, for the organisation of socialist production, the efforts of one country, especially a peasant country like ours, are not enough?for this we must have the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries."

Lenin and Trotsky both commented on numerous occasions that without the extension of the revolution internationally, victory in Russia would be lost.

The fullest Soviet and proletarian democracy was necessary in order to go forward to socialism. But whilst the Bolsheviks had made and were making history, they were doing so within the constraints of the prevailing, concrete historical circumstances.

The immediate task facing the young Soviet republic was the defence of working class power against counter-revolution.

In 1918-19 fourteen capitalist states committed their armies to war against the fledgling workers? state. A savage civil war ensued in which White generals Kolchak, Denikin and Yudenich submitted the proletarian and peasant populations under their rule to widespread terror and dissolved all Soviet organisations within territories under their control, re-establishing the institutions of the bourgeois state.

The Bolsheviks were obliged to subordinate the requirements of socialist advance to the necessities of revolutionary defence. The Cheka was established as an extraordinary commission to combat counter-revolution. A standing army was re-created, and by mid-1918 it proved necessary to abolish the right to elect officers, in order that those with the greatest military expertise could be appointed without delay, rather than allowing for the gradual training of fresh commanders through the elective principle.

The intensity of the struggle against counter-revolution also demanded the limitation of the democratic rights of the Menshevik and SR parties. In fact it was not until July 1918 that the Mensheviks and the SRs were temporarily excluded from the Soviets. The Left SRs resigned from the Soviet government in protest at the necessary compromise made by the Bolshevik-led regime with German imperialism in the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty in March 1918.

Despite the Soviet legality of the government, which had been appointed and confirmed in office by successive All-Russian Congresses of Soviets, the Left SRs returned to their individual terrorist traditions. They launched an armed insurrection against the regime, which resulted in the shooting of Lenin and in the assassination of the leading Bolsheviks Volodarsky and Uritsky.

The Mensheviks and Right SRs also refused to operate as loyal Soviet opposition parties or to accept the validity of the regime and Soviet democracy. Worse, they manoeuvred with and assisted the forces of direct counter-revolution.

The Menshevik conference of December 1918 was compelled to admit in a resolution that, throughout the Soviet republic, their groups had allied themselves with the propertied classes and had even fought side by side with the Whites against the Red Army and proletarian power.
In such circumstances the Bolsheviks were obliged to exclude these parties from the Soviets. To have done otherwise would have strengthened the forces of bourgeois counter-revolution. Soviets are not like bourgeois parliaments; they are not mere talking shops designed to obscure the true dictatorial nature of class rule. Rather they are executive bodies, organs of the proletarian dictatorship in which the struggle of the working class against reaction can be hammered out in discussion and put into action. Under conditions of military conflict to tolerate supporters of the enemy in a council of war would have been tantamount to treason.

The exclusion of the Mensheviks and SRs from the Soviets was by no means part of a general strategy of the Bolsheviks to establish a one-party state. Both parties continued to operate legally outside the Soviets, and when the Left SRs voted to refrain from armed struggle against the rule of the Soviets, they were granted full rights to operate within them once again. The same approach was taken towards the Menshevik Internationalists when they voted to give direct support to the Soviet regime in the war against imperialist intervention.

Just as force of circumstance and the dynamics of the struggle for the defence of the revolution had obliged the Bolsheviks to retreat in the sphere of Soviet democracy, so their original stress on workers’ control at factory level came under pressure from the twin sources of civil war and economic crisis. In his book Before Stalinism?The rise and fall of Soviet democracy (Polity Press 1990), Sam Farber, a recent libertarian critic of Bolshevism, has asserted that the policy of War Communism, far from being a necessary retreat forced on the Bolsheviks, implicitly revealed ?the political and ideological priorities of mainstream Bolshevism?.

Farber argues that:
?. . . while this set of policies greatly expanded the powers of the central state and vigorously attempted to reduce the role of the market, at the same time it not only consolidated the Red Terror but for all intents and purposes eliminated workers? control of industry and democracy in the Soviets. Again, there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers? control or democracy in the Soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared in connection with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921. In fact . . . the very opposite is the case, e.g. Lenin defended one-man management as perfectly compatible with socialism.?

**Preservation**

This is untrue. Lenin had initially favoured the preservation of private ownership of large-scale industry and commerce under the supervision of the state. Workers’ control would, he hoped, operate as a check on the actions of managers and at the same time provide the workers with a valuable school for self-management of industry. He envisaged the co-ordination of the economy through a Supreme Economic Council involving the unions, co-operatives of consumers and the factory committees which would enforce workers’ control at plant level.

It was not the Bolsheviks? doctrinaire prejudice in favour of state ownership but the actions of workers themselves that led to the nationalisations of the ?rst half of 1918. In response to capitalist sabotage, and even the ?ight of the property owners, the workers took over factories and enterprises and raised the demand for nationalisation. It was the very organs of workers’ control that Farber slates the Bolsheviks for subsequently muzzling that carried out the nationalisation policy he so despises. And yet despite the forced pace of these nationalisations, they completed the process of expropriating the capitalists.

But in conditions of acute shortages and economic dislocation, in the face of the unfolding civil war, the factory committees were unable to meet the tasks of co-ordinating production nationally. They too often treated their own enterprise as an independent unit, trading or exchanging between
themselves and obliged to realise a profit in order to compete, in the manner of separate autonomous privately owned enterprises. This self-managed system may have been attractive to petit bourgeois utopians, to anarchists and even to ultra-left elements within the Bolsheviks, but it threatened to undermine the very basis of the workers’ state itself.

Faced with this Lenin argued for a retreat. Contrary to Farber’s assertions, he recognised it as such, and in calling for the re-introduction of Taylorism, ‘one-man management?’, the use of specialists, the piece-rate system and bonuses for certain labour communes he admitted that:

?This measure not only implies the cessation?in a certain ?eld and to a certain degree?of the offensive against capital . . . it is also a step backward on the part of our socialist Soviet state power . . . To conceal from the people the fact that the enlistment of bourgeois experts by means of extremely high salaries is a retreat from the principles of the Paris Commune would be sinking to the level of the bourgeois politicians and deceiving the people.?

Initially from June 1918 factory committees continued to play an advisory role, retaining important powers but unable to exercise fully autonomous management. But in November 1919, the Soviet Republic was staring collapse in the face. Food shortages threatened the cities with immediate starvation, and the White Army reached within 200 miles of Moscow.

As a war measure the Bolsheviks were obliged to severely restrict the power of factory committees and to raise labour discipline. One-man management and Workers’ Disciplinary Courts were introduced, which were overseen by the trade unions. The Council of Labour and Defence was obliged to turn to the conscription of labour in order to keep the economy going in the face of the war threat. The crudest of the measures of War Communism?the requisitioning of grain?was undertaken in response to the real threat of mass starvation in the cities and the stockpiling of grain in the storehouses of the rich peasants (Kulaks).

The alternative proposed by Sam Farber to the measures of War Communism is reliance on market forces. This is sheer utopianism. In conditions of civil war, with a terribly depleted proletariat and the territory controlled by the Reds down to the size of sixteenth century Muscovy, normal trade could not survive and the Bolsheviks knew it.

War Communism, far from being a deliberate and preconceived plan to reduce the role of democracy at factory level in the interests of a ruling elite, was the precondition for the survival of any type of Soviets and for the very survival of the workers’ state. The alternative in reality was not Farber’s utopia, but victory for the White generals. It is to the credit of the Bolsheviks that they did not ?inch from extraordinary measures to defend the gains of October.

The continuation of grain requisitioning and the militarisation of labour at the end of the civil war were certainly mistakes for which the Bolsheviks were to pay dearly. Peasant revolts, strikes and the Kronstadt rebellion demonstrated this and forced the tremendous economic retreat of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Were the Bolsheviks justified in crushing the Kronstadt revolt? We believe so. We do not glorify this tragic episode, but we recognise its necessity and legitimacy in the face of the threat the rising posed to the existence of the workers’ state.

The Kronstadt sailors, despite radical demands and rhetoric couched in the language of defending and extending Soviet power, reflected in their social composition and in their programme the social weight and interests of the peasantry. As the mutineers? proclamation made clear: ?Let the whole world know, the
power of the Soviets frees the toiling peasantry from the yoke of the Communists?. This was a revolt of the petit-bourgeoisie against the severity and hardship imposed by the proletarian revolution.

The demand for Soviets without Communists meant, in the concrete conditions facing the republic at that time, the disintegration of working class rule. That is why the demand was immediately taken up by reactionaries, the SRs and bourgeois liberals. If the Bolsheviks had delayed in crushing the revolt, French and White plans to land at Kronstadt and launch an offensive on Petrograd could have succeeded. The involvement in the revolt of misguided but subjectively revolutionary elements did not alter and ought not to have altered the determination of the Communists to crush it.

Kronstadt more than any other event alerted the Communists to the need to retreat from War Communism and end the requisitioning of grain. The smychka?the alliance of the working class with the peasantry?had been an essential pre-requisite to October and was crucial to the survival of the revolution. Hence the need for NEP, with all its attendant risks in promoting the growth of the rich peasantry and bureaucratisation of the party itself.

In order to prevent the concessions being made to the peasantry promoting the development of alien class forces within the Communist Party, the Tenth Congress of the party in 1921 imposed a ban on party factions. This was not intended to prevent discussion altogether. Thus paragraph 4 of the draft resolution on Party Unity declared that ?Criticism of the Party?s shortcomings, which is absolutely necessary, must be conducted in such a way that every practical proposal shall be submitted immediately, without any delay, in the most precise form possible, for consideration and decision to the leading local and central bodies of the Party.? But such proposals were not to be submitted to groups formed on the basis of platforms.

The ban was intended to be a temporary measure to resist the pressure of the petit-bourgeoisie and peasantry within the party. Platforms in elections to the Central Committee were not prohibited. The ban was accompanied by a purge which aimed to expel careerist elements who had ?ocked into its organisations throughout the Civil War.

However, far from immunising the party against bureaucratisation and adaptation to alien class elements, the ban and the purge had the opposite effect. It laid the ground for the emergence and domination within the apparatus of the Stalin clique, itself a faction perfectly adapted to the petit-bourgeois outlook of the emerging bureaucratic ruling stratum. It utilised its control to throw open the gates of the party to place-seekers and pliant of?cialdom as soon as Lenin had died. The party members were denied the opportunity to discuss and develop political ideas.

We believe, as did Trotsky towards the end of his life, that the ban on factions was a mistake. It inhibited class consciousness within the party and hence in Soviet society. Neither can it be argued that the ban was unavoidable. From 1917-21, when the party faced the gravest of dangers from within and without, a strictly centralised but fully democratic internal structure enabled debate and discussion around central issues such as the trade union question, the Brest-Litovsk peace (even at the time of the Left SR revolt), and about the planning and desirability of the insurrection itself on the eve of October.

The application of NEP to preserve the smychka should have been accompanied by the fullest possible discussion at all levels of the party and the rede?nition of the party programme in order to make the exclusion of alien class elements possible without encouraging incipient bureaucratisation. By October 1923 Trotsky and the opposition, in the ?Platform of the Forty-Six?, drew attention to the fact that the ban had assisted rather than impeded bureaucratisation, though at that stage Trotsky still accepted it as having been a necessity.
Independence

The ban was not a result of Lenin and Trotsky’s desire to establish a pliant party or hostility to the very principles of proletarian democracy, but a dangerous and ultimately failed attempt to preserve the political independence of the workers’ interests within the party. It was not part of Bolshevism’s programme or normal method of operating, as the Stalinists later claimed.

The Revolution degenerated due to its isolation, the enforced nature of compromise with the peasantry, the economic and social devastation wrought by the wars of intervention and the civil war, and the failure of the European workers to take power.

In the face of these conditions, the revolutionary leadership of the Bolsheviks correctly sought to defend the revolution. Lenin towards the end of his life and Trotsky, in the 1923 opposition and after, fought against the bureaucratisation of the party, ultimately without success. But their fight reveals that the degeneration of the Russian Revolution was not the consequence of the Bolsheviks’ programme.

Those emergency measures were necessary departures from the real programme of Bolshevism for workers’ democracy. The usurpation of power by the Stalin faction negated that programme and destroyed the revolution.

The core of Farber’s critique, and that of all libertarians, is that it was impermissible to sacrifice workers’ democracy, plurality of Soviet parties, and workers’ control at factory level—even if only temporarily—in the defence of the economic gains of the revolution. He compares the norms of workers’ democracy in a healthy semi-state with the forms it must adopt in a life-or-death struggle with capital and objects to what he sees.

With such a normative method Farber, and all libertarian critics of Bolshevism, reveal their own passivity and bankruptcy. Faced with the first serious obstacle that reality places in the way of the dictatorship of the proletariat these critics give up.

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