

The failed quest for economic democracy in the Russian 1917 Revolution

By Anna Klimina

The paper discusses the lost promise of democratic socialism in 20th century Russia. It explains that contrary to what might be assumed, given subsequent historical developments, socialist thought in late imperial Russia was anything but homogenous. While all left-wing opponents of feudal autocracy believed that Russia's future should essentially be a non-capitalist order, they differed considerably in their understanding of a desirable economic foundation for socialism. Russian Marxists advocated first a dictatorship of a proletariat as the new form of post-revolutionary state, and then a centralized state control of the economy on behalf of the proletariat as the future economic model. In contrast, non-Marxist socialists, wary of replacing the tsarist autocracy with an equally authoritarian proletarian state, believed that economic democracy had to be the foundation of a new socialist order. These scholars imagined socialism almost exclusively in conjunction with workplace democracy, worker ownership, local governance and economic decentralization. The paper presents views of Russian Radical Populists of the 1880s and 1890s and their successors, the neo-Populists, who founded the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the party of the Russian peasantry. It demonstrates that at the time of February 1917 Russian Revolution, which dismantled the Tsarist autocracy, the Socialist-Revolutionaries' program of land socialization had garnered much support among Russia's peasantry, who made up 80 percent of Russia's population. The study also discusses the distribution of syndicalist ideas among Russian workers, who after the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution actually put these ideas into practice through establishing worker-run factories. However, both nascent efforts at instituting democracy (peasants and workers) were destroyed, first by the Bolshevik policies of 1918-1919 that eliminated worker control over enterprises in favour of their centralized regulation, and then by Stalin's 1929 turn to a tyrannical command economy. The study explains how the failure to establish economic democracy in the USSR made possible the emergence of vested interests in the form of a second (underground) economy rife with theft of public resources by enterprise directors and corrupt state bureaucrats, and, then, with the start of transition, the restoration of capitalism in its most neoliberal form in all countries of former USSR.