

An Anarchist FAQ

What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?

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What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?

As is well known, the Russian Revolution failed. Rather than produce socialism, the Bolshevik revolution gave birth to an autocratic party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy. In turn, this regime gave rise to the horrors of Stalinism. While Stalinism was denounced by all genuine socialists, a massive debate has existed within the Marxist movement over when, exactly, the Russian Revolution failed and why it did.

Indeed, it is fair to say that the date chosen indicates much about the individual's or party's other politics. Some argue around 1928, others say around 1924, a few -- anarchists and libertarian Marxists -- argue from the Bolshevik seizure of power 1917. The reasons for the failure tend to be more readily agreed upon within pro-Bolshevik Marxist circles than the date: isolation, the economic and social costs of civil war, the "backward" nature of Russian society and economy are usually listed as the key factors. As we shall see, these are often referred to as "objective factors" in contrast to the "subjective factors" of Bolshevik ideology, decisions and actions.

Moreover, what the Stalinist regime was is also discussed heatedly in Marxist circles. While anarchists agree with Emma Goldman's summation that it was *"an absolute despotism politically and the crassest form of state capitalism economically"* [**Red Emma Speaks**, p. 420] so confirming in practice Kropotkin's analysis that *"State Socialism . . . is in reality nothing but State capitalism"* ["*Caesarism*", **Freedom**, June 1899], mainstream Marxists have had more difficulty agreeing -- some (orthodox Trotskyists) claiming it was a *"degenerated workers state,"* others (such as the neo-Trotskyist British SWP) that it was *"state capitalist"* (although, as discussed in [section H.3.13](#), for different reasons than anarchists). Indeed, after describing the various Marxist theories on the Russian regime, one expert concluded that *"it is perfectly clear that Soviet society can hardly be explained in orthodox-Marxian terms at all. If it is accepted that the USSR was not communist in a Marxian sense, the analysis becomes almost impossible"*. [Marcel van der Linden, **Western Marxism and the Soviet Union**, p. 317]

For anarchists, however, the failure of Bolshevism did not come as a surprise. In fact, just as with the reformist fate of the Social Democrats, the failure of the Russian Revolution provided empirical evidence for Bakunin's critique of Marx ([section H.1.1](#)). As Emma Goldman recounts in her memoirs:

"Professor Harold Laski . . . expressed the opinion that I ought to take some comfort in the vindication anarchism had received by the Bolsheviks. I agreed, adding that not only their regime, but their stepbrothers as well, the Socialists in power in other countries, had demonstrated the failure of the Marxian State better than any anarchist argument. Living proof was always more convincing than theory. Naturally I did not regret the Socialist failure but I could not rejoice in it in the face of the Russian tragedy." [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 969]

Alexander Berkman, like Goldman an eye-witness to developments between 1920 and 1922, provides an excellent overview of what had happened in Russia after the October Revolution:

"The elective system was abolished, first in the army and navy, then in the industries. The Soviets of peasants and workers were castrated and turned into obedient Communist Committees, with the dreaded sword of the Cheka [political para-military police] ever hanging over them. The labour unions governmentalised, their proper activities suppressed, they were turned into mere transmitters of the orders of the State. Universal military service, coupled with the death penalty for conscientious objectors; enforced labour, with a vast officialdom for the apprehension and punishment of 'deserters'; agrarian and industrial conscription of the peasantry; military Communism in the cities and the system of requisitioning in the country . . . ; the suppression of workers' protests by the military; the crushing of peasant dissatisfaction with an iron hand . . ." [The Russian Tragedy, p. 27]

Given that Leninists claim that the Russian revolution was a success (at least initially) and so proves the validity of their ideology, anarchists have a special duty to analyse and understand what went wrong. Simply put, if the Russian Revolution was a success, Leninism does not need failures!

This appendix aims to discuss these pro-Bolshevik explanations for the failure of Bolshevism in more detail than in [section H.6.1](#), indicating why anarchists are not convinced by Leninist accounts of why Bolshevism created a new class system rather than socialism. This subject is no mere historical discussion. Unless we learn the lessons of history, we will be doomed to repeat them. More, given the fact that many people who become interested in socialist ideas will come across the remnants of Leninist parties it is important that libertarians explain clearly and convincingly why the Russian Revolution failed and the role of Bolshevik ideology in that process. We need to account why a popular revolution became a state capitalist party dictatorship. As Noam Chomsky put it:

*"In the stages leading up to the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, there were incipient socialist institutions developing in Russia -- workers' councils, collectives, things like that. And they survived to an extent once the Bolsheviks took over -- but not for very long; Lenin and Trotsky pretty much eliminated them as they consolidated their power. I mean, you can argue about the **justification** for eliminating them, but the fact is that the socialist initiatives were pretty quickly eliminated.*

*"Now, people who want to justify it say, 'The Bolsheviks had to do it' -- that's the standard justification: Lenin and Trotsky had to do it, because of the contingencies of the civil war, for survival, there wouldn't have been food otherwise, this and that. Well, obviously the question is, was that true. To answer that, you've got to look at the historical facts: I don't think it was true. In fact, I think the incipient socialist structures in Russia were dismantled **before** the really dire conditions arose . . . reading their own writings, my feeling is that Lenin and Trotsky knew what they were doing, it was conscious and understandable." [Understanding Power, p. 226]*

As we discussed in [section H.6](#), Chomsky's feeling is more than supported by the historical record. The elimination of meaningful working class freedom and self-management began from the creation of the new regime after the October Revolution and was firmly in place before the start of the civil war at the end of May, 1918. The civil war simply accelerated processes which had already begun, strengthened policies that had already been applied. Indeed, it could be argued that rather than impose alien policies onto Bolshevism, the civil

war simply brought the hidden (and not-so-hidden) state capitalist and authoritarian politics of Leninism (and mainstream Marxism) to the fore.

Which is why analysing the failure of the revolution is important. If the various arguments presented by Leninists on why Bolshevism failed (and, consequently, why Stalinism developed) can be refuted, then we are left with the key issues of revolutionary politics -- whether Bolshevik politics had a decisive negative impact on the development of the Russian Revolution and, if so, whether there was an alternative to those politics. As regards the first issue, as we discussed in [section H.6.2](#), anarchists argue that this was the case: Bolshevik ideology itself played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution (also see the appendix on "[How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?](#)"). And as regards the second, anarchists can point to the example of the Makhnovist movement active in Ukraine during the same revolution, which proves that alternative policies were possible and could be applied with radically different outcomes (see the appendix on "[Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?](#)").

Before continuing, we must note that our division of the discussion into objective and subjective factors is, of course, artificial and purely presentational. It is impossible to discuss everything at once and, moreover, this reflects pro-Bolshevik accounts of the regime which focus primarily on "objective factors" and rarely address ideological and structural influences (beyond lamenting that their often all-too-idealised version of Bolshevik ideology had to be undermined to secure the survival of the revolution). So it must be noted that anarchists stress the interplay between the "objective factors" and the subjective ones such as party ideology. Faced with difficult circumstances, people and parties react in different ways. If they did not then it would imply what people think has no impact at all on their actions, that the politics of the Bolsheviks played no role in their decisions -- which raises the interesting contradiction of why Leninists stress the power and importance of having the correct (their!) ideology. Unsurprisingly, this position simply cannot be maintained. As [section H](#) indicates, Leninist ideology itself played a key role in the rise of Stalinism.

Leninists, of course, try to distance themselves from Stalinism, correctly arguing that it was a brutal and undemocratic system (although some did, and do, defend it against attacks from the right). The problem is that it was when Lenin and Trotsky were at the head of the so-called "workers' state" rather than when Stalin occupied that position that the regime broke strikes, repressed protests, shot strikers, banned left papers along with radical organisations and party factions, sent workers and revolutionaries to prison, advocated and introduced one-man management and piece-work in the workplace, eliminated democracy in the military, packed soviets to secure party power and shut down soviets elected with the "wrong" (i.e. non-Bolshevik) majorities, eliminated independent trade unions, and so on.

Many Leninists know nothing of this. Their parties simply do not present their members with the full facts of when Lenin and Trotsky were in power, nor do they encourage an atmosphere of independent analysis and investigation to discover these themselves. Others do know and either ignore than when discussing the revolution or attempt to justify these actions. When anarchists discuss why the Russian Revolution failed, these Leninists have basically one reply. They argue that anarchists never seem to consider the objective forces at play during the Russian revolution, namely the civil war, the legacy of World War One, the international armies of counter-revolution and economic disruption. These "objective factors" meant that the revolution was, basically, suffocated and were the overriding cause for the rise of authoritarianism and the crushing of socialism.

Thus, as one British Leninist puts it, the *"degree to which workers can 'make their own history' depends on the weight of objective factors bearing down on them . . . To decide in any given circumstance the weight of the subjective and objective factors demands a concrete analysis of the balance of forces."* The conditions in Russia meant that the *"subjective factor"* of Bolshevik ideology *"was reduced to a choice between capitulation to the Whites or defending the revolution with whatever means were at hand. Within these limits Bolshevik policy was decisive. But it could not wish away the limits and start with a clean sheet. It is a tribute to the power of the Bolsheviks' politics and organisation that they took the measures necessary and withstood the siege for so long."* [John Rees, *"In Defence of October,"* pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 30]

For anarchists and other libertarian socialists, such "objective factors" do not explain why the Russian Revolution failed. This is because almost all revolutions will face the same, or similar, problems. As we indicate in [section 1](#) of this appendix, anarchists like Kropotkin had long indicated that a revolution would suffer such events and argued for strategies and structures which would mitigate their impact by encouraging mass participation and local initiative. More, as discussed in [section 2](#) the Bolsheviks themselves, with Lenin at their head, argued at the time that such factors would affect every revolution. In [section 3](#), we build on this by arguing that any defence of Bolshevism based on blaming the impact of the civil war is both factually and logically flawed, not least because as we discussed in [section H.2.1](#), Leninists like to claim that they are "realistic" (unlike the "utopian" anarchists) and recognise the need for a "workers' state" because civil war is inevitable in a revolution. As far as economic disruption goes, as we discuss in [section 4](#) this explanation of Bolshevik authoritarianism is unconvincing as **every** revolution -- indeed, every revolutionary situation -- has faced and will face this problem. Then [section 5](#) analyses the common Leninist argument that the revolution failed because the Russian working class became "atomised" or "declassed," showing that the Russian working class was more than capable of collective action throughout the 1918 to 1921 period (and beyond). The problem for the Leninists, which explains why they are disinclined to discuss it, is that it was directed **against** the Bolshevik party. As [section 6](#) shows, the Bolshevik leaders at the time did not explain their actions in terms of the *"objective factors"* they faced. Then [section 7](#) discusses the ideological utility that stressing "objective factors" has for Leninist ideology (namely, it shifts perspectives away from the Bolshevik vision of socialism) while [section 8](#) highlights how Leninists also stress the importance of the very ideology they seek to discount.

Three final points.

First, anarchists do not criticise the Bolshevik regime because it was not perfect. Anarchists, as indicated in [section H.2.5](#), have never thought there could be an "over-night" revolution which would usher in an ideal and so we subject the Bolshevik regime to realistic criteria, namely whether it was encouraging or undermining socialist tendencies. *"Not that I expected to find Russia a proletarian Eldorado,"* Alexander Berkman recalled. *"By no means. I knew the great travail of a revolutionary period, how stupendous the difficulties to be overcome."* [**The Bolshevik Myth**, 328-9] Emma Goldman likewise summed up this position well:

"Both these criticisms would be justified had I come to Russia expecting to find Anarchism realised, or if I were to maintain that revolutions can be made peacefully . . . I do not therefore expect Anarchism to follow in the immediate footsteps of centuries of despotism and submission. And I certainly did not expect to see it ushered in by the Marxian theory."

"I did, however, hope to find in Russia at least the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought. Not the fate of the individual was my main concern as a revolutionist. I should have been content if the Russian workers and peasants as a whole had derived essential social betterment as a result of the Bolshevik régime.

"Two years of earnest study, investigation, and research convinced me that the great benefits brought to the Russian people by Bolshevism exist only on paper, painted in glowing colours to the masses of Europe and America by efficient Bolshevik propaganda. As advertising wizards the Bolsheviks excel anything the world had ever known before. But in reality the Russian people have gained nothing from the Bolshevik experiment." [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. xlvii-xlviii]

Second, we must stress that libertarians do not think any future revolution will suffer as terrible conditions as that experienced by the Russian one. However, it might and we need to base our politics on the worse case possibility. That said, we argue that Bolshevik policies made things worse -- by centralising economic and political power, they automatically hindered the participation of working class people in the revolution, smothering any creative self-activity under the dead-weight of state officialdom. As a libertarian revolution would be based on maximising working class self-activity (at all levels, locally and upwards) we would argue that it would be better placed to respond to even the terrible conditions facing the Russian Revolution.

Third, it must be stressed that we are discussing these factors individually simply because it is easier to do so. In reality, they all interacted. Civil war undoubtedly meant economic disruption, economic disruption meant unemployment and that affected the working class via fewer goods available, fewer goods made it harder to exchange with the peasants for food, necessitating forced requisition by the regime, for example. So just because we separate the specific issues for discussion purposes, it should not be taken to imply that we are not aware of their combined impact. Likewise, recognising the impact of certain developments does not mean the responses to them are above criticism nor made the situation worse. Thus in our example above key links in that chain could have been broken by different policies.

To conclude: while mechanically invoking "objective factors" may be sufficient for the followers of Bolshevism, it cannot be sufficient for anyone who wants to learn from history, rather than repeat it. For, ultimately, if difficult times back in 1918-21 justified suppressing working class political and economic freedom and self-management, imprisoning and shooting anarchists and other socialists, implementing and glorifying party dictatorship, what might we expect during difficult times in the future? Simply put, if your defence of the Bolsheviks rests simply on "difficult circumstances" then it can only mean one thing, namely if "difficult circumstances" occur again (and they will) we can expect the same outcome.

Worse, perhaps a future revolution will be less destructive, less isolated, less resisted than the Russian (although, as we note below in [section 2](#), leading Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin argued that this would **not** be the case). That **is** a possibility. However, should we embrace an ideology whose argument is based on the hope that fate will be kinder to them this time? Particularly when, even assuming these better "objective circumstances," while we may manage to avoid the horrors of Stalinism we would not avoid the recreation of a some kind of new class system as such an outcome is inherent in state-socialism?

So while it cannot be denied that objective factors influenced how certain Bolshevik policies were shaped and applied, the inspiration of those policies came from Bolshevik ideology. An acorn will grow and develop depending on the climate and location it finds itself in, but regardless of the "objective factors" it will still grow into an oak tree, however stunted. Similarly with the Russian revolution. While the circumstances it faced influenced its growth, Bolshevik ideology could not help but produce an authoritarian regime with no relationship with **real** socialism.

1 Do anarchists ignore the objective factors facing the Russian revolution?

It is often asserted by Leninists that anarchists simply ignore the "objective factors" facing the Bolsheviks when we discuss the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. According to this argument, anarchists present a basically idealistic analysis of the failure of Bolshevism, one not rooted in the material conditions (civil war, economic chaos, etc.) facing Lenin and Trotsky. As one Trotskyist puts it, anarchists "*do not make the slightest attempt at a serious analysis of the situation*" and so "*other considerations, of a different, 'theoretical' nature, are to be found in their works.*" [Pierre Frank, "Introduction," Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 22] Thus:

"Bureaucratic conceptions beget bureaucracy just as opium begets sleep by virtue of its sleep-inducing properties. Trotsky was wrong to explain the proliferation and rise of the bureaucracy on the basis of the country's backwardness, low cultural level, and the isolation of the revolution. No, what gave rise to a social phenomenon like Stalinism was a conception or idea . . . it is ideas, or deviations from them, that determine the character of revolutions. The most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism has laid low historical materialism." [Frank, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 22-3]

Many other Trotskyists take a similar position (although most would include the impact of the Civil War on the rise of Bolshevik authoritarianism and the bureaucracy). Duncan Hallas, for example, argues that the account of the Bolshevik counter-revolution given in the Cohn-Bendit brothers' **Obsolete Communism** is marked by a "*complete omission of any consideration of the circumstances in which [Bolshevik decisions] took place. The ravages of war and civil war, the ruin of Russian industry, the actual disintegration of the Russian working class: all of this, apparently, has no bearing on the outcome.*" [**Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party**, p. 41]

So, it is argued, by ignoring the problems facing the Bolsheviks and concentrating on their **ideas**, anarchists fail to understand **why** the Bolsheviks acted as they did. Unsurprisingly anarchists are not impressed with this argument. This is for numerous reasons.

First, and most obvious, the rise of bureaucracies is hardly limited to Bolshevik Russia. As Trotskyists themselves note as regards the trade unions and social democratic parties, although they exist in advanced capitalist countries with a high cultural level these have ruling bureaucracies (and had them for many decades, indeed since before the First World War). Similarly, all States have bureaucracies regardless of their cultural level. Indeed, Marx himself noted the bureaucratic machine which existed in France and the role it played in society since the 1800s (see [section H.3.9](#)). Even Trotsky had to admit that the Bolshevik Party itself -- like all Social Democratic Parties across the globe -- had a bureaucracy before

the revolution (see [section H.5.12](#)), something which internal critics of every Leninist party which exists today echo, including those in the most advanced nations with a high cultural level (see [section H.5.11](#)). The list goes on.

Do anarchists argue that "ideas" produce these bureaucracies? No, far from it -- specific forms of social structure generate them. Thus hierarchical and centralised structures will inevitably generate bureaucracies -- a theory generated from a careful analysis of countless organisations, including the State and mainstream trade unions. Nor do these structures just appear, but rather reflect specific class interests and needs -- minority classes cannot favour social structures which include the masses. Thus *"the ideal of the **Jacobin State** . . . had been designed from the viewpoint of the bourgeois, in direct opposition to the egalitarian and communist tendencies of the people which had arisen during the Revolution"* [Peter Kropotkin, **Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 366] Likewise, previous revolutions saw a similar process, as Kropotkin noted:

"It is often thought that it would be easy for a revolution to economise in the administration by reducing the number of officials. This was certainly not the case during the Revolution of 1789-1793, which with each year extended the functions of the State, over instruction, judges paid by the State, the administration paid out of the taxes, an immense army, and so forth." [**The Great French Revolution**, vol. II, p. 460]

So based on an analysis of the State which recognised that it had its own vested interests (as outlined in [section B.2](#)), anarchists correctly predicted the *"new form of wage-labour which would arise if the State took possession of the means of production and exchange . . . New powers, industrial powers, added to those which it [already] possesses . . . would create a new, formidable instrument of tyranny."* [Kropotkin, **Modern Science and Anarchy**, p. 170] Trotsky's post-hoc analysis sought to explain something unanticipated in his own ideology and from which it had to be excused all responsibility, regardless of the facts and logic.

Given that Bolshevik ideology favoured adding more and more functions to the ("workers") state, extending its reach into economic matters, it comes as no surprise that its bureaucracy likewise grew -- at least to non-Trotskyists. As such, rather than express the *"most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism"*, the anarchist critique is rooted in a clear materialist analysis of the effects of certain organisational structures and why these develop. Insofar as ideas played a role in the fate of Russian Revolution, they are reflected in Bolshevik preferences for centralised structures and the social relationships these produced when they were built -- as we discuss elsewhere (see [section H.6.2](#) and its related appendix, ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#)). Rather than Trotsky's attempts to understand a degeneration he failed to recognise until 1923, anarchists saw the signs when they first arose precisely due to our theory (indeed, Trotsky's ability to recognise and explain Stalinism could only be hindered by him being one of the main architects of the degeneration).

Second, according to anarchist theory, the "objective factors" facing the Bolsheviks are to be expected in **any** revolution. Indeed, the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin predicted that a revolution would face the very "objective factors" which Leninists use to justify and rationalise Bolshevik actions.

As such, to claim that anarchists ignore the "objective factors" facing the Bolsheviks is simply a joke: how can anarchists be considered to ignore what we consider to be the inevitable results of a revolution? Moreover, these Bolshevik assertions ignore the fact that the anarchists who wrote extensively about their experiences in Russia never failed to note that difficult objective factors facing it. Alexander Berkman in **The Bolshevik Myth** paints a clear picture of the problems facing the revolution, as does Emma Goldman in **My Disillusionment in Russia**. This is not to mention anarchists like Voline, Arshinov and Maximoff who took part in the Revolution, experiencing the "objective factors" first hand (and in the case of Voline and Arshinov, participating in the Makhnovist movement which, facing the same -- if not worse -- factors, managed **not** to act as the Bolsheviks did).

However, as the claim that anarchists ignore the "objective circumstances" facing the Bolsheviks is relatively common, it is important to refute it once and for all -- even if it means repeating some of arguments made in [section H.6.1](#).

Anarchists take it for granted that, to quote Bakunin, revolutions "*are not child's play*" and that they mean "*war, and that implies the destruction of men and things.*" The "*Social Revolution must put an end to the old system of organisation based upon violence, giving full liberty to the masses, groups, communes, and associations, and likewise to individuals themselves, and destroying once and for all the historic cause of all violences, the power and existence of the State.*" This meant a revolution would be "*spontaneous, chaotic, and ruthless, always presupposes a vast destruction of property.*" [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 372, p. 373, p. 380] He took it for granted that counter-revolution would exist, arguing that it was necessary to "*constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces . . . to organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction*" and "*for the purpose of self-defence.*" [**Micheal Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 171]

It would, of course, be strange if this necessity for defence and reconstruction would have little impact on the economic conditions in the revolutionised society. The expropriation of the means of production and the land by a free federation of workers' associations would have an impact on the economy. Kropotkin built upon Bakunin's arguments, stressing that a **social** revolution would, by necessity, involve major difficulties and harsh objective circumstances. It is worth quoting one of his many discussions of this at length:

"Suppose we have entered a revolutionary period, with or without civil war -- it does not matter, -- a period when old institutions are falling into ruins and new ones are growing in their place. The movement may be limited to one State, or spread over the world, -- it will have nevertheless the same consequence: an immediate slackening of individual enterprise all over Europe. Capital will conceal itself, and hundreds of capitalists will prefer to abandon their undertakings and go to watering-places rather than abandon their unfixed capital in industrial production. And we know how a restriction of production in any one branch of industry affects many others, and these in turn spread wider and wider the area of depression.

*"Already, at this moment, millions of those who have created all riches suffer from want of what must be considered **necessaries** for the life of a civilised man. . . Let the slightest commotion be felt in the industrial world, and it will take the shape of a general stoppage of work. Let the first attempt at expropriation be made, and the capitalist production of our days will at once come to a stop, and millions and*

millions of 'unemployed' will join the ranks of those who are already unemployed now.

*"More than that . . . The very first advance towards a Socialist society will imply a thorough reorganisation of industry as **to what we have to produce**. Socialism implies . . . a transformation of industry so that it may be adapted to the needs of the customer, not those of the profit-maker. Many a branch of industry must disappear, or limits its production; many a new one must develop. We are now producing a great deal for export. But the export trade will be the first to be reduced as soon as attempts at Social Revolution are made anywhere in Europe . . . All that **can be**, and **will be** reorganised in time -- not by the State, of course (why, then, not say by Providence?), but by the workers themselves. But, in the meantime, the worker . . . cannot wait for the gradual reorganisation of industry . . . The great problem of how to supply the wants of millions will thus start up at once in all its immensity. And the necessity of finding an **immediate solution** for it is the reason we consider that a step in the direction of [libertarian] Communism will be imposed on the revolted society -- not in the future, but as soon as it applies its crowbar to the first stones of the capitalist edifice." [Act for Yourselves, pp. 57-9]*

This perspective was at the core of Kropotkin's politics -- he was an anarchist not because he thought the revolution would be easy but because he recognised it would be difficult. His classic work **The Conquest of Bread** was based on this clear understanding of the nature of a social revolution and the objective problems it will face. As he put it, while a *"political revolution can be accomplished without shaking the foundations of industry"* a revolution *"where the people lay hands upon property will inevitably paralyse exchange and production . . . This point cannot be too much insisted upon; the reorganisation of industry on a new basis . . . cannot be accomplished in a few days."* Indeed, he considered it essential to *"show how tremendous this problem is."* [**The Conquest of Bread**, pp. 72-3]

He pointed to the experience of the French Revolution as evidence for this, as it showed, *"[o]ne of the great difficulties in every Revolution is the feeding of the large towns."* This was because the *"large towns of modern times are centres of various industries that are developed chiefly for the sake of the rich or for the export trade"* and these *"two branches fail whenever any crisis occurs, and the question then arises of how these great urban agglomerations are to be fed."* This crisis, rather than making revolution impossible, spurred the creation of what Kropotkin terms *"the communist movement"* in which *"the Parisian proletariat had already formed a conception of its class interests and had found men to express them well."* [**The Great French Revolution**, vol. II, p. 457 and p. 504]

As for self-defence, he reproached the authors of classic syndicalist utopia **How we shall bring about the Revolution** for *"considerably attenuat[ing] the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way."* He stressed that the *"check of the attempt at Revolution in Russia [in 1905] has shown us all the danger that may follow from an illusion of this kind."* Elsewhere he argued that *"[i]f armed brigands attack a people, is not that same people, armed with good weapons, the surest rampart to oppose to the foreign aggressor?"* He recognised that *"a society in which the workers would have a dominant voice"* would require a revolution to create, *"a revolution far more profound than any of the revolutions which history had on record."* In such a rebellion, however, *"the workers would have against them, not the rotten generation of aristocrats against whom the French peasants and republicans had to fight in the [eighteenth] century -- and even that fight was a desperate one"*

-- but the far more powerful, intellectually and physically, middle-classes, which have at their service all the potent machinery of the modern State." Thus "each time that such a period of accelerated evolution and reconstruction on a grand scale begins, civil war is liable to break out on a small or large scale." [**Direct Struggle Against Capital**, p. 561, p. 121 and pp. 495-6]

It must, therefore, be stressed that the very "objective factors" supporters of Bolshevism use to justify the actions of Lenin and Trotsky were correctly predicted by anarchists decades before hand. Indeed, rather than ignore them anarchists like Kropotkin based their political and social ideas on these difficulties. As such, it seems ironic for Leninists to attack anarchists for allegedly ignoring these factors. It is even more ironic as these very same Leninists are meant to know that **any** revolution will involve these exact same "objective factors," something that Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks eventually acknowledged (see the [next section](#)).

Therefore, as noted [above](#), when anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman arrived in Russia they were aware of the problems it, like any revolution, would face. Their critique of Bolshevism was not based on decrying what they considered as inevitable, but rather the (counter-productive) Bolshevik response. Unsurprisingly, this extremely realistic perspective can be found in their later works. Berkman, for example, stressed that "*when the social revolution had become thoroughly organised and production is functioning normally there will be enough for everybody. But in the first stages of the revolution, during the process of re-construction, we must take care to supply the people the best we can, and equally, which means rationing.*" This was because the "*first effect of the revolution is reduced production.*" This would be initially due to the general strike which is its "*starting point.*" However, "[w]hen the social revolution begins in any land, its foreign commerce stops: the importation of raw materials and finished products is suspended. The country may even be blockaded by the bourgeois governments." In addition, he thought it important not to suppress "*small scale industries*" as they would be essential when "*a country in revolution is attacked by foreign governments, when it is blockaded and deprived of imports, when its large-scale industries threaten to break down or the railways do break down.*" Rather than assume the problem away, it was essential that to counteract isolation workers must understand "*that their cause is international*" and that "*the organisation of labour*" must develop "*beyond national boundaries.*" However, "*the probability is not to be discounted that the revolution may break out in one country sooner than in another*" and "*in such a case it would become imperative . . . not to wait for possible aid from outside, but immediately to exert all her energies to help herself supply the most essential needs of her people by her own efforts.*" [**What is Anarchism?**, p. 215, p. 223 p. 228, p. 229 and p. 227]

Emma Goldman, likewise, noted that it was "*a tragic fact that all revolutions have sprung from the loins of war. Instead of translating the revolution into social gains the people have usually been forced to defend themselves against warring parties.*" "*It seems,*" she noted, "*nothing great is born without pain and travail*" as well as "*the imperative necessity of defending the Revolution.*" However, in spite of these inevitable difficulties she pointed to how the Spanish anarchists "*have shown the first example in history how Revolutions should be made*" by "*the constructive work*" of "*socialising of the land, the organisation of the industries.*" [**Vision on Fire**, p. 218, p. 222 and pp. 55-56]

These opinions were, as can be seen, to be expected from revolutionary anarchists schooled in the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin. Clearly, then, far from ignoring the "objective

factors" facing the Bolsheviks, anarchists have based their politics around them. We have always argued that a social revolution would face isolation, economic disruption and civil war and have, for this reason, stressed the importance of mass participation (and the appropriate **federalist** structures required to foster it) in order to overcome them. As such, when Leninists argue that these inevitable "objective factors" caused the degeneration of Bolshevism, anarchists simply reply that if it cannot handle the inevitable then Bolshevism should be avoided: just as we would avoid a submarine which worked perfectly well until it was placed in the sea.

Moreover, what is to be made of this Leninist argument against anarchism? In fact, given the logic of their claims we have to draw the conclusion that the Leninists seem to think a revolution **could** happen **without** civil war and economic disruption. As such it suggests that the Leninists have the "utopian" politics in this matter. After all, if they argue that civil war is inevitable then how can they blame the degeneration of the revolution on it? Simply put, if Bolshevism cannot handle the inevitable it should be avoided at all costs.

Ironically, as indicated in the [next section](#), we can find ample arguments to refute the Trotskyist case against the anarchist analysis in the works of leading Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin. Indeed, their arguments provide a striking confirmation of the anarchist position as they, like Kropotkin, stress that difficult "objective factors" will face **every** revolution. This means to use these factors to justify Bolshevik authoritarianism simply results in proving that Bolshevism is simply non-viable or that a liberatory social revolution is, in fact, impossible (and, as a consequence, genuine socialism).

There are, of course, other reasons why the Leninist critique of the anarchist position is false. In terms of theory, the Leninist position is the crudest form of economic determinism. As we discuss in [section 7](#), ideas **do** matter and, as Marx himself stressed, can play a key in how a social process develops. In terms of the empirical evidence against the Trotskyist explanation, as we indicate in [section 3](#), soviet democracy and workers' power in the workplace was **not** undermined by the civil war. Rather, the process had begun before the civil war started and, equally significantly, continued after its end in November 1920.

Third, in terms of the economic and social backwardness of Russia, the similar (if not worse) backwardness of Germany in 1847 did not stop Marx arguing that socialist central planning was viable -- indeed, in the **Philosophy of Philosophy** he berated Ricardian Socialist John Bray for suggesting using labour-notes "*for a period of transition*" to communism while in the **Communist Manifesto** he asserted that "*the bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.*" [**Marx-Engels Collected Works**, vo. 6, p. 142 and p. 519] Moreover, the notion that Russia was only ready for a **bourgeois** revolution was held by the Mensheviks (reflecting the mainstream position of Marxist social-democracy) and accordingly denounced by Leninists, then and now. So being predominantly a peasant society with little, if any, large-scale industry did not stop Marx issuing a very public call for communist revolution in Germany in 1847 (indeed, this was the social situation across whole of Continental Europe during Marx's lifetime and for **many** decades afterwards).

Nor does the then backwardness of Russia hinder the adoption of various aspects of Bolshevism -- such as vanguardism, the necessity of party dictatorship, the centralised structure of socialism, one-man management, etc. -- by Marxists in the West after 1917, indeed until now. As such, "backwardness" is a selective excuse -- not least because few

Leninists would agree that vanguardism was a product of Tsarist Russia and so applicable only there and then. In short, if Leninists took the issue of "backwardness" seriously then they would question **all** aspects of their ideology and hopefully -- like the German Council Communists -- recognise that Leninism is permeated with the social conditions of a semi-feudal regime and has little to offer modern revolutionaries (or revolutionaries active in the advanced capitalist nations of post-war Europe).

Fourth, there is the example of the Makhnovist movement. Operating in the same "objective circumstances," facing the same "objective factors," the Makhnovists did **not** implement the same policies as the Bolsheviks. As we discussed in the appendix ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#), rather than undermine soviet, soldier and workplace democracy and replace all with party dictatorship, the Makhnovists applied these as fully as they could. Now, if "objective factors" explain the actions of the Bolsheviks, then why did the Makhnovists not pursue identical policies? Why did the Makhnovists not raise the necessity of party dictatorship to an ideological truism?

In summary, regardless of Trotskyist assertions, anarchists do not ignore the objective factors facing the Bolsheviks during the revolution. As indicated, we predicted the problems they faced and developed our ideas to counter them. As the example of the Makhnovists showed, our ideas were more than adequate for the task -- unlike those of the Bolsheviks.

2 Can "objective factors" really explain the failure of Bolshevism?

As noted in the [previous section](#) Leninists falsely argue that anarchists downplay (at best) or ignore (at worse) the "objective factors" facing the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. However, there is more to it than that. Leninists also claim to be revolutionaries, they claim to know that revolutions will face problems, that civil war is inevitable and so forth. It therefore strikes anarchists as being somewhat hypocritical for Leninists to blame these very same "objective" but allegedly inevitable factors for the failure of Bolshevism in Russia.

Ironically enough, Lenin and Trotsky agree with these anarchist arguments. Looking at Trotsky, he dismissed the CNT's leaderships' arguments in favour of collaborating with the bourgeois state as follows:

"The leaders of the Spanish Federation of Labour (CNT) . . . became, in the critical hour, bourgeois ministers. They explained their open betrayal of the theory of anarchism by the pressure of 'exceptional circumstances.' But did not the leaders of the German social democracy invoke, in their time, the same excuse? Naturally, civil war is not a peaceful and ordinary but an 'exceptional circumstance.' Every serious revolutionary organisation, however, prepares precisely for 'exceptional circumstances' . . . We have not the slightest intention of blaming the anarchists for not having liquidated the state with the mere stroke of a pen. A revolutionary party, even having seized power (of which the anarchist leaders were incapable in spite of the heroism of the anarchist workers), is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society. But all the more severely do we blame the anarchist theory, which seemed to be wholly suitable for times of peace, but which had to be dropped rapidly as soon as the 'exceptional circumstances' of the... revolution had begun. In the old days there

were certain generals -- and probably are now -- who considered that the most harmful thing for an army was war. Little better are those revolutionaries who complain that revolution destroys their doctrine." ["Stalinism and Bolshevism," **Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37**, pp. 423-4]

Thus to argue that the "*exceptional circumstances*" caused by the civil war are the only root cause of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution is a damning indictment of Bolshevism: Lenin did not argue in **State and Revolution** that the application of soviet democracy was dependent only in "*times of peace*." Rather, he stressed that they were for the "*exceptional circumstance*" of revolution and the civil war he considered its inevitable consequence. As such, we must note that Trotsky's followers do not apply this critique to their own politics, which are also a form of the "*exceptional circumstances*" excuse. Given how quickly Bolshevik "principles" (as expressed in **The State and Revolution**) were dropped, we can only assume that Bolshevik ideas are also suitable purely for "*times of peace*" as well.

But, then, Trotsky was not above using such arguments himself (making later-day Trotskyists at least ideologically consistent in their hypocrisy). In the same essay, for example, he justifies the prohibition of other Soviet parties in terms of a "*measure of defence of the dictatorship in a backward and devastated country, surrounded by enemies on all sides.*" In other words, an appeal to the exceptional circumstances facing the Bolsheviks! Perhaps unsurprisingly, his followers have tended to stress this (contradictory) aspect of his argument rather than his comments that those "*who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat. The Bolshevik party achieved in the civil war the correct combination of military art and Marxist politics.*" [Op. Cit., p. 426 and p. 430] Which, of course, suggests that the prohibition of other parties had little impact on levels of soviet "democracy" allowed under the Bolsheviks.

This dismissal of the "*exceptional circumstances*" argument did not originate with Trotsky. Lenin repeatedly stressed that any revolution would face civil war and economic disruption. In early January, 1918, he was pointing to "*the incredibly complications of war and economic ruin*" in Russia and noting that "*the fact that Soviet power has been established . . . is why civil war has acquired predominance in Russia at the present time.*" [Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 453 and p. 459] A few months later he states quite clearly that "*it will never be possible to build socialism at a time when everything is running smoothly and tranquilly; it will never be possible to realise socialism without the landowners and capitalists putting up a furious resistance.*" He reiterated this point, acknowledging that the "*country is poor, the country is poverty-stricken, and it is impossible just now to satisfy all demands; that is why it is so difficult to build the new edifice in the midst of disruption. But those who believe that socialism can be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistake: it will be everywhere built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine. That is how it must be.*" [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 520 and p. 517]

As regards civil war, he noted that "*not one of the great revolutions of history has take place*" without one and "*without which not a single serious Marxist has conceived the transition from capitalism to socialism.*" Moreover, "*there can be no civil war -- the inevitable condition and concomitant of socialist revolution -- without disruption.*" [Op. Cit., p. 496 and p. 497] He considered this disruption as being applicable to advanced capitalist nations as well:

"In Germany, state capitalism prevails, and therefore the revolution in Germany will be a hundred times more devastating and ruinous than in a petty-bourgeois country -- there, too, there will be gigantic difficulties and tremendous chaos and imbalance." [Op. Cit., vol. 28, p. 298]

Lenin reiterated this point again and again. He argued that *"we see famine not only in Russia, but in the most cultured, advanced countries, like Germany . . . it is spread over a longer period than in Russia, but it is famine nevertheless, still more severe and painful than here."* In fact, *"today even the richest countries are experiencing unprecedented food shortages and that the overwhelming majority of the working masses are suffering incredible torture."* [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 460 and p. 461] And from June, 1918:

"We must be perfectly clear in our minds about the new disasters that civil war brings for every country. The more cultured a country is the more serious will be these disasters. Let us picture to ourselves a country possessing machinery and railways in which civil war is raging, and this civil war cuts off communication between the various parts of the country. Picture to yourselves the condition of regions which for decades have been accustomed to living by the interchange of manufactured goods and you will understand that every civil war brings forth disasters." [Op. Cit., vol. 27, p. 463]

As we discuss in [section 4](#), the economic state of Germany immediately after the end of the war suggests that Lenin had a point: the German economy was in a serious state of devastation, a state equal to that of Russia during the equivalent period of its revolution. If economic conditions made party dictatorship inevitable in Bolshevik Russia (as pro-Leninists argue) it would mean that soviet democracy and revolution cannot go together.

Lenin, unlike many of his latter day followers, did not consider these grim objective conditions as making revolution impossible. Rather, for him, there was *"no other way out of this war"* which is causing the problems *"except revolution, except civil war . . . a war which always accompanies not only great revolutions but every serious revolution in history."* He continued by arguing that we *"must be perfectly clear in our minds about the new disasters that civil war brings for every country. The more cultured a country is the more serious will be these disasters. Let us picture to ourselves a country possessing machinery and railways in which civil war is raging, and this civil war cuts communication between the various parts of the country. Picture to yourselves the condition of regions which for decades have been accustomed to living by interchange of manufactured goods and you will understand that every civil war brings fresh disasters."* [Op. Cit., p. 463] The similarities to Kropotkin's arguments made three decades previously are clear (see [section 1](#) for details).

Indeed, he mocked those who would argue that revolution could occur without *"exceptional circumstances"*:

"A revolutionary would not 'agree' to a proletarian revolution only 'on the condition' that it proceeds easily and smoothly, that there is, from the outset, combined action on the part of proletarians of different countries, that there are guarantees against defeats, that the road of the revolution is broad, free and straight, that it will not be necessary during the march to victory to sustain the heaviest casualties, to 'bide one's time in a besieged fortress,' or to make one's way along extremely narrow,

impassable, winding and dangerous mountain tracks. Such a person is no revolutionary." [Op. Cit., vol. 28, p. 68]

Thus industrial collapse and terrible difficulties would face any revolution. As Lenin noted, *"in revolutionary epochs the class struggle has always, inevitably, and in every country, assumed the form of **civil war**, and civil war is inconceivable without the severest destruction, terror and the restriction of formal democracy in the interests of this war."* Moreover, *"[w]e know that fierce resistance to the socialist revolution on the part of the bourgeoisie is inevitable in all countries, and that this resistance will **grow** with the growth of the revolution."* [Op. Cit., p. 69 and p. 71] To blame the inevitable problems of a revolution for the failings of Bolshevism suggests that Bolshevism is simply not suitable for revolutionary situations.

At the 1920 Comintern Congress Lenin lambasted a German socialist who argued against revolution because *"Germany was so weakened by the War"* that if it had been *"blockaded again the misery of the German masses would have been even more dreadful,"* dismissing this argument:

"A revolution . . . can be made only if it does not worsen the workers' conditions 'too much.' Is it permissible, in a communist party, to speak in a tone like this, I ask? This is the language of counter-revolution. The standard of living in Russia is undoubtedly lower than in Germany, and when we established the dictatorship, this led to the workers beginning to go more hungry and to their conditions becoming even worse. The workers' victory cannot be achieved without sacrificing, without a temporary deterioration of their conditions. . . If the German workers now want to work for the revolution, they must make sacrifices and not be afraid to do so . . . The labour aristocracy, which is afraid of sacrifices, afraid of 'too great' impoverishment during the revolutionary struggle, cannot belong to the party. Otherwise the dictatorship is impossible, especially in western European countries." [Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, pp. 382-3]

In 1921 he repeated this, arguing that *"every revolution entails enormous sacrifice on the part of the class making it. . . The dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia has entailed for the ruling class -- the proletariat -- sacrifices, want and privation unprecedented in history, and the case will, in all probability, be the same in every other country."* [Collected Works, vol. 32, p. 488]

So Lenin is on record as saying these "objective factors" will always be the circumstances facing a socialist revolution. Indeed, in November 1922 he stated that rather than having undermined the revolution, *"Soviet rule in Russia is celebrating its fifth anniversary. It is now sounder than ever."* [Op. Cit., vol. 33, p. 417]

All of which must be deeply embarrassing to Leninists. After all, here is Lenin arguing that the factors Leninists list as being responsible for the degeneration of the Russian Revolution were inevitable side effects of **any** revolution and, moreover, the revolution was more sound than ever! Of course, Lenin did not ponder how *"Soviet rule"* was compatible with party dictatorship, but then neither did Trotsky.

Nor was this perspective limited to Lenin. The inevitability of economic collapse being associated with a revolution was not lost on Trotsky either. For example, in **Terrorism and**

Communism he argued that "[a]ll periods of transition have been characterised by . . . tragic features" of an "economic depression" such as exhaustion, poverty and hunger. Every class society "is violently swept off [the arena] by an intense struggle, which immediately brings to its participants even greater privations and sufferings than those against which they rose." He gave the example of the French Revolution "which attained its titanic dimensions under the pressure of the masses exhausted with suffering, itself deepened and rendered more acute their misfortunes for a prolonged period and to an extraordinary extent." He rhetorically asked: "Can it be otherwise?" So "revolutions which drag into their whirlpool millions of workers" automatically affect the "economic life of the country." By "[d]ragging the mass of the people away from labour, drawing them for a prolonged period into the struggle, thereby destroying their connection with production, the revolution in all these ways strikes deadly blows at economic life, and inevitably lowers the standard which it found at its birth." This affects the socialist revolution as the "more perfect the revolution, the greater are the masses it draws in; and the longer it is prolonged, the greater is the destruction it achieves in the apparatus of production, and the more terrible inroads does it make upon public resources. From this there follows merely the conclusion which did not require proof - that a civil war is harmful to economic life." Given these inevitable circumstances, he justified Bolshevik policies as being the "only solution . . . that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice" and, moreover, "dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 7, p. 135 and p. 109]

While this argument does have its self-serving elements -- generalising to all revolutions problems created or made worse by Bolshevik policies, decisions and prejudices -- the general point remains valid: revolutions are disruptive.

Another leading Bolshevik, Nikolai Bukharin, wrote his (infamous) **The Economics of the Transition Period** to make theoretical sense of (i.e. rationalise and justify) the party's changing policies and their social consequences since 1918 in terms of the inevitability of bad "objective factors" facing the revolution. While some Leninists like to paint Bukharin's book (like most Bolshevik ideas of the time) as "making a virtue out of necessity," Bukharin (like the rest of the Bolshevik leadership) did not. As one commentator, Stephan F. Cohen, notes, Bukharin "believe[d] that he was formulating universal laws of proletarian revolution." [**In Praise of War Communism: Bukharin's The Economics of the Transition Period**, p. 195]

Bukharin listed four "real costs of revolution," namely "the physical destruction or deterioration of material and living elements of production, the atomisation of these elements and of sectors of the economy, and the need for unproductive consumption (civil war materials, etc.). These costs were interrelated and followed sequentially. Collectively they resulted in '**the curtailment of the process of reproduction**' (and 'negative expanded reproduction') and Bukharin's main conclusion: 'the production "anarchy" . . . , "the revolutionary disintegration of industry," is an historically inevitable stage which no amount of lamentation will prevent.'" This was part of a general argument and his "point was that great revolutions were always accompanied by destructive civil wars . . . But he was more intent on proving that a proletarian revolution resulted in an even greater temporary fall in production than did its bourgeois counterpart." To do this he formulated the "costs of revolution" as "a law of revolution." [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 195-6 and p. 195]

Cohen notes that while this *"may appear to have been an obvious point, but it apparently came as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks. It directly opposed the prevailing Social Democratic assumption that the transition to socialism would be relatively painless . . . Profound or not, Bolsheviks generally came to accept the 'law' and to regard it as a significant discovery by Bukharin."* [Op. Cit., p. 196] To quote Bukharin himself:

"during the transition period the labour apparatus of society inevitably disintegrates, that reorganisation presupposes disorganisation, and that there the temporary collapse of productive forces is a law inherent to revolution." [quoted by Cohen, Op. Cit., p. 196]

It would appear that this *"obvious point"* would **still** come *"as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks"* today! Significantly, of course, Kropotkin had formulated this law decades previously and so the **real** question is how the Bolsheviks sought to cope with this inevitable law is what signifies the difference between anarchism and Leninism. Simply put, Bukharin endorsed the coercive measures of war communism as the means to go forward to socialism. As Cohen summarises, *"force and coercion . . . were the means by which equilibrium was to be forged out of disequilibrium."* [Op. Cit., p. 198] Given that Bukharin argued that a workers' state, by definition, could not exploit the workers, he -- like Lenin and Trotsky -- opened up the possibility for rationalising all sorts of abuses as well as condoning numerous evils because they were "progressive."

It should be noted that Lenin showed *"ecstatic praise for the most 'war communist' sections"* of Bukharin's work. *"Almost every passage,"* Cohen notes, *"on the role of the new state, statisation in general, militarisation and mobilisation met with 'very good,' often in three languages, . . . Most striking, Lenin's greatest enthusiasm was reserved for the chapter on the role of coercion . . . at the end [of which] he wrote, 'Now this chapter is superb!'"* [Op. Cit., pp. 202-3] Compare this to Kropotkin's comment that the *"revolutionary tribunal and the guillotine could not make up for the lack of a constructive communist theory."* [The Great French Revolution, vol. II, p. 519]

Ultimately, claims that "objective factors" caused the degeneration of the revolution are mostly attempts to let the Bolsheviks off the hook for Stalinism. This approach was started by Trotsky and has continued to this day. Anarchists, unsurprisingly, do not think much of these explanations: the "objective factors" listed to explain the degeneration of the revolution are simply a list of factors **every** revolution would (and has) faced -- as Lenin, Bukharin and Trotsky all admitted at the time. Bertrand Russell noted this after his trip to Soviet Russia, that while since October 1917 *"the Soviet Government has been at war with almost all the world, and has at the same time to face civil war at home"* this was *"not to be regarded as accidental, or as a misfortune which could not be foreseen. According to Marxian theory, what has happened was bound to happen."* [The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism, p. 103]

So we have the strange paradox of Leninists dismissing or ignoring the arguments of their ideological gurus. For Trotsky, just as for Lenin, it was a truism that revolutionary politics had to handle *"objective factors"* and *"exceptional circumstances"* and both thought they **had** during the Russian revolution in a manner consistent with their ideology: yet for their followers, these explain the failure of Bolshevism. Tony Cliff, one of Trotsky's less orthodox followers, gives us a means of understanding this strange paradox. Discussing the **Platform of the United Opposition** he notes that it *"also suffered from the inheritance of the*

exceptional conditions of the civil war, when the one-party system was transformed from a necessity into a virtue." [Trotsky, vol. 3, pp. 248-9] Clearly, "*exceptional circumstances*" explain nothing and are simply an excuse for bad politics while "*exceptional conditions*" explain everything and defeat even the best politics!

As such, it seems extremely ironic that Leninists blame the civil war for the failure of the revolution as they continually raise the inevitability of civil war in a revolution to attack anarchism (see [section H.2.1](#) for example). Yet, if civil war and the other factors listed by Leninists (but considered inevitable by Lenin) preclude the implementation of the radical democracy Lenin argued for in 1917 as the means to suppress the resistance of the capitalists then his followers should come clean and say that his book has no bearing on their vision of revolution. Given that the usual argument for the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is that it is required to repress counter-revolution, it seems somewhat ironic that the event it was said to be designed for (i.e. revolution) should be responsible for its degeneration.

As such, anarchists think these sorts of explanations of Bolshevik dictatorship are incredulous. After all, as **revolutionaries** the people who expound these "explanations" are meant to know that civil war, imperialist invasion and blockade, economic disruption, and a host of other "*extremely difficult circumstances*" are part and parcel of a revolution. They seem to be saying, "if only the ruling class had not acted as our political ideology predicts they would then the Bolshevik revolution would have been fine"!

In summary, anarchists are not at all convinced by the claims that "*objective factors*" can explain the failure of the Russian Revolution for, according to Lenin and Trotsky, these factors were to be expected in **any** revolution. That is why they say they want a "*dictatorship of the proletariat,*" to defend against counter-revolution (see [section H.3.8](#) on how, once in power, Lenin and Trotsky revised this position). Now, if Bolshevism cannot handle what it says is inevitable, then it should be avoided. To use an analogy:

Bolshevik: "*Join with us, we have a great umbrella which will keep us dry.*"

Anarchist: "*Last time it was used, it did not work. We all got soaked!*"

Bolshevik: "*But what our anarchist friend fails to mention is that it was raining at the time!*"

Not very convincing! Yet, sadly, this is the logic of the common Leninist justification of Bolshevik authoritarianism during the Russian Revolution.

3 Can the civil war explain the failure of Bolshevism?

One of the most common assertions against the anarchist case against Bolshevism is that while we condemn the Bolsheviks, we fail to mention the civil war and the wars of intervention. Indeed, for most Leninists the civil war is usually considered the key event in the development of Stalinism as well as explaining and justifying all anti-socialist acts of the Bolsheviks after they seized power in 1917.

For anarchists, such an argument is flawed on two levels, namely logical and factual. The logical flaw is that Leninist argue that civil war is inevitable after a revolution. They

maintain, correctly, that it is unlikely that the ruling class will disappear without a fight. Then they turn round and complain that because the ruling class did what the Marxists predicted they would do the Russian Revolution failed while also (incorrectly) asserting about anarchists do not recognise the need to defend a revolution (see [section H.2.1](#)).

So, obviously, this line of defence is nonsense. If civil war is inevitable, then it cannot be used to justify the failure of Bolshevism. Marxists simply want to have their cake and eat it to: you simply cannot argue that civil war is inevitable and then blame it for the failure of the Russian Revolution.

Also, by stressing civil war and denouncing those who "*forget the years of Civil War*", Trotsky and his followers end up being "*Apologist[s] for Stalinism*" for the civil war "*was initiated by the international bourgeoisie. And thus the ugly sides of Bolshevism under Lenin, as well as under Stalin, find their chief and final cause in capitalism*"™s enmity to Bolshevism which, if it is a monster, is only a reluctant monster, killing and torturing in mere self-defence. In short, "*so, if only in a roundabout way, Trotsky*"™s Bolshevism, despite its saturation with hatred for Stalin, leads in the end merely to a defence of Stalinism as the only possible self-defence for Trotsky. This explains the superficiality of the ideological differences between Stalinism and Trotskyism. The impossibility of attacking Stalin without attacking Lenin helps to explain, furthermore, Trotsky's great difficulties as an oppositionist. Trotsky's own past and theories preclude on his part the initiation of a movement to the **left** of Stalinism and condemned 'Trotskyism' to remain a mere collecting agency for unsuccessful Bolsheviks. As such it could maintain itself outside of Russia because of the ceaseless competitive struggles for power and positions within the so-called 'communist' world-movement. But it could not achieve significance for it had nothing to offer but the replacement of one set of politicians by another. The Trotskyist defence of Russia in the Second World War was consistent with all the previous policies of this, Stalin™s most bitter, but also most loyal, opposition." [Paul Mattick, "*Bolshevism and Stalinism*", **Anti-Bolshevik Communism**, pp. 68-9]

The other flaw in this defence of Bolshevism is the factual one, namely the awkward fact that Bolshevik authoritarianism started **before** the civil war broke out at the end of May, 1918. Simply put, it is difficult to blame a course of actions on an event which had not started yet. Moreover, Bolshevik authoritarianism **increased** after the civil war finished. This, incidentally, caused the few remaining anarchists who supported the regime to some degree to re-evaluate their position. In the words of Alexander Berkman:

*"I would not concede the appalling truth. Still the hope persisted that the Bolsheviks, though absolutely wrong in principle and practice, yet grimly held on to **some** shreds of the revolutionary banner. 'Allied interference,' 'the blockade and civil war,' 'the necessity of the transitory stage' -- thus I sought to placate my outraged conscience . . . At last the fronts were liquidated, civil war ended, and the country at peace. But Communist policies did not change. On the contrary . . . The party groaned under the unbearable yoke of the Party dictatorship. . . . Then came Kronstadt and its simultaneous echoes throughout the land . . . Kronstadt was crushed as ruthlessly as Thiers and Gallifet slaughtered the Paris Communards. And with Kronstadt the entire country and its last hope. With it also my faith in the Bolsheviks." [The Bolshevik Myth, p. 331]*

If Berkman had been in Russia in 1918, he may have realised that Bolshevik tyranny after the end of the civil war which climaxed with the attack on Kronstadt (see the appendix on ["What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"](#)) was not at odds with their pre-civil war activities to maintain their power. The simple fact is that Bolshevik authoritarianism was **not** caused by the pressures of the civil war, rather it started before then. All the civil war did was strengthen certain aspects of Bolshevik ideology and practice which had existed from the start. Needless to say, we cannot cover everything here and will by necessity focus on certain key developments which historian S.A. Smith summarises well:

"The Bolsheviks established their power in the localities through soviets, soldiers' committees, factory committees, and Red Guards. Numbering less than 350,000 in October 1917, the party had little option but to allow such independent organisations extensive leeway. Yet the same desperate problems of unemployment and lack of food and fuel that helped turn the workers against the Provisional Government soon began to turn workers against the Bolsheviks. In the first half of 1918, some 100,000 to 150,000 workers across Russia took part in strikes, food riots and other protests, roughly on a par with labour unrest on the eve of the February Revolution. In this context, the Bolsheviks struggled to concentrate authority in the hands of the party and state organs . . . In spring 1918, worker discontent translated into a renewal of support for the Mensheviks and, to a lesser extent, the SRs, causing the Bolsheviks to cancel soviet elections and close down soviets that proved uncooperative, thus initiating the process whereby soviets and trade unions were turned into adjuncts to a one-party state. When the Whites seized leadership of the anti-Bolshevik movement in the latter months of 1918, however, most workers swung back in support of the government. During the civil war, labour unrest continued . . . the Bolsheviks generally reacted by rushing in emergency supplies and by arresting the leaders of the protest, who were often Mensheviks or Left SRs . . . they did not scruple when they deemed it necessary to deploy armed force to suppress strikes, to confiscate ration cards or even to dismiss strikers en masse and then rehire them selectively. The Bolsheviks expected the working class to speak with one voice "in favour of the regime" - and when they didn't they, who had once excoriated the Mensheviks for their refusal to accept that a true proletariat existed in Russia, charged the working class with being no more than a mass of uprooted peasants with a thoroughly petty-bourgeois psychology." [Revolution and the People in Russia and China, p. 201]

The most important development during this period was the suppression of soviet democracy and basic working class freedoms. As we discuss in [section H.6.1](#), the Bolsheviks pursued a policy of systematically undermining soviet democracy from the moment they seized power. The first act was the creation of a Bolshevik government **over** the soviets, so marginalising the very organs they claimed ruled in Russia (and directly against the promises made by Lenin in **The State and Revolution** -- and not the last, as discussed in [section H.1.7](#)). The process was repeated in the local soviets, with the executive committees holding real power while the plenary sessions became increasingly infrequent and of little consequence. Come the spring of 1918, faced with growing working class opposition they started to delay soviet elections. When finally forced to hold elections, the Bolsheviks responded in two ways to maintain their power: either they packed the soviets with representatives of Bolshevik dominated organisation (making elections from the workplace irrelevant or they simply disbanded them by force if they lost (and repressed by force any protests against this). This was the situation at the grassroots, at the summit of the soviet system the Bolsheviks simply marginalised the Central Executive Committee of the soviets: real power was held by the

Bolshevik government. They also packed the Fifth All-Russian Soviet Congress held in July 1918, using their control over the credentials committee to increase the number of Bolsheviks by seating delegates from bodies they controlled). The power of the soviets had simply become a fig-leaf for a "soviet power" -- the handful of Bolsheviks who made up the government and the party's central committee.

It should be stressed that the Bolshevik assault on the soviets occurred in March, April and May 1918. That is, **before** the Czech uprising and the onset of full-scale civil war. So, to generalise, it cannot be said that it was the Bolshevik party that alone whole-heartedly supported Soviet power: the facts are, in the words of left-Menshevik Julius Martov, the Bolsheviks loved Soviets only when they were "*in the hands of the Bolshevik party.*" [quoted by Getzler, **Martov**, p. 174] If the workers voted for others, "soviet power" was openly replaced by party power (the real aim, as discussed in [section H.3.11](#)). The Bolsheviks had consolidated their position by early 1918, turning the Soviet State into a de facto one party state by packing, gerrymandering and disbanding soviets **before** the start of the Civil War.

Given this legacy of repression, Leninist Tony Cliff's assertion that it was only "*under the iron pressure of the civil war [that] the Bolshevik leaders were forced to move, as the price of survival, to a one-party system*" needs serious revising. Similarly, his comment that the "*civil war undermined the operation of the local soviets*" is equally inaccurate, as his is claim that "*for some time -- i.e. until the armed uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion -- the Mensheviks were not much hampered in their propaganda work.*" Simply put, Cliff's statement that "*it was about a year after the October Revolution before an actual monopoly of political power was held by one party*" is false. [**Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 163, p. 150, p. 167 and p. 172] Such a monopoly existed **before** the start of the civil war, with extensive political repression existing **before** the uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion which began it. There was a **de facto** one-party state by the spring of 1918: it took about a year for this reality to be reflected in Bolshevik ideology and rhetoric.

Other Leninists are just as loose with the facts as Cliff. His fellow British SWP member Chris Harman suggested that the Bolsheviks were really democrats and that "*[u]ntil the Civil War was well under way, this democratic dialectic of party and class could continue. The Bolsheviks held power as the majority party in the Soviets. But other parties continued to exist there too. The Mensheviks continued to operate legally and compete with the Bolsheviks for support until June 1918.*" Harman does not specifically indicate when he considered the civil war to have started, but almost always it is said to have begun with the revolt of the Czech Legion at the end of May 1918 (a date he seems to agree with, as he writes that the "*Right Social Revolutionaries were instigators of the counter-revolution*"). The Bolsheviks excluded the Right-SRs and Mensheviks from the government on 14 June of that year so "*well under way*" appears to mean around 3 weeks. While opposition parties were sometimes tolerated and allowed to stand for election to soviets after this date, the reality was that the soviets had become little more than a fig-leaf of Bolshevik Party by July 1918 yet Harman proclaims "*[o]f necessity the Soviet State of 1917 had been replaced by the single-party State of 1920 onwards.*" ["*How the Revolution was Lost*", pp. 13-36, Peter Binns, Tony Cliff, Chris Harman, **Russia: From Workers' State to State Capitalism**, pp. 18-9]

The suppression of Soviet democracy reached it logical conclusion in 1921 when the Kronstadt soviet, heart of the 1917 revolution, was stormed by Bolshevik forces, the rebels executed, imprisoned or forced into exile. Soviet democracy was not just an issue of debate

but one many workers died in fighting for: similar events to those at Kronstadt had occurred three years previously.

Before turning to other Bolshevik attacks on working class power and freedom, we need to address one issue. It will be proclaimed by pro-Bolsheviks that the Mensheviks (and SRs) were "*counter-revolutionaries*" and so Bolshevik actions against them were justified. However, the Bolsheviks started to suppress opposition soviets **before** the civil war broke out, so at the time neither group could be called "*counter-revolutionary*" in any meaningful sense of the word. The Civil War started on the 25th of May and the SRs and Mensheviks were expelled from the Soviets on the 14th of June. The right-SRs **did** support the revolt of the Czech Legion to form what was called the democratic counter-revolution, based on reforming the Constituent Assembly in Samara (the White generals came later, displacing the SRs and fighting for the restoration of the Tsarist regime). The Mensheviks refused to support this strategy and while the Bolsheviks "*offered some formidable fictions to justify the expulsions*" there was "*of course no substance in the charge that the Mensheviks had been mixed in counter-revolutionary activities on the Don, in the Urals, in Siberia, with the Czechoslovaks, or that they had joined the worst Black Hundreds.*" The real reason was the political losses in the soviets before the Civil War: the Bolsheviks "*drove them underground, just on the eve of the elections to the Fifth Congress of Soviets in which the Mensheviks were expected to make significant gains.*" [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 181]

Official Menshevik policy was to utilise soviet democracy to secure a change in government and policy, with any member found to have supported the armed rebellion of the right-SRs was expelled. This included a member of the Menshevik central committee who went "*without its knowledge*" to Samara and was "*expelled from the party*". Likewise, the Volga Mensheviks were "*sharply reprovved by Martov and the Menshevik Central Committee and instructed that neither party organisations nor members could take part in . . . such adventures.*" [Getzler **Op. Cit.**, p. 185] Such legal opposition did not stop the Bolsheviks repeatedly tolerating and banning the organisation (interestingly, periods of tolerance coincided with the **decline** of the White threat and the corresponding rise of working class protest). In summary, then, the charge that the Mensheviks "*were active supporters of intervention and of counter-revolution*" was "*untrue . . . and the Communists, if they ever believed it, never succeeded in establishing it.*" [Leonard Schapiro, **The Origin of the Communist Autocracy**, p. 193]

Attacks on working class freedoms and democracy were not limited to the soviets. Before seizing power, the Bolsheviks had long presented economic visions much at odds with what libertarians consider as fundamentally socialist. Lenin, in April 1918, was arguing for one-man management and "*[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.*" His support for a new form of wage slavery involved granting state appointed "*individual executives dictatorial powers (or 'unlimited' powers).*" Large-scale industry ("*the foundation of socialism*") required "*thousands subordinating their will to the will of one,*" and so the revolution "*demands*" that "*the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour.*" Lenin's "*superior forms of labour discipline*" were simply hyper-developed capitalist forms. The role of workers in production was the same, but with a novel twist, namely "*unquestioning obedience to the orders of individual representatives of the Soviet government during the work.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 316, p. 267-9 and p. 271]

This simply replaced private capitalism with **state** capitalism. *"In the shops where one-man management (Lenin's own preference) replaced collegial management,"* notes historian Diane Koenker, *"workers faced the same kinds of authoritarian management they thought existed only under capitalism."* [**Labour Relations in Socialist Russia**, p. 177] If, as many Leninists claim, one-man management was a key factor in the rise of Stalinism and/or *"state-capitalism"* in Russia, then, clearly, Lenin's input into these developments cannot be ignored (see [section H.3.13](#) on the obvious similarities between state socialism and state capitalism). After advocating *"one-man management"* and *"state capitalism"* in early 1918, he remained a firm supporter of both and looking back at this time from April 1920, he reiterated his position (*"Dictatorial powers and one-man management are not contradictory to socialist democracy"*) while also stressing that this was not forced upon the Bolsheviks by civil war. Discussing how, as in April 1918, the civil war was ended and it was time to build socialism he argued that the *"whole attention of the Communist Party and the Soviet government is centred on peaceful economic development, on problems of the dictatorship and of one-man management . . . When we tackled them for the first time in 1918, there was no civil war and no experience to speak of."* So it was *"not only experience"* of civil war, argued Lenin *"but something more profound . . . that has induced us now, as it did two years ago, to concentrate all our attention on labour discipline."* [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 30, p. 503 and p. 504]

In the light of this it is bizarre that some later day Leninists claim that the Bolsheviks only introduced one-man management because of the Civil War. Clearly, this was **not** the case: it was **this** period (before the civil war) that saw Lenin advocate and start to take the control of the economy out of the hands of the workers and place it into the hands of the Bolshevik party and the state bureaucracy. Thus what pro-Leninists like to portray as Stalinist had its roots in Lenin's regime, as can be seen when neo-Trotskyists like the British SWP's Peter Binns argue that Stalinism must be defined as *"state capitalism"* because of the *"exploitation and powerlessness of the Russian working class"*, created when it was *"decreed"* that *"all managers' orders"* were -- to quote a 1929 resolution of the Communist Party's Central Committee -- to be *"unconditionally binding on his subordinate administrative staff and on all workers"*. [*"The Theory of State Capitalism"*, pp. 73-98, **Russia: From Workers' State to State Capitalism**, p. 75] Given Lenin's imposition of one-man management in early 1918, why was Bolshevism **not** state-capitalist? Do social relationships change their nature dependent on who imposes them, whether it was Lenin or Stalin?

Needless to say, the Bolshevik undermining of the factory committee movement and, consequently, genuine worker's self-management of production in favour of state capitalism cannot be gone into great depth here (see [section H.6.2](#), for more discussion). Suffice to say, the factory committees were deliberately submerged in the trade unions and state control replaced workers' control. This involved practising one-man management and, as Lenin put in at the start of May 1918, *"our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not to shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it."* He stressed that this was no new idea, rather he *"gave it before the Bolsheviks seized power."* [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 27, p. 340 and p. 341]

It will be objected that Lenin advocated *"workers' control."* This is true, but a "workers' control" of a **very** limited nature. As we discuss in [section H.3.14](#), rather than seeing it as workers managing production directly, he always saw it in terms of workers' "controlling" or "supervising" those who did and his views on this matter were **radically** different to those of the factory committees. This is not all, as Lenin always placed his ideas in a statist context -- rather than base socialist reconstruction on working class self-organisation from below, the

Bolsheviks started "to build, from the top, its 'unified administration'" based on central bodies created by the Tsarist government in 1915 and 1916. [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 36] The institutional framework of capitalism would be utilised as the principal (almost exclusive) instruments of "socialist" transformation. Lenin's support for "one-man management" must be seen in this context, namely his vision of "socialism."

Bolshevik advocating and implementing of "one-man management" was not limited to the workplace. On 30th of March 1918 Trotsky, as Commissar of Military Affairs, set about reorganising the army. The death penalty for disobedience under fire was reintroduced, as was saluting officers, special forms of address, separate living quarters and privileges for officers. Officers were no longer elected. [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 37-8] Trotsky made it clear: "the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree". ["Work, Discipline, Order", **How the Revolution Armed**, vol. I, pp. 46-7] The soldiers were given no say in their fate, as per bourgeois armies.

Lenin's proposals also struck at the heart of workers' power in other ways. For example, he argued that "we must raise the question of piece-work and apply it . . . in practice." ["The Immediate Tasks Of The Soviet Government", **Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 258] As Leninist Tony Cliff (of all people) noted, "the employers have at their disposal a number of effective methods of disrupting th[e] unity [of workers as a class]. Once of the most important of these is the fostering of competition between workers by means of piece-work systems." He notes that this was used by the Nazis and the Stalinists "for the same purpose." [**State Capitalism in Russia**, pp. 18-9] Obviously piece-work is different when Lenin introduces it!

Finally, there is the question of general political freedom. It was also in this time period that the Bolsheviks first used the secret police (the Cheka, formed in December 1917) against left-wing opposition groups. The anarchists in Moscow were attacked on the night of April 11-12, with armed detachments of the Cheka raiding 26 anarchist centres, killing or wounding 40 and jailing 500. Shortly afterwards the Cheka carried out similar raids in Petrograd and in the provinces. In May **Burevestnik**, **Anarkhiia**, **Golos Truda** and other leading anarchist periodicals closed down. [Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, pp. 184-5] It must surely be a coincidence that there had been a "continued growth of anarchist influence among unskilled workers" after the October revolution and, equally coincidentally, that "[b]y the spring of 1918, very little was heard from the anarchists in Petrograd." [David Mandel, **The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power**, p. 357]

All this **before** the Trotsky provoked revolt of the Czech legion at the end of May, 1918, and the consequent "democratic counter-revolution" in favour of the Constituent Assembly (which the right-Socialist Revolutionaries led) and long before the rise of the White Armies (which replaced the right-SRs as the main threat to "soviet power" by the end of 1918) and Allied intervention. In summary, it was **before** large-scale civil war took place, in an interval of relative peace, that we see the introduction of most of the measures Leninists now try and pretend were necessitated by the Civil War itself. As discussed in [sections H.1.7](#), the promises of 1917 did not last six months.

This factual problem with the "civil war caused Bolshevik authoritarianism" excuse is the best answer to it. If the Bolsheviks pursued authoritarian policies before the civil war started, it is hard to justify their actions in terms of something that had not started yet. This explains why some Leninists have tried to muddy the waters somewhat by obscuring when the civil war started. For example, John Rees states that "[m]ost historians treat the revolution and the

civil war as separate processes" yet "[i]n reality they were one." He presents a catalogue of "armed resistance to the revolution," including such "precursors of civil war before the revolution" as the suppression after the July days and the Kornilov revolt in 1917. [John Rees, "In Defence of October," pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 31-2]

Ironically, Rees fails to see how this blurring of when the civil war started actually **harms** Leninism. After all, most historians place the start of the civil war when the Czech legion revolted **because** it marked large-scale conflict between armies. It is one thing to say that authoritarianism was caused by war -- large-scale conflict -- and another to say **any** form of conflict caused it. Simply put, if the Bolshevik state could not handle relatively minor forms of counter-revolution then where does that leave Lenin's **State and Revolution**? It is even worse if "civil war" is pushed back to **before** the actual revolution for then revolution is equated to civil war and so doomed to degeneration before it even starts. So while the period from October to May of 1918 was not trouble free, it was not one where the survival of the new regime looked to be seriously threatened as it was after that, particularly in 1919 and 1920. Thus "civil war" should be used, as is commonly done, to refer to the period from the Czech revolt (late May 1918) to the final defeat of Wrangel (November 1920).

This means attempts to push the start of the civil war back to October 1917 (or even earlier) simply weakens the Leninist argument. It still leaves the major problem for the "blame it on the civil war" position, namely to explain why the months **before** May of 1918 saw soviets being closed down, the start of the suppression of the factory committees, restrictions on freedom of speech and association, plus the repression of opposition groups (like the anarchists). Either any level of "civil war" makes Lenin's **State and Revolution** redundant or the source of Bolshevik authoritarianism must be found elsewhere. Given that Leninists to this day continue to point to Lenin's work as what they "really" stand for, it seems unlikely that they will take their rationales for the Bolshevik's violating it in practice to their logical position and place that work in the dustbin of history.

That covers the period **before** the start of the civil war. We now turn to the period **after** it finished. Here we find the same problem, namely an **increase** of authoritarianism even after the proclaimed cause for it (civil war) had ended.

The last White General Wrangel evacuated what remained of his forces to Constantinople in November 1920. With this defeat the Russian civil war had come to an end and the Bolsheviks started to demobilise the Red Army (halving its size to around 2,500,000 by the start of 1921). Those familiar with the history of the revolution will realise that it was some 4 months **later** that yet another massive strike wave occurred and the Kronstadt revolt took place (see the appendix "[What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?](#)"), while within the party, the 10th Congress banned factions. The repression of the strikes and Kronstadt revolt effectively destroying hope for mass pressure for change from below and the faction ban within the party closed off the very last "legal" door for those who opposed the regime from the left (although, as discussed in the appendix "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)", given that **all** the main factions did not question the necessity of party dictatorship there was no possibility for real socialist change).

It could be argued that the Bolsheviks were still fighting peasant insurrections and strikes across the country, but this has everything to do with Bolshevik policies and could only be considered "counter-revolutionary" if you think the Bolsheviks had a monopoly of what socialism and revolution meant. In the case of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine, the

Bolsheviks started that conflict by betraying them once they had played a key role in defeating Wrangel. As such, any resistance to Bolshevik rule by the working class and peasantry of Russia indicated the lack of democracy within the country rather than some sort of "counter-revolutionary" conflict.

So even the end of the Civil War causes problems for this defence of the Bolsheviks. Simply put, with the defeat of the Whites it would be expected that some return to democratic norms would happen. It did not, in fact the reverse happened. Factions were banned, even the smallest forms of opposition was finally eliminated from both the party and society as a whole. Those opposition groups and parties which had been tolerated during the civil war were finally smashed. Popular revolts for reform, such as the Kronstadt rebellion and the strike wave which inspired it (see [section 5](#) below), were put down by force. No form of opposition was tolerated, no freedom allowed. If civil war **was** the cause of Bolshevik authoritarianism, it seems strange that it got worse after it was finished.

This grim reality was what convinced anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to finally break with the regime. After rationalising away their doubts with the hope that the end of the civil war would see change, the continuation of repression showed them the error of their ways. As Goldman put it:

*"We must not fail to consider the Bolsheviks **continue** to employ exactly the same methods today as they did in 'the moments of grim necessity, in 1919, 1920, and 1921.' . . . The military fronts have long ago been liquidated; internal counter-revolution is suppressed; the old bourgeoisie is eliminated; the 'moments of grim necessity' are past . . . but the Terror, the Tchecka, suppression of free speech and press, and all the other Communist methods of former years still remain in force. Indeed, they are being applied even more brutally and barbarously since the death of Lenin. Is it to 'preserve the remnants of civilisation' or to strengthen the weakening Party dictatorship?" [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. liii-liv]*

This, then, is the main factual problem with the "blame the civil war" approach beloved by Leninists to this day: Bolshevik authoritarianism had not began with the start of the civil war, nor did it stop when the civil war ended.

As we discuss in [section H.6](#), the root causes for Bolshevik authoritarianism post-October was Bolshevik ideology combined with state power. After all, how "democratic" is it to give all power to the Bolshevik party central committee? Surely socialism involves more than voting for a new government? Is it not about mass participation, the kind of participation centralised government precludes and Bolshevism vanguardism fears -- as discussed in [section H.5](#) -- as being inevitably influenced by "*bourgeois ideology*"? In such circumstances, moving from party rule to party dictatorship is not such a leap.

That "civil war" cannot explain what happened can be shown by a counter-example which effectively shows that civil war did not inevitably mean party dictatorship ruling over a state capitalist economy (and protesting workers and peasants!). The Makhnovists (an anarchist influenced partisan army) managed to defend the revolution and encourage soviet democracy, freedom of speech, and so on, while doing so (see the appendix ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#)). Which, of course, does not really fit in with the Bolsheviks being forced to be anti-democratic due to the pressures of civil war.

So, in summary, civil war and imperialist intervention cannot be blamed for Bolshevik authoritarianism simply because the latter had started before the former existed. Moreover, the example of the Makhnovists suggests that Bolshevik policies during the civil war were also not driven purely by the need for survival. As Kropotkin argued in 1920, *"all foreign armed intervention necessarily strengthens the dictatorial tendencies of the government . . . The evils inherent in a party dictatorship have been accentuated by the conditions of war in which this party maintains its power. This state of war has been the pretext for strengthening dictatorial methods which centralise the control of every detail of life in the hands of the government, with the effect of stopping an immense part of the ordinary activity of the country. The evils natural to state communism have been increased ten-fold under the pretext that all our misery is due to foreign intervention."* [**Anarchism**, p. 253]

In other words, while the civil war may have increased Bolshevik authoritarianism, it did not create it.

4 Did economic collapse and isolation destroy the revolution?

One of the most common Trotskyist explanations for the failure of the Russian revolution is that the Bolsheviks faced terrible economic conditions, which forced them to be less than democratic. Combined with the failure of the revolution to spread to more advanced countries, party dictatorship, it is argued, was inevitable. In the words of Leninist John Rees:

"In a country where the working class was a minority of the population, where industry had been battered by years of war and in conditions of White and imperialist encirclement, the balance gradually tilted towards greater coercion. Each step of the way was forced on the Bolsheviks by dire and pressing necessities." ["In Defence of October," **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 41]

Thus *"economic devastation"* played a key part in the degeneration of the revolution. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 31] Other Leninists have made similar arguments, with Victor Serge noting that the *"decline in production was uninterrupted. It should be noted that this decline had already begun before the revolution. In 1916 the output of agricultural machinery, for example, was down by 80 per cent compared with 1913. The year 1917 had been marked by a particularly general, rapid and serious downturn. The production figures for the principal industries in 1913 and 1918 were, in millions of **poods**: coal, from 1,738 to 731 (42 per cent); iron ore, from 57,887 to 1,686; cast-iron, from 256 to 31.5 (12.3 per cent); steel, from 259 to 24.5; rails, from 39.4 to 1.1. As a percentage of 1913 production, output of linen fell to 75 per cent, of sugar to 24 per cent, and tobacco to 19 per cent."* Moreover, production continued *"to fall until the end of civil war . . . For 1920, the following indices are given as a percentage of output in 1913: coal, 27 per cent; cast iron, 2.4 per cent; linen textiles, 38 per cent."* [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 352 and p. 425]

Likewise Tony Cliff (like Serge, another of Rees's references), who argued that war-damaged industry *"continued to run down"* in the spring of 1918: *"One of the causes of famine was the breakdown of transport . . . Industry was in a state of complete collapse. Not only was there no food to feed the factory workers; there was no raw material or fuel for industry . . . The collapse of industry meant unemployment for the workers."* Cliff provides economic indexes. For large scale industry, taking 1913 as the base, 1917 saw production fall to 77%. In 1918, it

was at 35% of the 1913 figure, 1919 it was 26% and 1920 was 18%. Productivity per worker also fell, from 85% in 1917, to 44% in 1918, 22% in 1919 and then 26% in 1920. [Lenin, vol. 3, pp. 67-9, p. 86 and p. 85]

In such circumstances, it is argued, how can you expect the Bolsheviks to subscribe to democratic and socialist norms? This meant that the success or failure of the revolution depended on whether the revolution spread to more advanced countries. Leninist Duncan Hallas argues that the *"failure of the German Revolution in 1918-19 . . . seems, in retrospect, to have been decisive . . . for only substantial economic aid from an advanced economy, in practice from a socialist Germany, could have reversed the disintegration of the Russian working class."* ["Towards a revolutionary socialist party," pp. 38-55, **Party and Class**, Alex Callinicos (ed.), p. 44]

Anarchists are not convinced by these arguments. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, we are aware that revolutions are disruptive no matter where they occur and, moreover, Leninists are meant to know this too (see [section 1](#)). Simply put, there is a certain incredulous element to these arguments. Lenin himself had argued that *"[e]very revolution . . . by its very nature implies a crisis, and a very deep crisis at that, both political and economic. This is irrespective of the crisis brought about by the war."* [**Collected Works**, vol. 30, p. 341] Serge also considered crisis as inevitable, arguing that the *"conquest of production by the proletariat was in itself a stupendous victory, one which saved the revolution's life. Undoubtedly, so thorough a recasting of all the organs of production is impossible without a substantial decline in output; undoubtedly, too, a proletariat cannot labour and fight at the same time."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 361] As we discussed in detail in [section 2](#), this was a common Bolshevik position at the time and so it seems strange that -- yet again -- Leninists blame events they consider inevitable for the degeneration of the Bolshevik regime.

Secondly, and more importantly, every revolution or revolutionary situation has been accompanied by economic crisis. This means that **if** Bolshevik authoritarianism is blamed on the state of the economy, it is not hard to conclude that **every** Bolshevik-style revolution will suffer the same fate as the Russian one. For example, as we will shortly prove, Germany itself was in a state of serious economic disruption and falling production in 1918 and 1919, a collapse which would have got worse if a Bolshevik-style revolution had occurred there. This suggests that the common Leninist idea that a successful revolution in, say, Germany would have ensured the success of the Russian Revolution is flawed. Looking at Europe during the period immediately after the first world war, we discover great economic hardship. To quote one Trotskyist editor:

"In the major imperialist countries of Europe, production still had not recovered from wartime destruction. A limited economic upswing in 1919 and early 1920 enabled many demobilised soldiers to find work, and unemployment fell somewhat. Nonetheless, in 'victorious' France overall production in 1920 was still only two-thirds its pre-war level. In Germany industrial production was little more than half its 1914 level, human consumption of grains was down 44 per cent, and the economy was gripped by spiralling inflation. Average per capita wages in Prague in 1920, adjusted for inflation, were just over one-third of pre-war levels." [John Riddell, "Introduction," **Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920**, vol. I, p. 17]

Now, if economic collapse was responsible for Bolshevik authoritarianism and the subsequent failure of the revolution, it seems hard to understand why an expansion of the revolution into similarly crisis ridden countries would have had a major impact in the development of the revolution. Since most Leninists agree that a successful German Revolution would have made the difference, we will discuss this in more detail before going onto other revolutions and revolutionary situations.

By 1918, Germany was in a bad state. Victor Serge noted *"the famine and economic collapse which caused the final ruin of the Central Powers."* [Op. Cit., p. 361] The semi-blockade of Germany during the war badly effected the economy, the *"dynamic growth"* of which before the war *"had been largely dependent on the country's involvement in the world market"*. The war *"proved catastrophic to those who had depended on the world market and had been involved in the production of consumer goods . . . Slowly but surely the country slithered into austerity and ultimately economic collapse"* and *"overall food production declined further after poor harvests in 1916 and 1917. Thus grain production, already well below its prewar levels, slumped from 21.8 million to 14.9 million tons in those two years."* [V. R. Berghahn, **Modern Germany**, p. 47, pp. 47-8, p. 50]

The parallels with pre-revolution Russia are striking and it is hardly surprising that revolution did break out in Germany in November 1918. Workers' councils sprang up all across the country, inspired in part by the example of the Russian soviets (and what people **thought** was going on in Russia under the Bolsheviks). A Social-Democratic government was founded, which used the Free Corps (right-wing volunteer troops) to crush the revolution from January 1919 onwards. This meant that Germany in 1919 was marked by extensive civil war and in January 1920 a state of siege was re-introduced across half the country.

This social turmoil was matched by economic turmoil. As in Russia, Germany faced massive economic problems, problems which the revolution inherited. Taking 1928 as the base year, the index of industrial production in Germany was slightly lower in 1913, namely 98 in 1913 to 100 in 1928 and so Germany effectively lost 15 years of economic activity. In 1917, the index was 63 and by 1918 (the year of the revolution), it was 61 (i.e. industrial production had dropped by nearly 40%). In 1919, it fell again to 37, rising to 54 in 1920 and 65 in 1921. Thus, in 1919, the *"industrial production reached an all-time low"* and it *"took until the late 1920s for [food] production to recover its 1912 level . . . In 1921 grain production was still . . . some 30 per cent below the 1912 figure."* Coal production was 69.1% of its 1913 level in 1920, falling to 32.8% in 1923. Iron production was 33.1% in 1920 and 25.6% in 1923. Steel production likewise fell to 48.5% in 1920 and fell again to 36% in 1923. [V. R. Berghahn, **Op. Cit.**, p. 258, pp. 67-8, p. 71 and p. 259]

Significantly, one of the first acts of the Bolshevik government towards the new German Social-Democratic government was *"the offer by the Soviet authorities of two trainloads of grain for the hungry German population. It was a symbolical gesture and, in view of desperate shortages in Russia itself, a generous one."* The offer, perhaps unsurprisingly, was rejected in favour of grain from America. [E.H. Carr, **The Bolshevik Revolution**, vol. 3, p. 106]

The similarities between Germany and Russia are clear. As noted above, in Russia, the index for large scale industry fell to 77 in 1917 from 100 in 1913, falling again to 35 in 1918, 26 in 1919 and 18 in 1920. [Tony Cliff, **Lenin**, vol. 3, p. 86] In other words, a fall of 23% between 1913 and 1917, 54.5% between 1917 and 1918, 25.7% in 1918 and 30.8% in 1919. A similar

process occurred in Germany, where the fall in production was 37.7% between 1913 and 1917, 8.2% between 1917 and 1918 and 33.9% between 1918 and 1919 (the year of revolution). While production did rise in 1920 by 45.9%, it was still around 45% less than before the war.

Thus, comparing the two countries we discover a similar picture of economic collapse. In the year the revolution started, production had fallen by 23% in Russia (from 1913 to 1917) and by 43% in Germany (from 1913 to 1918). Once revolution had effectively started, production fell even more. In Russia, it fell to 65% of its pre-war level in 1918, in Germany it fell to 62% of its pre-war level in 1919. Of course, in Germany revolution did not go as far as in Russia, and so production did rise somewhat in 1920 and afterwards. What is significant is that in 1923, production fell dramatically by 34% (from around 70% of its pre-war level to around 45% of that level). This economic collapse did not deter the Communists from trying to provoke a revolution in Germany that year, so suggesting that economic disruption played no role in their evaluation of the success of a revolution.

This economic chaos in Germany is never mentioned by Leninists when they discuss the "objective factors" facing the Russian Revolution. However, once these facts are taken into account, the superficiality of the typical Leninist explanation for the degeneration of the revolution becomes obvious. The very problems which, it is claimed, forced the Bolsheviks to act as they did were also rampant in Germany. If economic collapse made socialism impossible in Russia, it would surely have had the same effect in Germany? This means, given that the economic collapse in both 1918/19 and 1923 was as bad as that facing Russia in 1918 and that the Bolsheviks had started to undermine soviet and military democracy along with workers' control by spring and summer of that year (see [section 3](#)), to blame Bolshevik actions on economic collapse would mean that any German revolution would have been subject to the same authoritarianism **if** the roots of Bolshevik authoritarianism were forced by economic events rather than a product of applying a specific political ideology via state power. Few Leninists draw this obvious conclusion from their own arguments although there is no reason for them not to.

So the German Revolution was facing the same problems the Russian one was. This means that when John Rees argues that giving machinery or goods to the peasants in return for grain instead of simply seizing it required "*revolution in Germany, or at least the revival of industry*" in Russia, he completely fails to indicate the troubles facing the German revolution (and the role Bolshevik policies and prejudices played in the collapse of industry, as noted in [section H.6.2](#)). "*Without a successful German revolution,*" he writes, "*the Bolsheviks were thrown back into a bloody civil war with only limited resources. The revolution was under siege.*" [John Rees, "*In Defence of October,*" pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 40 and p. 29] Yet given the state of the German economy at the time, it is hard to see how much aid a successful German revolution could have given and so his belief that a successful German Revolution would have mitigated Bolshevik authoritarianism seems exactly that, a belief without any real evidence to support it. As Lenin argued against the Russian left-communists in early 1918:

"Yes, we shall see the world revolution, but for the time being it is a very good fairy-tale . . . But I ask, is it proper for a serious revolutionary to believe in fairy-tales? . . . [I]f you tell the people that civil war will break out in German and also guarantee that instead of a clash with imperialism we shall have a field revolution on a world-wide scale, the people will say you are deceiving them. In doing this you will be

overcoming the difficulties with which history has confronted us only in your minds, by your wishes . . . You are staking everything on this card! If the revolution breaks out, everything is saved . . . But if it does not turn out as we desire, if it does not achieve victory tomorrow -- what then? Then the masses will say to you, you acted like gamblers -- you staked everything on a fortunate turn of events that did not take place . . ." [Collected Works, vol. 27, p. 102]

It seems ironic that modern-day Leninists subscribe to such "fairy-tales" in their attempts to excuse Lenin's regime.

The same can be said of other revolutions as well. The Paris Commune, for example, was born after a four-month-long siege "had left the capital in a state of economic collapse. The winter had been the severest in living memory. Food and fuel had been the main problems . . . Unemployment was widespread. Thousands of demobilised soldiers wandered loose in Paris and joined in the general hunt for food, shelter and warmth. For most working men the only source of income was the 1.50 francs daily pay of the National Guard, which in effect had become a form of unemployment pay." The city was "near starving" and by March it was "in a state of economic and political crisis." [Stewart Edwards, "Introduction," **The Communards of Paris, 1871**, p. 23] Yet this economic collapse and isolation did not stop the commune from introducing and maintaining democratic forms of decision making, both political and economic. A similar process occurred during the French Revolution, where mass participation via the "sections" was not hindered by economic collapse. It was finally stopped by state action organised by the Jacobins to destroy popular participation and initiative (see Kropotkin's **The Great French Revolution** for details).

During the Spanish Revolution, "overall Catalan production fell in the first year of war by 30 per cent, and in the cotton-working sector of the textile industry by twice as much. Overall unemployment (complete and partial) rose by nearly a quarter in the first year, and this despite the military mobilisation decreed in September 1936. The cost of living quadrupled in just over two years; wages . . . only doubled." [Ronald Fraser, **Blood of Spain**, p. 234] Markets, both internally and externally, for goods and raw materials were disrupted, not to mention the foreign blockade and the difficulties the war and revolution imposed in trying to buy products from other countries. This came on top of problems caused by the great depression of the 1930s which affected Spain along with most other countries. Yet, libertarian socialist norms of economic and social decision making continued in spite of economic disruption. Ironically, given the subject of this discussion, it was only once the Stalinist counter-revolution got going were they fatally undermined or destroyed.

Thus economic disruption need not automatically imply authoritarian policies. And just as well, given the fact that revolution and economic disruption seem to go hand in hand.

Looking further afield, even revolutionary situations can be accompanied with economic collapse. For example, the Argentine revolt against neo-liberalism which started in 2001 took place when economy was a mess, with poverty and unemployment at disgusting levels. Four years of recession saw the poverty rate balloon from 31 to 53 percent of the population of 37 million, while unemployment climbed from 14 to 21.4 percent, according to official figures. Yet in the face of such economic problems, working class people acted collectively, forming popular assemblies and taking over workplaces (see **Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina**, edited by Marina Sitrin).

The Great Depression of the 1930s in America saw a much deeper economic contradiction. Indeed, it was as bad as that associated with revolutionary Germany and Russia after the first world war. According to Howard Zinn, after the stock market crash in 1929 *"the economy was stunned, barely moving. Over five thousand banks closed and huge numbers of businesses, unable to get money, closed too. Those that continued laid off employees and cut the wages of those who remained, again and again. Industrial production fell by 50 percent, and by 1933 perhaps 15 million (no one knew exactly) -- one-fourth or one-third of the labour force -- were out of work."* [**A People's History of the United States**, p. 378] Specific industries were badly affected. For example, total GNP fell to 53.6% in 1933 compared to its 1929 value. The production of basic goods fell by much more. Iron and Steel saw a 59.3% decline, machinery a 61.6% decline and non-ferrous metals and products, a 55.9% decline. Transport was also affected, with transportation equipment declining by 64.2% railroad car production dropping by 73.6% and locomotion production declining by 86.4%. Furniture production saw a decline of 57.9%. The workforce was equally affected, with unemployment reaching 25% in 1933. In Chicago 40% of the workforce was unemployed. Union membership, which had fallen from 5 million in 1920 to 3.4 million in 1929 fell to less than 3 million by 1933. [Lester V. Chandler, **America's Greatest Depression, 1929-1941**, p. 20, p. 23, p. 34, p. 45 and p. 228]

Yet in the face of this economic collapse, no Leninist proclaimed the impossibility socialism. In fact, the reverse was the case. Similar arguments could apply to, say, post-world war two Europe, when economic collapse and war damage did not stop Trotskyists looking forward to, and seeking, revolutions there. Nor did the massive economic collapse that occurred after the fall of Stalinism in Russia in the early 1990s deter Leninist calls for revolution. Indeed, you can rest assured that any drop in economic activity, no matter how large or small, will be accompanied by Leninist articles arguing for the immediate introduction of socialism.

And this was the case in 1917 as well, when economic crisis had been a fact of Russian life throughout the year. Lenin, for example, argued at the end of September that *"[u]navoidable catastrophe is threatening Russia . . . The danger of a great catastrophe and of famine is imminent . . . Six months of revolution have elapsed. The catastrophe is even closer. Unemployment has assumed a mass scale. To think that there is a shortage of goods in the country"*. [*"The Threatening Catastrophe and how to Fight It"*, **Collected Works**, vol. 25, p. 327] This did not stop him calling for revolution and seizing power, arguing that only a genuine socialist government -- a Bolshevik one, naturally -- could implement the policies needed to solve the crisis. Nor did this crisis stop the creation of democratic working class organisations, such as soviets, trade unions and factory committees being formed. It did not stop mass collective action to combat those difficulties. It appears, therefore, that while the economic crisis of 1917 did not stop the development of socialist tendencies to combat it, the seizure of power by a socialist party did.

Given that no Leninist has argued that a revolution could not nor should not take place in Russia in 1917, in Germany after the First World War, in the USA during the darkest months of the Great Depression, nor in Europe after the devastation of the Second World War, the argument that the grim economic conditions facing Bolshevik Russia made socialist democracy impossible seem weak. By arguing that, for example, Germany in 1918 to 1921 could create a viable socialist revolution in economic conditions just as bad as those facing Soviet Russia, the reasons why the Bolsheviks created a party dictatorship must be looked for elsewhere. Moreover, if the pro-Bolshevik argument Rees, Cliff and others expound is

correct, then the German Revolution would have been subject to the same authoritarianism as befell the Bolshevik one simply because it was facing a similar economic crisis.

In short, if these arguments are taken seriously then you would have to conclude that, for Leninists, economic collapse only makes socialism impossible once **they** are in power. Which is hardly convincing, or inspiring.

Finally, the situation is not as bleak as these Leninist argument would suggest. Yes, revolutions and economic disruption do go together but this does not make revolution undesirable or impossible. It means that revolutionaries need to be aware of these predictable -- and predicted, at least by anarchists! -- developments and be aware of the solutions can only be found in decentralisation, federalism and self-management. As Kropotkin put it:

"The first months of emancipation will inevitably increase consumption of goods and production will diminish. And, furthermore, any country achieving social revolution will be surrounded by a ring of neighbours either unfriendly or actually enemies . . . The demands upon products will increase while production decreases, and finally famine will come. There is only one way of avoiding it. We should understand that as soon as a revolutionary movement begins in any country the only possible way out will consist in the workingmen [and women] and peasants from the beginning taking the whole national economy into their hands and organising it themselves . . . But they will not be convinced of this necessity except when all responsibility for national economy, today in the hands of a multitude of ministers and committees, is presented in a simple form to each village and city, in every factory and shop, as their own affair, and when they understand that they must direct it themselves." [Kropotkin, **Anarchism**, pp. 77-8]

Anarchists have always recognised that a revolution would face problems and difficult "objective factors" and has developed our ideas accordingly. We argue that to blame "objective factors" for the failure of the Russian Revolution simply shows that believing in fairy-tales is sadly far too common on the "serious" Leninist "revolutionary" left. As we discuss in the appendix on ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#), Marxist ideas were important and decisive in developments. In other words, economic disruption need not undermine a revolution if libertarian principles are applied. In Russia, this inevitable economic disruption was made worse by Bolshevik ideology due to the policies it inspired and the centralised structures it created.

5 Was the Russian working class atomised or "declassed"?

A standard Leninist explanation for the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party (and subsequent rise of Stalinism) is based on the "atomisation" or "declassing" of the proletariat. Neo-Trotskyist John Rees summarises this argument as follows:

"The civil war had reduced industry to rubble. The working class base of the workers' state, mobilised time and again to defeat the Whites, the rock on which Bolshevik power stood, had disintegrated. The Bolsheviks survived three years of civil war and wars in intervention, but only at the cost of reducing the working class to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917 . . . The bureaucracy of the

*workers' state was left suspended in mid-air, its class base eroded and demoralised. Such conditions could not help but have an effect on the machinery of the state and organisation of the Bolshevik Party . . . The vice-like pressure of the civil war had transformed the state in other ways. The weight of the bureaucracy, of the army, of the Cheka, had grown enormously during the civil war. Without these institutions the October regime would have been swept away in a bloody, reactionary counter-revolution. With them the October revolution had become sclerotic and authoritarian . . . The power of the bureaucracy, and within the bureaucracy the power of its top layers, grew." ["In Defence of October," pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, pp. 65-6]*

It is these objective factors which explain why the Bolshevik party substituted itself for the Russian working class. "*Under such conditions,*" argues Tony Cliff, "*the class base of the Bolshevik Party disintegrated -- not because of some mistakes in the policies of Bolshevism, not because of one or another conception of Bolshevism regarding the role of the party and its relation to the class -- but because of mightier historical factors. The working class had become declassed . . . Bolshevik 'substitutionism' . . . did not jump out of Lenin's head as Minerva out of Zeus's, but was born of the objective conditions of civil war in a peasant country, where a small working class, reduced in weight, became fragmented and dissolved into the peasant masses.*" [**Trotsky on Substitutionism**, pp. 62-3] In other words, because the working class was so decimated the replacement of class power by party power and then by that of the bureaucracy (Stalinism) was inevitable.

Before discussing it, we should point out that this argument dates back to Lenin. For example, he argued in 1921 that the proletariat, "*owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed, i.e. dislodged from its class groove, and had ceased to exist as a proletariat . . . the proletariat has disappeared.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 33, p. 65] However, unlike his later-day followers, Lenin was sure that while it "*would be absurd and ridiculous to deny that the fact that the proletariat is declassed is a handicap*" it could still "*fulfil its task of winning and holding state power.*" [**Op. Cit.**, vol. 32, p. 412]

Anarchists do not find these arguments particularly convincing. This is for two reasons.

First, it seems incredulous to blame the civil war for the "substitution" of Bolshevik power for working class power as party power had been Lenin's stated aim in 1917 (and long before) and October saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, **not** the soviets (see [section H.3.11](#)). As we saw in [section 3](#), the Bolsheviks started to gerrymander and disband soviets to remain in power **before** the civil war started. As such, to blame the civil war and the problems it caused for the usurpation of power by the Bolsheviks is unconvincing. Simply put, the Bolsheviks had "substituted" itself for the proletariat from the start, from the day it seized power in the October revolution.

Second, the fact is the Russian working class was far from "atomised." Rather than being incapable of collective action, as Leninists assert, Russia's workers were more than capable of taking collective action throughout the civil war period. The problem for Leninists is, of course, that any such collective action was directed **against** the Bolshevik regime. This caused the party no end of problems for if the working class **was** the ruling class under the Bolsheviks, then who was it striking and protesting against? Emma Goldman explains the issue well:

"In my early period the question of strikes had puzzled me a great deal. People had told me that the least attempt of that kind was crushed and the participants sent to prison. I had not believed it, and, as in all similar things, I turned to Zorin [a Bolshevik] for information. 'Strikes under the dictatorship of the proletariat!' he had proclaimed; 'there's no such thing.' He had even upbraided me for crediting such wild and impossible tales. Against whom, indeed, should the workers strike in Soviet Russia, he argued. Against themselves? They were the masters of the country, politically as well as industrially. To be sure, there were some among the toilers who were not yet fully class-conscious and aware of their own true interests. These were sometimes disgruntled, but they were elements incited by . . . self-seekers and enemies of the Revolution . . . no better than out and out counter-revolutionists, and of course the Soviet authorities had to protect the country against their kind." [Living My Life, vol. 2, pp. 872-3]

This still seems to be the position in pro-Bolshevik accounts of the Revolution and its degeneration. After the Bolshevik seizure of power, the working class as an active agent almost immediately disappears from their accounts and any mention of strikes and protests is short and fleeting, if it exists at all. This is unsurprising, as it does not bode well for maintaining the Bolshevik Myth to admit that workers were resisting the so-called "proletarian dictatorship" from the start. The notion that the working class had "disappeared" fits into this selective blindness well: why discuss the actions of a class which did not exist? Thus we have a logical circle from which reality can be excluded: the working class is "atomised" and so cannot take industrial action, evidence of industrial action need not be looked for nor mentioned because the class is "atomised."

As discussed in [section H.6.3](#), the Russian working class **did** take extensive collective action throughout this period (from the Bolshevik seizure of power to well after the end of the civil war) and faced substantial State repression as a result. Here we provide more evidence of the existence of working class collective struggle throughout the period 1918 to 1923 but before doing so, it is necessary to place Lenin's comments on the "declassing" of the working class in context: rather than being the result of a **lack** of collective industrial direct action and solidarity, Lenin's arguments were the product of its opposite -- the **rise** in collective struggle by the Russian working class. As one historian notes, "*[a]s discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin . . . began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated . . . workers had become 'declassified.'*" "Lenin's analysis," he continues, "*had a superficial logic but it was based on a false conception of working-class consciousness. There is little evidence to suggest that the demands that workers made at the end of 1920 . . . represented a fundamental change in aspirations since 1917*". Moreover, "*an analysis of the industrial unrest in 1921 shows that long-standing workers were prominent in protest.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, pp. 90-1]

Lenin's pessimistic analysis of 1921 is in sharp contrast to the optimistic mood of early 1920 in Bolshevik ranks produced by the defeat of the White armies. For example, writing in May 1920, Trotsky seemed oblivious to the atomisation of the Russian working class so much bemoaned later, arguing that "*in spite of political tortures, physical sufferings and horrors, the labouring masses are infinitely distinct from political decomposition, from moral collapse, or from apathy . . . Today, in all branches of industry, there is going on an energetic struggle for the establishment of strict labour discipline, and for the increase of the productivity of labour. The party organisations, the trade unions, the factory and workshop administrative committees, rival each one another in this respect, with the undivided support*

of the working class as a whole." Indeed, they "concentrate their attention and will on collective problems" ("Thanks to a regime which, though it had inflicted great hardship upon them, has given their life a purpose and a high goal!"). Needless to say, the party had "the undivided support of the public opinion of the working class as a whole." [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 6]

The turn around in perspective after this period did not happen by accident, independently of the working class resistance to Bolshevik rule. After all, the defeat of the Whites in early of 1920 saw the Bolsheviks take "victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of reconstruction on the basis of an intensification of War Communism policies with redoubled determination." This led to "an increase in industrial unrest in 1920," including "serious strikes." The resistance was "becoming increasingly politicised." Thus, the stage was set for Lenin's turn around and his talk of "declassing." In early 1921 "Lenin argued that workers, who were no more demoralised than they were in early 1920, had become 'declassed' in order to justify a political clamp-down." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 37, p. 80 and p. 18]

Other historians also note this context. For example, while the "working class had decreased in size and changed in composition, . . . the protest movement from late 1920 made clear that it was not a negligible force and that in an inchoate way it retained a vision of socialism which was not identified entirely with Bolshevik power . . . Lenin's arguments on the declassing of the proletariat was more a way of avoiding this unpleasant truth than a real reflection of what remained, in Moscow at least, a substantial physical and ideological force." [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 261] In the words of Diane Koenker, "[i]f Lenin's perceptions of the situation were at all representative, it appears that the Bolshevik party made deurbanisation and declassing the scapegoat for its political difficulties, when the party's own policies and its unwillingness to accept changing proletarian attitudes were also to blame." Ironically, this was not the first time that the Bolsheviks had blamed its problems on the lack of a "true" proletariat and its replacement by "petty-bourgeois" elements: "This was the same argument used to explain the Bolsheviks' lack of success in the early months of 1917 -- that the cadres of conscious proletarians were diluted by non-proletarian elements." ["Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War," pp. 424-450, **The Journal of Modern History**, vol. 57, no. 3, p. 449 and p. 428]

It should be noted that the "declassing" argument does have a superficial validity if you accept the logic of vanguardism. After all, if you accept the premise that the party alone represents socialist consciousness and that the working class, by its own efforts, can only reach a reformist level of political conscious (at best), then any deviation in working class support for the party obviously represents a drop in class consciousness or a "declassing" of the proletariat (see [section H.5.1](#)). Thus working class protest against the party can be dismissed as evidence of "declassing" which has to be suppressed rather than what it really is, namely evidence of working class autonomy and collective struggle for what it considers **its** interests to be against a new master class. The "declassing" argument is related to the vanguardist position which, in turn, justifies the dictatorship of the party **over** the class (see [section H.5.3](#)).

So the "declassing" argument is not some neutral statement based on the fact that the numbers of industrial workers fell between October 1917 and 1921. It was developed as a weapon in the class struggle, to justify Bolshevik repression of collective working class

struggle, to justify the continuation of Bolshevik party dictatorship **over** the working class. This in turn explains why working class struggle during this period generally fails to get mentioned by later day Bolsheviks -- it simply undermines their justifications for Bolshevik dictatorship. After all, how can they say that the working class could not exercise "*collective power*" when it was conducting mass strikes -- collective action -- throughout Russia during the period 1918 to 1923?

As such, it is not strange that most Leninist accounts of the revolution post-October rarely, if ever, mention what the working class was actually doing. We do get statistics on the drop of the numbers of industrial workers in the cities (usually Petrograd and Moscow), but any discussion on working class protest and strikes is limited at best, usually ignored. Which shows the bankruptcy of what can be called the "statistical tendency" of analysing the Russian working class. While statistics can tell us how many industrial workers remained in Russia in, say, 1921, they do not provide any idea of their combativeness or their ability to take collective decisions and action. If statistics alone indicated that, then the massive labour struggles in 1930s American would not have taken place. Millions had been made redundant: at the Ford Motor Company, for example, 128,000 workers had been employed in the spring of 1929 and only 37,000 were by August of 1931 (only 29% of the 1929 figure) while, by the end of 1930, almost half of the 280,000 textile mill workers in New England were out of work. [Howard Zinn, **A People's History of the United States**, p. 378] Yet in the face of this mass unemployment and economic crisis, the workers organised themselves and fought back. Likewise, the reduction in the number of Russian workers did not restrict their ability to make collective decisions and collectively act on them -- Bolshevik repression **did**.

Moreover, while Leninists usually point to the fall in population in Petrograd and Moscow during the civil war, concentrating on these cities can be misleading. "*Using the Petrograd figures*," notes Daniel R. Bower, "*historians have painted a lurid picture of flight from the cities. In 1918 alone the former capital lost 850,000 people and was by itself responsible for one-half of the total urban population decline of the Civil War years. If one sets aside aggregate figures to determine the trend characteristic of most cities, however, the experiences of Petrograd appears exception. Only a handful of cities . . . lost half their population between 1917 and 1920, and even Moscow, which declined by over 40 percent, was not typical of most towns in the northern, food-importing areas. A study of all cities . . . found that the average decline in the north (167 towns in all, excluding the capital cities) amounted to 24 percent between 1917 and 1920. Among the towns in the food-producing areas in the southern and eastern regions of the Russian Republic (a total of 128), the average decline came to only 14 percent.*" ["*The city in danger': The Civil War and the Russian Urban Population*," **Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War**, Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), p. 61] Does this mean that the possibility of soviet democracy declined less in these towns? Yet the Bolsheviks applied their dictatorship even there, suggesting that declining urban populations was not the source of their authoritarianism.

Equally, what are we to make of towns and cities which increased their populations? For example, Minsk, Samara, Khar'kov, Tiflis, Baku, Rostov-on-don, Tsaritsyn and Perm all grew in population (often by significant amounts) between 1910 and 1920 while other cities shrunk. [Diane Koenker, "*Urbanisation and Deurbanisation in the Russian Revolution and Civil War*," pp. 424-450, **The Journal of Modern History**, vol. 57, no. 3, p. 425] Does that mean soviet democracy was possible in those towns but not in Petrograd or Moscow? Or does the fact that the industrial workforce grew by 14.8% between October 1920 and April

1921 mean that the possibility for soviet democracy also grew by a related percentage? [Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 159] In neither case was soviet democracy encouraged, in spite of the reversal of the factor alleged to have undermined it.

Then there is the question of when the reduction of workers makes soviet democracy impossible. After all, between May 1917 and April 1918 the city of Moscow lost 300,000 of its two million inhabitants. Was soviet democracy impossible in April 1918 because of this? During the civil war, Moscow lost another 700,000 by 1920 (which is basically the same amount per year). [Diane Koenker, **Op. Cit.**, p. 424] When did this fall in population mean that soviet democracy was impossible?

Simply put, comparing figures of one year to another simply fails to understand the dynamics at work, such as the impact of "*reasons of state*" and working class resistance to Bolshevik rule. It, in effect, turns attention away from the state of working class autonomy and on to number crunching.

Ultimately, the question of whether the working class was too "atomised" to govern can only be answered by doing something Leninists rarely do: looking at the class struggle in Russia during this period, by looking at the strikes, demonstrations and protests that occurred under Bolshevik rule. Needless to say, certain strike waves just cannot be ignored. The most obvious case is in Petrograd just before the Kronstadt revolt in early 1921. After all, the strikes (and subsequent Bolshevik repression) inspired the sailors to revolt in solidarity with them. Faced with such events, in Leninist circles the scale of the strikes and the Bolshevik repression is understated and the subject quickly changed. As we noted in [section 10](#) of the appendix on "[What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?](#)", John Rees states that Kronstadt was "*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 61] Needless to say, he does not -- no more than Trotsky before him -- mention that the strikes were "*resolved*" by "*serious*" state repression as Emma Goldman recalled:

Trotsky . . . omits the most important reason for the seeming indifference of the workers of Petrograd. It is of importance, therefore, to point out that the campaign of slander, lies and calumny against the sailors began on the 2nd March, 1921. The Soviet Press fairly oozed poison against the sailors. The most despicable charges were hurled against them, and this was kept up until Kronstadt was liquidated on 17th March. In addition, Petrograd was put under martial law. Several factories were shut down . . . Under these iron-clad rules it was physically impossible for the workers of Petrograd to ally themselves with Kronstadt, especially as not one word of the manifestoes issued by the sailors in their paper was permitted to penetrate to the workers in Petrograd. In other words, Leon Trotsky deliberately falsifies the facts." ["Trotsky Protests Too Much", [**Writings of Emma Goldman**, 264]

Nor does Rees explain how "*an atomised, individualised mass*" **could** conduct such "*serious*" strikes, strikes which required martial law to break. Little wonder, then, Rees does not expound on the strikes and what they mean in terms of the revolution and his own argument. Ida Mett long ago stated the obvious about these all-Russia strike waves: "*And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?*" [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 81]

Similarly, we find Victor Serge arguing that the *"working class often fretted and cursed; sometimes it lent an ear to the Menshevik agitators, as in the great strikes at Petrograd in the spring of 1919. But once the choice was posed as that between the dictatorship of the White Generals and the dictatorship of its own party -- and there was not and could not be any other choice -- every fit man . . . came to stand . . . before the windows of the local party offices."* [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, pp. 365-6] An exhausted and atomised working class capable of *"great strikes"*? That seems unlikely. Significantly, Serge does not mention the Bolshevik acts of repression used against the rebel workers (see below). This omission cannot help distort any conclusions to be drawn from his account.

Which, incidentally, shows that the civil war was not all bad news for the Bolsheviks. Faced with working class protest, they could play the "White card" -- unless the workers went back to work, the Whites would win. This explains why the strikes of early 1921 were larger than before and explains why they were so important. As the "White card" could no longer be played, the Bolshevik repression could not be excused in terms of the civil war. Indeed, given working class opposition to the party, it would be fair to say that civil war actually **helped** the Bolsheviks remain in power: without the threat of the Whites, the working class would **not** have tolerated the Bolsheviks longer than the Autumn of 1918. As Emma Goldman recounted, *"Kropotkin emphasised, that the blockade and the continuous attacks on the Revolution by the interventionists had helped to strengthen the power of the Communist regime. Intervention and blockade were bleeding Russia to death, and were preventing the people from understanding the real nature of the Bolshevik regime."* [**My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 99]

The fact is that working class collective struggle against the new regime -- the new boss class -- and, consequently, Bolshevik repression, started before the outbreak of the civil war, continued throughout the civil war period and reached a climax in the early months of 1921. Even the repression of the Kronstadt rebellion did not stop it, with strikes continuing into 1923 (and, to a lesser degree, afterward). Indeed, the history of the "workers' state" is a history of the state repressing the revolt of the workers.

Needless to say, it would be impossible to give a full account of working class resistance to Bolshevism. All we can do here is give a flavour of what was happening and the sources for further information (also see [section H.6.3](#)). What should be clear from our account is that the idea that the working class in this period was incapable of collective organisation and struggle is false, the idea that Bolshevik "substitutionism" can be explained in such terms is also false. In addition, it will become clear that Bolshevik repression explicitly aimed to break the ability of workers to organise and exercise collective power. As such, it seems hypocritical for modern-day Leninists to blame Bolshevik party dictatorship on the "atomisation" of the working class when Bolshevik rule was dependent on smashing working class collective organisation and resistance. Simply put, to remain in power Bolshevism, from almost the start, had to crush working class power. This is to be expected, given the centralised nature of the state and the class structures and authoritarian social relationships it generates (see [section H.3.9](#)) and the assumptions of vanguardism (see [section H.5](#)). If you like, October 1917 did not see the end of *"dual power"*: rather the Bolshevik state replaced the bourgeois state and working class power (as expressed in its collective struggle) came into conflict with it. By 1921 these protests and strikes were threatening the very existence of the Bolshevik dictatorship, forcing it to abandon key aspects of its economic policies.

This struggle of the "workers' state" against the workers started early in 1918. *"By the early summer of 1918,"* records one historian, *"there were widespread anti-Bolshevik protests. Armed clashes occurred in the factory districts of Petrograd and other industrial centres. Under the aegis of the Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives . . . a general strike was set for July 2."* [William Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, p. 107] According to another historian, economic factors *"were soon to erode the standing of the Bolsheviks among Petrograd workers . . . These developments, in turn, led in short order to worker protests, which then precipitated violent repressions against hostile workers. Such treatment further intensified the disenchantment of significant segments of Petrograd labour with Bolshevik-dominated Soviet rule."* [Alexander Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 37]

The reasons for these protest movement were both political and economic. The deepening economic crisis combined with protests against Bolshevik authoritarianism to produce a wave of strikes aiming for political change. Feeling that the soviets were distant and unresponsive to their needs (with good reason, given Bolshevik postponement of soviet elections and gerrymandering of the soviets -- see [section H.6.1](#)), workers turned to direct action and the initially Menshevik inspired *"Conference of Factory and Plant Representatives"* (also known as the *"Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants"*, EAD) to voice their concerns. At its peak, reports *"estimated that out of 146,000 workers still in Petrograd, as many as 100,000 supported the conference's goals."* [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 127] The aim of the Conference (as per Menshevik policy) was to reform the existing system from within and, as such, the Conference operated openly: *"for the Soviet authorities in Petrograd, the rise of the Extraordinary Assembly of Delegates from Petrograd Factories and Plants was an ominous portent of worker defection."* [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 37]

The first wave of outrage and protests occurred after Bolshevik Red Guards opened fire on a demonstration for the Constituent Assembly in early January (killing 21, according to Bolshevik sources). This demonstration *"was notable as the first time workers came out actively against the new regime. More ominously, it was also the first time forces representing soviet power used violence against workers."* [David Mandel, **The Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power**, p. 355] It would not be the last -- indeed repression by the "workers' state" of workers became a recurring feature of Bolshevism.

The general workers' opposition saw the growth of the EAD. *"The emergence of the EAD"*, Rabinowitch notes, *"was also stimulated by the widespread view that trade unions, factory committees, and soviets . . . were no longer representative, democratically run working-class institutions; instead they had been transformed into arbitrary, bureaucratic government agencies. There was ample reason for this concern."* To counter the EAD, the Bolsheviks organised non-party conferences which, in itself, shows that the soviets had become as distant from the masses as the opposition argued. District soviets *"were deeply concerned about their increasing isolation . . . At the end of March . . . they resolved to convene successive nonparty workers' conferences . . . in part to undercut the EAD by strengthening ties between district soviets and workers."* This was done amidst *"unmistakable signs of the widening rift between Bolshevik-dominated political institutions and ordinary factory workers."* The EAD was an expression of the *"growing disenchantment of Petrograd workers with economic conditions and the evolving structure and operation of Soviet political institutions"*. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 224, p. 232 and p. 231]

It "appeared that the government was now ready to go to whatever extremes it deemed necessary (including sanctioning the arrest and even shooting of workers) to quell labour unrest. This in turn led to intimidation, apathy, lethargy and passivity of other workers. In these circumstances, growth in support of the [Extraordinary] Assembly slowed down." The Assembly's plans for a May Day demonstration to protest the government's policies were cancelled because of workers did not respond to the appeals to demonstrate, in part because of "Bolshevik threats against 'protesters'". This apathy did not last long as events "served to reinvigorate and temporarily radicalise the Assembly. These developments included yet another drastic drop in food supplies, the shooting of protesting housewives and workers in the Petrograd suburb of Kolpino, the arbitrary arrest and abuse of workers in another Petrograd suburb, Sestroresk, the closure of newspapers and the arrests of individuals who had denounced the Kolpino and Sestroresk events, the intensification of labour unrest and conflict with the authorities in the Obukhov plant and in other Petrograd factories and districts." [Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, pp. 40-1]

Early May saw "the shooting of protesting housewives and workers in the suburb of Kolpino", the "arbitrary arrest and abuse of workers" in Sestroretsk, the "closure of newspapers and arrests of individuals who protested the Kolpino and Sestroretsk events" and "the resumption of labour unrest and conflict with authorities in other Petrograd factories." This was no isolated event, as "violent incidents against hungry workers and their family demanding bread occurred with increasing regularity." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, pp. 229-30] The shooting at Kolpino "triggered a massive wave of indignation . . . Work temporarily stopped at a number of plants." In Moscow, Tula, Kolomna, Nizhnii-Novoprod, Rybinsk, Orel, Tver' and elsewhere "workers gathered to issue new protests." In Petrograd, "textile workers went on strike for increased food rations and a wave of demonstrations spread in response to still more Bolshevik arrests." This movement was the "first major wave of labour protest" against the regime, with "protests against some form of Bolshevik repression" being common. [William Rosenberg, **Russian Labor and Bolshevik Power**, pp. 123-4]

While the Kolpino incident "was hardly the first of its kind, it triggered a massive wave of indignation . . . Work temporarily stopped at a number of plants." Between Kolpino and early July, more than seventy incidents occurred in Petrograd, including strikes, demonstrations and anti-Bolshevik meetings. Many of these meetings "were protests against some form of Bolshevik repression: shootings, incidents of 'terroristic activities,' and arrests." In some forty incidents "worker's protests focused on these issues, and the data surely understate the actual number by a wide margin. There were as well some eighteen separate strikes or some other work stoppages with an explicitly anti-Bolshevik character." [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 123-4] Then, "[a]t the very end of May and the beginning of June, when a wave of strikes to protest at bread shortages broke out in the Nevskii district, a majority of Assembly delegates . . . resolved to call on striking Nevskii district workers to return to work and continue preparation for a general city-wide strike." [Rabinowitch, **Op. Cit.**, p. 42] Unfortunately, for the Assembly, postponing the strikes until later, until a "better time", rather than encouraging them gave the authorities time to prepare.

"At the end of May and beginning of June, a wave of strikes to protest the lack of bread swept Nivskii district factories" and "strikes followed by bloody clashes between workers and Soviet authorities had erupted in scattered parts of central Russia." In Petrograd, things came to a head during and after the soviet elections in June. On June 21, a general meeting of Obukhov workers "seized control of the plant" and the next day the assembled workers "resolved to

*demand that the EAD should declare political strikes . . . to protest the political repression of workers." Orders were issued by the authorities "to shut down Obukhov plant" and "the neighbourhood surrounding the plant was placed under martial law." [Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, p. 231 and pp. 246-7] So faced with workers collective action, the "Bolsheviks responded by 'invading' the whole Nevskii district with troops and shutting down Obukhov completely. Meetings everywhere were forbidden." However "workers were not so readily pacified. In scores of additional factories and shops protests mounted and rapidly spread along the railways." At the June 26th "extraordinary session" of the Conference a general strike was declared for July 2nd. The Bolshevik authorities acted quickly: "Any sign of sympathy for the strike was declared a criminal act. More arrests were made. In Moscow, Bolsheviks raided the Aleksandrovska railroad shops, not without bloodshed. Dissidence spread." On July 1st, "machine guns were set up at main points throughout the Petrograd and Moscow railroad junctions, and elsewhere in both cities as well. Controls were tightened in factories. Meetings were forcefully dispersed." [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 127] Unsurprisingly, "as a result of extreme government intimidation, the response to the Assembly's strike call on 2 July was negligible." [Rabinowitch, **Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule**, p. 42] This repression was not trivial:*

"Among other things, all newspapers were forced to print on their front pages Petrograd soviet resolutions condemning the Assembly as part of the domestic and foreign counter-revolution. Factories participating in the strike were warned that they would be shut down and individual strikers were threatened with the loss of work -- threats that were subsequently made good. Printing plants suspected of opposition sympathies were sealed, the offices of hostile trade unions were raided, martial law declared on rail lines, and armed strike-breaking patrols with authority to take whatever action was necessary to prevent work stoppages were formed and put on 24-hour duty at key points throughout Petrograd." [Op. Cit., p. 45]

Needless to say, "the Petrograd authorities drew on the dubious mandate provided by the stacked soviet elections to justify banning the Extraordinary Assembly." [Op. Cit., p. 42] While the Bolsheviks had won around 50% of workplace votes, they had gerrymandered the soviet making the election results irrelevant. Faced with "demands from below for the immediate re-election" of the Soviet, before the long-postponed election took place the existing Bolshevik-controlled Soviet confirmed new regulations "to help offset possible weaknesses" in their "electoral strength in factories." The "most significant change in the makeup of the new soviet was that numerically decisive representation was given to agencies in which the Bolsheviks had overwhelming strength, among them the Petrograd Trade Union Council, individual trade unions, factory committees in closed enterprises, district soviets, and district non-party workers' conferences." This ensured that "[o]nly 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance". In short, the Bolsheviks "contrived a majority" in the new Soviet long before gaining 127 of the 260 factory delegates and even these victories raised "the nagging question of how many Bolshevik deputies from factories were elected instead of the opposition because of press restrictions, voter intimidation, vote fraud, or the short duration of the campaign." Overall, then, the Bolshevik election victory "was highly suspect, even on the shop floor." [Alexander Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, pp. 248-252]

The fact the civil war had just started with the revolt of the Czech Legion at the end of May also undoubtedly aided the Bolsheviks during this election, as did the fact that the Mensheviks and Right-SRs had campaigned on a platform of winning the soviet elections as

the means of replacing soviet democracy by the Constituent Assembly: many workers still viewed the soviets as **their** organisations and aimed for a functioning soviet system rather than its end. With their electoral "mandate," secured beforehand, the opposition fatally weakened by its backward-looking perspective and the threat of counter-revolution (albeit in the name of the Constituent Assembly rather than White restoration), the Bolsheviks turned on the Conference, both locally and nationally, and arrested its leading activists, so decapitating one of the few independent working class organisations left in Russia. As Rabinowitch argues, *"the Soviet authorities were profoundly worried by the threat posed by the Assembly and fully aware of their growing isolation from workers (their only real social base) . . . Petrograd Bolsheviks developed a siege mentality and a corresponding disposition to consider any action -- from suppression of the opposition press and manipulation of elections to terror even against workers -- to be justified in the struggle to retain power until the start of the imminent world revolution."* [Early Disenchantment with Bolshevik Rule, pp. 43-4]

In Moscow, workers also organised a Conference movement and *"[r]esentment against the Bolsheviks was expressed through strikes and disturbances, which the authorities treated as arising from supply difficulties, from 'lack of consciousness,' and because of the 'criminal demagoguery' of certain elements. Lack of support for current Bolshevik practices was treated as the absence of worker consciousness altogether, but the causes of the unrest was more complicated. In 1917 political issues gradually came to be perceived through the lens of party affiliation, but by mid-1918 party consciousness was reversed and a general consciousness of workers' needs restored. By July 1918 the protest movement had lost its momentum in the face of severe repression and was engulfed by the civil war."* In the light of the fate of workers' protest, the May 16th resolution by the Bogatyr' Chemical Plant calling (among other things) for *"freedom of speech and meeting, and an end to the shooting of citizens and workers"* seems to the point. Unsurprisingly, *"[f]aced with political opposition within the soviets and worker dissatisfaction in the factories Bolshevik power increasingly came to rely on the party apparatus itself."* [Richard Sakwa, *"The Commune State in Moscow in 1918,"* pp. 429-449, **Slavic Review**, vol. 46, no. 3/4, pp. 442-3, p. 442 and p. 443] State repression also took place *"[i]n June 1918 [when] workers in Tula protested a cut in rations by boycotting the local soviet. The regime declared martial law and arrested the protestors. Strikes followed and were suppressed by violence. In Sormovo, when a Menshevik-Social Revolutionary newspaper was closed, 5,000 workers went on strike. Again firearms were used to break the strike."* Other techniques were used to break resistance. For example, the regime often threatened rebellious factories with a lock out, which involved numerous layoffs, new rules of discipline, purges of workers' organisations and the introduction of piece work. [Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 105 and p. 107] As discussed in [section H.6.1](#), similar events happened in other cities with the Bolsheviks disbanding soviets elected with non-Bolshevik majorities all across Russia and suppressing the resulting working class protest.

Rather than the Civil War disrupting the relationship between the vanguard party and the class it claimed to lead, it was in fact the Bolsheviks who did so in face of rising working class dissent and disillusionment in the spring of 1918. In fact, *"[b]y the early summer of 1918"* there were *"widespread anti-Bolshevik protests. Armed clashes occurred in the factory districts of Petrograd and other industrial centres."* and *"after the initial weeks of 'triumph' . . . Bolshevik labour relations after October"* changed and *"soon lead to open conflict, repression, and the consolidation of Bolshevik dictatorship over the proletariat in place of proletarian dictatorship itself."* [Rosenberg, **Op. Cit.**, p. 107 and p. 117] Given this, the

outbreak of the civil war consolidated workers support for the Bolsheviks and saved it from even more damaging workers' unrest. As Thomas F. Remington puts it:

"At various times groups of workers rebelled against Bolshevik rule. But for the most part, forced to choose between 'their' regime and the unknown horrors of a White dictatorship, most willingly defended the Bolshevik cause. The effect of this dilemma may be seen in the periodic swings in the workers' political temper. When Soviet rule stood in peril, the war simulated a spirit of solidarity and spared the regime the defection of its proletarian base. During lulls in the fighting, strikes and demonstrations broke out." [Op. Cit., p. 101]

This cycle of resistance and repression was widespread. In July 1918, a leading Bolshevik insisted *"that severe measures were needed to deal with strikes"* in Petrograd while in other cities *"harsher forms of repression"* were used. For example, in Tula, in June 1918, the regime declared *"martial law and arrested the protestors. Strikes followed and were suppressed by violence"*. In Sormovo, 5,000 workers went on strike after a Menshevik-SR paper was closed. Violence was *"used to break the strike."* [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, p. 105] It should also be noted that at the end of September, there was a revolt by Baltic Fleet sailors demanding (as they did again in 1921) a *"return to government by liberated, democratic soviets -- that is, 1917-type soviets."* The Left-SR controlled Kronstadt soviet had been disbanded and replaced by a Bolshevik revolutionary committee in July 1918. [Rabinowitch, **The Bolsheviks in Power**, p. 352 and p. 302]

This process of workers protest and state repression continued in 1919 and subsequent years. It followed a cyclical pattern. There was a *"new outbreak of strikes in March 1919 after the collapse of Germany and the Bolshevik re-conquest of the Ukraine. The pattern of repression was also repeated. A strike at a galosh factory in early 1919 was followed by the closing of the factory, the firing of a number of workers, and the supervised re-election of its factory committee. The Soviet garrison at Astrakhan mutinied after its bread ration was cut. A strike among the city's workers followed in support. A meeting of 10,000 Astrakhan workers was suddenly surrounded by loyal troops, who fired on the crowd with machine guns and hand grenades, killing 2,000. Another 2,000, taken prisoner, were subsequently executed. In Tula, when strikes at the defence factories stopped production for five days, the government responded by distributing more grain and arresting the strike organisers . . . strikes at Putilov again broke out, at first related to the food crisis . . . The government treated the strike as an act of counter-revolution and responded with a substantial political purge and re-organisation. An official investigation . . . concluded that many shop committees were led by [Left] Social Revolutionaries . . . These committees were abolished and management representatives were appointed in their stead."* [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 109-10] In the Volga region, in March 1919 delegates to a conference of railroad workers *"protested the Cheka's arrest of union members, which the delegates insisted further disrupted transport. It certainly curbed the number of strikes."* [Donald J. Raleigh, **Experiencing Russia's Civil War**, p. 371]

The strikes in Petrograd centred around the Putilov shows the response of the authorities to the "atomised" workers who were taking collective action. In March 1919, *"fifteen factories struck together (roughly 35,000 workers were involved) . . . workers at Putilov assembled and sent a delegation to the works committee . . . and put forward a number of demands . . . On 12 March Putilov stopped work. Its workers called to others to join them, and some of them came out in a demonstration where they were fired upon by Cheka troops. Strikes then*

broke out at fourteen other enterprises . . . On Sunday 16 March an appeal was made to the Putilovtsy to return to normal working the following day or . . . the sailors and soldiers would be brought in. After a poor showing on the Monday, the sailor went in, and 120 workers were arrested; the sailors remained until the 21st and by the 22nd normal work had been resumed." In July strikes broke out again in response to the cancellation of holidays which involved 25,000 workers in 31 strikes. [Mary McAuley, **Bread and Justice**, pp. 251-253 and p. 254] In the Moscow area, while it is "impossible to say what proportion of workers were involved in the various disturbances," following the lull after the defeat of the workers' conference movement in mid-1918 "each wave of unrest was more powerful than the last, culminating in the mass movement from late 1920." For example, at the end of June 1919, "a Moscow committee of defence (KOM) was formed to deal with the rising tide of disturbances" The KOM "concentrated emergency power in its hands, overriding the Moscow Soviet, and demanding obedience from the population. The disturbances died down under the pressure of repression." [Richard Sakwa, **Soviet Communists in Power**, p. 94 and pp. 94-5] In Tula "after strikes in the spring of 1919" local Menshevik party activists had been arrested while Petrograd saw "violent strikes" at around the same time. [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 19 and p. 23]

Historian Vladimir Brovkin summarises the data he provides in his article "*Workers' Unrest and the Bolshevik Response in 1919*" (reproduced along with data from other years in his book **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**) as follows:

"Data on one strike in one city may be dismissed as incidental. When, however, evidence is available from various sources on simultaneous independent strikes in different cities and an overall picture begins to emerge . . . Workers' unrest took place in Russia's biggest and most important industrial centres: Moscow, Petrograd, Tver', Tula, Briansk, and Sormovo. Strikes affected the largest industries . . . Workers' demands reflected their grievances . . . The greatest diversity was in workers' explicitly political demands or expression of political opinion . . . all workers' resolutions demanded free and fair elections to the soviets . . . some workers . . . demanded the Constituent Assembly . . .

"The strikes of 1919 . . . fill an important gap in the development of the popular movement between October 1917 and February 1921. On the one hand, they should be seen as antecedents of similar strikes in February 1921, which forced the Communists to abandon war communism. In the capitals, workers, just as the Kronstadt sailors had, still wanted fairly elected soviets and not a party dictatorship. On the other hand, the strikes continued the protests that had began in the summer of 1918. The variety of behavioural patterns displayed during the strikes points to a profound continuity. . .

*"In all known cases the Bolsheviks' initial response to strikes was to ban public meetings and rallies . . . In several cities . . . the authorities confiscated strikers' food rations in order to suppress the strike. In at least five cities . . . the Bolsheviks occupied the striking plant and dismissed the strikers en masse . . . In all known cases the Bolsheviks arrested strikers . . . In Petrograd, Briansk, and Astrakhan' the Bolsheviks executed striking workers." ["Workers' Unrest and the Bolshevik Response in 1919", **Slavic Review**, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 370-2]*

Nor was this collective struggle stop in 1919 -- *"strike action remained endemic in the first nine months of 1920"* and *"in the first six months of 1920 strikes had occurred in seventy-seven per cent of middle-sized and large works."* For the Petrograd province, soviet figures state that in 1919 there were 52 strikes with 65,625 participants and in 1920 73 strikes with 85,645, both high figures as according to one set of figures, which are by no means the lowest, there were 109,100 workers there. Strikes in 1920 *"were frequently a direct protest against the intensification of War Communist labour policies, the militarisation of labour, the implementation of one-man management and the struggle against absenteeism, as well as food supply difficulties. The Communist Party press carried numerous articles attacking the slogan of 'free labour.'"* Overall, *"the geographical extent of the February-March strike wave is impressive"* and the *"harsh discipline that went with labour militarisation led to an increase in industrial unrest in 1920."* [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 69, p. 74 and p. 80]

The spring of 1920 *"saw discontent on the railways all over the country."* This continued throughout the year. In Petrograd, the Aleksandrovskii locomotive building works *"had seen strikes in 1918 and 1919"* and in August 1920 it again stopped work. Workers had sent three representatives to the works commissar, who had them arrested. Three days later, work stopped and the strikers demanded their release. The authorities placed a guard of 70 sailors outside the enterprise to lock the workers out. The Cheka then arrested the workers' soviet delegates, who were from the SR (Minority) list, along with thirty workers and then the *"opportunity was taken to carry out a general round-up, and arrests were made"* at three other works. After the arrests, *"a meeting was held to elect new soviet delegates but the workers refused to co-operate and a further 150 were arrested and exiled to Murmansk or transferred to other workshops."* The enormous Briansk works *"experienced two major strikes in 1920"*, and second one saw the introduction of martial law on both the works and the settlement it was situated in. In Moscow, a strike in May by printers resulted in their works *"closed and the strikers sent to concentration camps after an attempt to start sympathy action failed."* [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 44, pp. 45-7, pp. 48-9 and p. 59]

In January 1920, a strike followed a mass meeting at a railway repair shop in Moscow. Attempts to spread were foiled by arrests. The workshop was closed, depriving workers of their rations and 103 workers of the 1,600 employed were imprisoned. *"In late March 1920 there were strikes in some factories"* in Moscow and *"[a]t the height of the Polish war the protests and strikes, usually provoked by economic issues but not restricted to them, became particularly frequent . . . The assault on non-Bolshevik trade unionism launched at this time was probably associated with the wave of unrest since there was a clear danger that they would provide a focus for opposition."* [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 95] The *"largest strike in Moscow in the summer of 1920"* was by tram workers over the equalisation of rations. It began on August 12th, when one tram depot went on strike, quickly followed by others while workers *"in other industries joined in to."* The tram workers *"stayed out a further two days before being driven back by arrests and threats of mass sackings."* In the textile manufacturing towns around Moscow *"there were large-scale strikes"* in November 1920, with 1000 workers striking for four days in one district and a strike of 500 mill workers saw 3,000 workers from another mill joining in. [Simon Pirani, **The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24**, p. 32 and p. 43]

Strikes occurred in other places, such as Tula were the workforce *"contained a high proportion of skilled, long-standing, hereditary workers."* An *"all-out strike"* began at the start of June and on 8 June the local newspaper published a declaration from the Tula soviet threatening the strikers with *"the most repressive measures, including the application of the*

highest measure of punishment". The following day the city was declared to be under a "state of siege" by the local military authorities. The strikers lost ration cards and by 11 June there was a return to work. Twenty-three workers were sentenced to a forced labour camp until the end of the war. However, the "combined impact of these measures did not prevent further unrest and the workers put forward new demands." On 19 June, the soviet approved "a programme for the suppression of counter-revolution" and "the transfer of Tula to the position of an armed camp." The Tula strike "highlights the way in which workers, particularly skilled workers who were products of long-standing shop-floor subcultures and hierarchies, retained the capability as well as the will to defend their interests." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 50-55] Saratov also saw a wave of factory occupations break out in June and mill workers went out in July while in August, strikes and walkouts occurred in its mills and other factories and these "prompted a spate of arrests and repression." In September railroad workers went out on strike, with arrests making "the situation worse, forcing the administration to accept the workers' demands." [Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 375]

While strike activity "was most common in Petrograd, where there had been 2.5 strikers for every workman," the figure for Moscow was 1.75 and 1.5 in Kazan. In early March "a wave of strikes hit the Volga town of Samara" when a strike by printers in spread to other enterprises. "Strike action in Moscow did not just include traditionally militant male metal workers." Textile workers, tram workers and printers all took strike action. [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 69, p. 72 and pp. 77-8]

The end of the civil war did not see the end of working class protest. Quite the reverse, for "[b]y the beginning of 1921 a revolutionary situation with workers in the vanguard had emerged in Soviet Russia" with "the simultaneous outbreak of strikes in Petrograd and Moscow and in other industrial regions." In February and March 1921, "industrial unrest broke out in a nation-wide wave of discontent or *volynka*. General strikes, or very widespread unrest" hit all but one of the country's major industrial regions and "workers protest consisted not just of strikes but also of factory occupations, 'Italian strikes', demonstrations, mass meetings, the beating up of communists and so on." Faced with this massive strike wave, the Bolsheviks did what many ruling elites do: they called it something else. Rather than admit it was a strike, they "usually employed the word *volynka*, which means only a 'go-slow'". [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 3, p. 109, p. 112 and pp. 111-2]

In Petrograd in the beginning of February "strikes were becoming an everyday occurrence" and by "the third week of February the situation rapidly deteriorated." The city was rocked by strikes, meetings and demonstrations. In response to the general strike the Bolsheviks replied with a "military clamp-down, mass arrests and other coercive measures, such as the closure of enterprises, the purging of the workforce and stopping of rations which accompanied them." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 113 and p. 120] As Paul Avrich recounts, in Petrograd these "street demonstrations were heralded by a rash of protest meetings" in workplaces. On the 24th of February, the day after a workplace meeting, the Trubochny factory workforce downed tools and walked out the factory. Additional workers from nearby factories joined in. The crowd of 2,000 was dispersed by armed military cadets. The next day, the Trubochny workers again took to the streets and visited other workplaces, bringing them out on strike too. In the face of a near general strike, a three-man Defence Committee was formed. Zinoviev "proclaimed martial law" and "[o]vernight Petrograd became an armed camp." Strikers were locked out and the "application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities" was "indispensable in restoring order" (as were economic concessions). [Kronstadt 1921, pp. 37-8, p. 39, pp.

46-7 and p. 50] Thus *"massive city-wide protest spread through Petrograd . . . Strikes and demonstrations spread. The regime responded as it had done in the past, with lock-outs, mass arrests, heavy show of force -- and concessions."* [Remington, **Op. Cit.**, p. 111] As we discuss in ["What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"](#), these strikes produced the Kronstadt revolt while the Bolshevik repression ensured the Petrograd workers did not act with the sailors.

A similar process of workers revolt and state repression occurred in Moscow at the same time. There *"industrial unrest" also "turned into open confrontation and protest spilled on to the streets"*, starting with a *"wave of strikes that had its centre in the heart of industrial Moscow."* Meetings were held, followed by demonstrations and strikes which spread to other districts over the next few days. Workers demanded that elections to the soviets be held. Striking railway workers sent emissaries along the railway to spread the strike and soon strikes were *"also spreading outside Moscow city itself into the surrounding provinces"*. In response, *"Moscow and Moscow province were put under martial law."* [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 130, p. 138 and pp. 139-144] This strike wave started when *"[m]eetings in factories and plants gathered and criticised government policies, beginning with supply and developing into general political criticism."* As was typical, the *"first response of the civil authorities to the disturbances was increased repression"* although as *"the number of striking factories increased some concessions were introduced."* Military units called in against striking workers *"refused to open fire, and they were replaced by the armed communist detachments"* which did. *"That evening mass protest meetings were held . . . The following day several factories went on strike"* and troops were *"disarmed and locked in as a precaution"* by the government against possible fraternising. February 23rd saw a 10,000 strong street demonstration and *"Moscow was placed under martial law with a 24-hour watch on factories by the communist detachments and trustworthy army units."* The disturbances were accompanied by factory occupations and on the 1st of March the soviet called on workers *"not to go on strike."* However, *"wide-scale arrests deprived the movement of its leadership."* March 5th saw disturbances at the Bromlei works, *"resulting in the now customary arrest of workers. A general meeting at the plant on 25 March called for new elections to the Moscow Soviet. The management dispersed the meeting but the workers called on other plants to support the calls for new elections. As usual, the ringleaders were arrested."* [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 242-3, p. 245 and p. 246] As in Petrograd, the mixture of (economic) concessions and coercion eventually broke the will of the strikers.

The events at the Bromlei works were significant in that the March 25th a mass meeting passed an anarchist and Left-SR initiated resolution supporting the Kronstadt rebels. The party *"responded by having them sacked en masse"*. The workers *"demonstrated through" their district "and inspired some brief solidarity strikes."* Over 3000 workers joined the strikes and about 1000 of these joined the flying picket (managers at one print shop locked their workers in to stop them joining the protest). While the party was willing to negotiate economic issues, *"it had no wish to discuss politics with workers"* and so arrested those who initiated the resolution, sacked the rest of the workforce and selectively re-employed them. Two more strikes were conducted *"to defend the political activists in their midst"* and two mass meetings demanded the release of arrested ones. Workers also struck on supply issues in May, July and August. [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 83-4]

In Saratov, the strike started on March 3rd when railroad shop workers did not return to their benches and instead rallied to discuss an anticipated further reduction in food rations. The *"railroad workers debated resolutions recently carried by the Moscow proletariat . . . The next day the strike spread to the metallurgical plants and to most other large factories, as*

*Saratov workers elected representatives to an independent commission charged with evaluating the functioning of all economic organs. When it convened, the body called for the re-election of the soviets and immediate release of political prisoners." During the next two days, "the assemblies held at factories to elect delegates to the commission bitterly denounced the Communists." The "unrest spilled over into Pokrovsk." The commission of 270 had less than ten Communists and "demanded the freeing of political prisoners, new elections to the soviets and to all labour organisations, independent unions, and freedom of speech, the press, and assembly." While the ration cut "represent[ed] the catalyst, but not the cause, of the labour unrest" and "the turmoil touched all strata of the proletariat, male and female alike, the initiative for the disturbances came from the skilled stratum that the Communists normally deemed the most conscious." The Communists "resolved to shut down the commission before it could issue a public statement" and as they "expected workers to protest the dissolution of their elected representatives", they also "set up a Provincial Revolutionary Committee . . . which introduced martial law both in the city and the garrison. It arrested the ringleaders of the workers' movement . . . the police crackdown depressed the workers' movement and the activities of the rival socialist parties." The near general strike was broken by a "wave of repression" but "railroad workers and dockworkers and some printers refused to resume work." The Cheka sentenced 219 people to death. [Donald J. Raleigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 379 and pp. 387-9]*

A similar "little Kronstadt" broke out in the Ukrainian town of Ekaterinoslav at the end of May. The workers there "clearly had strong traditions of organisation" and elected a strike committee of fifteen which "put out a series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels." On June 1st, "by a pre-arranged signal" workers went on strike throughout the town, with workers joining a meeting of the railway workers. The local Communist Party leader was instructed "to put down the rebellion without mercy . . . Use Budennyi's [Red] cavalry." The strikers prepared a train and its driver instructed to spread the strike throughout the network. Telegraph operators were told to send messages throughout the Soviet Republic calling for "free soviets" and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The Communists used the Cheka to crush the movement, carrying out mass arrests and shooting 15 workers (and dumping their bodies in the River Dnepr). [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 171-3] It must be noted that the call for "free soviets" had previously been raised by the anarchist-influenced Makhnovist movement.

Thus strike action was a constant feature of Bolshevik Russia during the civil war. Rather than being an "atomised" mass, the workers repeatedly organised themselves, made their demands and took collective action to achieve them. In response, the Bolshevik regime used state repression to break this collective activity: martial law, lock-outs, mass arrests, withholding rations and shootings. As such, **if** the rise of Stalinism can, as modern-day Leninists argue, be explained by the "atomisation" of the working class during the civil war then the Bolshevik regime and its repression should be credited with ensuring this happened.

Unsurprisingly, as Emma Goldman recounted, "counter-revolutionists, and bandits in Soviet penal institutions were a negligible minority. The bulk of the prison population consisted of social heretics who were guilty of the cardinal sin against the Communist Church. For no offence was considered more heinous than to entertain political views in opposition to the party, and to voice any protest against the evils and crimes of Bolshevism. I found that by far the greatest number were political prisoners, as well as peasants and workers guilty of demanding better treatment and conditions." [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 873] Indeed, of the 17,000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920,

peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40,913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Other rebel toilers were not so lucky:

"It is not possible to estimate with any degree of accuracy how many workers were shot by the Cheka during 1918-1921 for participation in labour protest. However, an examination of individual cases suggests that shootings were employed to inspire terror and were not simply used in the occasional extreme case." [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 35]

After Kronstadt and the various strike waves and protests of that time, Bolshevik repression of labour unrest continued. The economic crisis of 1921 which accompanied the introduction of the NEP saw unemployment rise while workplaces *"that had been prominent in unrest were particularly hit by . . . purges . . . The effect on the willingness of workers to support opposition parties was predictable."* Yet *"[d]espite the heavy toll of redundancies, the ability to organise strikes did not disappear. Strike statistics for 1921 continue to provide only a very rough indicator of the true scale of industrial unrest and appear not to include the first half of the year."* [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 182-183] For example, in early March, *"long strikes"* hit the textile towns around Moscow. At the Glukhovskaia mills 5000 workers struck for 5 days, 1000 at a nearby factory for 2 days and 4000 at the Voskresenskaia mills for 6 days. In May, 1921, workers in the city of Moscow reacted to supply problems *"with a wave of strikes. Party officials reckoned that in a 24-day period in May there were stoppages at 66 large enterprises."* These included a sit-down strike at one of Moscow's largest plants, while *"workers at engineering factories in Krasnopresnia followed suit, and Cheka agents reported 'dissent, culminating in strikes and occupation' in Bauman."* August 1922 saw 19,000 workers strike in textile mills in Moscow region for several days. Tram workers also struck that year, while teachers *"organised strikes and mass meetings"*. Workers usually elected delegates to negotiate with their trade unions as well as their bosses as both were Communist Party members. Strike organisers, needless to say, were sacked. [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 82, pp. 111-2 and p. 157]

The spring of 1922 likewise saw Soviet Russia *"hit by a new strike wave"* and the strikes *"continued to reflect enterprise traditions."* That year saw 538 strikes with 197,022 participants recorded. [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 183 and p. 184] The following year saw more stoppages and in *"July 1923 more than 100 enterprises employing a total of some 50,000 people were on strike. In August figures totalled some 140 enterprises and 80,00 workers. In September and November the strike wave continued unabated."* As in the civil war, the managers shut down plants, fired the workers and rehired them on an individual basis. In this way, trouble-makers were dismissed and "order" restored. The *"pattern of workers' action and Bolshevik reaction played itself out frequently in dozens of other strikes. The Bolsheviks acted with the explicit purpose of rooting out the possibility of further protest. They tried to condition workers that labour protest was futile."* The GPU (the renamed Cheka) *"used force to disperse workers demonstrating with the arrested strike leaders."* [Vladimir Brovkin, **Russia After Lenin**, p. 174, pp. 174-5 and p. 175]

In Moscow, *"[b]etween 1921 and 1926, all branches of industry and transport . . . experienced wildcat strikes or other spontaneous labour disturbances. Strike waves peaked in the winter of 1920-21 . . . and in the summer and fall of 1922 and 1923 . . . during July-*

December 1922, for example, 65 strikes and 209 other industrial disturbances were recorded in Moscow's state enterprises." Metalworkers were arguably the most active sector at this time while "a number of large strikes" took place in the textile industry (where "strikes were sometimes co-ordinated by spontaneously organised strike committees or 'parallel' factory committees"). And in spite of repression, "politicisation continued to characterise many labour struggles" and, as before, "spontaneous labour activism hindered not only the party's economic program but also the political and social stabilisation of the factories." [John B. Hatch, **Labour Conflict in Moscow, 1921-1925**, p. 62, p. 63, p. 65, pp. 66-7 and p. 67]

We even find one of the leading proponents of "atomised" excuse, neo-Trotskyist Tony Cliff, noting against Stalinism that "in 1922, 192,000 workers went on strike in state-owned enterprises; in 1923 the number was 165,000; in 1924, 43,000; in 1925, 34,000; in 1926, 32,900; in 1927, 20,100; in the first half of 1928, 8,900. In 1922 the number of workers involved in labour conflicts was three and a half million, and in 1923, 1,592,800." He did not ponder how a class he claimed elsewhere had become atomised, individualised, disintegrated and declassed could take such widescale collective industrial action -- nor did he mention the use of State repression under Lenin against such action, instead falsely asserting that before the rise of Stalinism it "was taken for granted that strikes were not to be suppressed by the state." [**State Capitalism in Russia**, p. 28] Ultimately, if these strikes between 1922 and 1924 showed a social basis existed to combat the rising Stalinist bureaucracy, surely the strikes between 1918 and 1921 likewise show a social basis existed to combat the existing Leninist bureaucracy?

As well as repression of strike waves across the country, the end of the civil war also saw the Bolsheviks finally destroy what was left of non-Bolshevik trade unionism. In Moscow, this took place against fierce resistance of the union members. As one historian concludes:

"Reflecting on the determined struggle mounted by printers, bakers and chemical workers in Moscow during 1920-1, in spite of appalling economic conditions, being represented by organisations weakened by constant repression . . . to retain their independent labour organisations it is difficult not to feel that the social basis for a political alternative existed." [Jonathan Aves, *The Demise of Non-Bolshevik Trade Unionism in Moscow: 1920-21*", pp. 101- 33, **Revolutionary Russia**, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 130]

The also Bolsheviks dispersed provincial trade unions conferences in Vologda and Vitebsk in 1921 "because they had anti-communist majorities." [Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, p. 176] At the All-Russian Congress of Metalworkers' Union in May, the delegates voted down the party-list of recommended candidates for union leadership. The Central Committee of the Party "disregarded every one of the votes and appointed a Metalworkers' Committee of its own. So much for 'elected and revocable delegates'. Elected by the union rank and file and revocable by the Party leadership!" [Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers Control**, p. 83] Fear of arrest (and worse!) was widespread and so, for example, a Moscow Metalworkers' Union conference in early February 1921 saw the first speakers calling "for the personal safety of the delegates to be guaranteed" before criticisms would be aired. [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 244] Such an atmosphere is hardly supportive for the encouragement of collective organisation!

Other forms of workers' organisation were also destroyed. For example, in his 1920 diatribe against Left-wing Communism, Lenin pointed to "non-Party workers' and peasants'

conferences" and Soviet Congresses as means by which the party secured its rule. Yet, **if** the congresses of soviets were "**democratic institutions, the like of which even the best democratic republics of the bourgeois have never known**", the Bolsheviks would have no need to "**support, develop and extend**" non-Party conferences "**to be able to observe the temper of the masses, come closer to them, meet their requirements, promote the best among them to state posts**". [The Lenin Anthology, p. 573] How the Bolsheviks met "**their requirements**" is extremely significant - they disbanded them, just as they had with soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities in 1918. This was because "[d]uring the disturbances" of late 1920, "**they provided an effective platform for criticism of Bolshevik policies.**" Their frequency was decreased and they "**were discontinued soon afterward.**" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 203]

In the soviets themselves, workers turned to non-partyism, with non-party groups winning majorities in soviet delegates from industrial workers' constituencies in many places. This was the case in Moscow, where Bolshevik support among "**industrial workers collapsed**" in favour of non-party people. Due to support among the state bureaucracy and the usual packing of the soviet with representatives from Bolshevik controlled organisations, the party had, in spite of this, a massive majority. Thus the Moscow soviet elections of April-May 1921 "**provided an opportunity to revive working-class participation. The Bolsheviks turned it down.**" [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 97-100 and p. 23] Indeed, one Moscow Communist leader stated that these soviet elections had seen "**a high level of activity by the masses and a striving to be in power themselves.**" [quoted by Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 101]

In short, an "**examination of industrial unrest after the Bolshevik seizure of power . . . shows that the Revolution had brought to the surface resilient traditions of organisation in society and had released tremendous forces in favour of greater popular participation . . . The survival of the popular movement through the political repression and economic devastation of the Civil War testifies to its strength.**" [Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 186] The idea that the Russian working class was incapable of collective struggle is hard to defend given this series of struggles (and state repression). The class struggle in Bolshevik Russia did not stop, it continued except the ruling class had changed. All the popular energy and organisation this expressed, which could have been used to combat the problems facing the revolution and create the foundations of a genuine socialist society, were wasted in fighting the Bolshevik regime. Ultimately, the "**sustained, though ultimately futile, attempts to revive an autonomous workers' movement, especially in mid-1918 and from late 1920, failed owing to repression.**" [Sakwa, **Op. Cit.**, p. 269] Another historian notes that "**immediately after the civil war**" there was "**a revival of working class collective action that culminated in February-March 1921 in a widespread strike movement and the revolt at the Kronstadt naval base.**" As such, the position expounded by Rees and other Leninists "**is so one-sided as to be misleading.**" [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 7 and p. 23]

So, looking at the Moscow Tram strike of August 1920 as an example, in addition to economic demands, strikers called for a general meeting of all depots. This was "**significant: here the workers' movement was trying to get on the first rung of the ladder of organisation, and being knocked off by the Bolsheviks.**" The party "**responded to the strike in such a way as to undermine workers' organisation and consciousness**" and "**thrott[ed] independent action**" by "**repression of the strike by means reminiscent of tsarism.**" The Bolshevik's "**dismissive rejection**" of the demand for a city-wide meeting "**spoke volumes about their hostility to the development of the workers' movement, and landed a blow at the type of collective democracy that might have better able to confront supply problems.**" This, along with the

other strikes that took place, showed that *"the workers' movement in Moscow was, despite its numerical weakness and the burdens of civil war, engaged with political as well as industrial issues . . . the working class was far from non-existent, and when, in 1921, it began to resuscitate soviet democracy, the party's decision to make the Moscow soviet its 'creature' was not effect but cause."* [Pirani, **Op. Cit.**, p. 32, p. 33, p. 37 and p. 23]

When such things happen, we can conclude that Bolshevik desire to remain in power had a significant impact on whether workers were able to exercise collective power or not. As Pirani concludes:

"one of the most important choices the Bolsheviks made . . . was to turn their backs on forms of collective, participatory democracy that workers briefly attempted to revive [after the civil war] . . . [Available evidence] challenges the notion . . . that political power was forced on the Bolsheviks because the working class was so weakened by the civil war that it was incapable of wielding it. In reality, non-party workers were willing and able to participate in political processes, but in the Moscow soviet and elsewhere, were pushed out of them by the Bolsheviks. The party's vanguardism, i.e. its conviction that it had the right, and the duty, to make political decisions on the workers' behalf, was now reinforced by its control of the state apparatus. The working class was politically expropriated: power was progressively concentrated in the party, specifically in the party elite." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 4]

Given this collective rebellion all across the industrial centres of Russia before, during and after the Civil War, it hard to take seriously claims that Bolshevik authoritarianism was the product of an "atomisation" or "declassing" of the working class or that it had ceased to exist in any meaningful sense. Clearly it existed and was capable of collective action and organisation -- until it was repressed by the Bolsheviks and even then it keep returning. This implies that a key factor in rise of Bolshevik authoritarianism was political -- the simple fact that the workers would not vote Bolshevik in free soviet and union elections and so they were not allowed to. As one Soviet Historian put it, *"taking the account of the mood of the workers, the demand for free elections to the soviets [raised in early 1921] meant the implementation in practice of the infamous slogan of soviets without communists,"* although there is little evidence that the strikers actually raised that *"infamous"* slogan. [quoted by Aves, **Op. Cit.**, p. 123] It must also be noted that Bolshevik orthodoxy at the time stressed, and had done since at least early 1919, the necessity of Party dictatorship **over** the workers (see [section H.1.2](#) for details).

Nor can it be said that this struggle can be blamed on "declassed" elements within the working class itself. In her study of this question, Diane Koenker notes that 90% of the change in the number of workers in Moscow *"is accounted for by men. Working women did not leave the city,"* their numbers dropping from 90,000 in 1918 to 80,000 in 1920. Why these 80,000 women workers should be denied a say in their own revolution is not clear, given the arguments of the pro-Bolshevik left. After all, the same workers remained in roughly the same numbers. Looking at the male worker population, their numbers fell from 215,000 to 124,000 during the same period. However, *"the skilled workers whose class consciousness and revolutionary zeal had helped win the October revolution did not entirely disappear, and the women who remained were likely to be family members of these veterans of 1917."* It was *"the loss of young activists rather than all skilled and class conscious urban workers that caused the level of Bolshevik support to decline during the civil war."* Indeed *"the workers who remained in the city were among the most urbanised elements."* In

summary, *"the deurbanisation of those years represented a change in quantity but not entirely in quality in the cities. The proletariat declined in the city, but it did not wither away . . . a core of the city's working class remained."* [Op. Cit., p. 440, p. 442, p. 447 and p. 449] As Russian anarchist Ida Mett argued decades before in relation to the strikes in early 1921 that inspired the Kronstadt sailor rebellion:

"The population was drifting away from the capital. All who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside.

"This fact must be emphasised, in order to nail the official lies seeking to attribute the Petrograd strikes that were soon to break out to peasant elements, 'insufficiently steeled in proletarian ideas.' The real situation was the very opposite. A few workers were seeking refuge in the countryside. The bulk remained. There was certainly no exodus of peasants into the starving towns! . . . It was the famous Petrograd proletariat, the proletariat which had played such a leading role in both previous revolutions, that was finally to resort to the classical weapon of the class struggle: the strike." [The Kronstadt Uprising, p. 36]

In terms of struggle, links between the events in 1917 and those during the civil war also exist. For example Jonathan Aves writes that there were *"distinct elements of continuity between the industrial unrest in 1920 and 1917. This is not surprising since the form of industrial unrest in 1920, as in the pre-revolutionary period and in 1917, was closely bound up with enterprise traditions and shop-floor sub-cultures. The size of the Russian industrial workforce had declined steeply during the Civil War but where enterprises stayed open . . . their traditions of industrial unrest in 1920 shows that such sub-cultures were still capable of providing the leaders and shared values on which resistance to labour policies based on coercion and Communist Party enthusiasm could be organised. As might be anticipated, the leaders of unrest were often to be found amongst the skilled male workers who enjoyed positions of authority in the informal shop-floor hierarchies."* Moreover, *"despite intense repression, small groups of politicised activists were also important in initiating protest and some enterprises developed traditions of opposition to the communists."* Looking at the strike wave of early 1921 in Petrograd, the *"strongest reason for accepting the idea that it was established workers who were behind the volynka [i.e. the strike wave] is the form and course of protest. Traditions of protest reaching back through the spring of 1918 to 1917 and beyond were an important factor in the organisation of the volynka. . . . There was also a degree of organisation . . . which belies the impression of a spontaneous outburst."* [Op. Cit., p. 39 and p. 126]

Clearly, then, the idea that the Russian working class was atomised or declassed cannot be defended given this series of struggles. As noted, the notion that the workers were "declassed" was used to justify state repression of collective working class struggle and defend the necessity of party dictatorship in face of it. Emma Goldman was right to later note how the *"thought oppressed me that what [the Bolsheviks] called 'defence of the Revolution' was really only the defence of [their] party in power."* [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. 57] The class struggle in Bolshevik Russia did not stop, it continued except the ruling class had changed from bourgeoisie to Bolshevik dictatorship:

"There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers

when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviki to silence criticism.

*"It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been **locked out** and that the Bolshevik State -- even as the bourgeois industrial master -- uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party." [My Disillusionment in Russia, p. xlix]*

All of which, incidentally, answers Leninist Brian Bambery's rhetorical question: *"why would the most militant working class in the world, within which there was a powerful cocktail of revolutionary ideas, and which had already made two revolutions (in 1905 and in February 1917), allow a handful of people to seize power behind its back in October 1917?"*

*["Leninism in the 21st Century", **Socialist Review**, no. 248, January 2001]* Once the Russian workers realised that a handful of people **had** seized power they **did** protest the usurpation of their power and rights by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks repressed them.

Yes, as Lenin argued, *"it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence."* In 1917 he was talking of the *"freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists"* but it equally applies to the working class -- if the so-called *"dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class"* is suppressing the working class itself then there can be *"no freedom and no democracy"* for the working class and so it **cannot** be the ruling class. Rather, it is the self-proclaimed *"vanguard"* party which is in fact the ruling class and just like *"under capitalism we have the state in the proper sense of the word, that is, a special machine for the suppression of one class by another, and, what is more, of the majority by the minority."* Thus the so-called *"workers state"* became, as anarchists had long predicted, like any other State, *"a power which arose from society but places itself above it and alienates itself more and more from it"* and *"consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command"* [*The State and Revolution*, **The Lenin Anthology**, p. 373, p. 374, p. 316] As can be seen, the Bolshevik regime was most definitely a State... **in the normal sense of the term.** That it prefixed the word "Red" onto these instruments of minority rule matters little, as can be seen from the repression of labour protest under Lenin from early 1918 onwards.

All in all, these strikes and subsequent repression confirms Bakunin's prescient critique of Marxism (see [section H.1.1](#)). Based on the anarchist analysis of the State as *"minority government, from the top downward, of a vast quantity of men,"* he correctly predicted that even the so-called workers' State *"cannot be sure of its own self-preservation without an armed force to defend it against its own **internal enemies**, against the discontent of its people."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 265] Yes, of course, workers viewed the Bolshevik regime more favourably than the possibility of a White victory -- but that is a very low bar indeed: socialism, surely, should aspire to be somewhat more appealing than the restoration of Tsarism!

Little wonder, then, that the role of the masses in the Russian Revolution after October 1917 is rarely discussed by pro-Bolshevik writers. Indeed, the conclusion to be reached is simply that for the Bolsheviks the role of workers is to support the party, get it into power and then

do what it tells them. Unfortunately for the Bolsheviks, the Russian working class refused this position, the same position it held under Tsarism and capitalism. Instead they practised collective struggle in defence of their economic **and** political interests, a struggle which inevitably brought them into conflict both with the "workers' state" and their role in Bolshevik ideology. Faced with this collective action, the Bolshevik leaders (beginning with Lenin) started to talk about the "declassing" of the proletariat to justify their repression of (and power **over**) the working class. Ironically, it was the aim of Bolshevik repression to "atomise" the working class as, fundamentally, their rule depended on it. While Bolshevik repression did, in the end, succeed it cannot be said that the working class in Russia did not resist this usurpation of power by the Bolshevik party. As such, rather than "atomisation" or "declassing" being the cause for Bolshevik power and repression, it was, in fact, one of **results** of them -- and helped ensure the rise of Stalin.

6 Did the Bolsheviks blame "objective factors" for their actions?

In a word, no. At the time of the revolution and for some period afterwards, the idea that "objective factors" were responsible for their policies was one which few, if any, Bolshevik leaders expressed. As we discussed in [section 2](#), leading Bolsheviks like Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin argued that **any** revolution would face civil war and economic crisis. Lenin **did** talk about the "*declassing*" of the proletariat from 1920 onwards, but that did not seem to affect the proletarian and socialist character of his regime (indeed, Lenin's argument was developed in the context of **increasing** working class collective action, **not** its absence).

This is not to say that the Bolshevik leaders were completely happy with the state of their revolution after the final victory over the White counter-revolution. Lenin, for example, expressed deep concern about the rising bureaucratic deformations he saw in the soviet state (particularly after the end of the civil war). Yet, while concerned about the bureaucracy, he was not concerned about the Party's monopoly of power in spite of the obvious relation between the two (how could a party dictatorship function without a bureaucracy?). Similarly, he tried to combat the bureaucracy by increasing the very structural forms which created it in the first place, namely by increasing centralisation, which in turn increased the bureaucracy and its power. In short, he fought the bureaucracy by "top-down" and, ironically, bureaucratic methods, the only ones left to him. A similar position was held by Trotsky, who was quite explicit in supporting the party dictatorship throughout the 1920s (and, indeed, the 1930s -- as discussed in the appendix "[Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally's pamphlet 'Socialism from Below'](#)"). Needless to say, due to the limitations of the ideology, both failed to understand how bureaucracy arises and how it could be effectively fought.

This position started to change, however, as the 1920s drew on and Trotsky was increasingly sidelined from power. Then, faced with the rise of Stalinism, Trotsky had to find a theory which allowed him to explain the degeneration of the revolution and, at the same time, absolve Bolshevik ideology (and his own actions!) from all responsibility for it. He did so by invoking the objective factors facing the revolution. Since then, his various followers have utilised this argument, with various changes in emphasis, to attack Stalinism while defending Bolshevism.

The problem with this type of argument is that all the major evils usually associated with Stalinism already existed under Lenin and Trotsky. Party dictatorship, one-man management,

repression of opposition groups and working class protest, state bureaucracy and so on all existed before Stalin manoeuvred himself into absolute power. Thus, for example, we find Peter Binns of the British SWP lament in 1987 that:

*"This exploitation and powerlessness of the Russian class [under Mikhail Gorbachev] is nothing new. It came about more than 50 years ago. The final vestiges of workers' rights disappeared in 1929 when it was decreed that all managers' orders were now to be 'unconditionally binding on his subordinate administrative staff and on all workers'. It was at this time that the trade unions ceased to be able to play any function on behalf of workers, in particular over the negotiation of wages. An internal passport system was introduced, and in 1930 all industrial enterprises were forbidden to employ workers who left their former jobs without permission . . . As the Russian authorities themselves cynically put it: 'With the entry of the USSR into the period of socialism, the possibility of using coercive measures by corrective labour have immeasurably increased.' . . . In fact all efforts to start **any** independent workers' initiatives, let alone workers' councils, are now suppressed and are standardly rewarded with extreme forms of repression."* [*"The Theory of State Capitalism"*, pp. 73-98, **Russia: From Workers' State to State Capitalism**, p. 75]

Yet this describes the regime under Lenin and Trotsky! As noted in [section H.3.14](#), in early 1918 Lenin advocated "dictatorial" one-man management and started to impose it, so ending the experiments in workers' control which had previously flourished since mid-1917. This was followed a few years later by the "militarisation of labour", likewise championed by Lenin and Trotsky:

"The militarisation of labour, rushed through the ninth Party Congress with typical Tammany Hall steam-roller methods, definitely turned every worker into a galley-slave. The substitution of one-man power in the shops and mills in place of co-operative management placed the masses again under the thumb of the very elements they had for three years been taught to hate as the worst menace . . . Insult was added to injury by the introduction of the labour book, which virtually stamped everyone a felon, robbed him of the last vestiges of freedom, deprived him of the choice of place and occupation, and fastened him to a given district without the right of straying too far, on pain of severest penalties." [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 780]

As noted in the [last section](#), workers who protested against the imposition of these policies and class relations were likewise rewarded with repression. Indeed, Trotsky wrote a book defending this regime against criticism by leading Marxist Karl Kautsky which included the comment that "*[i]n point of fact, under Socialism there will not exist the apparatus of compulsion itself, namely, the State: for it will have melted away entirely into a producing and consuming commune. None the less, the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State. And you and I are just passing through that period. Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction.*" [**Terrorism and Communism**, pp. 169-70] As Stalin put in 1930 (apparently, according to Binns, when a new class system had now developed):

"We are in favour of the withering away of the state, and at the same time we stand for the strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which represents the most

powerful and mighty of all forms of the state which have existed up to the present day. The highest development of the power of the state, with the object of preparing the conditions of the withering away of the state: that is the Marxist formula. Is it 'contradictory'? Yes, it is 'contradictory.' But this contradiction is a living thing and wholly reflects the Marxist dialectic." [quoted by Alfred B. Evans Jr., **Soviet Marxism-Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology**, p. 39]

Thus Stalinism and Bolshevism was based on the same social-relations -- and a social system is **not** defined by the individuals in charge and their intentions but rather the relations within its social structures and the power-relations these generate. While it can be argued that Stalinism was worse -- that repression was more brutal and privileges were more extreme -- this does not change the **class** nature of the regime and the inequalities that these authoritarian social relations created. As Emma Goldman saw at first hand, "*better and more plentiful food was served Party members at the Smolny dining-room and many similar injustices and evils*", there was a "*special hospital for Communists, with every modern comfort, while other institutions lacked the barest medical and surgical necessities*", "*housing arrangements disclosed similar favouritism and injustice*" along with general "*inefficiency, mismanagement, and bureaucratic corruption*". [**Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 732, p. 754 and p. 900] That the bureaucracy under Stalin gained more wealth and exercised greater power over its subjects hardly changes the class nature of the regime. Indeed, the greater abuses of Stalinism had their basis in the social relations created under Lenin and Trotsky (and, of course, Stalin who was -- least we forget -- an "*old Bolshevik*" as well, indeed an older one than Trotsky).

Worse for the advocates of this position, with the exception of the state bureaucracy, none of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders found anything to complain about. Whether it is Lenin or Trotsky, the sad fact of the matter is that a party dictatorship presiding over an essentially state capitalism economy was not considered a bad thing. Indeed, the "gains" of October Trotskyists claim that Stalinism destroyed were, in fact, long dead by 1921. Soviet democracy, working class freedom of speech, association and assembly, workers' self-management in the workplace, trade union freedom, the ability to strike, and a host of other, elementary, working class rights had been eliminated long before the end of the civil war (indeed, often before it started) and "*there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921.*" [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 44]

Which, of course, causes problems for those who seek to distance Lenin and Trotsky from Stalinism and claim that Bolshevism is fundamentally "democratic" in nature. The knots Leninists get into to do this can be ludicrous. A particularly crazy example can be seen from the UK's Socialist Workers Party. For John Rees, it is a truism that "*it was overwhelmingly the force of circumstance which obliged the Bolsheviks to retreat so far from their own goals. They travelled this route in opposition to their own theory, not because of it -- no matter what rhetorical justifications were given at the time.*" ["*In Defence of October*," pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 70] So we cannot judge the Bolsheviks on what they did **nor** what they said! This is understandable for, as Rees implicitly admits, the Bolsheviks did **not** blame "objective circumstances" for their decisions. Rather, they viewed them as ideologically correct responses to difficulties they thought **every** revolution would face.

So this sort of position has little substance to it. It is both logically and factually flawed. Logically, it simply makes little sense as anything but an attempt to narrow political discussion and whitewash Bolshevik practice and politics. Given that Leninists constantly quote from Lenin's and Trotsky's post-1918 works, it seems strange that they try to stop others so doing. Strange, but not surprising, given their task is to perpetuate the Bolshevik Myth. Where that leaves revolutionary politics is left unsaid, but it seems to involve worshipping at the shrine of October and treating as a heretic anyone who dares suggest we analysis it in any depth and perhaps learn lessons from it. As discussed in the [next section](#), there is utility in such spurious arguments.

Of course Rees' comments are little more than assertions. Given that he dismisses the idea that we can actually take what any Bolshevik says at face value, we are left with little more than a mind reading operation in trying to find out what the likes of Lenin and Trotsky "really" thought. Perhaps the root explanation of Rees' position is the awkward fact that there are no quotes from any of the leading Bolsheviks which support it? After all, if they were quotes from the hallowed texts expounding the position Rees says the Bolshevik leaders "really" held then he would have provided them. The simple fact is that Lenin and Trotsky, like all the Bolshevik leaders, considered a one-party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy as "socialism" (it also explains Trotsky's difficulty in understanding the obvious class-nature of Stalinism and his ambiguous position in terms of its "achievements"). Can we really dismiss this simply as "*rhetorical justifications*" rather than an expression of "*their own theory*"? Can we really ignore the awkward fact that they never expressed "*their own theory*" and instead we have to make do with the "*rhetorical justifications*" Rees is at such pains for us to ignore?

Which shows that a major problem in discussing the failure of the Russian Revolution is the attitude of modern day Leninists. Rees presents us with another example when he asserts that "*what is required of historians, particularly Marxists, is to separate phrase from substance.*" The Bolsheviks, Rees argues, were "*inclined to make a virtue of necessity, to claim that the harsh measures of the civil war were the epitome of socialism.*" Indeed, he states that non-Leninists "*take Lenin or Trotsky's shouts of command in the midst of battle and portray them as considered analyses of events.*" [Op. Cit., p. 46]

Yet this argument is simply incredulous. After all, neither Lenin nor Trotsky could be said to be anything **but** political activists who took the time to consider events and analyse them in detail, however wrongly. Moreover, they defended their arguments in terms of Marxism. Would Rees consider Lenin's **State and Revolution** as an unimportant work? After all, this was produced in the midst of the events of 1917, in often difficult circumstances (such as when hiding from the police). If so, then why not his other, less appealing, political proclamations (never mind actions)? Moreover, looking at just a few of the works produced in this period it is clear that they are anything **but** "*shouts of command in the midst of battle.*" Trotsky's **Terrorism and Communism** is a substantial book, for example. It was **not** an ad hoc comment made during a conference or "*in the midst of battle.*" Quite the reverse, it was a detailed, substantial and thought-out reply to criticism by the influential German social democrat Karl Kaustky (and, before Lenin, the most respected Marxist thinker in the world). Indeed, Trotsky explicitly asks the question ("*Is there still theoretical necessity to justify revolutionary terrorism?*") and answers yes, his "*book must serve the ends of an irreconcilable struggle against the cowardice, half-measures, and hypocrisy of Kautskianism in all countries.*" [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 9 and p. 10]

This work was circulated at the Second Congress of the Communist International along with Lenin's '**Left-wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder**, a work still recommended by the likes of SWP in spite of its defence of party dictatorship (see [section H.3.3](#)) and so in spite of it being, presumably, "*shouts of command in the midst of battle*" rather than "*considered analyses of events*". Significantly, Congress attendee anarchist-turned-Bolshevik Alfred Rosmer later opined that both works had "*lost none of their value*" and could "*still be profitably read today*". [**Lenin's Moscow**, p. 69]

Therefore, Rees's comments are hard to take seriously. It is even harder to do so when it becomes clear that Rees does not apply his comments consistently or logically. He does not object to quoting Lenin and Trotsky during this period when they say something he **approves** of, regardless of how badly it reflects their actions. This is hardly convincing, particularly when their "good" quotes are so at odds with their practice and their "bad" quotes so consistent with them: as Marx argued, we should judge people by what they do, **not** by what they say. This seems a basic principle of scientific analysis and it is significant, if not surprising, that Leninists like Rees want to reject it.

Worse, as we note in [section H.6.2](#), Bolshevik ideology played its role in the degeneration of the revolution from the start. Many -- but not all -- the negative developments within the Revolution were actually consistent with the vision of socialism expounded in 1917. Others were, of course, opposed to the claims made before the seizure of power but were inevitable given these very claims -- not least the swift rise of a new bureaucracy (as anarchists had warned about long before October) given Marxist prejudices in favour of centralism and nationalisation. Focusing on "objective circumstances" draws attention away from this negative impact of both the Bolshevik vision of socialism which guided the policies being implemented and the policies being imposed. The assumption that these policies were not only driven by necessity but also successfully countered this necessity cannot be maintained for the policies imposed not only reflected many of the pre-1918 positions of orthodox Marxism, they had a negative impact in-so-far as they made a bad economic situation worse as well as expanding and empowering an officialdom which soon enough became a new ruling class (for further discussion see the appendix ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#))

Ultimately, the theoretical problem with this position is that it denies the importance of ideas. After all, even if it were true that the **theory** of Bolshevism was different to its practice and the justifications for that practice, it would leave us with the conclusion that this **theory** was not sufficient when faced with the rigours of reality. In other words, that it is impractical -- a conclusion that Leninists do not want to draw, hence the stress on "objective factors" to explain its failure.

Similarly, there seems to be an idealist tint to Leninist accounts of the Russian Revolution. They seem to portray the Lenin of 1921 as, essentially, the same person as the Lenin of 1917. That seems to violate the basic ideas of materialism. As Herbert Read points out, "*the phrase 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' . . . became fatal through the interventions of two political expedients -- the identification of the proletariat with the Bolshevik Party, and the use of the State as an instrument of revolution. Expedients and compromises may have been necessary for the defeat of the reactionary forces; but there is no doubt whatsoever that what took place was a progressive brutalisation of Lenin's own mind under the corrupting influence of the exercise of power.*" [**A One-Man Manifesto**, p. 51] It seems common sense that if a political strategy exposes its followers to the corrupting effects of power we should factor this into any

evaluation of it. Sadly, Leninists fail to do this -- even worse, they attempt to whitewash the post-October Lenin (and Trotsky) by excluding the "bad" quotes which reflect their practice, a practice which they are at pains to downplay (or ignore)!

As libertarian socialist Cornelius Castoriadis noted, this pro-Bolshevik response *"teaches us nothing we could extend beyond the confines of the Russian situation in 1920. The sole conclusion to be drawn from this kind of 'analysis' is that revolutionaries should ardently hope that future revolutions break out in more advanced countries, that they should not remain isolated, and that civil wars should not in the least be devastating."* It does not explain *"why it 'degenerated' precisely in such a way that it led to the power of the bureaucracy"*, which is perhaps unsurprising for *"[i]nsofar as ideas play a role in the development of history -- and, in the final analysis, they play an enormous role -- the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy."* [**The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy**, p. 92 and p. 104]

Then, of course, there is the attitude of the Bolshevik leaders themselves to these so-called *"shouts of command in the midst of battle."* Rather than dismiss them as irrelevant, they continued to subscribe to them years later. For example, Trotsky was still in favour of party dictatorship in the late 1930s (see [section H.1.2](#)). Looking at his justly infamous **Terrorism and Communism**, we discover him in the 1930s reiterating his support for his arguments of 1920. His preface to the 1936 French edition sees him state that the book was *"devoted to a clarification of the methods of the proletariat's revolutionary policy in our epoch."* He concluded as follows: *"Victory is conceivable only on the basis of Bolshevik methods, to the defence of which the present work is devoted."* The previous year, in his introduction to the second English edition, he was equally unrepentant. *"The British proletariat,"* he argued, *"will enter upon a period of political crisis and theoretical criticism . . . The teachings of Marx and Lenin for the first time will find the masses as their audience. Such being the case, it may be also that the present book will turn out to be not without its use."* He dismissed the *"consoling illusion"* that *"the arguments of this book [were] true for backward Russia"* but *"utterly without application to advanced lands."* The *"wave of Fascist or militarised police dictatorships"* in the 1920s and 1930s was the reason. It seems ironic that Trotsky's self-proclaimed followers are now repeating the arguments of what he termed *"incurable Fabians"*, namely that arguments within it were irrelevant and not applicable in circumstances other than those it was written in. [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. xix, p. xxxv, p. xlvii and p. xxxix]

So rather than distance himself from the authoritarian and state-capitalist policies modern day Leninists claim were thrust upon an unwilling Bolshevik party by "objective factors," Trotsky defended them. This is unsurprising, given that as we noted above in [section 2](#), Trotsky himself argues in that work that these "objective factors" would be faced in **every** revolution. As it was, he argues that it was only the *"slow development of the revolution in the West"* which stopped *"a direct passage from military Communism to a Socialistic system of production."* Rather than admit to *"illusions"* caused by the *"iron necessity"* of winning the civil war, he talks about *"those economic hopes which were bound up with the development of the world revolution."* He even links Bolshevik practice with Stalinism, noting that the *"idea of five-year plans was not only formulated in that period [1918-1920], but in some economic departments it was also technically worked out."* Indeed, in 1920 he noted how the policies he was implementing in practice and defending in theory were *"correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice"*. [**Op. Cit.**, p. xliii and p. 135]

Even his essay outlining what he considers the differences between Stalinism and Bolshevism does not see him fundamentally distancing himself from the positions modern day Leninists like to explain by "objective factors." He stated that the "*Bolshevik party achieved in the civil war the correct combination of military art and Marxist politics.*" What did that involve? Immediately before making that claim he argued that the "*Bolshevik party has shown the entire world how to carry out armed insurrection and the seizure of power. Those who propose the abstraction of the Soviets from the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.*" Thus the "party dictatorship" is seen as being an example of "Marxist politics" being successfully applied and not something to be opposed. Moreover, "*the Bolshevik party was able to carry on its magnificent 'practical' work only because it illuminated all its steps with theory.*" ["Stalinism and Bolshevism," **Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37**, pp. 430-1]

Clearly, rather than denounce the power of the party as being against Bolshevik theory, as Rees claims, for Trotsky it represented its application. While Trotsky excuses some Bolshevik actions (such as the banning of opposition groups) as a product of "objective factors" (such as the civil war), he clearly sees the degeneration of the revolution coming **after** the civil war and its "*correct combination*" of "*Marxist politics*" and "*military art*," which included "*party dictatorship*" over the soviets.

This lack of distancing is to be expected. After, the idea that "objective factors" caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution was first developed by Trotsky to explain, after his fall from power, the rise of Stalin. While **he** was head of the Soviet state no such "objective" factors seemed to be required to "explain" the party dictatorship over the working class. Indeed, quite the reverse as he argued in 1923: "*If there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party.*" [**Leon Trotsky Speaks**, p. 158] In this he reflected party orthodoxy, as expressed by Zinoviev to the delegates to the Second Congress of the Communist International who were busy seeking wisdom from **Terrorism and Communism**:

"Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class . . . [T]he dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party." [**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 2, pp. 151-2]

Trotsky in 1920 (and beyond!) was just stating mainstream Bolshevik ideology, echoing a statement made in March 1923 by the Central Committee (of which he and Lenin were members) to mark the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party issued long after the need for "*shouts of command in the midst of battle*". It sums up the lessons gained from the revolution and states that "*the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat.*" Vacillations, of course, are expressed by workers' democracy. Little wonder the statement rejects it: "*The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the*

party." ["To the Workers of the USSR" in G. Zinoviev, **History of the Bolshevik Party**, p. 213, p. 214]

So, as with all the leading Bolsheviks, he considered the party dictatorship as an inevitable result of any proletarian revolution. Moreover, he did not question the social relationships within production either. One-man management held no fears for him and he considered the state-capitalist regime under himself and Lenin "socialist" and defended it as such. He was fully supportive of one-man management, going so far as to suggest in 1920 that *"if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully."* [**Terrorism and Communism**, pp. 169–70] Writing in the peace of 1923, he likewise argued that the *"system of actual one-man management must be applied in the organisation of industry from top to bottom. For leading economic organs of industry to really direct industry and to bear responsibility for its fate, it is essential for them to have authority over the selection of functionaries and their transfer and removal."* These economic organs must *"in actual practice have full freedom of selection and appointment."* [quoted by Robert V. Daniels, **A Documentary History of Communism**, vol. 1, p. 237]

As can be seen, all of these post-civil war opinions fit in well with his civil war opinions on the matter. Now, it seems strange that rather than present what he "really" thought, Trotsky expounded what presumably was the **opposite** of it. Surely the simplest conclusion to draw is that Trotsky said what he really did think and expressed this in his so-called *"shouts of command"* made during the civil war? Can all these comments be dismissed as *"rhetorical justifications"* and not reflective of Trotsky's real ideas? Ultimately, either you subscribe to the idea that Lenin and Trotsky were able to clearly express their ideas themselves or you subscribe to the notion that they hid their "real" politics and only modern-day Leninists can determine what they, in fact, "really" meant to say and what they "really" stood for. And as for all those "awkward" quotes which express the **opposite** of the divined true faith, well, they can be ignored.

Which is, of course, hardly a convincing position to take, particularly as Lenin and Trotsky were hardly shy in justifying their authoritarian policies and expressing a distinct lack of concern over the fate of any **meaningful** working class conquest of the revolution like, say, soviet democracy. Indeed, as we note in [section 3](#) of the appendix ["Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?"](#), the sad fact is that the inter-party conflicts of the 1920s were **not** about workers' democracy at all rather party democracy, as admitted in 1925 by Max Eastman, one of Trotsky's main supporters at the time, who noted that *"this programme of democracy within the party [was] called 'Workers' Democracy' by Lenin"* and that *"Trotsky merely revived this original plea."* [**Since Lenin Died**, p. 35] Ironically, Trotskyists in soviet prisons in the early 1930s *"continued to consider that 'Freedom to choose one's party -- that is Menshevism'"* and this was their *"final verdict."* [Ante Ciliga, **The Russian Enigma**, p. 280] No wonder they seemed surprised to be there!

Ultimately, Trotsky's issue with Stalinism was not based on **real** socialist principles, such as meaningful working class freedoms and power. Rather it was a case of *"the political centre of gravity ha[ving] shifted from the proletarian vanguard to the bureaucracy"* and this caused *"the party"* to change *"its social structure as well as in its ideology."* [**Stalinism and Bolshevism**, **Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37**, p. 422] The party dictatorship had been replaced by the dictatorship of the state bureaucracy, in other words. Once this happened,

Trotsky sought to explain it. As analysing the impact of Bolshevik ideology and practice were, by definition, out of the question given his role in formulating and imposing it, that left the various "objective factors" Trotsky turned to in order to explain developments after 1923, to explain Stalinism while keeping true to Bolshevik ideology **and** practice.

This legacy shows itself with those who repeated it afterwards. Trotsky's limited critique explains why, to quote Chris Harman (another member of the British SWP), Trotsky "*continued to his death to harbour the illusion that somehow, despite the lack of workers' democracy, Russia was a 'workers' state.'*" Simply put, there had been no workers' democracy under Lenin and Trotsky and he considered that regime a "*workers' state*" so why should this be a key criteria for evaluating Stalinism? The question arises why **Harman** thought that Lenin's Russia was some kind of "workers' state" if workers' democracy is the criteria by which such things are to be judged. But, then again, he thinks Trotsky's **Left Opposition** "*framed a policy along [the] lines*" of "*returning to genuine workers' democracy*"! [**Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, p. 20 and p. 19] This also undermines the SWP's "Stalinism was state-capitalism" position (it must be stressed, as noted in [section H.3.13](#), this is **not** the same as the anarchist analysis, even if the conclusions are the same). As orthodox Trotskyist Ted Grant summarised in 1949:

"If Comrade Cliff's thesis is correct, that state capitalism exists in Russia today [under Stalin], then he cannot avoid the conclusion that state capitalism has been in existence since the Russian Revolution and the function of the revolution itself was to introduce this state capitalist system of society. For despite his tortuous efforts to draw a line between the economic basis of Russian society before the year 1928 and after, the economic basis of Russian society has in fact remained unchanged." [*Against the Theory of State Capitalism: Reply to Comrade Cliff*," **The Unbroken Thread**, p. 199]

Indeed! Although Grant was wrong to view Stalin's Russia as a "*degenerated workers' state*" rather than reject Bolshevism for introducing state-capitalism and party dictatorship in Russia, the fact is that in terms of **social relations** he is correct -- Russia **was** state-capitalist under Lenin and Trotsky. The awkward fact is that the Russian working class was expropriated both politically and economically in the first few months. A new State -- with its own bureaucracy and armed forces separate from the masses -- was emerging by January 1918, with the elimination of democracy within the armed forces and workplaces imposed by March and April of that year. This process was in place before "objective factors" like civil war started or had a significant impact -- which undoubtedly explains why the Bolsheviks at the time did **not** justify their policies in those terms, why Lenin in November 1919 stated that the "*organisation of the communist activity of the proletariat and the entire policy of the Communists have now acquired a final, lasting form; I am certain that we are on the right path and that progress along that path is fully ensured.*" [**Collected Works**, vol. 30, p. 144]

The major problem for Trotskyists of all kinds is that all the characteristics which they claim differentiate Bolshevism and Stalinism were all applied under Lenin and Trotsky. So, while most neo-Trotskyists like to proclaim that socialism **has** to be politically and economically democratic to qualify as socialist in order to exclude Stalinism from Marxism, the awkward fact is that these same parties also consider Lenin's regime post-1917 as socialist in spite of it being a party dictatorship politically and state-capitalist economically: apparently, socialism need not be democratic after all.

For anarchists, however, the regime confirmed the *"belief that a revolution **À la Bakunin** would have brought more constructive results, if not immediate anarchism . . . the Russian Revolution had been **À la Bakunin**, but it had since been transformed **À la Karl Marx**. That seemed to be the real trouble. I had not been naïve enough to expect anarchism to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the old. But I did hope that the masses, who had made the Revolution, would also have the chance to direct its course."* [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 826] As Kropotkin summarised, we *"have always pointed out the effects of Marxism in action. Why be surprised now?"* In short, it was the case of *"a small political party which by its false theories, blunders, and inefficiency has demonstrated how revolutions must **not** be made."* [quoted by Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 36 and p. 98]

So, in summary, the leading Bolsheviks did not view "objective factors" as explaining the failure of the revolution. Indeed, until Trotsky was squeezed out of power they did not think that the revolution **had** failed: party dictatorship and one-man management were considered as expressions of a successful revolution. Trotsky's issue with Stalinism was simply that the bureaucracy had replaced the *"the proletarian vanguard"* (i.e. himself and his followers) as the dominant force in the Soviet State and it had started to use the techniques of political repression developed against opposition parties and groups against him. The idea that "objective factors" caused the failure of the revolution was not used to explain the party dictatorship but rather the usurpation of **its** power by the bureaucracy. Its subsequent use by both orthodox and neo-Trotskyists to rationalise Leninist policies do not address the fundamental issue of **why** the revolution failed as it, as we discuss in the [next section](#), exists to **exclude** the impact of Bolshevik ideology in that process. Ultimately, it is unconvincing when placed in the wider context of Leninist ideology before, during and after the civil war.

7 What role does "objective factors" play in Leninist ideology?

As we discuss in the appendix on ["How did Bolshevik ideology contribute to the failure of the Revolution?"](#), Marxist ideology played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution and in laying the groundwork for the rise of Stalinism. However, this is a conclusion which no Leninist could entertain for a moment and this explains the popularity of "objective factors" within these circles -- for its role is to obscure this key factor in the failure of the revolution. Kropotkin stated the obvious, namely that the problems were increased but not created by the counter-revolution and other "objective factors":

"The evils naturally inherent in party dictatorship have thus been increased by the war conditions under which this party maintained itself. The state of war has been an excuse for strengthening the dictatorial methods of the party, as well as its tendency to centralise every detail of life in the hands of the Government, with the result that immense branches of the usual activities of the nation have been brought to a standstill. The natural evils of State Communism are thus increased tenfold under the excuse that all misfortunes of our life are due to the intervention of foreigners."
[**Direct Struggle Against Capital**, p. 488]

So the stressing of "objective factors" is hardly accidental for it shifts perspectives away from Bolshevik ideology and its flaws. It ensures that any Leninist defence of Bolshevism based purely on stressing "objective factors" results in the conclusion that Bolshevik ideology

played **no role** in the decisions made by the party leaders, that they simply operated on autopilot from October 1917 onwards. As Samuel Farber puts it *"determinism's characteristic and systemic failure is to understand that what the masses of people do and think politically is as much part of the process determining the outcome of history as are the objective obstacles that most definitely limit peoples' choices."* [Before Stalinism, p. 198] This is particularly the case when, as in Bolshevik Russia, "the masses of people" have had their revolution expropriated from them and placed into the hands of a few leaders at the top of a centralised, hierarchical social structure which combines political and economic decision making and power.

For anarchists, "objective factors" and "ideology" are interwoven -- ideas reflect the social conditions in which they develop but how people react to events are influenced by the ideas in their heads and these are also influenced by "ideologically correct" sources from the past. The decisions made by those in power impact on the objective circumstances -- making them better or worse depending on their suitability to address the issues. Social structures create specific social relations, and so an ideological prejudice in favour of, say, centralisation results in the building of specific forms of social organisation which, in turn, quickly become objective factors. Similarly, concentrating power into a few hands automatically limits the options and knowledge available to solve the problems, as Malatesta noted long before 1918:

"Social action [...] is the resultant of initiatives, thoughts and actions of all individuals who make up society; a resultant which, all other things being equal, is greater or smaller depending on whether individual forces are directed to a common objective or are divided or antagonistic. And if instead, as do the authoritarians, one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government or who by reason of their position can influence the policy of the government. [...] Even if we pursue our hypothesis of the ideal government of the authoritarian socialists, it follows from what we have said that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, being able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing." [Anarchy, pp. 38-9]

In short, when a few hold political, economic and social power and are ruling in the name of the working class then the impact of ideology becomes correspondingly concentrated. Unsurprisingly, rather than just select policies at random the Bolshevik leadership pursued consistently before, during and after the civil war policies which reflected their ideology. There was a preference for policies which centralised power in the hands of a few (politically **and** economically), that saw socialism as being defined by nationalisation rather than self-management, that considered bigger as inherently better, that stressed that role and power of the vanguard above that of the working class, that saw class consciousness as being determined by how much a worker agreed with the party leadership rather than whether it expressed the actual needs and interests of the class as a whole.

By stressing just one aspect of the matter, the "objective," Leninists ensure that the other, the "subjective," is ignored and so ensure a flawed analysis of the revolution and lessons to be learned from it. Indeed, what could be learned? Only that any future revolution should occur in an advanced capitalist nation, avoid isolation, civil war and so on. Thus Bolshevik ideology can be uncritically embraced for, ultimately, it has never been applied!

Yet Bolshevism itself undermined the socialist potential of the revolution, irrespective of the actual circumstances involved (which, to some degree, will affect **any** revolution). For example, the Bolshevik preference for centralisation and nationalisation would negatively affect a revolution conducted in even the best circumstances, as would the seizure of state power rather than its destruction. Only the elimination of what makes Bolshevism Bolshevik would ensure that a revolution would be successful. So anarchists stress that rather than being forced upon them by "objective factors" many of these policies were, in fact, in line with pre-civil war Bolshevik ideas. The Bolshevik vision of socialism, in other words, ensured that they smothered the (libertarian) socialist tendencies and institutions that existed at the time. As Chomsky summarises, *"Lenin and Trotsky, shortly after seizing state power in 1917, moved to dismantle organs of popular control, including factory committees and Soviets, thus proceeding to deter and overcome socialist tendencies."* [**Deterring Democracy**, p. 361] That they **thought** their system of state capitalism was a form of "socialism" is irrelevant -- they systematically combated (real) socialist tendencies in favour of state capitalist ones and did so knowingly and deliberately (see sections [H.3.1](#) and [H.3.13](#) on the differences between real socialism and Marxism in its Bolshevik mode and [section H.6](#) on Bolshevik practice itself).

So it is important to stress that even **if** the Russian Revolution had occurred in better circumstances, it is unlikely that Bolshevism would have resulted in socialism rather than state capitalism. Bolshevik principles ensure that any revolution led by a vanguard party would not have succeeded. This can be seen from the experience of Bolshevism immediately after it seized power, before the start of the civil war and major economic collapse, so their application in even the best of situations would have undermined socialist tendencies in the revolution. Simply put, a statist revolution will have statist, not libertarian, ends.

The focusing on "objective factors" (particularly the civil war) has become the traditional excuse for people with a romantic attachment to Leninism but who are unwilling to critically analyse what the Bolsheviks actually did in power and how it so often reflected their pre-October policies and promises. This excuse is not viable if you seek to build a revolutionary movement today: you need to choose between the real path of Lenin and the real, anarchist, alternative. As Lenin constantly stressed, a revolution will be difficult -- fooling ourselves about what will happen now just undermines our chances of success in the future and ensure that history will repeat itself. For the "objective factors" argument is not a defence of Leninism, but rather one that seeks to evade having to make such a defence. Revolutionary politics would be much better served by confronting this history and the politics behind it head on. Perhaps, if Leninists did do this, they would remain Leninists, but at least then their party members and those who read their publications would have an understanding of what this meant. And they would have to dump Lenin's **State and Revolution** into the same place Lenin himself did when in power -- into the rubbish bin -- and admit that democracy and Bolshevik revolution do not go together.

Looking at the "subjective factor" and the ideology which drove it means to recognise that it was **not** a case of the Bolshevik regime wanting to introduce communism but, being isolated, ended up imposing state capitalism instead. Rather, these policies were explicitly advocated **from the start**, before the seizure of power in October 1917. So the idea that "objective factors" caused the degeneration of the revolution is valid if and only if the Bolsheviks were implementing socialist policies during the period immediately after the October revolution: that was not the case, Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks explicitly argued for these policies as essential for building socialism (or, at best, the preconditions of socialism) in Russia and

Bolshevik practice flowed from this analysis. Unsurprisingly, then, the Bolsheviks happily introduced authoritarian and state capitalist policies **from the start**. Many of the policies denounced as "Stalinist" by Leninists were being advocated and implemented by Lenin in the spring of 1918, i.e. **before** the start of the civil war and the deepening of economic chaos that it produced.

In other words, the usual excuses for Bolshevik tyranny do not hold much water, both factually and logically.

8 Do Leninists usually deny the importance of ideology?

In a word, no. Usually Leninists stress the importance of ideology in both social change and revolution -- after all, why join their party if ideology is unimportant as decisions are driven by "objective factors"? Yet, ironically, other aspects of their analysis of the Russian Revolution recognises that ideology **does** play an important role.

Indeed, the framework which Leninists use in this discussion shows the importance of Bolshevik ideology and the key role it played in the outcome of the revolution. After all, pro-Bolsheviks argue that the "objective factors" forced the **Bolsheviks** to act as they did. However, the proletariat is meant to be the "*ruling class*" in the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*." As such, to argue that the Bolsheviks were forced to act as they did due to circumstances means to implicitly acknowledge that the party held power in Russia, **not** the working class. That a ruling party could become a party dictatorship is not that unsurprising, nor that **its** vision of what "socialism" was would be given preference over the desires of the working class in whose name it ruled. So these apologetics show the validity of Bakunin's critique of Marxism:

"Nor can we comprehend talk of freedom of the proletariat or true deliverance of the masses within the State and by the State. State signifies domination, and all domination implies subjection of the masses, and as a result, their exploitation to the advantage of some governing minority.

"Not even as revolutionary transition will we countenance national Conventions, nor Constituent Assemblies, nor provisional governments, nor so called revolutionary dictatorships: because we are persuaded that revolution is sincere, honest and real only among the masses and that, whenever it is concentrated in the hands of a few governing individuals, it inevitably and immediately turns into reaction." [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 1, p. 160]

This is not the only way in which Leninist defences of Bolshevism undermines itself. In their own way, Leninists admit the key role of ideas indirectly when they cannot avoid mentioning the collective resistance to Bolshevism indicated in [section 5](#) above. In the few cases when the class struggle under the Bolsheviks is not ignored, Leninists often argue that while the working class was capable of collective decision making and action, the nature of such action was suspect. This argument rests on the premise that the "advanced" workers (i.e. party members) left the workplace for the front or for government posts, leaving the "backward" workers behind. This argument is often used, particularly in regard to the garrison of Kronstadt at the time of their revolt in early 1921 (see [section 8](#) of the appendix on "[What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?](#)").

Yet this argument raises more problems than it solves. In **any** revolution the most advanced, the most politically consciousness tend to volunteer to go to the front first and, of course, tend to be elected as delegates to committees of various kinds (local, regional and national; economic, political and social). There is little that can be done about it but if soviet -- or socialist -- democracy depends on the "advanced" workers being there in order for it to work, then it suggests two things. First, and most obvious, that ideas matter -- if not, then the question of advanced and backward workers would be irrelevant. Second, that the commitment to democracy is lacking in those who argue along these lines, for what happens if the "backward" masses reject the "advanced" elements? Given the key role played by the latter then do they have the right, even the duty, to impose their will on the former? And it also begs the question of **who** determines what constitutes "backward" -- if it means "does not support the party" then it becomes little more than a rationale for party dictatorship (as it did under Lenin and Trotsky).

Writing in 1938 while he defended the repression of the 1921 Kronstadt revolt, Trotsky argued that a *"revolution is 'made' directly by a **minority**,"* he argued that the *"success"* of a revolution is *"possible"* when *"this minority finds more or less support, or at least friendly neutrality, on the part of the majority."* So what happens if the majority expresses opposition to the party? Unfortunately Trotsky does not raise this question, but he does answer it indirectly by arguing that *"to free the soviets from the leadership [sic!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves. The experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats, proved this. Social Revolutionary-anarchist soviets could only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship. They could play no other role, regardless of the 'ideas' of their participants."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 85 and p. 90]

Thus to let the working masses (the *"majority"*) have free soviet elections and so reject the vanguard (the *"minority"*) would mean the end of soviet power, allowing the proletariat a say in the progress of the revolution means the end of the *"proletarian dictatorship"*! Which, of course, is interesting logic. The authoritarian core of the Bolshevik vision of revolution is thus exposed -- along with the key role of ideology in the outcome of the revolution!

Victor Serge likewise presented an insight into the Bolshevik perspective on the role of ideology in a revolution when he noted that in 1918 *"[a]gitation conducted by the SRs and Mensheviks called demonstrations in the streets and prepared for a general strike. The demands were: free trade, wage increases, payment of wages one, two or three months in advance and 'democracy.'* *The intention was to incite the working class itself against the revolution."* Which only makes sense once you realise that by *"the revolution"* Serge simply meant *"the Bolsheviks"* and the obvious truth that the working class was **not** managing the revolution at all, was **not**, in any sense, in power. *"The best elements among the workers,"* explains Serge, *"were away fighting; those in the factories were precisely the less energetic, less revolutionary sections, along with the petty folk, yesterday's small shopkeepers and artisans, who had come there to find refuge. This proletariat of the reserve often allowed itself to fall under the sway of Menshevik propaganda."* [**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, p. 229] Given that Serge is discussing the period **before** the revolt of Czechoslovak Legion (and so the start of the civil war), a greater indictment of Bolshevism cannot be found. After all, what does "workers' democracy" mean unless the proletariat can vote for its own delegates? Little wonder Daniel Guerin described Serge's book as *"largely a justification of the liquidation of the soviets by Bolshevism."* [**Anarchism**, p. 97] What point

is there having genuine soviet elections if the "*less revolutionary sections*" (i.e. Trotsky's "*majority*") will not vote for the vanguard? And can socialism exist without democracy? Can we expect an unaccountable vanguard to govern in the interests of anyone but its own? Of course not!

Thus we find Serge arguing that the "*party of the proletariat must know, at hours of decision, how to break the resistance of the backward elements among the masses; it must know how to stand firm sometimes against the masses . . . it must know how to go against the current, and cause proletarian consciousness to prevail against lack of consciousness and against alien class influences.*" [Op. Cit., p. 218] Ideas apparently **do** matter after all. Trotsky comments on this theme allows us to draw the obvious conclusions:

"The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves . . . if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself." ["*The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism*", pp. 53-66, **Their Morals and Ours**, p. 59]

Of course, by definition, **every** group is "*backward*" compared to the vanguard and so Trotsky's and Serge's argument amounts to little more than a justification for party dictatorship **over** the proletariat. Thus the validity of Bakunin's prediction that Marxism's "*sham people's government would be no other than the completely despotic rule of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of actual or alleged 'scholars.'* The people are no '*scholars,*' and therefore they are as a whole to be freed from the toils of government, and as a whole they are to make up the herd that is governed. What a splendid freedom!" {**Micheal Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 269] Is it then that surprising that Bolsheviks revised the Marxist theory of the state to justify elite rule? As discussed in [section H.3.8](#), once in power Lenin and Trotsky saw that the "workers' state" had to be independent of the working class in order to overcome the "*wavering*" and "*vacillation of the masses themselves.*"

The reason why such a system would not result in socialism does not take long to discover. For anarchists, freedom is not just a goal, a noble end to be achieved sometime in the distant future, but rather a necessary part of the process of creating socialism. Eliminate freedom (and, as a necessary result, workplace and community self-management, initiative, self-activity) and the end result will be anything **but** socialism. Ultimately, as Malatesta argued, "*the only way that the masses can raise themselves*" is by freedom "*for it is only through freedom that one educates oneself to be free.*" [Op. Cit., p. 53] Ironically, by using state repression to combat "*backward*" elements, the Bolsheviks ensured that they stayed that way and, more importantly, disempowered the **whole** working class so ensuring that Bolshevik dictatorship came into constant conflict with it and its continuing struggle for autonomy. Rather than base itself on the creative powers of the masses, Bolshevism crushed it as a threat to its power and so ensured that the economic and social problems affecting Russia increased.

And need it be pointed out that "low" culture or "backwardness" have been used by numerous imperialist and authoritarian regimes to justify their rule over a given population? It matters little whether the population are of the same nationality as the rulers or from a subjugated people, the arguments and the logic are the same. Whether dressed up in racist or classist

clothing, the same elitist pedigree lies behind the pro-Bolshevik argument that democracy would have brought "*chaos*" or "*capitalist restoration*." The implicit assumption that working class people are not fit for self-government is clear from these rationales. Equally obvious is the idea that the party knows better than working class people what is best for them.

Sounding like Bolshevik Henry Kissingers, Leninists argue that Lenin and Trotsky had to enforce their dictatorship **over** the proletariat to stop a "*capitalist restoration*" (Kissinger was the US state's liaison with the Chilean military when it helped their coup in 1973 and infamously stated that the country should not be allowed to turn communist due to the stupidity of its own people). Needless to say, anarchists argue that even if the Bolshevik regime had not already been capitalist (specifically, **state** capitalist) this logic simply represents an elitist position based on "*socialism from above*" (see [section H.3.3](#)). Yes, soviet democracy **may** have resulted in the return of (private) capitalism but by maintaining party dictatorship the possibility of socialism was automatically nullified. Simply put, the pro-Leninist argument implies that socialism can be implemented from above as long as the right people with the right ideas are in power. Thus the crudest determinism flips into the most vacuous idealism, with the flipping driven by the overwhelming necessity of defend the Bolshevik regime. And while we can understand Trotsky seeking to absolve his conscious on the role **his** decisions, policies and politics played in creating the regime Stalin so adroitly utilised in his rise to power, it becomes less clear why modern-day socialists would seek to encase themselves in such contradictions.

Such reasoning by Trotsky and Serge show the role of ideology in the outcome of the revolution, so undermining their invocation of "objective factors" to explain all. Yet, at the same time, they stress the importance of Leninist ideology in ensuring the "victory" of the revolution. They seek to have it both ways -- the application of the crudest form of deterministic materialism on the one side, the glorification of the will of a few leaders on the other. It also exposes the authoritarian core of Leninism which justified the repression of working class revolt. Given this, it is incredulous for Leninists like Chris Harman to suggest that it was the "*decimation of the working class*" which caused (by "*necessity*") the "*Soviet institutions*" to take "*on a life independently of the class they had arisen from. Those workers and peasants who fought the Civil War could not govern themselves collectively from their places in the factories.*" ["*How the revolution was lost*", pp. 13-36, P. Binns, T. Cliff, C. Harman, **Russia: From Workers' State to State Capitalism**, p. 18] Given that this "*independent*" life is required to allow the party (requoting Serge) to "*go against the current*," Harman simply fails to understand the dynamics of the revolution, the actual social position of the vanguard and the resistance of the working class subject to it. Moreover, the reason **why** the "*workers and peasants*" could not govern themselves collectively was because the party had seized power for itself and systematically destroyed soviet, workplace and military democracy to remain there (see [section H.6](#)). Then there is the way the Bolsheviks reacted to such collective unrest: they sought to break the workers as a collective force. The use of violence, lockouts and re-registration was typical, as was the arresting of "ringleaders" (see [section 5](#) above for details) It seems ironic, therefore, to blame "objective factors" for the "atomisation" of the working class when, in fact, this was a key aim of Bolshevik repression of labour protest -- repression which was easily justified by its ideology.

Ultimately, the degeneration of the Russian Revolution can be traced from when the Bolsheviks seized power **on behalf of** the Russian working class and peasantry and has its roots in Marxist ideology. Most obviously, state implies the delegation of power and initiative into the hands of a few leaders who form the "revolutionary government." Yet the

power of any revolution, as Bakunin recognised, derives from the decentralisation of power, from the active participation of the masses in the collective social movement and the direct action it generates. As soon as this power passes out of the hands of the working class, the revolution is doomed: the counter-revolution has begun and it matters little that it is draped in a red flag. Hence anarchist opposition to the state.

Sadly, many socialists have failed to recognise this. Hopefully we have shown that the standard explanations of the failure of the Russian revolution are, at their base, superficial and will only ensure that history will repeat itself. For the idea that Bolshevik policies did not impact on the outcome of the revolution is a false assertion, as the Makhnovists show (see the appendix "[Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?](#)") and Leninists themselves implicitly admit. Beliefs are utopian if subjective ideas are not grounded in objective reality. Anarchists hold that part of the subjective conditions required before socialism can exist is the existence of free exchange of ideas and working class democracy (i.e. self-management). To believe that revolution is possible without freedom, to believe those in power can, through their good intentions, impose socialism from above, as the Bolsheviks did, is indeed utopian.