

Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory

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For many years, just two simple narratives dominated the history of the Soviet Union. The first story was the regime's account of itself. In this account, socialism had been established from 1917 onwards. The decisiveness of the Bolshevik Party in arguing for the October Revolution had created the possibility of the Communist system. From October onwards, the story of the Soviet Union was a story of successive party-led initiatives: the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1921, the shift to collectivisation in 1929. There were no breaks, no accidents in this story. The hegemony of the Communist party could be traced back to 1917 or, even before then, to Lenin's adoption of the model of democratic centralism, which was the necessary precondition for the Party's later success. No one outside the leading circles of the Party had played any significant role in the historical process. The Party represented the historic interests of the Soviet working class. The Bolsheviks were entitled to speak on behalf of the proletariat. Workers had given their consent decisively in 1917; their support could also be assumed in earlier and later periods. Workers appeared in 'socialist' art as a backdrop: an audience watching its leaders in permanent support.

In Britain and America, a surprisingly similar narrative dominated. The leaders of the revolution, it was agreed, had been both disciplined and successful. The key to their victory was the fanaticism of a small number of hardened revolutionaries: the loyalty demanded by a party of a new type. More was made of the contradictions in some of Lenin's early writings on the party. Close textual analysis of documents written in 1902 and 1903 was conducted to 'prove' that in 1917 or 1923 the Bolsheviks had still been a party of middle-class intellectuals lauding it over the proletariat. The stages of the revolution were again flattened together: the capture of power, the early period of libertarianism, the bitter civil war, the NEP and collectivisation, Stalin's purges, the killings of the 1930s, were all portrayed as stages in the working out of Lenin's vision. Once again, the flower of the Communist system was shown to have been present in the seed. When the real history of events seemed to contradict this straightforward narrative it was left out, to make the story simpler. I well remember, during the course of a semester spent teaching Soviet history at a university in

northern England, remarking that for six months after the revolution, the Bolsheviks had governed in coalition with another party, the Left-Wing Social Revolutionaries. The students responded to this point with visible anxiety and confusion: that could not be true, could it? Set against the substance of the books in the college library, such a detail did not any make sense at all.

By the 1970s and early 1980s, frustration with the common implausibility of both stories had encouraged new generations of writers, such 'new social historians' as Alexander Rabinowitch, David Mandel, S. A. Smith and Steve Cohen, to attempt to investigate the actual roots of dictatorship. Most perceived some falling-apart of the revolution: a break between 1917, when workers had been enthusiastic supporters of a second revolution, and 1929, when the regime had set about dismantling the workers' few remaining chances for self-expression. There was an interesting discussion about how long workers' democracy had lasted before being crushed beneath the iron hand of autocracy. Common to all these writers was the idea that some counter-revolution had taken place. Such more complex narratives formed a radical counterpart to the self-criticisms of the new Soviet leaders, including above all Gorbachev. Yet with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the eminent contempt shown by many workers for the 'socialism' under which they had lived, such social history was again marginalised. Where it continued, it did so differently, by arguing some shadow version of the very different claim that Stalinism had enjoyed degrees of popular legitimacy. There were shades now, perhaps, of what the East Germans dubbed *Ostalgie*. Far more common, however, in both East and West, were revived forms of the old Cold War history, with the Western variant in the ascendancy. The best sign of this reversion of analysis was the success of Orlando Figes's *A People's Tragedy*, which ends in 1924, suggesting that the substance of Stalin's dictatorship was by then in place.

The problem with all these accounts was a common lack of archival basis. For British or American scholars, there was little choice: where Soviet records had fallen into foreign hands, as during the Civil War, these records were indeed combed assiduously. But no Western expert was allowed full access to the party archives. Nor indeed did Soviet scholarship seem capable of such deep honesty. All independent-minded scholars knew the limits of what they could write safely. The real curiosity is to see how little has changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Western scholars of Communist parties outside the Soviet Union took an immediate interest in the archives of the Communist International. Yet historians of the revolution in Russia have been slower in making use of the Communist Party's archives. As Kevin Murphy observes in the introduction to *Revolution and Counterrevolution*, 'fifteen years after the doors to the archives swung wide open, not a single source-driven study has supported either of the contending speculative arguments – that workers were either terrorised by the early Soviet state or impressed with Stalinism'.

Murphy makes good this absence by means of a careful history of one particular plant: the Guzhon metalworks in Moscow, later renamed the Hammer and Sickle Factory. In 1900 the plant was already the largest metal factory in Moscow; for each of the next three decades, it offered enough work to employ between two and four thousand workers. Marxist theory made much of the trend towards the concentration of labour in ever-larger factories. Lenin's own original contribution to Marxism began with his argument that industry was displacing agriculture in the Russian economy (it followed that Marxism and not populism should lead the Russian left). The Guzhon factory thus offers a case study to explore first, the processes leading to 1917, and second, the factors behind Stalin's rise to power.

Murphy's account of the first of these processes is relatively familiar. He shows the relative weakness of the Bolsheviks in Moscow, as a result of successive waves of repression following 1905. He documents the importance of the Lena Goldfields massacre in restoring workers' confidence to strike. He detects an antipathy among male workers to the employment of women alongside them: a fear and distrust that broke down rapidly in 1916. He demonstrates that the Social Revolutionaries had more support than the Bolsheviks in this factory, at least until summer 1917. What first transformed the politics of the factory was the determination of the employers to smash the workers' movement. In June 1917, Guzhon made a series of attempts to close the plant. The workers remained in occupation. Ultimately, the Provisional Government was forced to agree to the resumption of production, not as a result of any pro-worker sentiment, but for opportunistic reasons: to maintain military production. The attempted lockout was the key factor in fuelling demands for workers' control. The highs and lows of workers' activity, as Murphy detects them, correspond

closely to those suggested many years ago in Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. This first half of Murphy's book is not unoriginal; rather it confirms the existing, brilliant analysis of a key participant.

Some of the most powerful sections in the first half of Murphy's book come when the author attempts to quantify Bolshevik support in the factory. Prior to 1917, the number of card-carrying Bolsheviks was low: almost as soon as a cell was formed, its members would attempt to lead political strikes. These culminated, frequently, in the agitators' expulsion from the workplace. As late as April 1917, the number of Bolsheviks at Guzhon may have been as few as nine. By September 1917, the Bolshevik-dominated metal workers' union claimed 3,000 members in the factory. Regular factory meetings drew crowds of between 500 and 800. The factory's donations to other workers' strike funds were the highest in Moscow. Yet the number of card-carrying Bolsheviks was still low: attendance at Party meetings within the factory increased to an average of 22 in 1920 and 26 in 1921. Another source estimated the Bolshevik contingent as just 60 members in 1921. This raises an interesting point, to which Murphy never provides a direct answer: why did the Bolsheviks not recruit more supporters in the plant?

It is in the second half of the book that its originality really shines through. Drawing on the reports sent back to the party archives, as well as the archives of the political police, OGPU, Murphy is able to document the extent and durability of trade union organisation in the period after 1917, the extent of support for the state, and the extent also of dissent. Many surprises emerge. There were mass strikes in May 1923. Again, that August, management proposed pay cuts and were rebuffed by an angry mass meeting of some 1,500 workers. Well into the 1920s, Murphy shows, unions continued to meet and organise independently of management. In the first half of 1925, there were 220 disputes between unions and management: roughly one for every ten workers then in the factory. Systems of semi-compulsory arbitration tended to reduce the numbers of strikes, but did not end them. They also compelled the supposed organisations of the workers, the unions and Communist Party, to actually take the side of labour. The Communist Party cell was frequently compelled to follow the workers and support them against management. In 1925, the Party backed workers' demands for short-term loans from the factory to pay for holiday. In 1926, the Party again backed workers' demands for a 125 per cent pay rise.

Workers raised money for international causes, and, for example, donated 27,000 rubles to support the 1926 British general strike. In Britain, we know, such donations were assumed to be the forced levies of corrupt and bureaucratised unions, masquerading as independent, but in fact the creatures of state repression. In Murphy's history, it is clear that the donations were given freely. There are also vivid accounts of the meeting where Communist officials were charged with explaining to the workers why the general strike had failed. Questions cut through the bland Comintern assurances that British workers were just on the point of taking power, if only their leaders would allow them. 'Comrade speaker', one rank-and-file worker asked, 'what kind of guns do the English workers have?'

Workers in the Hammer and Sickle factory retained an idealistic way of judging the world. We might call it a 'socialist' consciousness, if we mean the term in Karl Marx's sense: as a philosophy of solidarity between different oppressed people. Such politics was all the more powerful because it led the workers to take positions different to those of the Party. In 1928, questions from workers in this factory were brought to the attention of the information department of the Party's Central Committee. The issue at dispute then was the forced requisitioning of food from rural areas. 'Tell us comrade', one worker asked, 'what is the danger of organising a peasant union, and will it be organised?' A second worker asked, will 'there be equality for everyone living in the Soviet Union, and if so when?' A third spoke in defence of the maligned richer peasants, the kulaks: 'even if a peasant has one horse, one cow, or several sheep, then you consider him a kulak.'

We described earlier how the main schools of historiography tend to homogenise the history of the Revolution, arguing that Lenin introduced the Soviet system ('totalitarianism', in the eyes of most Western scholars) in response to the Civil War of 1918–21, and that little of real significance changed afterwards. Sometimes it is agreed that the first six months after October were libertarian; more rarely is it allowed that any similar experimentation continued after 1918. A pattern of terror, it is argued, was in place by 1919,

1921 or 1924 and then remained. In Murphy's workplace history, nothing happens like that at all. The early years of NEP are shown to be a tumultuous period, in which many of the original inspiring ideas of the revolution were re-learned. They were only dismantled later. So, for example, the women's organisation Zhenotdel reached its peak as late as 1926 in the Hammer and Sickle factory, organising a meeting for 400 workers, including a lecture on abortion. Just two years later, the women's network was a shell and women spent International Women's Day 1928 protesting against their low pay. The early 1920s were a period of popular scepticism towards religion, when minorities were tolerated, and the hostility of the Orthodox Church to the Revolution was widely discussed. By 1928, atheism meant a bureaucratic campaign to force people to work through the Christmas holiday. In a key phrase, Murphy describes 1928 as 'the decisive year' for democracy both in the plant and, by implication, in the whole Soviet Union.

Every dissident network from the anarchists, the Workers' Group and Workers' Truth onwards was able to achieve some base in the plant. The Workers' Opposition captured the party organisation in the factory for a brief time. The Left Social Revolutionaries retained a presence until 1923: many of their members reappear as loyal Communists after 1927. The Trotskyist Opposition and then the United Opposition were both able to generate support. In 1926, Murphy judges their backing to have been 'widespread, but passive and ephemeral'. In 1927, by contrast, loyalist speeches denouncing the Opposition were met with tumultuous applause.

By the late NEP, the unions were already sliding backwards, at least in the Hammer and Sickle factory: Murphy makes this argument, citing E. H. Carr and R. W. Davies as his guides. He also draws a parallel with Western workers, whose strike figures showed similar falls in 1926–9. What destroyed the last opportunities for the workers to restate their independence was the shock work movement, which encouraged migrants to the cities to compete with established workers, demonstrating that they could double or treble the rate of labour, in return for modest advances of pay. In the Hammer and Sickle works, older skilled workers resisted the shock labour system, refusing to volunteer. Yet by March 1930, their battle was lost. 'Thirteen years (almost to the day)', Murphy writes, 'after the factory committee was created to defend workers' interests, it was formally transformed into its opposite: a management tool for raising productivity, working longer hours and lowering costs. In the spring of 1930 shock workers replaced 80 percent of factory committees nationally, and 51 percent in Moscow'.

It is often said that the Russian proletariat vanished between summer 1918 and spring 1921, perhaps not as a result of repression, but because workers were used by the Bolsheviks as their vanguard in the Civil War. Volunteering for the Red Army, the flu epidemic, the inadequacy of rations and the declining city population, all are said to have tamed the independent habits of Russian labour. We have no higher authority on this question than Lenin himself, who complained through 1920 and 1921 that the old Russian working-class was no more. The compelling message of Kevin Murphy's book is that Lenin was wrong: workers' organisation outlasted the tumults of the Civil War period and much of the NEP. If Lenin is wrong, then of course, so are the other authorities with which this review began. The NEP should not be seen as just another stage in the inevitable creation of Russian Communism or Soviet autocracy. We see, rather, the continuation of workers' struggle, and its tolerance in Soviet life. From the workers' perspective, the early and mid-1920s were a time of disappointment not dictatorship. When Stalinism came, it was a product of the late 1920s alone.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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