AFTER SIX YEARS: COMMENTARY ON *OCTOBER SONG*

[updated March 24, 2024]

To a growing number of people, there is a deepening perception of the need for fundamental change to overcome catastrophes that are increasingly engulfing humanity. Influenced by this reality, my research and writing over the decades have been immersed in making available material on such long-dead revolutionaries as Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, and V.I. Lenin.

It is within this framework that I wrote *October Song: Bolshevik Triumph, Communist Tragedy, 1917-1924*. In its preface I expressed the hope "that activists who want to confront and overcome the crises of global capitalism facing us today can benefit from positive but also critical-minded engagement with the Bolshevik tradition."

The purpose of this new commentary is, first of all, to explain the need for at least a virtual "second edition." This also creates an opportunity to define certain key aspects of *October Song*, and perhaps more importantly to acknowledge and briefly engage with significant works (most of them appearing after the composition of this one) related to various themes one finds in the present volume.

A Problem with, and Dimensions of, the First Edition

A critical commentary on *October Song*, authored by British historian Jonathan Smele for the important journal *The Russian Review*, highlighted a terrible deficiency which marred the first edition. In a passage dealing with the index of the first edition, Smele noted that "'dictatorship of the proletariat' gets 46 entries in the Index and 'imperialism' 31, while Komuch and Ukraine merit none (even Nicaragua gets 2), while E. H. Carr roundly defeats Admiral Kolchak 19:2, and General Wrangel, Petliura, Chkheidze, Tseretelli, and other vital players fail to score."[1]

Indeed, in the rush to produce *October Song* in time for the 100th anniversary of the 1917 revolution, the composition of the index was handled by someone contracted by the publisher who – it turned out – did not make a responsible job of it. The index did not reflect the fact that the Ukraine is discussed on 12 pages in the actual text, that Kolchak is discussed on 12 pages, that Wrangel and Petliura and Tseretelli *can* be found in the text (though not -- alas! -- Chkheidze). Regarding "Komuch" – that word doesn't appear anywhere in the book, but the actual phenomenon (an ephemeral effort to reestablish the Constituent Assembly, briefly supported by soldiers from Czechoslovakia, but soon brutally swept away by right-wing "allies") can be found on 10 pages. And so on.

A primary purpose of these follow-up comments is to provide the explanation for the need of a better index, which accompanies these comments.

In all fairness to Smele, however, it must be acknowledged that he is not simply complaining about the index. Most of his review consists of quite serious criticisms of the book. While not all of Smele's criticisms are flawed, I believe some of them are – seemingly flowing from mistaken assumptions of what the book is about. Responding to his critique in the following issue of *Russian Review*, I expressed disappointment that the defective index had diverted Smele's attention from what was actually in the book:

> … [Smele mistakenly characterizes] *October Song* as "a book about ideas … and, more specifically, the conflict of ideas within the Bolshevik party leadership." The book presents and engages with the ideas of various Mensheviks, both Left and Right Socialist Revolutionaries, anarchists, plus others further to the right. More than this, roughly one-third of the volume involves social history focused on the life experience of workers and peasants – with a pivotal chapter entitled "The Majority of the People," indicating that the Bolsheviks seriously misunderstood realities of peasant life.
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> Smele's complaint about my "predictably" brief coverage of "the pivotal Kronstadt rebellion" misses the point. I admittedly see this as less than "pivotal." That is because it was preceded by authoritarian, disastrous, sometimes murderous policies of the red terror and war communism repressing workers and especially peasants in 1918-20. A shrug about my presumed proclivity for Bolshevik apologetics takes the place of dealing with what I actually have to say.[2]

Unimpeded by mistaken assumptions and ignoring the faulty index, another reviewer – Dutch social anthropologist Don Kalb, writing in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology* – had a different sense of *October Song*, finding it "splendid and comprehensive," particularly in its engagement with social history, and concluding that it "deals with very responsibly" with the twin issues of "Soviets and democracy; and the party-state bureaucracy."[3]

Central to the October Revolution was the working class of the Russian empire, with "an outcome of long run social and political polarization dramatically escalated by war," as Kalb puts it. While readers will find many pages on Russia's small but vibrant working class in this volume, however, Kalb emphasizes (appropriately, I think) what he considers "interesting pages for anthropologists of peasantries, encapsulating many of the later debates in peasant studies."[4]

Kalb notes that "Le Blanc takes appropriate time to discuss the debates on the peasantry in classic Marxism, comparing Kautsky's and Lenin's classics of the 1890s with [Nikolai] Sukhanov's and in particular [Alexander] Chayanov's 1920s studies (supported by Lenin)."[5] But he goes on to present my argument with a succinctness and clarity worth presenting at length, given the importance of the realities under discussion:

> Le Blanc ultimately weighs-in in favor of Chayanov's (and Teodor Shanin's) populist socialism. Lenin was right that the countryside even in 1890 was thoroughly penetrated by capitalism. But he overestimated the actual social polarization among the peasantry. This conceptual error, an urban projection, did feed into anti-Kulak obsessions when few such kulaks [rich capitalistic peasants] could be found. … With Shanin and Moshe Lewin, building on Chayanov, Sukhanov, and many other works from the 1920s, Le Blanc believes that a mixed family farm/cooperative market-oriented socialist agriculture should have been a viable possibility for the Soviet Union. His book stops in 1924, but his implication is clear: though Leninist class categories did not help the peasant debate, there was enough research and vision available in the Soviet Union to make a non-Stalinist solution to the peasant question perfectly possible.[6]

This is far from the engagement in Bolshevik apologetics that Smele assumes. That is also true regarding the question of democracy and the soviets. "In a balanced and honest way, Le Blanc does point to a whole set of empirical and analytic shortcomings in Marxist Leninist intellectual practice with respect to peasant economies, bureaucracies, and public democratic processes," Kalb

observes. *October Song* "shows persuasively that the rise of Stalinism was enabled by some ongoing intellectual and strategic blind spots in the Marxism of the Bolsheviks."[7]

The fact remains that I continue to identify with the Marxism of the Bolsheviks, and as Kalb points out, I am "sympathetic to the revolution and seeking to preserve its memory for a new generation"[8] – in fact, I believe that understanding the 1917 revolution is essential for orienting those who struggle for a better world.

At the same time, I remain very much inclined to take seriously diverse understandings of fluid and complex realities that challenge presumed orthodoxies and certainties advanced in the name of Bolshevism. It seems to me that this approach is consistent with the best aspects of the Marxist method – and with the precepts of elemental honesty. Without such honesty, how can we be true to ourselves and to the struggle for a better world?

Additional Work by Others Worth Consulting

One of the most serious problems with all of my work on Russia is that I do not read or speak Russian. I have been reliant on translations. Fortunately, there has been an ocean of such translations that have been available to me and other Anglophone scholars. But there is much more that has not, and some of this is usefully surveyed in a variety of English-language sources, including: Larry E. Holmes, *Revising the Revolution: The Unmaking of Russia's Official History of 1917,* an account of Soviet historiography of the 1920s and early 1930s; Sheila Fitzpatrick's marvelous memoir *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia*; and two very useful surveys by R.W. Davies – *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* and *Soviet History of the Yeltsin Era*. Lars Lih has also played an important role in utilizing and drawing attention to important Russian and Soviet historiography – particularly the contributions of Bolshevik historian Vladimir Nevsky, whose comprehensive 1925 *History of the RKP(B)*, republished in Russia in 2009, awaits translation and publication in English. Post-Soviet left-wing historian Alexei Gusev has over the years provided a stream of important contributions, some finding their way into English translation. Intriguing, informative and valuable material can also be found in Ilya Budraitskis, *Dissidents among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*, and in his splendid 2023 essay, "Lenin's Laughter."[9]

Perhaps another limitation in this volume is related to a complaint from one of my better students, shortly before I retired. At the conclusion of a course on the history of "Russia and Soviet World," he commented that he had been hoping for more information and material on the Russian Civil War. He was particularly interested in the military history – and for this one should certainly consult a newly translated work, *The Russian Civil War 1918-1921*, a sketch of the Red Army's combat operations, written in the 1920s by Red Army leaders intimately involved in those operations – A. S. Bubnov, S. S. Kamenev (no relation to Bolshevik leader Lev Kamenev), M. N. Tukhachevskii, and R. P. Eideman.[10] (The Stalin purges of the late 1930s ended the lives of Bubnov, Tukhachevskii, and Eideman.)

A newer study, going far beyond military tactics, is a comprehensive work of social and political history, authored by none other than Jonathan Smele – *The "Russian" Civil Wars 1916-1926: Ten Years That Shook the World*. The dates indicate an engagement with causes and effects that

transcend military considerations. And regarding the quote marks in the title, Smele explains that "early twentieth century Russia was a multinational empire – indeed, it was the multinational empire of the modern era." He adds that "of the figures who came to prominence in it, many were not Russian at all – even if they sided with ostensibly 'Russian' political and/or military formations."[11]

Such an Empire-wide focus is also an outstanding quality distinguishing the recent contribution of Eric Blanc – *Revolutionary Social Democracy*: *Working-Class Politics Across the Russian Empire* (*1882-1917*).[12] The overly Russia-centric aspect of *October Song* is one of its limitations.

I urge readers of *October Song* to consult "competing" volumes that I have found compelling, by Stephen A. Smith and Mark D. Steinberg. Each appeared in 2017, the same year as *October Song*, and like my own book each seeks to take the measure of the Russian Revolution's meaning.

Smith's *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890-1928*[13] is a remarkably rich and clearly written synthesis that takes into consideration multiple strands of research. It combines economic history, intellectual history, political-institutional history, diplomatic history, military history, cultural history – without losing the attentiveness to the lives and struggles of the laboring majorities, workers and peasants, always so distinctive in the contributions of Smith and his once-young "social history" colleagues. There is much that can be learned here by any serious-minded reader.

Especially for so complex and contentious a topic, this can hardly be the "final word"--it is a reflection of the current state of scholarly understanding (and of Smith's understanding) about the meaning of what happened leading up to the 1917 revolution and about what happened in its wake. For someone more inclined to embrace the Bolshevik triumph than is Smith, assuming such a person aspires to be true to Marx (who intoned: "doubt everything"), this honestly written work is an especially valuable contribution.

The reader's perceptions are more than once tilted in a negative direction in this narrative simply by Smith's decision to start with positive accomplishments that are then offset by negative limitations. Someone inclined to make the case for Bolshevism would naturally reverse the order -- a negative limitation being offset by the positive accomplishment.

But one senses that Smith does not intend in any way to distort the picture. He is vibrantly alert to the "mixed" nature of reality.

He usefully gives a sense of controversies among historians over various aspects of the institutional dynamics of the Tsarist system and of growing industrial capitalism, over the lived experience of the impoverished peasant majority (and the extent of their impoverishment), over the variety of orientations within the growing working class and labor movement, over the nature and depth of the crises impacting on all of this.

Steinberg's wonderful volume *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921* shares many of the positive qualities of Smith's work, but it has artistic qualities of its own. Consider this long, crazy, challenging, and profound sentence from the book's introduction:

> Because the past, like the present, tends toward disorder and incoherence, we want to make it into "history" by putting its fractured pieces in some meaningful order, overlooking the many gaps in what we know or understand, highlighting connections and patterns, especially how events were connected causatively to the past and would shape what was to come (the definition of history as change over time), and through all of this, focusing on what we judge to be true and important according to whatever criteria we favor.[14]

This is a sweeping narrative – at one and the same time comprehensive and necessarily incomplete – woven from multiple voices and diverse experiences. It brings to mind 1920s symphonic works from the young Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich: a build-up of complex, mighty, dissonant swirls arising out of muted and somber beginnings, with crescendos of terrible violence and sometimes of melodic beauty.

Recognizing that no one can honestly claim to be a strictly "objective" purveyor of Truth, Steinberg acknowledges his own revolutionary "leanings" – confessing "my admiration for those who fought for something better in life for themselves and for others, especially for human dignity and rights, freedom, equality, and fairness, and who believed that these were not impossible goals. He adds: "But I have not hidden my recognition that history tends to bring disappointment, or worse." Yet he confesses, finally, his admiration for those who still try, continuing to reach for the better world.[15]

Steinberg clearly appreciates Bolshevik-feminist Alexandra Kollontai's perception that hope for a better future could be found "not in cultured districts [of the city] with their sophisticated, individualistic mentality," but rather "in the crowded dwellings of the workers, where amidst the stench and terrors beget by capitalism, amidst tears and curses, living springs find a way to emerge," generated by the "creative, active" side of workers' lives. He is inclined to embrace this form of "utopianism" that rejects *what is* in favor of *what could be* (301) – and in the latter part of his book he devotes beautifully written and insightful pages to exploring the lives and ideas of three such utopians: Kollontai, Trotsky, and the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Yet his fragmented reflections on the vast Russian Empire add essential diversity to the story through splendid vignettes of a radical Muslim intellectual (Mahmud Khoja Behbudi), a radical Ukrainian nationalist (Volodymyr Vynnychenko), and a brilliant Jewish writer (Isaac Babel). A sprawling and rich chapter on women and the peasantry bring in more elements of the story, as does the remarkable chapter – a centerpiece of the book – "Politics of the Street."

The Criminal Element

Far simpler is the story told by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa in his monograph *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution: Mob Justice and Police in Petrograd*. Hasegawa lays out essentials in the book's introduction, drawing a stark contrast between the popular mood after the February 1917 overthrow of the Tsar and the popular mood one year later, after the Bolsheviks had taken power. In the first instance, "people from all walks of life poured into the streets of Petrograd … giddy with happiness …" In the second instance, "anyone out beneath the gray, oppressive sky hurried home in the silence of an especially cold winter," drawing their hats over their eyes, "the better to avoid seeing the world around them."[16]

"How could the hopes of March 1917 have turned so quickly into bitter disillusion?" he asks. "The answer lies in the catastrophic social breakdown the followed the February Revolution."[17] Hasegawa spells this out with a clarity meriting lengthy quotation:

> I make two principal arguments. First, the erosion of the police, rising crime, and the catastrophic breakdown of everyday life in the city after the February Revolution helped to emasculate the Provisional Government. People were forced to live in fear for their lives and property, and they reacted with sporadic explosions of mob justice, which facilitated further chaos. With the courts in disarray and the militias rendered ineffective, brute violence became the common means to settle conflicts. The bedlam in Petrograd became a defining influence on the decision making of the Provisional Government, which responded with vain attempts to centralize power in ways that defied the "centrifugal" spirit of a revolution that diffused power to the lowest rungs of society. The resulting breakdown of social order created conditions the Bolsheviks exploited.
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> Second, the extent and intensity of crime and social breakdown nurture a fresh understanding of the emergence of a new kind of authoritarian dictatorship under the Bolshevik regime. … The regime then turned to the Cheka, the extralegal secret police concerned with counterrevolutionary opposition, as its standard law-enforcement arm.[18]

He concludes: "Thus was unrestrained violence brought upon ordinary people in the name of preserving not just social peace but also socialism and the Soviet state. This scheme would prevail for decades to come."[19]

Jerrod Laber announces in *The American Conservative* that "Hasegawa's book is essential reading, as it further exposes the false promise of utopia." He warns that "an unacceptable number of intellectuals … embrace the goals of the Russian Revolution, insisting it was hijacked by ambitious thugs." What Hasegawa's monograph demonstrates, according to Laber, is that "even before the rise of the Bolsheviks, the revolution did not catapult the average Russian into a workers' paradise. It plunged them into a violent, dystopian hell."[20]

Hasegawa's analysis finds at least partial corroboration among those not sharing the anti-revolutionary worldview of political conservatives. Consider the summary analysis of complex realities offered by Steinberg on the Russian revolutionary process before the Bolsheviks took power. With the fall of the tsarist regime, some liberal-minded members of the upper classes spoke hopefully about a joyous and relatively orderly birth of freedom, as Hasegawa indicates. But Steinberg describes something different that unfolded:

> Many observers found it difficult to embrace the disorder, especially the violence: crowds breaking into weapons factories and arsenals, wandering the streets carrying guns and draped in cartridge belts, driving about in "requisitioned" cars and trucks and shooting into the air, opening prisons and releasing criminals along with revolutionaries, and attacking police stations, sometimes setting them ablaze and beating any policeman they could lay their hands on. Crowds smashing store windows, looting and breaking into wine storehouses (and drinking) also poorly fit the narrative of peaceful restraint and unity.[21]

While this presents a more varied and complicated picture than that constructed by Hasegawa's conservative supporters – and perhaps than entertained by Hasegawa himself – there remain questions of the extent to which the revolutionary left was implicated in the criminal violence.

Hasegawa notes that many of the soldiers who rallied to the revolutionary cause in the insurgencies of the February Revolution never returned to their barracks, but instead formed gangs, sometimes in cooperation with common criminals, and increasingly joined by soldiers deserting from the front. Hasegawa explains that some of these "turned to crime, as a means of survival and an opportunity to strike it rich." Some of these began to identify themselves as anarchists, explaining their activity as "expropriating the expropriators." Hasegawa comments that "we do not know how many of these incidents were carried out by politically committed anarchists and how many by criminals opportunistically wrapping themselves in the anarchist banner." An additional complication involved the fact, as Hasegawa points out, that "before seizing power, and during the early days of their regime, Bolsheviks often set aside their ideological disagreements with anarchists and collaborated toward common ends."[22]

It may be worth taking a leisurely stroll, here, through pages of *British Agent*, the 1932 memoir of the youthful British diplomat R. H. Bruce Lockhart who was stationed in Soviet Russia in the period that Hasegawa is telling us about. Some of Lockhart's story matches Hasegawa's account perfectly – and some of it doesn't.

Life in the Soviet Russia of early 1918, Lockhart tells us, "was a curious affair. The Bolsheviks had not yet succeeded in establishing the iron discipline which today [in the early Stalin period] characterizes their régime. They had, in fact, made little attempt to do so." He adds that "there was no terror, nor was the population particularly afraid of its new masters." Lockhart observed that "the anti-Bolshevik newspapers continued to appear and to attack the Bolshevik policy with violent abuse," and that Russia's business classes, "still confident that the Germans would soon send the Bolshevik rabble about its business, was more cheerful than one might have expected in such disturbing circumstances."[23]

In fact, "the only real danger to human life during these early days of the Bolshevik revolution was furnished, not by the Bolsheviks, but by the Anarchists -- bands of robbers, ex-army officers, and adventurers, who had seized some of the finest houses in the city and who, armed with rifles, hand-grenades, and machine-guns, exercised a gangsters' rule over the capital." Lockhart added that "they lurked at street-corners for their victims and were utterly unscrupulous in their methods of dealing with them." Even prominent Bolsheviks were victimized by the gangs. "The Bolsheviks seemed quite incapable of dealing with this pest. For years they had been crying against the Tsarist suppression of free speech. They had not yet embarked on their own campaign of suppression."[24]

Lockhart went on this make additional points of interest, particularly given what was later learned about his own activities in Soviet Russia as a British Agent:

> I mention this comparative tolerance of the Bolsheviks, because the cruelties which followed later [the red terror, war communism, etc.] were the result of the intensification of the civil war. For the intensification of that bloody struggle Allied intervention, with the false hopes it raised, was largely responsible. I do not say that a policy of abstention from interference in the internal affairs of Russia could have altered the course of the Bolshevik revolution. I do suggest that our intervention intensified the terror and increased the bloodshed.[25]

In the Spring of 1918, the situation changed. "One of Trotsky's first tasks as Commissar for War had been to rid Moscow of the Anarchist bands who were terrorising the city." A simultaneous raid on "twenty-six Anarchist nests" – within the mansions they had taken over – was carried out. Over a hundred were killed in the fighting, and five hundred were arrested, with a considerable amount of weaponry and stolen loot retrieved by the Bolshevik authorities.[26]

Lockhart toured the wrecked mansions in the aftermath. "The filth was indescribable," he commented. "Broken bottles littered the floors. The magnificent ceilings were perforated with bullet-holes. Wine stains and human excrement blotched the Aubusson carpets. Priceless pictures had been slashed to strips." His description of the dead is revealing: "They included officers in guards' uniform, students---young boys of twenty and men who belonged obviously to the criminal class and whom the revolution had released from prison."[27]

Lockhart's closing comments at least partially match what Hasegawa tells us – although the tone seems different. "It was an unforgettable scene," he writes. "The Bolsheviks had taken their first step towards the establishment of discipline."[28]

There is an additional point that should be made in our discussion of criminal violence in relation to the author of this interesting memoir. Bruce Lockhart – bright and liberal-minded diplomat though he was – in 1918 had, in consultation with the British Foreign Office, been deeply engaged in plotting with anti-Bolshevik terrorist Boris Savinkov and British "Ace of Spies" Sidney Reilly (also a fiercely anti-Bolshevik killer). The goal was to ensure that Russia would remain aligned with British foreign policy interests, to be accomplished by murdering Lenin, Trotsky, and other Bolshevik leaders, and establishing a military dictatorship.[29]

The plans went awry but were discovered by the wily and austere head of the Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinsky, then publicized by the Soviet regime. An international scandal was mitigated by cool, persistent denials by the British government, and by Lockhart himself, persuading many journalists and scholars that this was merely Communist propaganda. Eventually documents have become available revealing that Lockhart and the others were, indeed, guilty as charged.

The obvious irony is that – at least in the stated opinion of Lockhart himself – it was such realities as those associated with the Lockhart Plot (rather than the repression of the more common form of criminal disorder on which Hasegawa focuses) that actually "intensified the terror and increased the bloodshed" associated with early Bolshevik authoritarianism.

Soviet Democracy

One of the most important recent contributions – so far insufficiently appreciated – is Lara Douds' succinct and outstanding study (building on, but going well beyond, previous work by T.H. Rigby) *Inside Lenin's Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the early Soviet State*. The government referred to is commonly known as Sovnarkon, an acronym for *Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov* (Council of People's Commissars). As Douds notes, Lenin and his comrades believed that by carrying out a revolution to give all power to the soviets, "they were constructing a novel and superior democratic system."

"There were competing visions among radical socialists who led the new regime of how this Soviet democracy was to be expressed in practice," Douds explains, "but government by Sovnarkom combining supreme executive and legislative power, responsible to the hierarchy of Soviets from local to national level, expressed at the centre in the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (Vserossiiskii Tsentral'nyi Ispolnite'nyi Kmitet or VTsIK), was initially the institutional form it took." She documents that "the history of the first years of Lenin's government illustrates that the monolithic, authoritarian party-state was not the immediate nor conscious outcome of Bolshevik ideology and intentional policy, but instead the result of ad hoc improvisation and incremental decisions shaped by both the complex, fluid ideological inheritance and the practical exigencies on the ground."

Douds engages with what she sees as "the overlooked but fascinating ways in which Soviet leaders attempted to apply elements of Marxist and socialist thought to the institutions at their disposal to create a superior form of democracy, although the experimental and innovative measures they trialed ultimately failed to deliver a freer and fairer system and instead crystallized into a dysfunctional state apparatus and a Communist Party dictatorship by the death of Lenin in 1924." But the party dictatorship is not how it all started out. Initially it was the government of soviets, not the party, that was predominant. "In the first year of two after the October Revolution, Sovnarkom's apparatus was certainly more developed than the equivalent party apparatus, which only began to expand from spring 1919."[30]

She gives attention to the dynamics of the two-party coalition that first governed the newborn Soviet Republic – the Bolsheviks (soon renaming themselves Communists) and the Left-Socialist Revolutionaries, which broke down due to the precipitous actions of the Left SRs. She also gives attention to the multi-party character of the soviets, in which Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, Left-Socialist Revolutionaries, and other oppositional leftists had voice and vote, until the relentless brutalization of the Russian civil war caused this to give way to repressions imposed by Lenin's Communists.

Douds also gives attention to the collegial, democratic-collectivist ethos which was initially predominant within the various components of the soviet government, although the crises and catastrophes of civil war, foreign intervention, and economic collapse resulted in this giving way to more authoritarian modes of functioning. She traces Lenin's efforts to push back against the ballooning of bureaucratic functioning and the erosion of soviet authority through the increasing incursions of the Communist Party – efforts which proved to be doomed to failure.

Causes for the failure are, Douds' research suggests, only partly attributable to the aggressive assaults on the revolutionary regime by powerful and vicious enemies both within Russia and globally. The replacement of multi-party democracy by single-party dictatorship quite naturally made the party predominant, by far, and quickly melted away the relative autonomy of soviet institutions. While touching on this, however, Douds seems to give greater weight to deficiencies she sees in Lenin's 1917 classic *The State and Revolution* – which, whatever its strengths as a work of historical-intellectual excavation regarding the views of Marx and Engels, she finds naïve and deficient as a blueprint for constructing a new form of government.[31]

A definite strength of Douds' study is the attention she gives to specific Bolshevik personalities who played a role in what happened and what failed to happen. This gives additional sparks of life to her narrative, but also provides insights into how the story unfolded. Particularly important to the story she tells is the impressive and admirable Jacob Sverdlov, who not only played a key role in promoting strong, vibrant, relatively democratic and effective soviets, but also preceded Stalin in the role of the Bolshevik party position of what would become known as "general secretary" – which under Sverdlov was a relatively modest entity but became under Stalin something else altogether. Preceding Sverdlov in this party position, of course, was Nadezhda Krupskaya, and shortly thereafter Elena Stasova, both of whom are given the spark of life in this narrative.

Other personalities are also part of the story – such as the somewhat problematical Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich and the sharp-minded critic Valerian Osinsky (an experienced comrade who became a spokesman for the Democratic-Centralist oppositional faction), as well as the very modest and impressive Alexander Tsiurupa, the independent-minded and capable Alexei Rykov, and others. Ideas, social forces, and institutions are important in the making of history, but so are human individuals (without whom, of course, there would be no history at all).

Working-Class Cadres

Central to the Russian Revolution was the existence of an organized working-class movement that grew in numbers, in consciousness, in power, and in militancy – ultimately embracing Bolshevik conceptualizations of "what is to be done." Ample discussion on this and related matters can be found in Ronald Suny's essays gathered in the collection *Red Flag Unfurled*.[32] New contributions to the comprehension of Russia's revolutionary history are studies that foreground prominent worker-Bolsheviks.

Barbara C. Allen's outstanding work, *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: The Life of an Old Bolshevik* has been joined by yet another – Charters Wynn's *The Moderate Bolshevik: Mikhail Tomsky from the Factory to the Kremlin, 1880-1936*. The thorough, tenacious, perceptive scholarship of Allen and Wynn enriches our understanding of qualities inherent in Bolshevism and of political and social dynamics within revolutionary Russia. Each in their own way, Tomsky and Shlyapnikov were remarkable people. Each showed himself to be a principled and tough-minded organizer. Despite very human weaknesses, each was a personification of what was best in the revolutionary working class and in the Bolshevik movement.[33]

There was another remarkable individual who rose out of the working class, whose admirable qualities – in some ways similar to those of Shlyapnikov and Tomsky – made Lenin perceive him as a "marvelous Georgian" in 1913, but who was also afflicted with pathologies that would grow over time, coming to full flower under the horribly intense pressures of the civil war period following 1917. Joseph Vissarionovich Jughashvili (1878-1953), known to the world as Stalin, has found his outstanding biographer with Ronald Suny's massive account from his birth to the Bolshevik triumph of 1917, *Stalin, Passage to Revolution*.[34]

Especially Suny's biography of Stalin provides a sense of how the Bolshevik organization and the revolutionary underground functioned – on the ground, day-by-day, year after year. Taken

together with certain older volumes (one thinks of Barbara Evans Clements' rich study *Bolshevik Women* – an essential text on the history of Bolshevism – and Osip Piatnitsky's *Memoirs of a Bolshevik*), Suny sharply challenges stereotypical distortions of pre-1917 Bolshevism. "The Bolsheviks operated not as a tightly centralized party in which orders that came down from above were faithfully carried out without question but as a loose and disputatious collection of strong-willed activists who had to be persuaded of the right course to take." They were "an argumentative lot. They were Protestants without an infallible pope. Many were well-read in the classics of Marxism and kept abreast of the controversies at party congresses and in the party press. … [who were] dedicated to … using a body of political theory and historical interpretation to analyze the politics of the moment and predict possible outcomes.… Strategy followed from their reading of the class configuration in Russia and in Europe."[35]

In Barbara Evans Clements' substantial examination of the historical realities, we find clear traces of the fluid and contradictory dynamics of lived reality. Becoming involved in the revolutionary party was a complex process. Sympathetic prospective members secretly "carried messages, distributed pamphlets, and raised money" for the party, gaining trust and forming relationships among party activists while continuing to "read socialism … and talk with their friends" about politics. "For every one such explorer who became a full-time revolutionary, there were dozens, if not hundreds, more who never went beyond this marginal state of involvement." Those who became party members helped advance the cause in multiple ways – "printed leaflets, attended party meetings, kept communications going with other revolutionaries and propagandized workers and students." What was meant by being in "the party" was especially complicated given that, up to 1917, both Menshevik and Bolshevik factions were part of the same Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Decisions within local party committees "were supposed to be made democratically; instructions from the center were followed or ignored, according to the judgment of the people on the spot; and Mensheviks and Bolsheviks often decided whether to fight or cooperate with one another in response to the situation at hand and their own personal inclinations." Making things even more complicated was a political "sense of family" which included "whoever was working for the cause of revolution in a particular city, not only Bolsheviks, but Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, sympathetic fellow travelers – virtually anyone who might lend a hand or host a meeting."[36]

At the same time, powerful pressures pushed activists in the direction of making choices about more coherent and sharply defined political orientations and practices. One such pressure was the fact that the revolutionary activists were up against a well-organized and repressive state apparatus. In addition, there were sometimes unbridgeable strategic and tactical divergences between the orientations of the different organizations. Despite grumpy complaints by practical activists regarding theoretical "tempests in a teapot" being generated among émigré intellectuals, prominent working-class organizers sometimes felt compelled to make choices separating Bolsheviks from the others. Given such realities, much can be learned from the experiences of prominent worker-Bolsheviks Shlyapnikov and Tomsky. Tracing the complex and very full lives of these key figures, and reflecting over their similarities, differences, and interplay, can reveal much about Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution – including their complexities and their fate. Each worked very closely with Lenin, but at one key point or another each came into conflict with him. As Bolsheviks they collaborated closely – but also at decisive moments came into sharp conflict with each other.

Shlyapnikov – from a family background of dissident Old Believers – was more inclined to hew to principles and, if need be, go into opposition on their behalf. His cerebral and egalitarian predilections, while generally in harmony with his practical-activist inclinations, drew him into an extended relationship with a strong and intellectual woman (Alexandra Kollontai). He seemed the personification of the "conscious worker" central to Lenin's perspectives, and in 1917 he was a key militant allied with Lenin's revolutionary thrust. Heading the metal workers union, he also assumed a position in the new Soviet regime as Commissar of Labor – but soon came into conflict with Lenin and others, amid the chaotic realities of the civil war and "war communism," in his opposition to the minimalization of unions' authority and workers' power. He led the Workers' Opposition, which played an important role in subsequent debates.[37]

Tomsky was also a leading militant among the metal workers, and like Shlyapnikov a practical-minded organizer deeply committed to building a revolutionary workers' movement. But he aligned himself with Lenin in opposing what both considered Shlyapnikov's pushing forward trade union interests in opposition to authoritarian expedients in the post-1917 situation. More of a "wheeler-dealer" than Shlyapnikov, he replaced his comrade as Commissar of Labor. In the course of the 1920 "Trade Union Debate" (in which authoritarian policies advocated by Trotsky were counterposed to trade unionist "workers' power" perspectives of Shylapnikov), Tomsky helped influence Lenin to develop a middle position.

Tomsky soon offended Lenin and others by allowing what they felt was too much leeway for oppositionists in the trade union movement. This resulted in his being temporarily assigned to far-off Tashkent, although he was not contrite about this. "I'm not afraid to criticize the Central Committee, I'm not afraid of being exiled," he responded. "Anyone who is afraid to disrespectfully treat his superiors, who is afraid that if he does so he will be subject to exile and arrest, he is not a communist."

But Tomsky was soon returned to his central labor position. It is said that he was Lenin's first choice for the new position of General Secretary of the Communist Party, but Tomsky preferred to retain his labor and trade union posts, and the position went to Stalin. Wynn notes that "the trade unions did enjoy considerable autonomy and power during the 1920s, contrary to the portrayal of them in much of the historiography of NEP," and that "during the latter half of the 1920s Tomsky and his fellow trade-union leaders' success in defending workers' economic interests … made it … a kind of 'golden age' for the trade unions."[38]

Tomsky and Stalin had been politically close on many issues and were personally close as well. But as Stalin consolidated his power, they were increasingly pals no longer. Stalin was preparing an authoritarian and brutal "revolution from above," designed to modernize the Soviet Union through forced collectivization of land and rapid industrialization, at the expense of the vast laboring majority. Wynn recounts: "At a family barbecue in Sochi in 1928, while Stalin was grilling *shashlik*, a very drunk Tomsky shockingly whispered into Stalin's ear, 'soon our workers will start shooting at you, they will.'"[39] Instead, struggles engineered by Stalin and his lieutenants broke Tomsky's power in the unions, marginalizing him and his Bolshevik allies Alexei Rykov and Nikolai Bukharin. This culminated in the murderous purges of 1936-38. Within that context, Shyapnikov was also arrested and executed – but when Tomsky saw what was coming, he chose to commit suicide.

Allen's and Wynn's studies indicate that Shlyapnikov and Tomsky were by no means "loners" – they were an organic part of an extensive working-class movement and revolutionary collective. They were a highly developed element among a layer of activists commonly referred to as *cadres*. As such, they had a capacity to develop an understanding of "the big picture," to analyze what actually exists and what ideally could exist, and to craft an approach to move from the one to the other; they had a capacity to convey this understanding to others, and to help others organize and mobilize in effective ways to bring about such change. They were cadres who could help others become cadres, capable of helping to ensure that the working-class movement and revolutionary collective could be sustained, could grow, win victories, draw in more adherents and activists, and possibly bring about a socialist triumph.

Stalin – and Beyond

Stalin too was part of the cadre layer of this Bolshevik collective, which fragmented under the pressure of events. The powerful fragment that contained Stalin and those in agreement with him consolidated a version of the new Communist order described in such studies as Sheila Fitzpatrick's *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* and Ronald Suny's *Red Flag Wounded: Stalinism, and the Fate of the Soviet Experiment*.[40]

A remarkable set of studies by a dissident historian in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia – the late Vadim Z. Rogovin – sharply pose the question "Was There an Alternative" to Stalinism? Rogovin responds by documenting the struggle of "Bolsheviks Against Stalinism," spanning the years 1923-1933.[41]

Rogovin's focus is on the Left Opposition associated with Trotsky. Yet he provides extensive information on a much broader opposition among both older and younger Communists to the intensifying bureaucratic dictatorship associated with Stalin. Many of them remained true – in varying degrees and in different ways – to aspects of the Bolshevik commitment incompatible with Stalin's version of Communism. And they lost.

As it turned out, however, the so-called "Communism" associated with Stalin and his team proved incapable of sustaining itself even to the close to the 20th century. Its collapse has caused many to dismiss it as "the road to nowhere." Yet the capitalist status quo continues to generate disasters and catastrophes – which attracts significant numbers of scholars, activists, and others to a continued study of what *actually* happened and what *might* have been.

Recent interest in the theoretical output of the prominent Bolshevik leader who crossed swords with Lenin, Alexander Bogdanov, has resulted in a pathbreaking intellectual biography by James D. White, and multiplying translations of Bogdanov's writings. The Bolshevik tradition continues to be critically explored by other works as well, including Lars Lih's new collection of essays *What Was Bolshevism?* and my own collection *Revolutionary Collective*. A continuing proliferation of studies of Trotsky are being joined by new interest in Stalin, and in a rich flood of work on Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, early German Communism, and much more.[42]

October Song is part of this multifaceted process, which shows no sign of letting up soon. It is a process which promises to yield additional insights to illuminate both what happened in the past and what might be possible in the future.

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[3] Don Kalb, "Trotsky Over Mauss: Anthropological Theory and the October 1917 Commemoration," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 42, September 2018, pp. 335, 337.
[4] Ibid., 331, 336.
[5] Ibid., p. 336.
[6] Ibid., p. 337.
[7] Ibid., pp. 337, 338.
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[9] Larry E. Holmes, *Revising the Revolution: The Unmaking of Russia's Official History of 1917* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2013); R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989); R.W. Davies, *Soviet History of the Yeltsin Era* (New York: St, Martin's Press, 1997); Lars T. Lih, "Supplement: Back to Nevsky!" *Weekly Worker*, June 7, 2023, https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1450/supplement-back-to-nevsky/.

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[16] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution: Mob Justice and Police in Petrograd* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017),
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[22] Hasegawa, pp. 99, 100, 211.
[23] R.H. Bruce Lockhart, *British Agent* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1933), pp. 238-239.
[24] Ibid., pp. 239-240.
[25] Ibid., p. 240.
[26] Ibid., p. 255.

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[29] Robert K. Debo, "Lockhart Plot or Dzerzhinskii Plot?" *Journal of Modern History*, 43 no.3, 1971, pp. 413-439**;** Benny Morris, *Sidney Reilly, Master Spy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 49-101; Jonathan Schneer, *The Lockhart Plot: Love, Betrayal, Assassination and Counter-Revolution in Lenin's Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Also of interest is Tony Williams, "British Agent (1934): Early Hollywood looks at the Bolsheviks," *World Socialist Web Site*, 18 February 2012, https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/02/brit-f18.html.

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[37] See Barbara C. Allen, ed., *The Workers' Opposition in the Russian Communist Party, Documents 1919-30* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023).
[38] Wynn, pp. 151, 159, 218, 251.
[39] Ibid., p. 289.
[40] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Ronald Grigor Suny, *Red Flag Wounded: Stalinism, and the Fate of the Soviet Experiment* (London: Verso, 2020).
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