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Leon Trotsky: Between the Power and the Dream - A Review of Paul Le Blanc's Biography

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Leon Trotsky. Paul Le Blanc. London: Reaktion Books, 2015, 224 pages, 35 halftones. Paper: \$16.95. A Volume in the "Critical Lives" series, distributed in the United States by the University of Chicago Press.

Review by Alan Wald in *Against the Current* #178 (September 2015). A reply by Paul Le Blanc will appear in *Against the Current* #179.

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PAUL LE BLANC has achieved the implausible — he has written a concise and compelling book about a sprawling, gargantuan subject. Leon Trotsky (born Lev Davidovich Bronstein, 1879-1940) was a titan of 20th century politics, a revolutionary Marxist genius who theorized a strategy for the Russian Revolution of 1917 and functioned as its on-the-ground organizer in the capital city of Petrograd (now St. Petersburg).

The son of wealthy Jewish farmers in the Ukraine, Trotsky was also a magnificent military tactician and brilliant orator who in 1918 founded the Red Army, and after 1923 stepped forward to become the epicenter of the Bolshevik opposition to Stalinism. On the heels of his 1927 expulsion from the Communist Party, he was forced into exile in Asia, Western Europe, and then Mexico.

Throughout the sinister era of the 1930s Trotsky served as a moral beacon in the face of Soviet despotism, barbaric fascism, and brutal colonialism. Commonly referred to by admirers as "The Old Man" — even in his fifties — he launched a new revolutionary movement (the Fourth International) in 1938, two years before he was murdered on orders from Stalin.

Most advantageous for young people today, Trotsky was a world-class writer of fecundity and sophistication. The sweep and daring of his intellectual projects — especially *Literature and*

Revolution (1925), *My Life* (1930), *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1931-33), and *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) — vivify his subjects in a way that still shines through the thick mists of time. He crafts sentences with sublime originality that ring again and again; to read his devastating polemics at almost any point is like watching Godzilla pulverize Tokyo.

Yet in only 200 pages, Le Blanc's Trotsky tracks the contours of this colossal political and personal biography, a life that evokes a Homeric epic at the outset and a dark Euripidean tragedy at its close. Trotsky even looks the part of a romantic revolutionary in photographs, of which Le Blanc's volume provides a generous selection.

Trotskyologists are a peculiar species. The journey from "True Disciple of the Old Man" to outright political nutter — sometimes on the Left, sometimes on the Right — is far from unknown. There are also certain academic specialists and journalists who are professionally anti-radical, selectively focusing on the "scandalous" elements of Trotsky's record in the manner of a drunk using a lamppost; for support, not illumination.

Alternatively, there is a danger in composing books and essays from too deep inside a Trotskyist echo-chamber; the result can be Trotskyists writing for each other with fill-in-the-blanks predictability about correct programs, principled politics, betrayers, renegades, centrists and so on. The most appalling cases give the impression of Lear on the heath, ranting to an audience of one.

Le Blanc, however, is simpatico to Trotsky yet an even-handed guide through the thicket of elusive, shape-shifting enigmas that mold, limit and challenge the human experience. While I'm hesitant to say that Le Blanc delivers any earth-shaking new evaluations, he offers a fresh perspective and judicious sense of objectivity that opens the door to a renewed engagement with select ideas that will especially appeal to present-day activists.

A Perspective from Exile

For Le Blanc, this means a focus on neither the revolutionary seizure of power nor the years of civil war, nor even the first stages of Trotsky's battle to save Bolshevism from the official Bolsheviks. Instead, Le Blanc looks back on all this from the years of exile, 1929-1940:

"To understand the man, we must, of course, look at his entire life — but in some ways the most decisive qualities of this revolutionary are to be found in the Trotsky who, in order to remain true to the ideals that animated his entire life, followed a trajectory that took him out of the center of power. This was the doomed but determined fighter who sought to defend and explain the relevance of the heroic best that was in the early Communist tradition." (12)

Sometimes it works to tell the familiar story but in a different way.

The book commences with "Introducing a Life," a portrait of Trotsky that offers humanizing facts about his personality and intimate relationships. Le Blanc's refreshing "warts and all" approach contrasts with those fierce partisans of their biographical subjects who balk at the incorporation into the narrative of matters such as family tensions, extramarital love affairs and psychological illness, as if they were forays into character assassination.

Le Blanc returns at later points in the book to elaborate the kinds of issues introduced here (Trotsky's sex life and battles with his older son, Lev Sedov [1906-38], comprise a section called "Personal Matters," 143-48), handily repudiating the "old school" tendency to split the public sphere of action from the private one of emotion and feeling. Quotations from a range of people who knew

Trotsky reveal glimpses of an intimate Trotsky about whom Trotsky himself said little.

Paraphrasing Trotsky's first wife, Alexandra Sokolovskaya (1872-38, a victim of Stalin's murderous purges), Le Blanc seems to endorse her view that "Trotsky could be very tender and sympathetic...but was assertive and arrogant." (25) The picture we get is that, like many others supremely consecrated to revolutionary politics, he cared deeply for the people around him...except when he didn't.

The introductory section also contains snippets from hostile critics of Trotsky, especially in several pages with the disarming subtitle, "Was Trotsky a Liar?" (15-18) Such contentions are explained further in the first full-length chapter, "The Shock of Exile," under the sub-heading "Communist Authoritarianism." (32-43) Then, as Le Blanc marches through the central episodes in Trotsky's exile, he continually takes us back to earlier events as they are introduced in the various books and pamphlets that Trotsky writes and publishes at each stage.

Thus we are guided across mid-1920s intra-party debates (*The New Course*, 1923) leading up to his expulsion from the Communist Party in advance of learning about chronologically earlier topics such as his take on the October Revolution (*The History of the Russian Revolution*) and the related formulation of the law of uneven and combined development (*The Permanent Revolution*, 1929).

As Le Blanc moves deeper into the 1930s, we learn first of Trotsky's analysis of the rise of fascism (*What Next?*, 1932), but then return to his argument about the nature of the Soviet state (contained in *The Revolution Betrayed*). Increasingly, however, the narrative finds a harmony between the subjects of his writing and concurrent political events of the Great Depression years as he enters the period of the Moscow Purge Trials, Spanish Civil War, and events leading to World War II.

To readers who are revisiting this material, some of the exegesis offered in Le Blanc's summaries of Trotsky's writings may seem a bit too much like "Trotskyism Made Simple." This passage is characteristic: "There is an obvious and simple law of history that has profoundly important consequences. This is the law of uneven development: different areas and different countries are just that — different." (78) And here is Le Blanc addressing the parallels between the Soviet and Nazi regimes:

"In retrospect one might be inclined to stress that both Stalin and Hitler, while perhaps not geniuses, were incredibly capable, each in their own way (if not all ways), and that both exhibited qualities to which the label of 'evil' arguably applies." (86)

This talky style of writing hints that parts of the volume may have originated in educational classes for socialist groups. A fair-minded reader will understand and respect its unpretentious proportions and intentions; Le Blanc makes no suggestion that his Trotsky biography is intended to compete with the field's major league cleanup hitters (Ernest Mandel, Pierre Broué), or the biggest slugger in the lineup (Isaac Deutscher). [1]

Scholarship and Popularization

A book of this limited size certainly runs the risk of plucking Trotsky's greatest hits without having to sit through the rest of the repertoire, but, despite my own preoccupation with matters not addressed (culture, Jewish identity), I find its emphases appropriate for an audience of activists.

Le Blanc is a serious Marxist scholar as well as a popularizer of socialist ideas with an international reputation. He is among the few of my generation who has successfully managed a double life as

academic and organizationally-committed militant (at present in the International Socialist Organization), and has negotiated the at-times tricky disparity between the two roles with unusual aplomb. Moreover, he has been thinking about the subject for decades while intervening in activist politics in his community in Pittsburgh, so the book expresses a unique hands-on sensibility.

What I admire is that he rarely offers political prescription; instead, he puts forward myriad insights that spring from his five decades of building a socialist presence in the U.S. On occasion, there are some unexpected swerves, as when he seems to repurpose scholar Lars Lih's approach to Leninism (*Lenin Rediscovered*, 2008) in arguing that Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution and his Transitional Program (1938) were aggressively unoriginal.

Moreover, while Le Blanc shows some signs of a reverential attitude toward Lenin himself, he also provides intriguing if brief looks across the political border by reporting on Trotsky's interactions with Simone Weil, Victor Serge and André Malraux, among others.

Yet issues such as Trotsky's personal quirks, or failures in underestimating Stalin's capacities, or his cockup of predictions for World War II and its aftermath, should take a back seat to another question: Whether or not Trotsky's own behavior in power aided or undercut his goal of achieving the socialist objective. This is what Isaac Deutscher described as a growing breach between "the power and the dream." (*The Prophet Unarmed*, 212)

Bolshevik Contradictions

While Le Blanc is clearly aware of the centrality of this puzzle, I occasionally find his evaluations too oblique; he is not as picky as I am about the maddening contradictions of the Bolshevik legacy and the need to face up to its discomfiting aspects in an unblinking manner. At the same time, we share the goal of reclaiming a revolutionary tradition without reproducing the very forms of repression that made revolution necessary; the aim is not to condemn but to understand.

An illustration is when he asserts, "Trotsky came to be seen as one of the most ruthless leaders of the early Communist state, even off the battlefield." (35) But "came to be seen" as ruthless (i.e. without pity, cruel, merciless) by whom? It makes a difference whether the opinion is that of hostile opponents, disillusioned friends or scrupulous historians (including the author of the sentence, who may or may not be neutral — I can't tell).

There is also an extraordinary range of degrees and types of ruthlessness, a term that applies to Stalin but also to some colleagues in my English Department. The issue is that polyvalent words can obscure the enormity or degree of hideousness of what may have happened. A sequence of quotations does follow this "ruthless" passage (35-38), with more later on (42-43), but the sense of the interspersed commentary is hard to pin down.

Le Blanc relies so much on ambiguous formulations — "Some would say this is far too generous" (10), "A common accusation has been" (15), "Some have been inclined to argue that" (81), "Some have characterized this as an effort" (81), "One might go further" (82), "to the point of excess, many have concluded" (167), "More than this, one might insist" (185) — that one might blink and get the wrong idea about his appraisal.

Unquestionably Le Blanc feels, like Deutscher, that the Bolsheviks' behavior, driven by brutal conditions, contributed to the decline of the revolution and rise of Stalinism. Yet it takes effort, not always rewarded, to determine just where he finds the contributory flaws in Bolshevik thinking and belief that Marxists ought to disclaim. On the one hand, he may well share some ideas of Rosa

Luxemburg and the Workers Opposition, but then he may also feel that the Bolsheviks had just cause in not being able to carry these out, while not particularly liking all the explanations offered or excessive measures of repression employed.

There is so often a moral muddiness to the means/ends equation that I lean toward a straightforward description of events, and clarity about what is being attributed to unacceptable actions by Bolshevik leaders and what is caused by “circumstances,” where at all possible.

Among the handful of times where I am certain that Le Blanc is disapproving of Trotsky is when he lets us know that Lenin was likewise critical, as in regard to Trotsky’s tendency to be excessively “administrative” (36), which led to his support for “the militarization of labor” in the 1921 debate on the role of trade unions. (39)

Neutrality and Responsibility

There is a sense that Le Blanc may be offering the reader options to reach his or her own opinions, which is good; learning needs to be a critically reflective action. But a welcome degree of strategic neutrality in presentation need not stand in contradiction to a specialist taking responsibility for a particular interpretation in a non-prejudicial manner.

Le Blanc’s one reference to the early years of the Cheka (the first Soviet state security organization, later called GPU) is to describe it as “infamous.” [2]

The adjective means having a bad reputation (and like “ruthless,” the expression connotes a range of construals) and I can’t fathom whether Le Blanc concurs with the more outright condemnations; for instance, the oft-cited one of Victor Serge, holding that the Cheka’s formation as an institution free of independent review was a disaster. [3] If so, then Trotsky should be described as mistaken in his acquiescence to its secret executions and tortures.

Other thorny judgments seem to be eluded by statements deploring brutality and repression without declaring plainly that the actual decisions bringing about such unpleasantness were wrong and unnecessary — beyond simply placing the blame on conditions. The most curious example here is Le Blanc’s elliptical reference to the Kronstadt rebellion in early 1921, when the Bolsheviks smashed the uprising of anarchist-influenced sailors at the Kronstadt naval fortress (near Petrograd): “In the name of defending the Revolution, a terrible violence was justified, which included the brutal repression of...angry sailors and workers who revolted at the Kronstadt naval base...” (39) [4]

Marxist students of the Kronstadt affair are not pacifists and understand that sometimes an act of violent repression is necessary to prevent far greater violence, yet too much is elided in this description and in reference to what followed. Were the Kronstadt sailors’ demands defensible, or were they, as Trotsky claimed, inspired by counter-revolutionaries and imperialists?

What exactly was “the terrible violence” — how much was necessary, in light of the state of the civil war at that point, and were all reasonable efforts at negotiation exhausted, especially in view of Trotsky’s categorical demand for unconditional surrender and the refusal of the Bolsheviks to allow negotiations through anarchist sympathizers? What role did Trotsky actually play and how thoughtfully did he reflect on it in later years?

Le Blanc tells us nothing of this, although most historians insist that Trotsky personally unleashed the force of 50,000 Red Army troops (some 10,000 killed) that crushed the rebellion. Afterwards, the Kronstadt survivors were paraded through the streets of Petrograd, 2000 of them summarily

executed (Trotsky denied participation but accepted responsibility), and others sent to a slower death in the White Sea concentration camp of Solovki.

Here is the rest of this summary provided by Joshua Rubenstein, cited by Le Blanc as a scholar whose account of Trotsky is “more generous” (10) than those of Dmitri Volkogonov and Robert Service: “He and Lenin had engaged in a deliberate distortion of the rebels’ motives to justify harsh suppression, claims Trotsky repeated in the years that followed. Once in exile, Trotsky did his best to avoid discussing the episode. He even denied participating in the assault on the fortress or in the reprisals that followed, while his followers, anxious to clear his name of any cloud, denied his involvement after his death. Trotsky hardly mentioned it in his memoirs...” (*Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary’s Life*, 121).

Le Blanc surely knows far more about all this than I ever will, and perhaps could convincingly contest some of Rubenstein’s details, as I might. Yet I have read Le Blanc’s own paragraphs several times without being able to figure out if he is repudiating this “terrible violence” as sadly excessive even while privately thinking that the assault itself was a necessary one — as if the two aspects might be separated.

What is awkward here is that defenders of the Bolshevik assault customarily characterize the events as a “tragic necessity” in which the Bolsheviks had absolutely no choice but to attack if the revolution were to be saved; this particular turn of phrase, routinely trotted out, is held by most orthodox Trotskyists but also shared with others, including partisans of Stalin’s USSR. [5]

Some revolutionary Marxist thinkers, such as Michael Löwy and Ernest Mandel, have argued the matter quite differently. Löwy holds that the crushing of the rebellion was not necessary. [6] Mandel, who believed that information on crucial aspects of the social forces involved at Kronstadt was insufficient for reaching conclusions, wrote without ambiguity that the strategic policies of 1921 were the result of egregiously false ideas held by the Bolshevik leadership about the political context. [7]

Le Blanc, commendably humane, undogmatic, and certainly one who would never sign on to all positions of the Bolsheviks, deplores excessive violence and repression wherever he finds it; when he writes that the attack was “justified” as a defense of the revolution, the tone to me suggests a genuine skepticism of the Bolshevik argument. [8]

Still, I can find no evidence in this book or in any of Le Blanc’s other writings that his own views are like those of Löwy (outright disapproval of the assault), Mandel (uncertainty that is combined with comprehensive strategic opposition to Bolshevik policy in 1921), or even that of Victor Serge (who combined a “tragic necessity” view with an insistence that atrocities of the Bolsheviks should be acknowledged up front, including admission of lies told at the time and after). [9]

The Need to Face Dicey Situations

It may seem churlish that I am so insistent that Le Blanc should more emphatically bang out his own opinions, since I have long envied his even-tempered approach to political debate. I endorse his refusal to emulate more blinkered Trotskyists who make a political litmus test out of Trotsky’s controversial term for the post-revolutionary USSR (“degenerated workers state”), but there at times when this book could use an overt polemic. It’s difficult to agree, disagree or otherwise evaluate when one can’t follow, and readers will see what they want to see.

At the least, Le Blanc ought to give sharp rap on the knuckles to Slavoj Žižek, whom he quotes

favorably on several occasions, for maintaining that *Terrorism and Communism* (1920) is “Trotsky’s key book,” and writing other glib foolishness (possibly mischievousness) in *Slavoj Zizek Presents Trotsky* (2007).

Without doubt, a short volume can’t possibly fill in all the gaps, but on the 1918-22 period we minimally need some paragraphs of straight forward exposition that describe and assess what Trotsky did, and why, in relation to the Cheka, Kronstadt, and the execution of frightened Red Army soldiers and their officers, along with episodes not mentioned by Le Blanc but cited by scholars (not all of them reactionary). This includes the use of families as hostages, the forced exile of hundreds of leading intellectuals in 1922, and Trotsky’s role as principal witness in the undemocratic trial and summary execution of Admiral Shchastny (a concern raised by Roy Medvedev in *Let History Judge*, 125).

In my own reading, the argument of Robert Service and others that Trotsky was out to establish a personal dictatorship doesn’t jibe with the facts. On the other hand, to fault Trotsky for episodes of callousness and misdirected fanaticism is not a case of confecting allegations out of nothing. Many historical figures, especially those who commanded armies, have exhibited such traits — yet are also great deal more.

The point is that controversies such as “Kronstadt” are ritualistically raised by those seeking to prove that Stalinism emerges directly from Leninism, if not Marxism itself. Revolutionary socialists today gain nothing if they refrain from confronting such dicey subjects with candor, build evasions into the grammar of their sentences, or rely in their own ritualistic fashion on a mantra of “tragic necessity.”

We can’t answer all the riddles, but if we don’t gaze at the heart of the matter our inquiries will go nowhere. Just as Marxists have speculated that the use of the united front tactic in Germany before 1933 might have prevented the rise of Hitler and even World War II, so we should be encouraged to rethink the policies carried out in the 1920s in the USSR. [\[10\]](#)

Zealotry and Revolution

In this stirring and engrossing book, Le Blanc has chosen to examine Trotsky’s writings in exile, precisely because they display his post facto evaluations of the past and his mature thinking on events in progress. One reads Trotsky’s original writings from this time with awe at the sparks thrown off by his brilliance and ability to give us a visceral sense of the world in crisis.

My hope is that Le Blanc’s beginning will inspire analytical commentary by others that might explore more pointedly the degree to which Trotsky was willing to admit mistakes and change course; to face facts that were at odds with his preconceptions. Perhaps it is the anarchist/existentialist gene with which I was born, but I believe that we need to do further thinking about zealotry; more specifically, the kind that permits the pitiless instrumentalization of thousands of living humans on behalf of an uncertain future, connected to an unshaken faith that the Soviet Union was on the road to a communist society.

That Trotsky’s morality was subordinated to the interests of the class struggle raises ethical issues worth exploring, valid questions that no one should be ashamed to ask. The principle sounds convincing to me; moralities always claim to be universal but are expressed through their embodiment in social groups, especially oppressed and oppressors.

Yet there exist many crude applications, mostly formulated by epigones, where violence seems

justified on mainly putative sociological grounds — such as the degree of “proletarian” versus “peasant” element in a population (again, Kronstadt). More to the immediate point, Trotsky mistakenly saw the objective interests of the proletariat refracted through a belief in the defense of a particular state and party whose machinery and policies were increasingly contradicting and compromising those interests.

This faulty calculus arose because Trotsky succumbed to zealotry in the brutal conditions of 1918-22, as many of us would. Then, in exile, he could be blind to the traps that befall those with excessive certainty about beliefs, above all when he was confronted with history’s infinitely complex web of causations.

For instance, in political debates he could rely on stark categorical distinctions rather than a continuum so that what might seem minor disagreements among comrades-in-arms over Spain, the Soviet economy and dialectical materialism morphed into titanic disputes that splintered rather than united.

To be sure, Trotsky’s steadfastness to admirable principles challenges us both morally and intellectually. Yet at the end of his life he was also capable of dispensing apodictic statements about his faction-ridden tiny vanguard, mimicked by lesser disciples, from which I will always run as if chased by devils. Even in his courageous and laudable exile years, this shortcoming was never really comprehended or acknowledged.

Forward movement in Marxist thought comes not only through applauding extraordinary feats but also by acknowledging fallibility and the limitations to knowledge, and recalibrating. If Trotsky declined to face the consequences of his actions that he did not fully predict or understand, why not say it outright?

I esteem Paul Le Blanc’s rendition of the Old Man, and agree that Trotsky’s legacy is essential to the politics of internationalism. Nonetheless, the revolutionary Marxist tradition required for the 21st century must learn to accommodate an authentic multiplicity of beliefs and practices, and to admire is not always to play follow the leader.

We will never know all the motivations for Trotsky’s behavior, nor acquire sufficient evidence to discern the full range of alternatives available; and this will not be the first time a trailblazing virtuoso has left us with several mysteries.

Alan Wald

P.S.

* Against the Current n° 178, September-October 2015. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4505>

Footnotes

[1] This is not to suggest that all of Deutscher’s political judgments are superior to those of the others. For a highly critical but respectful critique of Deutscher, see Neil Davidson, “The Prophet, His Biographer, and the Watchtower: Isaac Deutscher’s Biography of Leon Trotsky,” *Holding Fast to an Image of the Past: Explorations in the Marxist Tradition* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014),

[2] Victor Serge: "its formation was one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshevik leaders committed" (Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 2012 revised edition, 94).

[3] Idem.

[4] There is a footnote that lists three books that presumably include more information about Kronstadt, but whether Le Blanc is citing them because they reflect his opinion or because they reflect a range of views is not known.

[5] For the former, see Abbie Barkan, "Kronstadt: A Tragic Necessity," <http://www.marxisme.dk/arkiv/bakan/90-krons.htm> For the latter, see The 1921 Kronstadt Tragedy, Documents in Two Volumes, published by the Russian Political Encyclopedia in Moscow, 1999, which claims to confirm the counterrevolutionary nature of the Kronstadt rising.

[6] Here is how Löwy challenges the "necessity" argument: "These authoritarian tendencies... led to the tragic conflict of Kronstadt, whose main responsibility, in our view, lies with the Bolsheviks, for their refusal of the proposal advanced for mediation by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman" (Without Revolt, Power Becomes Meaningless, on-line at: <http://www.revue-ballast.fr/michael-lowy-sans-revolte-la-politique-devient-vide-de> sens/).

[7] The statement on Kronstadt is in Ernest Mandel, October 1917: Coup d'état or social revolution? (1992), 29, footnote 96. Forty-five years ago, he provided a forthright statement about events of the year 1921: "In retrospect, [there] can be no doubt [that] Lenin and Trotsky at that time committed an error of theoretical and political assessment. ... they estimated that the main threat was the internal decomposition of the dictatorship of the proletariat, with the relaxation of discipline of the working class and the centralization of the party.... But this was not the main danger. The main danger was the demobilization and growing political passivity of the working class, under the combined effects of hunger, deprivation, poverty, unemployment, on the one hand, and, secondly, the replacement of Soviet power by the power of the party apparatus" ("Democracy and Socialism in the USSR," on-line at: https://www.marxists.org/espanol/mandel/1973/democracia_y_socialismo_en_urss.htm&prev=search). In Trotsky as Alternative (1995), Mandel states: "From 1920-21 the strategy of the Bolshevik leadership hindered rather than promoted the self-activity of the Russian workers" (82).

[8] Michael Löwy's review of Trotsky assumes, with approval, that Le Blanc in this book "denounces" the decision of the Bolsheviks to physically quash the rebellion: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4010>.

[9] Here is all that Le Blanc (and co-author Kunal Chattopadhyay) say in the introductory essay to their collection Trotsky: Writings in Exile (2012): "Fearing a link between Kronstadt and counter revolution, the regime suppressed the rebellion" (14). I believe the fullest statement by Serge appeared in Dwight Macdonald's politics magazine in 1945, and is now online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1945/memoirs/ch04x.htm>.

[10] Although the putting forward of an alternative scenario for what the Bolsheviks should have done would be an undertaking far above my pay grade, Samuel Farber has made an commendable effort in Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy (1990).