



## Reply

William G. Rosenberg

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## WILLIAM G. ROSENBERG

### Reply

The thoughtful comments of Moshe Lewin and Vladimir Brovkin touch important issues. I agree, of course, with Lewin that the question of alternatives to Bolshevik rule can be resolved only by analyzing a longer time span and by broadening one's focus beyond territories and populations directly under Bolshevik rule. Despite impressive studies by Kenez, Radkey, Service, Rigby, Gimpel'son, and others, work remains to be done on a whole series of problems for the period between 1917 and 1921 before we can answer this question with confidence, from the politics of Constituent Assembly supporters in Siberia and the programs of other contenders for power to the role and fate of particular social groups. The point, however, as Lewin recognizes, is not so much whether there were alternatives, but whether alternatives were credible to those under Bolshevik rule who resisted the policies and power of the party. And here an analysis of the first eight months after October is central precisely because the civil war was still in its infancy, and the resistance of workers and others to Lenin could not yet be either inhibited or characterized as support for the White opposition. October was a triumph of the Bolsheviks, of course, but for vast sectors of the population it was also, and most importantly, the triumph of the "revolution" itself—which was seen as the resolution of social conflict in a deeply polarized society in favor of workers and peasants. It was precisely from November to July, therefore, that those loyal to the revolution, as they understood it, might well have mobilized against the Bolsheviks without great fear of aiding their own enemies. Hence their failure in this period deserves special attention.

Contention over Bolshevik policies and actions, or what were perceived as Bolshevik policies and actions, was precisely the locus of struggle in these early months, as it was again toward the end of the civil war, when Soviet Russia was reasonably secure from challenge by the Whites. Brovkin seems to underestimate the political importance of social polarization before October 1917, and consequently he neglects the significance of its relative absence in the spring of 1918 for the failure of Bolshevik opposition. The point is not whether workers protested Bolshevik policies, which they surely did, but that they demanded solutions to the critical problems of everyday existence within the context of a revolutionary society; an end to revolutionary Russia's "time of troubles" but not a return to discredited sociopolitical orders of the past; the realization, in sum, of their hopes and expectations for October. In suggesting that I do not see any real weakening of Bolshevik support, Brovkin misrepresents my argument, which is that the weakening of support (which oppositional activity clearly evidences), as well as the failure of the opposition itself, cannot be fully understood without close attention to social and economic circumstances. Simply put, the evidence shows that a workers' opposition, rather clearly defined in terms of its social and industrial base, emerged in Petrograd in the late spring of 1918 in search of a *workers'* state able to solve the grave crises of Russia's revolutionary order. Those who supported this opposition believed in the main, I think, that a revolutionary order could still relieve precisely the conditions of socioeconomic stress that were associated with labor dissidence. It thus seems clear that this protest cannot be conceptualized in political terms *alone* (Brovkin omits this important word in

restating my views). This analysis might be wrong, but not because I underestimate the enormous erosion in Bolshevik political support. And if it is right, it helps explain both the failure of the opposition and the great importance of the civil war itself in consolidating Bolshevik power, since a wide range of horrors, from repression and terror to punitive confiscation, could now be rationalized as necessary to defeat the armed enemies of the revolution, not simply the Bolshevik party.

As Lewin suggests, central to this consolidation was the process of state building. Through the work of Daniel Orlovsky and Thomas Remington we will soon know more about this complex phenomenon, but Lewin is surely right to emphasize the contribution to Bolshevik success of the party's ability to recruit help from a cross section of social groups, and its identification, which became the revolution's identification, with Russia's historic "heartland." It is an interesting paradox that Bolshevik efforts at political and administrative centralization in the spring of 1918, which struck out so forcefully against the very democratic commitments and organizations that had helped bring the party to power, corresponded rather well to the disillusionment with democratic practices and structures which many among the non-Bolshevik elites had felt even before October. The question needs research, but despite the convictions of some Mensheviks, it is unlikely that very many in any camp thought by the end of 1917 that a Russian state could be built in the near future on the foundations of political democracy, however odious the Bolsheviks' repression of opponents; and however opposed Petrograders and others of all social groups were to Bolshevik economic policies in the spring of 1918, few quarreled with the fundamental notion that a stronger rather than weaker state was needed, one more effective, with orderly policies of nationalization and regulation, and with less confusion and "anarchy at the top." It is in this sense that I refer in my article to "better Bolsheviks."

Two further points about this important matter of state building. First, it is likely that the *relative* success of the Bolsheviks in this effort helped identify Lenin's government as a workers' government and the soviet state as a workers' (and peasants') state, however much groups of workers and peasants opposed its policies, and however much its bureaucratic structure was populated by members of other social elites. Even if opposing the party was far from opposing a proletarian state, this confluence made it easier for Lenin and other party leaders to cloak (and rationalize) their own activities with the mantle of a greater, more broadly acceptable good, and made anti-Bolshevik activities among workers much more difficult. Bolshevik policies, as Brovkin insists, were precisely the issue, I agree. But how to oppose them effectively without weakening the revolutionary proletarian state order they were purportedly constructing was, at the same time, precisely the political dilemma facing Mensheviks, SRs, and other delegates to the Conference of Factory Representatives. Second, while the new state administration was indeed being staffed with members from different social elites, as Lewin points out, its ranks were also very much being staffed by workers. So, of course, were Bolshevik military detachments, local soviets, the unions—a whole panoply of state and party organizations at all levels. One cannot sensibly refer to workers on one hand and Bolsheviks on the other in this period as if they were socially quite distinct.

Brovkin makes this error. He discusses “workers” as if “Bolshevik authorities” reluctant to hold new soviet elections or to raise the bread ration were not themselves from the factories. The party’s highest echelons were not, of course, but if that had been the important social reality, Bolshevik power would have ended quickly. In fact, as I emphasize in my article, the evidence shows rather clearly how workers in factory committees resisted the protests of their own rank and file in the spring of 1918, how in many places the committees imposed even stricter regulations in the enterprises they controlled than the regimes they had overthrown. Even at Putilov, where much opposition was centered, it was a special workers’ commission that decided who should be fired as production shut down; and here as well as elsewhere the process was often arbitrary and cruel. Former employees returning from the front often marched into shops and physically evicted those they thought had taken their jobs. (Women workers were particularly vulnerable.) The Moscow Trade Union Council went so far as to adopt a resolution deploring “any arbitrary replacement of one group of workers by others”; the metal workers’ union ordered the rehiring of women and others who had been summarily evicted.<sup>1</sup> In April a decree by the Labor Exchange in Petrograd ordered that workers be hired only “in turn,” according to numbers assigned to them by the Exchange, but at the factory gates the committees filled positions *vne ocheredi*, according to their needs.<sup>2</sup> Not only were these orders from above as ineffective as the earliest attempts to impose one-person leadership, but attempting to implement them was often very dangerous. Workers’ committees themselves frequently needed armed force to maintain order and even so could hardly begin to solve their problems. Not surprisingly, they and other worker organizations (like the soviets) soon became the focus of intense opposition.

The important point is that it was the workers themselves—some Bolsheviks, some not—who were armed, who largely made up Red Guards detachments, who formed factory militias, and who, with others, fired on their comrades. It was workers in factory committees and local soviets who resisted new elections, along with Bolshevik party leaders. And it was workers’ representatives in the unions who sounded the echoes of 1917 in attacking their rank and file for holding endless meetings during working hours. If the first priority for many in the Conference of Factory Representatives was the release of their arrested comrades (a very different matter, incidentally, from supporting the Mensheviks as a party), and even if the resolution of problems creating deep social and economic insecurity in the spring of 1918 was a less immediate objective (which I doubt), both had to do in Petrograd with the ways workers themselves were exercising power.

Brovkin argues it was “the unprecedented Bolshevik repression that thwarted opposition organizing at every step” and implies that this best explains the consolidation of Bolshevik power and the failure of the opposition in Petrograd. It is true, of course, that workers and other Bolshevik opponents were brutally repressed at every step; yet I doubt a well-armed opposition of well over 100,000 persons in Petrograd would have failed to support the general strike of July 2 out of fear alone. The error of Brovkin’s viewpoint, it seems to me, lies

1. *Rabochii mir*, 9 (July 21, 1918): 31–33.

2. *Izvestiia petrogradskogo obshchestvennogo upravleniia*, 43 (May 11, 1918).

precisely in its reluctance to consider the social components of protest in this period, and their relation to opposition politics.

Obviously opposition to Bolshevik power and policies was (by definition) political—an opposition and protest against the (ineffective) manner in which workers (and others) in positions of authority were using their power. And clearly the opposition demanded a Constituent Assembly, free elections, and the other goals Brovkin and I both cite. It is important to remember, however, that the language of protest is always symbolic. Strike demands, protest banners, other forms of protest language may or may not be a literal representation of the values and commitments of the workers. The conventions of political discourse impose their own style and form, and so do conscious strategies and tactics. It is precisely for this reason that one needs to dig below the surface of appearances, to try to decipher political affect, and to attempt to understand, among other things, the social import and meaning of protest.

Most important here, it seems to me, is that while “revolution” promised the workers political freedom, it also promised economic and social security, material betterment, and an end to the frightening uncertainties of the “capitalist order.” When these hopes were overwhelmed in Petrograd by the disasters of early 1918, the workers clung to their commitment to “revolution” even while their anger swelled against those (including workers) in power. Brovkin seems to believe that the protesting workers were committed to a democratic political system based on party politics, something which had never been a central aspect of Russia's political culture or experience, rather than to a state that “represented” their class interests. He maintains that vast numbers of workers themselves, not simply their Menshevik and SR spokesmen, were “guided [by] . . . demands for justice and free elections.” But what kind of justice? What kind of free elections? Were those Petrograd workers who supported the Conference of Factory Representatives now largely committed to liberal principles and Western concepts of law? This is doubtful. Each new disaster in the spring of 1918, each new decision by those in power, whether within individual enterprises or more broadly, brought a flood of calls for new people to take charge. The rank and file demanded that their factory committees be recalled in enterprise after enterprise; workers demanded new soviet elections, new leadership in the unions, new persons in charge of the labor exchanges and central state agencies. Brovkin stresses that by mid-May the Assembly represented 100,000 or more in Petrograd, and he seems to take seriously the notion of representation in the Western sense of democratic politics. To my mind, the conference represented its supporters in the same way factory committees represented the rank and file, who elected them one week and clamored for their removal the next when conditions failed to improve and new work rules or other sanctions were imposed. Of course those clinging to power resisted new elections. And of course the call for new elections was a rallying cry for the disillusioned, as well as for opposition parties and groups of all kinds. On the surface, however, this no more signifies a commitment to democratic political forms in the Western sense than Lenin's and the Bolsheviks' strident demands for elections in 1917.

Consider the delegation to Smol'nyi from Putilov to which Brovkin refers, which carried an ultimatum about new soviet elections. Whether or not these were “employed workers from Petrograd's biggest plants” I simply do not know, since I have no evidence on the social composition of the delegation. *Petrograd-*

*skoe ekho* indicates, however, that the meeting at Putilov which dispatched this delegation was attended by some 14,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> Were *these* people employed? Were they from the city's biggest plants? The employment figures cited in my article suggest this is quite unlikely, even allowing for errors. And where were these workers (and thousands like them) on July 2? The evidence suggests to me that the events of late February 1917 (or July in Petrograd, or in Moscow in August on the eve of the State Conference) did not repeat themselves, despite the massive numbers apparently behind the opposition, in large part because commitment to the democratic objectives of the Conference of Factory Representatives did not, in fact, mean what Brovkin thinks it meant.

Essential here, in my view, is an understanding of the general disillusionment on the part of vast numbers of Petrograd workers and others with party politics in general by the spring of 1918 (disillusionment that seems to have been associated with the failure of the Provisional Government to solve Russia's pressing social and economic problems, and which very much underlay the Bolsheviks' coming to power), as well as an understanding of the very meaning of "democracy" in the revolutionary period as a whole. These matters need further research, but in all likelihood, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> it was only for a very small minority of Russia's population, Western in outlook as well as culture, that the concept centered on constitutional politics, civil liberties, and a rule of law characteristic of the Western states they hoped Russia might emulate. It is probable that for the vast majority of workers, peasants, and ordinary soldiers, as well as for a substantial sector of Russia's radical intelligentsia, democracy came to signify instead a social order in which the very divisions characterizing Russia's existing social relations were replaced by a state devoted to popular interests. Democratic political procedures were seen by many as essential to this process, but it is unlikely they were the essence of popular concern. Indeed, the very extent of Russia's social disparities in 1917, as well as the social and economic catastrophes of the period after October, made participatory politics inimical to social order. If the democratic commitments of men like Kerenskii soon turned into a defensive liberalism, in which the rule of law became, in effect, the defense of minority interests against spontaneous assault, the participatory basis of worker (and Bolshevik) politics became central not to the task of determining popular interests (which was readily done from above) but to working out the most effective ways of meeting them, and to mobilizing support. To be "democratic," in other words, came to mean simply to be responsive, even if (as was almost always the case) decisions and policies were implemented with authoritarian methods. As a definition of political method, it signified at best a resistance to arbitrariness and repression, not to the concentration of authority or even authoritarianism itself, if the latter could be shown in some way to be in the service of the interests and the welfare of the masses. And essential to the preservation of "democracy" in this sense was not the recognition of law (or even party rules) as superordinate authority, and certainly not civil liberties in the Western sense, but the acceptance of scrutiny and criticism as the means of determining proper (effective) policies. In my view the insistence of the confer-

3. *Petrogradskoe ekho*, no. 71, May 29, 1918.

4. "Democratic Dissent in the USSR," *Democracy*, 3, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 119-20.

ence delegates that there be new elections to the Petrograd soviet was a "key" demand only in this sense.

I agree, finally, with Lewin's call for a broader perspective on Russia's civil war experience as a whole, and appreciate Brovkin's careful and trenchant analysis of a particular aspect of this experience. Their thoughtful and forceful responses help clarify the important questions and issues and bring us closer to finding answers.