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## THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY TRANSFORMED: STALIN'S RISE TO POWER (1917–1927)\*

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In 1917, the Bolsheviks promised the liberation of the working masses from exploitation. And yet, within twenty years, they had delivered a regime that was substantially more exploitative and repressive than that of the Tsarist regime they had overthrown. This article argues that more than a quarter of a century after the opening of the archives, we still misapprehend how it happened. Historians tend to see the process as programmatic, or planned and intentional: that the Bolsheviks were authoritarian by nature, or that Stalin hijacked the Revolution and satisfied his lust for power by building a personal dictatorship. The article argues that we have failed to grasp the extent to which the positive programme of liberation continued to motivate the Bolshevik leadership throughout the interwar period. But they had underestimated the obstacles to creating a consensual, participatory political order. Considerable progress was made overcoming basic illiteracy, but it was another matter altogether to establish a functioning administrative apparatus, to fight and win the civil war, and to rebuild a shattered economy. The breakdown of liberal (“bourgeois”) democracies in Europe encouraged complacency about the superiority of the “transitional” proletarian dictatorship. The struggle for power after Lenin’s death turned local organisations against inner party democracy. It did not seem appropriate to revive it either in the midst of collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. The survival of the Revolution and catching up to the advanced capitalist countries took precedence. But if we treat extreme political violence and dictatorship as ends in themselves, we will fail adequately to grasp the fate of the Revolution.

*Keywords:* Stalin; democracy; dictatorship; bolshevism.

В 1917 г. большевики обещали освобождение трудящихся масс от эксплуатации. Но в течение 20 лет они установили режим гораздо более эксплуататорский и репрессивный по своей сути, чем побежденный ими ца-

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ризм. Автор утверждает, что спустя более четверти века после открытия архивов мы все еще остаемся в неведении по поводу того, почему так случилось. Историки склонны рассматривать этот исход как запрограммированный либо преднамеренно спланированный, поскольку большевики были авторитарны по своей природе, или же Сталин «оседлал» революцию и установил личную диктатуру, удовлетворяя жажду власти. До сих пор нет ясности в понимании того, в какой степени положительная программа освобождения народа продолжала мотивировать большевистское руководство в межвоенный период. Большевики недооценили препятствия на пути создания общественного порядка, основанного на согласованном политическом участии. Существенный прогресс был достигнут на пути ликвидации неграмотности, но значительно труднее было создать функционирующий государственный аппарат, бороться и выиграть Гражданскую войну, а также восстановить разрушенную экономику. Падение либеральных («буржуазных») демократий в Европе укрепляло ощущение превосходства «переходной» пролетарской диктатуры. Борьба за власть после смерти Ленина направила местные партийные организации на борьбу с внутривластной демократией. Возрождать ее в условиях коллективизации и ускоренной индустриализации казалось неуместным. Гораздо более важным представлялось выживание революции и стремление догнать передовые капиталистические страны. Автор отмечает, что если относиться к проявлениям политического насилия и диктатуре как к конечной цели советской власти, невозможно должным образом понять судьбу революции.

*Ключевые слова:* Сталин; демократия; диктатура; большевизм.

As we approach the hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution, it is an appropriate moment to return to what was perhaps the key question at the heart of Anglo-American “Soviet Studies” between the 1950s and the 1980s. How is it that a revolution that promised the liberation of working people ended up generating an extremely violent and hyper-centralised dictatorship? The question drew the attention of perhaps every major specialist in the period, a time when the secretive Soviet state was blocking access to the overwhelming mass of party and state archives [Deutscher; Schapiro 1955; Daniels; Laue; Pethybridge; Carr; Service; Schapiro, 1984; Gill]. Curiously, though we have now had access to almost all of these materials since 1991, when the Soviet system collapsed, very little work has been done on the evolution of the Bolshevik political order largely because political history is not in fashion. Of course a single article cannot definitively explain the origins of the communist dictatorship. It is a huge question that needs to be addressed in many dimensions (ideology, culture, politics and so on) and this text represents a first effort to sketch the outlines of a long-term project I started a few years ago. I have been collecting documents from central archives in Moscow (РГАСПИ – RGASPI), from republic archives (in Ukraine) and more local materials (*oblast’ /*

*guberniia / uezd / raion*) materials in Vinnitsa, Ukraine and Ekaterinburg in the Urals. The aim of this article is briefly to discuss the broadest outlines of the Anglo-American scholarship on the issue, and to indicate a few ways I propose to challenge some basic ways the issues are understood on the basis of the materials I have collected.

The first thing to grasp about early Anglo-American scholarship on 1917 and its aftermath is that it was a product of the Cold War, when the USSR was the enemy. The “totalitarian model” developed (among others) by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski [Friedrich, Brzezinski] posited that “democracy” represented by the US was a perfect counterpoint to “totalitarianism” represented by the USSR. The US represented “government by the will of the people” and the USSR represented “government against the will of the people”. Friedrich and Brzezinski asserted that the US encouraged citizens to think for themselves, whereas Soviet citizens were told what to think. This view of the world divided between “good guys” and “bad guys” was grossly simplistic, but it nevertheless had a profound resonance in Anglo-American thinking for a generation. In this context, it is not surprising that the dominant view was that Bolshevism was inherently authoritarian; that the 1917 Revolution was a coup d'état and the new regime always lacked popular legitimacy; and that Leninism led inevitably to Stalinism [Schapiro, 1955; Laue; Pipes; Malia].

Since the late 1960s, there have been various challenges to basic tenets of the totalitarian “revisionists” like Robert Tucker and Stephen Cohen argued that Leninism and Stalinism were different political phenomena, and that one did not lead inevitably to the other. Cohen argued most forcefully that Stalinism was a perversion of Leninism [Tucker, 1973; Cohen]. In the 1980s a second wave of revisionists from among social historians variously attributed the model. Early origins of dictatorship to Russian backwardness [Lewin] and the impact of the Civil War [Fitzpatrick]. Studies of 1917 challenged the notion of a coup d'état, and identified elements of popular support [Rabinowitch; Smith, 1983]. And yet, in the Anglo-American vision of the roots of the communist dictatorship, the figure of Joseph Stalin still looms large. It remains the dominant view both among “traditionalists” and most “revisionists” that Stalin's personal ambitions; his lust for power; his control of the party machinery; his revengefulness and fear of enemies; his predisposition to concentrate power in the political centre together played the central role in the emergence of the dictatorship. Stalin was the principal author of the Soviet variant of totalitarianism [Deutscher; Conquest; Tucker, 1990; Khlevniuk; Kotkin].

This paper will concentrate mostly on the aftermath of 1917, but the larger project will start at the turn of the twentieth century, not only to trace the origins of the Bolshevik party, but also to explore the domestic and international context both of the Revolution and of the descent into dictatorship. My first point is that the situation was fluid and no outcomes were inevitable. There were plenty of reasons to be guardedly optimistic about the prospects for democratic change in Russia. The broader

trend across the developed world had been towards democracy, towards the extension of a democratic suffrage. Russia was a relative latecomer in the process, hampered of course by an autocratic regime resistant to change, by low levels of popular education, the small middle class and so on, but the direction of change was promising. The Bolsheviks were not anti-democratic in principle. The conspiratorial party – seen by historians so often as the ‘genetic’ origin of the party dictatorship – was not an end in itself, but a necessary means to achieve a state that would rule in the interests of working people. And the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia was a history of political debate – principled and often angry debate – shifting coalitions and occasional compromise. That is an essential ingredient of democracy.

My second and much more significant point is that historians tend to exaggerate the clarity of the choice between “democracy” and “dictatorship” (or totalitarianism, or authoritarianism) in early twentieth-century Europe. We tend to forget that it was far from clear to contemporary observers what “democracy” was, and even if it was a good thing. We tend to forget, for example, that in 1917, at the time of the Revolution, only a minority of the adult population of Great Britain had the vote [Sternhell; LeBon; Spengler].<sup>1</sup> To get the vote, one needed to own property – a qualification specifically intended to exclude the working class. While there was a general acceptance that things had to be done to improve the living and working conditions of the labouring classes, a substantial part of the European elite – and middle class – were staunchly opposed to giving workers the vote. They did not think that working people were capable of understanding complex issues of policy and thus to vote in an informed way. In that sense, the views of the Bolshevik leadership were rather similar to those of many European conservatives. Bolsheviks tended to accept that the working classes of the Russian Empire were backward and that the process of educating them and drawing them into government would take generations. In reference then to the Cold War-era literature on early Soviet politics, historians tended to filter the story of early Bolshevik Russia through the lens of the contemporary scene where the world was divided between democratic “good guys” (Europe and America) and the authoritarian “bad guys” of the USSR. Presenting the evolution of the early Soviet state as a story of authoritarian figures defeating the democrats entirely overlooked the parlous state of democracy in Europe at the time of the October Revolution. Why should the Bolsheviks embrace some form of “liberal” democracy when so many Europeans considered it to be dangerous, ineffective and rotten? And yet they did not reject democracy as such.

The Bolsheviks took power in the name of working people. There is no reason to question their commitment to end the exploitation of la-

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<sup>1</sup> In Britain, a series of reform acts between the 1830s and 1920s gradually abolished property and gender qualifications on the vote. Some European countries were ahead of Britain in enacting universal suffrage, but most were slower primarily because they thought that universal suffrage would lead to revolution, if not the end of western civilisation.

bour by capital. That was no simple task, though it was far simpler than establishing a new political order from scratch, to come up with an alternative to liberal, representative democracy. They had almost no time to grapple with such questions before the Civil War began in earnest. As students of past revolutions, they knew well that existing elites would do everything in their power to crush Bolshevik power. It would be necessary to respond to violence not just with violence, but also with unity and discipline. The fate of the February Revolution presented other lessons for the Bolsheviks.



Joseph Stalin. 1918. At the front of the Civil War

The insistence of the Provisional Government on procedural norms, the rule of law, consultation and discussion inhibited them from getting things done, and that contributed to the descent into chaos. Bolsheviks knew that if their revolution were to succeed in creating a participatory proletarian state, they would need a highly centralised, disciplined, fearless and ruthless organisation, at least in the first instance.

In this context, Bolshevik political practice in the context of the civil war and after was not lacking a democratic, liberationist impulse. Here I do not mean to brush the more authoritarian, dictatorial actions under the carpet so to speak – the creation of the Cheka and the Red Terror; disbanding the Constituent Assembly; the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion; the factionalism rule, though most of these can be seen as fundamentally defensive moves rather than as expressions of the sort of state the Bolsheviks wanted to create. “Soviet” government – government rooted in Soviet structures, from local soviets up to the Central Executive Committee – showed an impulse to create a responsive, consultative, participatory political order. The problem was that it did not work. It was, perhaps, too consultative and participatory in the circumstances. Discussion of crucial issues took too long when decisive leadership was needed [Cook; McAuley; Rigby; Collins; Pietsch].



Again, historians are too quick to forget that in the context of the First World War, the “democratic” states of Europe suspended the work of parliamentary opposition and invoked what were called governments of national unity. These “democratic” regimes created political police forces to silence opposition to the war. They engaged in widespread surveillance and mass propaganda to sustain morale and shape popular opinion [Justifying War...; Holquist; Englander]. When the war ended, the democratic regimes radically restrained political policing and surveillance. They restored the role of the formal opposition. They lifted controls on the press and disbanded the apparatuses of propaganda. And they extended the franchise. But for the Bolsheviks, there was not the same sort of clear transition from war to peace. In places, the civil war dragged on until 1923. The war with Poland (1919–1921) was perceived as an extension of the civil war by proxy. European states made no secret of their anti-Communism, such that the Bolsheviks had the sense that a new intervention could occur at any time [Harris, 2007].

The Bolsheviks did not abandon the Soviet structures. Rather, they gradually grafted on party structures via party “fractions” that could pre-decide issues by means of party discipline. The rise of the Party as the new locus of decision-making was not part of some grand plan, nor was there a conscious drift away “democracy” towards “dictatorship”. There was no contradiction in Bolshevik minds between “democracy” and the “dictatorship” of the proletariat. The European “democracies” tended to offer the electorate a choice between parties of traditional elites and parties of “labour”, but the labour parties tended to be reformist, accepting the existence of capitalism, the practical dominance of the “bourgeoisie”, and the continued exploitation of labour by capital. “Bourgeois democracy” ruled in the interests of the bourgeoisie, whereas the “dictatorship” of the proletariat was more democratic (at least in theory) because it ruled in the interests of the broader mass of working people. The “Lenin Levy” and campaigns for “Soviet construction” were substantially about bringing representatives of the labouring masses into administration with the longer term aim of overcoming their political backwardness and encouraging a popular engagement in the revolutionary project. To the extent to which the Bolsheviks had a coherent vision of democracy, it was a vision of direct democracy, in which, to use Lenin’s phrase, “every scullery maid must learn to govern the state” [Ленин, с. 306–307].

So what happened to this “democratic” spirit across the 1920s? The historiography overwhelmingly points the finger of blame at Joseph Stalin. The standard explanation, which dominates to the present day, is that he sought to accumulate total power, and that he used his position as General Secretary of the Party and its power over appointments to build a personal following [Kotkin; Trotsky, 1940]. The standard explanation tells us that Stalin was able to demonise his opponents, end any meaningful “intra-party democracy” and thus establish a monolithic orthodoxy that he alone defined. But there are big problems with the standard explanation.

The first problem with the standard explanation is that the General Secretary's power over appointments did not put him in a position to pack party and state bodies with people who would be personally loyal to him. Here we need to remember that the Bolshevik party was completely transformed in the first decade after the revolution. At the time of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks were a 20,000 strong band of generally well-educated professional revolutionaries. But by the middle of the 1920s, party membership exceeded 500,000. It was then a mass-based party of power, with much lower levels of education on average. Stalin's primary responsibility



Joseph Stalin. 1924. Speech at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviets

when he took over as General Secretary in 1922 was to establish a basic administration of party records, to distribute cadres to a network of regional organisations that was expanding at a blistering pace and to develop basic administrative skills and a smoothly functioning apparatus of government. The records of the Party Secretariat show that this organisation was barely able to cope with the task, and that they were, for the most part, assigning cadres “completely blindly” [РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 69. Д. 140. Л. 30]. There is very little archival evidence that Stalin used the Secretariat to appoint people on the basis of their loyalty to him [Harris, 2005]. We have to look for explanations of the descent into dictatorship elsewhere.

To understand the closing down of party debate and the imposition of a single orthodoxy, we have to look beyond the personality and ambitions of one man, Joseph Stalin. It is most instructive to look again at the transformation of the Bolshevik party, at its massive growth and the staffing of a vast array of state and party bodies. The Bolsheviks did not have a clear idea of how to build an apparatus of state when they seized power. For years after the Revolution, the local government was in chaos and often unable to deliver the most basic administrative functions. Particularly after Sverdlov's death in 1919, Lenin relied on Stalin more than anyone else to bring

order out of the chaos. As Sverdlov had done, Stalin focused on setting out clear divisions of responsibility and clear hierarchies of responsibility. He earned a reputation as a “centraliser”, though there is little reason to conclude he was building central power for its own sake or to build a dictatorship. His analysis of the challenges of local administration had Lenin’s support, and though Lenin criticised him on occasion for heavy-handed tactics, there was no division between the two on the centralising strategy [Smith, 1998; Suny, p. 210–212].<sup>2</sup>

Of course there were groups and individuals who objected to the tendency to centralism and pressed for various forms of democratic change as soon as the tide of the Civil War shifted in the Bolsheviks’ favour. Nikolai Osinskii, Timofei Sapronov and others coalesced in a loose organisation known as the Group of Democratic Centralism, arguing that War Communism had fed an excessive and “bureaucratic” concentration of power in the centre. They favoured a radical decentralisation of power and the “popular participation of the workers in government and economic administration as the most vital precondition of socialist construction” [Kowalski, p. 3; Daniels, ch. 4; Remington, p. 115–116]. The Workers’ Opposition, led by Alexander Shliapnikov, picked up their mantle in the early 1920s, again railing against centralisation and proposing that workers should elect councils that would direct the economy. Both groups had their supporters in the Party, but neither had enough support to shift the prevailing sentiment in favour of centralism and the enforcement of a single political line imposed from above. The argument against rushing democratic reform was reasonably clear and sensible. The Civil War was more or less over, but the industrial economy was a shambles, running at around fifteen percent of its pre-war capacity and desperately in need of investment. The countryside was in the grips of famine through 1922. The war with Poland (1919–1921) and various plots uncovered by the political police signalled to many Bolsheviks that the threat of counter-revolution remained very real. Giving control over a decimated economy to decentralised councils elected by illiterate and semi-literate workers was fraught with risks. There was nothing particularly “unbolshevik” in the proposals. They were just inappropriate to the current circumstances.

But when would the time be right for democratic reforms? By 1923, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was driving a clear recovery in the industrial economy. The famine had been brought to a close. The threat of counter-revolution had not especially receded, but there were high hopes for communist revolution in Europe. Trotsky made that case, as lead signatory of the *Declaration of the 46* (October 1923) and author of a *New Course* for the Party (December 1923). Trotsky had not supported the Democratic Centralists or the Worker’s Opposition. Indeed he had contributed to their defeat, though his 1923 proposals echoed certain elements of the platforms of these earlier groups [Priestland, ch. 1]. Trotsky argued that the current system of centralised command was choking off discussion in the Party.

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<sup>2</sup> Most famously Lenin criticised Stalin for his conduct in the so-called “Georgian Affair”.



The emerging gulf between the secretaries who issued the commands (*verkhi*) and the rank and file who had to implement them (*nizy*) was not only causing discontent in the lower orders of the Party. More significantly, it was preventing the correction of mistakes made by the centre in the elaboration of NEP. Among other things, Trotsky demanded the election of all party committees by their members [Trotsky, 1943].<sup>3</sup>

Did Trotsky foresee and try to stop the emergence of a communist dictatorship? That is what Trotsky wanted people to think: over the years many historians have substantially accepted his accounts, but the archives indicate that they were more than a little self-serving. He was ill through much of 1923 with the consequences of malaria, attending the meetings of the Politburo infrequently. At the time, top party leaders were working long hours to address the problems of the emergent quasi-capitalist system of NEP: the Scissors Crisis, the structure of foreign trade, the role of trades unions and so on. Trotsky was given responsibility for perhaps the most important question: the organisation of industry. His work, largely completed at home and apart from the rest of the Politburo, increasingly turned him against NEP and its emphasis on the trade between town and countryside. When he presented his proposals to the Politburo, they were clearly incompatible with the direction his colleagues were taking, and they demanded changes [РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 337; Д. 339. Л. 4, 342]. It was a fascinating moment because the transition to NEP had been difficult and fraught with crisis and controversy. For the first time, in the summer of 1923, there were signs that NEP might generate economic growth that could compensate for the compromise with “capitalist elements” [РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 84. Д. 470; Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 26. Л. 56–62] but just at that moment, Trotsky was rallying the doubters.

The Politburo majority was horrified that their influential but largely absentee colleague was trying to undermine the immense work that they had undertaken in the previous nine months. In order to iron out some kind of workable compromise, they held a series of meetings with Trotsky, often at his flat in light of his continuing illness [РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 84. Д. 476. Л. 4]. In early December, they thought they had settled on a mutually agreeable formulation, but within days, Trotsky began to publish the New Course articles in Pravda [РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 400. Л. 1]. Stalin and the rest of the majority were furious. Trotsky seemed to be signalling his intention publicly to disagree with the policy platform he had only just agreed to. In short, in advocating freedom of policy discussion, elections to party bureaus and closing the gulf between the *verkhi* (bosses) and *nizy* (rank and file), he was not promoting democratic principles so much as identifying a way to rally the rank and file against the leadership. Stalin and the other members of the majority made it clear that they were not opposed to the electoral principle in party committees, but in the current conditions it was not going to be possible in all committees, every time

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<sup>3</sup> It was originally printed as a series of articles in Pravda in December 1923.

[Сталин, с. 368–369; РГАСПИ. Ф. 558. Оп. 1. Д. 2569. Л. 71 (Сталин); Ф. 17. Оп. 84. Д. 476. Л. 9–10 (Бухарин); Ф. 17. Оп. 171. Д. 26. Л. 63–72 (Дзержинский)]. In that regard, Stalin and the majority had ample support among party secretaries in district and provincial party organisations throughout the Soviet Union

Local organisations were prone to dysfunction, and Trotsky's demands were doomed to make matters worse. In the early 1920s, Stalin's Secretariat had standardised a clarified the responsibilities of local organisations, but infighting (*skloki*) remained a serious problem. Relations between Soviets and their executive committees (*ispolkomy*) frequently broke down. Soviet executive committees' relations with parallel party committee were often tense. District committees did not always get along with their bosses in the guberniia committees and so on. Most *skloki* were rooted in personality clashes, but they were exacerbated by lingering confusion about who was responsible for what, and the grave challenges of local governance in the early 1920s. Establishing an effective local administration and rebuilding the local economy after years of war, amidst famine in the countryside and mass unemployment in the cities, was always going to be an immensely difficult task, made even more difficult by meagre budgets and shortages of cadres with basic administrative skills. The challenges bred resentments, provoked infighting and the conflicts tended to paralyse organisations bringing their work to a standstill [Getty, ch. 5; Davies, Harris, ch. 1].

In this context, Trotsky's proposals were seen as a recipe for disaster [ДАВО. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 5. Л. 19; Д. 47. Л. 54; ЦДООСО. Ф. 4. Оп. 2. Д. 45. Л. 9; Ф. 8. Оп. 1. Д. 42. Л. 1–2]. Given the extremely low educational levels of the local party rank and file, giving them the power to elect party secretaries was likely to make a difficult situation even worse. Talented and experienced cadres were in extremely short supply such that it made sense that they should be assigned to organisations where the need was greatest. Where *skloki* paralysed organisations, moving the embattled cadres to another organisation was the preferred strategy [ДАВО. Ф. 1. Оп. 1. Д. 43. Л. 12; Д. 44. Л. 6, 60; Д. 45. Л. 1, 6; ЦДООСО. Ф. 1494. Оп. 1. Д. 190. Л. 42–42 об]. Trotsky had demanded not only elections to all party committees, but also the end of *naznachenstvo*: the power of party cadre departments to assign party officials with organisations under their purview. It might have worked in Moscow or Petrograd where there was a much higher concentration of educated and experienced officials, but in the provinces, Trotsky's proposals looked like a serious threat to the basic administrative stability and early signs of economic growth that had only just emerged.

It is important to note that this does not mean that there was any principled opposition to democratic reform either in the Politburo majority or in the provinces. There was only recognition that it was premature. Both in the centre and the provinces there were serious and sustained efforts to train and promote new cadres. The majority acceded to Trotsky's call from the *New Course* of December 1923 to draw hundreds of thousands

of industrial workers into the Party. From the autumn of 1923, there was a campaign to monitor party bosses and to remove those who used their positions for personal gain. There were renewed efforts to encourage members of the public to attend party meetings and for party secretaries at all levels to make regular public speeches on the work of their organisations. They were directed to form networks of “study circles” in which the members of the public could learn more about and discuss party policy. There is plenty of evidence of a serious effort to prevent the emergence of a self-serving, authoritarian ruling caste, and to encourage members of the public to take an interest in what their government was doing [КПСС в резолюциях...]. The actions of the Politburo majority were consistent with Lenin’s injunction that “every scullery maid must learn to govern the state”. They were consistent too with a growing body of contemporary opinion in Europe that giving the vote to the ill-educated, “immature” working masses was a threat to political stability.

But when would the time be right to reverse the centralisation of power and allow the masses to exercise the skills the state was encouraging them to develop? There was never a shortage of reasons to put it off. Internal and external threats to the Revolution remained grave, at least in the eyes of the Soviet leadership. The demands of leadership and administration became ever more complex, especially with the beginning of the Five-Year plans in the late 1920s. The growing need for specialised skills and knowledge made Lenin’s hopes for the scullery maid seem naïve. In the provinces, the principal focus of party and state officials remained unchanged. Stable administration and economic growth took precedence over open policy discussion. Indeed the two were seen to be in conflict. Trotsky did not stop attacking the Politburo majority, and every subsequent episode in the dispute brought complaints that the progress of their practical work was disrupted. They enthusiastically responded to the majority’s calls for party unity and discipline, and raised few objections when, in 1927, Trotsky was ultimately expelled from the Party.

My intention here is not to absolve Stalin of responsibility for the descent into dictatorship, but rather to observe that the focus on the actions and intentions of one man results in a gross simplification of events. I have tried to argue here that the Anglo-American scholarship has tended to assert that there was a clear choice for the Bolsheviks between “democracy” and “dictatorship”, and that they opted for dictatorship. My first point was that democratic change in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century was fraught with controversy, and in a moment of crisis during the First World War democratic development was reversed in important respects. Soviet Russia was developmentally much farther behind Britain, France, Germany and other “democratic” states, and in a much more profound political crisis. In the first decade of Soviet power, Bolshevik leaders considered various institutional structures and pathways to embed a different vision of democracy, but they commonly accepted that it would take

generations to achieve. And because the end of the civil war did not end the sense of threat and crisis, they remained focused on the importance of discipline and unity. That combined with the transformation of the Party from a narrow group of professional revolutionaries to a mass party of power, and the subsequent weakness of commitment to open party discussion, particularly at the subnational level, gave Stalin the opportunity indefinitely to delay democratic development and to develop instead the mobilisational state that would carry out the “Great Break”. The strange coincidence in 1936 of the introduction of elections to party organisations on the one hand, with the beginning of the “great terror” is the subject of my on-going research.

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