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Bolshevik Russia: “The party is bankrupt. Its influence has fallen to a minimum”

Friday 3 November 2023, by [PHIPPS Mike](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2023).

Mike Phipps reviews [Communist Dissidents in Early Soviet Russia: Five documents translated and introduced by Simon Pirani](#), published by Matador

The Russian Revolution has probably been more analysed, discussed and argued about than any other social revolution in history. Leon Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* is still in print and widely read nearly a century after it was written and the centenary year of the 1917 seizure of power saw a plethora of [new analyses](#) published.

The Revolution’s undoubted importance to the global workers movement has been boosted by the ready availability of many of the writings of some of its key leading figures, Lenin and Trotsky in particular. Here, our understanding of this great historical process has been shaped by what writings have been widely available in translation. The capacity of newly unearthed material to throw fresh light on the events in question means books like the current one are always of great interest.

The five documents presented here were written in a short period between the autumn of 1920 and the summer of 1922 following the Reds’ victory in the Russian civil war. It was a tumultuous period. In early 1921, food supply and transport came close to collapse. Peasant anger and working-class discontent fuelled a strike wave, followed by the revolt at the Kronshtadt naval base, which was suppressed by the Red Army. A tactical retreat was forced upon the Russian Communist Party which abandoned the policies of ‘War Communism’ in favour of the ‘New Economic Policy’. At the same time, a rift was opening between the ranks of the Party and its elite, the subject of much discussion at this time.

The first document here is a letter written in September 1920 by Anton Vlasov, a Red Army commander, to the Russian Communist Party Central Committee and specifically to Lenin. Vlasov calls on the party leadership to take action against the material privileges and corruption of party leaders, citing examples of their “depravity”, and warns that the party is losing the confidence of the ranks and of the working class. “The party is bankrupt. Its influence has fallen to a minimum,” Vlasov concludes.

The second document is a declaration by a small group who quit the RCP in early 1921 to form the short-lived Workers and Peasants Socialist Party (WPSP). It is the only extant document from the group, which criticises the “nanny-communists” who now dominate the Party and the soviets, and who “ruthlessly and cynically trample under foot everything that the proletariat once fought for, and spilled its blood for.”

“Dissatisfaction,” writes Pirani, “was running high in the Moscow factories. In elections to the soviet, held in April 1921, many factories elected non-party delegates, who had stood against, and defeated,

RCP candidates.” The RCP maintained its majority, thanks only to large numbers of delegates from government offices.

The third document translated here is a platform entitled “We are collectivists”. Written by unknown authors, it is less angry and immediate. It advocates a “proletarianization” of the arts and sciences, while sharing the ideas of other opposition groups, particularly in its concern that the “transition from war communism to state capitalism” now sanctioned by the party leadership would mark a shift of political power away from the working class to “the technical intelligentsia”.

The fourth document is an appeal by the Workers Truth group, formed by communist militants who had fought in the Red Army during the civil war. Issued in early 1922, it deals with similar themes – the class character of Russian society and of the soviet government, and the need for cultural as well as political renewal. It argues that a new bourgeoisie is taking shape and that capital is “on the march against the gains made by the working class.” This process is facilitated by the RCP which has “increasingly, irretrievably, lost its relationship and commonality with the proletariat.”

This group’s activities were short-lived. Prominent members were arrested by the security forces in late 1923 and denounced in prosecution documents as “old Mensheviks”. In fact, most were in their early twenties and had joined the Bolsheviks as teenagers.

The final document here showcases excerpts from the diary of Iosif Litvinov, a Jewish Latvian communist. As an undestroyed personal account, it’s almost unique historically, given its frank expressions of opposition. It shines a light on the moods, political and psychological, of the civil war veterans among whom Workers Truth first took root. This excerpt gives a flavour:

“Let’s take the communists. How they have degenerated! People who set themselves the aim of changing the world, of fighting with all forms of prejudice, must themselves be brave, revolutionary, and fearless in deed, word and thought. And so the Bolsheviks were, at one time. And now? How does the party look? A herd of sheep, bereft of its own judgement, out to please those with influence, terrified of taking a single independent step. The communists have worked out their own caste prejudices, their rules, their catechism.”

A deep sense of despair pervades this record. Many Red Army veterans, comments Pirani, “felt that NEP was the bonfire of their hopes for changing society; at most, a betrayal. Litvinov’s first diary entry notes that communists were committing suicide ‘on a daily basis’.”

These communist dissidents of the early 1920s made little impact on the course of Soviet history, with the secret police making it impossible for them to operate outside the Communist Party. The party’s ban on factions in 1921 also cut short these debates, which raised many of the themes that Leon Trotsky would later – perhaps too late – make central to his critique of the evolution of the party’s policies and practice.

The NEP continued until 1928, when the increasingly Stalinized party began a policy of forced collectivization. The mass repression from the 1930s onwards not only wiped out the dissident communists: it was so thorough as to deprive post-Stalin dissidents of any connection with their predecessors. “This was a painful break in the historical memory of the workers’ movement,” suggests Pirani.

But that does not mean that socialists today cannot learn from these debates. The problem of bureaucratisation in revolutionary processes and the changing class character of revolutionary parties is still one to wrestle with today.

Mike Phipps’ book Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow: The Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn (OR

Books, 2022) can be ordered [here](#).

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