

Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Russia, 1917-1928¹

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The centenary of the overthrow of the Tsarist regime and the Provisional Government and the establishment of soviet power is a moment of ideologically-charged discussion about what happened in 1917 and how these events and the subsequent development of "Communism" in Russia should be understood. In this context, I outline a historical materialist approach to the issues of revolution and counter-revolution that are most important to understanding the Russian experience and use this to develop an argument in defence of two central claims, concentrating on the second.

The first is that in 1917 a socialist revolution took place that, within the territories in which it was successful, destroyed the class power of the dominant landlord-capitalist class and replaced it with working-class rule. This argument is not original. It is, however, necessary to make here because of the stubbornly common belief that the October Revolution was nothing more than a Bolshevik coup.

The second claim is that by late 1918 working-class rule had been replaced with something qualitatively different, the rule of a working-class leadership layer that improvised a fragile state to defend the revolution, and that the social layer at the top of this surplus-extracting state of proletarian origin evolved by the late 1920s into a new ruling class. This outcome represented the triumph of counter-revolution, definitively ending the rupture with class society that had been initiated in 1917. The loss of working-class rule and the eventual consolidation of a new ruling class were not the result of Bolshevik ideology, although this did influence the trajectory of developments. The decisive causes were material pressures acting on a working class plunged into catastrophic social crisis and war in 1918 and then, after the Civil War, on the party-state leadership layer that sought to maintain its state against Western European capitalist societies with their more powerful productive forces and militaries as well as the classes from which it had to extract surpluses in order to reproduce its rule.

I Theoretical Preliminaries for a Historical Materialist Understanding of the Russian Revolution

In order to have the most fruitful kind of discussions about what took place in Russia in 1917 and the years that followed, it is necessary to clarify a number of key concepts. Without a shared theoretical framework, we can describe and analyze events but our ability to understand the world-historic social processes that unfolded and their significance for us today will inevitably be limited. With that in mind, I will offer a minimalist discussion of a number of concepts from the perspective of a reconstructed historical materialism that remains committed to the hypothesis that at the very least substantial progress in a transition from capitalism towards a society without class exploitation and state relations is possible.

Revolution is the first concept in need of clarification. A good starting point is Perry Anderson (1988) definition: "an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target, that has a determinate beginning -- when the old state apparatus is still intact -- and a finite end, when that apparatus is decisively ended and a new one erected in its stead" (p. 322). However, it is essential to distinguish between political and social revolutions. Neil Davidson (2012) suggests, convincingly, that

If the categories of political and social revolution are to be helpful in terms of historical understanding, then I think we have to narrow the scope of political revolutions so they are not about transformation but control of the state and broaden the scope of social revolutions so that transformations of the state can be both an effect and a cause of

socioeconomic transformation. Political revolutions therefore take place *within* a socioeconomic structure and social revolutions involve a *change from* one socioeconomic structure to another (p. 492).

This elucidation points to the need to modify Anderson's general definition by removing the insistence that a revolution ends when a new assemblage of state power replaces the previous one; a political revolution may well involve a change in who controls a state apparatus that does not fundamentally restructure it. While the distinction between political and social revolutions is clear enough, Davidson (2012) adds that "the relationship between political and social revolutions is complex. Some political revolutions have social implications and all social revolutions have political implications" (p. 495). Social revolutions themselves should not be equated with lengthier processes of transition from one mode of production to another, which may or may not involve social revolutions. "A focus on fundamental change at the level of the state seems to be the best means of distinguishing between the process of modal transition and the moment of social revolution" (p. 493).

The Russian Revolution was, of course, seen by the Bolshevik leadership and most of its opponents as a particular kind of revolution: a socialist revolution. This kind of social revolution should be understood as one that involves a rupture with the capitalist mode of production and the start of a transition to socialism. But what is socialism? I use this term in the sense of what Marx called, "in different texts, equivalently: communism, socialism, Republic of Labour, society of free and associated producers or simply Association, Cooperative Society, (re)union of free individuals" (Chattopadhyay, 2016, p. 217). This is different from the usage of the term by some Marxists² to refer to an early stage in the transition to communism in Marx's sense, what Marx (1968) called in the text generally referred to as "Critique of the Gotha Programme" "the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society" (p. 324). Socialism in my sense (following Marx³) would be "a society of free and associated individuals with social ownership of the means of production and without state, commodity production or wage labour" (Chattopadhyay, 2016, p. 230). It would transcend both states and markets, since "both express modes of social alienation in which human beings are unable to regulate and govern their economic and political affairs democratically, and in which institutions and mechanisms outside their control dominate and direct their life activities" (McNally, 1993, p. 186)

A socialist revolution, then, is one that initiates a transition towards such a society. Its essential feature is that it establishes working-class rule (equivalent to what Marx "commonly called the 'conquest of political power by the proletariat'" with "several interchangeable labels in Marx's writings: 'workers' state,' the 'political ascendancy (or sway, *Herrschaft*) of the proletariat,' 'workers' political (or state) power,' the 'rule (*Herrschaft*) of the proletariat,' and some others" including "the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'" [Draper, 1986, p. 1]). A socialist revolution makes the working class the dominant or ruling class (whether alone or in combination with one or more other classes). The class that rules is "the most fully *developed*" class, "the class which is organized and concentrated on a society-wide basis" (Hoffman, 1986, p. 351). Unlike capitalist rule, which can be exercised through a number of different political forms, from fascism to democratic republics that grant extensive social rights to citizens, working-class rule can only exist as the democratic control of society by the working class. The capitalist class can be dominant in a territory in the absence of any democratic political institutions and without any involvement by capitalists in government and state administration,

thanks to its control of social production as private property. In contrast, the working class, lacking private property in the means of production, can rule only if its members are in democratic control of important social decisions. This includes decisions concerning both the "political" affairs of public life and the "economic" issues of social production. In the straightforward words of dissident US Trotskyist Joseph Carter, "without political power the working class cannot be the ruling class in any sense" (cited in van der Linden, 2009, p. 94). Although this conception of working-class rule is not an argument from authority, it was Marx's view.⁴

Working-class rule is a necessary condition for any progress to be made in a transition towards socialism. Since socialism would be a society of freely-associated producers, only the agency of the direct producers themselves can reconstruct society in ways that begin to lay the basis for socialism; no other group's activity can be a substitute for the self-activity of the working class in the creation of socialism. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1988) put it, "the realization of socialism on the proletariat's behalf by any party or bureaucracy whatsoever is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms, a square circle, an underwater bird" (p. 297). Many things might be done by others on behalf of the direct producers and in their name, but not movement towards socialism.

With reference to this theoretical conception of socialist revolution, the meaning of counter-revolution deserves a brief preliminary clarification. I suggest that we understand it simply as the negation of the rupture with class society initiating a process of transition to socialism accomplished by a socialist revolution. This entails the establishment of the rule of an exploiting class, either the one deprived of social supremacy by revolution or a new one. A counter-revolution need not mirror a revolution in being, in Anderson's previously-cited phrase, "an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target," although that is a logical possibility.

These theoretical positions on the meaning of socialism, the character of working-class rule and the necessity of its existence for any transition towards socialism differ from those of most self-identified Marxists. A likely objection is that they lead to the conclusion that the kind of society that developed under Communist Party rule in the USSR (not to mention other similar societies) was not in transition towards a classless, stateless society after democratic working-class control ceased to function but since we know that such a transition had at least begun (even if after a certain point socialism was no longer "being built") the theoretical perspective must be defective.

No matter how common such an objection is, it is one that I wholeheartedly reject. It rests on the assumption that the USSR, in spite of its shortcomings, must have been in transition to socialism in the sense of the term used here. To defend this assumption, working-class rule must be redefined and the necessity of the self-determining agency of the working class for the reconstruction of society in the direction of socialism must be jettisoned (it is rare for people who hold such views to argue that Marx was wrong on the issues at stake, but that is what such views imply). The crudest expression of this stance is "they said they were building socialism so they must have been building socialism." A more sophisticated argument is that the organization of the means of production as nationalized property in the USSR was in and of itself evidence of a society in transition to socialism. This was the position advanced in 1936 by Leon Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*:

The nationalization of the land, the means of industrial production, transport and

exchange, together with the monopoly of foreign trade, constitute the basis of the Soviet social structure. Through these relations, established by the proletarian revolution, the nature of the Soviet Union as a proletarian state is for us basically defined (Trotsky, 1970, p. 248).

On this basis, the USSR was "a *preparatory regime transitional* from capitalism to socialism" (p. 47), with socialism meaning what Marx called "the lowest stage of communism" (p. 47). Note here that the state is defined as a workers' state by virtue of the presence of state property, not the rule of the working class -- a completely different understanding from the theoretical approach taken here (following Marx). Equally important, the approach taken by Trotsky treats a legal-political form as sufficient evidence to prove that a transition to socialism is at least underway. It fails to investigate the social content of this property form to discover what social relations of production operate in society. Even though such an approach may use some of the same words as the one advanced here, its understanding of what working-class rule and the transition to socialism involve is dramatically different. It changes the meaning of these concepts in order to defend the position that the USSR under Stalin was in transition to socialism even though the state had, as Trotsky admitted, "grown into a hitherto unheard of apparatus of compulsion" run by "an uncontrolled force dominating the masses" (p. 51). This should be utterly unconvincing for any historical materialist who shares Marx's belief that the self-emancipation of the working class is at the heart of the socialist project.

II 1917: A Socialist Revolution

What took place in Russia between February and October 1917 was nothing if not a revolution in the sense of Anderson's previously-quoted definition. The "February Revolution" brought down the monarchy, installing the Provisional Government and shaking but not dismantling the rest of the existing state apparatus. It also gave birth to an extraordinary level of working-class and, to a lesser extent, peasant self-activity and self-organization. By the spring approximately 700 soviets had been created, with workers and soldiers quicker to form them than were peasants (Smith, 2017, p. 108). Having toppled the Tsar, workers then "determined to overthrow 'autocracy' on the shop floor" (p. 117) and started to form factory committees and unions, as well as militias and other organizations. Thus they created "dual power" in both the political and economic spheres; institutions of democratic working-class power coexisted with the unelected Provisional Government and capitalist power. Rural areas saw a rising tide of direct action by peasants. By autumn peasant self-activity had escalated from incursions on landlords' power into the seizure and redistribution of their property (p. 126). Social relations of gender and national oppression were also rattled by the self-activity of subordinated groups (pp. 140-142, 128-133). The experience of worsening social and political crisis and the failure of the Provisional Government to implement the key demands of workers and peasants drove an uneven but quickening process of popular radicalization (Smith, 1983; Mandel, 1984), brilliantly evoked in China Mieville (2017)'s historical narrative. The Provisional Government lost most of its support among both the exploited, who increasingly placed their faith in soviet power, and their exploiters, who sought the imposition of a dictatorship that would restore order. As SA Smith (2017, p. 151) notes, "In the last analysis... the Provisional Government had expired even before the Bolsheviks finished it off." Its overthrow marked the end of dual power in the political sphere. With the power of the landlord-capitalist ruling class broken in much of the territory of

the former empire, the highly-developed and self-organized working class became the dominant class; its democratic institutions were in control of most important social decisions.

What kind of revolution was this? Lars Lih (2017) has recently argued, influenced by Kautsky, that it was not a socialist revolution. Rather, it was, he suggests, "an *anti-bourgeois democratic revolution*"-- made by workers and peasants against the bourgeoisie, but not socialist "in terms of its class content and its program" because "the peasant allies of the proletariat were not ready for socialism." However, Lih's characterization fails to consider the significance of the dual power that had arisen in the paid workplace sphere in inseparable association with the soviets that were the foundation of working-class rule. The combination of soviet government and dual power in workplaces, which in a small minority of cases went further and established workers' self-management (Smith, 1983, p. 24), challenged the power of capital itself. This meant that the unfolding social revolution broke through the boundaries of a bourgeois revolution -- one that would promote the development of "an economy subject to capitalist laws of motion and a state committed to competitive accumulation" (Davidson, 2012, p. 575) -- and took on a socialist character. A social revolution that replaces the rule of an exploiting class with working-class rule initiates a transition towards socialism; it is a socialist revolution. Initiating a transition, making it possible for the working class to begin to reorganize society in a manner whose logic is one of movement towards socialism, must be distinguished from actually starting to reconstruct society in this way. The Russian Revolution opened the door to a transition to socialism. But the conditions in Russia were such that the material potential for undertaking any social reconstruction towards socialism was very minimal. As I will argue in the next part of this paper, the revolution did not lead to movement in this direction.

In the broadest sense, what happened in Russia was made possible by the uneven and combined development of capitalism as a global system. The Tsarist state was one of those states "unable to reproduce the level of development attained by the advanced capitalist states, but nevertheless able to 'unblock' themselves to the extent of making partial advances in specific areas" (Davidson, 2012, p. 297). It was "driven by military competition to introduce limited industrialization and partial agrarian reform" (p. 297). The efforts of the feudal-absolutist state succeeded in fostering pockets of advanced capitalist industry and an urban working class. The capital-labour antagonism this generated was mediated and intensified by the political conditions of Tsarism (including not just repression but a politically-weak capitalist class and the absence of a union officialdom of any significance) and interlaced with the rural class antagonism between peasants and landlords and the conflicts arising out of Russian domination of the other nations contained within the empire. The resulting situation was potentially explosive, and the effects of the First World War (itself a product of the uneven and combined development of global capitalism [Anievas, 2011]) on Tsarist society eventually served as the detonator. However, although these conditions explain the outbreak of revolution they do not explain how the revolution was able to succeed as a socialist revolution. Here the agency of the Bolsheviks was crucial, as John Eric Marot (2013, pp. 117-165) has emphasised. The Bolsheviks' politics made them "better able to comprehend and predict the course of the class-struggle, to politically provide for it and, in so far as provided for, to shape its evolution and guide it to a victorious denouement" (Marot, 2013, p. 164). Their party was -- thanks to the political circumstances in which its members organized, not Bolshevik theoretical innovation -- united around revolutionary politics rather than encompassing both revolutionary and reformist socialists, and was organized largely on a workplace rather than neighbourhood basis (Gluckstein, 1984). In addition, the party in 1917 had an "internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralized

structure and method of operation, as well as [an] essentially open and mass character," as noted by Alexander Rabinowitch (1976, p. 311). These organizational qualities allowed the Bolsheviks both to respond to and politically intervene within the widespread working-class self-activity and political debate about how to resolve the crisis gripping Russia that took place between February and October.

III From Revolution to Counter-Revolution

i) From Working-Class Rule to Bolshevik Leadership Rule

By October 1917 there were over 1400 soviets operating. Close to half were made up of workers' and soldiers' delegates elected by general assemblies in workplaces and military units. A large minority were peasant soviets, others united deputies of workers, soldiers and peasants, and a few were exclusively military. "By that time the overwhelming bulk of the soviets in the major industrial centres had already realized the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' *de facto*" (Smirnov, 1997, p. 432). Within five months of October most peasant soviets had merged with those of workers and soldiers (p. 433). The Soviet Congress held in Petrograd immediately after the overthrow of the Provisional Government created a Council of People's Commissars (CPC/Sovnarkom) as a central government. Initially all-Bolshevik, it was soon joined by members of the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party (Left SRs). The CPC was to be accountable to the congress's Central Executive Committee (CEC), in which the Bolsheviks had a majority (Rabinowitz, 2007, pp. 19-21). The Soviet Congress met four times in 1918, as intended, with the last meeting of that year in November. Its CEC met every four or five days until mid-1918 (Farber, 1990, p. 29). But "it did not hold a single meeting between July 14th, 1918, and February 1st, 1920 -- though decrees continued to be issued in its name" (Liebman, 1975, p. 230). The armed forces loyal to soviet power were initially structured democratically, with officers elected until March 1918 (Benvenuti, 1997).

"Despite the insecurity of the new regime, soviet power advanced during winter 1917-18 across the length of the former empire" (Smith, 2017, p. 158). However, this was not the uniform spread of a centralized system. Rural county and county soviets frequently ignored central decisions, "intensif[ying] the tendency for power to devolve to the lowest level" (p. 160). In Petrograd, district soviets did not immediately replace old district municipal government structures. Once they did, "they became politically powerful and staunchly protective of their autonomy and independence from interference both by national and citywide government agencies and by higher and parallel party bodies" (Rabinowitch, 2007, p. 391).

However, Marcel Liebman's (1975) claim is well-founded: "by the second half of 1918 the soviets had lost their drive and their animation... their life was due much more to the activity of their executive organs than to that of their deliberative bodies, which had become lethargic" (p. 230). One dimension of this change was the Bolshevik exclusion of other parties. In June 1918, after the outbreak of civil war, the Bolshevik majority on the CEC voted to bar Menshevik and Right SR members and directed other soviet bodies to follow its example. The following month, after the assassination of the German ambassador carried out on the orders of the Left SR Central Committee, Left SRs were barred from serving as soviet delegates unless they rejected their leadership's actions. Local soviets were then told that all Left SRs should be expelled from responsible government posts, although in Petrograd this order was softened in practice, in part because there was such a shortage of capable staff (Farber, 1990, p. 27; Rabinowitch, 2007, pp.

295, 301-302). The Bolshevik removal of almost all other members of other parties from soviet office was a feature of "the *militarization* of the whole of public life" that "suppressed the soviets as really functioning bodies" (Liebman, 1975, p. 230). It must be remembered that as this happened food shortages, job losses, and the outbreak of civil war had already begun to disrupt urban society severely. For example, Moscow's population fell from 2 million in May 1917 to 1.7 million in April 1918 while Petrograd's dropped from at least 2.3 million at the start of 1917 to below 1.5 million in June 1918. In the latter city nearly half of the manufacturing workforce was laid off in the first three months of 1918 (Koenker, 1989, p. 81; Rabinowitch, 2007, pp. 259, 224).

By the time soviet power was established, many urban workers had created "an astonishing combination of direct and representational democracy" (Smith, 1983, p. 206) in the paid workplace sphere through factory committees. In Petrograd, workers' power exercised through factory committees usually coexisted with the old management in a situation of workplace dual power (p. 240). However, most enterprises remained under private ownership. The November 1917 decree on workers' control issued by the CEC, which "gave workers full rights of control over production, distribution, finance and sales" and laid out "a hierarchy of control organs at enterprise, district, city and national level" (pp. 210, 211), was not translated into practice. Both factory committee and union activists sought to regulate production, leading to frictions. Early in 1918 the factory committees merged with the unions, becoming the workplace level units of the latter. The regulation of production now became the priority of the unions, but two years later there was still evidence at the workplace level of "that spirited independence and concern for self-management which had been a hallmark of their [factory committees' – DC] activity in 1917" (p. 223).

Dual power in the workplace did not sit well with capitalists already horrified by soviet power. This led to a sharpening of class antagonism in the sphere of production and a wave of workplace takeovers by workers intent on pushing their government to expropriate private employers who wanted to close enterprises. This workers' self-activity and moves by owners to transfer shares in their companies to German citizens (requiring compensation according to the onerous terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk) triggered the sweeping nationalizations undertaken in June 1918. Most nationalized enterprises were run by collegial management boards, with one-third of the members appointed by workers, one-third by regional or national union officials and the remaining third by regional bodies of the state's Council of National Economy. A small minority -- 10.8% in 1919 -- were under "one-man management, though this percentage rose dramatically during 1919-20" (p. 241).

What existed in the urban territory of the revolutionary regime between late October 1917 and late 1918 can be characterized as working-class rule, albeit incomplete because in most cases the democratic control of society exercised through soviets was not extended to the paid workplace sphere. A transition towards socialism was opened but in spite of important policy decisions including the decree on workers' control almost no movement in this direction actually took place. To use the phrase Marx applied to the Paris Commune, "the great social measure" of working-class rule in Russia "was its own working existence" (Marx, 1970, p. 78). However, with the suspension of soviet democracy working-class rule metamorphosed into something qualitatively different. The leadership of what was now officially the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) -- a party that was very much a segment of the working class, not a force external to the class -- had begun to rise above the class in whose name it claimed to rule. It attempted to direct the fragile improvised state that it was building, using it to control the "social

body" of workers and peasants as an "authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself" (p. 69), to use words written by Marx in an altogether different context. Its aim was to defend what Hal Draper (1987, p. 99) dubbed the "Beleaguered Fortress" of soviet power against the domestic and foreign military forces pitted against it while doing whatever it could to promote revolutions abroad that would relieve the isolated revolution in Russia.

The state that began to take shape under the pressures of civil war was a "command-administrative system" that "functioned more like a loose set of rival and overlapping jurisdictions than a centralized bureaucratic hierarchy," "although the trend was towards centralization of power in the hands of the party oligarchy" (Smith, 2017, p. 209). It became "a sprawling and ramshackle edifice, the product of no architect's design" (Remington, 1984, p. 163). In spite of extensive economic nationalization, "there was virtually no meaningful planning of production" (p. 154). The working class did not rule through this state: "The power that the workers had seized in October 1917 fell completely from their hands in the course of the ensuing civil war... The state retained, to be sure, certain important links with the working class but it stood above it and beyond its control" (Mandel, 1984, p. 418). Yet neither was this state the foundation for the rule of a new exploiting class, for there was none. The state definitely did control the output of the workers who toiled in state-owned workplaces and appropriate agricultural products from peasants, although its administrative inefficiency meant that it had difficulty allocating the surplus it controlled. Simon Clarke's argument is pertinent here:

Marx's analysis did not centre on *who* appropriated the surplus, but on the prior question of the *social form* of the production and appropriation of a surplus, which cannot be separated from the question of the social basis of the power to appropriate a surplus. A surplus cannot be conceptualised independently of the social form of its production and appropriation, so it is impossible to identify *whom* it is who appropriates the surplus without an analysis of the social form of its production (cited in van der Linden 2009, p. 279).

Thus we need to examine how the production of the surplus was socially organized. By the time soviet democracy ceased to function the great majority of wage-earners in Soviet Russia were producing for enterprises owned by a state that they did not control. But state authorities had only weak control of workers' labour processes. There were requirements for civilians to hold labour books and respond to calls for labour mobilization and conscription, and rations could be denied to disobedient workers. Starting in May 1919 growing numbers of workers were placed under military discipline and forbidden to leave their jobs (Remington, 1984, pp. 83-86). However, in the words of a historian unsympathetic to workers, "there were no effective ways to deal with loafing during the civil war" (Iarov, 1997, p. 614); the militarization of labour made it difficult to fire workers, and the threat of worker protest meant that management rarely resorted to repression. Wages were increasingly paid in goods but managers were often unable to pay the rations owed (p. 614; see also Sirianni, 1982, pp. 222-229). At the important Hammer and Sickle factory in Moscow studied in detail by Kevin Murphy unauthorized departures and absenteeism were rampant during the Civil War (Murphy, 2005, pp. 69-70). SA Smith reports that

in the first nine months of 1920, for example, no fewer than 90 per cent of the 38 514 workers mobilized for work in thirty-five armaments plants left their jobs. This prompted a volley of measures to punish "labour deserters," including dispatch to concentration

camps, but these were a sign of impotence not of strength (Smith, 2017, p. 231).

In order to feed the urban population and the military, the state also coercively extracted as much agricultural production as it could, in the face of considerable resistance from the peasantry that had taken the aristocracy's land into its own hands in 1917 (pp. 224-228).

In short, during the Civil War the state relied mainly on force to appropriate the products of peasant labour and on workers' dependence on wages, bolstered by political exhortation and coercion, for the appropriation of their surplus labour. But there was no cohesive social stratum in command of state power, and control over society by central state institutions existed more on paper than in reality. There was still a degree of democracy as well as freedom of discussion within the Communist Party whose leadership headed the state, although the failure of the leadership to implement democracy-enhancing proposals from the Democratic Centralist opposition passed by a soviet congress and party conference in December 1919 is revealing about what had become of soviet and party democracy (Pirani, 2008, pp. 56-57). Thus what replaced working-class rule can be characterized as a *surplus-extracting state of proletarian origin*. This state was attempting to govern rural areas where peasants in effective control of the land produced primarily for their own subsistence and urban areas where production was organized neither by capital nor by democratically-associated direct producers but by ineffective state organs. This was a historically unique phenomenon, the result of an unstable situation in which social supremacy had passed from the working class to the leadership of one segment of that class, a social layer whose power over society was not highly developed.

The most important reason for the end of working-class rule was the catastrophic disruption of urban life caused by the outbreak of civil war. As Smith writes,

life was reduced to a constant search for food, fuel, shelter, and warm clothes, and to trying to avoid disease and crime... In spring and summer 1918 and again in summer 1919 many cities came close to starvation... every ounce of energy was drained by the exigencies of survival... Against a background of perishing cold, poor diet, unsanitary conditions, and health facilities at breaking point, epidemic disease erupted on a devastating scale (Smith, 2017, p. 218).

Another aspect of wartime disruption that contributed to soviet democracy ceasing to function was the departure of so many of the most politically-active workers to military or state service away from city or town life (Koenker, 1989, p. 94).

The overwhelming impact of these social conditions does not mean that the Bolshevik leadership's actions did not also contribute to short-lived working-class rule giving way to their own unstable social supremacy. Yet contrary to a widespread belief there was never a Bolshevik plan for one-party rule. Rabinowitch's detailed study of Petrograd in the year after October 1917 reveals "the lack of any special concern on the part of most veteran Bolsheviks with the institutionalization of an authoritative and exclusive directing role for party organs in government" (p. 391). Rabinowitch emphasizes something too often missed by studies of 1917 and its aftermath: the Bolsheviks "had to transform themselves from rebels into rulers without benefit of an advance plan or even a concept" (p. 390). The most powerful influences shaping the early years of soviet power and Bolshevik government "were the realities the Bolsheviks faced in their often seemingly hopeless struggle for survival" (p. 390).

Their handling of those realities was, though, shaped by their theory. A crucially-important fact almost never considered seriously in interpretations of what happened after 1917 is that the Bolsheviks had long believed that the coming revolution would be one in which their task would be, in the words of the programme of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, "the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and its replacement by a democratic republic" (Programme, 1903). It would be a bourgeois revolution made by the working class and peasantry. Such a revolution would destroy feudalism, establish a bourgeois-democratic republic and open the road to the unfettered development of capitalism in Russia and a future socialist revolution (Lenin, 1975). This position changed only at the Bolshevik party conference of April 1917 (Liebman, 1975, p. 132), which declared that the revolution unfolding in Russia was "the first stage of the first of the proletarian revolutions which are the inevitable result of war," while also accepting that, "Operating as it does in one of the most backward countries of Europe amidst a vast population of small peasants, the proletariat of Russia cannot aim at immediately putting into effect socialist changes" (Lenin, 1917). The possibility that they would find themselves leading a socialist revolution and then governing a regime that was attempting to move Russia towards socialism as soon as possible without having first gone through a bourgeois revolution and a period of capitalist development was one that had never been contemplated by the Bolsheviks. Consequently, as Rabinowitz notes, they had not "even a concept" of what to do after soviet power replaced the Provisional Government. What they did have was a version of Marxism in which the dictatorship of the proletariat was not understood, following Marx, as something that could only exist as the rule of society by the working class itself through new democratic institutions (Draper, 1987). While Bolshevism was never politically homogenous, what Samuel Farber calls its "mainstream" around Lenin had what, from the perspective of the historical materialism I defend, we can call "democratically deficient conceptions" (Farber, 1990, p. 211). Above all, proletarian dictatorship did not necessarily entail the control of society by workers through the soviets and other new democratic institutions of class rule that the Bolsheviks championed in 1917. For Lenin, "the party was the final repository of working-class sovereignty" (Farber, 1990, p. 212). Thus Bolsheviks could believe sincerely that the working class was in power because their party was running the state (Draper, 1987, pp. 136-142).⁵ Their political conceptions also failed to recognize the importance for working-class rule of self-management in the sphere of production (Farber, 1990, pp. 71-73). That said,

an elementary sense of proportion and perspective demands that we distinguish between Lenin's flawed conception of democracy, which he by and large upheld at least until the Spring of 1918, and the clearly anti-democratic perspective that, with his associates, he began to adopt shortly before and especially during the course of the Civil War (Farber, 1990, p. 211).

The latter is best understood following Draper (1987, p. 100): "under the intolerable pressures of isolation in the Beleaguered Fortress, principles" – for example, majority rule, political rights for all parties that accepted soviet power, and press freedom – "were first distorted by the strain of emergency exceptions, and *then the distortions themselves became the principles.*"

Before moving on to the period after the Civil War, it is worth pausing to ask why the early end of working-class rule is still rarely recognized by historical materialists? In most cases, the obstacle is theoretical conceptions that accept what the Bolshevik leadership maintained, namely that the class ruled because a party committed to communism was in power. It is held

that the working class can rule even though workers themselves are not in democratic control of society; party rule is at least an adequate substitute. A different but related stance is proposed by Marot in an important recent essay on the relationship between the state and the peasantry in the 1920s. Marot (2013, p. 45) claims that

Under the NEP, the workers' state, though "bureaucratically deformed" remained, all the same, a workers' state precisely because the latter largely abided by the working class's refusal to sacrifice its present-day, actually-existing material interests for the sake of potential material benefits arising from future economic development.

Put differently, the state's class character was determined by its practice in relation to the working class even though there is no evidence that the working class actually controlled the state. Others believe, following Trotsky's position in *The Revolution Betrayed*, that the nationalization of the means of production is sufficient grounds to declare that the working class ruled. But historical materialists who reject substitutionist and state-property positions have also denied the early end of working-class rule. One reason for this is a failure to accept what we now know about the rapid decline of soviet democracy. For example, in 1940 US Trotskyist Max Shachtman challenged Trotsky's position, arguing that the working class's "social power lies in its political power," but asserting that "in the most difficult days" of the Civil War "the state was the 'proletariat organized as the ruling class' – organized through the Soviets, through the trade unions, through the living, revolutionary proletarian Communist party." As we have seen, such a characterization of the state is not supported by what we know about workers' democracy after 1918. A sympathetic identification with Bolshevism has long been and often continues to be a barrier to reckoning with this knowledge. Another objection to the view for which I am arguing is the claim that soviet democracy could have been revived and working-class rule restored had a successful socialist revolution elsewhere come to Russia's aid. In my view, that counter-factual hypothesis is not implausible, although the question of what would have been required to overcome resistance to a revival of soviet democracy by elements of the party and state officialdom is rarely given sufficient consideration.⁶ Nevertheless, this does not undermine my argument that working-class rule was soon replaced by the rule of the leadership of a revolutionary workers' party organized through a fragile surplus-extracting state of proletarian origin.

ii) From a Ruling Stratum to a New Ruling Class

To the surprise of the Communist leadership, the Reds won the Civil War only to find themselves still in command of the Beleaguered Fortress, since nowhere else had workers taken power. In the years after the Civil War the ruling layer became increasingly class-like and finally consolidated itself as a new ruling class by 1928 at the latest. This represented the triumph of counter-revolution and a definitive return to class society, albeit of a kind quite different from the one torn apart by the socialist revolution of 1917.

From the time that the institutions of soviet power became a surplus-extracting state of proletarian origin, the ruling layer had three class-like characteristics: it had enough control of surplus labour to give it social supremacy, it was not subject to democratic control from below by the working class (or peasantry) and it commanded the state's armed forces. The second of these was confirmed by its response to democratic impulses from below that emerged outside the

ranks of the party after the end of the Civil War. There had been widespread expectations that the end of the war would be followed by a return to workers' democracy. However, the year 1920 saw a further growth in the power of the CEC and its commissariats, which were controlled by the party's top leadership. By the end of that year 86% of enterprises were under "one-man" management, with managers' disciplining of workers aided by party and union officials (Pirani, 2008, pp. 57, 91). The 1921 Kronstadt rebellion was misrepresented by the party leadership as a "White Guard plot" and suppressed with great brutality (Smith, 2017, pp. 257-260). This took place just as the party leadership was deciding to adopt the New Economic Policy (NEP), a move accompanied by a hardening of its anti-democratic stance: "it concluded that liberalization on the economic front required an intensification of the party's monopoly of power and party leaders were increasingly willing publicly to voice the party's absolute right to rule" (p. 282). Strong support for non-party candidates in the soviet elections of early 1921 met with hostility from Communist leaders. Party committees increasingly made decisions, further draining soviets of meaningful political life. The repression of other socialist parties by the Cheka was stepped up (Pirani, 2008, pp. 96-107).

After the Civil War, two changes gave the ruling layer additional class-like features. First, the party-state leadership, not subject to democratic control from below by the workers and peasants in whose name it claimed to rule, became ever-more insulated from the party membership. Party democracy was weakened by the 1921 ban on factions. Crucially, the Central Committee (CC)'s secretariat soon became a powerful body dominating other party structures. During the years 1921-1924, as Simon Pirani (2008, p. 170) summarizes,

the party apparatus reinforced its control over the party, and thence over the state apparatus... it used channels of appointment and command to determine the election of delegates to party congresses; it established tight control over the distribution not only of information about the political and economic situation, but also of full information about its own instructions and policies; it systematized the upward flow of information to the secretariat; and it achieved a degree of immunity from legal proceedings for party members, and for officials in particular.

The rapid and overwhelming defeat of the Left Opposition (LO) that came together in late 1923 around a platform that included criticisms of the bureaucratic regime within the party reflected, in part, just how entrenched the dominant grouping within the party leadership had become (pp. 215-225). It did not hesitate to use the GPU (as the security police was named in 1922-1923) against the LO; later the renamed OGPU acted inside the party "as the secret police of the emergent Stalinist leadership" (Smith, 2017, p. 296), which was now entirely free of any democratic control. From 1923 the influx of new members, many of whom joined with the aim of acquiring technical skills or simply to better their personal situation, benefited the group that now controlled the party. The party that had emerged from the Civil War as an egalitarian and self-sacrificing militarized vanguardist political force committed to defence of the new regime and world revolution was becoming an administrative instrument for the leadership, now committed to "socialism in one country." Control of an obedient and much-enlarged membership would be part of how the ruling layer ruled (Pirani, 2008, pp. 225-232). By 1927 only 8000 of the approximately 786 000 members had been Bolsheviks at the beginning of 1917 (Rigby, 1968, pp. 52, 352).

The practice of appointing rather than electing officials was an important part of the dismantling of party democracy. This made possible a second and related momentous change: from 1923 the CC -- in effect, its secretariat -- gained the right to fill important posts by appointment, the *nomenklatura* system; provincial and district committees did the same for lower-level positions (Smith, 2017, p. 292). Even though this system did not function very efficiently in the 1920s (Monty, 2012), it was a mechanism for a key part of the ruling layer to exercise power over the hierarchy of state managers beneath them. Efforts were also made to increase the number of state officials who belonged to the party (Sternheimer, 1980, pp. 337-338). The way in which the elite operated was not the impersonal rule-governed manner of its self-image -- "bureaucracy galvanized by clientelism was what kept the party-state functioning" (Smith, 2017, p. 295) -- but nevertheless during the NEP years it gained a cohesion that made it even more like a ruling class. Thus two important changes within the party -- the elimination of the possibility that the party membership could direct or replace the leadership and the establishment of top-down control by that leadership over state managers and other important party office-holders -- made the ruling layer increasingly class-like.

In addition to these two changes, another feature that the party-state elite acquired as it became a class in the years after the Civil War was its use of the surplus product extracted by the state of proletarian origin "for purposes that are alien and hostile to" those of the working class "in order to strengthen and expand its rule over production and society," to use a line from the 1965 study of the Polish ruling class by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski (1982, p. 24). During the Civil War, the governing layer's overriding priorities were military victory over the White and foreign forces that sought to reimpose the aristocratic-capitalist ruling class and support for revolution beyond Russia's borders. These were its key priorities for how it used workers' surplus labour and peasants' surplus product. In spite of the undemocratic and often coercive methods involved, the priorities of the ruling layer converged with the interests of the working class and, to a lesser extent, the peasantry; both of these classes would have been dealt a historic blow if the Communist state had been overthrown and the old exploiting class restored, as this would have signified a triumphant counter-revolution. After the Civil War, the ruling layer's priorities shifted. Isolated in a devastated country in which the forces of production were much less developed than those of the rest of Europe, it soon came to stake its survival not on rescue by revolution abroad (the prospects of which seemed remote) but on industrialization using the resources available within its borders -- a strategy ideologically justified by the novel notion of "socialism in one country" (as EH Carr [1970, p. 378] noted, "industrialization was the economic corollary of socialism in one country"). The decision to move forward with industrialization was adopted as policy at the party's 14th congress in 1925 (pp. 377-378). According to official statistics, between 1923-1924 and 1927-1928 the share of the state budget devoted to economic development rose from 49.7% to 58.7% (and then shot up dramatically) while social and cultural spending (including education and health care) went from 5.7% to 6.6% (calculated from Clarke, 1972, p. 33). With the working class unable to democratically shape the goals, pace and methods of industrialization efforts, the social layer at the helm of the state inevitably used workers' surplus labour for economic "purposes" "alien and hostile" to its interests. That individual workers enjoyed strong institutionalized job security rights, protection against discipline and the ability to file grievances over wages and working conditions, and also had some control over the labour process (Filtzer, 1986, p. 21, 160), did not given them any control over the surplus extracted from them. Throughout the NEP years the labour of the working class was to a substantial degree alienated.

It may be objected that even at the end of the 1920s, with crash industrialization and forced collectivization of the peasantry (in reality, its dispossession as a class of independent producers) underway thanks to the Stalinist rulers' ability to deploy overwhelming coercive force, the group that controlled the state was still not a ruling class. Much depends on how the concept of class is understood. For Weberian sociology, "the absence of markets immediately means that there is an absence of classes" (Barker, 1981, p. 18); an objection stemming from such a position is really a debate between contending theories of class and as such raises issues far beyond the scope of this paper. In the class theory used here, a class is understood, in GEM de Ste. Croix's words (cited in Camfield, 2004-2005, p. 423), as

a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership or control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes.

The contention that the ruling group was not a ruling class in a historical materialist sense because its members did not individually own the means of production, which were not inheritable as private property, as Trotsky (1970, p. 249) observed, and because "no collective mechanism exist[ed] to establish their title to property" and they did "not, *as individuals*, have any means of control over the surplus product" (Ticktin, 1978, p. 43) is not persuasive. It fails to dig beneath the legal form of property ownership to analyze the controlling activity of Russia's rulers within the relations of production, including their relationship to the direct producers. As a collectivity, the ruling members of the party-state officialdom exercised control over the state-owned means of production, exploited the urban and rural direct producers, and decided what would be done with the surplus extracted. As such, they were able to become a class (Barker, 1981, pp. 21-22).

Another objection to the position advanced here is that a counter-revolution could not have taken place because the replacement of the rule of one class with that of another necessarily involves a violent social upheaval of a kind not seen in Russia in the 1920s. In the words of Trotsky (1933),

The Marxist thesis relating to the catastrophic character of the transfer of power from the hands of one class into the hands of another applies not only to revolutionary periods, when history sweeps madly ahead, but also to the periods of counterrevolution, when society rolls backwards.

This is a universal generalization from the experience of the defeats of the revolutions against aristocratic ruling classes in Europe in the 1800s, from the Paris Commune of 1871, and from the counter-revolutionary suppression of attempts at socialist revolution in Europe after 1917. What took place in Russia was uniquely different from the experiences that informed Trotsky's thinking: the social-revolutionary replacement of the rule of the aristocratic-capitalist class with working-class rule, which was soon peacefully supplanted by the social supremacy of the leadership of a segment of the working class not subject to democratic control from below, out of which evolved a new ruling class. The eventual consolidation of the directing elements of the Communist party-state officialdom as a new ruling class, which represented the conclusion of the process of counter-revolution, was accomplished without large-scale violence because the rule of

the working class had already ceased to exist years earlier.⁷ What happened in Russia in 1917-1919 suggests that although exploiters do not peacefully allow exploited classes to uproot their rule it is possible for working-class rule to be peacefully replaced by the rule of a revolutionary leadership of the class that enjoys popular support. After the Civil War a working class deprived of independent political organization and lacking any military forces of its own was in no position to prevent the directing elements of the party-state officialdom from gradually becoming a ruling class.

How should the development of the ruling layer into a ruling class in the 1920s be explained? This was, I contend, primarily conditioned by the social pressures acting on the Communist leadership as it sought to maintain the surplus-extracting state of proletarian origin against foreign and domestic foes. Outside its borders, it faced Western European capitalist societies with much more advanced productive forces and hence superior military might. Within its borders, it contended with the classes from which it was compelled to extract surpluses in order to reproduce its rule: a working class that could, thanks to the labour relations regime, stymie efforts to intensify its exploitation, and a peasantry whose control on the land allowed its members to decide how much of their product to consume and how much, if any, to sell to the state to feed the urban population (Marot, 2013, pp. 45, 62). Balancing between, on the one hand, the working class out of which and over which it had arisen and, on the other, the much-larger peasantry, and with an eye to the capitalist states that had tried to overthrow it during the Civil War, the ruling layer sought to develop industry. It did so in order to be able to defend its rule against foreign military intervention and because it believed that the development of the state-owned productive forces was the essence of "socialist construction" (Chattopadhyay, 2005-2006; Marot, 2013, pp. 99-105). Disagreements within the CP about how to develop industry within the framework of the NEP, with its commitment to ensuring a relationship between the state and the peasantry that would ensure that the urban population was fed, were secondary (Marot, 2013, pp. 36-37, 55-59). By 1923, with no prospect of assistance from a victorious revolution elsewhere, preserving the state had become the overwhelming preoccupation of the dominant group within the ruling layer; this was soon expressed in the notion of "socialism in one country" (Hallas, 1985, pp. 83-103).

Democracy within the CP facilitated the indirect reflection of working-class and peasant interests within the party. This could only be a hindrance to leaders intent on implementing their policies regardless of the desires of the people in whose name they claimed to rule. It was also an obstacle to the CC secretariat's control over the party organization. Thus the party leadership in 1921-1922 weakened party democracy, which paved the way for the apparatus led by Stalin to successfully eliminate it altogether as part of its quest to turn the party into an instrument with which it could govern Russia within the circumstances just described. Similarly, the *nomenklatura* system and the enrolment of more state officials into the party gave the secretariat more control over the party-state officialdom. The dominant elements of the ruling layer did not seek this control because power was an end in itself. Sensing the antagonism that existed between themselves and those whose surplus the state appropriated, what they sought was the maximum ability to run the state in the way they saw fit as they groped their way towards a strategy for industrialization, with as little influence from the working class and peasantry as possible. The 1925 decision to industrialize, after which "gradually the extent of administrative controls increased, the role of market forces declined" (Nove, 1982, p. 143), led to increased state investment in industry and then to the First Five-Year Plan that took effect in 1928. That the dominant group at the top of the party-state machine was able to set the country on a new

economic development path bureaucratically directed from central state bodies that called for investment on a scale never before contemplated within the party (p. 147) testifies that a ruling class had already come into existence. The subsequent debates of 1928-1930 between Stalin and the "right opposition" over plan targets, policy towards the peasantry and attacks on workers' rights (Reiman, 1987, pp. 85-107) amounted to a dispute over what strategy the ruling class ought to pursue to reproduce its rule.

Although, as I suggested earlier, weaknesses in Bolshevik theory contributed to the passage from working-class rule to party leadership rule during 1918, the ideology of pre-October Bolshevism is largely irrelevant to explaining the evolution of the ruling stratum into a new ruling class in the years after the end of the Civil War. The determinants of that process were primarily the social pressures acting on the CP leadership. In addition, by 1921 Bolshevik thought was quite different from what it had been in October 1917. It was now the ideology of a militarized party ruling undemocratically over a largely-indifferent or hostile population, not a seasoned party of revolutionary struggle that during 1917 had been changed by an influx of radicalizing members of a working class with which it had a dynamic relationship (Liebman, 1975, pp. 147-161). To use Draper's previously-quoted phrase (1987, p. 100), under the pressure of social conditions principles were first distorted "and *then the distortions themselves became the principles.*" However, the "democratically deficient" (Farber, 1990, p. 211) dimension of pre-October Bolshevik politics facilitated the ideological mutation that took place during the Civil War. Perhaps the most striking ideological shift notable after the Civil War is that the leadership now believed it was possible to make considerable progress in socialist construction in an isolated country where the level of development of the productive forces was low and the peasantry so outnumbered the proletariat, a notion alien to the Marxist tradition (Farber, 1990, pp. 200-201; Marot, 2013, pp. 36-37). Nevertheless, the development of the ruling layer into a class was fundamentally the result of material pressures, not ideology. However, the very weak commitment to democracy of Bolshevism in the form in which it exited the Civil War and the belief that the measure of socialist construction was the development of state industry facilitated the rise of the new ruling class.⁸

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² As Peter Hudis notes (2013, p. 190), "The later notion that 'socialism' and 'communism' represent distinct stages of social development -- a staple of Stalinist dogma -- was alien to Marx's thought and only entered the lexicon of 'Marxism' after his death."

³ On Marx's concept of socialism, see Hudis 2013 and Chattopadhyay 2016.

⁴ See Draper (1986, especially pp. 269-274, 298-301).

⁵ For a relevant contemporary contrast, see Luxemburg (1970), pp. 393-394.

⁶ While this is obviously speculative, I believe that by 1923 (and possibly earlier) the restoration of working-class rule would have required a level of popular mobilization against the dominant group within the party-state officialdom sufficient to consider it a revolution. This would not have been a social revolution (there was no ruling class to overthrow). However, to the degree that the ruling layer had developed class-like features and state relations had begun to acquire the character of the state power of a ruling exploiting class this revolution would have had some qualities of a social revolution. It would not have been a straightforward political revolution in Davidson's sense, since the change involved in reestablishing working-class rule would have been more than a fight for "control of the [existing -- DC] state" (Davidson, 2012, p. 492). A revolution to restore working-class rule in the historically unique situation produced by working-class rule having given way to the rule of a social layer that was originally the leadership of one segment of the working class that, while not a class, had some class-like features and was ruling through a form of state power that was proletarian in origin but not socio-political content, would have had a hybrid character.

⁷ The very violent dispossession of the peasantry was carried out by the new ruling class, not as part of the process by which the directing elements of the Communist party-state officialdom became a ruling class.

⁸ The critical examinations of Trotsky and the Left Opposition by Marot (2013, pp. 87-116) and Molyneux (1981, pp. 102-104) support this interpretation. Within the party, the most consistent opposition was the Democratic Centralists, on whom see Colombo 2016-2017.