

Pano Vassilev: The Soviets Idea

Chapter III. — Appearance and Evolution of the Councils Idea in RUSSIA and the Attitudes of the Russian Anarchists towards it.

"Our soviets were nothing more than the Russian version of the French bourses du Travail and the Italian chambers of labour". ① This assertion has a measure of truth to it, but is not completely true. The Russian workers' councils were indeed akin to the bourses and chambers to the extent that these, like the councils, presented themselves as organs uniting and co-ordinating the activities of the workers of the various undertakings and works of a region, i.e. organs uniting the workers geographically at local level. The soviets resembled the bourses and chambers in the sense that they too sought — for a time at least; in accordance with the role played in them by the Russian anarcho-syndicalists — to become organs regulating production and distribution of goods at local level under the new communist arrangement. But independent of this resemblance, the Russian workers' soviets displayed one very specific characteristic which set them quite apart from the bourses and chambers, and even from the local workers' councils of the Spanish labour organisations. The bourses and chambers in France and Italy, and the councils or committees in Spain, are in fact local workers' trade union councils made up of delegates from the trades organisations or from the producers already resident locally. These organisations have their established, regulated existence, and their delegates in the union councils, bourses or chambers are answerable to the assemblies of these organisations.

The position in the Russian soviets of the workers' delegates is quite different in that respect. In the majority of cases, these soviets are made up by the assembled delegates selected in fact, like in the bourses and chambers, by the workers of the different undertakings and the various branches of production. But these delegates are not appointed by organisations firmly tied to the labour unions; they are selected by the unorganised, amorphous masses of workers, dispersing and coming together as the need arises and who attend the gatherings charged with electing the members of the soviet for the sole purpose of casting their votes. That this is the situation may be deduced from the description given by the Russian anarchist, the teacher N. Karelkin when he broaches this question in his book Novoe kopoekoe izlozhenie politicheskoy ekonomii (Political

2.

Economy, nearly set out in Brief), in the chapter on "The Russian workers' councils."

"The Soviets of the worker delegates consult the representatives of the workshops and firms. These soviets consist exclusively of persons delegated and elected by workshop — where the smallest workshops come together into joint assemblies. How many workers take part in the gatherings which elect the delegates sent to the soviet? That is a secondary issue. The important point is that every worker, precisely because he is a worker, and regardless of whether or not he is up to date with his dues, or whether or not he is included among the number of members of the soviet, can at any time present himself at the meetings" (p. 176).

This occasional manner of coming together and co-ordinating later made it easier for the parties to secure control of the soviets. The Russian proletariat was obliged to act quickly in view of the circumstances. And when it became necessary to mount mass actions, there were not, save in occasional, exceptional instances, any proletarian class organisations already in existence and operating regularly with organs of their own designed to prepare struggles. It may be said that when the events of 1905–1906 drew the Russian workers into the maelstrom of the great social struggles of the day, they were all but un-organised. There were scarcely any trade unions and strikes occurred amid silence and utter isolation. Insofar as they did exist, the unions were weak, impotent, scattered across the land without any connection between them and, in most cases, were branches of the social-democratic faction. All in all, prior to the appearance of the councils in 1905, the Russian proletariat was in disarray. There are many reasons for this situation but those are the facts. Up until 1905, the Russian workers' strikes were led by provisional strike committees chosen by the firm's strikers and in liaison with other sectional strike. This way of leading the struggle is always found whenever the proletariat is dis-organised and bereft of any regularly functioning mass trade union, as was the case in Bulgaria up until 1923.

And here among us, given the absence of labour unions the big strikes such as, say, the tobacco workers' strike in Thrace in 1930 and the Rila canal workers' strike of the same year, were led, not by the unions which are non-existent, but by temporarily elected strike committees made up of delegates from each undertaking c

leading group of workers. And that committee automatically faded away once the strike was over.

This was the situation in Russia up until 1905. The workers had no unions and "events hurtled along at stupefying speed" (2). The strikes spread massively and lasted a long time. The defeat of Russia by Japan in the 1904-1905 war was the straw that broke the camel's back. The navy mutinied and the whole population turned against the absolute monarchy. Gradually the strike wave covered the whole country. Finally in October 1905 the strikes, which, once short-lived and fleeting had become prolonged and massive, turned into a famous general strike by the Russian proletariat. In the face of such pressure, the tsar had a manifesto published on 17 October 1905 wherein he promised to introduce a constitution and a parliamentary regime into Russia. But the working class greeted the manifesto with misgivings and signified its wish to go beyond the usual protest actions. It wanted to take its own destiny into its hands and to establish a new society wherein the running of society would be overseen by the workers of town and country and not by some parliament. And so there emerged the notion that this role would fall to the Soviets of worker delegates, which had been only strike committees up to that point, elected by the workforce of the firms. These Soviets, like the strikes, became regular and lasting.

Driven along instinctively by the course of events and by life itself, the workers and the worker Soviets, as non-party organisations, strove to be the independent and autonomous organs of the working class which, quite independently of the activity of the political parties, took upon themselves alone the leadership of struggles and the organisation of society's new lifestyle. But unfortunately this proved impossible, for in the majority of cases and in the most populous regions the social democrats in those days had comparatively sturdy organisations which had been in existence since 1901-1902 and which had been engaged in vigorous propaganda drives.

Had there at that point been in Russia a solid anarchist organisation with the backing of the masses of the people, one might have been able to reckon upon a broad-based socialist revolutionary movement. The political parties would have been important. They would have had to move forward under pressure from the people, for fear of being consigned to oblivion otherwise. But no such organisation existed. There were

4. only some scattered groups, tiny groups, of anarcho-communists. The fact is that as ever, they wielded some influence over events by being, as they were everywhere in the van of the movement and by escalating the struggle. But this was not enough. The masses of workers were not marshalled behind one class party (3)

The Social Democrats and the SR's (Social Revolutionaries) took over the councils of worker delegates and strove to turn the executive strike committees into statist political committees which gradually were metamorphosed into "provisional governments". This hampered the natural pace of the revolution and narrowed its horizons. The statist socialists did all in their power to bring the movement to heel and to steer it towards their narrow political goals (...) But the leadership of the revolution evaded the political parties. "The extremist revolutionaries" of the masses of the populace were continually growing in number. (4)

In truth, thanks to these "extremist revolutionaries" and to the "anarchist instincts" of the Russian proletariat, the political parties did not succeed in 1905 in seizing "the leadership of the movement" and in corralling it within the framework of "their narrow political objectives". But nor were the anarchists able to push the revolutionary movement in the direction of real social revolution investing it with an organised and consciously libertarian tenor. This was due not merely to weakness, lack of organisation and the youth of the Russian anarchist movement (5), but also to something else which Rogdaev omitted to mention specifically in his report. However another Russian anarchist, M. Raevski grasps and very clearly emphasises this fact:

"The persistent anarchist propaganda over the past 3 years and the unending roll-call of victims offered up by the anarchists upon the altar of the Russian revolution (in 1905) failed to produce what might reasonably have been expected of them... (...) We cannot, in attempting to explain away the dismal results, point the finger at the psychology of the proletariat and peasantry of our country. The worker and peasant movement in Russia through these sudden reforms, its behaviour and its slogans forced even the newspapers of the Cadets and Social Democrats to acknowledge the importance of the latent components of anarchism in the make-up of the worker and peasant masses (...) "

5.

" What emerged as impediments to the spread of our movement were chiefly the isolation of the most active members of our group from the people. This isolation was no so much a result of the delicate circumstances of a new current without ties to the proletarian orders and compelled by that very fact to pursue a dogged fight against the established parties which were its seniors. Most of the time this isolation came from the firmly entrenched faith and deliberate endeavour in the direction of preserving anarchist activity! " ⑥

These negative factors, extremely corrosive as far as the expansion of anarchist influence was concerned, were typical of Russian anarchism up until the very eve of the 1917 revolution. They ruled the roost in anarchist circles. Regrettably the anarchists were unable to shrug them off, even once the revolution was underway. The Russian anarchist movement was very heavily influenced by the tactics of Nekrasov ⑦ from bygone days and old-style individualistic terrorist habits and capabilities. This attitude was bolstered by the terrorist movement in France and other Western nations at a time when the anarchist labour union movement in those countries was in eclipse. The Russian political conditions specific to the tsarist age were largely such as to favour the retention of these tactics and the reinforcement of a state of mind in keeping with that individualistic and sectarian approach. At the time in question, when the workers' soviets were being formed and there was an emergent interest in proletarian union organisation outside of the party-political sphere, anarchism in Russia was dominated by the schools of the besnachaltsi (the anti-authoritarians) and the chernoznamentsi (the black flag sector) ⑧ opposed to the trade union movement. These factions refused any truck with the workers' councils and thus they drifted away from the mass movement of the proletariat, leaving the area open to the endeavours and influence of the social democrats (Menshevik and Bolshevik) and of the SRs.

The members of these factions declared that the mass proletarian movement, immersed in the darkness of everyday demands occasionally illuminated by the dazzling rays of the extreme ideal, would inescapably gobble up and draw into traditional union and political affairs any revolutionary anarchist who flinted with it (-)

According to them, it was quite sufficient in order to unleash the social revolution — " the people's free-for-all " — to engage among the peasants in propo-

-ganda in favour of "terror in the countryside", "to organise", "through the anarchist groups", "attacks upon private property and a series of terrorist acts." The people, roused from its slumbers by exploding bombs, would shrug off the sleep of thousands of years and set about destroying the old world and building the new one (-).

Their entire strategy rested upon the optimistic view of constantly preparing the amorphous toiling masses, preparing them for insurrection under pressure from the pioneers of the social revolution, the anarchist groups. ⑨.

So it is scarcely surprising that, despite the anarchistic instinct of the Russian working masses, the political parties succeeded in taking the soviets in hand, and the unions newly created thereafter and in driving the anarchists out of them. In this, the parties were preventing the revolution from developing along libertarian lines, and they turned it into a virtually exclusively political revolution.

Quite obviously, all the Russian anarchists did not share this sectarian attitude towards the workers' movement and organisations. There was a happy exception to this general trend, i.e. the Russian anarcho-syndicalists, known in Russia under the name of the novomirtsy (because they appeared in South Russia in Noy Mir) and abroad they were grouped around the review *Khleb i Volya* (Bread and Liberty) — hence their nickname of *khleboroltsy* — published in Geneva, and then under the name of *Golos Truda* (Voice of Labour) — from 1906 on published in New York. But this tendency was quite comparatively weak and, moreover, most of its best representatives were active abroad (in Paris, Geneva, London, New York, etc.) where they had been forced to emigrate. Only indirectly had they any influence over the labour movement in Russia. Their attitude towards the "masses", the workers' trade union soviets was completely different from that of traditional Russian anarchism.

With exceptional clarity and wholly in the spirit of the Bakuninist view of the role of trades councils and local worker soviets, the Russian anarcho-syndicalists were active inside the soviets. The first among them — according to Vassili Khodolev — was Novomirsky with his book iz Programmy sindikalnogo

7.

Anarchizma (Extract from the Anarcho-syndicalist Programme) published in New York in 1907.

When, after 1905-1906, the Bolsheviks went on neglecting the "soviets", awarding them no significance as the format or organ of the socialist society to come, and regarding them as a hang-over from the past, the anarcho-syndicalists whose activity, as we have seen, largely launched the idea of summoning a general congress of labour organisations, non-party, in 1907, took the view — and Novomirsky's book testifies to this — that the soviet is the organ which, on the morrow of the revolution, will serve to regulate production and consumption in the new society.

In his chapter on Collectivism and Communism, where he describes what the workers will have to do once having expropriated the capitalists and liquidated the State, Novomirsky said:

"Concretely, that means that: all of the labour associations of a town or a village establish a federation, which is to say a free union of organisations enjoying equal rights. Each organisation participates in the federative council of the commune where the representatives of the different associations, at the request of their comrades, draw up general lists of vital products, their amount, their quality, etc. The workers' communes are knit into larger unions such as national and international federations" (10).

Documents aplenty testify to the positive and serious-minded attitude of the Russian anarcho-syndicalists towards the trades unions and the workers' soviets, and to the negative outlook of the anti-syndicalists.

Take, for instance, the testimony of the noted Russian anarchist, Maria Korn in her article Knopotkin and the Russian Revolutionary Movement where, among other things, she refers to the controversies between "syndicalists" and "anti-syndicalists" in anarchist circles:

"This was going on at a time when French revolutionary syndicalism was flourishing, and the comrades, familiar with the workers' movement abroad talked enthusiastically about the progress of anarchist ideas among the workers and how the labour organisations were with alacrity embracing the free anarchist ideal and the anarchist strategy (...)." They dreamed of founding a simila

8.

movement in Russia through the efforts of anarchists. Others, on the other hand, as distrustful of the trades unions as of the unions of the bourgeoisie, detected the spirit of revolution only among the impoverished elements of the masses of the people. Participation in the unions seemed to them a concession, a deviation from the anarchist ideal. Fundamentally, the difference arose from their starting-points: the "syndicalists" looked chiefly to future tasks and the time of reconstruction; the "anti-syndicalists" were more preoccupied with the revolutionary struggle today and were fearful lest anarchists might be swallowed up by the labouring masses generally, which they regarded as not revolutionary" (11).

"Later on, another issue featured in our factional disputes (12), in the shape of our relations with the soviets of workers' representatives first created in 1905. Could anarchists enter these? Yes, was the syndicalists' answer. No, said their adversaries." (13)

And adversaries of syndicalism were in the majority in the Russian anarchist movement and had a decisive impact upon the results of anarchist activity among the worker and peasant masses. This majority was made up (as we can see from an article by Georgi Maximov on the history of Russian anarchism) of individuals with "strong personalities, but feeble anarchist culture"; with a primitive conception of anarcho-communism and of the problems posed by the revolution and by life itself."

Another Russian anarcho-syndicalist Mark Mirochny, speaking of the shaky basis and superficiality of Russian anarchist propaganda materials and of the tenuousness of the ideas of most Russian anarchists prior to the revolution, said

"There was a deluge, a ghastly flood of declamations some calling for battle against the authorities and capital, some proclaiming all the delights of the anarchist commune of the future. But there was not one word on the niggling issues of everyday life; issues like: how, with the workers themselves, are we to overcome the devastation of war and the sabotaging of the feeble industry of a country in the throes of revolution? Few among us offered clear and concrete answers..." (14)

"And if we endeavour to spell out our great failings in two regards: lack of the most crucial knowledge and a huge dose of absurdity, we will understand

9.

clearly all of the infantile ills of our movement at the time of the revolution. We will have the explanation for its having been possible for, say, the manifesto of the famous Gordin brothers, to have appeared, wherein one reads, among other things: "Valets lay the foundations of anarchy! Prostitutes, lay the foundations of anarchy! Princes of the night, be princes of the day, lay the foundations of anarchy!" we will understand how it was possible and even an inevitable psychical need that there should have appeared a here and now, uncompromising, unasserted anarchism, an anarchism for the running of a household, for the founding of the black guard, etc. Finally we will have an explanation of the greatest of the misfortunes gnawing at the anarchist movement of our country: the absence of a large and powerful anarchist movement".

"Anarchism is a beautiful science of the organisation of people's economic and social life on a humane and rational basis. It is a living, creative movement of the labouring masses in search of their complete emancipation. A minority of short-sighted pygmies mana to narrow, misrepresent, and reduce to a laboured, maimed and petit bourgeois individualism repudiating the need for any organisation, to a scorn for "the mass", the labour movement and its organisation."

"We were not anarcho-syndicalist enough. We had wasted a lot of time in organising ourselves, when the vital interests of the revolution required organisation of the labouring masses. We did not succeed in establishing a sufficiently sturdy groundwork under our feet, and that enabled the Russian government to wipe us out with comparative ease". (14).

Apropos of the positive and proper relations of the Russian anarcho-syndicalists with the soviets, the unions and generally with the workers' mass organisations, as well as their comprehensive vision of the problems of the social revolution, one may refer to two documents... the resolutions of the congress of the confederation of Pan-Russian anarcho-syndicalists (15) held on 25 August 1918, and the draft-declaration from the insurgent revolutionary army (Makhnovist) of the Ukraine, of 20 October 1919, written by Voline (16) a noted Russian anarcho-syndicalist!

The anarcho-syndicalists' resolution states that congress has determined:

1. - to struggle against State power and capitalism: to group the independent soviets into federations and to set about bringing together the independent workers' and

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peasants' organisations with an eye to production."

"2. — to urge the workers to set up free soviets and to urge upon them struggle against the institution of councils of people's commissars, for these represent a form of organisation which cannot but have dismal consequences for the working class" (7)

In the Makhnovist army's draft declaration, in the section on "Establishing soviets", Voline writes:

"With a view to establishing a broad union and reciprocal links, all these organisations — in the areas of production, labour, distribution, transport, etc. — appear without pressure and from the bottom up, coordinating bodies akin to economic councils, which exercise the technical function of regulating socio-economic matters on a grand scale. These councils may be communal, urban, regional and so on. They are freely organised. Nowhere does political administration, run by leaders of this or that party, dictating their wishes and imposing their political power under the cover of 'soviet power', feature. These technical councils are only consultative operational organs which regulate the economic activities of the localities" (8).

With the bulk of Russian anarchists being anti-syndicalists, this was not their attitude to the workers' movement and the workers' soviets which played such a significant, and in my estimation, such a decisive role.

"The anarcho-communists", — wrote Yarchuk in an article about the anti-syndicalists — "took but little interest in the organisations of the great masses of the workers. They even attacked them (the anarcho-syndicalists) because they were participants in the workers' organisations. They took the line that the anarchists should concern themselves with the destruction of the old society, and with the immediate establishment of anarchist communes. They continued to place their hopes in tiny anarchist groups, thinking that these would push the masses in the direction of anarchist communism."

~~Even the view of figures of prestige and influence such as Kropotkin~~

Even the opinion of figures enjoying in the worldwide anarchist movement the prestige and standing of Kropotkin; to the effect that .. "in the absence of trade unions any revolution is doomed to failure", and "one must, one should enter the soviets", provided of course that "these soviets are organs of combat against the bourgeoisie".

oisse and the State, and not organs of rule"; even this opinion was unable to draw a change from the bulk of Russian anarchists, the majority of whom were anti-syndicalists, in the matter of non-aligned workers and mass organisations and mass movements. To the end, the comrades clung to their old sectarian, wrong-headed stance. They shunned the unions when they should have been there to prevent the politicians and statists from taking them over and warping the revolution. These shortcomings in most Russian anarchists turned out to be fatal for the future as well as for Russian anarchism and the revolution.

We have to learn the lesson of all this. We have to understand that if the majority of Russian anarchists had not adopted that sectarian attitude towards the trade union movement of the proletariat and the soviets as organs of the proletariat's struggle, we would assuredly not be in the dismal situation in which we find ourselves now: above all since that influence would have been beneficial to the development of the anarchist outlook of the Russian working masses, who, what is more, of themselves were treading a libertarian path to the solution of the social question. Had they adopted a positive line then, with the masses instinctively falling into line with their ideas, they would not have been so speedily overwhelmed, exiled and denied all involvement in the construction of the new, communist society by adroit and cunning demagogues who — as Karelkin so astutely puts it — "Rode to power on the backs of anarchist slogans".

Notes.

- ① Vassily Khudoley, "Russian anarchist (anti-councilist and anti-syndicalist)", in the Amerikanski Izvestia, 1923.
- ② N. Rogdaev, The Anarchist Movement in Russia, a report to the International anarchist congress in Amsterdam in 1907.
- ③ Of course Rogdaev here talks about "class party" not in the sense of political party, but rather of a class economic organisation, just as he does in his pamphlet The Basis of Syndicalism where he called the CGT "the party of labour". (We have not managed to locate this phrase in the 1904 pamphlet; on the other hand it does

figure in Malatesta, *Articles Politiques*, Ed. 10/18, 1979 on pages 90-95 and 259, relating to 1897 — translator's note).

- (4) N. Rogdaev, op. cit. pp. 36-38.
- (5) The anarchist movement in Russia in Bakunin's day had been destroyed and wiped out utterly around 1880. It re-emerged around 1901-1902.
- (6) M. Raevski *Tri myenia vakhn sindikalizma* (Three Views on Syndicalism).
- (7) See Chapter II, № 18 (Translator's note).
- (8) Individualist groups described by Paul Trivich in *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, London 1973, p. 55—
- (9) M. Raevski, op. cit.
- (10) Novomirski *Kolektivizam i komunizam*, izdanie Svobodna Komuna, 1919, p. 17 [See the creation of the first soviet as described in Voline's *The Unknown Revolution*]
- (11) P. A. Kropotkin *ego uchenie*, Chicago, 1931, p. 168. (Directly translated from the Russian — translator's note).
- (12) See Chapter № 3 (Translator's note).
- (13) Op. cit. p. 189.
- (14) M. Mratchine, *Rezultatite*, in *Rabotnicheska Myslal*, № 73, 1923
- (15) Partly translated into French in A. Skinda *Les Anarchistes dans la Révolution russe* (Translator's note).
- (16) This document, a collective work and not Voline's alone, and of which the Russian original has "vanished" thanks to Leninism, now is to be found only in a Bulgarian translation of 39 pages (a copy may be found at the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam). We printed a Spanish translation of it in *Espoir*, Toulouse, VIII - IX 1974. The complete text appears in Alexandre Skinda's *Nestor Makhno, Cosaque de l'Anarchie*, 1982 — Translator's note.
- (17) Rocker, op. cit. p. 28.
- (18) Bulgarian translation, pp. 20-21.