

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > **Communist Dissidents in Early Soviet Russia. An introduction to Simon (...)**

Communist Dissidents in Early Soviet Russia. An introduction to Simon Pirani's book

Monday 23 October 2023, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2023).

This book gives voice to Russian communists who participated in the 1917 revolution, but found themselves at odds with the Communist party as it consolidated its rule in the early 1920s. One Red army veteran demands action against corrupt officials; another mourns the dashed hopes of 1917 and the loss of friendship and solidarity. A “collectivist” group aspires to new cultural and technological revolutions; other oppositionists denounce material inequalities, the return of workplace exploitation and creeping state authoritarianism. The five documents in the book are published in English for the first time, with an introduction and notes. The book is available in English and Russian, as a PDF, free to download via this [link](#).

Introduction

The five documents in this collection were written in a short, tumultuous period of less than two years — between the autumn of 1920 and the summer of 1922 — that followed the Reds' victory in the Russian civil war [1]. After the main White armies were defeated in October-November 1919, early Soviet Russia lived through an extraordinary 15-month interregnum. On one hand, the Red Army consolidated its control over Ukraine (by February 1920) and, when attacked by Polish forces, pursued its enemies almost as far as Warsaw, briefly inspiring communists' hopes of sparking a European revolution before an ignominious defeat (August 1920). On the other hand, grain requisitioning policies, on which supply to the revolution's urban base relied, exacerbated tensions in the countryside, and in the autumn of 1920 a string of peasant revolts erupted.

In February-March 1921, the interregnum was brought to an end by a political and economic crisis. Food supply and transport came close to collapse. Peasant anger merged with working-class discontent, over both material hardships and the Bolsheviks' encroachments on soviet democracy. A wave of strikes erupted in Moscow and Petrograd (now St Petersburg), followed by the revolt at the Kronshtadt naval base, which was suppressed by the Red Army. This stand-off with the workers and peasants, in whose name the 1917 revolution had been made, posed a potentially existential threat to the Soviet government. A tactical retreat followed, at the Russian Communist Party (RCP) tenth congress in March 1921. Grain requisitioning, trade monopolies, labour compulsion and other “war communist” economic policies were abandoned, and replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP). Initially this meant replacing grain requisitioning with a tax in kind on peasant farmers, but it soon expanded into a revival of private entrepreneurship and trading that left only the financial system and key industries in state hands.

The RCP changed rapidly during this time. It had about one-third of a million members in March 1919, and opened its doors to recruits in October 1919, when the civil war's outcome was in the balance. As a result, membership rose to nearly half a million by January 1920, and to around three-quarters of a million in the spring of 1921. From there it fell again: some members left, disillusioned;

many more were excluded in a series of purges. The cohort that joined the party during the civil war outnumbered those who joined in 1917; both groups dwarfed the core of a few tens of thousands of veterans of the clandestine, pre-1917 organisation. As Soviet Russia emerged from the civil war, a material rift opened up between the party ranks (mostly workers and Red Army soldiers) and an as-yet-embryonic elite of party leaders, “responsible officials” in soviet bodies, and non-party specialists and managers. The party’s internal discussions were for months dominated by talk of “the tops and the ranks”: in September 1920, it was the main subject of the party’s national conference; two months later, a coalition of opposition groups that focused attention on the issue narrowly failed to take control of the Moscow party. The first document in this collection was written during this discussion; the other four appeared after the tenth congress, and considered in various ways the new order taking shape under the NEP, the elite’s burgeoning role in it, and the escalating assaults on soviet democracy.

The communist dissidents of 1920-22 were anything but a homogenous group. There were some points on which they concurred with each other and with the RCP leadership: that the forward march of the revolution was inevitable, although the pace could be in question; that the motor of progress was the class struggle, understood narrowly as one waged by the working class not only against the bourgeoisie and the moneyed middle class, but also, to differing extents, against elements of the intelligensia and of the peasantry. Crucial issues on which the oppositionists were divided included their assessment of the Soviet state and of the RCP: the state had in some respects crossed to the enemy camp, in the more radical groups’ view. Such radicals included short-lived breakaways from the RCP such as the Workers and Peasants Socialist Party (WPSP) and the Workers Truth group, whose documents are included here. Within the RCP, the two most significant groups on a national level were the Workers Opposition, whose supporters were concentrated in the RCP leadership of the trade unions, and the Democratic Centralists. Both were formal participants in the discussion preceding the tenth congress, and both were dissolved after it, in accordance with the decision to ban factions. (Collections of these groups’ documents have been published recently, or are in preparation, by other historians.) [2]

The documents

Document no.1 is a letter written in September 1920 by Anton Vlasov, a Red Army commander, to the RCP Central Committee and specifically to Lenin. Vlasov called on the party leadership to take action against the material privilege and corruption of the “tops”, and warned that the party was losing the confidence of the ranks and of the working class. He directed workerist anger at officials’ “servility, debauchery and luxury”, and an especially sexist ire at party leaders’ wives. [3] If nothing is done, Vlasov warned, soldiers like himself will intervene “arms in hand”. Some of Vlasov’s claims about elite privilege seem exaggerated, and the Moscow committee of the party found them to be “three quarters untrue”. Historians have found no more details of Vlasov’s biography. But there is no doubt that his anger at party structures that had been “completely torn away from the masses” was widely shared. [4]

Document no. 2 is a declaration by a small group who felt that anger, and 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, published in May 1921 and addressed to the Moscow soviet. It denounced the “nanny-communists” [5] who now dominated 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 — with hardship and supply shortages, with the perceived exacerbation of that hardship by economic policy decisions, and with the RCP’s political intolerance — 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. When the soviet assembled in May, these non-partyists represented most of the largest factories, which in 1917 had been the

bedrock of the Bolsheviks' support. However, the RCP comfortably maintained its majority, thanks to large numbers of delegates from government offices. A tiny number of delegates (28 out of 2115) represented other parties, including the WPSP. The economic policy proposals in the declaration, and even the denunciation of "executive-committee-ism" and measures proposed to tackle it, would not have been out of place inside the RCP. But the demand for political rights for those outside the RCP, and the very fact that the declaration's authors had themselves quit the party, was unacceptable.

The WPSP was founded and led by Vasilii Paniushkin, whose revolutionary experience, like Anton Vlasov's, had been shaped in the military. Before 1917 he was a seafarer, and was alleged to have been among a group of Bolsheviks who during the revolution killed seven students found to have tsarist officers' epaulettes. By 1918 he had risen up the party's ranks to serve as a special military commissar and member of the collegium of the Cheka (security police). In 1920 he joined the rank-and-file opposition in Moscow. In June 1921, after the declaration appeared, Paniushkin was arrested. Six months later he was freed, after a meeting with Lenin; the WPSP was wound up and he was restored to RCP membership. [6]

Document no. 3, a platform entitled "We are collectivists", strikes a contrast with the others in content and style. Here there is little of the anger that consumed Vlasov, or the political and practical urgency that motivated the WPSP. Rather, the authors, whose names are unknown, presented a view of communist philosophy and culture, as well as politics and organisation, in preparation for a struggle — for "technological revolution", to organise the social relations of production and for proletarian culture (part VIII) — that they expected would split the RCP, but only over a number of years. Rather than leaving the RCP, they were resolved to stay within it, as an ideologically tight-knit, and essentially clandestine, group of fellow thinkers in proletkult organisations and trade unions (part IX). [7]

The Collectivists declared themselves to be adherents of Vperedism, the Marxist tendency headed, prior to 1917, by Aleksandr Bogdanov. [8] This signified, above all, a belief in the "idea of independent proletarian culture" (part II). Developing this culture, through "proletarianisation" of the arts and sciences, and building on the work of the proletkult organisations set up after 1917, was a central practical task. So was the preparation of technological revolution (part X).

Having started out with this distinctive and thought-provoking critique of Bolshevik ideology, the Collectivists moved on to less original political proposals that overlap with those of the Workers Opposition, the WPSP and the Workers Group. The platform's authors had, before the tenth party congress in March 1921, supported the Workers Opposition as a proletarian voice in the RCP — but thought that its "belief in the necessity of building communism and its militant utopianism" had been overtaken by events (part III). The proletariat may have retained "hegemony" after the tenth congress — and the platform categorised the Soviet state as "the dictatorship of a proletarian-peasant bloc" — but the party leadership had now sanctioned a "transition from war communism to state capitalism" and a corresponding shift of political power away from the working class to "the technical intelligentsia" (part IV). Progress from this state capitalism to socialist revolution is inevitable, the authors believed, and they expected it to unfold internationally over the course of the next two decades (part VII).

Alla Morozova has recently argued that, while the Collectivists were surely influenced by Bogdanov, they can not accurately be described as "Bogdanovists"; politically, they formed an intermediate link between the Workers Opposition and Workers Truth. [9] Whether they implemented their plan to build a clandestine network in the Communist party is unknown: certainly it left no trace that historians have found. Nevertheless, the Collectivists' platform was distributed at a proletkult conference in November 1921, and attracted sufficient attention that Lenin proposed publishing it,

together with a response. That was never done, but Bukharin polemicised against it in Pravda, the party's main newspaper. Bogdanov, who had abandoned Bolshevik politics to focus on research, was denounced in Bukharin's article, and responded robustly. In September 1923 he was arrested and briefly detained as the supposed ideologue of the Workers Truth group. He denied any direct connection with it, and with the Collectivists, and historians have found no evidence of any. [10]

Document no. 4, an appeal by the Workers Truth group issued in early 1922, deals with some of the same themes as the Collectivists — the class character of Russian society, and of the soviet government, and the need for cultural as well as political renewal. The group was formed by communist militants who had fought in the Red Army during the civil war, including several who were studying on higher education courses on to which communist cadres had been invited. Workers Truth defined the Russian economy as state capitalist, but considered the “proletarian dictatorship” that the RCP proclaimed to be a fiction. In the group's view, the “technical organising intelligentsia” was drawing together with elements of the old bourgeoisie, and “a new bourgeoisie [was] taking shape”; capital was “on the march against the gains made by the working class” in 1917. The RCP was facilitating this offensive, having “increasingly, irretrievably, lost its relationship and commonality with the proletariat”. All this meant that a new workers' party was needed.

The group's analysis of the soviet state's class character challenged the RCP's claim that the enemy was essentially external and the state essentially a “workers' state”. Actually, the appeal asserted, workers are “disorganised” and their consciousness is muddled: “are they living under the ‘proletarian dictatorship’, as the Communist party repeats endlessly in speeches and articles, or in a country of arbitrary rule and exploitation, as life itself convinces them at every step?” Workers, who were “eking out a miserable existence” while the new bourgeoisie “wallows in luxury”, needed clarity and organisation in a new party. When arrested in November 1923, Polina Lass-Kozlova, one of the leaders of the Workers Truth group, told her interrogators that she and her comrades believed that, under the given historical conditions, the proletariat's lack of experience of practical statecraft, and its lack of cultural preparation, meant that proletarian dictatorship was impossible. They acknowledged that soviet power was “the only possible” one in Russia, but that describing it as a worker-peasant government “did not correspond to the real content and nature of that power”. [11]

The Workers Truth group circulated typewritten copies of the appeal published here, and two editions of a newspaper, before being suppressed. Prominent members were rounded up by the security forces in September 1923, when workers' aspirations to improved pay and conditions fuelled a wave of strikes. The security police feared that this would provide fertile ground on which dissident communist groups could grow. They also targeted another such network, the Workers Group led by Gavriil Miasnikov, a worker Bolshevik based in Perm', and supported by many who had participated in the 1920 Moscow opposition. [12] The Workers Truth members protested vigorously at being categorised in the party press as “Menshevik-counter-revolutionaries”. Prosecution documents had described them as “old Mensheviks”; actually, apart from Lass-Kozlova, who was 28, they were all under 25; all had joined the Bolsheviks as teenagers. Fania Shutskever, a Red Army veteran, spent more than a year in prison; at least three others were detained. One of them, E. Shul'man, told Trotsky in December 1923 that they were being exiled to distant parts of Russia. [13]

Document no. 5, excerpts from Iosif Litvinov's diary, shines an exceptional light on the moods, political and psychological, of the civil war veterans among whom Workers Truth first took root. Litvinov, a Latvian Jewish communist, had served in the tsarist army, participated in the revolutionary soldiers' movement, and then in the short-lived soviet seizure of power in Riga in 1919. He wrote the diary while studying at the Institute of Red Professors in Moscow, alongside Shutskever among others. On top of the emotional turmoil into which soldiers returning from so many wars have been plunged, the Red Army veterans, in addition, felt that NEP was, at least, 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”. His diary is very unusual for having survived the Stalinist era, and found its way to post-Soviet historians, through a complex and tragic series of circumstances (see the Introduction to the text). Many more such documents were destroyed by their authors or otherwise disappeared.

Comments

The communist dissidents of the early 1920s made little impact on the convulsive course of Soviet history. The Cheka and its successors effectively made it impossible to operate outside the Communist party. Some dissidents abandoned public activity (at least, any that was visible to historians); some, such as Paniushkin, returned to the Communist party and served the Soviet state in political or administrative roles. This latter path was also trod by prominent members of the Democratic Centralist group and the Workers Opposition.

The New Economic Policy gave way during the first five-year plan (1928-32) to a policy of forced industrialisation and collectivisation. This resulted in a new influx of migrants from the countryside to urban areas, and a fearful attack on working-class living standards and demands for speed-up in industry. Workplace revolts ensued, and former Communist party members and non-party communists were prominent among their organisers. In 1928, members of both the Bolshevik-Leninist faction led by Trotsky, and the Democratic Centralist group, were expelled en masse from the party. Although they effectively operated underground, they saw no alternative to one-party rule, and saw the workers’ movement as an auxiliary to pressure for internal change, rather than a force to be mobilised against the “workers’ state”. [14] In the 1930s and 1940s, almost the only traces of dissident communist activity were left in the prison camps.

In the Soviet Union after Stalin, socialist and communist dissidents were deprived of direct connections with their predecessors: they knew little more about them than could be gleaned from official publications. [15] This was a painful break in the historical memory of the workers’ movement. Not only had the dissident communists of the 1920s been physically annihilated or terrorised into silence, but also the documents in which they articulated their understanding of how the revolution had degenerated disappeared into the archives.

Now, a little more than a century after they were written, the documents can be a source of inspiration — but not a model for our times. Too much has changed. To their authors, the international working class would be unrecognisable. In India and China, let alone the wealthy capitalist countries, urban working people comprise a far greater share of the population than in 1920s Russia; rates of nutrition, literacy and health care access are incomparably higher. Most have electricity and the internet. Or, to look at technological progress another way, the “gigantic technologies of destruction” that so horrified the Workers Truth group — poison gas, artillery and early armoured vehicles — have been superseded by machine guns, flying bombers, nuclear weapons and electronic surveillance. Ecological crises loom. Social transformations in this century may have as little in common with the Russian revolution as it had with the French revolution of 1789.

Revolutions often raise hopes they can not fulfil, and the documents in the collection are striking, first, for the way that they reflect the collision between the hopes of 1917 and the civil war, and the harsh economic and political facts of the NEP. “People, who have lived for four years as if on a drug-induced high, are counting their wounds”, Litvinov wrote (doc. 5, 15 January entry). To the Collectivists, “the military consumer communism of the besieged fortress” had during the civil war seemed to be “genuine production communism”; looking back self-critically, they realised that “it never once entered our heads to check our perspectives and our view of the future against the facts” (doc. 3, part III). In 1921-22, back in civilian life and confronted with the NEP, this reckoning with

reality could no longer be postponed.

The character of the soviet state was a conundrum with which all the documents' authors tussled. The material inequality that enraged Vlasov, and so many others, had to be explained. For the WPSP, the problem was that the proletariat had been "pushed out of the governance of the Republic"; proletarian power was being subverted by "a bureaucratised element whose connections with the proletariat have been severed or lost" (doc. 2). This view of a hostile class element within the state could also be heard within the RCP, and was not especially controversial; it was the WPSP members' readiness to quit the party that provoked a reaction. The authors of other documents went further, though.

The Collectivists defined this alien grouping as a "technical-bureaucratic intelligentsia" that was on the way to becoming a "new bourgeoisie"; they believed they were witnessing a transition from "dictatorship of the worker-peasant bloc under proletarian hegemony" to the political rule by this intelligentsia (doc. 3, part IV). The Workers Truth group argued that this "technical organising intelligentsia" had come to the fore not only in Soviet Russia, but in all the countries emerging from the first world war. In Russia, the RCP had become the party of this intelligentsia, and, thereby, "the representative of the general, national interest of capital". The idea that Soviet Russia was a "proletarian state" was a deception; "the class interests of the ruling bourgeois groups in Russia naturally require the papering-over of class contradictions in our republic".

However, the formation of the new elite had aspects to which the communist dissidents paid little attention. Some tens of thousands of "responsible officials", all party members, were at its centre, and indeed were given special dispensation by the 11th party congress in 1922 for excessive legal earnings; they, along with managers in industry and the notorious NEPmen, were accumulating political, social and economic power. [16] The dissidents' narrow focus on the "intelligentsia", surely reflecting long-standing prejudices in the industrial workers' movement against specialists, belied this complexity. Vlasov railed against "the intelligentsia's thirst for power" and the way that the directorate of food supply had become a "haven for Mensheviks" (doc. 1); the Collectivists' and Workers Truth group's analyses also reflected this bias. For the Collectivists, the proletkult organisations, on which they relied to carry forward the struggle for cultural and technological revolution, had as a priority to be purged of "middle-class elements" and "elements hostile to the proletariat" (doc. 3, part X).

Some dissidents, in keeping with long-standing Bolshevik tradition, also assumed that the peasantry, which comprised the vast majority of the Russian population, was essentially hostile. For the Collectivists, the peasantry, "in consequence of its intermediate social position", could not play an independent political role; as capital's offensive against the proletariat intensified, the peasantry would side with it. Proof of its "limiting role" in its alliance with the proletariat was the party's failure to nationalise the land in 1917, and its decision to replace the food supply monopoly with the tax in kind, in 1921 (doc. 3, part IV). The Workers Truth group also saw the countryside as the source of threats: the NEP was stimulating "rapid growth of a significant layer of kulaks", they claimed (doc. 4) — certainly a premature judgment in 1922. The WPSP's declaration, by contrast, refers throughout to the need to "consolidate close links" between the urban and rural proletariats, and to the need to supply traded goods to the countryside (doc. 2).

As well as the narrow definition of the working class, as employed industrial workers, the dissidents also shared the Bolsheviks' assumptions that political positions were innately determined by class characteristics — and that democracy could be afforded only to those understood to be proletarian. The WPSP urged that political rights be extended to "all genuinely revolutionary parties" who were "not stained by betrayal of the proletarian cause", and the release of those parties' representatives — but not, presumably, any Mensheviks or Socialist Revolutionaries — from prison. The death

penalty, the WPSP said, should be abolished “except in cases of clearly defined enemies of the proletariat” (doc. 2). The Workers Truth group was much less categorical, but claimed (incorrectly) that bourgeois opposition groups enjoyed freedom of speech and combination, and that “revolutionary elements of the proletariat” had to fight for it (doc. 4).

The dissidents’ narrow identification of revolution with the industrial working class left them with other blind spots. The huge changes that the revolution had brought about, and was bringing about, for women, and in the domestic sphere, are not mentioned in the documents, apart from the WPSP’s brief assertion that “serious attention” needed to be paid to schools and nurseries, as well as other municipal services (doc. 2).

Reading these documents in 2023 — when the war in Ukraine provides a shocking reminder of the durability of Russian imperialist nationalism — the dissidents’ lack of interest in Russia’s future relationship with its former colonies is also striking. When the Workers Truth group urged “support by all means to the national bourgeoisie of the emerging capitalist countries of the east in their struggle against colonial empires”, they meant “India, China, Egypt and so on”, and not, apparently, Russia’s periphery. The Russian republic’s task was “the establishment of close links” with “advanced capitalist countries such as Germany and America”, and a boycott of “reactionary France” (doc. 4). This fitted with their view that Russia could aim only for state capitalism, and not socialism, and that the class struggle would be conducted most effectively if that bitter truth was recognised. The Collectivists envisaged an ongoing struggle against “the colonising aspirations of foreign concessionaire capital, and the speculative tendencies of Russian capital” (doc. 3, part X).

We must not read back to 1921-22 changes that took place subsequently. The dissidents knew no more about the future crushing effects of Stalinist centralisation than they did about the first five-year plan or the purges. By 1921 the Ukrainian Rada’s fate had been sealed, and the Georgian republic had been subverted, and then removed by the Red Army — but the Soviet Union did not yet exist, and in 1922 the row among Bolshevik leaders about its constitution and nationalities policy was conducted behind closed doors. The dissidents shared most Communists’ conviction that national and democratic issues were subordinate to the class struggle. In the circumstances — when the revolution had destroyed the empire, and Russia’s future relationship with its former colonies was in flux — what mattered most was defence of the revolution from the capitalist powers. Whether or not the soviet state could be defined as a “workers’ state”, the dissidents were for defending it, as they had done during the civil war, arms in hand.

The documents’ authors feared that the Russian republic was being bureaucratised, and even that it was being turned into an agency of capital — but that did not mean an agency of imperialism. This really was a blind spot, one shared with socialists in imperialist countries at other times and places. It was combined with an allegiance to the republic founded in their self-identity as communists, as opposed to people of any particular nation. Litvinov, a Latvian Jew who renounced his religion and changed his surname to a Russian-sounding one, lamented the fate of “poor, unhappy Russia: everyone wants to take you on the road that they have chosen”: the Christians, to Orthodox piety, the communists, to world revolution; he wanted Russia to “live just for yourself” (doc. 5, 3 February entry). Five months later, in a better mood, he hailed the Russian republic as “the most stable government in the world”, in contrast to the European powers (doc. 5, 10 July entry).

The dissidents also had to confront the painful fact that it was the Communist party, of which they had all been members, that was presiding over the growing bureaucratisation and authoritarianism of the soviet state. Their starting point was the gulf between the party and the industrial working class for which it claimed to speak. The WPSP asserted that the bourgeoisie has “found reliable helpers in the communist party” for their “drive to smash the proletarian power from within” (doc. 2). According to Workers Truth, the Communist party had “increasingly, irretrievably, lost its

relationship [...] with the proletariat”; the “chasm” dividing it from the working class was “getting ever deeper” (doc. 4). The Collectivists explained the party’s desertion of the proletarian cause in mechanical class terms: while the proletariat could develop collectivist culture, “authoritarianism and individualism” were “characteristic of [non-proletarian] layers of our party: the peasantry and the intelligentsia” (doc. 3, part IV).

Litvinov, writing only for himself, opened up broader issues about the reproduction of alienated personal and social relations in the “communist” organisation. “There is no genuine friendship or solidarity between communists”, he wrote (doc. 5, 21 February entry) — a damning indictment. He pondered the relationship of communism and humanism. In the party’s lame attempts to explain reactions to the 1922 famine on the Volga in class terms, the theory of class struggle had been vulgarised “to the point of idiocy”; “all that is common to all humanity was declared to be non-existent”; the party had become “a herd of sheep, bereft of its own judgement” (doc. 5, 26 January entry).

Stalinist murder and censorship severed the experience of Litvinov’s generation not only from socialists and others in the Soviet Union, but also from socialists and communists internationally, as they tried to understand the outcome of the 1917 revolution and the first state that claimed to rule in the name of working people. As the revolution degenerated, the only voice that had lived through it, that could be clearly heard in the workers’ movement elsewhere, was Lev Trotsky’s, and then only to the extent that the Trotskyists were able to counter the Stalinist lie machine. Some of the Mensheviks, anarchists such as Grigorii Maksimov, and the hard-to-categorise Victor Serge, had smaller audiences. The Workers Opposition was known, if at all, through Alexandra Kollontai’s pamphlet about it. The fraying threads of discussion and understanding were further broken by the second world war and the larger political, social and cultural divisions of the “cold war”; the bureaucratism and incorporation of workers’ organisations in Western countries had its effect too. But that the heterogenous multitude of voices in the post-revolutionary Soviet state was almost unheard by later generations is undeniable. [17]

The opening of the Soviet archives in the late 1980s, and the collapse first of the Soviet Union’s repressive apparatus and then of the Union itself, was a shift in the opposite direction. Historians played their part, and so all the documents published here, except the WPSP manifesto, have been published in Russian, albeit in small-circulation academic books and journals (see introduction to each document for details).

All the documents are published here in English for the first time. In the use of sub-headings, capital letters, paragraphs and so on, I have tried to follow their original style.

Simon Pirani is Honorary Professor at the University of Durham. He is author of *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (Routledge 2008) and many other books and articles about Russia and Ukraine

[Click here](#) to subscribe to *ESSF newsletters in English and/or French*.

P.S.

syg.ma

<https://syg.ma/@sygma/communist-dissidents-in-early-soviet-russia-an-introduction-to-simon-pirani-s-book>

Footnotes

[1] The first section of this Introduction summarises points from S. Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920-1924: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (London: Routledge, 2008). The publication of these documents continues the research for that book, in which communist and working-class dissent in the early 1920s is discussed in more detail

[2] See Barbara Allen (ed. and trans.), *The Workers' Opposition in the Russian Communist Party: Documents, 1919-30* (Leiden: Brill, 2021). Collections of documents by the Democratic Centralists and the Workers Group (see below) are also under preparation for the *Historical Materialism* book series

[3] Demonising officials' wives was a commonly-used trope among male rank-and-file communists. See Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 120-121. The historian Jean-Jacques Marie suggests that Vlasov's motivation may have been antisemitic, but the text of the letter does not bear this out. The reference to Rozengol'ts as "that tradesman who has learned to shout and command" could possibly be read as antisemitic in tone. But Vlasov denounces party leaders of all ethnic backgrounds, and the greatest vitriol is reserved for Burdukov, a Russian, and Novikov, most likely a Russian. J.J. Marie, *Cronstadt* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 154

[4] See Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 52, 59 and 121. The Moscow committee minutes are at TsAOPIM, op. 3, f. 1a, d.6, l. 42ob

[5] The phrase "opekuny-kommunisty" is used. An opekun is a guardian appointed to safeguard the interests of minors or incompetents; the sense here was that the communist "tops" treated workers as incapable children. This was a common theme for oppositionists. See S. Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 105

[6] On Paniushkin, see Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 104-105, 118-119 and 249

[7] The proletarian culture movement was founded in October 1917, shortly before the Bolshevik seizure of power, at a conference initiated by the Petrograd factory committees and supported by Anatolii Lunacharskii, who would soon become commissar of enlightenment. During the civil war, under the acronym Proletkult, it expanded as a national network of workers' associations, and briefly became a focal point for worker writers and artists, and an active participant in discussions about the future of revolutionary culture. In October 1920, the Proletkult was integrated into the commissariat of the enlightenment, but its local organisations continued in practice to enjoy some autonomy for some years afterwards

[8] Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873-1928) was a physician, philosopher and science fiction writer, and from 1903 a member of the Bolshevik fraction of Russian Social-Democracy. In the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, Bogdanov was at odds with Lenin first on philosophical issues and then political ones. He formed Vpered as a grouping within Bolshevism in 1909; it was dissolved in 1912. After that, Bogdanov ceased political activity and focused on research and writing; he was nevertheless popular, after 1917, among some rank-and-file Bolsheviks. His philosophy of Tektology is seen as a precursor of systems theory

[9] Alla Morozova, "Byla li platforma 'kollektivistov' platformoi 'bogdanovtsev'? K voprosu o stepenii retseptsii i transformatsii idei A.A. Bogdanova v dokumentakh vnutripartiinoi oppozitsii v RKP (b) v nachale 1920-kh godov", *Via in tempore* 49 (2022), no. 1, pp. 163-174

[10] Morozova, "Byla li platforma", op. cit. On the polemic between Bukharin and Bogdanov, see: Bukharin, "Kollektivistskoe likvidatorstvo", Pravda, 13 December 1921; N.S. Antonova and N.V. Drozdova (eds.), *Neizvestnyi Bogdanov v 3-kh knigakh* (Moscow: AIRO, 1995), kn. 1, pp. 204-222

[11] "Iz protokola doprosa v OGPU P.I. Lass-Kozlovoi", V. Vilkova, RKP (b) *Vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v dvadtsatye gody: dokumenty i materialy 1923 g* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), pp. 104-105

[12] For Miasnikov's biography, see Paul Avrich, "Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G.T. Miasnikov and the Workers Group", *The Russian Review* 43 (1984), pp. 1-29. Translations of the Workers Group's 1923 manifesto, and Miasnikov's 1930 pamphlet *The Current Deception*, published in France in 1930, were published in: International Communist Current, *The Russian Communist Left 1918-30* (ICC, 2005). A protocol of Miasnikov's interrogation by the Soviet security police in 1945, before he was executed, is [available](#) in an electronic library: The Last Testament of the Left Communist Gavriil Miasnikov, translated and annotated by Malcolm Archibald (accessed on 20 January 2023)

[13] On the dissidents' activity in 1922-23, see Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, pp. 195-199 and 203-205. On arrests, see also Vilkova, RKP (b) *Vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v dvadtsatye gody*, pp. 116-118. It is possible that Shulman's letter did not reach Trotsky; historians found it in Viacheslav Molotov's archive. But the arrests were publicly known and mentioned during the 1923 party discussion; neither Trotsky nor any of his closest comrades registered any protest

[14] On the workers' movement, see e.g. Jeffrey Rossman, *Worker Resistance Under Stalin: class and revolution on the shop floor* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005). On the communist opposition, see e.g. Aleksei Gusev, "The 'Bolshevik Leninist' opposition and the working class, 1928-1929" in D. Filtzer et al (eds), *A Dream Deferred: new studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 153-170

[15] A recent overview is: Ilya Budraitskis, *Dissidents Among Dissidents* (London: Verso, 2022), pp. 103-166

[16] See S. Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, especially pp. 166-191. The NEPmen were private entrepreneurs of the period

[17] For example, in his three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism*, published in the 1970s, Leszek Kolakowski mentions the Workers Opposition in passing, but otherwise focuses on differences among the Bolshevik leaders (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and Bukharin). Marcel van der Linden, in *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: a survey of critical theories and debates since 1917* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) mentions in passing an article written by Miasnikov in 1931, but none of the other dissident communists