

The Russian workers and the Bolshevik party in power

By Simon Pirani. Talk presented to the Iranian Socialist Forum, 24 September 2006.

Introduction/what the talk is about

This talk is about the relationship between the Bolshevik party and the Russian workers after the 1917 revolution. Specifically, it covers the period between 1920, when the civil war between the “Reds” (Bolsheviks) and “Whites” (counter-revolutionaries) came to an end, to 1924, when the clique headed by Joseph Stalin began to consolidate its power at the top of the state hierarchy.

The talk is based on research I have recently completed for my doctoral dissertation. I have concentrated on events in Moscow, the Soviet capital. Incidentally, if any listeners are interested to read various articles I have written, they can email the organisers of this discussion, and we can let you know where to find these.

Before starting it's worth telling you why I did the research, and why I concentrated on that particular period. I am a socialist and, like millions of others, grew up believing that the 1917 revolution – the first revolution that produced a government claiming to be a workers' government – was the most important event of the 20th century. I still believe that. The other so-called workers' states, such as those in China and eastern Europe, were brought into being not so much by mass action as by military action. Other revolutions in which vast sections of the population participated directly produced governments that were anti-worker and anti-socialist: the Iranian revolution is perhaps the clearest example. So the Russian revolution remains the best example of a workers' revolution that we have.

For many decades I, like many socialists, also assumed that the government produced by the Russian revolution – Lenin's government – provided us with something of a working model for the future, a guide to work with. I never had any illusions about the Stalinist dictatorship that took shape in the late 1920s; I always thought, and still think, it was anti-working-class and anti-socialist. But I thought of Lenin's government, and Lenin's party, as models that, with some modification, could be adapted for use in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. When I started my research six years ago I was no longer so sure about this. Now I am certain that it was wrong.

Lenin's government tried to do what it was doing in very adverse circumstances. No sooner had it come to power than Russia was plunged into a civil war in which counter-revolutionaries sought to drive out the Bolsheviks and return one or another traditional form of capitalist rule. Had they been successful, the counter-revolutionaries (“Whites”) would surely have crushed workers' organisations, destroyed such democratic freedoms as there were, and reversed the land reforms that had won the Bolsheviks support among the peasants. The Bolsheviks hung on grimly to power during the civil war, and in the course of doing so, forgot about – or temporarily abandoned implementation of, depending on your interpretation – many of the socialist principles they had espoused in 1917. Democratic principles – the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, the primacy of soviets of elected workers' and peasants' deputies, the right of self-determination for the colonised nations in the Russian empire, free political association and free speech, and the abolition of the death penalty – were breached, on the grounds that everything had to be subordinated to the aim of winning the civil war.

There are no doubt many lessons to be learned from a critique of Bolshevik actions during the civil war. But such a critique would be tempered by a recognition that the Bolsheviks' room for manoeuvre really was very, very limited. They lived with daily crises in which military defeat, famine and disease, and collapse of the economy and of the country's transport infrastructure

loomed. 1920 was a turning point. While none of these threats had been completely overcome by then, or for some years afterwards, by the middle of that year the main “White” armies were beaten and within the Bolshevik party itself, and among workers, discussion began about how to build the new society. This is one of the reasons I decided to research the post-civil-war period. The Bolsheviks’ room for manoeuvre increased. Policy discussions were focused not on how to survive the latest onslaught of the “Whites” or the European powers, but on how to build the economy and the so-called “workers’ state”. Force of circumstance continued to play a strong part in determining what the Bolsheviks did in this period, but improved circumstances allowed them to make real choices. Examination of these choices tells us much about the validity of their ideas for socialist and democratic change.

It may make it easier for listeners to follow the talk if I say something now about my main conclusions. The first concerns the Bolshevik party. I will argue that in the post-civil-war period the party practiced “vanguardism in power”. It believed that it, and not the working class, had the right and duty to take political decisions and exercise political power. Faced with the possibility of reinvigorating the soviets, the main organs of workers’ democracy, that had ceased to function during the civil war, it failed to do so – because it did not want worker socialists outside the Bolshevik party to participate in making decisions. Faced with socialist parties and groups that wanted soviet rule but were politically opposed to the Bolsheviks, it used the repressive apparatus of the state to silence them.

The second conclusion concerns the state apparatus that the Bolsheviks were constructing at this time. In the spring of 1921, the crisis between the Bolsheviks and the workers who had supported them in 1917 reached its height. After an interruption in food supplies that threatened some of the big industrial areas with serious shortages, there was a wave of strikes. At the Kronshadt naval base, which had been a bastion of Bolshevism in 1917, the sailors revolted against the government. After this crisis, the government decided that in order to ensure stable food supply and to rebuild the economy, it would abandon the state-centred approach to economic construction and encourage privately owned peasant holdings, private trade and a small amount of private industry, alongside the state-owned sectors. Industry remained state-owned, and the Bolsheviks argued that expansion of the state-owned sector was at the heart of building socialism. My research – which is concentrated in Moscow, where more than 95% of workers worked in the state sector – shows that, from the start, workers’ labour in this sector remained alienated in every possible sense. Management methods reminiscent of tsarist Russia were prevalent; expressions of non-Bolshevik political opinion and attempts to expand working-class participation in the process of decision-making were heavily punished; and all the experiments of 1917-18 in giving workers some measure of control in the process of production were junked. The Bolsheviks believed, nevertheless, that the state they were building was a “workers’” state, and that its working-class character was guaranteed by their own presence at the top. While I am not convinced that they could have rebuilt the economy more rapidly or effectively than they did, I am convinced that by calling their state a “workers’ state”, and identifying it with socialism, they did a terrible disservice to the workers’ movement. If socialism is taken in the sense that Marx meant it – as a movement to recreate society by superseding both the state and private property, a movement in which the stress is laid on democracy, on collective creativity – then the state being built under Lenin was, and perhaps could not have been other than, a negation of socialism. Surely, then, it can not have been a workers’ state.

Another conclusion concerns the way that the Bolsheviks managed their relationship with the working class in the years under discussion. In the period after 1921, I argue that they offered the working class what might be described as a “social contract”, along the following lines: that if workers increased production, and maintained labour discipline – both of which were very badly needed for the economic recovery – then the Bolsheviks would for their part ensure that workers’

living standards would increase. During the civil war living standards had fallen way, way below what they had been back in 1913, before the disruptions of the first world war and the revolution. And even after the civil war they were still way down – in 1921 wages were usually less than half what they had been in 1913. So this was an attractive offer from the workers' point of view. But there was a corollary: while workers could challenge decisions about pay and conditions at factory level, broader political decisions would be appropriated by the party. Workers' political activity was effectively limited to public displays of support for the government. I argue that such displays were the opposite of the type of widespread political participation that had begun to develop in 1917, and the wiping-out of which was one of the worst defeats of the period.

The talk will be structured as follows. First I will talk about the working class, and working class politics, and refer to some key events at the end of the Russian civil war. Then I will talk about the party and its politics. Then I will talk briefly about the rise of the new Soviet ruling class, and the party's role in this. Then I will draw some conclusions, and I hope that will provoke some questions and discussion.

The working class and working-class politics

Let us think about the Russian working class as it emerged from the civil war in 1920. It had been through seven years of war and revolution that had sharply reduced its numbers and weakened it as a fighting force. The population of Moscow, the capital city and one of the largest concentrations of workers, had fallen by half, from about one million to about 500,000. Most Moscow workers at that time were first- or second-generation migrants from the countryside, and most of these migrants maintained strong connections with their home villages. During the war and the civil war, with factories closing due to lack of supplies or fuel, many workers returned to their villages, where they were more likely to get fed. Skilled workers whose labour was in short supply sometimes moved to other industrial centres in search of higher pay. During the first world war, many workers were conscripted to the army; in 1918-20, during the civil war, many more, and especially those with Bolshevik sympathies, joined the Red army. Back in Moscow, women and new in-migrants met such demand for labour as there was. Meanwhile, workers' living standards collapsed. Hyperinflation destroyed all value that money had. Workers relied on rations, or "payment in kind", supplemented by what they could find on the markets. Fuel and firewood were in short supply too.

The issue of the demographic decline of the working class became sharply politicised. When workers protested or went on strike – most often because they were short of food and rations they had expected had not arrived, but sometimes in protest at Bolshevik policies – Lenin and other Bolsheviks often dismissed them as "deproletarianised" workers who had arrived from the countryside and replaced the "genuine", "conscious" workers. The skilled male workers with a long history of trade union organisation, who were the conscious soul of the working class, were away dying and fighting at the front, and what remnants were left behind in the factories were indifferent to, or hostile to, the struggle – or so the rhetoric ran. This argument has continued to colour the view of historians. One of the most well-known socialist historians of the Soviet regime, Isaac Deutscher, described the workers' movement at the end of the civil war as "an empty shell". The soviets became "creatures of the Bolshevik party", he said, because they "could not represent a virtually non-existent working class".

In the last two or three decades, a younger generation of historians of the workers' movement has researched this issue again, and shown that Deutscher's view was one-sided. In 1985 the American historian Diane Koenker made a detailed analysis of the demographic changes among workers. Broadly, she concluded that, yes, the working class was weakened, but no, it did not cease to exist. Some Moscow industries virtually ground to a halt, particularly those producing consumer goods – but others, including metallurgical and clothing factories supplying the army, increased output.

While some experienced workers left for the civil war fronts, most of the Red army recruits were young peasants or peasants-turned-workers; and many old-timers remained in the factories, keeping the traditions of the workers' movement alive as best they could. My research emphasises, moreover, that the working class not only did not disappear in the physical sense, but that it did not disappear in the political sense either. Factory committees and trade union organisations were naturally weakened when activists left for the front or left the city to work elsewhere. But they did not collapse. The metalworkers, the largest single group of workers in the city of Moscow, continued to hold city-wide assemblies that – in the absence of a functioning soviet – became the leading working-class political forum. In late 1920 and early 1921, arguments raged in these meetings about such issues as the way that the rationing system was organised – who got how much food, in other words – about the role of the trades unions in industrial management, and about the policy of food requisitioning from the peasantry that was causing uproar in the countryside.

It's important to bear in mind that in 1920 – that is, the first year after the civil war – the Bolshevik party pursued an economic policy based on ever-tightening central state control and ownership. State ownership was expanded to almost the whole of industry; there was a state monopoly in many areas of trade; prices were controlled, and quite a few Bolsheviks thought that, before long, money would be abolished and trade refashioned as a series of state-controlled barter transactions. Labour was controlled, too. Compulsory mobilisation of labour, and the use of military-style "labour armies", which had originally been used during the civil war to ensure that vital industries had enough workers, was expanded: it was used, for example, in the transport sector, to rescue it from a state of collapse. It's easy to forget about this important episode of Bolshevik history, because at the beginning of 1921 the Bolsheviks quickly abandoned this policy and introduced the New Economic Policy, which bore similarity to what is these days called a "mixed economy". But in 1920, nothing could have been further from many Bolsheviks' minds. Indeed illustrious Bolshevik leaders, such as Bukharin and Trotsky, wrote pamphlets explaining how centralised state control, including compulsory mobilisation of labour and other dictatorial forms of organisation, were almost the same thing as socialism.

In the factories, while workers were interested in the political issues about how socialism would be developed – and there is evidence that they followed discussions on such subjects with interest – the main thing that concerned them in 1920 was rationing policy. This made a big difference to how they were going to feed their families. With food in short supply, and different government departments and organisations anxious to keep workers at their workplaces, a desperate competition for rations developed. While attempts were made to simplify the system, to base it on three or four categories of rations, various party committees and industrial organisations were constantly thinking up ways to get extra ration entitlements, in the hope of improving their workers' situation. As you can imagine, most of the office-based officials were not shy about making sure that whoever went short of rations, it was not them. All types of corruption, from getting double or triple rations for oneself to large-scale bribery and theft, was rampant.

As well as the issue of bureaucratic corruption, another issue about which passions ran high was the privileges of the party elite. Although this elite was small at this stage, and its privileges pretty modest, a great deal of political heat was generated by the idea that, in a workers' state, leaders might be getting more, just for being leaders. While some Bolsheviks, such as Bukharin, refused on principle to accept privileges, Lenin consistently defended such conditions on the grounds that leaders needed them to work effectively. So Bukharin wanted to live in an ordinary flat, instead of in the National Hotel with the other Bolshevik leaders – but the central committee instructed him to move to the hotel. Another sensitive subject was the living conditions of the Bolshevik leaders and their staff in the Kremlin, and in September 1920 there was such a row at a party conference about this that a special commission was set up to investigate it. The commission produced a report showing that central committee members had extra meals, in some cases luxurious living

conditions, too many cars, and other privileges – but it was kept secret, and not published until 1992.

Issues of material privilege and bureaucratic corruption were frequently discussed at workers' meetings, where the demand of "equal rations for all" became very popular. It wasn't always clear how much equality there should be: for example, some workers, such as those supplying the Red army, themselves had larger rations, and they weren't enthusiastic about giving these up. But the main thrust of this slogan was against the perceived privilege both of Moscow's large army of bureaucrats, and of the party elite. Within the party, rank and file members protested against the living conditions at the top, arguing that in times of hardship all communists should sacrifice equally.

Tensions mounted between workers and the party throughout 1920, and led to a confrontation in the spring of 1921. The main reason for this was a transport crisis that came to a head in January 1921. Food supplies from the countryside were loaded on to trains to go to Moscow and Petrograd, Russia's second capital, but due to lack of fuel and other problems on the railways, did not arrive. Things were made worse by the anti-market policy of the government, which had resulted in the closure of Moscow's largest market by Bolshevik armed forces in December 1920. In Moscow, the city's party leadership had to cut rations in the middle of January, and, although during 1920 it had had little sympathy with strikes for "equality of rations", it now accepted that principle, and cancelled all types of special rations. By then, though, discontent was spreading fast.

At the end of February 1921, there was a wave of strikes across Moscow. The slogan for "equal rations" could be heard everywhere, and, in some places, particularly where other socialist parties such as the Social Revolutionaries and anarchists had support, resolutions were passed making democratic demands, such as an end to repression against pro-soviet parties. There were also strike waves in Petrograd, Saratov and other industrial centres. And in the first few days of March, the sailors at Kronshtadt revolted, demanding a return to soviets elected on the principles of workers' democracy, and the right of free speech and organisation for all pro-soviet parties. Briefly, it may be said that, while it was mainly an action by pro-soviet sailors, there is some evidence that counter-revolutionary forces wanted to exploit it to get at the Bolshevik government. The Bolsheviks, convinced that they were in danger, and having no intention of meeting the sailors' demands, put the revolt down forcibly, in a military attack which resulted in hundreds of deaths. The sight of a so-called workers' government gunning down workers shocked and divided supporters of the Russian revolution, and arguments have continued to rage about it ever since.

In recent years it has become fashionable among right-wing historians to claim that at this moment Russia was on the verge of a new revolution – or counter-revolution, we might say – and that the sailors and their supporters could have overthrown the Bolsheviks and installed some other type of government. In my opinion there was no prospect of such an event. The sailors, and many workers, wanted better food supplies and they wanted a return to the principles of soviet democracy of 1917. But very few of these people seriously wanted a violent overthrow of the Bolsheviks, as they knew that would probably result in the reimposition of a capitalist regime. For this reason, although there were strike waves in many industrial centres before the Kronshtadt revolt, there were no strikes at all organised in sympathy with it.

While workers did not want to overthrow the Bolsheviks, many of them were far from being uncritical supporters. In fact in the spring of 1921 an independent workers' movement developed in which many different political tendencies played a part. One excellent source of information on this are the minutes of an explosive two-day conference of the Moscow metalworkers, held in February 1921 during the strike wave. This conference shocked the Bolsheviks. They had always thought of the metalworkers as their strongest supporters in the workers' movement, but when party leaders

arrived at this meeting, they were heckled and accused both of hoarding privilege while workers went hungry, and of using dictatorial and repressive methods to silence workers who disagreed with them. The meeting passed resolutions calling for “equality of rations”, changes to the pay structure, and a greater role for trade unions in industrial management. These resolutions were most actively supported by worker socialists who had supported the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 but were not party members. There was also a significant grouping in the meeting that supported the Social Revolutionary (SR) party, the historic party of the Russian peasantry. And some SR supporters were among those who put together perhaps the most important resolution at the meeting, which called for the replacement of grain requisitioning in the countryside with a “tax in kind”, that is, called for peasants to be able to keep the surplus they produced as a means to stimulate the agricultural sector and increase the supply of food. This ran counter to the statist economic policy that the Bolsheviks had continued throughout 1920. Some rank and file Bolsheviks at the meeting said that using market mechanisms to stimulate peasant agricultural production was an unforgivable retreat from the gains made during the civil war. Nevertheless, the resolution was passed – and within days, the same theme was taken up by the Bolshevik party itself. The abolition of grain requisitioning and the introduction of the “tax in kind”, which meant allowing peasants to hand over a set portion of their produce and keep the rest to sell on the market, was a central point of the New Economic Policy adopted in March 1921.

There are three tendencies to note in the workers’ movement of early 1921, which continued to play a role in one way or another throughout the early 1920s.

The first was the continued activity of non-Bolshevik socialist parties, people who had sided with the “Reds” during the civil war. In Moscow there were active groups of Mensheviks, left-wing SRs and anarchists. The Bolshevik response to their activity was fairly consistent: they were subject to continuous harassment. Their members were arrested, their publications confiscated and their meetings broken up. In a notorious incident in May 1921, a group of Mensheviks and SRs in the Butyrka prison in Moscow, including elected delegates to the city soviet, was beaten up by officers of the Cheka (special detachments).

The second, much more widespread phenomenon, was the organisation of “non party” socialist groups, made up of worker socialists who had refrained from joining, or left, the various socialist parties. Some of these workers followed the strong non-party tradition that had appeared among worker socialists in 1917, who opposed the division of the political forces of the working class into different parties, and argued for unity. Some of them were supporters of non-Bolshevik socialist ideas – in particular various shades of SR politics – who had little confidence in the organising abilities of the small, repressed groups that formally represented those parties. Some were former Bolsheviks who considered that the Bolshevik party had abandoned the principles of 1917. These groups became powerful in many Moscow factories, and in one of the most important factories, the AMO car works, won a majority on the factory committee, repeatedly defeating the Bolshevik cell at the factory in elections.

The third phenomenon was the appearance of dissident communist groups who left the party and published their own manifestoes and newspapers. In Moscow, the first of these was the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party formed by the veteran Bolshevik Vasilii Paniushkin, who left the party in 1921, and supported demands by the non-party groups and other socialist parties for greater democracy on the Moscow soviet. Another notable group was the Workers Truth group, formed by rank and file party members who after Red army service were studying at the communist university; their critique of the party and its apparatus was the most radical and far-reaching, and they said the party had become the representative of a “technical organising intelligentsia” that would build a new type of capitalism in Russia. A third group, the Workers Group, had very strong support among rank-and-file Bolshevik workers and soldiers in Moscow, and although it believed in trying to

change the party from within, its leaders were expelled from the Moscow organisation in early 1923. All these groups, within weeks of quitting the Bolshevik party, faced arrests, sackings and exile to Siberia.

In April 1921 new soviet elections were called, the first after the civil war. In Moscow, the Bolsheviks had a majority, but only because they won seats in small workplaces and among office workers. The non-party socialists heavily defeated the Bolsheviks in all the large factories, and out of 2000 delegates they had 500 seats. The Bolsheviks regarded this as a humiliating defeat for themselves. But when the soviet convened, they ignored appeals by the non-party socialists to work together on the soviet executive. Using their office-based majority, they elected an executive where the big factories who voted for the non-party socialists were simply not represented. This refusal to work together with socialists, supporters of the revolution, who represented workers who had lost faith with the Bolshevik government, is to my mind typical of what I call “vanguardism in power”. It is a perfect example of a moment where the Bolsheviks had a real choice – to broaden the political base of their government and to reinvigorate the workers’ democracy that had appeared in 1917 – and decided not to do it because they did not trust workers who were outside their own ranks. This monopolisation of political power did great damage to the workers’ movement. It distanced the Bolshevik party from many of the most active, most political workers. It turned the soviet into an empty talking-shop, because the Bolsheviks simply used it to rubber-stamp resolutions that had been worked out in advance inside the party. In short, it represented a lost chance to revive workers’ democracy. The Bolsheviks had decided, instead, to wield political power on their own.

The party and party politics

In the next part of the talk, I will say something about the party, about how it changed in the first few years after the civil war, and about the new relationships it established with workers after NEP was introduced in 1921.

Let’s think about the type of organisation that the party was. If, before the revolution, it was a network of underground worker activists and intellectuals, and, in 1917, large numbers of workers and soldiers flooded into its ranks, by 1920 it had changed again. It was a party literally steeled on the fields of battle in the civil war. A survey of party members in September 1920 found that, in Moscow, out of every ten party members, five had joined in the last year, that is, 1919-20; three had joined between the October revolution and August 1919; one during 1917; and one before that. Nationally, 89% of party members were male, and of these, 70% had completed military training, mostly at the front.

Those who joined the party before the revolution, and whose ideas about socialism were formed by reading Marx and other classics, were in a small minority. Most of the members had read a few pamphlets by Engels or Kautsky, at best. In view of how things turned out after the civil war, and the rapidity with which a party-state elite coalesced inside the Bolshevik party, it is worth drawing attention to the strong streak of statist socialism that existed among these members. Senior Bolsheviks complained that one of the most popular books among these “civil war communists” was *Looking Backward*, by the right-wing American socialist writer Edward Bellamy, which depicted a socialist future where workers were marshalled like bees in a hive by a tight-knit elite.

There is a fair bit of evidence that in 1920, as the Bolsheviks pressed ahead with a centralised, statist economic policy, many of these “civil war communists” thought that labour compulsion, the state monopoly in industry and trade, and all the rest, would quickly lead to so-called “socialism”. And when the party leadership, faced with the food and transport crisis, opted in 1921 for the New Economic Policy, based on allowing controlled use of market mechanisms, they saw this as a

dreadful betrayal. The introduction of NEP, of a “mixed economy”, led to the rapid enrichment not only of the party elite, but of a class of traders, shopkeepers and industrial managers. The sight of the nouveau riche, flaunting their wealth in Moscow restaurants, disgusted the communists who returned from the civil war fronts, often unemployed, injured or ill. The so-called “proletkult” poets, who had spent the civil war writing about socialist utopias of the future, cursed the wealth created under NEP. Of the “civil war communists” in general, some joined dissident groups, which protested with particular vehemence against material privilege in the party hierarchy; some left the party in disgust; some even committed suicide. But the majority accepted the argument put forward by the Bolshevik leaders in 1921, that the main tasks were to build the new state apparatus, and to rebuild the economy. As the worker party members returned from the Red army to Moscow, they rarely returned to the factories from which they had come. They more often went into administrative jobs in local or central government, or became industrial managers. In 1921, the Moscow party secretary, Isaak Zelenskii, complained that the party was like a pump, sucking members out of the factories and pushing them into administrative and management jobs. This severely weakened the factory cells, whose function was to explain government policy to workers, and to encourage discipline in the work forces, and they remained weak in many factories until a mass recruitment campaign, the “Lenin enrolment”, held in January 1924 just after Lenin’s death.

Now I will say a little about the period after 1921 when industry was being rebuilt, the economy was getting back on its feet, and a new set of relationships were being formed between the party, the industrial managers and other people in the apparatus, and the workers. The industrial revival started right after NEP was introduced, in 1921, and by about 1925 levels of production, and standards of living, at last got back to what they had been before the first world war. Workers and their families naturally longed for an end to the years of hunger, disease and deprivation produced by the first world war and civil war, and the economic revival made this possible. Approximately, real wages were at one fifth of their 1913 level in 1920, around a half in early 1922, and back to the 1913 level in 1925. Other statistics, such as those for food consumption, show a similar pattern. But politically, these years were a disaster. The party’s monopolisation of political power intensified; the minority of politically conscious workers who wanted to participate in politics, but not on the party’s terms – be they non-party socialists, Mensheviks, anarchists, or dissident communists – faced isolation and repression; and within the party, privileged groupings of industrial managers, state administrators and others began to coalesce into an elite that would become the new Soviet ruling class.

As I said in the introduction, I describe the deal offered to the working class by the party at this time as a “social contract”. Workers had to maintain labour discipline and increase production and productivity. The party would then ensure that living standards continued to rise. And while workers could protest about particular problems at factory level, any working-class political action in the wider sense was ruled out, if it was not under the party’s control. Those who tried it were faced with increasingly harsh repression. And the majority of workers, often angry with the incursions on workers’ democracy, but not prepared to challenge them actively, conceded the political sphere to the Bolsheviks.

I have already said something about the way this “social contract” operated on the Moscow soviet. The executive was packed out with the Bolsheviks and their loyal allies. Dissidents were shouted down at meetings, subject to harassment by the Cheka special forces, and to energetic slander campaigns. The result was that the soviet became a lifeless formality. Pre-prepared resolutions were brought from party bodies and passed without discussion. Lectures were given by party leaders and debate made impossible. The majority of workers, unwilling to enter into open political conflict with the party, responded by shrugging their shoulders and abstaining from elections. During the soviet elections of November 1923, for example, the Cheka agents who monitored events in the workplaces reported a very high level of abstention at most large workplaces, usually between 50%

and 90% at the big textile mills in the countryside surrounding Moscow. Workers voted with their feet.

Another field of independent working-class activity that was stifled was in the trade unions. Straight after the 1917 revolution, trade union apparatuses had been established, financed from government funds. Although everyone in the Bolshevik party agreed that this was an undesirable state of affairs, and that the unions should be financed and run independently, they never were. In 1922 a campaign was run to ensure that workers contributed their subscriptions to shop-floor activists, instead of having them deducted in advance from their wages. But the campaign failed. The unions grew as an apparatus, closely linked to the state apparatus. The other problem was the party's attitude to strikes. This issue was discussed at the 11th party congress in 1922, and while the right to strike was formally accepted, it was heavily qualified with statements that strikes in enterprises owned by the state – the so-called “workers’ state” – went against the wider interest of the working class and should be avoided. In Moscow, where more than 90% of workers worked in state-owned enterprises, this meant in practice that most strikes were rapidly deemed to be illegal. There were hundreds of short strikes at workplace level – often about such issues as the late payment of wages, which was widespread, or about piece work rates – and these were usually settled by negotiation. But where workers tried to organise industry-wide strikes, or solidarity strikes with workers in another enterprise, the party clamped down swiftly. The standard answer to such strikes was the sacking, and if necessary arrest, of the leaders. The mass sacking of workforces, and their re-employment without “troublemakers”, was also common. These practices were defended, at the time and subsequently, on the grounds that the building of the economy was a higher interest than the sectional interest of the workers involved. But the net effect was that the “workers’ state” was imposing on workers all the relationships characteristic of alienated labour, and the workers’ movement was being weakened and its foremost activists being driven out of the factories.

While the soviets and unions were weakened, and participatory workers’ democracy smothered, the Bolsheviks began to organise big public displays of support for the regime, in which workers were invited to play a part – a politically passive part. In 1922, such displays of support were organised for campaigns such as the confiscation of church valuables for famine relief, and a campaign around the trial of those leaders of the SR party who had taken the “White” side during the civil war. A notable part of this latter campaign was the demand, raised by Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks, for the death penalty to be used against the SR leaders. The abolition of the death penalty had been an important democratic slogan in 1917, and although the death penalty had frequently been used during the civil war, the Bolsheviks and all other socialists had spoken of it as an important socialist principle, to be implemented as soon as the civil war ended. In 1922, the party broke with this tradition. At factory meetings, resolutions calling for the death penalty were moved by party members, and pressure put on workers to vote for this. It is interesting to note from trade union and factory records that many workers refused to support such resolutions, not out of sympathy with the SRs, but out of belief in the principle of abolition. Others simply refused to participate in meetings where these issues were discussed.

The party's political record during the early years of NEP may be summed up as follows. As the economy revived, the factories started up again, and the conditions for working-class political activity became more favourable, the party blocked all forms of that political activity that it did not control. It mobilised workers on campaigns, such as those on church valuables or the trial of the SRs, that had been decided on in advance by its own leadership. Workers were encouraged to march on the streets in support of slogans that the party had decided, but workers were given no part in deciding what the slogans were. Working-class participatory democracy of the kind that had begun to develop in Russia in 1917 was made impossible. Those who tried to develop it, in the non-party group on the Moscow soviet, in the factories, or even in the other socialist groups, were silenced, by repressive means if necessary. The organisations through which working-class

participatory action should have and could have been encouraged, the soviets and the unions, became empty shells through which party directives were transmitted. In a word, the party expropriated political power from the working class.

At the 11th party congress in 1922, the last one that Lenin took part in, he gave a speech in which the logic of the Bolsheviks' "vanguardism in power" was made clear. Lenin warned the congress against recruiting too many workers to the party. He rebuked those Bolsheviks who claimed that the economic recovery, and the consequent return of many workers to the factories, provided a new reservoir of working-class activists, and opportunities for a renaissance of working-class consciousness, of which the party should make use. Lenin's argument was that the Russian working class in its current guise could not be regarded as properly proletarian. He claimed that the working class that Marx had written about did not exist in Russia and said: "wherever you look, those in the factories are not the proletariat, but casual elements of all kinds." The practical consequence of this for Lenin was that political decision-making had to be concentrated in the party, and the party had to teach the working class why it was superior to its political enemies.

Aleksandr Shliapnikov, the metalworker who in 1920 had led the Workers Opposition in the Bolshevik party, reacted very sharply to Lenin's argument. He said that party leaders were deceiving themselves about the nature of the working class. For example, when workers went on strike due to economic hardship, some Bolsheviks wrongly blamed "monarchists" for causing the strikes, when in fact they were caused simply by desperation. Shliapnikov criticised Lev Kamenev, the leader of the Moscow party, for dismissing even the advanced Moscow workers as people who "express the interest of peasant proprietors". Shliapnikov feared that "by painting the proletariat in false colours, comrades are seeking justification for political manoeuvres and their search for support in other social forces". Those other social forces, it may be said in hindsight, were those being drawn together in the new party elite. Shliapnikov told the congress: "Remember, once and for all, that we will never have a different or 'better' working class, and we need to be satisfied with the one we have." This was advice that Lenin did not accept.

My final point is about the way that, in the early 1920s, elements of the new Soviet ruling class, and many aspects of the bureaucratic system of rule that it exercised, began to take shape within the party. A hierarchy was created with power and wealth concentrated at the top. The elite that took shape there did not privately own the factories or the land in the way that capitalists and landowners did, but they exercised no less control than capitalists did over that wealth. The labour of soviet workers in this period was alienated labour characteristic of capitalism, and the state apparatus was used to discipline workers to accept their subordinate role. This is an enormous subject, and given the limited time, I only want to draw your attention to three aspects of the elite's development that were already underway in the early 1920s.

The first point is about the centralised organisation of the party apparatus. During the civil war, centralisation was arranged in a fairly ad-hoc fashion, with party and military authorities spewing out instructions to meet the latest crisis or problem. After the 10th congress in 1921, a new type of centralisation was introduced. The party's central committee secretariat appointed and monitored the work of communist officials (cadres) – of which there were about 15,000 in 1922 and double that number by 1925 – who wielded tremendous executive power. Stalin was in charge of the secretariat from 1922. The influence of his group of supporters in the party was magnified through the secretariat, which could appoint, remove and replace officials in almost all types of state bodies, from the local authorities in distant provinces to senior officials in industrial administration in Moscow. Such officials were all supposed to be elected, but such elections soon became a formality, with the decision being made at the centre, which made "nominations" that were invariably accepted. By the mid 1920s even the Red army command and the Cheka had relatively little independence from this system.

The second point is that, while the apparatus became increasingly centralised, the party itself changed from being a forum for discussion of disputed questions into something more like a machine for implementing instructions from above. The tenth party congress of 1921 had adopted a resolution forbidding the formation of factions, and although it was repeatedly claimed that this was not supposed to curtail free speech inside the party, in practice it did. Members made repeated complaints about the atmosphere in which discussion was discouraged. These issues came to a head in late 1923, when an opposition grouping was formed headed by Trotsky, Evgeny Preobrazhensky and Timofei Saporonov, demanding a return to genuine elections of party officials and freedom of discussion within the party. For a month or so, the party cells sprung to life and held lengthy meetings to discuss these issues, and many other related ones. A foul-mouthed campaign of abuse was conducted against the opposition, despite its leaders being veteran revolutionaries, which prefigured the witch-hunts of the 1930s. And once a party conference was held and the party leadership's position endorsed, the days in which open challenges could be made to the leadership's line were over.

The third point is about the growth of the elite as a social group. Certainly, the party officials I have mentioned – 15,000 in 1922, more later on – could be considered to be part of the elite. So could many industrial managers, trade union officials and army commanders. It is important to bear in mind that in the early 1920s the members of the elite were already accumulating not only decision-making power, but also material wealth. During the civil war, most communists had believed that party members should not have material privileges and in 1920, when workers were demanding “equality of rations”, as I mentioned earlier, there was also a strong movement within the party against the privileges of the so-called party “tops”. But in August 1922, the party's national conference decided to give “responsible officials” – which meant, essentially, the 15,000 people I have mentioned – the right to better earnings. They were allowed to senior managers' salaries, plus 50%; they were guaranteed housing, medical care, and child care and education for their children. By modern-day standards, or even by the standards of the western European middle class in 1922, these privileges were not very great. But the point is that they were sanctioned for some party members and not others, thus doing away with the principle of material equality between communists, and opening the door for much greater accumulation of wealth in future. The first group within the elite to become legally rich were the industrial managers, and a survey by the white-collar workers' union in 1924 showed that 1500 of its members were earning more than 30 times the minimum wage. There were much greater illegal earnings, though, and corrupt relationships between party officials, industrial managers and traders often led to them becoming very rich, very quickly.

The Stalinist system took time to develop, and really emerged in its finished form only during the period of forced industrialisation and forced collectivisation of agriculture, that is, the first five-year plan of 1928-1932. But these important aspects of it were already taking shape under Lenin.

Conclusions

In drawing some conclusions from the things I have talked about, one question has to be addressed straight away: Did Leninism lead to Stalinism? Or, did the 1917 revolution inevitably lead to the horrible dictatorship of the 1930s? The answer to both questions is “no”, in my view. The Russian revolution let loose all sorts of possibilities for development, and the Stalinist counter-revolution was the negation of many of these possibilities. There are many factors in the background of that counter-revolution: the stage reached by Russia's economic development; the difficulties of modernisation and industrialisation; the absence of any revolutionary change in western Europe. As for Lenin's political regime and Lenin's party, both of these had to be subject to substantial changes both before the victory of Stalin's clique within the party, in the mid 1920s, and the emergence of

Stalin's regime, fully fledged, after the first five-year plan. What I would say, though, is that there were ways in which the party's actions under Lenin made easier, and paved the way for, the rise of the new elite. Let me highlight three of these.

Firstly, the way that Lenin's party turned its back on working-class participatory democracy effectively blocked off the political development of the working class and stifled its creativity. It disarmed the working class in the face of its enemies, and therefore in the face of the new Soviet elite. It cut off the creative development that the working class had started in 1917, which was surely the most potent force to resist dictatorship and forms of repression and exploitation.

Secondly, by identifying the struggle for socialism with the construction of the state apparatus, as Lenin and all the party leaders of his time did, the Bolsheviks perverted the meaning of socialism and presented the tasks of the working class in the socialist revolution in an upside-down way. The Bolsheviks assumed that the state that they were building was a workers' state, and that its working-class character was guaranteed by their own presence at the top of the hierarchy. They referred to the defects of the state apparatus as bourgeois intrusions into this working-class state, but they never allowed discussion of the idea that the state itself had an alien class character. So for example, the convincing analysis of the young communists in the Workers Truth group, who characterised the state as the instrument of a technical intelligentsia that would introduce a form of state capitalism in Russia, could not be discussed publicly. The devoted revolutionaries who put forward this analysis were sent to Siberia in 1923.

Thirdly, by justifying repressive actions as necessary for the construction of the workers' state, the Bolsheviks opened the door for the elite to flourish, and weakened its enemies. Neither Trotsky nor other Bolshevik leaders who ended up opposing Stalin criticised the use of the Cheka to silence political opponents of the party under Lenin. They did not even object to the use of repressive methods against party members who dissented from the majority. Thus the idea of democracy as an integral part of socialist development could never take root.

Another question that is raised is: given the unfavourable circumstances in which the Russian revolution took place, could things really have been much different? This is a very valid question, and my opinion is that, given the level of Russia's economic and cultural backwardness, perhaps things could not have turned out much better than they did. If, for example, the Bolsheviks had allowed non-party socialists, or the Mensheviks or anarchists, to participate in the soviets, would that have changed much? If Lenin had listened to the advice of oppositionists such as the Democratic Centralists, and put more energy into building more participatory, more federal types of soviets, would that have prevented the rise of the elite? I personally have no particular reason to be optimistic on this score, because the circumstances in many respects favoured the elite, which rested on powerful social forces.

The point, in my view, is that by using authoritarian and hierarchical methods, and calling them socialist, the Bolsheviks did terrible damage to the idea of socialism, and therefore to the international workers' movement. For decades afterwards, even where the instructions from Moscow to foreign Communist Parties were ignored, or not heard, the reputation of Bolshevism, as the force that led the first so-called workers' government in the world, was powerful. The assumption that authoritarian methods and hierarchical party structures, that dictated ideas to the working class instead of encouraging creating collectivity, was widespread, far more widespread than the political influence of the Stalinist Communist Parties. The idea that socialism was in the first place something implemented by a state machine – rather than the negation and destruction of the state, as Marx understood it – was predominant in the workers' movement.

Even if the history of those countries that comprise the former Russian empire might not have turned out much better, had the Bolsheviks acted differently, the history of the workers' movement could have done.

One final lesson for the present day might be that socialists should pay more attention to the dissenting voices that were around in Russia at the time, not because they necessarily had all the answers, but because they were able to highlight the dilemmas produced for socialists by the Russian revolution in a way that many Bolshevik leaders failed to do.

For example in 1920, even before most of the events that I have talked about took place, the Belgian-Russian communist Victor Serge, who was a senior official in the Communist International at the time, wrote, with reference to the Soviet republic as it emerged from civil war: "The pitiless logic of history seems hitherto to have left very little scope for the libertarian spirit in revolutions. That is because human freedom, which is the product of culture and of the raising of the level of consciousness, can not be established by violence; [and yet] precisely the revolution is necessary to win – by force of arms – from the old world [...] the possibility of an evolution [...] to spontaneous order, to the free association of free workers, to anarchy. So it is all the more important throughout all these struggles to preserve the libertarian spirit."

Serge then defined the task of "libertarian communists" as being to "recall by their criticisms, and by their actions, that at all costs the workers' state must be prevented from crystallising". A damaging legacy of the choices made by the Bolshevik leaders in 1920-23 was that, in Russia, public enunciation of such questions was stopped almost completely and the crystallised "workers' state" became a burdensome shibboleth for the workers' movement.

Thank you for listening. I would very much like to hear your views, and to answer any questions.

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Simon Pirani is a socialist journalist, and author of *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (forthcoming from Routledge)