

## Liberals, Jacobins and Grey Masses in 1917

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### HISTORY SHIFTS

On 13 December 1917, Morgan Philips Price, the *Guardian* correspondent in Russia, wrote from Petrograd that the Bolsheviks were 'incapable of constructive work. They are destructive Jacobins who believe that by flaming decrees, passionate speeches, terrorism and the guillotine that they can create a worldly paradise.' Yet two weeks later he wrote to his sister that, despite rapidly worsening physical conditions, 'physically starving, I was mentally fed with the joyful news that Russia, Red, Revolutionary triumphant Russia had overthrown her capitalist tyrants, burst her chains and had set out on the road to peace'.<sup>1</sup> Price was possibly the best-informed Western correspondent in Russia during the Revolution. He had lived there for several years, his Russian was fluent and he had travelled widely to report on the progress of the Revolution. His uncertain attempts to understand what was going on around him show how difficult it was at the time to make sense of the Russian Revolution and its wider significance. He had no sense that two decades later the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution would be celebrated in a country in the grip of Stalin's dictatorship with several hundred thousand executed in that year and millions imprisoned. In 1917–18, the Revolution seemed to Price to be an attempt to end a bloody world war that he opposed, to halt the slide into chaos within Russia and to unblock the stalemate that appeared to exist in the wider world. But Price was also torn by the way that the struggle for power – even in a revolution based on mass participation – also involved an element of realpolitik and force.

In mainstream historiography, this has always been seen to lend the Revolution an element of illegitimacy and to point forward to Stalinism. The Stalinist regime itself claimed to derive directly from 1917 even as it

murdered many of those on the left who had taken part in the events of that year. In this sense Soviet and Cold War Western writing tended to have a mirror image quality – while the former proclaimed ‘continuity, good’, the latter said ‘continuity, bad’. The so-called ‘social history school’ of Western historians in the 1970s and 1980s offered a partial challenge to this, presenting a view of the Revolution as a mass popular uprising in which the Bolsheviks were as much pushed as pushing. But it was only a partial challenge, for when it came to the issue of how deep a break Stalinism was few were prepared to declare it complete.<sup>2</sup> Hence, when Soviet society collapsed in 1991 the past equivocations came home. It was not so much that these historians discovered a truth that they had hitherto not known. It was hardly the case that they were ignorant of the brutality of Stalinism. Rather, they lost a handhold for their ambiguity in the power of an existing state. They were sent spinning in their analysis, sometimes ending with conclusions that were almost the opposite of what they had argued earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The most important reversal, if only in terms of readership, came from Orlando Figes in his *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924*, a work which attempted to do for the Russian Revolution what Simon Schama's *Citizens* had attempted for the French Revolution nearly a decade before. For Figes, author of a major study of the peasantry in war and revolution, ‘the ghosts of 1917 have still not been laid to rest’. His book was intended to help this by showing how the tragedy of the Revolution flowed from over-ambition and violence. If ‘liberal-democratic triumphalism’ had been overdone in the wake of 1991, liberal democracy itself was now the only way forward. This was not least the case in Russia where what was then called the ‘Red-Brown’ alliance of fascists and ex-Stalinists, in ‘their violent rhetoric, . . . class for discipline and order’ . . . [and] angry condemnation of the inequalities produced by the growth of capitalism, and . . . xenophobic rejection of the West’ reflected conceptions which they had ‘adapted from the Bolshevik tradition’.<sup>4</sup>

Yet this revisionism of the revisionists is a return to a much older agenda, albeit dressed up in the fashionable language of the day. The Revolution was, in its own terms, ‘premature’. Despite Engels' warning in 1895 that ‘the time has passed for revolutions accomplished through the sudden seizure of power by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses’, the October Revolution was exactly such an insurrectionary Jacobin coup.<sup>5</sup> And whatever the degree of class consciousness attained by some workers, this was more than compromised by the way the popular movement also spawned violence of a more brutal kind from the darker, greyer side of the lower classes stimulated by and incorporated into Bolshevism.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Revolution necessarily unravelled towards Stalinism because of its internal contra-

dictions. There was no betrayal of the revolution by Stalin – only a more or less logical development from it.

The effect of this shift has been profoundly conservative. In Russian terms it helped to legitimize by default the choices not made in 1917. But it also helped to legitimize the new regime of the 1990s by ruling out the idea of more radical change from below. Not only was there no alternative to the substantial social continuity at the top of society in Russia and other parts of the former USSR, but it was apparently now sufficient for the old/new leaders to declare their abandonment of past totalitarian views and their mistaken faith in Lenin and Marx in order to secure their place in the present. But the effect extended beyond Russia. 1917 was the most sustained mass revolutionary episode in world history since 1789 and if it necessarily ended badly then what does that say about the possibility of radical change in the future?

Yet there is a puzzle in this argument. Despite well-known views to the contrary, most Western specialists have been sceptical of the idea that tsarist Russia could have developed into a prosperous constitutional democracy.<sup>7</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union this view has not fundamentally changed. Historians in Russia, freed of the need to toe a party line, have written more positively on tsarism but, East and West, once we discount the nostalgia and the fairly blatant attempts to use history to legitimate the post-1991 transition, what is remarkable is how limited the revisionism has been.<sup>8</sup> This creates a paradox in much of the writing on 1917 – it is more a critique of the choices that were made by Lenin and the Bolsheviks than a direct attempt to vindicate the choices that were *not* made and the possibilities that did *not* occur. The Bolsheviks are damned for what they did, implicitly absolving others for the responsibility for what they did or did not do. How tenable is this view?

### LIBERAL DILEMMAS AND COMPROMISES

In 1856 in London Alexander Herzen published the programme of Russia's first group publicly aspiring to emulate Western European-style liberalism: 'Liberalism! This is the slogan of every educated and sensible person in Russia. This is the banner which can unite around it people of all spheres, all classes, all tendencies . . . In liberalism lies the whole future of Russia.'<sup>9</sup> Why did this prove false?

An obvious answer is provided by the famous argument penned by Peter Struve in his early days as a Marxist that, 'the further east one goes in Europe, the meaner, more cowardly and politically weak the bourgeoisie becomes, and the greater are the cultural and political tasks that fall to the proletariat'.<sup>10</sup>

When Struve wrote these words he believed that the limited development of capitalism in Russia also limited the possibility of liberalism. But in the following years he abandoned his 'Marxism', eventually emerging as Russia's leading 'liberal conservative' in the first half of the twentieth century. His subsequent belief that progress was possible through mutual accommodation reflected an idealist approach. Liberalism did not have to be anchored in capitalism or a strong middle class. It could derive as much from ideological and cultural commitment. But if this is the case why was this commitment not made? The answer for those who accept Struve's starting point is both ideological and tactical. For historians like Schapiro and Pipes, liberalism in Russia, both as an ideology and a party political force, was compromised and undermined because many of those who should have been liberal mixed their ideas and politics with elements of *populism* and *radicalism*.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this was then the issue of tactics, especially after 1905, with some blaming tsarism for refusing an accommodation with Russian 'liberalism' and others blaming Russian 'liberalism' for rejecting the hand of tsarism. It is not our intention here to discount such issues, but to the extent that they played a role then, contrary to Struve's later argument, they need to be set in the context of the pattern of social and economic development. The irony of Struve's vision is that the political insight of the younger man perhaps holds the best key to the failure of the political project of the older man.

Why should bourgeois liberalism be 'meaner, more cowardly and politically weak' in a country like Russia? It was Trotsky who laid out the most satisfactory social analysis of this in his writings on Russian development before and after 1905.<sup>12</sup> His analysis of Russia's early development drew on liberal accounts, notably those of Miliukov, in seeing tsarism as a political form that dominated the social estates. This domination partly reflected the backwardness of Russia, though he rejected the view that Russia was so backward that it was the state which created the estates. But autocratic domination also arose from the way that the Russian state had to carve a geopolitical space for itself against hostile neighbours, especially in the west. This forced it to privilege military needs and to exploit the peasants to pay for them – a process which then helped to perpetuate the backwardness that became increasingly evident in the nineteenth century. Had Russia been left to its own devices then over the very long run it might have developed more independent estates and an autonomous middle class. But capitalism developed as an international system and did not allow this space. Global development began to pull Russia into the world economy. This led to what Trotsky called a pattern of 'uneven and combined development' where the larger elements of backwardness existed alongside the smaller elements of modernity, interacting with and reinforcing one another. So far as liberalism

was concerned the consequence was the speedy development of a small and more modern bourgeoisie whose role derived less from a 'natural' internal development than the inflow of foreign funds and state sponsored industrialization. Although consumer goods production' was the major part of industrial output before 1914 (and even more so if smaller scale industry is included) the more dynamic element in economic growth came from the state through state-sponsored industry and protection. This helped to create a greater gap between big and small capital in Russia than was found in the West and a greater dependency of big capital on tsarism. But the relationship was not entirely one-sided. In trying to control the social and political consequences of uneven development, the tsarist autocracy might not have been at one on a whole range of issues with the wider business class but, if only in its own interests, it had to recognize and respond to their economic role.<sup>13</sup> This (inter)dependency made the Russian bourgeoisie ill-placed socially and economically to challenge tsarism politically. Worse, this process also created a small but concentrated working class and did nothing to solve the problems of the mass of the peasants so that, unlike in Western Europe, it was harder to develop them as a bastion of small propertied support in defence of 'order'. Thus the bourgeoisie had also had reason on its left to fear provoking too radical a confrontation with the authorities.

Indeed, Trotsky argued, this created a situation where the Constitutional Democrats or Cadets, the main liberal party, drew heavily on sections of the gentry and the intelligentsia and professions for the mainstay of its support. This social base, at a tangent to Russian industry, trade and commerce as a social force, allowed Russian liberalism to dally with radical programmes. But insofar as liberals sought to find a base and reflect the interests of these more authentically bourgeois groups they had to develop a more conservative politics in practice. This dilemma ripened between 1905 and February 1917.

The high point of reform in Russia came in the midst of the 1905 revolution with the tsar's October Manifesto. Even in liberal circles there was sharp disagreement about the extent of the concessions this involved. But what can be less doubted is that in constitutional terms every step that followed involved a retreat from any serious form of constitutional democracy. This forced liberals into a defensive holding operation, which was never completely secure (evidenced both by the plots of ministers against the third and fourth Dumas and their alienation of much of the Octobrist support that had existed in 1905-7). The Stolypin *coup d'état* of 3 June 1907 further narrowed what Miliukov called the 'pseudo-constitution' that emerged from 1905, by violating the fundamental laws and disbanding the second Duma and then changing the electoral laws to make them even more restricted. But the political substance of what followed, as reflected in the elections to the

third Duma, was easily summarized by Miliukov for an American audience in early 1908:

About thirty thousand large proprietors received the right to elect the majority of the third Duma. Practically no more than nineteen thousand came to the polls, and they chose for the electoral colleges more than half of the electors for the whole of Russia, 2,618 out of 5,160. The remaining 2,542 might belong entirely to the opposition; the majority was in advance assured to the large land-owners. Thus there is no exaggeration in saying that the majority of the present Duma is elected by 19,000 proprietors of the larger landed estates. They control 300 and odd members, while only 100 to 150 members represent large democratic masses and belong to the opposition. Some of them as, for instance, the St. Petersburg delegates are chosen by a larger vote (20,000 each) than all three hundred members of the majority.<sup>14</sup>

This attempt to narrow the political space created in 1905 did not arise simply from a wilful defence of autocracy. Rather it arose from a recognition that genuine democratization would open up the question of wider social reform. Miliukov argued that the consequence of 1905 had been to draw the autocracy and nobility closer together in the face of peasant disturbance. He spoke, only partly ironically, of the fears that now beset the gentry.

It is now common to hear of country houses transformed into veritable castles, manned with armed forces hired from Caucasian warrior tribes, to protect the noble homes. On some estates searchlights are actually used at night to disclose the invisible foes who come to burn the house or even blow up its inhabitants.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed the Stolypin reforms were not, as so often presented by Western historians, a step towards a more adequate capitalism, but an attempt by the nobility to set the peasant community against itself and so avoid losing their own lands either to some compensated scheme of state land purchase or even more radical rural change.<sup>16</sup>

The existence of this 'pseudo-constitutional' regime, which seemingly became more 'pseudo' over time, did indeed pose tactical issues for liberal forces, whether the more conservative Octobrists, the Progressives or the Cadets themselves. Political stances on constitutional issues and relations with tsarism did not always coincide with wider political programmes. The Cadets, for example, despite their often sharp attacks, were more co-operative than they had been in the first and second Dumas. Indeed, they

were sometimes politically to the right of the smaller group of Progressives who were otherwise to the right of the Cadets in terms of their social programme. But none of these groups wanted a return to the confrontation that had occurred in 1905 and the reason for this was more than tactical.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its unevenness Russian capitalism was strengthening. The years 1908–14 saw a second industrial surge and a period of relative prosperity, which gave greater confidence to the business community and some of its Young Turks like Paul Riabushinskii and Alexander Konovalov. In 1912 Riabushinskii had declared that 'the merchant is coming', and one business paper wrote that

Our New Year's toast is raised in honour of the bourgeoisie, the Third Estate of contemporary Russia; to this force which is gaining strength and is growing mightily, which thanks to the spiritual and material riches inhering in it has already left far behind the degenerating *dvorianstvo* [landed aristocracy] and the bureaucracy which controls the country's destinies . . .<sup>18</sup>

But this growth also had its effects on the workers and was reflected in the recovery of the labour movement after 1910–11 from the repression and downturn that followed 1905. That year had shown that liberal hopes might be put at risk by actions on the street and in the factories. The elections to the second Duma (also based on an indirect but wider franchise than the third and fourth), in which the parties of the left had stood and done well, also showed that beyond political reform might come social reforms leading in an undesired direction. While Miliukov and other leading figures had few qualms about attacking the nobility and gentry, they were less enthusiastic about arguments that threatened the power of the lords of industry and trade. In this sense the classic liberal dilemma of having to steer a path between right and left heightened in these years and all the more so because the restrictions on wider political activity by the authorities deprived politics in the Duma of the wider base that parliamentary politics was developing elsewhere in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

But there was another element to this ambiguity and ambivalence. After the military humiliation in the Russo-Japanese War and diplomatic humiliation in the 1908–9 Bosnian crisis, tsarism sought to recover its status through the so-called 'Great Programme', which, especially through the expansion of the navy, was intended to underpin a major step forward in military power. This was attractive not only to conservative forces. Struve articulated a vision of Russian liberal imperialism. In 1908 he talked of 'Great Russia', echoing Stolypin. Struve's nationalism led him to articulate a mystique of the Russian

state alongside a more pragmatic concern with economic interests. He saw 'liberal imperialism' as a way of re-enforcing the national ideal: 'the touchstone and yardstick of all so-called domestic politics of government as well as [political] parties ought to lie in the answer to the question; in what measure does the policy further the so-called external power of the state?' 'Russian liberalism will always doom itself to impotence until such a time as it acknowledges itself to be Russian and national.'<sup>20</sup> But there was a contradiction here. Struve's arguments, said Pokrovsky from the left, meant demanding 'from one and the same plant that it blooms with roses and tasty pears . . . You can only have one and naturally, the practical bosses of Mr Struve have always preferred pears to roses. First you must have enough to eat – and the various pleasant things in life can wait.'<sup>21</sup> Struve's national and imperial call was not immediately embraced by all liberals but, because liberalism was cast within a national great-power framework, the pull to these poles, if necessary at the expense of other reforms, was evident in Russia no less than elsewhere in Europe.

Moreover the drive to improve Russia's position as a great power also had direct socio-economic effects leading to military expenditure with an emphasis on munitions and shipbuilding which, Gatrell showed some time ago, explains the pre-war boom as much as more autonomous consumer expansion does. In the extreme case of the Putilov works the output of railway equipment fell from 53.3 per cent to 29.6 per cent of total production between 1900 and 1912 while defence products rose from 14.6 per cent to 45.8 per cent in the same period.<sup>22</sup> Thus whatever the tensions with tsarism politically, the economic tie was still very real.

War resolved these tensions by bringing liberalism in all its forms into the *union sacrée* to fight what was portrayed as a defensive war, albeit one that provided the opportunity to achieve expansionist war aims. Of course, the patriotic wave swept up part of the socialist movement too, but in Russia it was the liberals' final compromise with tsarism that was the most important immediate effect of the war. Much to the embarrassment of the right of the Cadet Party, the newspaper *Rech* was initially closed for a day by the censor who feared its previous opposition to war in the build-up of the crisis. But when the Duma met for one day on July 26 it was Miliukov who overcame resistance in the Cadet Party from those who accepted the war but still wanted to extract an internal price for support. 'We are united in this struggle; we set no conditions and we demand nothing.' There was, said Miliukov later, 'only one condition for our collaboration with the government – victory'. The Cadets had effectively adopted the earlier arguments of Struve even if he now moved further to the right as they did so.<sup>23</sup> The Cadet statement to the Duma spoke of 'our first duty [being] to preserve [Russia's]

position as a world power' and in support of the defence of this, 'let us postpone our domestic disputes, let us not give our adversary even the slightest excuse for relying on the differences which divided us'.<sup>24</sup> It was Miliukov's strong support for using the war to increase Russian power especially in the South that led to him being called 'Miliukov-Dardanel'sky'. In his memoirs he implies that he saw this epithet as a partial compliment. Anxious to show how this support fitted in with the needs of a modernizing Russian capitalism, he quoted approvingly a contemporary who wrote that his position was 'based not on the old Slavophile mystic ideology but in the tremendous fact of the rapid economic development of the Russian South which can no longer remain without free access to the sea'.<sup>25</sup> But it is difficult also to avoid the argument that no less than for government itself, indeed perhaps more so, war offered the liberals the chance to overcome tensions in their position by seeking a resolution or path to a more civil redemption through war. In spring 1916 Morgan Philips Price wrote to C.P. Trevelyan in England that

the intellectuals and bourgeois, merchants and capitalists, who constitute the Cadet and kindred parties . . . are the most keen for carrying on the war to the end, and the most bitter haters of everything German in the country . . . These Progressives, or Russian liberals . . . are . . . on all foreign questions [the] most chauvinist of any party in Russia, and are great believers in war to the last gasp as a means of saving Russia internally.<sup>26</sup>

"Literary chauvinism" considerably outweighed the actual mood even of pretty bourgeois circles', Alexander Shlyapnikov later wrote.<sup>27</sup> It is characteristic of the inversion of values that patriotic war enthusiasm produced in liberal circles that Miliukov could unselfconsciously condemn 'international socialism' for fanning 'into blazing flame the social hostility of the people' to such an extent that they carried away 'the elements of truly healthy internationalism not beneath but above – in the cultural strata, in ideas, and institutions' – strata, in reality, most enthusiastic about national war.<sup>28</sup>

The government was more than happy to exploit this gift to its own advantage. Rodzianko, as the Octobrist leader of the Duma, and Miliukov, as Cadet leader, were both anxious to keep politics within the Duma. Miliukov had to go further and also try to hold the line against more radical tendencies within the Cadet Party. Cadet policy was symbolized by his comment on 14 February 1917, the day of the opening of the last ever session of the Duma, that 'our only deeds are our words'. The maximum demand that the Duma moderates would support was 'a minority enjoying national confidence', not 'a ministry responsible to the Duma' – hoping, said one *Okhrana* report, 'to

effect a peaceful revolution? or evolution?, clandestinely, with the sanction of the government itself.<sup>29</sup>

The equivocations that this produced in the Duma were well discussed in English by Raymond Pearson and subsequent research has largely filled out his account.<sup>30</sup> The result was that liberals had also to share the responsibility for the war and its effects. Of course they would have preferred a 'clean' and efficient war on their own side, the better to carry out the killing of the other side. National war was legitimate and necessary. The illegitimate thing was to try to stop the war short of final victory, which is what happened in 1917.<sup>31</sup> But the responsibility for the scale of the blood that was spilled did not lie, said Chkheidze in the Duma in July 1915, at the door of the government alone:

The Fourth Imperial Duma was, on the whole, at one with the Government. Not only the Reactionaries but even our Imperialists from the Capitalist classes and a considerable portion of the Radical Russian Intelligentsia have considered union with the Government a source of new strength. The Fourth Duma has undertaken . . . co-operation with the Government, and within the limits of the present regime . . .<sup>32</sup>

It is worth pausing for a moment on the dimensions of the bloodshed that followed not simply because of the light it throws on liberal predilections for certain types of violence but because, while the general link between war and revolution is well understood, the very direct ways in which the pain and violence of war might have contributed to the anger and violence of revolution is less commented on.

We know that before April 1917 mobilization added 13.7 million to the peacetime army of 1.4 million and several hundred thousand after.<sup>33</sup> We only know the number of Russian dead within huge margins of error. A recent authoritative demographic count prefers to give upper and lower bounds, which range from 1.7 million to 3.37 million.<sup>34</sup> These are all aggregate statistics. Measuring what they meant to people is more difficult. It seems likely that many hundreds of thousands of deaths were never even reported to families at home. Parents, wives (a sample study showed that 65.6 per cent of troops killed, wounded and missing were married) and children therefore waited in vain for sons, husbands and fathers who would never return.<sup>35</sup> If tsarism could not keep track, perhaps some hoped the post-February regime could: 'in the months that separated the two revolutions,' writes Catherine Merridale, 'the Petrograd Soviet was bombarded with letters testifying to this disorientation, loss and pain. Tens of thousands wanted help in finding their missing relatives – "at least tell me they are dead,

so that I can pray for them" – while others pleaded for their sons and husbands to come home. "They have taken them all," one woman wrote, now hoping that a democratic government would make amends.<sup>36</sup>

For those who did come back there were physical and mental scars of war. Again the figures are imprecise. 5.148 million were hospitalized in the rear according to one set of statistics, 2.8 million from wounds and 2.3 million from illness but this includes some double counting. On the other hand it excludes large numbers treated at the front. A significant minority of all of these would carry some disability for life.<sup>37</sup> Psychological scarring was also widespread. S.A. Preobrazhenskii, who became a shell-shock expert, suggested that psychological casualties were four times as numerous as physical ones. An estimated 1.5 million veterans were too ill to return to work or normal family lives.<sup>38</sup>

War also led directly to the creation of a huge refugee population. By January 1917 some 4.9 million refugees had been registered and there were perhaps another half a million unregistered refugees.<sup>39</sup> Refugees fled partly to escape the fighting, especially in the retreats of 1915. The demographer Volkov gave a figure of over 300,000 members of the civil population killed in the fighting on the Eastern Fronts. But others were forced to move by the Russian military because they were considered suspect Poles, Germans and, above all, Jews. Official policy, opposed as it is true by the liberals though not always to the limit, helped to legitimize a pogrom atmosphere. In turn, in some areas dispossessed, displaced and diseased refugees themselves took to looting and violence as they sought security.<sup>40</sup>

Neither the physical nor the psychological impact of the violence that war brought with it could be contained at the front. 'The war', said Alexander Blok, 'was when humanity really turned brutal and the Russian patriots in particular'.<sup>41</sup> Gorky, often quoted as a critic of 'irrational mob violence' in 1917, also made this point.<sup>42</sup> 'Human life has become cheap, very cheap, too cheap. For a fourth year human blood is being spilled, for a fourth year mankind gives up to the Moloch of war its finest achievement – its priceless gift – its life . . . Man has lost the best aspects of this nature, love and compassion.'<sup>43</sup> The February Revolution would do nothing to stop this. On 25 March Kamenev wrote that Russia 'had asked for peace, and they [the previous regime] gave her a river of blood, bitterness and corpses' but soon the accusation would be made no less about the Provisional Government.<sup>44</sup>

The February Revolution occurred in spite of, rather than because of, anything that Russian liberals did. Indeed they were desperate to avoid it. In the short term Miliukov rose to the occasion but neither he nor any other political or social leader could overcome the legacy of the past and the way that February intensified the dilemmas of liberalism by the huge shift to the

left in the popular mood. The first Provisional Government would give way to three coalitions in the short time before it fell in October.

After February the Cadets became the authentic focus of bourgeois support drawing to them business figures and groups that had hitherto kept a varying distance. Kerensky said that they now 'organised all the political and social forces of the country representing the interests of the propertied classes, the high command, the remains of the old bureaucracy, and even fragments of the aristocracy'; Rosenberg describes them as 'the political core of bourgeois Russia'.<sup>45</sup> But with the radicalization that occurred they had no hope of establishing a mass base that could compete with the parties of the left. Their membership probably arose to around 100,000 but their electoral fortunes, though varying, were weak. Even in Petrograd and Moscow, wrote Rosenberg, 'Russia's first elections of the revolutionary period show the Cadets with a staggering loss of city influence and prestige in the two strongest areas of past support'. This weakness, evident in the next months in other elections, was confirmed with the vote for the Constituent Assembly, which gave them only 6-7 per cent of the national total. Thus 'with their own limited natural constituency, the Cadets themselves could never claim to rule on the basis of representative principles', argued Rosenberg.<sup>46</sup>

How then were they to achieve their ends of continuing the war to maintain and extend Russia's position as a great power and to stabilize it internally? One way was ideological, through constant insistence that the Revolution had clear limits that should not be transgressed – a view which they tried to impress not only on the wider public debate but especially on leaders to the left of them.<sup>47</sup> Beyond this, it was necessary to try to manipulate the political process through internal and external pressures on the Provisional Government. Indeed, politics at the top between February and October came to have an element of chicken about it. Speaking at the First Congress of Soviets Tsereteli said that, 'the Right says, let the Left run the Government, and we and the country will draw our conclusions; and the Left says, let the Right take hold, and we and the country will draw our conclusions . . . Each side hopes that the other will make such a failure, that the country will turn to it for leadership.'<sup>48</sup> Yet it is surely striking that in this contest each major crisis of the Provisional Government involved the liberal-bourgeois elements either abandoning it completely or abandoning it temporarily to bring pressure on it. When the Cadets left the Provisional Government (over possible Ukrainian separation) Kerensky denounced them: 'On the front, thousands are giving up their lives – and you here, you desert your posts and smash the government.'<sup>49</sup>

It was the inability to make this pressure work to stabilize the situation that increasingly disposed key figures and social groups to look beyond 'politics'

towards a military saviour. In this sense, the intricacies of who did what in the run-up to the failed Kornilov coup are neither here nor there. Indeed given some of the indecisiveness in the past and the current stakes it is not surprising that figures like Miliukov may have hoped for rather than actively encouraged Kornilov's plans. The significant point is that a coup of some sort increasingly seemed to be the only way out. And when the half-hearted one attempted by Kornilov failed, the same imperatives remained. Unless the crisis was resolved in some other way it was only a matter of time before another attempt was made. Indeed if we follow Richard Pipes in seeing Peter Struve as the liberal who had the courage to see earlier and more clearly than other liberals what was necessary, then it is significant that he was not disheartened by the collapse of Kornilov's venture, thinking that another time would come.<sup>50</sup>

### JACOBINISM AND REVOLUTION

This failure of bourgeois liberalism to imprint itself on Russia had been anticipated by the left. The solution, as the left saw it, was therefore for revolutionary democracy to help clear the path to a capitalist, bourgeois, democratic regime. This view was shared by almost all the left before 1914 including Lenin, save for some left Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and Trotsky who, as we have seen, had begun to develop the basis of an alternative argument. The strength of the commitment to the idea of 'bourgeois democratic revolution' derived from the belief that capitalism had to and would develop nationally before socialism became possible. What the left had to do, therefore, was assist in this development by encouraging the most radical democratization while defending the interests of the workers and peasants.

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution broke with these limits. Capitalism was an international system creating contradictions in a country like Russia that prevented it travelling the road that Western Europe had travelled. The war also pushed Lenin, Bukharin and others to a similar position, especially in the context of the way that capitalism had moved into an imperialist phase where national and international contradictions and war become more closely meshed together.<sup>51</sup>

But to their critics on the left, then and since, this was seen to lead only to an adventurist attempt to overstep the bounds of the possible. However, the rejection of the argument rests less on a rejection of its analysis of the contradictory pattern of development – as I have tried to show, the experience of Russia confirms it – than on its consequences.

We can take as an example Baruch Knei-Paz's sympathetic but critical

account of Trotsky's argument. For Knei-Paz the problem is not Trotsky's analysis of the contradictions of backwardness but the political consequences of this argument in the idea of 'permanent revolution'. Trotsky argued the working class would be forced to the front, could take power and inaugurate a wider European revolution which would then help the weak reactionary state break out of its backwardness. But, argues Knei-Paz, the very backwardness which pushed the working class forward also had its 'vengeance' in making this working class too weak to take and sustain power itself. This is a good example of the approach to the revolution that sees it as deriving from a problem with no solution – a view that Knei-Paz, like most other historians, does not state explicitly but the sense of which permeates his account. Seeking to impose a solution to this contradiction led Trotsky and the Bolsheviks more widely to 'over-estimate . . . the workers and mass consciousness'. From this it followed that Trotsky, no less than Lenin, had to support the substitution of party for the weak class, adopting a Jacobin model which Trotsky had once attacked Lenin for holding. As Knei-Paz puts it, the theory of permanent revolution 'could not be put into practice without Lenin and the Bolsheviks' and this Jacobin model was not only the secret of the success of the Bolsheviks in 1917 but also their subsequent downfall.<sup>52</sup>

This deployment of the concept of Jacobinism has a long history but, as we suggested earlier, the critique of 'Bolshevik-Jacobinism' and what Trotsky once called 'Maximilian Lenin' has gained new force. It is important therefore to make some distinctions. Firstly, there is the real Jacobinism of the French Revolution, which is discussed elsewhere in this volume. Secondly, there is the rhetorical evocation of the French Revolution and its imagined categories in the course of subsequent revolutions. The power of the image of revolutionary France has been so strong that a sense of it has suffused debate for two centuries, and in Russia in 1917 it was everywhere from the use of the term 'citizen' to the singing of the 'Marseillaise' to the use of its terminology as a crutch for contemporary political debate.<sup>53</sup> However, the sense of Jacobinism as it is currently deployed is more specific than this. It is an argument about substitutionism – the substitution of a minority in the name of the majority through a party-led insurrectionary coup – and it is in these terms that it is wielded against Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks in 1917.

But what those who use this argument have failed to notice is that October can just as easily be seen as a democratic attempt to resolve a Jacobin dilemma that much of the rest of the left created for itself and which had led *it* into a cul-de-sac. What these less radical sections objected to was not 'substitutionism' *per se* but what they saw as substitutionism for 'socialism'. What they defended and practiced, and what was ultimately their downfall, was their

own 'substitutionism' for a failed bourgeoisie – ironically, in terms of the normal argument, a more authentic form of Jacobinism.

The left initially resisted the idea of participation in the Provisional Government precisely on the grounds that it was a bourgeois government with bourgeois tasks. Only Kerensky broke with this position. With the three coalition governments, both the SRs and the Mensheviks effectively began to play the role of substitutionism believing that they now had to assist in carrying out the bourgeois revolution when the bourgeoisie would not. They were trapped into this role because, as Neil Harding once said, 'they bucked the argument' of reconsidering what was happening in the Russian Revolution. The mainstream of the SR party and the Mensheviks remained

rooted in the synthesis of 1905 (economic analysis – comparatively low development of capitalism, derivative political practice – the realisation of the democratic revolution). In 1917 they bitterly criticised Lenin's proposals for an advance to socialist practice but made little or no attempt to confront the theoretical basis for which this was derived.<sup>54</sup>

The dilemmas that arose from this were most obvious in the divisions among the Mensheviks over what to do. For Potresov it was necessary at all costs to 'secure the responsible participation of progressive elements of the bourgeoisie', though it is striking that such formulations implied that the onus in maintaining the role of the bourgeoisie did not so much lie on the shoulders of the bourgeoisie itself as on the left. With the withdrawal of the Cadets from the first coalition in July this dilemma grew. The main Menshevik leadership seemed to say that any bourgeois ally would now do, in order to give credibility to the bourgeois revolution in which the bourgeoisie was actually playing a tiny role.

The Soviets are supported only by a minority of the population, and we must strive by all means to have those bourgeois elements, which are still able and willing to defend with us the conquests of the revolution, take over with us . . . the enormous responsibility for the fate of the revolution.

But who were these remaining bourgeois elements? If they existed at all they appeared to be quite marginal, certainly they did not include the Cadets:

The conduct of the Cadet Party must be regarded as treacherous and criminal. It refused to submit to the demands of democracy and deserted the Government, so as to leave the still inadequately organised and struggling revolutionary democracy, but especially the proletariat, alone to fight against

the chaos and the growing counter-revolution. Equally treacherous and criminal is the conduct of the industrialists who are secretly contributing to the disorganisation of economic life, so as to force the helpless working class to accept their own terms . . .<sup>55</sup>

At this point Trotsky was chiding those who held such views as being calves to the tigers of the real Jacobins.<sup>56</sup>

Further to the left, Martov seemed to want to be such a 'tiger'. With the temporary withdrawal of the Cadets from the Provisional Government in early July he argued that 'the last organised group of the Russian bourgeoisie had turned its back on the Revolution' and was going over 'to the attack against the peasants' and workers' democracy'. It was therefore necessary to respond 'by taking over state power'; 'there is only one proper decision for us at present: history demands that we take power into our own hands. The Revolutionary Parliament [the Congress of Soviets] is bound to take account of this. . .'. But still, it seemed, only with the aim of carrying out the most radical democratization and reform without ultimately compromising capitalism in Russia in order to be able to hand power back (in what way?) at some later stage to the bourgeoisie. The Kornilov coup magnified these contradictions even more because much of the left now drew the conclusion that no coalition was possible with the bourgeoisie or its political representatives. Postresov, faithful to the logic of bourgeois revolution, denounced the refusal of a coalition as 'worse than Bolshevism. This is absurdity', but the idea that 'revolutionary democracy' could substitute for the bourgeoisie was implicit in the arguments that the non-Bolsheviks (and now left SRs) remained committed to.<sup>57</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of October Martov went back to Marx and Engels to find grounds for attacking 'Bolshevik Jacobinism', but his discussion (only partially unwittingly?) caught the pre-October dilemma just as well. While Marx and Engels had emancipated themselves from earlier Jacobin conceptions, suggested Martov, they had also recognized the possibility of a 'premature' conquest (Marx), 'a fortuitous conquest' (Martov) of power by the people or their leaders before the stage of maturity for socialism was reached. This, however could only be a 'momentary' political domination over the bourgeoisie on the basis not of 'conscious masses' but 'masses which are simply in revolt' (Martov). Whoever allowed this would then have to play the Jacobin role of making the bourgeois revolution for the bourgeoisie – but was this more a description of the Bolsheviks or of the socialists who were supporting the Provisional Government?

In making this argument, the aim is to do more than stand the normal approach on its head for its own sake. The fact that the SR and Menshevik

leaderships tried to carry out this role of *limiting* one revolution, if necessary against the opposition of the groups they claimed to represent, whilst *carrying out* another in the interests of the groups that they opposed, created enormous contradictions for them. If they were to play the role of Jacobins to the bourgeoisie they had also to play the role of Jacobins against their own supporters and, to some extent their own desires. This was put clearly by A.V. Peshekhonov, who had been the Popular Socialist Minister of Food from May to August, in a passage quoted by Lenin in his pamphlet 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?'

In essence these demands are just. But this programme which we fought for before the revolution, for the sake of which we made the revolution, and which we would all unanimously support under other circumstances constitutes a very grave danger under present conditions . . . when it is impossible for the state to comply with [these demands]. We must first defend the whole – the state, to save it from doom, and there is only one way to do that; not the satisfaction of demands, however just and cogent they may be, but, on the contrary, restriction and sacrifice, which must be contributed from all quarters.<sup>58</sup>

This contradiction eventually exacted a fatal political price for the Mensheviks and SRs. First, it had an impact on the level of active support for both the Revolution and these parties. In the autumn of 1917, two tendencies are evident as popular frustration grew with what had been achieved – there is evidence of both a shift to a more passive position in some quarters and a shift to greater radicalism in others. In one sense, this is characteristic of the peak that occurs in any genuinely revolutionary situation since such a situation cannot be sustained indefinitely. Seizing the moment is then the centre of the crisis. Allowing it to pass does not mean that the crisis will fall back to some lower level of compromise – it is more likely, and certainly was more likely in Russia in 1917, to open up the possibility of another attempted coup from the right. The radicalization, however, provided the opportunity for the party that benefited from it to take more decisive action. Thus in late August and September 1917 we see SR and Menshevik support in both local elections and the elections to the Soviets shifting significantly to the Bolsheviks, giving them a number of spectacular victories.

The crisis was no less evident in the haemorrhaging of the membership from the Mensheviks and what Melancon calls a 'stampede' from the SRs towards the Bolsheviks. Fragmentation grew within these parties as their base was pulled to the left. Among the Mensheviks we know that by their August conference only some 5 per cent of the delegates supported Postresov and the

right, 55 per cent the centre's 'revolutionary defencism' associated with Liber and Dan, and the remainder different left platforms – support for which sees to have grown in the period that followed. But the most spectacular tension arose within the SRs, where a left SR faction that eventually became the Left SR Party crystallized, and took with it at least half the party and possibly the majority of members.

These tendencies forced the leaderships of these parties to rise even more above their members. The internal political separation of the leadership grew further, weakening claims to legitimacy. This was most notably the case in the SRs. As early as their May congress the left SRs had got only one seat on the Central Committee despite having the support of some 20 per cent of delegates and on some motions 40 per cent. By August and September many more sections of the party had swung to the left, causing the Central Committee to expel the Petrograd, Voronezh and Tashkent organizations for being too left wing. As electoral lists were drawn up for the Constituent Assembly, they were weighted in favour of the centre and at the expense of the left. The decision to join the last coalition caused a huge row in which the Central Committee rode down opposition. It opposed calling both the party congress and second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, it then discouraged delegates from attending until it thought this might backfire. The main leaders then walked out with the Mensheviks and expelled the left SRs who remained behind, seizing the party's assets so the left was forced to establish a new party. Thus, while it may be that up to 60 per cent of the delegates at the Constituent Assembly were SR in one form or another, the claim that this entitled the centre-right SRs to form a government over the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs ignores the way the group at the top had effectively stolen the party from its members and the left, who were allowed a mere 40 representatives at the Assembly.<sup>59</sup>

This points to an interesting conclusion that few historians have been prepared to confront – Bolshevik successes in 1917 reflected the fact that they were a substantially more democratic organization than their competitors. Their membership grew throughout the period, the party welcomed groups like the Inter-District Group, it was able to incorporate new figures into its leadership, there was not the same social differentiation that was apparent in the other parties and there was not the same differentiation in political perspectives because there was a serious and lively debate about what was happening that mattered not only in an intellectual sense but also in a political sense. But were the workers, as Martov said, not 'conscious masses' but 'masses which are simply in revolt'?

## GREY MASSES

This disparagement fits ill with the analysis of developing class consciousness, especially in the towns, but it is easy to find many contemporaries stressing exactly this. They did so, however, more as a corollary of their political arguments than as a result of a genuine attempt to come to terms with either what was going on below or the character of the revolutionary crisis. It was a commonplace in early twentieth-century Russia to talk of the 'dark' masses, the 'grey' masses and the like to describe not only the peasants but also less skilled sections of the working class. Even workers themselves could use this language of one another. But in intellectual circles its use intensified after 1905 and in 1917 itself. Yet, for all the well-known doubts about the quality of education and literacy, there had been a considerable expansion before 1917. In this sense, the 'grey' masses were rather less 'grey' than they had been at any time before; however, the discourse of 'grey' and 'dark' was not intended as a sociological but more a political designation.

A sense of distance from, and fear of, the lower classes was a commonplace of conservative thought in tsarist Russia no less than elsewhere in Europe before 1914.<sup>60</sup> Although liberals and more radical groups had traditionally expressed a sense of 'love of the common people', the 'common people' – first as peasants, then as workers – were easier to love in the abstract than as individuals with all their faults. Moreover they were easier to love as a 'suffering class' on whose behalf one fought than as peasants or workers who fought for themselves. So long as the peasantry was capable of little more than a succession of local challenges, and so long as the working class was ill-formed, this contradiction mattered little. Indeed frustration with what Alexander Blok called, in his 1908 essay on the 'People and the Intelligentsia', the 'dreadful laziness and dreadful torpor' of the people, might spur the *intelligent* to greater heights. It was when the 'laziness' and 'torpor' appeared to give way to a more serious challenge from below that problems arose, and this is what happened increasingly after 1900 and in 1905. A sense now emerged, said Blok, of 'the slow awakening of a giant . . . a giant waking with a singular smile on his lips'. 'Writers and public figures, officials and revolutionaries' might meet with 'workmen, sectarians, tramps and peasants' but there was now a greater sense of a gap and foreboding about its consequences. 'No *intelligent* smiles like [the awakening giant]', wrote Blok; 'we would think we knew all the ways of laughing there are, but in the face of the muzhik's [peasant's] smile . . . all our laughing instantly dies; we are troubled and afraid'.<sup>61</sup>

It was the revolution of 1905 that helped bring a gnawing sense of how great the gap was between the cultured sections of Russian society and the

mass of the people, and also to widen the gap between liberals and the left. For liberals, the most inspiring element of 1905 was its least radical phase and the most threatening its most radical time. The first phase involved significant popular action that forced the tsar's October Manifesto, but until this point the liberals felt in control of the popular movement and so they also felt at one with it. Even Struve was briefly affected by this spirit; two days before Bloody Sunday he had written in exile that 'there are no revolutionary people in Russia yet', but when he returned to Russia in October 1905 he briefly regretted his 'terrible sin' of lack of faith in the people.<sup>62</sup> However, it was just at this point that control began to slip away and in November and December the revolution entered a second phase, with workers – encouraged by the left – organizing themselves more independently to demand social reform as well as political change. Those who sympathized with the abstract people might well now find themselves at risk from the real people. It was rather as if, said Vasilii Rozanov (in an image he would use of 1917 itself), the performance of the Divine Comedy was over; 'the public gets up. "Its time to put on our overcoats and go home"'. They look round. But there are neither overcoats to put on, nor houses to go to.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time the government also encouraged wider patriotic disorders and pogroms, which led to some 10,000 people being hurt and 3,000 deaths (the figures are Miliukov's).<sup>64</sup> Thus if the strikes of November and December and the Moscow uprising showed the danger of revolution, the pogroms showed the danger of sections of 'the people' mobilized from the right. A third sense of unreliability emerged in the Spring of 1906, when the First Duma was disbanded and the Cadets appeal for passive resistance evoked only a limited response. The people, it seemed, would not come when they were called but when they did come they were a dangerous, unpredictable and possibly uncontrollable force.

This sense found several expressions in the years between 1906 and 1914. The most substantial in an intellectual sense was the series of essays under the title *Vekhi* (Landmarks) in which, led by Peter Struve, former Marxists and radicals re-evaluated their position. The *Vekhi* authors attacked the previous pretensions of the intelligentsia and emphasized that political freedom was dependent on prior moral and cultural change and the recognition of the importance of a legal order – not least by the intelligentsia itself. Beyond this, the authors also attacked illusions about 'the people'. It was the essay by Mikhail Gershenzon that put this latter argument most bluntly and which created the greatest furore. Gershenzon argued that there was deep-seated popular hatred for intellectuals (and the upper classes) in Russia that was qualitatively different from that in the West. There, hatred on both sides

remained within a rational discourse and could be politically directed and resolved. In Russia it had an emotional quality that went beyond this. Here the people

See our human and specifically Russian face but do not sense in us a human soul; thus they hate us passionately, probably with an unconscious mystical horror. They hate us even more profoundly because we are their own. This is the way we are; not only can we not dream of fusing with the people, but we must fear them worse than any punishment by the government, and we are condemned to bless that authority which alone with its bayonets and prisons manages to protect us from popular fury.<sup>65</sup>

The subsequent *Vekhi* debate saw the authors attacked not only from the left but also by moderate and radical liberals including the mainstream of the Cadet Party, which obviously could hardly endorse such a blatant argument for a retreat from serious political engagement in the present.<sup>66</sup> But, as is so often the case, the *Vekhi* group captured a moment in respect to the wider trajectory of liberalism and the intelligentsia and posed a question in relation to the popular movement, where concern was also evident more widely in Russian society in a degree of moral panic over issues like hooliganism, morality and sexuality.<sup>67</sup>

During the war these concerns seemed to grow. Indeed, in his memoirs Miliukov even records that at this point he read Taine on the French Revolution.<sup>68</sup> It is easy to understand, therefore, his sense of foreboding that politics might again become the preserve of the ignorant people. Miliukov, said Chernov, 'never spoke the language of the people. For him it was a tremendous alien force.'<sup>69</sup> Speaking at the Council of Ministers in August 1915, Sazonov seized on the conservatism of Miliukov and the Cadets with an evaluation no less brutal than the one on the left: 'If one manages this nicely and gives them a little way out, the Cadets will be the first to come to an agreement. Miliukov is the greatest bourgeois, and he fears the social revolution more than anything else. And, in general, the majority of the Cadets are trembling for their fortunes.'<sup>70</sup> Indeed a significant part of the Cadet leadership was even nervous about the party's own membership. One provincial member characterized the leadership's view of the members: 'You are not needed, we here in Petrograd watch all for you and never make mistakes. . .' The leaders were the party and the party was the leaders. 'We ourselves are the democratic masses', said Rodichev, rejecting the view that the people were being ignored.<sup>71</sup>

Another part of the irony of February 1917, therefore, is that while it was mass action on the streets that briefly restored some credibility to liberalism as

a progressive force it was also a sense of the 'grey' and 'dark' forces within this mass action that panicked them.<sup>72</sup> *Svobodnyi naroda* wrote, 'the larger part of the dark masses of people simply are not able to understand the present meaning of freedom'.<sup>73</sup> Thus it became necessary to hold the line against the 'dark', 'grey' forces below. Tyrkóva-Williams – on the right of the Cadets – argued that 'human dignity consists not so much in receiving life's bounties as giving one's best to life', a philosophy which, as a woman of means (and married to an English gentleman), she no doubt found comforting. But below her were 'workmen [who] unaccustomed to intelligent discipline and lacking strong moral and professional traditions destroyed all industry with childish behaviour'. Here was a revolution of 'licentious appetites', a 'bacchanalia' of demands and one in which the focus on material gains was seemingly inversely proportional to the intellectual level of the participants. But some of the idealization of the past still survived for her: 'One may boldly assert, despite all the crimes committed by the mob, [that] the masses were more innocent, and better than their leaders'.<sup>74</sup> This was not a view shared by Pitrim Sorokin, or so it appears from his pseudo diary of 1917. From the very first moments of February, he suggested, he had felt that 'the mob mind was beginning to show itself and that not only the beast but the fool in man was striving to get the upper hand'. The reality of the Revolution appeared to be symbolized not only by mob violence but effeminacy and sexual promiscuousness, which ranged from couples in the street, to the activities of the prostitutes; from Kollontai's voracious sexual appetite (sic), to Zinoviev's 'womanish voice' and 'his fat figure . . . hideous and obscene, an extraordinary moral and mental degenerate'.<sup>75</sup> The venom of such portraits (Lenin's face, said Sorokin, reminded him 'of those congenital criminals in the albums of Lombroso') reminds us that, to the extent that a sense of class and class conflict was constructed through discourse, this was a double-sided process.

In the original *Vekhi* collection Bulgakov had remarked that:

The intelligentsia oscillates continually and unavoidably between two extremes, uncritical worship of the people and spiritual aristocratism. The need to show this uncritical reverence in one form or another (in the form of old fashioned populism, originating with Herzen and based on a belief in the essentially socialist character of the Russian people, or in the more recent Marxist form, in which only one section of the people, the proletariat, rather than the nation as a whole, is reckoned as having this character) arises from the very foundations of the intelligentsia's creed. But a contrary principle also arises necessarily from these same foundations – an attitude of arrogance towards the people as the object upon which salvific influence is to be

exerted, as children who need a nanny to educate them in 'awareness', who are unenlightened in the intelligentsia's sense of the word.<sup>76</sup>

Immediately after October, Bulgakov penned a series of dialogues in which different individuals try to make sense of the Revolution (interestingly, without there being a Bolshevik present). In one exchange he returns to this theme – an 'author' remarks of 'the shared looks of the soldiers and sailors; they are now bestial, hideous, especially the latter, and the whole lot of "comrades" seem devoid of souls and dominated by instincts only by a kind of Darwinian ape – *homo socialisticus*'. But the 'author' is answered by the 'diplomat', an amoral character who had done his service to his country without being taken in by any of the rhetoric:

quite lately you were ready to kneel before a soldier's grey cloak! What an aristocratic, undignified way of regarding the people: crusaders today and brutes tomorrow! While they are really mere ignorant men, who have been forcibly led to the slaughter, stood it at first, were recorded with full marks, and afterwards lost their temper, 'self-determined themselves' and showed their innate ruthlessness. Crusaders indeed! You can't get over the official lie, which is as fulsome as the flattery strewn nowadays by official scribes before proletarian potentates.<sup>77</sup>

In the hands of those who thought about the popular movement in more systematic terms, this idea of the backward masses came to have a more precise meaning. So, far from class consciousness being associated with radicalism and backwardness with moderation, the relationship was inverted. Thus on the right of the Mensheviks, for the Defencist group, Potresov argued that it was necessary to 'rally . . . the broad masses of the proletariat aiding it in every way to improve its class organisation and to combat the rebellious and predatory tendencies of an enlightened section of the working class which is disturbing the regular and democratic advancement of its cause'.<sup>78</sup> The centre Mensheviks talked of the danger to freedom posed by 'the union of all the dark forces, of the secret and open counter-revolutionists. Counter-revolution can derive its strength only from mass support. . . . What was needed was 'incessant educational and organisational activity' to pull workers to the Mensheviks and to understand why they were 'refusing to seize all power'. Thus, far from class consciousness coming to mean a situation in which, in a famous phrase, 'men, as a result of common experience (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs', for more moderate theorists

and politicians on the left it represented 'darkness'.<sup>79</sup> True class consciousness, true enlightenment over darkness, was that which understood the need for a degree of restraint and co-operation with the bourgeoisie!

However, it was possible to be both class conscious and constructive, and to the extent that the writings of 'social historians' in the 1970s and 1980s elaborated this their work will remain a major contribution. Indeed, perhaps the fact that Russia held together in the way that it did had something to do with the self-organization from below that developed with the radicalization? Philips Price certainly felt this:

I can confidently say that after my recent journey in the interior of Russia in the last two months, that if it were not for the revolutionary councils in the towns, villages and among the soldiers of the garrisons, the anarchy would be fifty times worse . . . Of course it is plain that the ruling classes in England and their allies, the bourgeoisie here, must in order to save their class privileges discredit all movements like those which inspire the Russian revolution . . .<sup>80</sup>

Doomed to take place, doomed to fail, might be a good summary of the conclusions of much current historical writing on the Russian Revolution; but, as we have tried to show, if choices existed in 1917 then they existed on both sides. Making the Bolsheviks appear as the only dynamic force is not only one-sided, it also provides an alibi for those who made other choices. But the choices that they made were important and conditioned what happened. Remaining trapped within a rigid theoretical framework, they finally abandoned the Revolution at a crucial moment in walking out of the Soviets. We should perhaps leave the last word to Sukhanov who, opposing the takeover of power, nevertheless drew a crucial distinction when the Mensheviks and Right SRs abandoned the Soviet:

I was thunderstruck . . . First of all, no one contested the legality of the Congress. Secondly, it represented the most authentic worker-peasant democracy . . . thirdly, the question was: Where would the Right Mensheviks and the SRs leave the Congress for? Where would they go from the Soviet? The Soviet, after all was the revolution itself . . . So where could one go from the Soviet? It meant a formal break with the masses and the revolution. And why? Because the Congress had proclaimed a Soviet regime in which the minute Menshevik-SR minority would not be given a place! I myself considered this fatal for the revolution, but why link this with abandoning the supreme representative organ of the workers, soldiers and

peasants? . . . The old bloc could not swallow its defeat and the Bolshevik dictatorship. With the bourgeoisie and with the Kornilovites – yes; but with the workers and peasants whom they had thrown into the arms of Lenin with their own hands – impossible.<sup>81</sup>

## 'Our Position is in the Highest Degree Tragic': Bolshevik 'Euphoria' in 1920

Lars T. Lih

'Russia – looted, weakened, exhausted, falling apart.' Thus reads the first sentence in the volume of Lev Trotsky's writings containing his speeches on economic issues during 1920 – a sentence that appropriately sounds the keynote of the sombre rhetoric of that grim year.<sup>1</sup> The world war and then the civil war had drained Russia's resources and ripped apart the interdependent pre-war economic organism, and yet a large military establishment still had to be supported. The transport system was on the verge of utter collapse. Industry had no goods to give the peasants for their grain. The peasants were understandably reluctant to part with their grain for nothing and indeed had less and less for themselves. Inflation had destroyed the financial system. Disease, hunger and cold stalked the land. The lives of the workers had gotten worse, not better – the promises of the Revolution were more distant than ever. No wonder Trotsky angrily asked how the newspapers dared to publish optimistic articles. Didn't they see that 'our position is in the highest degree tragic'?<sup>2</sup>

The Bolsheviks would hardly have been sane if they had not realized how grim the situation was. But wait – the most eminent scholars in the field, on both the left and the right, assure us that the Bolsheviks were in fact far from fully sane in 1920. The devastation caused by the war did not bother them, indeed, 'the mood of 1920 remained on the whole one of complacency'.<sup>3</sup> 'Complacency' is too mild a word for many historians, who prefer 'euphoria'.<sup>4</sup> Russia in 1920 was 'a theatre of the absurd' in which the depressing reality was presented 'as if it were what it was supposed to be, as imagined by the Communist leaders'.<sup>5</sup> And what did the Communist leaders imagine reality to be? 'In a veritable ideological delirium, the most colossal economic collapse of the century was transmogrified into really-existing Communism, the radiant future *hic et nunc*.'<sup>6</sup>

No wonder Sheila Fitzpatrick finds that 'the Bolsheviks' perception of the real world had become almost comically distorted in many respects by 1920'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is rather comical that most Bolsheviks believed that 'the war economy measures applied during this period offered the shortcut to socialism that had been dubbed a childish "leftist" dream a short while before'.<sup>8</sup> And no doubt when we read that grain requisitioning by force was 'regarded by the Party, from Lenin down, as not merely socialism, but even communism' – or that the entire party thought for a brief period at the end of 1920 that the Soviet countryside was already fully socialized – it is hard to suppress a smile.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, though, it is not very funny, when we consider 'the millions of victims who had paid with their lives for the leaders' brief moment of frenzy'.<sup>10</sup>

If what the academic experts say is true, then the real question about the Bolsheviks in 1920 is not 'what were they thinking?', but 'what were they smoking?' According to the standard view, 'war communism' – the name given *ex post facto* to the policies and the outlook that reached its apogee in 1920 – was essentially a *hallucination*. There is no milder word for it. One of the main supports for this academic consensus is none other than Trotsky, whose rather un-euphoric words we have already cited. Trotsky's speeches, appeals, directives and pamphlets from 1920 make up one of the most extensive and easily available sources of evidence for the Bolshevik world-view during 'war communism'. He wrote so much during this one year that one wonders how he found time to do anything else. We shall test the 'euphoria' consensus by looking at this body of material and establishing the connections Trotsky made between the national economic crisis, Bolshevik policies, and the socialist transformation of society.

One of the key issues in the centuries-long discussion of the French Revolution is the relation between the original aims of the Revolution in 1789 and its radical outcome in 1793. Was the Terror a perversion of revolutionary aims, a natural outgrowth, or just a transitory necessity? 'War communism' has the same sort of implication for our understanding of the aims of the Revolution in 1917. There is thus a parallel between the issues explored here and the issues in other essays in this volume. Yet there is also a striking contrast. The amount of documentation and sophisticated argument about the relations between 1789 and 1793 is staggering, because historians have always understood the importance of these links. The debate is at a correspondingly high level, whatever we may think of current trends. But this is not true in the case of the Russian Revolution. As will become evident, the most elementary facts about the Bolshevik outlook in 1920 have *not* been established. 'Theatre of the absurd' is in reality a good description of debates about war communism, since all sides attribute views to Trotsky and

other Bolshevik leaders that are the exact opposite of what they were trying to pound home to their audiences in speech after speech.

The theme of the present collection of essays – ‘refuting revisionism’ – also hardly fits the present essay, since the hallucinatory view of war communism is for all practical purposes an unchallenged consensus. The portrayal of war communism as nothing but a set of destructive fantasies plays a key role in discrediting the Russian Revolution, if only because it provides a direct bridge between 1917 and the Stalin era. Yet, as we shall see, it was not originally created by those hostile to the Revolution – it was created and is still defended today by the left, and particularly by Trotsky loyalists. This essay will show that Trotsky in 1920 is too important a subject to be left to the Trotskyists.

#### MILITARIZATSIIA: ‘A NATURAL, SAVING FEAR’

‘Russia’s industry lay in ruins, there was barely any transport, and the one pressing problem was how to save the towns from imminent starvation, not how to bring about a Communist millennium.’<sup>11</sup> Leszek Kolakowski thus expresses the views of historians who have castigated the Bolshevik leaders for neglecting the national emergency of 1920 in favour of their ideological hobbyhorses. Central to this charge is the set of policies adopted in early 1920 under the general label of ‘militarization of labour’. These policies were predicated on the assumption that military hostilities were coming to an end and that economic reconstruction was the order of the day – and so (historians conclude) these policies cannot be dismissed as simply a response to the civil-war emergency. No, militarization is how the Bolshevik leaders now conceived of socialism or in any event Soviet Russia’s long-term future. As the principal architect and defender of these policies, Trotsky is Exhibit A of this accusation – especially since his eloquent defence of labour militarization, contained in the grimly titled *Terrorism and Communism*, is easily available in English.

All this is very odd. ‘Militarization’ is a label for a rather disparate set of policies whose connecting link was that they were all meant as responses to an economic crisis caused or greatly exacerbated by the civil war. ‘Militarization’ means national emergency. And no one was more insistent about this than Trotsky.

‘Why do we speak of militarization? Of course, this is only an analogy, but one that is very rich in content.’<sup>12</sup> The core of this analogy for Trotsky was not any particular organizational feature of the army. It was rather that the army represented the supremacy of the whole over the part when a nation was faced with a life-or-death battle for survival. ‘In speech after speech

throughout the year, Trotsky tried to impress upon his audiences that this was exactly how they should perceive the economic situation – as literally a life-or-death crisis. The key word in his understanding of militarization is 'ruin' (*gibel'*). 'We must tell the masses that breakdown and ruin threaten all of Soviet Russia.'<sup>13</sup> This situation of mortal danger is the basis of the analogy with the army:

What is an army? The army is the one organisation in the world in which a person is obligated to give his life unconditionally and fully. An army demands bloody sacrifices. It is not concerned with the sacred interests of the individual and demands sacrifices in the name of the interests of the whole. Our economic position is like the military position of a country surrounded by an enemy that is two or three times stronger than it. An habitual, normal regime – an habitual, normal method of work – will not save us now. We need an exceptional wave of labour enthusiasm, an unprecedented readiness of each one of us to sacrifice himself for the revolution, and we need an exceptionally authoritative economic apparatus that says to each particular person: it's tough for you, you're sick, I know it, but despite the fact that I know it's tough for you, I give you orders, I put you to work in the name of the interests of the whole. This is militarization of labour.<sup>14</sup>

What was needed was 'an internal militarization, based on complete understanding and dictated by a situation of fear – a natural, saving fear when faced with the ruin of the country'.<sup>15</sup>

There were two other qualities of army life that Trotsky consistently put forward as a model. One was 'exactness' (*tochnost'*), a word that pops up frequently in his speeches along with an entourage of hard-to-translate terms: *akkuratnost'*, *ispolnitel'nost'*, *formlennost'*, *iasnost'*. This bundle of qualities evokes a combination of the reliability of the ideal German with the get-up-and-go of the ideal American – in other words, the ideal organization man. Trotsky, like many Marxists of his generation, saw the modern world as a clash of large-scale organizations, which meant that these individual qualities were life-and-death matters for whole societies. The transition to the New Economic Policy (NEP) made no difference to Trotsky's views. In a *Pravda* article of December 1921 entitled 'Man, we could really use some exactness!', he insisted 'Exactness and accuracy [are] among the most necessary traits of an aware, independent, cultured human being.'<sup>16</sup>

Another common theme in Trotsky's speeches of this era is the claim that the Red Army was in many ways a mirror of Soviet Russia as a whole. Trotsky was certainly not saying that Soviet Russia in 1920 or socialist society in general was or should be a compulsory hierarchical organization. He was

talking about the basic *class relations* of Soviet Russia. *All* armies (according to Trotsky) reflected the basic class relations of the larger society around them, and the Red Army was just an example of this. For Trotsky, the essential fact about the Red Army was that it represented a winning combination of the peasantry, the military *spetsy* and the 'advanced workers'. In contrast, the White armies reflected the class hostility between peasant and officer and correspondingly fell apart. The Bolsheviks won the civil war because 'the soviet regime created an army in its own likeness, and this army learned how to win'.<sup>17</sup> Thus Trotsky used the Red Army as a model of *class partnership*. (Of course, Trotsky was at pains to emphasize that this partnership could only work because of the monopoly position of a disciplined party.)

So much for metaphors – what actual policies lay behind them? The labour militarization policies can be summarized as follows. First, locate and mobilize scattered skilled workers. Second, organize in the most coordinated and expedient way possible the onerous 'labour duties' already widely imposed on the peasantry. Third, put vitally important 'shock' enterprises on a 'war footing' in which food rations were more solidly guaranteed but also in which workers were officially tied down to the enterprise. Fourth, create 'labour armies' out of military units caught between full combat readiness and full demobilization. Fifth, 'shake up' the trade union leadership in the crucial transport sector. Sixth, and most generally, install a regime of the strictest possible labour discipline.

We leave to one side questions about whether these policies were well thought out, whether they were implemented in a competent way or even whether they actually ended up improving the economic situation. Our concern here is what these policies tell us about how the Bolsheviks, and Trotsky in particular, viewed socialism in 1920. We note first of all that they do not give the impression of a leap into the unknown of a socialist utopia – rather, they seem to be responses to specific and very real problems. We note further that although the policies were defended under the rubric of 'universal labour duty', they are in fact constructed on the 'shock' principle of diverting resources into the most urgent sectors.

This 'shock' logic comes out particularly in the policy of putting crucial factories on a war footing. Some historians write as if the Bolsheviks wanted to militarize all factories, but this would have contradicted the entire logic of the policy.

The most important factor of success [in these crucial factories] is the increased ration, but this ration is given out along with a war footing status. Obviously, it would be senseless to put industry as a whole on a war footing, so it is necessary to select certain shock points such as the railroads and

locomotive factories and concentrate our best workers there and send shock production groups to them.<sup>18</sup>

To be placed on a war footing essentially meant a *privileged* position, with the result that workers actually petitioned for this status to be conferred on their factory. Indeed, although the Bolshevik leaders could hardly have realized it, this 'shock' priority policy was a step in the direction of NEP. To guarantee the rations of some workers was to tell other workers to fend for themselves – and ultimately this fending could no longer be done in the semi-legal fashion tolerated in 1920.

A special mention should be made of the 'labour armies', if only to stress that they played a relatively unimportant part in the complex of labour militarization policies. The labour army concept was specifically tied to the existence of army units in an awkward transitional stage between combat readiness and demobilization. Some historians – fascinated, one suspects, by the scandalous term 'labour army' – have made these the centerpiece of Bolshevik economic legislation in 1920, asserting that Trotsky and co wanted to transform all of Russia into labour armies. In reality, Trotsky put least ideological weight on these policies and gave them the most cautious and empirical defence.<sup>19</sup>

Another feature of the labour militarization policies was that all of them assumed a readiness to apply compulsion to any extent necessary. This aspect hardly needs emphasis. What does need emphasis is the equally central role of material incentives, because historians have consistently ignored or even denied the existence of *any* role for material incentives. Trotsky argued at some length that lack of consumer goods meant that otherwise desirable policies of material incentive were not applicable. The same dire shortage meant that differential 'bonus' systems had to be applied despite their manifest unfairness ('the state should – this is of course obvious – put the best workers in the best conditions of existence by means of the bonus system'). We have seen this assumption at work in the increased ration given to 'militarized' factories.<sup>20</sup>

'Militarization' thus did not mean 'a transfer of a military model of ignoring material incentive over to the civilian economy'. On the contrary, Trotsky makes it quite clear that the labour armies themselves were using bonus systems that improved their productivity.<sup>21</sup> If anything, this kind of policy represents the 'civilianization' of the army rather than the reverse.

Many readers have gained the impression that Trotsky was calling for the maintenance of 1920 levels of compulsion into the indefinite future. Actually, Trotsky explicitly says that compulsion would steadily decrease as the economic crisis receded into the past, the material situation improved

and people better understood the benefits of the new system.<sup>22</sup> The contrary impression is partly an artifact of the way the key term *trudovaia povinnost'* is translated in the English edition of *Terrorism and Communism*. I have translated this as 'labour duty', that is, something that is both a moral obligation and enforced by the state. One support for this translation is the equivalent German term *Arbeitspflicht*. Other possible translations are 'labour service' and 'labour obligation', 'Labour conscription' is sometimes seen and even 'forced labour', both of which I regard as tendentious. In the English edition of Trotsky's book, however, the term is translated as 'compulsory labour service' (compare the German term *Zwangsarbeit*). This translation is perhaps defensible, given the realities of the situation. Nevertheless it thoroughly obscures Trotsky's views on the *relation* between 'compulsion' (*prinuzhdenie*) and labour duty. Trotsky argued that *labour duty* was a basic socialist principle that would always be valid, while the *compulsion* needed to back it up during the revolutionary crisis would steadily decrease until it disappeared. This may or may not be an acceptable position, but it becomes opaque when the English translation has Trotsky asserting that 'the very principle of compulsory labour service is for the Communist quite unquestionable' (p. 135).

Another misunderstanding arises from the use of the word 'transition' in the rhetoric of this period. 'Transition' could refer to the whole era between the workers' revolution and the final construction of socialism. But it could also refer to the short-term transition from a capitalist regime to a socialist regime – that is, as Marxists understood it, from a regime of bourgeois class sovereignty to a regime of proletarian class sovereignty.

It is this second short-term revolutionary transition that understandably preoccupied the Bolshevik leaders in 1920. Bukharin and Trotsky both wanted to get across the same basic thesis about *this* transition; just as the advent of a proletarian regime required the political upheaval of revolution and civil war, so it required an economic upheaval that manifested itself by what Bukharin rather pompously called 'negative expanded reproduction' on a gigantic scale. Compulsion was an essential aspect of the transition period not only because of the quasi-inevitable political crisis but also because of the quasi-inevitable economic crisis.

Thus Trotsky scoffed at Jean Jaurès's idea that the transition to socialism could be accomplished by means of gradual democratization. 'In this connection he was deeply mistaken. History shows humanity another path – the path of the cruellest bloody clashes, of world imperialist butchery with civil wars to follow.'<sup>23</sup> It followed that a fall in productivity and in quantity of products was natural, 'given the transition of the national economy onto new rails'.<sup>24</sup> 'We know from experience and should have predicted from Marxist

theory the inevitability of the deepest crises during the epoch of revolutions. [Society's development] is not a straight one but a zigzag one.<sup>25</sup>

Looking back in 1922, Trotsky summed it up: 'Revolution opens the door to a new political system, but it achieves this by means of a destructive catastrophe.'<sup>26</sup> It is this understanding of the 'transition period' that informed Trotsky's polemic against Menshevik criticism. Trotsky pounced on a phrase in the Menshevik statement to the effect that compulsory labour was *always* unproductive under *all* circumstances. If this was the case, Trotsky retorted, then you could forget about socialism – because a worker conquest of power leads to a profound economic crisis that cannot be resolved without compulsion (among other things).<sup>27</sup> 'Over and over it becomes evident that for [the Menshevik orator] the tasks of the transition period – that is, the proletarian revolution – do not exist. This is the source of the utter irrelevance of his criticism, his advice, plans and recipes. We're not talking about how it will be twenty or thirty years from now – then, of course, things will be much better – but how we can climb out of economic breakdown *today*.'<sup>28</sup> In other words: don't talk about the socialist utopia, talk about the national emergency!

Trotsky also reasoned as follows: a *socialist* regime has a particular right to apply compulsion for the public interest. Socialism means a universal obligation to work. No idle parasites! He who does not work, neither shall he eat! Furthermore, socialism implies the regulated distribution of labour according to plan – it stands for the right of the collectivity as against the rights of the individual. If, at any time, circumstances are such that labour is absolutely necessary and it cannot be attained in any other way, then, undoubtedly, a socialist government has the right to use physical compulsion. In making this argument, Trotsky was not admitting that physical compulsion was or ever could be used against the labour force as a whole. He maintained that labour militarization would not be successful unless the large majority of the working class supported it. Physical compulsion was applied only to slackers. Nevertheless, the government should have no compunction about applying it.

Some people, including many socialists, find this argument shocking. Speaking as a historian, I will only say that Trotsky is not distorting the hostility of pre-war socialism toward non-working 'parasites'. Certainly this type of argument is not a product of 1920. Anyone who thinks otherwise should look at Bukharin's pronouncements on labour duty and labour discipline in early 1918, when he was in his Left Communist and allegedly 'libertarian' stage.<sup>29</sup>

The right to apply physical compulsion and the expediency of using it in any particular case are two different things:

The element of material, physical compulsion can be greater or smaller – that depends on many things, including the degree of wealth or poverty of a country, the heritage from the past, the level of culture, the condition of the transport system and of administrative mechanisms – but obligation, and consequently compulsion as well, is a necessary condition of taming bourgeois anarchy, of the socialisation of the means of production and labour and the reconstruction of the economy on the basis of a single plan.<sup>30</sup>

This passage certainly implies that, say, as the transport crisis eases up, the need for out-and-out compulsion will correspondingly decrease. This implication is further strengthened by the one passage in *Terrorism and Communism* where Trotsky does take a long-term perspective. According to Trotsky, the crucial long-term task for the regime is to raise productivity. If socialism turns out to be less productive than capitalism, it is doomed, but the productivity of labour under capitalism was ‘the result of a long and stubborn policy of repression, education, organisation and incentives applied by the bourgeoisie in relation to the working class’.<sup>31</sup> Despite fundamental differences, socialist labour productivity would share one basic feature with its predecessor; it would be the result of a long process (especially in Russia where capitalism hardly accomplished its own historic mission) that used a variety of means. Repression is one of these means, but a minor one compared to moral influences and material incentive.<sup>32</sup>

This discussion more than any other in *Terrorism and Communism* does give a flavour of the Stalin era and its ‘politics of productivity’, to use Lewis Siegelbaum’s phrase. ‘A good engineer, a good mechanic, and a good carpenter must have in the Soviet Republic the same fame and glory as was enjoyed hitherto by outstanding agitators, revolutionary fighters and, in the period just passed, the most courageous and capable commanders and commissars’ – such a sentence does have a 1930s feel about it. But historians have been so obsessed with saddling Trotsky with the cranky thesis that physical compulsion was the *only* short- and long-term method of socialist construction that they have entirely overlooked these genuine links.

To conclude, Trotsky’s justification of the use of compulsion may be paraphrased as follows:

*The economic ruin that threatens Russia and our limited resources means that compulsion is written into the situation. If backward elements of the working class do not understand the full gravity of the situation, we shall nevertheless ensure by whatever means necessary that they do their job. Of course this compulsion could only work because the bulk of the working class does understand the gravity of the situation – in fact, the continuing heroism of the Russian working class is a standing rebuke to the slander of such as Karl Kautsky. Of course this compulsion only works as one element*

*in a broad array of measures based primarily on differential material rewards and campaigns to explain the nature of the national emergency. Of course the element of compulsion will steadily decrease as we pull out of the present crisis situation, until it finally disappears in full socialism.*

*This is all true, but none of it should obscure the fact that we as socialists have the right and the duty to use compulsory methods in order to defend the proletarian vlast' (regime) and to get the economy on its feet again. The transition to socialism will always start off with the economic chaos and breakdown caused by revolution. If compulsory methods are always unproductive, as our critics claim, we will never get past this starting point.*

*Not only the Mensheviks but critics within our own party compare our use of compulsion – undertaken in order to prevent the collapse of the economy and the ruin of the country – with the use of compulsion to build Egyptian pyramids or to conduct Arakcheev's nutty 'labour colony' experiments under Tsar Alexander. Are these critics liberals, are they pacifists, that they don't see the difference between compulsory labour used to satisfy elite whims and compulsory labour used to keep the masses from dying of cold and hunger? Harsh times require harsh measures, and we Bolsheviks are not the ones to flinch when the fate of the revolution and the country hang in the balance.*

#### **THE ROAD TO SOCIALISM DURING A 'CARICATURE PERIOD'**

Marx wrote that the proletarian revolution does not unfold with such dazzling fireworks or so brilliantly as the bourgeois revolution. Kerensky's historical story was over in nine months, but we attack, retreat and again attack, and we always say that we have not traversed even a small portion of the road. The slowness of the unfolding of the proletarian revolution is explained by the colossal nature of the task and the profound approach of the working class to this task.<sup>33</sup>

Thus did Trotsky assess the situation in December 1920 (a period when the hallucinations of war communism were supposed to be at their height). The metaphor of a journey along the road to socialism was fundamental to Marxism since it differed from other varieties of socialism, primarily in its vision of how and by whom socialism would be achieved. The better we grasp the implication of this and related metaphors, the better we can understand the Bolshevik rhetoric of 1920 (or any other time).

Even granting that they had travelled only a short distance of the journey, the Bolsheviks felt that they had much to brag about. The very possibility of travelling down the road was due to the daring conquest of political power in 1917. Despite adverse conditions, they had managed to travel some part of the journey. They were definitely headed in the right direction and progress would be quite rapid once the war was over and the country was united.

Nevertheless, in another rhetorical context, a speaker who earlier had quite sincerely made all these positive points could put the emphasis on other aspects of the same situation: we are not yet a socialist society, we still have a long and difficult way to go, and at present we suffer from a combination of the breakdown of the old and the embryonic nature of the new.

The road metaphor can also help us grasp what the advent of NEP changed and what it did not change in the Bolshevik outlook. In a 1922 speech to the Comintern that defended the New Economic Policy, Trotsky claimed that 'none of us thought that having taken over the *vlast*', it was possible to remake society overnight'. On the contrary, war communism was 'the regime of a blockaded fortress with a disorganised economy and exhausted resources' – methods that could not fail to damage the economy severely. War communism inevitably created a 'bureaucratic surrogate of socialist [economic] unification', since 'old methods of economic verification were removed by the civil war before we succeeded in creating new ones'. Obviously, 'there was no communism in Russia. There was no socialism here and there could not have been.'

Trotsky nevertheless admitted that the Bolsheviks prior to NEP had been over-optimistic on one point. They believed they could move forward out of the post-civil-war crisis of 1920 towards socialism 'without large economic shifts, shake-ups and retreats, that is, by a more or less straight ascending line'. Progress toward socialism would take place 'by means of corrections and changes in the methods of our war communism' (for example, an adequate exchange equivalent would be given to the peasants for their grain). This optimism was partly based on the hope that a European revolution would bail the Bolsheviks out, after which Russia would thankfully switch from the role of the locomotive engine of socialism to its caboose.<sup>34</sup>

The knee-jerk reaction of historians when confronted with passages of this sort is to say something along the following lines: 'Well, sure, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders claimed afterwards that they did not have utopian expectations of remaking society overnight, but this was just a cover-up. The Bolsheviks sang quite a different tune during war communism itself!' In point of fact, Trotsky has here described quite accurately both the sober and the uplifting aspect of what he and others were saying in 1920. This can be illustrated by Trotsky's thoughts on planning and the coordination of industrial enterprises.

The evidence is confusing at first because the 1920 slogan 'single economic plan' had two quite distinct meanings. In speeches in the spring of that year, and in *Terrorism and Communism*, 'single economic plan' referred to a basic strategy for overcoming the crisis: first solve the transport crisis, then go on to machine-building and so forth.<sup>35</sup> This was a plan for recovery rather than for

coordinating ongoing economic activity. This 'single economic plan' properly belongs in our earlier discussion of the national emergency. Trotsky took the basic idea from a pamphlet by S.I. Gusev published at the beginning of the year. The brunt of Gusev's argument is: let's not get fancy here with high-faluting socialist projects, but focus our attention exclusively on the most elementary and pressing tasks.<sup>36</sup>

There was nothing particularly socialist about the actual set of stages advocated by Gusev and Trotsky. At the Ninth Party Congress, Gusev's 'plan' was both attacked (by Rykov) and defended (by Bukharin) as a strategy appropriate to *any* devastated economy. Trotsky strongly defended Gusev's plan, but he was mainly interested in it as an agitational device for focusing energy and explaining to the workers why they needed to make sacrifices.<sup>37</sup>

When Trotsky resumed his speech on economic matters at the end of the year, 'single economic plan' had taken on the socialist connotation of centralized coordination of economic activity in lieu of the market. Trotsky had discussed aspects of this issue throughout the year. What particularly exercised him was *glavkokeratiia*, a term he invented that rapidly became a byword in 1920. Each nationalized and amalgamated industry was headed up by a 'head committee' or *glavny komitet* or, in common parlance, a *glavk*. *Glavkokeratiia*, or rule by the Moscow 'head committees', was highly resented by just about everybody else in the Bolshevik establishment.

The essence of *glavkokeratiia* was the absence of meaningful coordination, since each *glavk* controlled its own industry with only tenuous links to anyone else. The problem was most intense in the localities, where competing representatives from the central *glavki* almost literally fought it out. Trotsky recited horror stories of how the localities were prevented from effective use of their own locally available resources while they waited months for some non-forthcoming permission from Moscow. Trotsky summed up a basic structural reason for the prevailing economic chaos: 'The centre doesn't know and the locals don't dare.'<sup>38</sup>

This inevitable combination of a broken-down old system and an embryonic new system meant that Soviet Russia was now in a 'caricature period' of transition.<sup>39</sup> One solution might have been to charge ahead to full centralized coordination. But Trotsky scotched that idea. An 'immediate leap' into full centralization was impossible and any such hope was a 'bureaucratic utopia'.<sup>40</sup> The difficulty was that 'our economy is oriented toward a single plan, but this single plan does not exist – in fact, there does not yet exist any apparatus for either working out or implementing such a plan'.<sup>41</sup> Some Bolshevik supporters may have a naive expectation of the existence of a plan 'as something complete and whole. We haven't got that far yet and won't for a long time.' The task of national electrification alone would require ten, maybe thirty years, and this

electrification was an essential prerequisite for bringing technical progress and culture to the peasantry. How can there be a single centralized plan as long as this great task remains unaccomplished – as long as ‘the socialist economy is a series of isolated islands in the agricultural ocean?’<sup>42</sup>

Given the inadequacies of *glavkokratiia*, it was wrong to blame the locals when they responded to urgent needs any way they could. Trotsky made all these points in a speech of January 1920 to a party audience that was not published until the mid-1920s – understandably, in view of its stunning frankness. The two greatest symbols of outlaw economic activity in 1920 were home-brewing (*samogonka*) and ‘sackmanism’ (*meshoshchnichestvo*). Home-brewing used precious grain to make vodka for local consumption while sackmanism channelled grain into the black market. Yet Trotsky was prepared to shock his audience by announcing that

*samogonka* is the protest of local needs against the centralism that does not satisfy them . . . I am speaking about the semi-contraband or completely contraband production that occurs in the localities and plays an enormous economic role, because otherwise the country will be ruined. How can one live without horseshoes, without nails? Either you steal them from the warehouses or you make them yourself with primitive methods.<sup>43</sup>

Another obstacle to rational economic coordination was the collapse of the money system. Looking ahead, Trotsky assumed that in the not-too-distant future some sort of measure of labour would play the coordinating role that money had played under capitalism. But what was on his mind in 1920 were the difficulties created by the absence of either capitalist or socialist value measures. Back in the old days, he told his listeners, market competition had coordinated economic activity – in a primitive and barbaric way, true, but nevertheless it had ensured some sort of equilibrium. But money prices were incapable of playing that role now:

In our work we have bumped up against the important question of how to compare the work of production in comparison with the results that we get. The old accounts are conducted in rubles – and everybody well knows how much our Soviet ruble is worth . . . If I told you that transport absorbed 3 billion or 15 billion rubles, you would greet both the one and the other figure with the same lack of surprise. We have to find a value instrument that answers to the needs of socialist society.<sup>44</sup>

The result, *hic et nunc*? ‘The old significance of money is destroyed and a new apparatus of distribution is still not functioning. And, comrades, this helps to

explain all our troubles, including the fuel crisis.'<sup>45</sup> Why, then, had the Bolsheviks destroyed the money system before they were able to replace it? Because revolutionary necessity demanded that they smash not only the state but the economy: 'There is no way of building [the new] without destroying the old, because you have to take power out of the hands of the bourgeoisie.'<sup>46</sup> These outbursts show why Trotsky was able to accept so easily – one feels, with relief – the return of a functioning money system under NEP.

Trotsky's sarcastic sallies against *glavkokeratiia* and its manifold defects struck such a chord that by the end of the year he became frightened at his own success and tried to cool things down (possibly at the invitation of the Politburo):

Much more serious [than opposition within party circles] is what's happening in the more profound strata, among the workers male and female and the peasants male and female. And there's no doubt about it – here there is dissatisfaction, completely natural and lawful dissatisfaction with the economic position, that is, with overwhelming poverty. This dissatisfaction can take sharp forms among the dark masses, it can express itself in elemental and stormy protests of indignation, strikes in factories by the more backward elements of the working class. And when we blame everything on the bureaucracy, then all we're doing is planting prejudices in the heads of the most backward, hungry and freezing labouring masses. They're going to start thinking that there is some sort of central monster called 'the bureaucracy' that holds material goods in its hands and doesn't give them to the masses. People will start relating to it as a class enemy, just as earlier the worker did to the capitalist.<sup>47</sup>

One can easily see from these speeches that the Bolshevik leaders were themselves weary of continually issuing calls for further sacrifice:

War is a cruel trade and the organs of war are cruel ones; their work consists in the merciless impoverishment of all the living forces and means of the country. When the war approaches its end, then those elements of exhaustion and dissatisfaction that accumulated during the war make themselves known. And this is a good thing, because it testifies to the vitality of the organism itself.

Russian workers are understandably disillusioned after the collapse of their 'unrealistic expectations'. As a result, 'the wide mass still to this day does not feel in appropriate fashion what the soviet regime really is'.<sup>48</sup>

Maybe next spring, Trotsky mused at the end of the year, we could tear

down some of Moscow's rotten, filthy, disease-ridden apartment buildings and replace them with ones like those in New York City – buildings that included a bath, that provided gas and electricity and where the trash was collected every day. If we could build just one building like this, the response would be colossal. Because up to now the workers see the wheels turning but they don't see the economic machinery working.<sup>49</sup>

Such were the dreams of 'war communism' – whether modest or grandiose, the reader must judge.

### ENTER THE HISTORIANS

We find in Trotsky's speeches of 1920 innumerable variations on two overriding themes. One is the austere 'blood, sweat and tears' evocation of the economic ruin facing the country unless extraordinary efforts were made. The other is an insistence on the manifold difficulties created by the breakdown of the capitalist system combined with the primitive, incomplete 'caricature' version of socialist institutions set up during the war.

When we turn to the historians, we find a near-unanimous portrayal of the Bolshevik outlook in 1920. We learn that the Bolsheviks ignored the national crisis in favour of ideological experiments. We further learn that the Bolsheviks viewed the institutions of 1920 as an embodiment of full socialism and as an admirable and workable long-term system. The principal body of evidence adduced for these assertions are the speeches of Trotsky.

What is the origin of the framework that dominates the interpretation of these particular texts? Why is it not only dominant but also unchallenged? One fact answers both questions. Historians on the left created the framework. Historians in the Trotskyist tradition – starting with Trotsky himself – played the major role in this process. Paradoxically – given the charge that Trotsky ignored the national emergency – the key theme of the framework developed by these historians is that there was no serious national crisis. An obvious and painless solution existed, namely, the early introduction of NEP and the legalization of the free grain market. Only ideological blinders kept the Bolsheviks from realizing this.

One of the earliest and most influential statements of this argument is Trotsky's memoir, *My Life*, published in 1930. The four or five pages devoted to economic policies in 1920 in these memoirs are a disappointment for the historian. Trotsky does not even mention labour militarization, labour duty, labour armies, exactness, *glavkokeratiia* or the other issues discussed in this essay. His entire aim is a polemical one, to explain away his conflict with Lenin during the 'trade union discussion' of late 1920 and early 1921 and to

show that he was actually much closer to Lenin than the 'epigones' (aka all the other leaders of the Bolshevik party).

As often with Trotsky, he tells a story to show that he was right all along. In March 1920 he proposed replacing grain requisitioning with a food-supply tax. If this proposal had been accepted, much suffering would have been avoided. Nevertheless, Lenin and the politburo turned it down. 'Once the transition to market methods was rejected, I demanded a correct and systematic implementation of "war" methods in order to attain real results in the economy.' His views on the trade unions grew out of the logic of these war methods. When Lenin finally caught up with Trotsky and advocated NEP, Trotsky instantly supported him – but he did not correspondingly change his views on the unions quickly enough. Only on this last point does Trotsky actually admit error.<sup>50</sup>

This little parable has had an immense influence on later views of 'war communism' as a set of unnecessary and destructive measures motivated by ideological blindness. Nevertheless, it is full of holes. It is not important for our purposes that Trotsky has strongly misrepresented his proposal of March 1920.<sup>51</sup> What concerns us here is Trotsky's suggestion that he adopted his labour policies only because his March proposal was turned down. However, these policies were all in place and elaborately defended by Trotsky some time *before* he made his quasi-*proto-NEP* proposal.

Trotsky does not explain how his March proposal would have addressed the pressing problems that gave rise to the various militarization policies. The only concrete policy he does describe in his memoirs is the effort to revive the transport system from its near-death experience. And here, oddly enough, Trotsky stresses how vital this work was and how necessary were the methods adopted. He sums up: 'These results were attained by emergency methods of administrative pressure that inevitably arose from the grave position of transport.' (True, he then adds 'as well as the system of war communism itself' – but this tacked-on reference to 'war communism' seems supererogatory.)<sup>52</sup>

In any event, we know for a fact that Trotsky did *not* repudiate the labour militarization policies of 1920. Twice after the publication of *My Life*, Trotsky authorized foreign reprints of *Terrorism and Communism*. He warned the workers that this is what real revolutions look like and asserted:

At the time of the civil war, when this book was written, the Soviets were still under the flag of 'war communism.' This system was not an 'illusion' – as the Philistines often maintained afterwards – but an iron necessity. The question was how the wretched resources were to be applied, mainly for the needs of the war, and how production, on however small a scale, was to be

kept alive for these same ends and without any possibility of the work being paid for. War communism fulfilled its mission in so far as it made victory a possibility in the civil war.<sup>53</sup>

The influence of Trotsky's parable can be seen in the changing assessment of 'war communism' by Trotsky loyalist Victor Serge. Writing in 1922, Serge condemns the Kronstadt rising and defends Bolshevik policy.<sup>54</sup> In his book-length study from the late 1920s, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, Serge considers war communism at greater length and justifies it in terms that go well beyond the chronological framework of the book. Defining war communism as 'an ambitious attempt to organise socialist production', he argues that it was responsible for victory in the civil war and *not* responsible for the decline in production. He also asserts that if international circumstances had been more favourable the same methods might have achieved great success. In all this, he follows Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* and his 1922 speech to the Comintern.<sup>55</sup>

In 1937, the tone is strikingly different. In *Destiny of a Revolution*, Serge cites Trotsky's memoirs to show that in 1920, 'by misfortune Lenin's clear-sightedness is defective this time, he doesn't see the possibility of quitting the road of war communism without surrendering to the rural counter-revolution'.<sup>56</sup> The bitterness of Serge's attack on war communism becomes more intense in his memoirs written in the mid-1940s. Here the definition of 'war communism' is expanded to include everything he disliked about the regime, including the party monopoly, the terror and requisitioning (that is, taking grain without compensation). Bolshevik policy suggestions arose solely out of a stunning ignorance of what was really going on (Serge seriously suggests, for example, that the head of the food-supply ministry thought the black market was completely unimportant). But now Serge adds an element that is *not* in Trotsky's memoirs – the claim that in 1920 the Bolshevik leaders thought that their policies were not transitory measures but communism *tout court*.<sup>57</sup>

This claim became the keystone of Isaac Deutscher's immensely influential chapter on war communism in the first volume of his biography of Trotsky. This chapter – 'Defeat in Victory' – is the foundation text for all further academic discourse on war communism. Deutscher very explicitly argues that the crisis could have been solved without any unpleasantness:

To cope with [the crisis] one of two courses of action had to be taken. The government could stop the requisitioning of food from the peasant and introduce an agricultural tax, in kind or money. Having paid his taxes, the peasant could then be permitted to dispose of his crop as he pleased, to

consume it, sell-it, or barter it. This would have induced him to grow the surpluses for urban consumption. With the flow of food from country to town restored, the activity of the state-owned industries could be expected to revive. This indeed would have been the only real solution. But a reform of this kind implied the revival of private trade; and it could not but explode the whole edifice of war communism, in the erection of which the Bolsheviks took so much pride.<sup>58</sup>

It all seems so simple. Money was notoriously valueless, but a money tax would have provided the government with necessary resources. There were no industrial consumer items then available, but the peasants would have undertaken backbreaking labour in order to get them. The workers had no food, but they would have gladly waited many long months until the extra grain presumably sown in spring 1920 became available for exchange. The transport system was on the point of collapse, but massive new demands on the system created by a private market in grain would have repaired the locomotives and gotten snow off the tracks without harsh labour discipline and compulsory labour duties. Soviet Russia was still completely isolated and threatened with invasion, but the inability to feed a large army would not have created any security threat.

At the end of the passage, Deutscher suggests the motive for refusing such an obvious solution – the Bolsheviks' pride in the edifice of war communism. They *liked* taking grain without compensation. 'The Bolshevik was . . . inclined to see the essential features of fully fledged communism embodied in the war economy of 1919–20.'<sup>59</sup> Having identified the Bolshevik view of socialism with the war economy, Deutscher proceeds to identify the war economy with Stalin's concentration camps. Trotsky argued that 'the workers' state had the right to use forced labour; and he was sincerely disappointed that they did not rush to enrol in the labour camps . . . What was only one of many facets in Trotsky's experimental thinking was to become Stalin's alpha and omega.'<sup>60</sup>

The Deutscher scenario became even more usable for the right when Moshe Lewin and others decided to use war communism as a polemical weapon in their advocacy of 'market socialism'. Lewin puts the blame for the economic crisis of 1920 squarely on Marxist hostility to the market. War communism started when the Bolsheviks

began to speed up the dismantling of [capitalist] mechanisms and to replace them with more direct controls and distributive administrative techniques, apparently as a deliberate implementation of a suddenly rediscovered theory. This conception of a socialist economy explains why the illusion could

spread, why with undue obstinacy it was adhered to for far longer than the economy could bear, and why it was disastrous.<sup>61</sup>

In turn, the failure of war communism explains why Lenin, Bukharin and Trotsky began to rethink and redefine socialism as compatible with markets. Unfortunately there was a 'swing of the pendulum' under Stalin back to war communism and the original Marxist anti-market definition of socialism. Thus we see that the aim of Lewin's narrative is to draw the tightest possible link between the Marxist conception of socialism, the illusions of war communism, the disastrous state of the Russian economy in 1920, and the tyrannical Stalin era.

Lewin and other were so engaged in their fight for reform of the Soviet system that they did not notice how effective their own narrative was in the hands of the right. The right did understand these implications – that is why writers such as Martin Malia and Robert Conquest willingly cite Lewin as an authority on war communism, even though his account is utterly undocumented.<sup>62</sup>

The consensus on war communism created by Deutscher and Lewin is still unchallenged today. The chapter on war communism in Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy* is so strongly derivative of Deutscher that Figes even uses the same chapter title, 'Defeat in Victory'. Figes uses Deutscher's imagery to make Deutscher's points. Trotsky was not particularly concerned with the national emergency, but only with 'the bureaucratic fantasy of imposing Communism by decree.' This shows his affinity with Stalin: 'Both were driven by the notion that in a backward peasant country such as Russia state coercion could be used to provide a short-cut to Communism'. The main difference with Deutscher is that Figes adds a new – although, if we accept their shared view of the situation, more plausible – moral: 'The perversion was implicit in the system from the start.'<sup>63</sup>

In essential agreement with Figes about Trotsky in 1920 is a recent book by S.A. Smith. Smith is a representative of the left as that term is understood in academic Soviet studies, that is, someone who is not organically incapable of mentioning that the Bolsheviks were sometimes hemmed in by objective constraints. In his *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, for example, we find an innovative discussion of the real dilemmas driving food-supply policy. Yet when it comes to 1920, Smith reverts to form. We are again introduced to Trotsky, 'the most enthusiastic exponent of the idea that "obligation and compulsion" could be used to reconstruct economic life on the basis of a single plan'. True, 'not all Bolsheviks were enamoured of the idea of the labour army as a microcosm of socialist society'. (Although Smith notes that 'not all Bolsheviks' had these crazy ideas, he is uninterested in what

these presumably more sane Bolsheviks thought, probably because Trotsky's nuttiness makes better copy.) After a mention of illusions about money, Smith concludes: 'Over the winter of 1920–21 such euphoria was rapidly dispelled.'<sup>64</sup>

This description is, as advertised, very short and yet it packs in a great many misconceptions. As we have seen, Trotsky tied the use of compulsion strongly to the economic crisis and had no intention of relying on it exclusively even under those circumstances. The 'plan' mentioned here is a broad set of priorities for getting out of the pit of economic breakdown and not a socialist plan that replaced the market – Trotsky insisted that a plan in this sense was many years away. Trotsky described the labour army as a microcosm of contemporaneous Soviet (not 'socialist') society in the same sense that any army reflects the society that produced it, and the specific point Trotsky wanted to make with the comparison was the possibility of class collaboration.

The corpus of Trotsky's pronouncements in 1920 is a crucial source for any engagement with the big questions of the Russian Revolution. The aims of the Revolution, their relation to pre-war revolutionary and socialist traditions, their role in determining the outcome of the Revolution, the role of the Bolshevik party in leading and/or repressing popular revolt – none of these issues can be seriously debated without a firm grasp of Trotsky's reaction to a crisis that he regarded as an inevitable companion to revolution. And Trotsky is only one of the voices of 1920, albeit among the more voluble and authoritative of them. This essay has not aimed at tackling the big questions themselves but rather at making such a discussion possible. We have to know that we do not know the basic elements of the Bolshevik outlook during these years. This salutary realization will not occur as long as historians who disagree on so much else join hands in affirming the reality of the will-o'-the-wisp that is Bolshevik 'euphoria' in 1920.