

## *Communist dissidence and its context*

Review article. *The Russian Communist Left 1918-30*, by the International Communist Current. By Simon Pirani

Vladimir Demidov, who in 1917 led the Bolshevik cell at the heavy artillery workshops in Moscow's Bauman district, was, in a way, the communists' answer to Horatio, Lord Nelson. During the October uprising, he directed the workshops' Red guard, which mounted artillery on the banks of the Yauza river and shelled the Alekseevskoe military academy and other buildings held by counter-revolutionary forces. On 27 October, after prolonged street fighting, the Menshevik-led rail union Vikzhel negotiated a ceasefire, to which the Bolsheviks' Moscow leadership agreed. But when Aleksandr Arosev called Demidov on behalf of the city's Bolshevik-dominated military revolutionary committee, and ordered him to stop the bombardment, Demidov claimed that he could not hear – and continued the shelling until the other side ran up a white flag. Arosev later recalled the phone call: “Demidov was irrepressible and not without cunning. He kept on answering ‘I can't hear!’ And then another shell: boom!”<sup>1</sup> Where Nelson turned a blind eye, Demidov pleaded a deaf ear.

Demidov's reactions that day were shaped not only by the euphoria of the moment, but by a vision of revolution in which workers' armed action had a central place. This readiness to turn the guns against the bourgeoisie was combined with an almost puritanical conviction that industrial workers were the only progressive social force; that the communists among them had a special role; and that the Bolshevik party's workplace cells therefore held the key to pushing the revolution forward. Demidov's outlook was closely moulded by the circumstances in which he conducted political activity during the first world war: as one of the Bolshevik militants in the tsarist army, whose success in bringing large numbers of soldiers over to the party's side – in disciplined formation and with their weapons – was pivotal in October. He was among a group of worker-soldiers stationed at the Brest fortress, on the western front. In 1916 the group moved to the Bauman heavy artillery workshops and the Bolshevik cell there, headed by Demidov and Nikita Tuliakov, soon won control of the factory committee.

After the October uprising, Demidov served on the eastern front in the civil war, and returned to the workshops in early 1920. Like many Red army communists who arrived in Moscow at that time, he was appalled at the growth of privilege, hierarchy and bureaucratism in the Moscow party. The comrades-in-arms culture that had evolved among Red army communists clashed sharply with the already comparatively comfortable existence of those wallowing, struggling or drowning in the government apparatus. That summer, Demidov became one of the leaders of the Bauman opposition, a district grouping loosely allied to the trade union officials who that year proclaimed the Workers Opposition. Demidov believed that the proletarian character of the state was guaranteed by the party, and the proletarian character of the party by its industrial worker members. In his eyes, like those of most party leaders, the dilution of the party's class nature was the main cause of bureaucratism; in contrast to those leaders, he railed at the young party officials sent into the district to keep an eye on him because of their supposedly “petty bourgeois” social backgrounds. Demidov was a committed

---

<sup>1</sup> Baumanskii raionnyi komitet VKP(b), *Ocherki po istorii revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia i bol'shevistskoi organizatsii v Baumanskom raione* (Moscow, 1927), pp. 149-150.

internationalist, and in the autumn of 1920, even after the Moscow newspapers were reporting that Tukhachevsky's army was being driven back in Poland, he told cell meetings of his hopes that that army would help spread the revolution to western Europe.

In March 1921, when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was declared and factions banned in the party, the Bauman group split. Its most prominent leader, Vasilii Paniushkin, quit the Bolshevik party and formed the Russian Workers and Peasants Socialist Party, which grew rapidly for two months until it was shut down by a series of arrests. Paniushkin's group not only denounced anti-worker and bureaucratic tendencies, but also urged a "workers' democracy" that specifically embraced all soviet parties (i.e. including Mensheviks, SRs, anarchists, etc) and non-party workers. Demidov did not yet go that far. He stayed in the party, remained critical, but shied away from a broader vision of workers' democracy. He made no public protest about the suppression of the Kronshtadt rising. Many Bolshevik rank-and-filers were alarmed by the assault on Kronshtadt, but it was supported by all the party's organised opposition groups.

In 1923, in another row about full-time officials being sent by the centre to spy on, or control, the Bauman dissidents, Demidov was expelled from both the Communist Party and the metalworkers' union. Maria Berzina, a former schoolteacher now running the workshops cell with him, was also kicked out. Angry mass meetings were held in their defence, but to no avail. The issue proved fertile ground for the Workers Group led by Gavriil Miasnikov, which recruited Demidov, Berzina and other former Bauman opposition activists. In September 1923 the Workers Group was broken up by the secret police and Demidov exiled to the Solovetskie islands. He repented and rejoined the party at some stage, but to no avail: in 1935 he was tried with other former Workers Oppositionists and shot.<sup>2</sup>

The 1923 manifesto of the Workers Group, to which Demidov rallied, is one of the important documents made available in English for the first time in *The Russian Communist Left*. It called, as the left opposition would do later in the same year, for more intensive development of Russian machine-building, for the substitution of imported technology and for tight controls on foreign capital (p. 174). But its political arguments were more radical than those of the left opposition: the Workers Group argued that "the greatest peril" of the early NEP period arose from the rapid expansion of the material wealth of leading cadres. Danger threatened from an unexpected quarter: the "hegemony of a powerful group deciding to take political and economic power into its own hands, naturally under the pretence of very noble intentions" (p. 175). The manifesto argued that to confront this, reorganised soviets, as opposed to the All-Russian Executive Central Committee and other central bodies, should direct "the whole state apparatus" (p. 177). This version of the manifesto seems to be based on abbreviated texts published by the Workers Group's foreign sympathisers in the 1920s; it is to be hoped that in future the (much longer) full manifesto, which sets out in more detail both the Workers Group's critique of Lenin's strategy and its limited (but much less limited than Lenin's) vision of workers' democracy – and which is now available to readers at the Russian federal archives – will also be translated.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I collected information on Demidov and the groupings of which he was part, mostly at the Central Archive of the Social-Political History of Moscow (the former Moscow party archive), especially in fond 3 (the Moscow party committee), fond 63 (Bauman district organisation) and fond 465 (Vimpel' (former heavy artillery workshops) cell). See Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920-24: Soviet workers and the new Communist elite* (Routledge, forthcoming 2008), especially chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>3</sup> The full manifesto, a 76-page printed brochure with 17 sections of text, is stored at the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (formerly the central party archive) in fond 17, opis' 71, folder 4. I estimate that it

*The Russian Communist Left* also includes two other texts previously unavailable in English, the 1927 “Platform of the 15” signed by Sapronov and others, and a 1931 article by Miasnikov. There are two other long-out-of-print documents – the Left Communists’ theses (1918) and *The Workers’ Opposition* (1920) by Aleksandra Kollontai – and commentaries on the communist left by supporters of the International Communist Current (ICC). Here I will, first, refer to the historiographical context; second, offer some thoughts on the left’s approach to its history, provoked by this collection; and, third, comment on the issue of the continuity of Russian left communism down to the late 1930s.

*The Russian Communist Left* is published at a time when the Soviet archives have been open for long enough that historians have begun not only to unearth previously concealed documents of such groupings, but also to understand better the lives that people like Demidov lived and the circumstances that shaped their dissident activity. And the documents are best read in this context. It is exciting that we now know not only the text of the manifesto that Demidov supported, but also about the path he took to get there. We know more not only of what the dissidents said, but also about the conditions under which they said it. We know that a minority of the oppositionists, including Demidov and Paniushkin, joined the Bolsheviks in the difficult, dangerous years after 1905; most of the dissidents, though, were of the generation that flooded into the party during the revolution and the civil war, numerically overwhelming their older comrades. We know that the dissidents by and large saw NEP as a retreat, but that – unlike those who simply became disillusioned or quit the party in disgust – they channelled their concerns into a search for alternatives to Lenin’s strategy. We are starting to learn about the relations between this first wave of communist dissidents and the second one, which flooded into the communist oppositions in 1927-28 as the party leadership began to turn the screws on workers prior to the “great break” (the industrialisation drive and forced collectivisation of the first five-year plan). We know that, right through that “great break” and on into the 1930s, many of the most visible dissidents – i.e. those that wrote the documents – held to the conviction that the USSR remained a “workers’ state” that needed reform; a more radical, usually younger, group saw that state as a dictatorship imposed by the class enemy.

Recent publications in English that touch directly on the history of communist opposition include the memoirs of Eduard Dune, who was close to the Democratic Centralist leader Timofei Sapronov; articles by Barbara Allen, who has researched the life of Aleksandr Shliapnikov, the Workers Opposition leader; Kevin Murphy’s recent book on the dynamics between workers and the party at the Hammer and Sickle works in Moscow; and my own work on party-worker relationships in Moscow. Some of Aleksei Gusev’s work on the influence of such movements on the Left Opposition in the late 1920s, and the tensions within the opposition, will soon be available in English too.<sup>4</sup> Worker opposition more generally has

---

is at least twice as long as the version used. The origin of the version published is not stated, but a bibliographical note (p. 31) mentions texts published in 1924 in Scotland and a French translation published later in the 1920s.

<sup>4</sup> Eduard Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, (Urbana, Illinois University Press, 1993); Barbara Allen, *Worker, trade unionist, revolutionary: a political biography of Alexander Shlyapnikov 1905-1922* (PhD. diss, Indiana University, 2001), and “The evolution of Communist Party control over the trade unions”, *Revolutionary Russia*, 15:2 (2002), pp. 72-105; Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: class struggle in a Moscow metal factory* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2005); Simon Pirani, “The Moscow Workers’ Movement in 1921 and the Role of Non-partyism”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 56:1 (2004), pp. 143-160, “The party elite, the industrial managers and the cells: early stages in the formation of the Soviet ruling class in Moscow, 1922-23”, *Revolutionary Russia* 19:2 (2006), pp. 197-228; Aleksei Gusev, “Naissance de l’Opposition de Gauche”, *Cahiers Leon Trotsky* 54

been widely written about, for example in Diane Koenker's recent history of the Russian printers' union. Jeffrey Rossman's book *Workers Against Stalin* deals primarily with industrial opposition among textile workers during the first five-year plan, but also contains inspiring descriptions of non-party socialist leaders who were active in that movement.<sup>5</sup> As for the broader context in which both communist and non-communist dissidents operated, there has been a constant stream of writing by historians: about the social background of those generations, about the social and cultural history of the working class in which they operated as well as labour history *per se*, about their culture and mores, and about the peasantry to which workers remained so close.<sup>6</sup>

The introductory essay in *The Russian Communist Left* (pp. 13-31) makes reference to this body of work, but the main political survey of the left communist groups, first published in 2000 (pp. 61-115), unfortunately does not. And it suffers as a result. The authors are more interested in judging the left communists' documents textually, against what they regard as immutable communist standards, than in the actual struggles during which these documents appeared, and the real people such as Demidov to whom they were addressed. The authors seem almost determined to ignore the historiography. For example, they discuss the Kronshtadt rising of 1921, and revisit the old dispute about the class character of the Kronshtadt garrison – that is, whether the challenge to the Bolsheviks in 1921 came from the revolutionaries that fought alongside them in 1917, or by peasant interlopers, as Trotsky later claimed. Trotsky's assertion was “in total opposition to reality”, the authors write (p. 88) – and actually I think they have a case. But the evidence offered is lamentable: an Italian left communist document of 1938, whose authors were unlikely to have had access to the relevant information, is quoted, while Israel Getzler's research on this specific issue, and that of Paul Avrich and Mary McAuley on related issues, is ignored.<sup>7</sup> By 2000, some effort might even have been made to consult, or at least acknowledge the importance of, the hundreds of previously secret documents on Kronshtadt published in Russian in the early 1990s. Otherwise history becomes a matter of doctrinal faith, rather than a study of what actually happened.

---

(1994), pp. 5-39, and “The Bolshevik Leninist Opposition and the Working Class, 1928-29”, in Donald Filtzer et al., *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Peter Lang, forthcoming). In Russian, there has appeared not only a new body of historical writing, but also a stream of collections of archive documents. Although no volume dedicated to communist dissidents of the 1920s has appeared, there have been collections on the anarchists, Social Revolutionary maximalists and Mensheviks. Valentina VilkoVA's volume on the 1923 party crisis has appeared in both English and Russian. Valentina VilkoVA, *The Struggle for Power: Russia in 1923* (New York, Prometheus, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Diane Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian printers and soviet socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Rossman, *Worker Resistance Under Stalin: class and revolution on the shop floor* (London, Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The list is too long to give here. Recent bibliographical surveys of labour history covering the early Soviet period are Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny, “Class Backwards? In Search of the Soviet Working Class”, pp. 1-26, in Siegelbaum and Suny (eds), *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (London, Cornell University Press, 1994) and Siegelbaum, “The Late Romance of the Soviet Worker in Western Historiography”, *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006), pp. 463-481.

<sup>7</sup> Israel Getzler, *Kronstadt 1917-1921: The Fate of a Soviet Democracy* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 223-226. Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970); Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd 1917-1922*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1991. Avrich's article on Miasnikov (“Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. Miasnikov and the Workers Group”, *Russian Review* 43 (1984), pp. 1-29) is referred to.

Despite such shortcomings, *The Russian Communist Left* offers food for thought. As well as the Workers Group manifesto, the “Platform of the 15” (pp. 184-231) tells us how the radical minority of the communist opposition in 1927 reacted to the events addressed in the much better-known “Platform of the United Opposition”. Miasnikov’s condemnation of Stalinism, written from exile in 1931 (pp. 235-268), is both trenchant and enraged at the same time. I also found compelling an item from the ICC’s own history – an essay written in 1977, “The Communist Left in Russia 1918-30” (pp. 33-60). It offers an account of the retreat of the Soviet state from socialist aims that in retrospect seems more convincing than some others available to those active in left politics thirty years ago. The assertion that the party and state were “proletarian” is questioned: the Bolsheviks, “prisoners of their substitutionist conceptions”, believed it was possible to administer the state machine and capitalist economy while waiting for the world revolution, oblivious to the fact that “the necessities of state power” were transforming them into “agents of counter-revolution”; the tendency towards degeneration was “accelerated by the fact that the party had fused with the state and thus had to adapt itself even more quickly to the demands of national capital”; the “great achievement” of the Russian communist left groups was their readiness to work “against the party and against the Soviet state” when left with no alternative (pp. 48-49).

In the series written in 2000, the ICC develops its analysis of the Soviet state, characterising the social system over which it prevailed as “state capitalism, [...] not an organic step towards socialism [but] capitalism’s last form of defence against the collapse of its system and the emergence of communism” (p. 73). It’s a line of thought that could be followed in respect of the last twenty years of Chinese, Russian and world history. The concept of the vanguard party – which in the 1920s had “fused with the state” – is not subject to any similar critique, though. And that is hardly surprising, since the ICC itself apparently clings to the vanguardism that played a critical, and negative, role, in Bolshevik politics in the 1920s, and in the international workers’ movement subsequently. (The ICC regards “the revolutionary political organisation” (itself, presumably) as the “vanguard of the working class”, striving for a “regroupment of revolutionaries with the aim of constituting a real world communist party” (p. 279).) This approach colours the style and methodology of *The Russian Communist Left*, whose authors see themselves as bearers of “the torch of organised marxist militancy – and thus of marxism”, who have a duty “to reclaim the work of their ‘forgotten’ ancestors” (p. 7).

This brings me to a final point, about the ideological and organisational continuity of left communism in early Soviet Russia. The introductory essay in *The Russian Communist Left* seeks to “affirm the continued existence of the communist left” from 1918 to the 1930s, as a group that distinguished itself from others with a long shopping-list of political positions, including the characterisation of Social Democracy as bourgeois; emphasis on soviet democracy; opposition to the notion of state capitalism being a progressive stage in the struggle; opposition to national liberation wars as reactionary; and opposition to parliamentarism, participation in elections and trade unionism “in all its forms” (pp. 13-14). To support this contention, it is argued (1) that the Workers Group of 1923 was “in political and organisational continuity with the Left Communist fraction of the RSDLP(B) and an integral part of the international communist left” (p. 21); (2) that the group continued “issuing appeals, leaflets and manifestos until 1929” (p. 26); and (3) that due to its “political clarity and organisational strength”, it “was to maintain itself as an organisation until 1938” (p. 23). I suggest, to the contrary, that the Workers Group was just one of a series of dissident groups that appeared briefly in 1921-24, and had no more or less continuity with Left Communism of 1918 than the others; that the largest Workers Group organisation, in Moscow, ceased to exist by 1924, and no evidence has yet been found of any persistent organisation after that, only of

isolated patches, and of Miasnikov's energetic literary activity; and that the shopping-list of political positions mentioned was largely irrelevant to the waves of communist dissidence in 1921-23 and 1927-29. Taking the three points in turn:

1. There was only limited organisational coherence in the Left Communist fraction of 1918, and no organisational continuity between it and the Workers Group. The Left Communist fraction included first-rank Bolshevik leaders, in particular Bukharin, who by 1920 had become the most energetic opponent of dissidents; others such as Yuri Piatakov who eschewed the 1920-21 dissidents and the Workers Group, and joined the short-lived Left Opposition of 1923; and the group around Valerian Osinskii, Vladimir Smirnov and others, many of whom would participate in the "military opposition" of 1919 and the Democratic Centralist group. None of these people went on to support the Workers Group; of its supporters whose biographies are known, most, like Demidov, had been around the Workers Opposition or associated groups in 1920-21.<sup>8</sup> While there were, of course, themes that recurred in the Left Communists' political arguments and the Workers Group's, there was hardly political continuity. And neither grouping fully accepted the list of positions enumerated: for example, neither rejected "trade unionism in all its forms".

2. To my knowledge, no historian has so far found any record of activity by the Workers Group between 1924 and 1928. The GPU's reports to national party leaders for those years, published in 2000, contain references to occasional activity by anarchists, Mensheviks and SRs, or former Bolshevik party members, but nothing about the Workers Group or any successor. Inside the party, the Trotskyists and Democratic Centralists organised in 1925, and for a sustained period from 1926 until the mass expulsions that followed the fifteenth party congress in October 1927. After that, both the United Opposition and the Democratic Centralists, now expelled from the party, were active among industrial workers. Speed-up and attacks on living standards by the regime from 1928 produced a wave of worker protest, and this swelled support for the most radical communist dissidents. At this point the Miasnikov tendency reappeared briefly, under the name Workers Communist Party, which produced at least one issue of a newspaper before being broken up by the GPU.<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence either that this group undertook nationally coordinated or large-scale organisation, or that it had the strength or longevity to develop its programme in any meaningful sense.

3. The record for the 1930s is clearer. Former supporters of the Workers Group and other left dissidents managed brief spurts of activity in the prison camps and in foreign exile. They formed a "federation of left communists" at the Verkhneuralskoe prison camp, together with some Democratic Centralists and former Trotskyists; there are scattered mentions of similar activity elsewhere in the gulag.<sup>10</sup> Miasnikov himself was in prison and internal exile from 1923, fled Russia via Iran in 1929, and resumed his political activity in Paris in 1930. The Russian historians B. Belenkin and V. Vinogradov researched his biography in detail, noting that he attempted to form a Russian exile group, to publish a newspaper, and to form an international organisation. They found no evidence that these attempts were successful. At least one number of the paper appeared, though, with contributions by Miasnikov and a

---

<sup>8</sup> Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, and Avrich, "Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin", op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> I thank Aleksei Gusev, the author of a dissertation and articles on the communist opposition of the late 1920s, for this information, based on his archival research. Email from A. Gusev, 13 November 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (London, Ink Links, 1979), pp. 279-282 and 303-304; email from A. Gusev, 13 November 2007.

handful of others; this was found later by another historian, Yuri Felshtinskii, who published it on the internet.<sup>11</sup>

The picture is of a small group of dissidents, who briefly came together in the spring of 1923 and agreed on a programme, but – due in the first place to the severity of Stalinist repression – succeeded neither in developing that programme, winning workers’ support for it, or of sustaining organisational activity for any length of time. This does not square with the claims made by the ICC, without reference to specific sources, that left communism took a politically or organisationally consistent form in early Soviet Russia.

The opening of the archives has made possible substantial progress in studying the history of communist and worker dissidence in early Soviet Russia. Research already undertaken points in at least two important directions. First, that there were strong currents of socialist thought that flowed outside any party organisation, so much so that groups of “non partyists” won majorities in important soviets (Kronshtadt in 1917, Moscow in 1921), were prominent in decisive workers’ movements (Petrograd in 1918), and offered alternative perspectives insufficiently covered by historians previously. Second, within the Bolshevik party, the range of views was far greater, and changed more often, than some literature suggests. Moreover, the historiography of the last 30 years has provided us with a mountain of information on social relations and cultural changes, inside and outside the workplace, that formed the context for workers’ and communists’ political struggles. The documents in *The Russian Communist Left* – and others now available, that will hopefully be translated, from groups ranging from the Ignatovists, Paniushkin-ites and Collectivists of 1920-21 to the radical left of 1927-29 – are important pieces of this exciting jigsaw.

--

This review article first appeared in *Revolutionary History*, vol. 10 no. 1 (Socialist Platform/Merlin Press 2008)

---

<sup>11</sup> B.I. Belenkin and V.K. Vinogradov, introduction to “Filosofii ubiistva, ili pochemu i kak ia ubil Mikhaila Romanova”, *Minuvshee* 18 (1995), pp. 15-17; [www.felshtinsky.com](http://www.felshtinsky.com), page titled “Listovki”.