

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > **Review: Bolshevism and revolutionary democracy**

Review: Bolshevism and revolutionary democracy

Saturday 2 January 2010, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2009).

* **Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 289 pages. \$160.**

* **Soma Marik, *Reinterrogating the Classical Marxist Discourses of Revolutionary Democracy* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008), 537 pages. \$55.**

Given the complexities and crises of our time, we may see increasing numbers of thoughtful people and rising layers of young activists once again asking, “What is socialism and how can it be achieved?” Impacting on the answers to this question are the questions wrestled with in the books under review, which give attention to the fact that, as Simon Pirani puts it, “the Russian revolution of 1917 was a defining event, maybe the defining event, of the twentieth century,” and that “the retreat from, or failure of, the revolution’s aims . . . have, no less than its achievements, been a central problem for all those concerned with progressive social change.” [1]

Back in 1917, when the workers and peasants upsurge in Russia culminated in the triumph of the revolutionary-democratic councils known as soviets, Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party (soon renamed “Communist Party”) at the head of the upsurge, declared: “Comrades, workers, soldiers, peasants and all working people! Take all power into the hands of your soviets. . . Gradually, with the consent and approval of the majority of the peasants, in keeping with their practical experience and that of the workers, we shall go forward firmly and unswervingly to the victory of socialism - a victory that will be sealed by the advanced workers of the many civilized countries, bring the peoples lasting peace and liberate them from all oppression and exploitation.” As John Reed reported in his eyewitness account *Ten Days That Shook the World* (corroborated by much serious scholarship since then), “the only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterward, in smoke of the falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the framework of the new.” [2]

Yet within a decade the bureaucratic and murderous dictatorship under Joseph Stalin was - in the name of Lenin and Bolshevism - consolidating its hold over the Soviet Republic. In fact, as Pirani argues, “within months of the October [1917] uprising, the revolution was in retreat from the aims of social liberation it had proclaimed. It was confounded by circumstances, and pushed back by the state.” [3]

Pirani adds that “the retreat, like the revolution, was not uniform or unidimensional. Workers, communists and others kept trying to push the revolution forward.” Many historians would agree

with the assertion of Moshe Lewin, in his 2005 summation *The Soviet Century*, that “the year 1924 marks the end of ‘Bolshevism’” – with the new bureaucratic layer led by Stalin defeating, one after the other, a succession of Communists still animated by the ideals of 1917. [4] Many had earlier contributed to their own defeat. Soma Marik asserts – in terms that Pirani would certainly endorse – that “all too often, in place of admitting that acute crises were causing departures from workers’ democracy, the Bolsheviks justified those departures as developments superior to bourgeois democracy. This caused a severe retreat in the theoretical field and ultimately affected their political practice seriously.” She goes on to insist (with a perspective similar to Lewin’s – but perhaps not Pirani’s): “Nonetheless, the process of bureaucratization and the rise of Stalinism meant a decisive break with the Bolshevik legacy, rather than an essential continuity.” [5]

In most cases, such questions are not adequately explored by scholars whose primary experience happens to be outside of the labor and socialist movements. More helpful is an immersion not only in the literature and historical material of Marxism, socialism, and communism, but also an intimacy with the practicalities of left-wing organizations and with the interplay of such organizations with the larger working class. It helps especially if a person with such experience has been shaken into a critical-mindedness. Such people are more inclined to know which questions to ask, and where to look for the answers to such questions.

It is fortunate that in our own time there is a flow of important work from such people, two of whom are under review here. British scholar Simon Pirani was once a prominent activist in the Workers Revolutionary Party, now obviously disillusioned with the orthodoxies of that now-imploded super-Trotskyist sect. He has produced an extremely important piece of research – *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24*. Soma Marik is an Indian scholar. Her adherence to the Fourth International of Trotskyist origin, perhaps tempered by difficulties in building a revolutionary organization in her native land, has certainly been impacted by a commitment to feminist perspectives. Her book is as awkwardly named as it is rich with information and insight – *Reinterrogating the Classical Marxist Discourses of Revolutionary Democracy*.

What Marik does – aptly explained in the laudatory foreword by prominent Marx scholar David McLellan – is to explore “the revolutionary and democratic core of Marxism” and to offer “a careful dissection of the ways in which Marx and the Bolsheviks united theory and practice.” What Pirani does – aptly noted in the blurb by Diane Koenker, herself a pioneer in the study of the Russian working class – is to take “a close look at the relationship between the Bolshevik party and the democratic aspirations of rank-and-file workers in Moscow in the crucial early years of the Russian revolution.” [6]

Primarily a work of intellectual history, Marik’s study is thorough – combing through the mass of primary and secondary sources related to her subject, not least of which is a splendid utilization of Hal Draper’s rich body of work (which also informs Pirani’s study). As do Draper and a number of other prominent scholars (David McLellan, Richard N. Hunt, Michael Löwy, August Nimtz, etc.), Marik produces a clear, coherent, fully documented, and stimulating discussion of classical Marxism informed by the notion that, as she puts it, “central to Marx’s concept of workers’ democracy was the principles of working-class self-emancipation.” While this is ground well covered by others, whose contributions she capably summarizes and synthesizes, Marik’s effort contains two additional components: (1) almost every chapter of the book contains material critically examining how questions of gender and issues of feminism relate to, and shed light on, the “larger issues” under discussion; (2) there is an exploration of the interrelationship between Marx and Bolshevism.

Pirani’s book is – in some ways – much narrower in scope. A work of social history, it focuses on realities in Moscow in a five-year period. Its publication coincides with the appearance of two other important volumes wrestling with similar issues – Alexander Rabinowitch’s *The Bolsheviks in Power*:

The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd (2007) and Kevin Murphy's splendid *Revolution and Counter-Revolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* (2005), which looks at a single workplace from roughly 1900 to 1932.

These three books are part of a much larger stream of scholarship, which suggests an important limitation (yet also a strength) of Pirani's work: far from having the finality of a synthesis, it is a contribution to a much larger collective work-in-progress. The weaknesses in Pirani's book, it seems to me, arise when he strains against the limitations of his study, reaching for generalizations that distort rather than shed light on the valuable new information that he is sharing with us.

At the very beginning of his book is a summary of Pirani's thesis: "The working class was politically expropriated by the Bolshevik party, as democratic bodies such as soviets and factory committees were deprived of decision-making power [as] the Soviet ruling class began to take shape. ... Some worker activists concluded that the principles of 1917 had been betrayed, while others accepted a social contract, under which workers were assured of improvements in living standards in exchange for increased labor discipline and productivity, and a surrender of political power to the party." [7]

It is difficult to convey in a short review how valuable is the new material that Pirani presents in this compelling study. The essential outlines of what he offers will hardly be news to those who have engaged with, for example, Paul Avrich's fine old account *Kronstadt 1921* or the narratives, memoirs, and novels of Victor Serge, Robert V. Daniels' substantial 1960 work *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia*, or Samuel Farber's more recent *Before Stalinism, The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*. But Pirani utilizes new materials (including contemporary reports, speeches, articles, and interventions by dozens of Bolshevik and non-Bolshevik workplace activists, factory managers, dissidents and bureaucrats - culled from minutes of various soviet, trade union, and party meetings, from newspapers of the time, as well as from detailed reports of the Cheka, not to mention a considerable body of Russian-language post-Soviet scholarship). Pirani accepts the conception of the Bolshevik-led 1917 revolution as a profoundly democratic and promising reality, and he seems to accept the need to have postponed that glowing promise in 1918-1920, in the face of foreign invasion and brutal civil war. But once the Bolsheviks won the civil war, he asks, what explains the reason for the promise not simply being deferred but abandoned?

Some scholars have drawn on Lenin's own partial explanation: "an industrial proletariat ... in our country, owing to the war and the desperate poverty and ruin, has become declassed, i.e., dislodged from its class groove, and has ceased to be a proletariat. ... Since large-scale capitalist industry has been destroyed, since the factories and works are still at a standstill, the proletariat has disappeared." Lenin's view was that only the Communist Party, largely composed of those who had been workers, and committed to a revolutionary working-class program, could hold the new Soviet Republic together. Isaac Deutscher made this a central component of his own influential account of Russia's post-revolutionary realities. More recent historians such as Diane Koenker have effectively challenged this as exaggerated, though Koenker's own data indicates elements of truth in Lenin's formulation: dramatic socio-economic disruptions, combined with revolutionary workers being drawn into the Red army and state apparatus, obviously impacted on the vitality and political cohesion of the Russian workers' movement. Pirani observes, however, that "the working class was far from non-existent, and when in 1921, it began to resuscitate soviet democracy," responses from powerful elements in the Communist Party worked not for its revival but its limitation and even elimination. [8] Tensions and conflicts sharpened with implantation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), beginning in 1921, reviving the devastated economy with market mechanisms but also fostering inequality and corruption.

Vibrant details emerge from this - connected with specific tensions and conflicts, passions and

personalities - which provide patches of color, motion, and flavor that help us understand in new ways what is going on in the five eventful years that Pirani examines. At times, the complex swirl of what he unearths and presents is almost overwhelming - and at times, it seems to me, he tries to pull it all into a more coherent package than is justified by the more jumbled and fluid realities. But essential elements of the Bolshevik and Soviet tragedy do emerge, nonetheless, and with uncommon freshness and poignancy.

One Communist militant remembered of the revolutionary years: "We all lived in a state of revolutionary romanticism: weary and exhausted but happy, festive; unkempt, unwashed, long-haired and unshaven, but clear and clean of thought and heart." A Communist returning from the civil war wrote to Lenin that "in the heart of every conscious comrade from the front, who at the front has become used to almost complete equality, who has broken from every kind of servility, debauchery and luxury - with which our very best party comrades now surround themselves - there boils hatred and disbelief." A disillusioned party member explained in a letter of resignation: "I cannot be that sort of idealist communist who believes in the new God That They Call the State, bows down before the bureaucracy that is so far from the working people, and waits for communism from the hands of pen-pushers and officials as though it was the kingdom of heaven." In 1920, a leader of the Democratic Centralist faction in the Communist Party snapped: "Why talk about the proletarian dictatorship or workers' self-activity? There's no self-activity here!" [9] A 1923 manifesto from the dissident Workers Group asserted:

"What are we being told? 'You sit quietly, go out and demonstrate when you're invited, sing the Internationale - when required - and the rest will be done without you, by first-class people who are almost the same sort of workers as you, only cleverer.' ... But what we need is a practice based on the self-activity of the working class, not on the party's fear of it." [10]

Among the early working-class oppositional groups in and around the Russian Communist Party, the best known is the Workers Opposition led by Alexander Shlyapnikov and Alexandra Kollontai. While they figure in Pirani's account, he gives much more attention to other (and in some ways more interesting) formations - the Democratic Centralists led by Timofei Sapronov and Valerian Osinskii, Workers Truth whose activists included such female militants as Polina Lass-Kozlova and Fania Shutskyever, and the Workers Group whose leading personality was the tough, thoughtful worker-Bolshevik militant Gavriil Miasnikov. It is one of the great tragedies of Bolshevism that such oppositional currents were crushed by 1923, and that aspects of their perspectives, rooted deeply in the Bolshevism that culminated in the 1917 triumph and initially enjoying significant working-class support, were not allowed the space to challenge the ominous and ultimately murderous bureaucratization. Beginning with Lenin himself, and then Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and others (all of whom had "pragmatically" yet myopically worked to eliminate these early currents), the bureaucratic-authoritarian onslaught dealt them defeat after defeat after defeat.

Marik sees the decisive moment occurring at the Tenth Party Congress of the Communist Party in March 1921, when a ban on organized opposition was codified both inside and outside of the Communist Party. "Yet, in 1921, it seemed to be only another temporary measure," she writes. "Lenin pleaded for time, thereby creating the impression that eventually, in one or two years, matters would change. But the effect of the changes of 1921 was devastating. The danger of bureaucratization had been ever present from the early days of the revolution. Once workers' democracy was throttled, this bureaucratization could proceed unhindered." [11] It is worth reflecting, however, on Trotsky's classic essay of 1937, "Stalinism and Bolshevism":

"As far as the prohibition of the other Soviet parties is concerned, it did not flow from any "theory" of Bolshevism but was a measure of defense of the dictatorship [of the proletariat, i.e., the workers' state] in a backward and devastated country, surrounded by enemies. For the Bolsheviks it was clear

from the beginning that this measure, later completed by the prohibition of factions inside the governing party itself, signaled a tremendous danger. However, the root of the danger lay not in the doctrine or in the tactics but in the material weakness of the dictatorship, in the difficulties of its internal and international situation. If the revolution had triumphed, even if only in Germany, the need to prohibit the other Soviet parties would immediately have fallen away.” [12]

Marik identifies a key problem embedded in Leninist theory, whose negative effects crop up over and over in Pirani’s account. “The lack of discussion about the role of political parties in *The State and Revolution* remains a significant flaw,” she writes. “Lenin’s account of representative democracy can be criticized for being silent on the question of plurality, rival programs within the workers’ state, and on the distinction between counter-revolution and opposition.” [13] She and Pirani document the fact that Lenin, Trotsky, and other leading Bolsheviks idealized the Communist Party under their leadership as the only legitimate political expression of Russia’s revolutionary working-class.

Marik notes that this was related to the fact that initially “most non-Bolshevik parties, who were chosen by the workers, peasants and soldiers to represent them in the Soviets, decided to turn their backs on the Soviets and even to join hands with a bourgeois-aristocratic counter-revolution.” But she also insists (drawing on the work of another Indian scholar, Kunal Chattopadhyay’s *The Marxism of Leon Trotsky* [2006]) that the multi-party socialism Trotsky had insisted on as early as 1904 – which he had abandoned when the other socialist parties turned against the Russian Revolution, but returned to by the 1930s – was the key to avoiding the disaster that befell Soviet Russia. [14]

There were others, however, who were insisting on the same point at the very moment when Lenin and Trotsky were inadvertently helping to engineer the revolution’s defeat. Pirani draws our attention to a 1922 declaration of the Workers’ Group, calling for “the resurrection of workers’ democracy in the form of workplace-based soviets,” that seems to hit the nail on the head:

“It argued that, whereas during the civil war the emphasis had been on suppressing the exploiters, NEP required rebuilding such soviets as the ‘basic cells’ of soviet power. There could be no free speech for those who oppose revolution, ‘from monarchists to SRs,’ and curtailing democracy during the civil war had been an unavoidable necessity. But under NEP ‘a new approach’ was needed, including free speech for all workers: ‘there is no such thing in Russia as a communist working class, there is just the working class, with Bolsheviks, anarchists, SRs and Mensheviks in its ranks,’ among whom ‘not compulsion, but persuasion’ had to be used. ... The manifesto lambasted the use of ‘bureaucratic appointments that brush aside the direct participation of the working class’ to run industry. ...” [15]

One of the most serious problems with Pirani’s account is a tendency to accuse the Bolsheviks (or Communists) as a whole, and Lenin in particular, of authoritarian ideological inclinations and goals which, at best, seriously oversimplify the realities. According to his own account many Bolsheviks opposed and fought against manifestations of what he presents as “the Bolshevik position.” The label “anti-worker” is applied very freely, sometimes to corrupted and tyrannical officials, to be sure, but also to some Bolsheviks who had been workers for most of their lives and who saw themselves as attempting to defend the medium-term and long-term interests of the working class in the face of understandable but problematical short-term discontents.

Certain conceptions are pushed further than the facts will bear. Here are two examples.

1. Pirani writes that Marx “asserted that the abolition of bureaucratic hierarchy and the introduction of officials paid a skilled workman’s wages . . . would be integral to ‘the political form of . . . social emancipation,’” and then announces: “In Bolshevism, this aspect of Marx’s thought was almost

completely obliterated.” There are a number of first-hand accounts that contradict this. For example, in the remarkable memoir of a Communist survivor of the gulag, Joseph Berger’s *Nothing But the Truth* (also published under the title *Shipwreck of a Generation*): “In the early years of the regime the ascetic tradition of the revolutionaries was maintained. One of its outward manifestations was the ‘party maximum’ – the ceiling imposed on the earnings of Party members. At first this was very low – an official was paid scarcely more than a manual worker, though certain advantages went with a responsible job. Lenin set the tone by refusing an extra kopeck or slice of bread. . . .” There were certainly exceptions to this — Trotsky records with distaste the case of his own brother-in-law, Lev Kamenev, who threw little parties during the stark civil war period, supplied with “bottles and dainties” supplied by the somewhat corrupt but affable Abel Yenukidze. [16] With the New Economic Policy, as many (including Pirani) have been able to show, immense inequalities became far more common. But our understanding is not enhanced by denying the realities that Berger and others attest to.

2. Pirani tells us: “The most influential socialist analysis of the USSR, Trotsky’s, . . . relied heavily on the Bolsheviks’ old discourse about ‘alien class elements,’ and excluded from examination the party’s political expropriation of the working class,” Pirani writes. This is not true. From exile, Trotsky wrote: “On the foundation of the dictatorship of the proletariat – in a backward country, surrounded by capitalists – for the first time a powerful bureaucratic apparatus has been created from among the upper layers of the workers, that is raised above the masses, that lays down the law to them, that has at its disposal colossal resources, that is bound together by an inner mutual responsibility, and that intrudes into the policies of a workers’ government its own interests, methods, and regulations.” Trotsky was merciless in describing the ex-working-class functionary: “He eats and guzzles and procreates and grows himself a respectable potbelly. He lays down the law with a sonorous voice, handpicks from below people faithful to him, remains faithful to his superiors, prohibits others from criticizing himself, and sees in all of this the gist of the general line.” [17]

Pirani (perhaps understandably) turns on Lenin. The wonderful quality of Lenin’s Marxism for most of his life, and especially in 1915-1917, was the unity of the revolutionary strategy and the revolutionary goal, each permeated by a vibrant, uncompromising working-class militancy, insurgent spirit, and radical democracy. The culmination of this in the 1917 revolution was Lenin’s triumph. His tragedy was that it broke down in 1918 – not simply because of the immense violence for foreign invasion and civil war, not to mention the earlier devastation of World War I, but because the simple solution of “workers’ democracy” became problematical when the abstract visions were brought down to the level of concrete realities. Workers’ committees and councils in the factories and neighborhoods did not have enough information and knowledge to form practical decisions nor enough skill and practical experience to carry out decisions for the purpose of running a national economy, developing adequate social services throughout the country, formulating a coherent foreign policy, or even running a factory that would be interconnected with a larger economic system. [18]

This was especially so in the horrendous context in which revolutionary Russia found itself by 1921. The unexpected reality that the Bolshevik Revolution did not succeed in sparking international revolution, in the wake of global radicalization fostered by the imperialist slaughter of World War I, was a key factor in the tragic equation – the Soviet Republic’s isolation in a hostile capitalist world. There were thus no socialist regimes in more advanced industrial economies of Germany and other European countries to help in the development of revolutionary Russia, as had been expected in 1917.

Pirani makes much of a fragment of Lenin’s 1922 speech which he interprets as defining the Russian working class out of existence. The speech actually contains various good, bad, and contradictory formulations as Lenin grapples with the kinds of problems alluded to above, which tend to be

avoided in Pirani's narrative. He could just as well have drawn our attention to the words of Leon Trotsky. "Under the form of the 'struggle against despotic centralism' and against 'stifling' discipline, a fight takes place for the self-preservation of various groups and subgroupings of the working class, with their petty ward leaders and their local oracles," Trotsky wrote in 1921. "The entire working class, while preserving its cultural originality and its political nuances, can act methodically and firmly without remaining in the tow of events and directing each time its mortal blows against the weak sectors of its enemies, on the condition that at its head, above the wards, the districts, the groups, there is an apparatus which is centralized and bound together by an iron discipline." [19]

Although Pirani does not put this quotation in his book, this could also be seen as a rationale for "the new ruling class." While there may be truth to Pirani's analysis, however, there may also be elements of truth in Trotsky's comments - reflecting the tragic dilemma facing Bolshevism in the early 1920s. And the fact remains that a number of apparent representatives of this "new ruling class" had spent most of their lives fighting for workers' democracy and socialism and would soon end their lives in continuing to wage that struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. The realities seem far more contradictory and fluid than Pirani will allow.

Nonetheless, Bolshevism failed to sustain its own revolutionary democracy, and what Bolsheviks did and failed to do are part of the equation. While this defeat resulted from factors beyond their control, fateful choices by Lenin and his comrades were also among the negative factors. Those who seek to do what they tried to do, but to do it better, should reflect over these works by Pirani and Marik.

By Paul Le Blanc

P.S.

* From Paul Le Blanc, "Bolshevism and Revolutionary Democracy," *New Politics*, Winter 2009, 45-52.

Footnotes

[1] Pirani, 1.

[2] Lenin, *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism, Selected Writings*, edited by Paul Le Blanc (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 279-280; John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: Signet, 1967), 256.

[3] Pirani, 1-2.

[4] Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 308

[5] Marik, 7.

[6] Marik, vi; Pirani, i.

[7] Pirani, iii.

[8] Lenin cited and his comments discussed, along with Koenker's critique, in Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1993), 304-305, 335; Pirani, 22-23.

[9] Pirani, 45, 53, 55, 91-92.

[10] Ibid, 142.

[11] Marik, 477.

[12] *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 426.

[13] Ibid, 379.

[14] Ibid, 380.

[15] Pirani, 195-196.

[16] Pirani, 166-167; Joseph Berger, *Nothing But the Truth* (New York: John Day Co., 1971), 89; Leon Trotsky, "Abel Yenukidze," *Portraits Political and Personal* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), 179.

[17] Pirani, 167; Leon Trotsky, "What Next?" in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971), 213.

[18] Among sources that provide information and insights are: Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies, Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), Edward Allsworth Ross, *The Russian Soviet Republic* (New York: Century, 1923).

[19] Pirani, 163; Leon Trotsky, "Lessons of the Paris Commune," in *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 56. Lenin's 1922 speech deserves extended scrutiny and reflection - see Lenin, "Report of the Political Committee of the RCP(B), March 27," *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 263-309 - the comments on which Pirani focuses can be found on 299.