

## Review Article

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### BOLSHEVISM AND THE "IMPERATIVES" OF REVOLUTION

#### Russia, 1917–1921

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (New York: Norton, 1976); John L. H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution: A Study in Mass Mobilization* (New York: Norton, 1976); Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR: The First Period, 1917–1923* (New York and London: Monthly Review, 1976); and Oliver H. Radkey, *The Unknown Civil War in Soviet Russia* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institute Press, 1976).

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Few issues are more central to early Soviet history than the relationship between Russia's revolutionary experience and the development of Stalinism. Established in the name of social equality and the end of political coercion, the Soviet "experiment" seemed by the mid-1930s to have eliminated social conflict, but in nightmarish style. Stalinism became a synonym for social rigidity, thought control, and repression; "totalitarianism" entered the political vocabulary, to be used interchangeably with European fascism or Soviet socialism. Industrialization and rapid economic development notwithstanding, the question for many was not one of progress, but how a vibrant revolutionary society lost sight of its goals, and rapidly stagnated into a repressive bureaucratic order.

Many in the West have found the answer in the "imperatives" of Leninist theory and practice. As Stephen F. Cohen pointed out recently, a remarkable consensus has developed which in one way or another sees post-revolutionary Russia, and especially Stalinism, as the outgrowth of ideological presumption, doctrinal intolerance, and a ruthless, centrally directed party mechanism.<sup>1</sup> In this view, Leninism was ideally suited, in an opportunistic way, to the chaos of Russia's revolutionary context and the consequent need for social order; Stalinism, with its command economy, highly centralized bureaucracy, and police state politics, was the logical (if extreme) application of Leninist principles to the tasks of collectivization, industrialization,

and political control. Even those who argue with Trotsky that Stalin “betrayed” the revolution generally see the process of betrayal evolving through the generalized patterns of bureaucratization and “commandism.” For a skilled manipulator like Stalin, the argument runs, it was relatively easy to ride these trends to the top.<sup>2</sup>

The problem with arguments which stress Leninist “imperatives” and objective processes like bureaucratization is not, of course, that they are entirely wrongheaded. The problem lies rather in the way they tend to obscure the particularities of social context in which Russia’s revolution occurred, and discourage careful analysis of the day-to-day manner in which early Bolsheviks confronted Russia’s problems. Also, concepts like “centralization” and “bureaucratization,” like their more recent analogs “convergence” and “technocracy,” presume the importance of transcendent patterns of social organization, and tend to ignore the attitudes, social goals, or values of the societies or movements they describe. In a word, arguments of this sort tend to be ahistorical. They often suggest causalities without clear demonstration, and in the process, generally imply the futility of radical politics.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that similar structures may support radically different institutions, and the very manner or style in which social functions are performed may seriously affect the nature of their institutional setting. A sense of urgency and a deep anxiety about survival, for example, may make the qualitative nature of central control institutions radically different in conditions of crisis (Soviet Russia in the Civil War) than in times of relative order (Russia under Brezhnev), even though their functions are the same. The converse may also be true: despite a radical restructuring of institutions, continuities of attitude and outlook may obviate significant change. The degree to which Bolsheviks after 1917 absorbed the cultural directiveness of Tsarist society may well have had a far greater effect on Soviet development than the process of revolutionary leveling; in China, similarly, the presumptions of experts about their social importance may prove more influential on future social organization than institutional settings which discourage expertise. Unless one explores historical settings carefully, in other words, and understands both cultural particularities and concrete sets of attitudes, structural appearances may belie profound developmental differences.

Assumptions about “normative” social patterns like “centralization” and “bureaucratization” also affect related conceptions of deviance and social struggle. In James C. Davies “J-Curve” theory of revolution, conflict emerges when past progress is blocked and “manifest reality breaks away from

anticipated reality.”<sup>3</sup> This formula is by now a familiar one to many students of revolutionary movements, but often, those devoted to “objective” social analysis seem unaware that notions like “anticipated reality” can be historical quicksand. How can one disassociate “anticipation of future progress,” for example, from assumptions about what is progressive? In a given historical setting, deviance and conflict may indeed be related to frustrated expectations, but the expectations themselves may challenge the very type of social organization on which dominant conceptions of stability and progress are based. Similarly with the notion of struggle. If one assumes societies tend towards centralization, struggle tends to mean political competition. “Class struggle” becomes “which group will rule?” rather than “how do value systems differ” or “how will resources be allocated?”; and “struggle” itself seems inappropriate as a term of description when political competition has either been neatly institutionalized or effectively eliminated.

On the other hand, a perspective which assumes the presence of powerful disintegrative forces can regard the notion of struggle as much more fundamental to social behavior. The advantage here is not prescription, as “vulgar” Marxists would have it, but a recognition that social antagonism is itself a “normative” pattern, and highly desirable insofar as equalization of social income and position are desirable ends. From this perspective one can also see more readily that significant differences often exist between the goals of broad social groups struggling for material or social betterment, and those of political organizations struggling for power in their name.

These problems are not new ones for serious students, of course, but they deserve restatement here by way of opening discussion on the nature of change in Russia during the revolution of 1917, the subject of several recent books. In general, historical literature has emphasized the political nature of this process. Perhaps the most common view sees an archaic and inept Tsarist government beset by multiple pressures of industrialization and modernization, virtually collapsing under the onslaught of World War I, and leaving the country on the brink of anarchy and chaos. The February revolution occurs to fill the political breach. But instead of the anticipated constitutional monarchy and national “ministry of confidence,” two rival political groups are organized, the unofficial but authoritative worker, soldier, and peasant soviets, and the “legitimate” Provisional Government. The ensuing months witness the rapid diminution of the power of each, as both prove unable to mobilize Russia effectively for her own well-being and defense. A tightly knit Bolshevik party, meanwhile, rapidly builds its strength. Better organized than its rivals, willing to play to the masses in its closely directed effort to discredit established authorities, unencumbered by democratic

scruples, Lenin and his comrades are able to maneuver into striking position. The October “coup” thus emerges as the logical, some say “inevitable,” consequence of material deprivation, institutional underdevelopment, frustrated expectations, and political machination: the “imperatives” of “backwardness.”<sup>4</sup> Social upheaval is not, however, followed by significant social change, except for the elimination of Russia’s aristocracy and small social elite. The Bolsheviks simply replace one group of rulers with another, preserving in exaggerated form traditional institutions of authority. Or so a common argument runs.

A very different picture begins to emerge, however when 1917 is examined in broader terms of differential attitudes and the notion of *social* struggle. Pre-revolutionary conflict can be seen developing not so much from the exigencies of modernization and Tsarist administrative ineptitude as from a popular rejection of the premises on which “progress” was being measured, particularly in terms of the World War. Liberal politicians, seen by Tsarist officials as fomentors of popular discontent, actually presumed the creation of Western political institutions fundamentally alien to ordinary Russians, drawing closely from English models. The overwhelming mass of workers and peasants had few, if any, liberal commitments. Already in 1906, workers and especially peasants indicated they were not very likely to rally behind a Western system of rule, at least not in times of revolutionary upheaval.<sup>5</sup> More important, liberal Russia saw the war as an important vehicle for “progress,” a means of assuring substantial economic development and a consolidation of Russia’s geopolitical importance. “War to Complete Victory” meant territorial expansion and the annexation of Constantinople and the Dardanelles Strait, which many regarded as not legitimately Turkish.<sup>6</sup> The struggle of ordinary Russians, however, was not so much for imperial glory, as for material betterment, and for social and political institutions which would end the instruments of past social and economic oppression. It is quite possible, in fact, that Russian soldiers proved more “war weary” than their German, Austrian, or French comrades not because the carnage was greater or the Tsarist regime significantly less competent, but because the premises of imperialist competition on which the war was largely based were generally alien to their outlook. In any case, the war itself was readily identifiable in Russia with such traditional social inequities as gentry landholding and the estate system; and Russia’s emergent social polarization was not simply one of class position, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, one of attitude and outlook.

If one looks at Russian events this way, February marks the beginning of a two-tiered process of change. On one level, political parties and groups strug-

gled to secure the "Russia" of their various conceptions, hoping to impose their values and goals on a disorganized political economy. This involved the establishment of capable, authoritative instruments of power, and the invocation from above of such Western moral imperatives as the "supremacy of law." On another, workers, peasants, and their comrades-in-arms struggled to free themselves from long-standing economic and social insecurities, now further intensified by the war. Equality was important not in terms of the ballot box, but in terms of distributing land; "freedom" for many was not the "liberty" (*svoboda*) of Western intellectual tradition, but the "will" (*volia*) of local community determination. This meant taking local matters into ones own hands, in the village tradition: forming peasant councils to appropriate land, and factory committees to assure fair wages, organizing militias to prevent "unprofitable" plants from closing and depriving workers of their livelihood. Seen from above the revolution unfolded into chaos; authority and order were lost to elemental anarchic forces (*stikhiia*). But from below, Russia was rapidly developing an enormous network of popular institutions, leading, in fact, to a more thoroughly "structured" society than ever before in Russian history, although obviously not one initially susceptible to effective coordination or central direction.

In this perspective, October is no longer a "revolution," but simply a stage in the increasingly irrelevant "upper" process of political maneuvering. Social polarization emerges from genuinely antagonistic values as well as social interest, and 1917 becomes in large measure a struggle over the premises on which a new society is to be built, rather than primarily an episode of political upheaval. Also from this perspective, the question of reimposing state authority, or Bolshevik "bureaucratization," can be seen as much in terms of social alignments as political strategy. Social context, the struggle of particular social groups to reassert their traditional roles, conflicting values, and such elements as rank and file Bolshevik attitudes emerge with Central Committee directives as factors of determinant importance.

The great merit of Alexander Rabinowitch's study on the Bolsheviks is that he destroys any lingering notions of that party as a tightly organized, centrally directed group in 1917, uniform in its outlook and singleminded in its conspiratorial effort to seize power. Lenin and his comrades "came to power" (in Rabinowitch's nicely chosen phrase) by rejecting liberal notions of "progress," and indeed by ignoring Lenin's early organizational plan, and by closely reflecting mass aspirations. They did so programatically, by denouncing the war as alien and imperialist, and calling immediately for radical social change. And they did so in institutional and organizational terms,

despite the elitist bias of Lenin's "vanguard" concept, by constructing a mass party on fundamentally democratic principles, welcoming rank and file participation and structuring local cells very much like the workers' and soldiers' own committees. It is clear from Rabinowitch's presentation that the strictures of Lenin's famous pamphlet *What is to be Done?* meant very little to day-to-day party operations in 1917, and that most who joined and worked in Bolshevik ranks bore little resemblance to the "professional" revolutionaries it describes.

This latter aspect of Bolshevik success is most important, and has generally been ignored. Too often it is assumed that the party Lenin envisioned in *What is to be Done?* largely materialized in 1917, and that this was a principal reason underlying victory in October. On the contrary, Rabinowitch shows that Lenin's followers in their day-to-day activities may have been among the least "elite" of Russia's parties, and certainly less so than the ostensible champions of political democracy, the liberal Constitutional Democrats. While Lenin's supporters rallied in streets and factories, published newspapers for the trenches and enrolled almost anyone who supported their goals, Kadets spoke to workers and peasants in condescending prose, argued for the postponement of national elections, expressed concern about Russia's readiness for democratic government, and held their "mass" meetings in concert halls or social clubs.<sup>7</sup> Nor was careful organization, another "imperative" of *What is to be Done?*, a special feature of Bolshevik party structure before October. The Socialist Revolutionaries also had a highly directive Central Committee, as Oliver Radkey has shown,<sup>8</sup> one perhaps even more inclined to issuing orders than the Bolsheviks'. SRs constantly stressed the need for organization, especially at party congresses, and spent much of their energy and resources in this regard. Perhaps Lenin personally appreciated the value of organization more than other individual political figures, but as Rabinowitch demonstrates, this found no special reflection in everyday party activity, at least not for most of 1917.

Instead, Rabinowitch shows that what distinguished the Bolsheviks dramatically in this period from the party of Lenin's initial conception, and what contributed significantly to the party's success, was its ability at every level to tolerate differences, publicly and privately, and the refusal even of its top leadership to sever ties with dissident elements. While the SRs voted to muzzle their most prominent figure, Victor Chernov, and insisted in a Central Committee resolution that all members were "obliged to adhere to its decrees in each and every action . . . without the privilege of defending the minority's positions, and without the privilege of voting contrary to the will of the Central Committee," (a posture which eventually led to a three-way split

in SR ranks),<sup>9</sup> Bolshevik leaders were remarkably tolerant of different views in their ranks. The prevailing view, as Rabinowitch rightly argues, was one of “moderation.” This helped keep the party together and growing during such troublesome episodes as the Petrograd leadership’s negative response to Lenin’s April “theses,” and even after the debacle of the July Days, when Bolshevik soldiers moved on their own to seize power in the party’s name.

Rabinowitch shows, for example, how the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” was officially withdrawn at the Sixth Bolshevik Congress in July, (as Lenin moved away from any collaboration whatsoever with Mensheviks and SRs), but how at the same time, as late as September, Kamenev was calling openly for the creation of a broad, democratic coalition at the Democratization Conference, while Trotsky, now chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, urged full power to soviets everywhere. Many local party groups similarly rejected the Sixth Congress resolution, as Rabinowitch shows, and continued to work with party rivals, sometimes even presenting a united “Social Democratic” slate in local elections. This diversity was true on other issues as well, ranging from cooperation with Menshevik dominated trade unions to mobilizing the peasants. Rabinowitch makes clear that the manner in which Lenin retained Zinoviev and Kamenev in positions of responsibility after their celebrated opposition to seizing power in October (an opposition, incidently, which was broadcast all over the Petrograd press), was in fact, part and parcel of the party’s general revolutionary style, at least in this period.

Rabinowitch uses the terms “flexible” and “tolerant” to describe the attitude of party leaders within their own organization, and he makes a persuasive case. He documents the lively and intense debate which characterized party meetings at all levels, and shows how local (district) party organizations were especially democratic and decentralized. In my view, these very attributes – so conspicuously lacking in Stalin’s party – may well have been the essence of Bolshevik organizational power in 1917. Without being pushed from the party by ideological or organizational rigidity or excessive directiveness from the Central Committee, individuals and local party groups with varying views on specific issues could continue to fight together for common, overall objectives, particularly the acquisition of state power.

This is not to imply that Lenin’s supporters were in any way irresolute in terms of leading Russia away from “bourgeois” rule, that they were not persistently harsh in their attacks on socialist moderates and “conciliationists,” or that Lenin’s energy and Trotsky’s charisma were not also important factors in determining the revolution’s course. But it is to maintain that in

contrast to their rivals, as Rabinowitch demonstrates, the Bolsheviks in 1917 were an open, mass organization, genuinely tuned to the attitudes and desires of ordinary workers and even many peasants, particularly those in uniform. Primarily for this reason they continued to gain organizational strength in 1917, and by September were able to capture majorities not only in the Moscow and Petrograd Soviets, but also in the Moscow City Duma. In *conception*, the party leadership, and especially Lenin, continued to see the Bolsheviks as a highly centralized political organization, capable of responding quickly and effectively to directives from above. Lenin certainly never lost his commitment to centralism, expressed so cogently in *What Is to Be Done?*, and maintaining party democracy was clearly unimportant as compared to gaining power. But in *practice* during 1917, Lenin's party conducted its affairs to a very great extent in the same fashion as the people it fairly claimed to represent: as rough and tumble populist democrats, without much regard for formal democratic procedures, but with tolerance for differences within party ranks, and without excessive "commandism." Thus a key to their support and organization strength was not only their commitment to immediate, radical social change, but also their popular style.

How then, did the party rapidly metamorphize into the centralized and increasingly bureaucratic organization which so facilitated Stalin's rise to power? John Keep rightly suggests a two-fold answer in his fine study, both parts of which relate to the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which most Russians found themselves during the revolution and civil war years. Keep shows first how Russian society "mobilized" during 1917 around various local institutions. In urban areas, particularly Moscow and Leningrad, workers formed scores of individual factory committees, organized trade unions, set up soviets of all sorts. In the countryside peasants also organized, sometimes in land and food committees, sometimes in soviets, occasionally in local *zemstvos*. The primary goal of all these groups was to deal with problems of production and supply, and to seek improvement in material conditions. Factory committees led the fight for higher wages and better working conditions, but also worked to assure continuity in production and to maintain labor discipline. An agreement between the committees and the Petrograd Society of Manufacturers in March sanctified these organizations in part because the manufacturers themselves recognized the value of worker participation in factory affairs.<sup>10</sup> In April, the Provisional Government established a network of local land committees for similar reasons, assuming those directly involved in agriculture could deal most effectively with problems of food supply.<sup>11</sup>



This process was largely spontaneous, and in his initial perspectives, Keep seems to be among those who regard the revolution essentially in terms of political disintegration and Leninist skullduggery. He insists in his introduction that "anarchy" and "chaos" are the terms which best describe the state of Russia in 1917. But Keep is also a first-rate historian, with eyes keenly focused on social process. The evidence he examines quickly leads him to more sophisticated description. He shows, for example, how the very fact of mass participation in myriad local organizations created strong institutional pressures towards centralization and directiveness. Local groups often conflicted with each other in the pursuit of similar goals, and few organizations were capable on their own of making any substantial improvements in such pressing areas as food supply. The market mechanism linking town and countryside was also in shambles, and the parasitic army continued its stranglehold on transport, even as the state treasury was being drained of virtually all its resources.

In these circumstances, what Keep calls the "cadre" of mass organizations (only a few of whom at first were Bolsheviks) began to play increasingly directive roles. Centralizing agencies of various types were set up at different levels, uniting, for example, most of the railroad workers' committees in Moscow yards and shops in a special railroad soviet, or various trade union groups in local and regional "central bureaus." Various types of "executive committees" also began to play increasing roles within individual organizations. Keep uses the term "initiative group" to describe these bodies, and what emerges implicitly from the wealth of material he presents is not a conspiratorial effort on the Bolsheviks' part to "seize power," but a natural gravitation of party activists to positions of organizational responsibility. It is this process of "gravitation" which forms the second part of Keep's explanation for emergent authoritarianism.

Keep's personal sympathies are overtly liberal, perhaps even conservative. He is unabashed in his condemnation of Leninist politics, and is clearly repelled by the contemporary Soviet leviathan. But however important high politics later became, Keeps suggests forcefully that the councils of state power were largely secondary in terms of the revolution itself. Directives from Petrograd concerning food procurement, transport, the supply of raw materials to industry, even military recruitment could only be generalized statements of intent; their implementation had to depend on specific local conditions and the inclinations of various local committees. Government statements became policy questions, to be debated in terms of the political merits of this or that party; the principles on which Russian society was actually administered stemmed directly from popular inclinations. "Mass mobilization" is a reason-

able term for this process, as Keep uses it, providing one recognizes that throughout 1917, the mobilizing agencies, for the most part, were not imposed from above. One can imagine a very different chronicle of cabinets and ministers having virtually no effect at all on this process.

What did matter, and to an increasing degree, was both the ineffectiveness of local committees in meeting popular needs, and the political sympathies of increasingly directive cadre elements. Despite his own deep-seated anti-Marxism, Keep shows Russian social process in 1917 to involve a powerful dialectic, one in which social leveling and the destruction of traditional institutions and patterns of authority led spontaneously in the course of meeting social needs to the development of a new *apparat*.

In my judgment, those centralizing pressures from below need not have led "inevitably" to authoritarianism, as Keep seems to imply, but to avoid it, those propelled into positions of power had to be capable of exercising command and enforcing emergency directives without losing their commitment to the ultimate establishment of political democracy. Lenin and most Bolshevik leaders, of course, had no such commitments; their own support for centralization was not simply a situational response, but an integral part of Leninist political philosophy, however different the actual conduct of local party affairs before October. Thus the Bolsheviks were well tuned to mesh with broader centralizing tendencies during the revolution not because of Leninist prescriptions or a tightly directed party machine but because they were politically and ideologically close to the mass of Russia's urban workers and hence felt the need from below for directiveness. They had a popular style; they were willing and anxious to take control, and ideologically inclined to being directive themselves. Their organizational base was constantly expanding, in part because they tolerated differences in party ranks and avoided serious splits, and they were capable, especially after the formation of Red Guard units, of exercising authority.

Does this mean, then, that an explanation for Soviet authoritarianism must be sought, at least initially, in the objective social processes of the 1917 revolution? I would argue that to a large extent it does, a conclusion possibly discomfiting to those who would exaggerate Lenin or Leninism in either positive or negative terms. The tendency towards centralization had strong dynamic qualities of its own in 1917, ones which could conceivably have been harnessed by other well-organized movements. This, however, is not to diminish Lenin's personal genius, or the way in which Bolshevik boldness in such matters as opposing the war generated popular sympathies and mobi-

lized a popular radicalism. Lenin crystalized radical sentiment more cogently than any other political figure in 1917. Bolshevik authoritarianism, in contrast, say, to that of Kornilov, Kolchak, or others on the right, gained a relatively substantial degree of popular support precisely because the party in subjective terms was close to masses of workers and soldiers.

To Charles Bettelheim, however, Director of Studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Laureat of the French Academy, and a leading theorist of revolutionary socialism, the Bolsheviks' coming to power hardly assured victory for Russia's workers, and not because Lenin or the party's leadership betrayed popular goals. Rather, Bettelheim argues that the crucial feature of early Soviet history is the *defeat* of Russia's proletariat by *bourgeois* forces. Instead of constructing socialism, the Soviet Union consequently developed into a "capitalist state of a particular type," a phenomenon which has disoriented revolutionaries, ideologically disarmed Russian workers, and drastically weakened the international socialist movement by falsely identifying the Soviet system with socialism.<sup>13</sup>

Bettelheim's vision of social change is a very particular one. In his view, the "driving force of history is the class struggle, and . . . as long as classes exist, it is through conflicts between classes that social relations are transformed," not economic conditions or efforts to cope with desperate problems of administration. Arguments resting on issues of economics or political organization are but other versions of a useless "congealed Marxism," whether offered by conscious Marxists or not.<sup>13</sup> Analyses which turn on the "primacy of productive forces" distort historical understanding. They camouflage the true nature of class relations, and lead to a mechanistic identification of legal forms of ownership with class relations.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the fact that workers' committees and peasant soviets seized factories and confiscated estates did not necessarily mean the establishment of proletarian hegemony, and the fact that the Bolshevik party rapidly assumed control over Russia's new administrative apparatus in the name of workers and peasants does not mean to Bettelheim that the party achieved revolutionary goals.

Like Keep, Bettelheim sees the emergence of a group of professional administrators in Russia's mass revolutionary organizations as a crucial element in the subsequent development of Bolshevism. But rather than aiding the workers' cause, these elements and their hierarchical pattern of control were the foundation of a new bourgeois order and a crucial weakness in the proletariat's struggle for hegemony. Moreover, these "bourgeois" patterns emerged not so much as a consequence of administrative necessity, but as a result of Russia's underdeveloped revolutionary consciousness, one

which was insufficiently attentive to the dangers of “economism.” “What had to a large extent penetrated a decisive section of the working class masses,” Bettelheim writes, “were not the fundamental ideas of revolutionary Marxism – those which light up the path to socialism and reveal what is necessary for the march to communism – but those that corresponded to what Lenin called ‘immediate tasks’.”<sup>15</sup> By “fundamental ideas,” Bettelheim has in mind an awareness of bourgeois attitudes and patterns of behavior, and the notion of class struggle. By accusing the Bolsheviks of responding to “immediate tasks,” he means that Russian workers and the party itself failed to handle correctly the contradiction between the proletarian character of Russia’s new ruling power, and the necessity to involve broad non-proletarian masses in the organs of administration.

Thus, as the management of public affairs became concentrated in the hands of a small elite, Russia’s bourgeoisie, with its practical expertise and its presumptions about the appropriateness of top-down social control, gained a secure foothold. This reinforced “the *state* aspect of the organization of the ruling power, the separation of machinery of government from the masses, . . . and non-democratic forms of centralization.”<sup>16</sup> One might add that it also reinforced the traditional Russian pattern of authority, one which had temporarily been destroyed by the mass organizations but which remained the only style of national government with which ordinary Russians were really familiar. The fundamental task of a revolutionary party at this vital juncture was to prevent old patterns from re-emerging. Instead, the new administrative elite moved quickly to appoint additional specialists and managers, imposed differential wage scales and other inequities, and re-established what Bettelheim rightly calls the traditional components of “capitalist discipline.” While Russia’s private or petty bourgeoisie was largely weakened and the gentry almost fully expropriated, he argues, a new “state bourgeoisie” developed rapidly. Objective bourgeois social relations were perpetuated behind a proletarian facade.

Many of these administrators, moreover, were not only far removed from Russian workers in terms of social origin, but also increasingly remote from soviets, workers’ committees, and other institutions of mass control. Administrative independence in the name of economic efficiency became the rationalization for eliminating participatory democracy and its fledgling institutions. The new elite, according to Bettelheim, was not even composed of new people; former specialists and bureaucrats simply reassumed their traditional tasks. This encouraged the bourgeoisie as a whole, and had a mushrooming effect. More members of the old order infiltrated the state apparatus, and rapidly extended their dominance. It also acted to socialize

those genuinely proletarian activists who had risen directly from revolutionary ranks, and who quickly acquired bourgeois styles and values.

As this occurred, in Bettelheim's view, fundamental changes also began to take place within the Bolshevik party, which grew from a small group of some 20,000 revolutionary activists in early 1917 to more than 600,000 members by the beginning of 1920. Relations between rank and file members and the party's higher organs changed. The Politburo became a fixed body of five permanent members, and many if not most of the decisions which had previously been the subject of much debate at lower levels now became its province alone. In fact, the eclipse of participatory methods in areas of state administration could not help but affect the party's own apparatus. Not only was the state mechanism increasingly influential in party affairs, it helped establish a new authoritarian ethos. Also, it provoked the creation of new control institutions like the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, which in turn reinforced growing authoritarian tendencies.

What is one to make of all this? A good deal of Bettelheim's analysis is exaggerated and simplistic. His insistence that "economism" and what he calls "the problematic of economic forces" is a crude distortion of Marxism shows only that one can take what one wants from Marx's writings. His argument that "fear gripped the Russian bourgeoisie" whenever the established order was threatened underestimates the role of liberals in toppling the Tsarist regime in their effort to "modernize" the state and prosecute the war effectively, and there is still precious little evidence on which to make judgments about the attitudes and outlooks of Russia's new administrative elite, much less accurate information of its social origins. To argue that "capitalist discipline" was reestablished after October is not to demonstrate the emergence into power of a new, state bourgeoisie.

Bettelheim also underestimates the difficulties of Russian social and economic circumstances during the revolution and civil war, difficulties I will return to in a moment. He is totally wrong in arguing that Lenin, like Mao, was consistently a partisan of a "mass revolutionary line," resisting forcefully the bureaucratization of both party and state. It is wishful reading of Lenin's later writings to say that the Russian leader "urgently stressed the need vigorously to apply a mass line once again" as a means for achieving the revolutionary transformation of political and economic relations.<sup>17</sup> In my view, Lenin's concern in his later essays, such as *Better Less but Better*, is not for increased popular control but for a streamlined, more effective party apparatus, one perhaps more proletarian in social composition, but still implicitly more elitist. Lenin never trusted control from below, least of all in the

countryside, despite the fact that the party in 1917 largely developed from below into a popular, mass organization. There was, consistently, a paternalism in his empathy for Russia's workers and poor peasants, and if his commitment to proletarian interests was dominant and deep-rooted, his enormous anxiety in the years after 1917 had overwhelmingly to do with retaining power, party stability, and Stalin's heavy handling of the explosive nationality question, not with turning the party in a Maoist direction.

But despite his often impenetrable jargon, Bettelheim focuses neatly on the crucial role of social *relations* in affecting class structure, and on the intimate relationship between presumptions of competence and expertise, and the development of social institutions which reinforce hierarchy and weaken commitment to either social or political democracy. The extensive use of material rewards and substantial wage differentials *did* encourage what might fairly be called "bourgeois" social relations, even if the extent to which pre-revolutionary bourgeois elements reassumed positions of authority still needs to be demonstrated. What Bettelheim calls for implicitly, if not in clear-cut terms, is a consciousness of style and affect, as well as sensitivity to attitudinal aspects of class. And this, it seems to me, is crucial to understanding the emergence of Stalinism.

For in some ways, paradoxically, Bolshevik success was also the source of a fatal weakness. By this I don't mean that instruments of authority and control led "necessarily" to Stalinism, as some argue (although there were certainly strong tendencies in that direction); or even that Bolshevik commitment to party and organization doomed Russia to rule by *apparatchiks*. Bettelheim is right to try to break with a conception of the Russian revolution which presents its history "as the 'outcome' of decisions and 'choices' made by the Bolshevik party, and thus in imagination making the party the demiurge, responsible for all successes and failures . . ." <sup>18</sup> Keep, Rabinowitch, and other serious students of this period would, I think, agree.

Rather, I have in mind that once the Bolsheviks successfully acquired the rudiments of state power, it was no longer necessary for them to maintain the tolerance or flexibility which had brought them such support in 1917, or even close practical ties with ordinary workers, and they regressed to the elitism of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* Instead, as Bolsheviks acquired responsibility for dealing with Russia's crushing economic problems, and for directing rather than simply energizing the struggle against internal and foreign enemies, party members at all levels slid easily into "commandism" and hierarchy. Any party in power in these circumstances would have been pressured in similar directions, as the history of Russia's liberal Constitutional

Democrats during the Civil War suggests.<sup>19</sup> The Bolsheviks moved towards authoritarianism not only in response to objective circumstances, but also, as I've already suggested, as a result of ideological disposition. A mass line might have been ideologically desirable in these circumstances from the standpoint of democratic Marxism, and one might even argue with Bettelheim that the future of a genuine revolutionary socialism depended on it. But as a means of reorganizing Russia's hopeless economy, of preventing or at least minimizing starvation, of coping with massive unemployment and the rapid, spontaneous demobilization of the old army, mass methods could hardly have been effective, and in my view, would only have facilitated the success of anti-Bolshevik forces.

It is this necessity for centralized control during the Civil War which Professor Radkey seems to ignore in his discussion of the 1920–21 Tambov peasant rebellion.<sup>20</sup> This episode was clearly one of the most troublesome of the Civil War period for Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and involved at its peak some 20,000–25,000 well organized men, led by Alexander Antonov. The uprising developed primarily in response to Bolshevik food levies, which in 1920 exacted more from the peasants than they needed for their own survival, often in brutal fashion. In 1921 Lenin was forced to organize a full-scale military force to suppress it, headed by a Special Plenipotentiary Commission of the Central Executive Committee under Antonov-Ovseenko.

Radkey has enormous sympathy for peasant rebels, largely precipitated (if one can judge from his constant asides) by an unmitigated hostility to communists and intellectuals. He makes no effort to relate the Tambov events to other comparable European peasant rebellions (and seems quite unfamiliar with works like Hobsbawm's *Bandits*), but his study is informative and lively. What he fails to see is the degree to which the Russian social context itself helped force the unspeakable horrors of Civil War on Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks alike. Workers in Moscow and Petrograd in 1920 were also on subsistence wages, just like the Tambov peasants. The forcible extraction of grain was certainly not a desirable strategy from the Bolsheviks' viewpoint, and Lenin may well have recognized (as does Radkey) that the levies were sometimes used to satisfy local grievances as well as to support the urban areas, and were fundamentally corrupting in a number of ways to the Bolshevik movement as a whole. It was hardly the "kulaks" who suffered alone from the exactions; antipathy between town and country grew beyond remedy, and set the background for civil war in the 1930s, when Stalin "solved" the problem through collectivization. In 1920 and 1921, only the callous could truly relish provincial administrative responsibilities, and one

can appreciate the growing distance between party and people more by studying events in Tambov than by focusing on party ideology or organization. Here, perhaps, is a more powerful reason for the eclipse of a mass revolutionary consciousness than the infiltration of Bettelheim's "bourgeois" elements, although the two are surely related. To say with Radkey, however, that the Tambov peasants were a "genuine revolutionary force against tyranny,"<sup>21</sup> and to imply, as Radkey does, that Antonov and the peasant rebels might have established a less repressive order than the Bolsheviks, is virtually to ignore the realities of Russia's social dislocation and economic catastrophe.

What may have been possible, but extraordinarily difficult, for Russian radicals in this period, was the maintenance of substantial directiveness without excessive "commandism," a revolutionary attitude towards the style of control and towards social relations, without formally institutionalizing at this juncture the forms of mass social and political democracy. In conditions of total economic dislocation, class struggle need not involve organic social or political reconstruction, if revolutionary leaders can maintain a radical consciousness. In other words, in conditions such as Russia experienced, class struggle is imperative not so much as Bettelheim insists, to prevent bourgeois experts from assuming positions of administrative competency, but to prevent the perpetuation of bourgeois attitudes and social relations. Of course, as far as the Bolsheviks are concerned, this would have required a leadership group committed in the main to democratic practices, which it was not.

This raises a final question, but one which for now must remain open. Was there, in fact, a commitment among Russian workers and peasants themselves to what revolutionary intellectuals called proletarian democracy, or was bourgeois acquisitiveness and the desire to dominate a more universal condition? We return to Professor Davies' "J-Curve," which assumes that those whose expectations are not fulfilled share the values of those whose control they are challenging. Professor Keep suggests the dominant peasant mood in 1917 was one of "self-confidence" and "optimism," a conviction that a new age of brotherhood was about to dawn in which "all major decisions would be taken at the lowest possible level."<sup>22</sup> If he is right (and if we ignore his subsequent suggestion that these were really naive and utopian perspectives, which threatened to perpetuate Russia's backwardness vis-à-vis more industrialized nations), then a struggle for revolutionary social relations might well have succeeded in eventually controlling "bureaucratic imperatives." If not, even the most pristine of revolutionary parties might well have been overwhelmed by the difficulties of "bringing consciousness to the people." At the very least, enormous energy would have had to be spent on education and training, and commitment to developing revolutionary consciousness



could not weaken even after power was secure. Whether socialist democracy was possible at all in Russia, however, or whether it may develop in the future, as Roy Medvedev has suggested,<sup>23</sup> is a subject for further discussion. It is also one that will only be resolved by additional studies which look closely at attitudes and values, the nature of social struggle, and the particularities of Russia's historical experience.

## NOTES

1. Stephen F. Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), pp. 3–29.
2. In his study *Lenin's Last Struggle* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), Moshe Lewin argues that Lenin himself was aware before he died of the way in which an increasingly rigid state and party apparatus was facilitating Stalin's rise to power, and while party dictatorship, of course, conformed to his wishes, he became increasingly alarmed at Stalin's use of both the state and party machine. His illness, however, made him powerless. See esp. pp. 65–76, and Lenin's "Testament," cited p. 80.
3. James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 27, 1 (February 1962), pp. 5–6.
4. See e.g., the argument in T.H. von Laue, *Why Lenin? Why Stalin?* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1965).
5. In the summer of 1906, as the Tsar dissolved the First Duma (Parliament), a group of liberal and socialist deputies met at Viborg, Finland, and issued a famous Manifesto. It called on workers and peasants to resist the tsarist regime until parliament was restored, refusing to pay taxes, submit to the draft, and the like. Although ordinary Russians had rallied by the thousands against the government in the course of 1905, the Manifesto drew absolutely no response, and was a crushing disappointment to the liberals. Most of the signatories were arrested.
6. Just before taking office in 1917, the Provisional Government's first Foreign Minister, the liberal leader Paul Miliukov, published a series of articles to this effect in the widely read *Vestnik Evropy*. See the discussion in William G. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), chap. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, esp. chaps. 4–6.
8. Oliver H. Radkey, *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 425 *et seq.*
10. An English text of this agreement is in R. P. Browder and A. F. Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), II, pp. 712ff.
11. See *ibid.*, pp. 528–32.
12. Bettelheim, pp. 18–20.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–62.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 493.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
19. Rosenberg, esp. chaps. 9–14.

20. The Tambov uprising, on Antonovshchina, as it came to be called, was one of a series of "Green" rebellions against both Bolshevik Reds and anti-Bolshevik Whites, the most famous of which was led by Nestor Makhno.
21. Radkey, *The Unknown Civil War*, p. xii.
22. Keep, p. 156.
23. Roy A. Medvedev, *On Socialist Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).