

known example of how even after all the trials of the Civil War a section of the Russian fleet and proletariat could not only foresee for themselves some of the harmful aspects of the New Economic Policy but also raise some as their central demand the political one of free elections to the Soviets. For this they were miserably slandered and crushed by force of arms!

The experience of the Makhnovites in the Ukraine is a well known example of how the organisation of anti-capitalist regional autonomy was treated by a government pledged to minority rights of national self-determination. It was miserably slandered, double-crossed and crushed by force of arms!

Another interesting, but less well known area to investigate would be what happened to the soldiers' Soviets. It is a common apology of latter-day Leninists that the war disrupted Soviet democracy, yet this war also saw the development of a coherent army. What happened to Soviet democracy in that? Did it go out the door when Trotsky re-introduced many traditional features of military discipline?

Analysis

I should end with some indication of what the consequences of the above analysis are for revolutionaries. Revolutionaries in a revolutionary situation have a crucial responsibility to raise the question of power—the organisation of the masses for their own ends. We should seek, however, the construction of a united and democratic organisation of this power, and see this as



THE BUREACRACY: Stalin in 1929. By this time any idea about socialism had long been forgotten.

the active force, rather than acting "on its behalf". We should not take a mandate from such an organisation to form a government, but rather fight for its own involvement in decision making.

We should be prepared for workers in struggle to throw up a plurality of organisations, and seek to develop these into a common unity, rather than stifle their development.

We must above all beware of those who may seek to develop these into a common

unity, rather than stifle their development.

We must above all beware of those who may seek to refer uncritically to the Bolsheviks' record as a source of prescriptions in crisis.

At all times, whether in revolutionary struggle or in the political tasks we undertake in the present day, the beacon towards which we steer is the mass self-determination of labour.

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RUSSIA 1917

57



13000 fully armed soldiers from Kronstadt arrivé at Petrograd to fight the White general Kornilov. Lenin called them the 'flower of the revolution'.

The revolutionary process in Russia was associated with widespread discontent. Russia's participation in the imperialist First World War had placed tremendous strain on all aspects of society.

Although the war initially supplied some industrialists with considerable gains, it rapidly rendered the Russian economy derelict. For example, by the end of 1916 iron and steel production had fallen to 1/6 of its 1914 level, and coal production to 1/10 of its 1914 level. The rail transport system had come completely unstuck, with 1/3 of its locomotives out of commission waiting for repairs. The Russian general staff had mobilised some 15 million men, an estimated 1/3 of the male agricultural and industrial workforce, draining the land of manpower in order to form an army which they were increasingly unable to supply with munitions and basic necessities.

In the countryside the area of cultivated land was contracting and yield had declined by as much as 1/3. Starvation haunted the factories and the front; yet inflation made the richer peasants increasingly reluctant to part with their surplus produce above what they needed to sell to pay taxes.

What is known as the February Revolution was essentially the beginning of two simultaneous tendencies. On the one hand, all sections of the masses began to take actions and to raise demands directed towards the alleviation of those grievances which the war had either created or worsened. The soldiers wanted food and an end to the war; the factory workers, food and an end to the miserable conditions of their employment; the peasants, land enough to give them security from the vagaries of the market and freedoms from the landowners, merchants and tax collectors who were their scourge. On the other hand, there was a succession of provisional governments which failed either to crush these protests or to end them by finding solutions to the underlying problems.

Why did these governments fail? Partly because the disaffection of the soldiers limited their capacity for repressive action, but also partly because they were governments of the bourgeoisie which felt itself threatened by every aspiration of the masses.

Capital

The sort of social development associated with the bourgeoisie in America and

RUSSIA 1917

The last months of 1977 have seen the socialist press publish many celebrations of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The interpretation of this major episode in working-class history is one of the areas in which Libertarian Communists take a rather different attitude from that of those revolutionaries anxious to be of a 'Leninist' or 'Trotskyist' tradition.

The Libertarian Communist Group admits, however, that a comprehensive and agreed libertarian alternative has yet to be produced. What we present here, therefore, is by no means a group position. It is rather an individual viewpoint, which we hope exhibits the spirit of criticism we feel on this subject as a group, whilst contributing to the ongoing process of resolving this problem by new analyses.

Western Europe had not take place in Russia. The political ambitions and competence of the Russian bourgeoisie were determined by their particular history. Their main characteristics were that they were dominated by foreign capital, their resources were often concentrated in large and modern plants, and they tended to be subservient to a state apparatus which could claim substantial responsibility for their existence. The Russian bourgeoisie did not sociologically or economically merge with the proletariat through intermediate layers of urban petty bourgeoisie. They were, on the contrary, acutely aware of the gulf between themselves and the large concentrations of workers in the factories. They were accustomed not to side with these latter against the autocratic state, but rather to call upon this state to obliterate all manifestations of independent proletarian activity. The Russian bourgeoisie cursed the imperial bureaucracy for its inefficiency and railed against the privileges of the court factions, but they had, and needed, little political programme of their own beyond

the hope of 'a united government composed of men enjoying the confidence of the country'. They dare not even stir up the peasantry, entangled as they were in a web of commercial interests with the major landlords and fearful of any change in established property relations.

Involvement in the war was itself a consequence of the combined interests of the autocracy and the bourgeoisie. Foreign control of leading sectors of industrial growth (e.g. of 60% of the output of pig iron) and especially of the money supply (e.g. 55% of Petrograd's bank resources were in foreign hands on the eve of the Revolution) gave an economic rationale to the military alliances. The bourgeoisie hoped, moreover, that success in battle would bring renewed economic and political gains in Turkey, Afghanistan and Poland.

Property

Once the autocracy had been blown away, it became increasingly evident that the bourgeois parties and those socialists who put their faith in a 'bourgeois stage' in

the revolutionary process had nothing to offer. The key contribution of the Bolsheviks between February and October was to define the question of the agency through which could be accomplished those measures whose absence kept the masses in turmoil—the ending of the war, confiscation of land by the peasants, satisfaction of the workers grievances in industry—as a question of class power.

The issue of bourgeois property was hardly ever raised directly by the mass movements of the period, except insofar as the land expropriations of the peasants threatened it or the weak class-anarchist current could get a hearing. In general terms the question of bourgeois property was only raised indirectly, through the medium of the political consequences the bourgeoisie felt necessary for its survival.

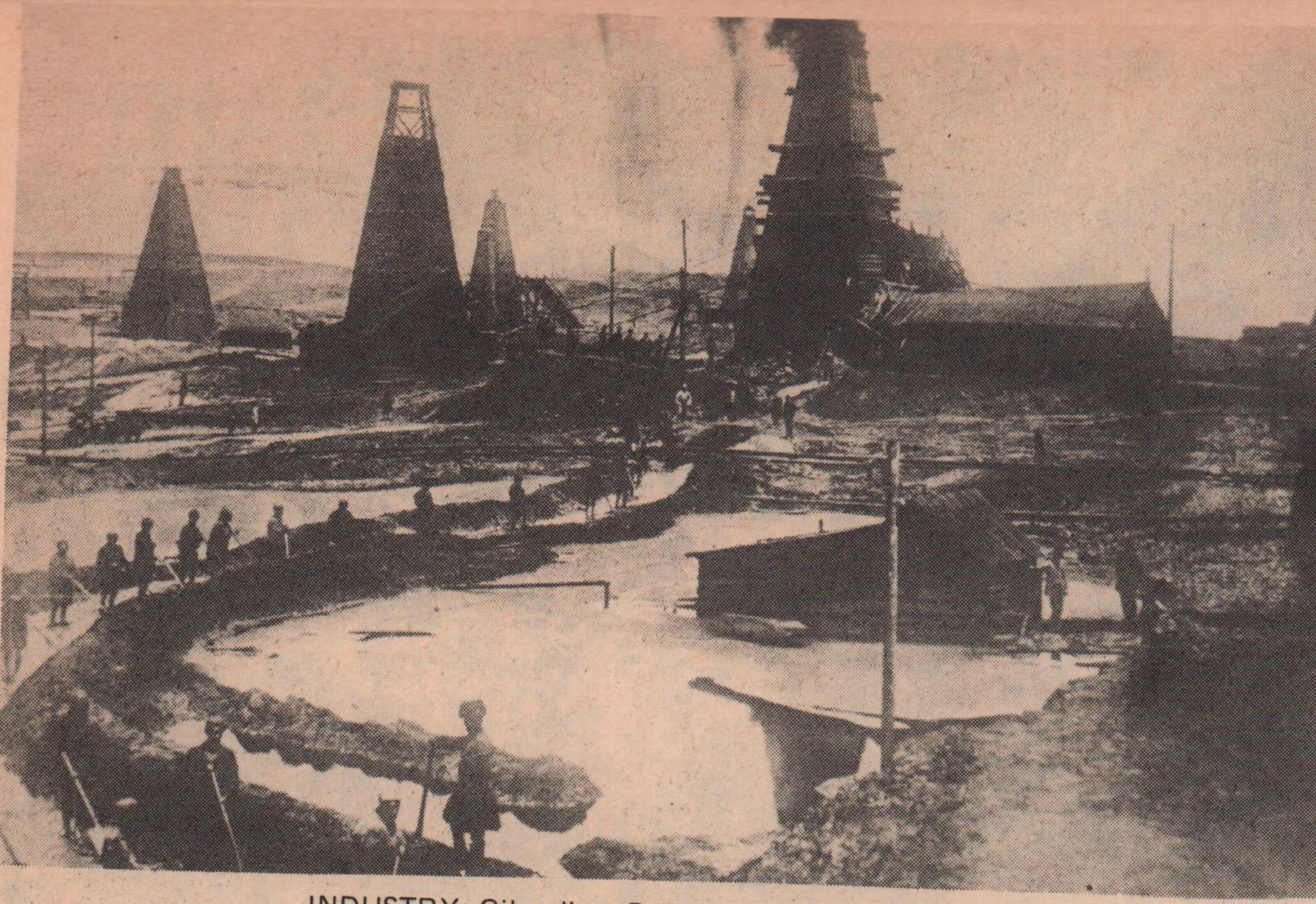
October saw the removal of the bourgeoisie from power at least insofar as it saw the removal of its representatives from the government and the abandoning of the political objectives with which it had associated itself.

Soviets

A new organisation, the Soviets, had emerged as the location for the formulation of social objectives, an organisation associated with the participation and the policies of the previously oppressed social classes, the workers and eventually the peasants. This political expropriation provided the context for an entire social reconstruction. The capacity for organisation and struggle provided by the proletariat along with the allegiance of the soldiers, had laid down the conditions for the working people of both town and country to begin to determine the nature of their own work according to their own assessment of social needs and objectives. Or had it.

We know now that somehow, somewhere along the line, the workers and the peasants were to get left out of the process. Whereas under capitalism workers are alienated because social priorities are ultimately ordered and controlled by the accumulation of capital, the Russian workers were rapidly to find they had almost as little influence over the ordering and control of a bureaucratic planning which, if it did not behave in exactly the same way as capital, seemed nevertheless just as remote and alien.

Let's consider for a moment this question



INDUSTRY: Oil wells at Baku before the revolution.

of involvement. On the one hand its failure to appear in the Soviet planning process did not prevent the accomplishment of tasks which a Russian capitalism, as dependent on imperialist capital, might well have found impossible should it somehow have survived the state to which it was brought by the war. On the other hand, in purely productive terms its significance would surely have been of a positive nature in terms of the accurate assessment of objectives, potential capacities etc. What's more, workers who know why they are working and feel an interest in their work tend to work better. I believe, however, that it is as wrong on this side of the argument to leave matters exclusively at the level of productive efficiency as it is to ignore it. We have an interest in the rationalisation and planning of the productive forces insofar as such objectives coincide with our total species development.

The understanding of, and responding to, social needs and capacities by each of us individually as part of the collective, changes not merely the "how" of production, but also the "what" and the "why". That is the importance of the mass self-determination of labour in the revolutionary process.

What happened to the mass self-determination of labour in Russia? We could slip here into total and unapologetic fatalism. We could stop at pointing out that for us to seize hold of the world there must be ideal conditions for the revolution the world over. We see that from its onset the Russian Revolution was hampered by the non-occurrence of revolution elsewhere, in that workers aid from advanced industrial nations was not forthcoming, whilst imperialist counter-revolution was. We see that this placed the task of reconstruction in the context of a small and shattered industry hung in potential tension, with an overwhelming mass of newly independent peasant-farmers. We can see that both the Russian workers and the peasants were but poorly developed in terms of technical, cultural, organisational and political experience. These were certainly daunting problems.

Nevertheless, it is only after we have assured ourselves that everything possible was done that could have been done to sustain the mass self-determination of labour, even under these conditions, that we can allow ourselves the judgement that the disappearance of this component to the degree seen in Russia was unavoidable.

Lenin

Of particular interest to us should be the

THE TERROR

It is worth mentioning here the general question of repression in this period. From the very first days of the Revolution the vitality of the mass movement was endangered by the harassment, official and semi-official, of critics of the Bolsheviks. As early as December 1917 the 'Cheka', the 'Extraordinary Commission', had emerged from the Petrograd military-revolutionary committee, and it had not been too sensitive in its

search for 'counter-revolutionary' activities. The Bolsheviks do not appear to have advocated the right of appeal of all suspected 'counter-revolutionaries' to their local Soviet. Instead, only Sovnarkom, if that, had control over the 'terror'. Indeed, this 'terror' varied widely in practice. At times it was of a fairly petty nature, for instance, Voline writes in his **Unknown Revolution** of the cutting off of

performance of the revolutionary leadership, the Bolsheviks. That so much was achieved was due to the fact that the workers and soldiers in particular rallied behind the posing by the Bolsheviks of the necessity for a new power in Russia. Without this consolidation of the idea of a new social organisation, the way would have been left open for the autocrats and the bourgeoisie to impose a most violent and



All-Russian Congress of Factory and Shop Committees.

bloody retribution.

For the rest of this article, however, we must proceed to look at, as it were, the other side of the Bolshevik coin, in terms of the posing of the issue of social power.

The big question, of course, is the one of how the Bolsheviks related the party itself to this change in social power. I interpret the dominant tendency in the Bolsheviks to have been one that tended to conflate the Party and the exercise of power by the proletariat (also understanding this exercise of power to be the proletariats way of leading the peasantry). This tendency was the one represented by Lenin. A neat expression of the conflation comes, for instance, in his work *On Compromises*. He said

"Our Party, like any political party, is

electricity supplies to the print works of the Anarcho-Syndicalist paper Golos Truda, and of the jostling and chasing away of its street sellers etc. It could also amount to repression of sizeable proportions, for instance, in April 1918, the Cheka seized Anarchists of all tendencies, from partisans to pacifists. Whatever its specific manifestations, the general characteristic of the terror and its lack of responsibility to direct Soviet institutions undoubtedly contributed in its own way to the centralising ossification of the Revolution.

striving after political domination for itself. Our aim is the dictatorship of the revolutionary proletariat." A rather vaguer expression of the same thing occurs in the better known work Left Wing Communism. "The mere presentation of the question 'dictatorship of the party or dictatorship of the class' testifies to the most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking... It is common knowledge... that as a rule and in most cases... classes are led by political parties."

It is also possible, of course, to find passages of Lenin in which he seems to emphasise the sovereignty of the Soviets rather than that of the Party. In *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* for instance, he wrote of the Soviets

"This apparatus, by virtue of the fact that its personnel is elected and subject to recall at the peoples will without bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus."

In the final analysis, it is to the practice of the Bolsheviks to which we must turn. There we see a practice which reveals a repeated emphasis upon the Party, especially on the Party as government, rather than upon the fight to involve the workers and peasants in the Soviets as decision-making bodies, where the leading role of the proletariat, insofar as it still had one, could be expressed politically.

The organisation and accomplishment of October was the responsibility not of the Soviets as a whole, but rather of the

protesting at the extent to which Sovnarkom was governing with previous submission to VTsIK. A resolution supporting Sovnarkom in this was passed, however, and thereafter Sovnarkom began to operate with increasing independence.

The constitution eventually passed by the 5th All-Russian Congress did nothing to counteract the lack of initiative of the Soviets and the drift of power away from VTsIK to Sovnarkom. The crucial point, however, is that there was no attempt by the Bolsheviks to prevent this contraction of political influence.

In the period between the insurrection and the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly they had spread confusion as to whether the Assembly or the Soviets were to be the sovereign organisation, eventually making a complete about turn on the matter. They had not consistently fought in the Soviets for the Soviets to proclaim their sovereignty. As events proceeded they were to show further unwillingness to take matters into the Soviets. They were also to show themselves unable to foster initiatives taken by the workers outside the Soviets.

Peace

No doubt in the early days many Soviet delegates had been engaged in heated discussion in their localities over the questions upon which they would be called upon to ratify a decision. In the case of the insurrection and the dismissing of the

Bolshevik dominated Petrograd Soviet and its military-revolutionary committee. The Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets merely ratified the event, and legitimised a 'provisional workers and peasants government' which was to direct affairs 'until the convocation of the Constituent Assembly'.

This provisional government consisted of the Bolshevik-dominated Council of Peoples Commissars (Sovnarkom) and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). When the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets opened in January 1918, however, it found itself again merely ratifying a decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly already executed by the VTsIK. That the Second Congress had left behind. Or rather, by a VTsIK which had more than doubled its size since then: 108 delegates had been added by the peasant congress in November, another 100 had appeared from the army and the fleet, and 50 from the Trades Unions.

As a result of these events, the crucial opening period of the Revolution was marked by considerable confusion as to where decision making and political power were actually located. This confusion was not limited to the question of the competence of the All-Russian Congress. There was further confusion between VTsIK and Sovnarkom. The latter body conferred legislative power on itself by a decree of 30th Oct 1917. In doing so it admitted 2 qualifications. Its powers were to be valid 'only to the convocation of the Constituent Assembly' and VTsIK had the power to 'defer, modify or annul' any of its enactments.

Within a week of the passing of this decree non-Bolsheviks in VTsIK were

Constituent Assembly there does not seem to have been much disagreement. However, on the question of the peace negotiations with Germany, there was disagreement, and this makes it a good issue around which to study the participation of the Soviets in government in their heyday.

It is particularly important here to separate the question of the rights or wrongs of the Brest-Litovks settlement from the way in which it was achieved. There was considerable disagreement at the time on the matter. On the one hand those who saw the need for a settlement even at the price of annexations in order to give the new government a breathing space. On the other those who thought that the abandonment of aggression and the front coupled with propaganda and partisan resistance to any offensive would provide both a workable military strategy and also an inspiration to the workers of Europe. According to the bourgeois historian Shapiro (*Origins of the Communist Autocracy*), the government went so far as to take a referendum of the views of some of the Soviets and found that a majority were in favour of the second course of action outlined above.

Given the length of the negotiations and the strength of feeling in the country, this was an issue on which the Bolsheviks could

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have sought the widest possible debate, and made the final decision of all the Soviets. Debate was certainly fierce in VTsIK and the Bolshevik Party, but it does not appear to have been politically centralised outside these bodies. Certainly, the extraordinary 4th All-Russian Congress of Soviets of March 1918 was called merely to ratify the treaty.

It was the way the decision was taken as much as the actual settlement which had tremendous repercussions on the Soviets. In particular the main non-Bolshevik party, the Left Social Revolutionaries, lost confidence in the Soviets and proceeded to appeal to the workers and peasants to take up arms against the Germans, without the sanction of the Soviets. The German ambassador, Nirbach, was assassinated, and clashes occurred between revolutionary partisan units and troops loyal to VTsIK. As a result the Left Social Revolutionaries were expelled from VTsIK, and their presses were closed down.

In the handling of decisions relating to the Constituent Assembly, and to the peace, and in the operation of the terror, we see components of the decline of mass involvement in the Soviets. We see that the Bolsheviks did not seek to foster this involvement, and indeed, through their handling of the terror and of the organisation of the Soviets, served to hinder it. The progressive alienation of Soviet power was not simply a matter of the quality of involvement in the Soviets themselves. This was particularly true with regard to the proletariat, and its relations with the entire sector of public life associated with the management of the economy.

In the general upheaval after February 1917 the Soviets had not been the only form of working-class organisation to develop. Many industrial enterprises had seen the founding of plant based workers committees. On May 30th 1917 a conference of such factory committees in Petrograd defined themselves as 'fighting organisations elected on the basis of the widest democracy' seeking to create 'new conditions at work' and the 'organisation of thorough control of labour over production and distribution'. Individual committees seem to have varied from types of trade union branch to revolutionary organisations of the shop floor.

On October 17th 1917, however, an all-Russian conference of such committees called for the passing of all power to the Soviets, mainly due to the Bolsheviks having a majority at the conference.

The existence of the factory committee movement raised important questions about the running of the economy in the post-October period. The first of these was whether or not the factory committees could assume "ownership" of their places of work. The Bolshevik conception was quite clearly that Soviet power did not involve actual expropriation of the bourgeoisie. They did not propose any sweeping measures of confiscation.

The Bolsheviks envisaged a controlled or directed capitalism, "state capitalism" in Lenin's words, arrived at by such measures as the nationalisation of credit. However, this strategy collapsed rapidly even before the introduction of "war communism". In many places the employers simply fled, in others they were summarily deposed. Repeated Soviet decrees stating the need for



Anarchist banner in the Ukraine.

government approval of any expropriation went unheeded. The Bolsheviks could do little to curb this movement.

Mixed up with the problem of whether or not to take over the factories was the wider problem of what the basis was to be for assessing and implementing economic objectives, and what role the factory committees were to play in these processes.

Solution

The Bolshevik solution to the problem involved the effective subordination of the organs of working-class power to officials appointed by the state. On November 14th VTsIK passed a decree on workers control which laid down what the factory committees could and could not do. Factory committees were to remain in control of their individual enterprises, but were to be ultimately under the control of the "All-Russian Council of Workers Control", which was itself dominated by representatives of the Trades Unions. (The general relation of the factory committees to the Trades Unions is by no means clear, but the committees do seem to have been at this stage the more authentic rank and file movement.) Moreover, 'in all enterprises of state importance' (A phrase which could mean anything) all factory representatives were to be 'answerable to the State for the maintenance of the strictest order and discipline and for the protection of property'.

Following the passing of the decree a projected All-Russian Congress of Factory Committees was prevented from meeting. Eventually, on December 5th 1917, a further step was taken with the creation of the Supreme Economic Council (Vesenka), empowered to work out 'a plan for the organisation of the economic life of the country and the financial resources of the government'. A few members of the All-Russian Council of Workers Control, now subordinate to Vesenka, did sit on this new body, but they were outnumbered by representatives of the Commissariats and by specialists appointed by the government.

In the space of a few months, therefore, the skeleton of a planning system was erected which gave exceedingly little scope to the initiative and involvement of the working class through its factory organisation. Decisions about economic priorities were to be increasingly taken by state departments connected with the working class neither through the Soviets nor through any separate organisation based on the factory committees. It was not long before the combination of undemocratic centralisation of control, civil war, increased economic chaos and demoralisation began to threaten even those rights in plant organisation which the factory committees had fought for and won. (Some latter-day Leninists point to the economic chaos as an example of how badly the committees fared without central control. How they could develop more than "parochial" interests when they were repeatedly being cut off

the ability to recognise that the class came above the individual factory, and the desire to be involved in the formulation of class wide objectives. From the first day the Bolsheviks opposed rather than encouraged this ability and desire.

Kronstadt

We can see, I hope, that there are, at least, cases to be further investigated with regards to the ability of the Russian masses to sustain involvement in the revolutionary process. Although the Bolsheviks contributed to the circumstances where such activity and involvement could flourish, they failed to fight for it, and eventually actively hindered it. What's more, still other features of the Russian Revolution could be considered in this light, were it not for lack of space.

The experience of Kronstadt is a well



PARTRIDGE SHOOT: Red Army soldiers massacre the sailors and inhabitants of the Kronstadt garrison. Throughout the firing the huge gun emplacements of the garrison remained facing out to sea, guarding against the possibility of White attack. The people of Kronstadt had insisted on carrying out re-elections for their Soviet: Trotsky said in his ultimatum to them 'We will shoot you down like partridges'.

from centralised organisation is generally left unexplained.)

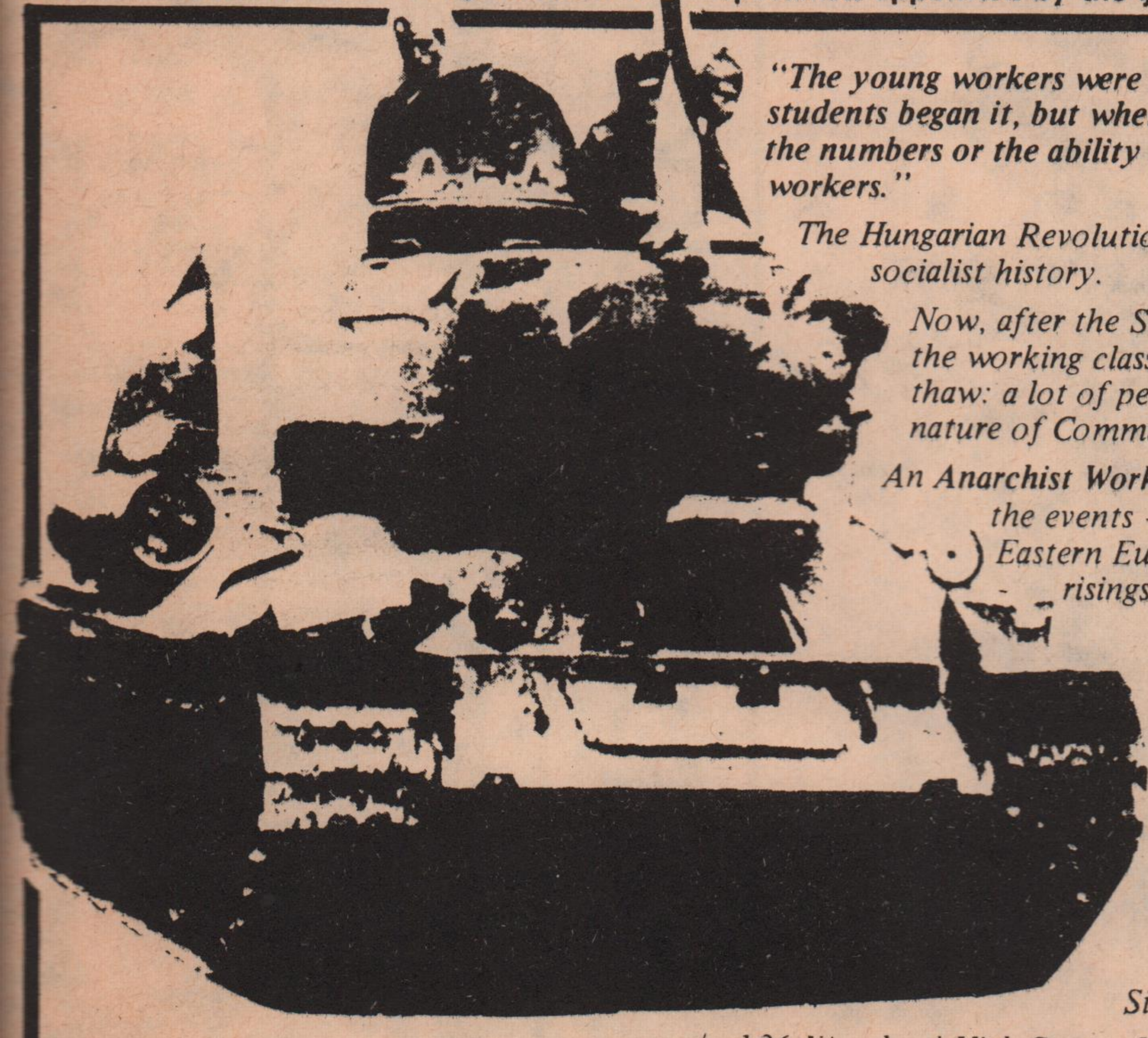
Lenin's Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government gives, as early as April 1918, an indication of how the Bolsheviks intended to cope with the problems. Among the measures he proposed were the introduction of piece-work, "Taylorian" systems of work organisation, a card system for registering the productivity of each worker, productivity bonuses and stricter discipline. He wrote "Unquestioning submission to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of labour processes that are based on large-scale machine industry . . . today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of the labour process."

The working class had been given no opportunity to express itself on these matters through the Soviets. Where it did express itself, through the factory committees, and later, to a certain extent, through the Trade Unions, it showed both

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