



## More than One Piece is Missing in the Puzzle

Moshe Lewin

*Slavic Review*, Volume 44, Issue 2 (Summer, 1985), 239-243.

---

Your use of the JSTOR database indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use. A copy of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use is available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>, by contacting JSTOR at [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu), or by calling JSTOR at (888)388-3574, (734)998-9101 or (FAX) (734)998-9113. No part of a JSTOR transmission may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except: (1) one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or (2) with prior written permission of JSTOR and the publisher of the article or other text.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

*Slavic Review* is published by American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/aaass.html>.

---

*Slavic Review*

©1985 American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact [jstor-info@umich.edu](mailto:jstor-info@umich.edu).

©2001 JSTOR

MOSHE LEWIN

## More Than One Piece is Missing in the Puzzle

William Rosenberg's article offers an occasion for reflecting on some important problems concerning the early stages (months) of the Bolshevik Revolution. A host of methodological and historiographical problems pertaining to this period remain unsolved. But broader interpretative tasks concerning the Bolshevik party and the regime it helped produce also come to mind. Thinking about the changing attitude of workers in this revolution, the role of their support for the Bolsheviks, and the impact on the regime of obvious signs of disenchantment and a degree of political divorce between these partners in early 1918 is precisely the stuff that can serve as a good starting point for tackling some of the puzzling questions, provided we keep in mind and introduce other important parts of the overall jigsaw puzzle.

In substance, Rosenberg argues that the unrest among workers in early 1918 and an apparent revival of Menshevik and SR influence was limited mainly to metal workers and printers, for reasons which his article explores; more importantly, that the unrest was not really political—even when it appeared to be—but was rather caused by bread-and-butter issues. The workers seemed to be asking just for “better Bolsheviks” rather than for a toppling of the regime—the reason being that there actually was no real alternative to strong state intervention into the growing economic chaos. And this, so it seemed, only the Bolsheviks could provide. Rosenberg points to the twin tendencies, in economic life and among workers engaged in the workers' control movement, of “localism” with its disaggregating effects and of a growing demand for a countervailing intervention from the center.

The heart of the trouble was, however, that the Bolsheviks were not able to “deliver” quickly, to keep their own promises and thereby to respond to the great hopes of their supporters. Instead, the crisis deepened—but the Mensheviks and the SRs failed to cash in on it politically. Rosenberg does not say so, but he implies that these two parties did not offer a credible alternative and therefore failed to organize the strike of July 2 and failed *tout court*. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, tended to react to growing signs of despair and unrest with ever more armed force.

It is refreshing to read that the Bolsheviks were not necessarily able to do whatever they wanted, to follow a supposedly premeditated master plan by using their manipulative skills as their main method. Much was not of their own making in the whole crisis. Not the revolution, for instance, and not the downfall of tsardom, to mention just these two, with other examples readily available. The onslaught on many institutions and their destruction or weakening did not always work to the Bolsheviks' advantage, and the workers did not support them unconditionally. Still, Rosenberg seems to believe that support for the Bolsheviks existed, though not without ups and downs—but this point is not clearly stated.

It is quite natural, and necessary, to ask at this point a number of questions: (1) Who were the workers, what were their numbers, what was happening to them? The article obviously raises this problem as a subject for further study. (2) What was the extent of the workers' support for the Bolsheviks during some of the crucial stages in the making of the new regime? It is apparent that this

problem is not yet really clarified. (3) Who else might have supported the Bolsheviks? We know something about this too but still not enough and not in a way that would allow us to see the historical meaning of those early and later contributions to the Bolshevik camp or shifts and changes among the supporters. A last problem emerges, therefore: (4) In studying this regime at its early stages, is it sufficient to concentrate on the workers, and can the time scale—the first half year or so—yield enough good answers?

A larger time scale—embracing, at least, the periods of civil war and of massive unrest before NEP set in—will, I think, still confirm the picture of support for the regime among the different categories of the working class. But we must be more familiar with those categories in order to understand the nature of the support and know whether it was always unswerving and massive. Had it been unswerving and massive, official Soviet sources, then and today, would not contain so many complaints about “backward” layers and “backward” moods among workers, anarcho-sindicalist proclivities in their midsts, and tendencies to plain looting, presumably resulting from “petty bourgeois dissoluteness.” Knowledge of regional, professional, economic problems (like the picture of industrial contraction that Rosenberg presented) but also of cultural differences among workers would help account for their different reactions in and toward the new regime.

Another factor—known to us in outline only—is the devastation suffered by this class, which began already in the spring and turned into a calamity during the civil war. Flight to the countryside, unemployment, but also deaths, including death on the battle fields, were some of the manifestations of the decomposition and the severe contraction of the industrial working class. But another contributing factor was the very support given by many workers quite actively to the Bolsheviks. Existing figures point to a very considerable participation of workers in the Red Army, and to their movement into the ranks of soviet bodies and administrative posts and to full-time party activities. Women made up a considerable percentage of the workers, and the drain by the army and the trade unions and the party involved mainly males. After the civil war many more workers who had served in the army moved into administrative and political jobs, and this was certainly an expression of “support” that also weakened the political base inside the working class—as Soviet sources argued quite often. Changes in the workers’ moods, anti-Bolshevik strikes, support for other parties were thus caused by a number of factors, some of which still remain blanks to be filled in.

The size of this proletariat thus was not an unimportant matter. Lenin thought in 1908, when he was able to examine the professional composition of the population as revealed by results of the 1897 census that were beginning to be available, that the urban and rural proletariat counted some 22 million people. Rosenberg mentions 18 million, but it is no accident that this question is still an important field of study for Soviet historians, as is the social composition of the whole population. There are obvious political and ideological connotations and sociological problems in the assessment of the number of “proletarians” and even more in the category that Lenin defined as the rural “semi-proletariat.” Lenin perceived this combination of proletarian and semi-proletarian categories as representing the majority of the nation, and this assessment allows us to understand his thinking on revolutionary strategy and the character of the events between 1917 and 1921. But a paradox also exists: this larger figure is frequently

cited by Soviet and other authors, including Lenin himself, but, as is the case in Rosenberg's article, the discussion just ignores those millions and instead uses the better-known figure of 2 to 3 million industrial workers from the "census industry," and even the narrower category of the hundreds of thousands of workers that resided in Petrograd and Moscow (sometimes also including workers in the Urals and the Donbas). What actually happened to the overwhelming majority of others, did they really exist and who were they?

A first glance at different statistics—taking workers from the "census industry," adding small artisan and *kustar'* shops that employed some wage earners, adding miners and transportation workers and even throwing in farm laborers (*batraki*)—suggests no more than about 7 million (obviously not the result of a precise calculation). And even this figure includes day laborers (*podenshchiki*) in city and countryside, who worked for wages but in changing places and circumstances, dispersed over a huge country, often not integrated into any bigger agglomeration of workers, sometimes employed only part time or seasonally. Do they belong to the proletariat that Lenin had in mind, and that we too might consider as a meaningful social and political factor? Even a figure like 7 or even 8 million contained statistical products which may be proved to have been sociologically and politically "empty." The inclusion of farm workers presents another serious problem. What counted during the revolutionary upheaval was the concentrated masses of wage earners, mainly in industry, who could easily be reached and organized and whose actions could influence events. And their actions had an impact mainly in a number of well-known cities and five or six important centers, especially during the dawn of the new regime. The dwindling of the workers' support in these centers was a painful blow politically and ideologically, but it did not have to be a lethal blow. If the regime was able to cope with the situation despite a much depleted industrial working class, part of which showed its disenchantment with the regime, this points to an obvious conclusion: the Bolsheviks could draw their support from a much more heterogeneous following. Without the soldiers—to mention only the most obvious factor—the new regime could not have come to power. Their support was no less crucial than that of the workers, and one could even discuss, space permitting, whose contribution was more crucial and at what stage. The soldiers came from different social strata inside and outside the peasantry, although most of them were peasants. They strongly influenced the outcome of events not only as long as they stayed with their units but also when they deserted from the front to their villages, where they often created a pro-Bolshevik revolutionary leaven. John Keep and Oliver Radkey have stressed these two points.

The peasantry at large represented a crucial factor even before it actually supported the revolution, and even when it was "neutral"—and at some stages Lenin was ready to be content with a neutral peasantry. But there were also layers, plausibly the poorer ones, that gave more than neutrality. As a group they opened up an avenue for the Bolshevik takeover by their drive against the landowners, but later their attitude varied according to circumstances, social group, and region. They also launched big anti-Bolshevik uprisings after the Whites were defeated, and on a smaller scale even earlier. This raises the problem of the social and strategic foundations of the revolutionary period, which applies to all the classes involved, including, though perhaps to a lesser degree, the workers: the motivations and actions of different groups involved in the events

could have an impact favorable to the Bolsheviks, even if the actions were only concurrent and mutually supportive, without intention and without commitment to Lenin's cause. The refusal of support to the other side could also be crucial. But this kind of support often was shifting and shaky; witness not only the massive jacquerie of 1920–21, but also a wave of anti-Bolshevik strikes and riots among workers that occurred at the same time and were certainly more bitter than anything that happened in the spring of 1918. But the Whites were no longer there to benefit from these actions. If Rosenberg is right in his assumption that the lack of a credible alternative already played a role in 1918—at least in the eyes of many workers—it became a much more potent factor two to three years later.

The survival of the regime therefore depended on support from different directions, but this support could not be taken for granted and often was treacherous. For this reason modern-day Soviet accounts that present an inexorable march of history toward a new era certainly do not reflect the view of Bolshevik leaders and supporters during the events that demanded from them constant vigilance and maneuvering to stave off emergencies, unpleasant surprises, and deep crises. Therefore, when the industrial workers—the mainstay of the revolution in ideological terms—showed signs of faltering, other supporters, at times no less important, could and did come to the rescue. In the end more was given to the Bolsheviks than they could have hoped for, from quite unexpected quarters: the bureaucracy that served the previous regime, for example; considerable numbers of former tsarist officers, seemingly the natural constituency of the Whites; numerous former members of other parties who often rendered valuable help, despite or independent of their social origin. So the ideological and political realities of the social basis of the revolution did not exactly match. The ideological mainstays at times wavered or gave in, ideological enemies or groups considered shaky often gave important political support to a system whose final aim and many current practices were not acceptable to them.

Against the background of a social crisis and a maze of interests and shifting attitudes, another aspect was crucial in providing the new regime with a staying power that surprised most observers: the rather impressive state building activity displayed by the Bolsheviks. For this purpose, numbers of individuals from the laboring population—industrial workers, rural dwellers, and other persons of lower status—were drafted into various party and state agencies. Nothing comparable could be expected on the other side. At the same time a selection of persons, broader or narrower as the case might be, from other backgrounds also participated, including specialists, scholars, organizers of all kinds. Here may lie the root of the Bolsheviks' success: hectic institution building on a broad popular basis and help from a cross section of elites and non-elites.

Such statements need scrutiny and study, but it is clear that terror alone would not have accomplished the task. The Whites used terror profusely, but they lacked many of the other resources that the Bolsheviks possessed. One crucial element, which Rosenberg suggests, must be kept in mind: the state building was going on during a deepening crisis, a growing decomposition of social and economic life, and amid a civil war that pitted not only Reds against Whites but also saw Greens fighting against both and among themselves, and in which different regional and national movements and armies were involved, most of them trying to form their own political entities. There was no Russian state

at this stage, only numerous attempts at forming one. Lenin's was one attempt among many, and at some moments during the civil war it did not appear very solid. But Lenin built the core of his system on the territory that was the historic heartland of the Russian state, and from there it spread to the rest of the empire. In the following two to three years the Bolsheviks repeated the same historical pattern; they eliminated all the competitors that had conquered the huge *okrainy* and, amid the chaos of those years, they established themselves firmly and created a new state and a new order.

Were the Reds and the Whites the only serious contenders? Rosenberg suggests that workers felt, however vaguely, that in early 1918 there was no longer an alternative to the Bolsheviks. The experiences of the early months are insufficient to support an argument for this important point. The span of time chosen for an inquiry must be justified by the study of a longer period, which may produce arguments that justify a narrower focus. That Mensheviks and SRs were not very serious contenders even during those months of 1918 when despair and disenchantment seemed to have pushed numbers of workers into their camp can be shown by subsequent events. The SRs won the election to the Constituent Assembly, which was easily dispersed. When this party had a chance to establish its own government in Samara, it was not able, despite its militant past, to field an army of its own and easily fell prey to counterrevolutionary officers. The SRs were not a factor in the civil war and hence no factor at all. The Mensheviks, who did not fare well in the Assembly elections, split and actually were pushed to the side of the road during the stormy events. The surge of support they seemed to have regained in parts of the working population in early 1918 turned out to have been only a ripple. The unrest among workers was a bitter blow to the Bolsheviks, and more adversity was in store for them at the beginning of the civil war, when uprisings at the Votkinsk and Izhevsk armament factories produced some of the best, purely proletarian units for Kolchak's army who fought for the Whites to the last. But there were few phenomena of this kind. The workers either preferred the Bolsheviks or loathed the Whites. Politically the result was the same. The workers, including many Mensheviks, had the choice of being on the side of the Reds or being seen by the Whites as Red. Many memoirs by White generals confirm this point. There was no other rallying point against the Whites but the Bolsheviks, and in this sense the Whites must be considered a crucial factor in pushing to this conclusion not only the workers who were not Bolsheviks but especially peasants, mainly in the later stages of the civil war, and other groups that had no commitment whatsoever to Marxism or communism.

That the civil war also disfigured, if that is the right term, many on the Bolshevik side, or frustrated their hopes in many ways, is an important subject of its own. It is hinted at briefly in Rosenberg's last paragraph. For our purposes it is sufficient to recapitulate: the support, rising or dwindling, given by workers to the Bolshevik camp has to be seen as part of a heterogeneous assembly of social groups and classes, most of them far from steadfast but, in the end, providing a winning combination for the party or camp that showed a better performance in producing a state system.