The Communist Manifesto: A Case Study in the Class Politics of Industrialization

Benjamin B. Goldberg
Riverdale High School

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians

Part of the European History Commons, and the Political History Commons

http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2017/oralpres/13

This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Historians Conference by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
The Communist Manifesto: A Case Study in the Class Politics of Industrialization

Over the tumultuous course of the 20th century, little remained untouched by the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as espoused in their best-known work, The Communist Manifesto. Yet at the time, the very notion of “communism” was rejected by the powers that be; as the Manifesto itself explains, “All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this Spectre (of communism).” It took a monumental event to shift this concept of a new world from the distant fringes of western politics to the global center stage—an event which manifested as the sudden and absolute seizure of power in the world’s largest contiguous nation-state, Russia. The prophecy of Marx and Engels, dismissed for so many decades, appeared to be coming true. The optimistic Russian workers hoped that it would be so, while the established aristocracy prayed that it would not. The aristocracy and urban laborers did comprise all of Russia, though; the fate of the country rested not just in their hands, but in those of the rural peasants isolated from the major cities, the intelligentsia debating the merits of one system or another, or the thousands of men under arms mobilized to fight World War I. Marx predicted that his revolutionary goals would be realized in a stable, modern, and, most importantly, industrial country, while the Russian Empire was anything but. Consequently, despite the commitments the Bolsheviks had to the construction of a socialist society, the underdevelopment and social disorder of post-World War I Russia guaranteed that
altered adaptations of Marxism, such as those promoted by Lenin, would replace Marx’s prescribed model.

In order to understand how the application of the communist vision outlined by Marx and Engels was affected by the conditions of Russia, it is first necessary to examine how the development of that vision was driven by the conditions at the time of the publication of the Manifesto. Both Marx and Engels were migratory in their personal lives (appropriate enough, given the internationalist bent of early communist thought), but most of their time was split between Germany and Britain. Engels, in particular, came from a family that owned property in the British city of Manchester, and his experiences in that municipality shaped much of Engels’ image of capitalism. The city of Manchester was, in many ways, the epitome of industrialization; its great cotton processing plants provided the promise of a new life to lower-class farmers, who crowded into the city’s dismal slums to get jobs at one colossal factory or another. In these proletarian districts, living conditions and working conditions alike were abominable. In particular, diseases and injuries ran rampant, driving the death rate up to one out of 30.8 persons per year in the 1840s; given that the death rate across all of England and Wales was one out of every 45 persons per year in the same period, it is reasonable to infer that the lower classes were in fact safer in the farmlands than in the cities (Boyer).

The class dynamic in 1917’s Russia was entirely different. Though Russia was not strictly “feudal,” since serfdom had been abolished in 1861, the class hierarchy was still defined mostly by possession of agricultural land rather than industrial capital. Since the end of serfdom, most peasants in Russia ostensibly owned the land they lived on, but more often than not, this land was too small to farm enough on which to subsist. Consequently, most peasants still had to
Goldberg

work the land of a wealthier benefactor—usually the monarchy, the Russian Orthodox Church, or a wealthier private landowner. Though some factories did develop in cities like Petrograd or Moscow, they were largely owned by foreign capitalists, meaning that there was little in the way of a Russian national bourgeoisie to revolt against (“What Was the Bolshevik Revolution?”).

All of these factors meant that the resentment of the Russian poor was directed at the estate owners, and not, as Marx and Engels predicted, at the factory bosses.

The Bolshevik Revolution was preceded most notably by the Revolution of 1905. This revolution occurred in a similar context to its more significant successor; Russia, seen as weak and backwards after a humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, was prepared to modernize, and the Tsarist system was perceived as an obstacle to be overcome to achieve this goal (Ulam 218). Nearly all of the opposition groups in Russia saw this as a priceless opportunity, including the Socialists, a leftist faction that incorporated both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. However, Lenin’s faction of the Socialists acted at the time with deep restraint, arguing that it would be self-destructive to try to turn this popular discontent into an explicitly Marxist movement. This prompted a dispute between the Bolsheviks (of which Lenin was a key leader) and the Mensheviks, in which the Bolsheviks insisted, in accordance with Marx and Engels, that it would be no great betrayal to allow Russia to become a modern liberal democracy and for the Socialists to operate as a party in that system. As one might expect, this was a controversial position to take, and did not sit well with much of the revolutionary movement. Even by the time of the uprising of the Petrograd Soviet (“Soviet”, in this context, refers to a workers’ council), the Bolsheviks remained a minority faction.
The shift began to arise when the Menshevik faction and their allies the Socialist Revolutionaries proposed a bizarre system in which the Petrograd Soviet would exist as the representative of the workers, but would not seize absolute power from the bourgeois republican Provisional Government until capitalism developed fully. In a reversal of their previous position, the Bolsheviks defied this proposition (Ulam 321-322). It was ultimately the appointment of General Lavr Kornilov as commander-in-chief of the Russian Army that pushed the Bolsheviks ahead; Kornilov was seen as a Napoleon-like figure who would crush the Soviets and restore one-man rule, granting credence to the Bolshevik claim that armed insurrection was the only solution (Ulam 357).

For the following analysis of Bolshevik policy, it is essential to keep certain guidelines of terminology in mind. “Communism” herein shall refer to a classless, stateless society, rather than to any society administered by a communist party. “Socialism,” in turn, describes any society in which the ownership of the means of production is public or in some sense collective. Marx described socialist societies that had not yet progressed to full communism as the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which did not necessarily imply autocratic or authoritarian rule, but indicated that the state was under the control of the working classes. This terminology will describe states such as the Soviet Union that did not claim to have reached communism but still identified as socialist (Ollman). “Marxism,” in turn, describes the belief that human history consists of a sequence of these states, in which one stage of history develops out of the class struggle of the previous stage, all moving inexorably towards full communism. Finally, for the sake of clarification, it is worth noting that while many anti-Tsarist organizations in Russia could
be considered “socialist revolutionaries,” the term Socialist Revolutionaries (or SRs) refers to a specific political faction, and not revolutionary socialists in general.

The foremost key obstacle to the fulfilment of Marx’s predictions in Russia was the worker-peasant divide, which skewed strongly in favor of the peasantry due to the lack of industrial development. Despite the economic reforms of the late 19th and early 20th century, 85% of the Russian population lived in rural areas as of 1917 (Atkinson). Marx and Engels believed that the heel of capitalist oppression was most keenly felt by the urban proletariat, and the revolutionary potential of the agricultural laborers had already been spent; the *Manifesto* proclaims: “The serf, in the period of serfdom, raised himself to membership in the commune... The modern laborer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class.”

University of Toronto Professor of Russian History John L. H. Keep, in his book *The Russian Revolution*, recounts how the Russian socialist parties attempted to win over the rural poor. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, being primarily urban in their demography, attempted to assemble a system by which the peasants could be involved in the system of soviets, but were largely unsuccessful; in the April 1, 1917 issue of the Socialist Revolutionary newspaper for the Moscow region, the Socialist Revolutionaries proposed an “All-Russian Soviet of Peasant Deputies” that would oversee a plethora of rural town and village councils; this ignored that the peasants already had a system of district committees that had wielded effective political authority since the abdication of the Tsar and it was poorly received by the peasants (Keep 223).
In spite of this failure of worker-peasant relations, the Socialist Revolutionaries became the “default” revolutionary peasant party, but the rural wing of the SRs was much more diverse and disparate in its views than the urban wing (probably on account of its larger number and greater geographic spread of constituents), including some who were, for all intents and purposes, aligned with the Bolsheviks (Keep 230). The Bolsheviks envisioned nothing less than class war in the farms and villages, in direct defiance of Marx and Engels’ guidelines. Though this position was controversial with the other revolutionary parties in Russia, and the peasants were not enthusiastic about the idea of protracted war against the forces of reaction in their own homes, they were won over by Lenin’s promise of total expropriation of the possessions of the landowners (Keep 235-236).

As the power and influence of the Bolshevik faction grew, its need to adopt a decisive, clear plan to liberate the peasants as Lenin had promised became more urgent, but simultaneously, it was necessary for clear positive economic results to be delivered to the whole of Russian society. Consequently, the Bolsheviks planned to organize peasant councils, formed from the poorest and most downtrodden farmers from before the revolution, which would immediately begin managing the land of the defeated landowners and use them to produce food for the rest of Russia (Keep 387). These policies exemplified the Bolshevik attitudes towards the peasants: they promised them liberty and prosperity to unprecedented degrees, and argued that it was only the interests of the bourgeoisie that kept these hopes from coming to fruition.

The Bolsheviks initially sought to organize soviets to lead the peasants in revolutionary activity, but because the party was dominated by urban workers, these soviets failed to
convince the rural poor that their interests were represented. They were promptly replaced with “Committees of the Village Poor,” which were more independent of the urban soviets, and consequently more erratic and unpredictable in their actions. Even then, many rural Russians declined to participate, causing struggle and instability between pro-Bolshevik and neutral or anti-Bolshevik peasants (Keep 459-460). This chaos continued to force the Bolsheviks into micro-management of the farming communities, making bureaucracy, rather than socialism, inevitable in the countryside. Regardless of how hard the Bolsheviks attempted to placate the peasants, the sociopolitical disorder and economic development that characterized their lives prevented them from becoming the ideal revolutionaries Lenin had hoped for. They expected the adaptation of Marx’s conception of the urban proletariat to agricultural society to be simple, but this task proved impossible in reality.

Even in the major cities and amongst the industrial workers, a lack of political unity presented the Bolsheviks with a nearly insurmountable political challenge. Even with the Tsar and the Provisional Government defeated, the lack of clear central authority allowed nearly anyone with a sufficient quality of armed personnel to proclaim regional authority, making armed conflict across the vast nation inevitable. As related by journalist John Reed,

“The Central Rada at Kiev immediately declared Ukraine an independent Republic, as did the Government of Finland, through the Senate at Helsingfors. Independent ‘Governments’ spring up in Siberia and the Caucasus. The Polish Chief Military Committee swiftly gathered together the Polish troops in the Russian army, abolished their Committees and established an iron discipline... All these ‘Governments’ and ‘movements’ had two characteristics in common; they
were controlled by the propertied classes, and they feared and detested Bolshevism...”

David Killingray, author of *The Russian Revolution* for the Greenhaven World History Program, notes that Reed was “An American friend of Lenin who was in Petrograd when the Bolsheviks seized power.” This makes Reed uniquely equipped to comment on the motivations behind the Bolsheviks’ seemingly authoritarian actions. His best-known work, *Ten Days That Shook The World*, reveals to what extent the fear of the violent counter-revolution that was constant in the post-revolutionary period influenced their actions. Red Army leader Leon Trotsky succinctly encapsulated the position of the Bolsheviks at a revolutionary conference on the Russian press:

> He distinguished between the Press during the civil war, and the Press after the victory. ‘During civil war the right to use violence belongs only to the oppressed.... The victory over our adversaries is not yet achieved, and the newspapers are arms in their hands. In these conditions, the closing of the newspapers is a legitimate measure of defence.’ (Reed)

From this, observers can deduce that, to the Bolsheviks, it was not merely necessary that the mass media be put in the hands of the working classes, as would follow logically from Marx and Engels’ concept of socialism, but that the media be reduced by force to a minimum of action for the sake of securing their newly-won but disorderly nation.

To the well-read student of communism, this statement is likely to evoke Marx and Engels’ description of German Socialism or “true” socialism. The *Manifesto* charges that the German Socialists are guilty of
“hurling the traditional anathemas against liberalism, against representative
government, against bourgeois competition, bourgeois freedom of the press,
bourgeois legislation, bourgeois liberty and equality, and of preaching to the
masses that they had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by this bourgeois
movement” (Marx).

Intuitively, one expects that this is exactly what Marx and Engels would support, but
they proceed to explain that the situation in Germany makes the pursuit of such a political
program futile and, indeed, outright counterproductive. As the Manifesto posits:

While this "True" Socialism thus served the governments as a weapon for
fighting the German bourgeoisie, it, at the same time, directly represented a
reactionary interest, the interest of the German Philistines. In Germany the
petty-bourgeois class, a relic of the sixteenth century, and since then constantly
cropping up again under various forms, is the real social basis of the existing
state of things. To preserve this class is to preserve the existing state of things in
Germany. The industrial and political supremacy of the bourgeoisie threatens it
with certain destruction; on the one hand, from the concentration of capital; on
the other, from the rise of a revolutionary proletariat. ‘True’ Socialism appeared
to kill these two birds with one stone. It spread like an epidemic. (Marx)

Though this statement referred specifically to Germany, it sets a precedent for Marx
and Engels that the eradication of “bourgeois” political liberties can only proceed when the
bourgeoisie have been the dominant class for long enough to advance those liberties. It would
be difficult to argue that that precedent of bourgeois liberal rule existed in agrarian, monarchist, and barely post-feudal Russia.

Given that Lenin was the most prominent of the Bolsheviks and the architect of much of their policy, when one questions the motivations behind a policy such as the suppression of the newspapers, one must first understand the ideological train of thought that led him to such an idea. In one of Lenin’s better-known works, *On the State and Revolution*, he asserts that, if the state is the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms, if it is a power standing above society and ‘eliminating itself more and more from it’, it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this ‘alienation’. (Lenin 315)

A professor of Russian and Soviet history, Harvard’s Adam Ulam notes in his work *The Bolsheviks* with regards to *State and Revolution* that: “no work could be more un-representative of its author’s political philosophy and his general frame of mind than this one by Lenin.” He goes on to describe the book as “almost a straightforward profession of anarchism” (Ulam 353). It seems unlikely that Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* as a propaganda piece intended to do nothing more than ingratiate himself with the movement; had that been the case, he would have no reason to spend much of it damning his erstwhile comrades for “unprecedentedly widespread distortions of Marxism” (Lenin 313). Given that *State and Revolution* was written and published before Lenin even had the authority to shut down newspapers, it becomes clear that the Bolsheviks’ seemingly un-Marxist newspaper
policy was exactly what Trotsky asserted: a security decision forced by the political situation of the time.

Up to this point in the history of the revolution, obstacles to the development of socialism in Russia would almost entirely internal. Russia was poor, underdeveloped, had no established modern political apparatus, and was so disordered as to necessitate the exercise of grim authoritarianism for the sake of stability. It is curious, then, that most of the Bolsheviks’ solutions to these internal problems were akin to the metaphorical band-aid; they ultimately pushed the peasants, the media, and anything else that could not be dealt with aside to focus on other issues. For a radical ideology like Marxism, built on tearing out oppressive social structures by the roots, this is highly counterintuitive. Nevertheless, some problems existed in Russia that were in no way internal, and because they could not be contained by the policies of the Bolsheviks, there was no other option than smashing them outright. Foremost among these was foreign intervention in the Russian Civil War. As John Reed describes, “individual French and British officers were active these days, even to the extent of giving advice at executive sessions of the Committee for Salvation,” the Committee for Salvation being the anti-Bolshevik government body. The Bolsheviks had nothing to offer these western military adventurers; the existence of the socialist experiment angered the military leaders of countries like France and Britain were angered by the existence of the socialist experiment. Consequently, the expeditionary forces sent by the belligerents of World War I could only be driven out by force.

Given the state of civil war, and given that the Bolsheviks had taken it upon themselves to manage the whole of the Russian economy, they adapted harsh measures in order to ensure the survival of the new government. The Bolsheviks organized a policy of “war communism,” in
which the surrender of surplus resources became the product not of loyalty to socialist ideals, but of martial law. Rather than all resources belonging to the collective, groups of soldiers claimed foodstuffs from the peasants by force in order to feed the military forces and the industries immediately necessary for defense (Roberts 243). Unsurprisingly, this negatively affected the rural population, which constituted the majority of the population at the time.

Shortly after the end of the war, in the early 1920s, Lenin felt able to acknowledge that this had done more harm than good in many respects, and that a change in policy was needed. Though Lenin acknowledged “the vastness of our agricultural country with its poor transport system” and, consequently, the need to collect large amounts of resources in short periods of time to support the war effort, he was quite clear in declaring that “war communism” should be reversed (Roberts 253).

While it is impossible to determine the impact of war communism on the course of the war, and how it might have turned out differently without it, the fact remains that the combination of war itself and war communism did no favors to Russia’s development. Lenin began to phase out war communism in favor of the New Economic Policy. He began by replacing the surplus appropriation that was the core of War Communism with a simple tax, so that a certain portion of the grain would be taken, but not the entire surplus. Lenin took the policy a step further by allowing the sale and purchase of the surplus grain that had not been taxed, restoring some amount of capitalism in the countryside. Market reforms were more limited in the factories, but still existed; though the state still dictated that the factories should prioritize necessary goods over luxuries, said necessary goods were bought and sold rather than distributed (Glaza).
The development of the New Economic Policy does parallel Marx and Engels in many regards, but as it applies to capitalism rather than socialism. Consider this excerpt from the *Manifesto*, on the development of capitalism out of feudalism:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Marx)

The introduction of the New Economic Policy, which averted the “extinction” promised by poor infrastructure and war communism through the “cheap prices of its commodities” and brought “civilization” to still-backwards Russia, seems more reflective of the Marxist conception of bourgeois capitalism than of socialism.

One can argue that war communism was hardly what Marx and Engels had envisioned in their prediction of an inevitable communist society, but it was perceived as an inherently Marxist policy by the Bolsheviks, as argued by Lenin in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*:

“Without comprehensive state accounting and control of production and distribution of goods, the power of the working people, the freedom of the working people, cannot maintain itself,
and... a return to the yoke of capitalism is inevitable” (Roberts 247). The New Economic Policy, on the other hand, was a concession; Lenin would acknowledge that war communism “assumed that we would be advancing in a straight line,” implicitly admitting that by taking up the New Economic Policy, he was following a more roundabout road to communism. Consequently, it is impossible to see the transition from war communism to the New Economic Policy as anything other than a prime example of the material reality of underdevelopment and instability forcing the Bolsheviks to, even in their own eyes, abandon Marxian orthodoxy.

Though the influence of the *Communist Manifesto* is visible in the progression of the Bolshevik Revolution, its dictates consistently took a backseat to the effects of slow development and political discord in Imperial Russia. To attribute events in revolutionary Russia to a few great figures may be appealing, but it is fundamentally fallacious. Analysis of the period must be grounded, first and foremost, in the conditions of the time. For most Russians, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky were names that appeared in newspapers or pamphlets and little more, but the crops they grew, the factories they worked in, and the families they fed were very real. Where the Russian Revolution is concerned, questions of *who*—who the people supported, who they trusted, or who they hoped to see defeated—can never be more important than questions of *what*—what they needed, what they wanted, and what they hoped to avoid. For a select few, the Revolution was a struggle for power, but for the masses, it was a struggle for survival.
Works Cited


