THE LESSONS OF THE 1919 PROGRAMME AND THE ABC OF COMMUNISM BY PHIL SHARPE

INTRODUCTION

The October revolution of 1917 would seem to be the practical vindication of revolutionary Marxism. Traditional forms of Social Democracy had become reformist and had adapted to the interests of the bourgeois nation state and only the most principled forms of Marxism led by Luxemburg and Lenin upheld the internationalist perspective of world revolution. However the October revolution did not become the impetus for the success of the international class struggle. Instead the citadels of world capitalism survived and reformism become influential in countries like Germany and Britain. The 1919 Programme of the Russian Communist Party was adopted when the very survival of the Soviet regime was at stake because of civil war. The seriousness of this situation was articulated but what was emphasised concerned the optimistic prospects of world revolution. In other words the programme considered the political situation as being about explaining the process of transition from capitalism to socialism whilst what was actually occurring was the development of international counterrevolution of the major imperialist countries against the fragile Soviet regime. This meant the short-term situation would be characterised by the encirclement of the isolated proletarian state by powerful hostile forces, and this development would imply that the prospect of building socialism in Soviet Russia would be distorted by this unfavourable balance of class forces. To some extent the 1919 programme attempted to come to terms with this situation by proposing policies for the advance of socialism within an isolated condition. Unfortunately these policies were generally over-optimistic and could not be realised in conditions of civil war, material scarcity and economic dislocation. Consequently the very survival of the regime was based upon the prospects for international revolution. But the defeat of the German proletarian revolution in 1919 was a crucial defeat for the advance of the world revolution and this meant the formation of the Hungarian Soviet republic could not overcome this setback.

Thus the elaboration of the 1919 programme occurred in crisis conditions for the Soviet regime. The attempted development of the world revolution was being undermined by important defeats, and so the period of the revolutionary offensive had come to an end. It had proved impossible to realise victory in the international class struggle when the process of the formation of the various Communist parties was still in its infancy. Furthermore the civil war in the areas of the Soviet republic meant the consolidation of the regime on the basis of short-term policies was impossible. It could be argued that the part of the 1919 programme that dealt with the role of socialist construction was effectively a fiction. However the various defenders of the programme would still argue that it represented a relevant guide to action. This was the interpretation provided by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in their popular work: ‘The ABC of Communism’. They outlined how the development of capitalism had led to world war and resulted in the October revolution. Imperialism was the epoch of world revolution. The most important task of the Soviet regime was to support the revolutionary process and so provide inspiration and assistance to the international class struggle.

In complicated terms we can suggest that the 1919 programme and the ‘ABC of Communism’ were valid until the durability and strength of international counterrevolution became apparent. The programme, and its justification, comprehends the success of the October revolution but what is not explained is the complexity of the international class struggle. (Bukharin was ultimately to provide an explanation with his conception of the temporary stabilisation of capitalism) Bukharin does grapple with the problem of internal counterrevolution but his approach is based on the importance of revolutionary optimism in a situation of adversity. It is arguable whether this is the most practical approach when the prospect of a major victory for counterrevolution is on the horizon. Possibly the most important lesson for the present is that it is ultimately foolish to substitute optimism for realism when attempting to come to terms with the complexities of the class struggle.

THE 1919 PROGRAMME OF THE RUSSIAN COMMUNIST PARTY

The programme begins with the claim that the revolutionary developments in countries like Germany indicate that the world proletarian revolution has begun. (1) However the fact that effective uprising in Germany has been defeated is glossed over and instead what is provided is a description of how the development of the antagonism between capital and labour will result in the realisation of communism or a classless society. It is the task of the Communist party to lead the proletariat and its allies in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the attainment of communism via the establishment of the transitional society of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Capitalism has prepared the objective conditions for the realisation of these aims by the development of state monopoly capitalism which is transitional to socialism, and subjectively inter-imperialist war generates unrest and results in the intensification of the class struggle. The programme has provided an accurate description of the world until 1919. It describes the political situation in the following terms: “The imperialist war could not end in a just peace or even in any stable peace between the bourgeois governments. At the stage of development which capitalism has now reached this war must inevitably be transformed, and is being transformed under our very eyes, into a civil war between the exploited and toiling masses (led by the Proletariat) and the bourgeoisie.”(2)

This description of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism, because of the formation of finance capital, which has resulted in the process of imperialist expansion, and led to the outbreak of imperialist war that has promoted revolutionary struggle, is in accordance with the actual developments within reality. What has occurred is the effective development of civil wars in many countries. But instead of outlining a perspective that indicates the alternatives as the victory of counterrevolution or proletarian revolution, the victory of the latter is defined as being inevitable: “Nothing but the proletarian, the communist revolution, can lead humanity out of the blind alley in which it has been placed by imperialism and imperialist wars. However great the difficulty in the way of revolution, whatever temporary defeats it may sustain, however high the waves of the counterrevolution, the ultimate victory of the proletariat is assured.”(3) It is one thing to suggest that only the proletarian revolution can represent a progressive historical outcome when contrasted to the alternatives of the domination of capitalism as imperialism, and the related prospect of imperialist wars. But it is another thing entirely to imply that the struggle for communism will result in inevitable victory. This standpoint justifies a determinism that is not supportable in relation to the complexity of historical events. Instead it would be more flexible and yet principled to define the outcome of the class struggle in terms of the triumph of socialism or barbarism. It is true that the Russian revolution and the First World War has put communism onto the agenda but this does not mean that the outcome of international class struggle is inevitably in favour of the interests of the working class. Instead it is entirely possible that defeats can occur, and these can represent strategic defeats that undermine the struggle for socialism for long periods of time.

The programme is more realistic when it poses the issue of the victory of the international proletarian revolution in conditional terms: “To bring about the victory of the world-wide proletarian revolution it is essential that there should be absolute and mutual trust, the most intimately brotherly alliance, and the highest possible cohesion of the revolutionary activities of the working class in the more advanced lands.”(4) This comment is establishing that the revolutionary struggle can only succeed in terms of the highest levels of solidarity and the development of organisational cooperation that implies support for a common programme and flexible strategy. The suggestion is being made that without these factors there will not be an automatic victory of the working class because of the imperatives of objective conditions, and instead only the most advanced levels of organisation and perspectives can bring about success in the international class struggle. What is being implied by this view is that victory will not come about if the party is primitive and unprepared and the working class is not united by the highest forms of co-operation and an understanding of common interest. Unfortunately this analysis does not result in the related recognition that the very complexity of the tasks of the class struggle means that victory is not inevitable. The strength and wisdom of the class enemy and the influence of Social Democracy, means the tasks of revolution are complicated and defeat could be the result of the struggle for communism. However despite the concessions made to determinism the programme is aware of the importance of political tasks such as challenging the domination of Social Democracy over the working class if the prospect of revolution is to be realised.

What is possibly problematical is the emphasis on the importance of the Third International located in Moscow. The issue of domination by Moscow is glossed over and instead it is argued that a new revolutionary international based on Marxism and the rejection of reformism has been formed in 1919. The role of Russia in the actions of the International is beneficial as long as the Soviet state is principled and committed to the importance of world revolution. But the role of the Soviet regime in its relation to the international becomes complicated when the national state begins to put its interests before those of world revolution. It could be argued that this question was not yet relevant in 1919, but the increasing isolation of the Soviet state would create pressures for it to reject principled support for world revolution. In other words 1919 was a turning point for the Soviet state. It had adopted a programme that proclaimed the inevitable victory of world revolution and yet the adverse effects of defeats in the international class struggle were being felt. The pressures of isolation would create serious tests of the commitment to world revolution, and the optimism of the period 1918-19 would be increasingly replaced by caution about the prospects of immediate success in the class struggle. Hence the validity of the 1919 programme would be quickly put to the test.

The section of the programme that tackles the internal politics of the Soviet state claims that the character of the political system is superior to the bourgeois state which is effectively a dictatorship in the interests of the minority against the majority: “In contrast with this, proletarian or soviet democracy transforms the mass organisations of those who are oppressed by the capitalist class, of the proletarians and semi-proletarians (the poor peasants) that is to say, of the immense majority of the population, into the permanent and unified foundation of the entire state apparatus, local and central, from bottom to top…….It is the task of our party to work indefatigably on behalf of the complete inauguration of that higher form of democracy which needs for its right functioning the continuous uplifting of the level of culture, organization and initiative power of the masses.”(5) The programme is able to argue with justification that the bourgeois republic is in the interests of the exploiting classes. However, this does not mean that the Soviet state is automatically superior because it has to be evaluated in terms of its level of mass participation and the ability of the state to express the interests of the workers and poor peasants. The programme is committed to this principle of participation via the role of the mass organisations of the workers and peasants. Hence the aim is to establish a state that represents genuine Soviet democracy in relation to the realisation of the principles of mass participation of the organisations of the formerly exploited in the functioning of the state. But there is a possible contradiction and tension because these principles are outlined in terms of the vanguard role of the party. Only with the supervising role of the party will it be possible to develop the creativity and activity of the workers and peasants. This conception of leadership could become the justification of elitism and the development of the party state. The onset of civil war has accelerated this possibility because the demands of war mean the principles of mass participation in the activity of the state become secondary to the tasks of being successful in the war. Thus it could be argued that this democratic and popular aspect of the programme is already being falsified and the role of the Soviet state is being replaced by the development of the party state.

What is true about the programme is the commitment of the state to crush the resistance of the exploiting classes such as the bourgeoisie. It is being argued that the class struggle requires the temporary abolition of the rights of the bourgeoisie. What is not recognised by this logic is that this process of repression establishes a precedent that is also applied to the Menshevik and SR parties because of their differences with the Bolsheviks. It could be argued that the necessities of the civil war require these limitations of political rights but this is not what the programme suggests. Instead it is being argued that the requirements of the class struggle require the restrictions of the political rights of the bourgeoisie: “The Soviet state, which by its very nature has led to the crushing of the resistance of the exploiters, and the Soviet constitution, which is based upon the idea that all freedom is a fraud in so far as it conflicts with the deliverance of labour from the yoke of capital, does not shrink from depriving the exploiters of political rights.”(6) In other words the very conception of progress in the class struggle is defined by the ability of the Soviet state to repress the opposition of the bourgeoisie to the aims of socialism. Only a period of repression of the exploiters will enable the Soviet state to become stronger and therefore bring about victory over the forces of counterrevolution. What is glossed over by this analysis is the possibility that this very repression could be extended to anyone who disagrees with the Bolsheviks. The effective banning of all parties during the civil war suggests that this repressive logic was being realised. No supporter of Bolshevism could reject emergency measures against the bourgeoisie during the civil war but these actions should not be defined in terms of the logic of the class struggle because what this meant was the defence of a single party state. Genuine Soviet democracy should mean a multiparty system and the rejection of the restriction of political rights. Furthermore the importance of the universal franchise would mean that any restriction of the political rights of the bourgeoisie should also be temporary. It was necessary to wage the class struggle by the methods of democracy rather than by the application of state repression.

The point being made is that the only alternative to the development of democracy as the primary principle of the political character of the state is the justification of state repression. The view that this coercion can be limited to the bourgeoisie is false because it was inevitably extended to apply to the other socialist parties. Hence the following view was becoming an empty promise: “The Russian Communist party must induce wider and yet wider masses of the working population to avail themselves of democratic rights and freedoms, and it must enlarge the material possibilities in this direction.”(7) The right to assembly, and of association, and freedom of the press, is absurd if the only party that is able to function is the Bolsheviks. What is not recognised by the programme is that the increasing formation of a one party state is undermining the possibility to realise democratic rights. Instead these rights are formal and without practical credibility and application. Instead of recognition of this dire situation the programme makes boasts about the superiority of proletarian democracy when compared to bourgeois democracy. The constituencies and electoral units of the state are no longer territorial and instead are the workplaces of the proletariat. Mention is made of the prospect of the electoral recall of delegates and the end to the division between the legislative and executive character of the political system. The aim of the apparent development of democracy means: “Our party must concentrate its energies upon the task of bringing about a closer approximation between the instruments of power and the working masses, upon the basis of a clearer and fuller realization by these masses of democracy in practice, especially by promoting the responsibility and accountability of the persons chiefly concerned.”(8) But the practice of democracy is not limited to the functioning of the apparatus of the state in terms of the principles of accountability and participation. Instead if these aspects are to be realised the ability to challenge the policies of the state must be possible. This prospect is undermined by the erosion of the multi-party system. Instead of addressing this issue the programme does support the privileging of the proletariat in the franchise system. The implication is that electoral bias will ensure the political rule of the proletariat. But what is also justified is an electoral system that will result in the perpetual domination of the Bolsheviks. In this context electoral bias will not realise the intended aim of the alliance of the workers, poor and middle peasants which requires some form of coalition of the Bolsheviks and S-R’s.

However the programme does accept that the low cultural level of the workers who participate in the administration of the state is promoting the problem of bureaucracy. It is suggested that increasing participation, and the continual simplification of the functions of the state, will create the conditions for the abolition of the very role of the state. What is not accepted by this analysis is that the very domination of the state by the party is generating the problem of bureaucratisation. The issue of the party state is the most important question that is being glossed over by the programme. Instead we have an outline of the principles of Soviet democracy which are dogmatically considered to be superior to bourgeois democracy. What is not addressed is how the civil war has undermined the application of Soviet democracy and generated the related problem of the single party state. Consequently the issue of bureaucracy is considered to be about the low cultural level of the working class and the relationship of this question to the single party state is not tackled.

The programme does outline in principled terms its commitment to women’s equality. It calls for the party to conduct an ideological campaign in order to oppose sexism within the working class and exploited sections of the peasantry. Furthermore the aim is to emancipate women from the ‘material burdens of the old domestic economy’ by the development of communal housing, wash houses, crèches and housing.(9) What is not addressed is the difficulty of realising these demands in a situation of acute material scarcity of resources. Instead the contradiction between good intensions and practical realities is not tackled. This problem is connected to the effective absence of the importance of the civil war within the programme. Hence the question of the adverse effect of the development of a war economy in relation to the issue of socialist construction is not tackled. Instead it is assumed that a democratic Soviet state will be the equal of the immense tasks of the war and economy. The very prospect that the actions of the state might not be equal to the complexity of the practical questions that need to be addressed is glossed over.

It is accepted by the programme that nations have the right to secede from the Soviet state. But the preference of the programme is for the unity of Soviet states on a federal basis. This implies that the character of the Soviet state should express generous forms of autonomy and the ability to express national aspirations within a single unit. But in practice the principle of national self determination was distorted by the requirements of the civil war. The Red Army was ambiguous in its acceptance of self determination in areas of tension such as the Ukraine and Georgia. This situation was consolidated by the bureaucratic formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922 under the supervision of Stalin. The Programme also argues that the newly created Red Army should have a decidedly proletarian character in terms of the end of the isolation of the army in barracks and in relation to the role of political Commissars who provide political instruction. There is a commitment to the election of officers but combined to the appointment of officers inherited from the old Tsarist army. In other words the role and conduct of the Army should be to uphold the principles of socialism and so should not provide the justification for the reactionary domination of the Soviet state by an independent army with Bonapartist ambitions. What is not addressed by the programme is the detrimental role the Army has upon the economy in terms of the distortions introduced by the creation of a war economy.

The section of the programme on religion is committed to not only ending the connection of the state and religion but also effectively supporting eradicating religious belief and replacing it with scientific enlightenment. But, in contradictory terms it is also argued that this process should be realised in such a manner that it does not result in the opposition of religious followers: “While doing this, we must carefully avoid anything that can wound the feelings of believers, for such a method can only lead to the strengthening of religious fanaticism.”(10) Historical experience has indicated that it is more cautious to limit measures to the separation of church and state. An ideological offensive against the beliefs of religious followers only strengthen support for the various faiths. It could also be argued that standpoint of atheism is not central to the doctrine of socialism. It is possible to develop and strengthen socialism without the necessity of opposing religion. Only if religious followers actively engaged in counterrevolutionary activity would it be necessary for the Soviet state to consider measures that confronted opposing various forms of religious belief. What would be preferable would be an accommodation between church and state.

The importance of the economy is tackled by the programme. The primary task is posed in terms of the development of the productive forces because of the disorganisation of economic activity by imperialist war and civil war. This question is connected to the continued expropriation or nationalisation of large firms and the centralisation of production on the basis of planning: “The break-up of the imperialist economy bequeathed as a legacy to the opening period of soviet reconstruction an utterly chaotic condition in respect both of the organization and of the administration of production. Hence, one of our fundamental tasks, one of our most urgent needs, is to secure the greatest possible cohesion in all economic activities of the country, which must be unified in accordance with a general government design. We must effect the maximum centralisation of production in the sense of uniting it into individual branches and groups of branches; and in the sense of concentrating it into the best possible units; and in the sense of the speediest fulfilment of economic tasks. We must secure the maximum solidarization of the whole economic apparatus, rationally and economically utilizing all the material resources of the country.”(11)

In other words the programme recognises that the regime has urgent economic tasks because of the dire levels of output and productivity because of the present economic and political situation. The answer to these issues is posed in the traditional form of an emphasis upon nationalisation, centralisation and planning. It is implied that the character of economic activity will be centralised by the soviet state on the basis of a unified economic plan, and the aim will be to increase output to meet the needs of the civil war and the material requirements of the population. The Soviet state will also promote the development of small scale craft and artisan production in relation to these aims. In order to ensure the popular participation of the working class in the development of economic activity the trade unions will be involved in the work of economic administration: “Thus protecting the indissoluble union between the central State authority, the national economy, and the broad masses of the workers, the trade unions must in the fullest possible measure induce the workers to participate directly in the work of economic administration. The participation of the trade unions in the conduct of economic life, and involvement by them of the broad masses of the people in this work, would appear at the same time to be our chief aid in the campaign against the bureaucratization of the economic apparatus of the Soviet power.”(12) The role of the trade unions would not seem to be the expression of workers control of production because the dominant economic role is with the state economic apparatus which has responsibility for the development of the planning process and the centralisation of the economy. In this context the trade unions act to ensure that the economic functions of the state are carried out in a democratic manner, or with the approval of the working class via the role of the trade unions. This relationship of state to trade unions could fail to realise its democratic aspirations because the union official may be a party member who is willing to endorse the objectives of the planning process without proper recognition of the interests of the working class. For example they may accept lower wages and adverse conditions in order to realise the objectives of planning.

In other words there could be a contradiction between the programmatic objective of the trade unions having ‘popular control over the results of production’ and ‘labour power at the disposal of the state’. (13) This conception would suggest that the workers should uncritically accept the directives of the state concerning the assignment of labour between the various branches of the economy. Hence the issue of an ‘intimate association’ between the Soviet state and the trade unions would be one in which the latter organisations accept the instructions of the former. This emphasis is reinforced by the virtual demand that workers establish ‘comradely discipline’ and a ‘sense of responsibility’ in their work. (14) Thus it is not surprising that the programme suggests: “In this work of creating a new socialist discipline, the leading role is assigned to the trade unions.”(15) This viewpoint does imply that the role of the trade unions is subordinate to the state and that they effectively implement the directives of the state. The programme makes no mention of the independence of the trade unions from the state because it is assumed that their interests are identical. However the trade unions do ensure the popular character of the economic activity of the state, and so ensure that it is democratic and corresponds to the interests of the working class. Apparently the trade unions can carry out this function without coming into conflict with the state, and so it is assumed that the state will effectively accept the ideas of the trade unions as being functional in relation to the economic role of the state. (The contradictions and tensions of the programme about the character and role of the trade unions was bound to create the prospect of the debate about the trade unions and the state in 1920)

The programme also argues that the workers should accept the importance of the bourgeois experts for the process of increasing production. In this context the rewards of work will be different in order to motivate the experts to act in accordance with the interests of the Soviet state and so the prospect of equality in terms of the proceeds of labour will not be realised. Consequently the economy that is being envisaged is hierarchical in which the Soviet state issues instructions and the trade unions ensure they are carried out in a democratic manner. The specialists also have effective autonomy in order to promote efficiency and productivity. The programme does emphasise that concessions to bourgeois elitism must be avoided but the party must also oppose the type of self-conceit within the working class that suggests work can be carried out without the role of the bourgeois specialists. This view implies that the trade unions should be definitely subordinated to the bourgeois experts. Overall the programme does not defend the view that the trade unions should have the opportunity to challenge the directives of state or bourgeois specialists. The assumption of trade union supervision of the bourgeois specialists does not imply they should challenge their leadership unless they adopt a definite counterrevolutionary posture. Hence trade union defiance of the bourgeois expert should be a last resort and should not be an expression of the rejection of methods that increase productivity.

In other words whilst the programme makes occasional references to economic democracy it is obvious that the urgency generated by the dire economic situation implies that the role of the trade unions should be to articulate and implement the policies of the state. Hence references to the importance of the trade unions for ensuring the democratic character of economic activity means that the unions express support for the economic actions of the state. The programme does not allow for the possibility that the state and the unions could disagree about economic policy. However, if this was to occur the assumption is that the trade unions should overcome their syndicalist tendencies and accept the directives of the state. What is paramount is that the trade unions accept the economic plans of the state because otherwise the attempt to resolve the dire economic situation may not be realised. Thus it is the terrible economic situation that has undermined any commitment to economic democracy. The programme assumes that any form of economic democracy – unless one that upholds the aims of the state in an uncritical manner – should be rejected. What is not envisaged is that the trade unions should be able to criticise the economic priorities of the state. Hence the role of the trade unions in promoting the end of bureaucracy in the state apparatus does not imply the legitimacy of opposition to economic directives. Nor is it being suggested in the programme that the trade unions should initiate economic policy. Instead the dominant role in economic activity belongs to the state because this is the only organ that can nationalise and centralise the economy in an efficient manner. The era of nationalisation in order to promote workers control of production has come to an end. Instead workers control has been diluted to the tame role of the trade unions which is the subordinate partner of the state and provides popular legitimacy for its actions.

The section on agriculture is confusing and glosses over the detrimental effects of war communism and the requisitioning of grain by the state. In a contradictory manner the programme aims to support the development of collective farming and also upholds small scale farming of the middle peasantry. The programme supports the organisation of the poor peasants, and opposition to the kulaks and the implementation of measures to ensure the middle peasantry support socialist construction. This analysis has been distorted by the flawed approach of war communism. What is not acknowledged is that the land reform that took place in 1917 -18 led to the creation of what became a significant middle peasant stratum, and the kulaks were a tiny part of the population. The poor peasants aspired to become middle peasants with family plots of land. The commune system was reinforced by this process and agricultural activity occurred with its framework. In this context the promotion of collective farming was very unpopular and the most sensible policy was to encourage the development of the commune in order to re-create the proletariat-peasant alliance. But war communism and the dogma about collective farms undermined this possibility. What was not recognised in 1919 was that war communism would not result in sufficient grain for the cities and the army and instead measures were needed to encourage the increased production of agricultural products. The section of the programme on agriculture was antiquated before it was conceived and the introduction of the New Economic Policy was only a matter of time. This policy reinstated the right of the peasants to sell their own produce and provided tax incentives for increased production of agricultural products.

THE ABC OF COMMUNISM

The ‘ABC of Communism’ was a book written by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in order to promote the 1919 programme. They outline how the aims of the Bolshevik party, as an expression of the interests of the revolutionary class, are expressed by this programme. In 1903 Russian Social Democracy adopted a programme that conceived its aims in terms of the overthrow of Tsarism, the establishment of a democratic republic, and the introduction of reforms that would benefit the workers and peasants. The changes in social conditions since that time had created the justification for the introduction of a new programme. The working class in Russia has become stronger and more capable of promoting the overthrow of capitalism, and this development had been confirmed by the external situation of imperialist war that has promoted the prospect of world revolution. Capitalist development is creating the basis for the inevitable uprising of the workers, and the result has been the overthrow of capitalism in Russia and international discontent: “In order fully to understand how all this has come about, it is necessary to be thoroughly well acquainted with the nature of the capitalist system. Then we shall realize that its breakdown was inevitable. Once we grasp that there will be no return of the old system and that the victory of the workers is assured, we shall have full strength and confidence as we carry on the struggle on behalf of the new social order of the workers.”(16) This comment supports the view of the 1919 programme that the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable in national and international terms. It is being suggested that this perspective is necessary to develop the confidence of the working class to struggle for socialism. However it could also be argued that this approach actually results in complacency about the complexity involved in the struggle to realise socialism. For example what could be justified is an underestimation of the durability of international capital, and a related failure to recognise its counterrevolutionary capacity to oppose the development of proletarian revolution. Hence the 1919 programme has recognised the importance of civil war, even if in implicit terms, and so accepts that the struggle for proletarian power is not yet assured in Russia. It is also necessary to admit that the world revolutionary upsurge of 1918 has been defeated and the various communist parties still only have minority support of the working class. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that economic crisis can become economic recovery and therefore provide the prospect of concessions for the workers that will undermine the process of radicalisation. In other words the very events within objective reality do not confirm that the advance of world revolution is inexorable. Instead it is uneven and could result in the isolation of the Soviet regime of Russia. Consequently whilst it can be argued that the contradictions of capitalism can result in the intensification of international class struggle this situation does not mean that the existing system will be inevitably overcome. Instead it is more cautious to accept that historical development is open-ended and poses the alternatives of socialism or barbarism.

The authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ outline how the development of capitalism results in the generation of class struggle between the employers and workers because of the increased frequency of crisis and war. Capitalism also prepares the basis for the new society in terms of the increased socialisation and organisation of production which comes into conflict with the limitations of the private ownership of the means of production. The ultimate result of national economic development is the formation of the state capitalist trust. They have the capacity to organise production in national terms but competition occurs internationally between rival state capitalist trusts over raw materials and markets. The ultimate outcome of these conflicts is inter-imperialist war or world war. In order to organise war the economy is administered by the state capitalist trust, and this process contributes to the power of the bourgeoisie and undermines the ability of the working class to oppose capitalism: “State capitalism uniting and organizing the bourgeoisie, increasing the power of capitalism, has of course greatly weakened the working class…..They were deprived of the right to strike; they were mobilized and militarized; everyone who raised his voice against the war was hauled before the courts and sentenced as a traitor. In many countries workers were deprived of all freedom of movement, being forbidden to transfer from one enterprise to another.”(17)

Hence it would seem that the description of the development of capitalism has resulted in good reasons why the prospect of revolution is not inevitable. Instead the growth of capitalism has led to the generation of state capitalism that has increased the power of capital over labour. The concentration of capitals in the form of state regulation means that the unrest of the working class can be ruthlessly suppressed by the combination of economic and political power. Consequently the situation of increasing crisis that has resulted in imperialist war can be apparently resolved in favour of the capitalist class because of the increased power of capital via the role of state regulation. This process is reinforced by the development of the coercive powers of the state, and has led to increased repression against the working class. The result is that the working class is unable to take advantage of the crisis of capitalism, and instead state capitalism is able to reinforce its social power without effective opposition. This analysis would seem to undermine the conception of the inevitable overthrow of capitalism and instead provides a reactionary alternative in the form of the role of the capitalist state regulating the economy and resisting working class unrest. However the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ contradict the political logic of this analysis when they also suggest: “It was inevitable that the war, whose burden pressed so heavily on the working class, should in due course lead to a rising of the proletarian masses.”(18) A vivid description is provided of the disorganisation of inter-imperialist conflict, the lack of food, and the tragic results of war: “The capitalist system was breaking down. The anarchy of production had led to the war, and this had induced an enormous accentuation of the class conflict. Thus the war led to the revolution…..The era of the collapse of capitalism had set in.”(19) The conditions of the war had worsened the situation of the working class and so led to the rejection of the discipline imposed by the domination of the capitalist over the worker: “Such a condition of affairs, in which the old order has been destroyed and the new order has not yet been created, can be ended in no other way than by the complete victory of the proletariat in the civil war.”(20)

This perspective is confusing. On the one hand it is not apparent that the cohesion and intensified domination imposed by state capitalism can be undermined by the effects of war. It seems entirely possible that the regulatory role of state capitalism was able to tackle effectively the dislocating results of the imperialist war? (The evidence is contradictory – the state capitalist economy of Germany did begin to break up in 1918 because of the pressures of Allied sanctions, but the British application of state capitalism was still sound during the war) On the other hand it was also possible that working class unrest could be repressed by state capitalism. Thus the perspective of international civil war was over-optimistic. Also Social Democracy acted to uphold state capitalism against the threat of revolution, as in Germany. Consequently the superficial view that the state is disintegrating because of the pressures of mass revolt is misleading and instead state capitalism did act to uphold the system in general terms. Only where state capitalism was weak as in Russia did revolution occur. Hence international civil was not occurring. This criticism of the standpoint of the ‘ABC of Communism’ is not meant to deny the fact that the imperialist war had promoted a crisis that could result in the development of international civil war. The point is that this prospect was not inevitable because of the very importance of state capitalism. It was the ability of state capitalism to regulate production and facilitate the creation of an immense state apparatus that was able to repress the opposition of the working class which meant the prospect of international revolution was limited to the most vulnerable areas of the world economy. In the last analysis the outbreak of proletarian revolution occurred where state capitalism was most vulnerable because of the strains imposed by the demands of the war economy. This situation was Russia. It is true that state capitalism was being undermined in Germany, and so led to mass unrest, but Social Democracy intervened in order to re-establish the stability of the economy. Instead of this type of cautious appraisal of the situation after the Russian revolution, the authors of the ABC of Communism declare the international civil war has begun and its result will be the victory of the proletariat over capitalism: “A decisive victory over the enemy and the realization of the dictatorship of the proletariat – such will be the inevitable outcome of the world wide civil war.”(21)

The major problem with this determinist approach is that it underestimates the importance of strategy and instead tends to conceive the process of international revolution in terms of an irreversible process that cannot be opposed. Hence the only outcome of the class struggle is the victory of the proletariat. What is not acknowledged by this approach is the complexity involved in the attempt to realise proletarian power, and therefore what is not properly understood is the importance of strategy, or the conception of how victory in the class struggle is to be realised. In the Russian Revolution the strategy of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ was crucial for developing the popular and democratic character of the struggle for revolution. Without this strategy it would have been very difficult to bring about proletarian revolution. In contrast the most advanced sections of the working class in Germany lacked a similar coherent strategy and were confused by the influence of Social Democracy within the workers councils. The result was a half-hearted attempt at insurrection that lacked popular mass support. In 1919 the German revolution had been temporarily defeated, and this was a serious setback for the prospect of the development of international civil war. This defeat is mentioned in the ‘ABC of Communism’ but its implications are not discussed. What is not mentioned is the prospect of the temporary isolation of the Soviet state until the revival of the international class struggle. Instead the various defeats in the class struggle are glossed over because of the dogma of the perspective of the inevitable proletarian victory in the international civil war.

The authors do outline accurately how the Russian revolution was the possible beginning of world revolution because of the backwardness of its economy and the greater levels of dislocation of its economy because of the imperialist war. They rightly argue that the fact that revolution has occurred in Russia does not mean that it has matured for communism, and so it requires the world revolution to develop the favourable basis for transition to this higher form of society. They suggest that the capitalist class is tenacious in advanced countries in Germany and Britain and so the process of revolution is slower and more complex. This recognition that the development of revolution is more difficult in the advanced countries should have resulted in a revision of their conception of the inevitability of international revolution, but instead they suggest that international civil war has entered into a favourable phase because of onset of war between the proletarian state and international capital, as in relation to the opposition of the Soviet regime to the intervention of various imperialist armies in the civil war within Russia. Ultimately they are more cautious about the prospects of proletarian victory in the international civil war. The apparent modification of their analysis means Bukharin and Preobrazhensky argue on the one hand: “The more vigorous the proletarian onslaught, the more firmly do the capitalists close their ranks.”(22) On the other hand they suggest that disunity in the imperialist camp, and the potential for colonial revolution, means imperialism is being undermined and weakened: “Thus the imperialist system is being broken up by two different groups of influences. On the one hand, we have the upward movement of the proletariat, the wars waged by the proletarian republics, and the revolts and the wars carried on by the nations enslaved to the imperialists. On the other hand, we have the oppositions and disharmonies among the great capitalist powers. Instead of ‘lasting peace’, there is complete chaos; instead of universal repression of the proletariat, there is fierce civil war. In this civil war the strength of the proletariat waxes while the strength of the bourgeoisie wanes. The inevitable issue of the struggle will be the victory of the proletariat.”(23)

In other words despite occasional reservations and references to the durability of the capitalist system the overriding emphasis of their perspective is about the increasingly favourable character of international civil war and the maturing prospects of the success of world revolution. The intervention of the proletarian state in the process of international civil war can only enhance the chances of the success of the revolutionary struggle. In contrast the imperialist camp is riddled with continued differences because of unfinished rivalries and the tensions that have accompanied the end of the First World War. Hence the imperialists cannot unite in a convincing manner in order to oppose the Soviet state. Therefore the international balance of class forces favours the victory of the proletariat in the international civil war. This optimistic approach does not deny the importance of the costs of revolution in terms of the tragedy of war and economic dislocation. But the ‘costs of revolution’ is not an argument against class struggle because the continuation of imperialism will result in greater terrible wars and distress for the working class. Primarily it is necessary to endure civil war because the ultimate result will be communism which will be able to resolve the problems inherited from capitalism and lead to the flourishing of the productive forces. Consequently it is the argument that victory in the class struggle will be inevitable is made to justify international civil war. ‘History is on the side of the proletariat’ and this recognition will make the sacrifices of the present worthwhile when the overthrow of capitalism occurs and it is possible to build communism.

However the optimistic perspective of the above analysis is also modified by the recognition that there is an alternative to the triumph of communism: “We are thus confronted by two alternatives and two only. There must either be complete disintegration, hell broth, further brutalization and disorder, absolute chaos, or else communism.”(24) This emphasis on the possibility of chaos concerns how the economic crisis and imperialist war has led to unrest, and the development of opposition to capitalism, and so the period of chaos will be temporary when compared to the favourable prospect of the victory of the working class. The more conscious that the struggles of the international working class become the greater is the prospect of the success of the world revolution: “Herein lies the splendid historical significance of the proletariat. The workers may suffer defeat in individual battles, and even in individual countries. But the victory of the proletariat is no less certain than the ruin of the bourgeoisie is inevitable.”(25) Thus the alternatives of chaos or the success of the proletariat are only temporary options that relate to the possibility that defeats can occur and the crisis situation of capitalism can deepen. But the very chaotic character of contemporary capitalism will continue to promote support for the struggle for communism and the aim of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the choice between alternatives becomes reduced to an issue about when the victory of the world revolution will occur. In the long-term, even possibly the short term, the success of the international class struggle is inevitable.

However the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ also suggest that the victory of the world revolution implies the importance of solidarity between the workers of all countries. This principle is necessary in the struggle against capitalism, and is also required in relation to the support that should be given to any isolated proletarian state. This support is vital until the development of the world revolution creates international soviet states: “Complete mutual trust, a brotherly alliance, united revolutionary action against world capitalism – these alone can bring victory to the working class.”(26) But in 1914 the Second International collapsed and broke into competing national units that adopted the standpoint of national defence. These organisations were divided into open opportunists who supported their national bourgeoisie and centrists who oscillated between the standpoint of the right-wing Social Democrats and the approach of revolutionary Marxism. The success of the proletarian revolution in Russia led to the formation of a new Communist International in order to provide leadership for the struggle for world revolution. The implication is that only when the Communist International is able to overcome the influence of the opportunists and attract the centrists to the revolutionary banner will the struggle for socialism be advanced considerably. However it is also implied that the continuation of the crisis of capitalism ensures that the task of uniting the working class against capitalism will be realised. The common struggle against capitalism will occur and result in the victory of the international working class. This means any isolated proletarian state will receive the assistance of the international working class in order to enable the national regime to survive, and also increasingly the working class will unite under the banner of the Third International. This process will also advance the prospects of success in the international class struggle.

In other words 1919 was a year that still represented the continuation of the heroic ambitions and aims of the Bolsheviks. They were confident of the success of world revolution and of victory in the civil war. This heroic standpoint was manifested by the international perspectives of the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’. They advocated the prospect of the inevitable victory of the international working class. This standpoint could not be sustained for a long period because it could be argued that by the end of 1919 the initial attempts of the international working class to overthrow capitalism had not succeeded. The result of this situation was that Bukharin drastically modified his perspectives in his works of 1920 and 1921. He became a realist who emphasised the survival of the proletarian military dictatorship and was more cautious about the success of the international revolution. The period 1920-21 was prelude to him becoming a right communist who emphasised the importance internationally of the proletarian-peasant alliance and the stabilisation of international capitalism.

However, in the ABC of Communism the authors are already making concessions that justify an elitist conception of socialism and communism. In this work the authors defend the repression of the opposition of the bourgeoisie by the dictatorship of the proletariat, and this view is obviously dictated by the civil war. But they also argue that the transformation of the economy in the interests of the working class in the form of the nationalisation of the means of production, or the realisation of social ownership, is carried out exclusively by the proletarian state: “We understand, therefore, why the expropriation of the bourgeoisie must be effected by the organized power of the proletariat. Now this organized power takes the form of the dictatorial workers state.”(27) Already in this heroic period of Bolshevism the role of the working class and the proletarian state is considered to be identical. There is no conception that nationalisation should be promoted in order to advance workers control of production. Instead it is assumed that the result of nationalisation will be the domination of the state, and this situation will be based on the influence of the communist party that acts as the expression of the interests of the working class. It is not possible to divide the means of production between the workers because this would result in the re-emergence of private ownership of the means of production. The strengthening of the proletarian state takes the form of its close relationship between party and working class and the establishment of close connections with the middle peasants. This political alliance combined with repression of the old bourgeoisie should bring about stability within the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The conception of ideal communism is influenced by the elitist view of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is argued that there will be co-operative production within the economy that is organised on the basis of a common plan. In contrast to state capitalism the high levels of organisation of the economy will not be connected to the continuation of the importance of exploitation. Hence there will not be permanent managers, and instead of working at one particular job the division of labour will be based on flexibility and constant changes of occupation. The aim of production will be for use and not profit and so the commodity character of capitalist production will be replaced by the importance of products that met needs. The role of money will have become superfluous because of the fact of abundance of goods and so products will be distributed in accordance with need. Furthermore, the end of the role of classes will mean the end of the importance of the state. The central question then becomes: “But, how, they will ask us, can this vast organization be set in motion without any administration? Who is going to work out the plans for social production? Who will distribute labour power? Who is going to keep account of social income and expenditure? In a word, who is going to supervise the whole affair?”(28) The answer is not posed in terms of the principles of economic democracy or workers control of production. Indeed this would seem to have become superfluous because all that is required is a centralised administrative office, or statistical bureaux: “There, from day to day, account will be kept of production and all its needs; there also it will be decided wither workers must be sent, whence they must be taken, and how much work is to be done….all will have become accustomed to social labour, and since all will understand that this work is necessary and that life goes easier when everything is done in accordance to a prearranged plan and when the social order is like a well oiled machine, all will work in accordance with the indications of these statistical bureaux.”(29)

The problem with this conception is that people are still being told what to do and they do not act in accordance with their own initiative and potential for creativity. The statistical bureaux have the ultimate responsibility for the formation of plans and the allocation of resources. Even the task of the rotation of labour is not the responsibility of the workforce and instead the workers have to act in accordance with the instructions of the statistical bureaux in all aspects of their economic activity. It could be argued that the statistical bureaux represent an alienating mechanism that imposes its imperatives onto the actions of labour. What is not recognised by the authors of the ABC of Communism is that only economic democracy of the producers can establish a situation in which the influence of controlling economic instruments is overcome and truly replaced by the significance of the central economic actors. Until that time the process of production, distribution, the allocation of resources, and the appropriation of the surplus, is decided by what is a centralised bureaucracy or the administrators of the plan. The main assumption being made is that the rapid advance of the productive forces under communism will overcome any tendency towards the reproduction of class divisions and instead a classless society will be constructed. But the point is that as long as the statistical bureaux effectively functions as a distinct organ that has control over the surplus the possibility for the division of economic functions into the organiser and the organised is being created. The bureau is a form of state capitalist trust controlling the surplus produced by subordinated workers. Only the organisation of the plan on the basis of economic democracy can overcome this problem.

The authors also argue that the limitations of small scale agrarian socialism are overcome by movement towards the creation of large scale collective farms. This standpoint glosses over the importance of the process of transition to large scale agricultural production and that this development can only be based on voluntary consent. Indeed this is the aspect missing in the conception of communism in that it ignores the issue of developing the consent of producers in relation to the task of creating large scale forms of economic activity on the basis of a plan of production. Human beings are abstracted out from the importance of the plan and instead the character of planning is projected onto abstract forms of centralised institutions. This approach is utopian and impractical. Instead in order to make it realistic it is necessary to elaborate the role that the producers and consumers can have in relation to the development of a viable plan of production. However this approach is ignored because of the elitist illusions of the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’.

Their standpoint is more realistic when they consider the process of development of communism in relation to actual economic and political events. They argue that the prospect of communism in Russia will be enhanced if the formation of the Soviet regime becomes part of an international establishment of a Soviet regime. It will be possible to exchange raw materials for advanced industrial goods in relation to the tasks of constructing communism. The creation of a single economic and political unit based on the aim of communism will enable a unitary plan of production to be developed: “When, however, Russian manufacturing industry is able to join forces with the productive industry of the West, then the joint organization of production will speedily enable us to draw the petty producers and the peasants into a general and immense co-operative organization. If, for instance, there existed one great European system of production organized by the working class, then vast quantities of the products of urban industry could be supplied to the rural districts.”(30) But this perspective is the ultimate aim in relation to the prospect of building socialism in the most favourable conditions. It is initially necessary to recognise the immense tasks created by the isolation of the Soviet regime and the effects of imperialist war, civil war and the overall economic dislocation of the economy inherited from Tsarism and capitalism. There has been a rapid decline in production, the transport system has collapsed, and the bourgeoisie tried sabotage in order to undermine the efforts of the new proletarian regime, and in the present civil war has created a war economy that has distorted priorities and led to new problems. Furthermore, the working class is small and the majority of the population are peasants or petty proprietors who support small scale commodity production and are hostile to socialism. But these dire problems are beginning to be tackled by a Soviet regime. This type of state has overcome the class bias of bourgeois democracy and is based on the principled alternative of proletarian democracy or Soviet power: “The mass organizations of the workers, the semi-proletarian peasants, etc (soviets, trade unions, factory committees, etc) have become the actual foundations of the proletarian state authority.”(31) Soviet democracy means that the organisations of the working class have become the basis of the administration of society, and it is the task of the party to raise the cultural level of the workers so that they can fully participate in the administration of the state.

The emphasis of the authors of the ABC of Communism is that the dire economic situation, exacerbated by civil war, does pose serious questions about the possibility of constructing socialism in Russia. The most favourable scenario for the building of socialism is based on the formation of an international proletarian state, but this is still a long-term prospect and is not yet possible in relation to the continuation of the struggle for socialism in Europe. Thus it would appear that the isolated character of the proletarian regime has undermined the prospects for socialism in Russia, and this point seems to be emphasised by the dire economic problems of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This terrible situation has been intensified by the onset of civil war. However what to a partial extent offsets the problems of the objective economic situation is expressed by the formation of the Soviet state which is based on the participation of the mass organisations of the working class in the administration of society. The result of this development is the generation of a popular and democratic character in relation to the regime. This means the working class can begin to promote the process of the building of socialism within Russia. The rights that are effectively formal under bourgeois republics have become effective rights under the Soviet regime and this includes the commitment to realise equality for women. But it is also admitted by the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ that the most important organ for the creation of the laws and policies of the regime is expressed by the role of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet. The possibility that a contradiction could arise between the role of the Central Executive Committee and the popular promise of the Soviet regime is not studied. Instead it is asserted that: “The soviet institutions are based on the Communist Party, the trade unions, the factory committees, and the cooperatives. These organizations comprise many millions of workers, who all combine to support the soviet power. Through the instrumentality of these organizations, the toiling masses take an active part in the state administration.”(32) The task of the party is to promote proletarian democracy in relation to the effectiveness of the Soviet organs, and to advance the union of the state apparatus, the working class and the poor peasants. It is being assumed that if these political tasks are carried out immense advances in the construction of the socialist economy can also be realised.

The point being made is that the potential dynamism of the political superstructure can become the basis to tackle important economic problems. This means that the popular and democratic character of the Soviet regime, which attempts to involve the participation of broad masses of working people, can become the structure that develops the appropriate policies for resolving the dire economic situation and therefore beginning the process of the development of the productive forces. In initial terms what is called for is the creation of a war economy that can attempt to tackle the issues created by the civil war and the problem of economic disorganisation. Success in these terms will create the basis to begin the process of the promotion of the revival of industries and the modernisation of agriculture. In relation to political tasks the most important task of the Soviet regime is to create an army that can achieve victory in the civil war. This is an army composed of workers and peasants and has intimate links to the Soviet state. In these terms the army is determined to be victorious in the civil war and this possibility will enhance the prospect of concentrating on economic tasks and the creation of a viable economy that can survive until the victory of the world revolution. Furthermore, the role of the Soviets is based on the leading role of the proletariat. This vanguard position is not in order to create privileges but is instead based on the recognition that the working class has to create alliances with the poor and middle peasants in order to develop support for the Soviet regime. The working class is the most steadfast supporters of the Soviet state and it utilises its determination and sense of solidarity in order to build bridges with the peasants in order to promote the tasks of victory in the civil war and generate the beginning of socialist construction in the economy.

However the ability of the working class to tackle issues has been undermined by its general level of cultural backwardness, lack of experience in the work of administration, the elitist influence of the bourgeois specialists, and the fact that the most advanced workers have joined the Red Army. Consequently there is the problem of bureaucracy within the state which can only be overcome by raising the cultural level of the workers and promoting greater levels of participation in the state administration. The implication is that if the problem of bureaucracy becomes acute the Soviet state will not be able to resolve its acute tasks such as organise the victory of the Red Army and begin the process of socialist construction. In other words the issue of the influence of bureaucracy is not merely about elitism, and the possibility of differences developing between State and society, it is also about the capacity of the state to successfully engage with the practical tasks of the moment. A Bureaucratic state cannot become the instrument of the development of socialism. Instead it will begin to develop other interests that result in the alienation of the state from the working class. However, if the state tackles the issue of bureaucracy within the apparatus of administration it will be possible to make progress from the condition of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the withering away of the state. The important role of participation will replace the necessity of a distinct organisation called the state. In this context the aims of socialism will be realised.

However because of the civil war it is not always possible to act in accordance with the norms of Soviet democracy: “This state of affairs is due to the military situation of the Russian republic. What exists today in Russia is not simply the dictatorship of the proletariat; it is a militarist-proletarian dictatorship. The republic is an armed camp. Obviously, the above described conditions will not pass away while the need persists for the militarization of all our institutions.”(33) Hence the demands of civil war mean that the importance of Soviet democracy is often replaced by a situation whereby policy making becomes restricted to the role of elites that have to make military decisions. The very character of the proletarian regime is influenced by this militarisation of the state and so the problem of bureaucracy becomes acute. The state cannot be a genuine workers state because it is not based on the application of the principles of Soviet democracy and the highest levels of participation. Instead the party leadership and the military act on behalf of the working class, and this situation develops because of the demands of the civil war. Hence the ideals of the Commune state cannot be realised in this situation, and so the state will have to be democratically renewed when the civil war is over if the problem of bureaucratic elitism is to be tackled. Obviously the problem will be that sections of the party will acquire interests that favour the continuation of proletarian-military dictatorship. It will have to be the aim of the party to promote the raising of the cultural level of the working class, and so encourage participation in the state, if the military-proletarian dictatorship is to be dismantled.

Thus with this sober analysis of the formation of the military-proletarian dictatorship the effective end of the heroic period of the Soviet regime and the world revolution is being announced. What is being rationalised are the demands related to the survival of the Soviet regime, in a condition of isolation, and in connection to the prospect that it might be overthrown. Hence there seems to be no alternative than to administer the state in accordance with the principles of military organisation. In this context it seems inevitable that the principles of Soviet democracy will be compromised. The authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ are able to perceptively describe the situation as it is and they hint at the measures that will have to be necessary if the bureaucratic character of the existing state is to be overcome, which is the renewal of Soviet democracy and the administration of the state by the whole of the working class. What is not explained are the problems that will occur if the military-proletarian dictatorship becomes consolidated, and difficult to replace. Thus they describe what has happened, but do not attempt to predict what could result if the military-proletarian dictatorship becomes ossified. In actuality this type of regime was replaced by the renewal of the proletarian-peasant regime in the period of the NEP. This could be the only progressive outcome in the absence of international revolution. It was necessary to create the consent of the peasants for the proletarian regime, via the relaxation of economic controls on their production and trade. Bukharin becomes one of the most prominent supporters of NEP, whilst Preobrazhensky was one of its most important critics. Thus the questions related to the progress of the Soviet regime become polarised between socialism in one country and international revolution. Stalin was to resolve these tensions by the revival of the military dictatorship but its relation to the proletariat had become replaced by the total domination of the bureaucracy. Soviet democracy was effectively ended and instead a party state was consolidated.

THE ABC OF COMMUNISM AND THE ECONOMY

The authors of the ABC of Communism can only envisage one type of Socialist economy that replaces the domination of private ownership of the means of production which is nationalisation of the large firms by the proletarian state. This action is different to the development of state capitalism that results in nationalisation but still upholds the exploitation of the working class. Instead the proletarian state carries out nationalisation on behalf of the interests of the workers: “Now the factories, the workshops, the means of transport, and so on are transferred to the proletarian power; they do not pass under the control of the organization of the masters, but under the control of the organization of the workers. In this case, therefore, there is actually effected the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. The capitalists actually forfeit the foundations of their wealth, their dominion, their energy, and their power. The whole basis of exploitation is destroyed. The proletarian state cannot exploit the proletariat, for the simple reason that is itself an organization of the proletariat.”(34) The apparent identity of the interests of the workers and the Soviet state means that the issue of economic democracy is considered to be effectively superfluous. Or to put it another way, the role of the Soviet state represents the input of democracy into the process of nationalisation. Workers control of production can only be considered to be a diversion because it would imply undermining the centralisation of the economy which is being established by the actions of the organs of the state. Furthermore the primary economic tasks in a situation of civil war and economic dislocation are to organise production and increase output. Hence the question of economic democracy seems to be a luxury when the task is to rebuild an economy that is able to begin to meet needs: “The problem of increased production comprises a number of problems. How can we increase the quantity of the material means of production (machinery, coal, and raw materials) and how can we increase the amount of labour power? How can we best organize production (what is the best way of planning our economic life as a whole, how should one branch of production be linked up with another, how should production be administered, what is the best and most economical way of allotting the reserves of raw material, how can we best dispose of the available labour power)? How can we secure better work, in so far as it depends on the workers themselves? (the question of a comradely labour discipline, that of the struggle against slovenliness, slackness, idleness, etc). Last of all comes the question of applying science to production, the question of the work of the skilled experts.”(35)

In other words the problems involved in the resolving of the tasks of increasing output and productivity demand the formation of a hierarchy within the relations of production. The agencies of the state have the task of formulating theoretical answers to the demands of the economy and the workers have the role of implementing these plans. Hence the development of economic democracy would undermine the stability and efficiency of this hierarchy, and would effectively result in the undermining of the discipline of labour. What would result would be a failure to met economic plans and instead the situation would deteriorate and the ability to met material needs would not be realised. The only manner in which the plans for the economy can be implemented is for the highest levels of discipline, and this suggests the workers should carry out the plans without question. The role of the factory committees and trade unions should be subordinated to these aims. If workers begin to question these economic tasks they should be reminded that the Soviet state acts in the interests of the working class. It is therefore anti-working class for the workers to oppose the aims of the Soviet state. What this conception of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky does not address is that only the actual functioning of economic democracy would overcome divisions between the role of the state and the activity of the workers in the workplace. Without economic democracy we have a situation in which the state effectively instructs the workers about what to do. This rigid conception of discipline cannot actually encourage workers to meet targets and to realise the highest levels of quality in the production of goods. Instead there is a situation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which is not conducive to the prospect of achieving the necessary levels of output required for tackling the dire economic situation.

The problem with the approach of Bukharin and co was that they reduced the role of the economic to that of the political. This meant that if it was possible to define the Soviet regime as a type of workers state it would be plausible to understand socialist economic activity in terms of what was being proposed by this state apparatus. Thus it was assumed that there was an identity of interest between the state and the workers organised in the workplace, and so it was in the interests of the latter to obey the dictates of the former. The economic plans of the state should be accepted by the workers without question because the state was an expression of the interests of the working class. It was not considered possible that the interests of the state and the working class could diverge. Consequently it was a matter of discipline and socialist consciousness that the workers should carry out without question the economic aims of the state. However, Bukharin had introduced an element of doubt into this equation of state and working class with his conception of proletarian military dictatorship. This approach suggested that the state apparatus was becoming bureaucratised and so could conceivably support policies that were not in the interests of the working class. Hence Bukharin’s perspective could imply that economic democracy was required in order to ensure that the state in economic terms acted according to the interests of the working class. The pressure of the working class was required if the state was to advance economic measures that would be compatible with the principles of industrial democracy. But whilst Bukharin was aware of the importance of the role of the trade unions for economic tasks this was still envisaged in terms of the discipline required for increasing productivity. The trade unions would encourage the workers to work harder within the factory. This was how the creativity of the working class was envisaged in economic terms. The actual importance of the workers for setting production targets was being rejected in the name of efficiency and the demands of productivity. Only the Soviet state, via its economic mechanisms and agencies, could safeguard the economic interests of the working class.

Consequently it is not surprising that the takeover of factories by the workers in the immediate aftermath of the revolution is described as haphazard, and only when the Soviet state begins to nationalise enterprises is the economic process conceived in terms of organisation and the potential for planning: “Nevertheless, one of the fundamental tasks of the Soviet power was and is that of uniting all the economic activities of the country in accordance with a general plan of direction by the state.”(36) The local administration of the factories is based on the role of trade unions and the technical staff, but these are responsible to centres which supervise the production of a given industry. These central organs are accountable to the Supreme Economic Council. There are also departments that organise sectors of production and are also responsible to the Supreme Economic Council (SEC). The process of economic development would be immensely advanced if the international revolution is victorious and enables the promotion of an international plan of production. This situation would advance the prospects for the construction of socialism in both national and international terms. But in the absence of this development national economic activity has to be strictly controlled by the Soviet state. This conception of socialist economy means the role of the trade unions in the organisation and management of production is based on subordination to the Soviet state. The trade unions are ‘statified’. The trade unions participate in all levels of the state in order to enhance the administration of the economy. The goal is that the trade unions: ‘should take an ever increasing share in the administration of industry, until the day when the whole of economic life, from the bottom to the top, shall constitute a unity which is effectively controlled by the industrial (productive unions)” (37)

Hence it would seem that the aim of the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ is for the ultimate realisation of workers control of production, via the increasing importance of the trade unions in the organisation and administration of production. This process should begin with the role of the factory committees at local workplace level and they encourage workers to become involved in the process of economic activity. The involvement of the trade unions in the state will also promote challenging any tendency towards bureaucratism. But making these grand claims about the importance of the trade unions for economic activity does not mean that what is being contemplated is the realisation of the principles of economic democracy. Bukharin eloquently suggests that the workers should use intuitive and be creative about making suggestions to improve production but the primary aim of this situation is that the workers should in a voluntary and self-imposed manner enforce the virtues of labour discipline: “Labour discipline must be based upon the feeling and the consciousness that every worker is responsible to his class, upon the consciousness that slackness and carelessness are treason to the common cause of the workers.”(38) The point is what is the basis of the discipline? Is it a discipline that is self-discipline, or the understanding among the workers that it is important to develop production in a dire economic situation, or is this discipline ultimately external and based on the instructions of the Soviet state, via its economic organs? The emphasis of Bukharin is on the role of self-discipline which is described as mutual control, or the utilisation of the collective consciousness and awareness within the working class itself on the importance of developing production and working on the basis of the highest standards of work performance. But what is glossed over by this almost syndicalist description of the participation of the working class in the organisation and administration of production is that he has also justified the hierarchy involved in economic activity. The workers have no alternative then to obey the SEC, and its lower organs, because they are the instruments for the allocation and distribution of economic resources. The SEC establishes the guidelines for targets that the workers have little choice than to obey or be subject to disciplinary measures. Hence the ultimately external character of labour discipline means that Bukharin’s description of self-imposed discipline within the work process is an ideal that has not yet been realised. Crucially the working class has not been able to establish sufficient levels of economic democracy that would express its ability to organise and plan production. Thus mutual control is a fiction that cannot be realised because of the high levels of the centralisation of production.

However the significance of Bukharin’s description of economic democracy is that he has outlined an ideal to which reality should correspond. He has provided a description of the principles of workers control of production which the Soviet regime should support. What he has not recognised is that his prior analysis of the process of nationalisation by the Soviet state – which he praises – has led to a situation of extreme centralisation that undermines the possibilities to develop economic democracy within the relations of production. Thus the state imposes its targets and aims onto the working class which is still alienated because of the actuality of external constraints within the process of production. What would overcome this alienation is expressed by the realisation of Bukharin’s principles of mutual control within the process of production. But this possibility is closely connected to bringing about the demise of the proletarian military state. However this state is an expression of the requirements of civil war, and so as long as the civil war continues the situation will not be changed. Hence there is a strategic impasse that can only be resolved by the ending of the civil war. This prospect will enable Soviet democracy to be revived, for bureaucracy to be overcome, and extreme centralisation of the economy as a war economy to be ended. In these circumstances the prospects for the realisation of Bukharin’s ideal of economic democracy could become credible. But this did not occur because Lenin and Zinoviev considered that trade union independence meant that the trade unions should become educators for communism rather than the basis of economic democracy. Bukharin’s lack of influence meant his conception of economic democracy was rejected as being (which it wasn’t) an accommodation to Trotsky’s conception of the subordination of the trade unions to the state.

The authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ recognised that the land reform promoted by the October revolution had created a peasantry that was based on the domination of the middle strata, but they refused to accept its historical significance. In other words they did not consider that the Soviet regime should accept what had happened: “The communist economic system is yet more advantageous, yet more productive than the capitalist economic system; in like manner, communist farming on the large scale will prove more productive than peasant farming on the small scale.”(39) This viewpoint may have been formally true but it did not explain the fact that any move towards the collectivisation of agriculture in Russia would undermine the alliance between the Soviet state and the peasantry. Bukharin was aware of the inefficiency of peasant farming, and that the introduction of scientific methods would improve productivity, but the crucial question was how could this modernisation be carried out without alienating the peasants from the aims of the Soviet regime? The authors of the ABC of Communism tend to gloss over the complications involved in relation to the introduction of more collective and co-operative farming and instead outline in the most abstract terms what would be the advantages involved in the introduction of these higher economic forms. As an alternative to the defence of these collective agricultural forms it would have been more useful to discuss in detail how it could be possible to improve the peasant commune and its individual family farming units. (This task is carried out in brief detail) However it is admitted that: “But whatever successes we may achieve in this matter of organizing soviet farms and communes, for a long time to come small scale peasant farming will continue to exist; for a long time to come small scale peasant farming will be the predominant form of Russian agriculture alike in respect of the area thus cultivated and in respect of the quantity of agricultural produce.”(40) Thus the role of the state should be to encourage the modernisation of this small scale farming. It is possible to encourage the peasants to enlarge holdings and to oppose the continual division of land into smaller and narrow strips. Better quality seed for growing and feeding animals can be provided, and it is necessary to train agricultural experts who can provide knowledge about the methods of farming.

In relation to the interests of the peasantry the rights of the kulaks to develop capitalist type farming has been restricted by the Soviet state. The middle peasants have a tendency to support the interests of the rich peasants. It is necessary that the Soviet state opposes this alliance by developing measures that encourage the formation of an alliance between the middle peasants and the Soviet regime. This means the middle peasants will not be coerced into collective farms and instead the development of their small scale production has to be encouraged. The Soviet regime will promote the interests of the poor peasants in order to develop an alliance between these forces and the middle peasants and against the rich peasants. What is not recognised by this analysis is that the process of land reform has created a homogenous peasant class, and the forces of the rich peasantry are very miniscule. The peasantry in general has a shared interest in the development of their plots of land and so they are against the development of collective types of production. In this sense the division of the peasantry into three forms of contrasting class interest is effectively a fiction. The peasantry in general have an interest in clinging to their land and are against any attempt by the state to develop collective forms of agriculture. In other words instead of opposing the largely mythical class of the kulaks it would be more constructive if the Soviet regime encouraged the development of the existing peasant commune. This means that class struggle in the countryside is a policy with little support, but it is part of the Bolshevik dogma that the bourgeois democratic revolution in the countryside should become socialist. What is not recognised by this perspective is that the middle peasants will not support class struggle in the countryside, and instead it is necessary to utilise different methods if the aims of the peasantry and the Soviet state are to become compatible. This recognition would be similar with the view of the authors of the ABC of Communism that small scale agricultural production has a long term and durable future. The strategic problem with the standpoint of the 1919 programme and the ABC of Communism is that it upholds two contradictory policies. On the one hand supporting the middle peasantry and small scale production and on the other hand calling for class struggle in the countryside. The latter approach justifies grain requisitioning, and it is not recognised that this policy is a failure precisely because it undermines the alliance of the Soviet state with the middle peasantry.

The ABC of Communism contends that the emphasis of the process of distribution under the Soviet state is to bring an end to commodity exchange in relation to the nationalisation of the economy, the role of buyers and sellers in the market will become replaced by state distribution. However, in a contradictory manner they also admit that petty trade still continues based on the role of private middlemen. In order to undermine this development of speculation the Soviet state encourages the role of cooperatives in order to promote distribution in a non-profit making manner. But what is not explained is how this process operates in relation to the situation in which trade in the countryside has been replaced by compulsory requisition of grain. Instead of providing an analysis the authors of the ABC of Communism comment: “In the rural districts it is important that the rich peasants should be excluded from the management of the co-operatives; that the comparatively well to do inhabitants of the countryside should not receive any privileges in the matter of distribution; and that the entire apparatus of the rural co-operatives should be controlled by the poor peasants and the class conscious among the middle peasants.”(41) In fact what is being described is a fiction. The development of co-operatives in the countryside was miniscule, and the process of the distribution of goods was based on the compulsory requisitioning of grain. This situation only antagonised the peasants from the aims of the Soviet state and led to the hoarding of food. Hence the only trade that effectively occurred was based on the role of private merchants. What was not being admitted by this reluctant defence of war communism was that it was necessary to provide incentives to the peasants – goods for trade – if they were to produce food for the state. This meant war communism had to be ended as quickly as possible. This point was effectively accepted by the authors of the ABC of Communism given that they were reluctant to support war communism.

To the extent that commodity production remains within the transitional society of socialism the need for money is also required. The increasing replacement of wages with payment in kind will increasingly undermine the necessity of money: “Thus from the very outset of the socialist revolution, money begins to lose its significance. All the nationalized undertakings, just like the single enterprise of a wealthy owner (for the owner of the unified enterprises is now the proletarian state) will have a common counting house, and will have no need of money for reciprocal purchases and sales. By degrees a moneyless system of account-keeping will come to prevail. Thanks to this, money will no longer have anything to do with one great sphere of the national economy. As far as the peasants are concerned, in their case likewise money will cease by degrees to have any importance and the direct exchange of commodities will come to the fore once more. Even in private trade among the peasants, money will pass into the background, and the buyer will find himself able to procure corn only in exchange for products in kind, such as clothing, household utensils, furniture, etc. The gradual disappearance of money will likewise be promoted by the extensive issue of paper money by the state, in association with the great restriction in the exchange of commodities dependent upon the disorganization of industry. The increasing depreciation of the currency is, essentially, an expression of the annulment of monetary values.”(42)

This comment represents the collection of illusions generated by war communism. The decline in the role of money and private trade caused by economic disorganisation promoted the view that what was taking place was the generation of features that would be located within a communist system. It was not recognised that payment in kind was an inferior system of rewards when compared to the money based economy of developed capitalism, and instead it was being suggested that socialism and communism were being promoted in terms of the decline of commodity exchange and private trade. The idea that peasants would welcome the replacement of trade, via the demise of money and its substitution with barter, is ludicrous. This view is effectively a rationalisation of the compulsory system of grain requisitioning. Furthermore, the depreciation of money is not an expression of transition to a moneyless economy and is instead a representation of inflation caused by the scarcity of goods and commodities. What was not happening was the creation of system with features of communism, and instead what was occurring was regression to a pre-capitalist system of simple commodity production based on barter as the basis of exchange, with the decline of the universal role of money. The demise of wage payments was also not an advance, and instead inflation meant workers preferred payment in kind, especially items of food. The point was that the abolition of money and the transcendence of commodity exchange would only become progressive when the development of the productive forces created the material conditions for transcendence of these elements inherited from capitalism. Instead what is occurring was regression to a simple agrarian economy, and industry was in a dire situation of dislocation. Trotsky was to argue in favour of the re-stabilisation of the value of the rouble in order to revive the development of the economy. But the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ could only recognise the progressive features of the depreciation of the value of money. Thus: “Inasmuch as the issue of paper money accelerates the depreciation of the currency, it leads indirectly to the expropriation of the money capital of the bourgeoisie, for it reduces the purchasing capacity of this money capital to a fraction of that which it formerly possessed.”(43) What is not explained is how this expropriated money capital can contribute to the realisation of the resources of the state if it is worthless. Instead in an ideal and abstract manner, Bukharin outlines the possibility for the generation of revenue by means of clever book-keeping. This aim is entirely absurd if massive inflation is still part of the economic system.

In other words the economic policy advocated by the authors of the ABC of Communism is a mixture of realism and idealism. There is recognition of the problems created by economic dislocation and the civil war. This suggests that the prospect to overcome these problems will be long-term and involve the success of the proletarian revolution in other countries in order to create an international plan of production. However concessions are also made to idealism in terms of the suggestions that elements of communism are being created in terms of the promotion of a moneyless economy. These illusions gloss over the problems of an economy that is still devastated by the effects of the imperialist war and civil war. In overall terms the emphasis of the authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ is about the practical urgency required to tackle the dire economic problems. This understanding should have led them to understand that the claims being made about tendencies of transition to communism was nonsensical.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE PROGRAMME

(i)The National Question

The ABC of Communism outlines in emphatic terms how the struggle against capitalism is international and should aim to overcome all differences based on nationality. However, the development of capitalism has led to various forms of national oppression and inequality. The result is the process of differentiation between oppressed and oppressor nations. The Russian empire was based on the oppression of many nationalities. Hence: “The proletariat must be ready to grant complete national self-determination, must be ready, that is, to concede to the workers who form the majority in any nation the full right to decide the question whether that nation is to be completely integrated with the other, or to be federated with it, or is to be entirely separated from it.”(44) Lenin would disagree with this formulation because he would argue that this definition places conditions on the right of self-determination. Instead of this demand being an expression of the principle of the right of secession from the dominant nation this right is diluted to mean that only if the proletariat of the oppressor nation is in favour of secession should it then be implemented. The implication is that the right of self determination is only applicable when the proletariat is in a position to be able to connect independence with the prospect of the development of socialism. Lenin would argue that this effective dilution on the right of self-determination does not explain the importance of national uprisings in favour of self-determination which do not have the leadership of the proletariat in the national struggle. Instead it is entirely possible that the national bourgeoisie or peasantry could lead a struggle for national independence. The authors of the ‘ABC of Communism’ would reply that in the era of international struggle against capitalism and imperialism the issues involving the national question are being intimately related to the development of the proletarian revolution. For example if Bavaria established a separate Soviet regime it would be in the interests of the working class of Germany as a whole, and Bavaria in particular, to support secession of this area so that it could consolidate a proletarian regime. This distinct Soviet state would then become the basis of struggle for revolution in Germany as a whole. But if revolution occurred in Germany and the bourgeoisie of Bavaria desired separation it would be in the interests of the working class of Bavaria to resist this separation and instead unite with the working class of all of Germany.

Bukharin also argues that if both Ireland and England form Soviet republics the question of their unity can only be decided by voluntary means because the workers of Ireland should learn by experience that the proletarian regime of the UK no longer desires an oppressive relationship and instead wants to form a political unity of equals. It is also possible that the national bourgeoisie of an oppressed nation will lead the struggle for separation from a Soviet regime. However the working class of the oppressed nation will learn from their own experience that national independence under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie will not result in their emancipation. Instead it is the interests of the proletariat of the oppressed nation to strive to achieve unity with the Soviet regime of the formerly oppressor nation: “The working class will speedily realize that the bourgeoisie has declared independence that it may independently flay its own proletariat. The workers will speedily realize, moreover, that the proletariat of the neighbouring Soviet state desires the union, not for the sake of exploiting or oppressing the workers of the smaller land, but that all workers may join in a common struggle for deliverance from exploitation and oppression.”(45)

Thus Bukharin would argue that in the conditions of international civil war the most relevant form of national self determination is based on the importance of the aspirations of the working class of the oppressed nation. It is Lenin who provides a more abstract and ideal scenario about the unity of classes in the struggle for national liberation. In contrast Bukharin would suggest that the national struggle cannot be separated from the class struggle, and in this context the principled standpoint is related to the interests of the working class of the oppressed nation. However what he does not explain is the prospect of a situation in which the proletariat of the oppressed nation may support the national aspirations of the bourgeoisie. In this context the principal of self determination can only be realised in unconditional terms. Furthermore, he does not allow for the possibility that the Soviet regime of the formerly oppressor nation could still be influenced by great power chauvinism. (This point could be related to Soviet Russia’s domination of Georgia and the Ukraine in the early 1920’s) But despite these reservations it could be argued that Bukharin has advanced our understanding of the relationship of the national question to the class struggle. Hence he is not being unprincipled, or making a concession to national chauvinism when he argues: “The Communist Party recognizes that the nations have the right to self-determination even up to the point of secession; but it considers that the working majority of the nation and not the bourgeoisie embodies the will of the nation. It would, therefore, be more accurate to say that when we speak of recognizing the right of the nations to self-determination, we are referring to the right of the working majority in any nation. As far as the bourgeoisie is concerned, inasmuch as during the period of civil war and proletarian dictatorship we deprive it of civic freedoms, we deprive it also of the right to any voice in the question of national affairs.”(46)

It is necessary to emphasise that the approach of Bukharin is most appropriate when the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat becomes acute. This situation occurs in a period of mass unrest and revolutionary uprising. In this context the proletariat of the oppressed nation will begin to challenge the standpoint of national supremacy held by the bourgeoisie. But in other times it is not unprincipled to accept that the national struggle for self determination may be led by the national bourgeoisie. Consequently on the one hand Lenin was dogmatic to effectively reject the perspective that the national struggle could acquire a proletarian character. His approach seemed to suggest that the aspiration for self-determination would be generally based on the domination of the national bourgeoisie. On the other hand Bukharin was dogmatic when he denied the possibility that a principled struggle for self determination could occur under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. His approach was reductionist in that he reduced all national struggles to being an expression of the aspiration for Soviet power. Thus his view that the will of the nation was proletarian was mythical because the question of the will of the nation depended on the balance of class forces. In a period of international revolution the will of the nation would tend to acquire a proletarian colouration but this was not apparent during an era of capitalist stabilisation. However, Lenin’s approach was more problematical because he tended to conceive of the national struggle in terms of a unity of classes and so disconnected the issue of national self-determination from the role of class antagonism. In this sense the national question became to be conceived by Lenin as bourgeois democratic and its relation to proletarian class struggle was not articulated. His approach is defined in the following terms: “Through utilisation of bourgeois democracy to socialist and consistently democratic organisation of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and against opportunism. There is no other path. There is no other way out. Marxism, just as life itself knows no other way out. In this path we must include free secession and free merging of nations, we must not fight shy of them, not fear they will defile the “purity” of our economic aims.”(47) This is a dogmatic perspective. What if concrete reality does indicate the significance of different forms by which self-determination can be realised, other than by means of bourgeois democracy? It is entirely possible that the national bourgeoisie is dependent on imperialism and so the tasks of the national question can be most adequately realised by the proletariat. In order to establish this point requires concrete analysis.

Unfortunately Bukharin resorts to dogmatic reasoning in order to justify the perspective of proletarian leadership in the national struggle. He refers to the proletariat being the ‘will of the nation’. This is an idealist formulation that is ultimately idealist and essentialist. His standpoint acquires a sounder and more principled basis when he outlines how the expansionist tendencies of capitalist development have led to imperialism and national oppression. In this context the national bourgeoisie continually betrays the promise of national liberation and instead its actions result in the domination of one nation by another. Consequently the promise of genuine national liberation is generally with the role of the proletariat and the aim of the formation of a world side socialist republic that would end all forms of national oppression. It is the reactionary role of the national bourgeoisie in the era of imperialism that means the task of national emancipation requires the leadership of the proletariat. This approach became the basis of Trotsky’s application of the theory of permanent revolution for India and China.

(ii)The Red Army

The traditional demand for the formation of an armed militia of all of the people has proved to be unrealistic in conditions of civil war or the war between proletarian and bourgeois states. Instead there is still the need to create a standing army but it is based on the interests of the workers and peasants. This decision to create a Red Army has been vindicated by the successes in the civil war: “It is perfectly clear that without the Red Army the Russian workers and peasants would have found it impossible to maintain a single one of their achievements of their revolution. Without the Red Army they would have been crushed by the forces of reaction at home and abroad.”(48) The Red Army is explicitly based on the interests of the working class and self-imposed discipline that replaces the imperatives of an officer caste. The influence of the Communist party is connected to the important role of political commissars and communist groups. It has been necessary to utilise some of the old Tsarist officers who have been sympathetic to Soviet power because of the inexperience of many of the officers of the new Red Army. It has proved to be inefficient to continue to uphold the traditional aim of the election of officers in conditions of civil war. Instead it has been necessary to appoint them from above by means of traditional methods of selection. The main task of the Red Army will be to wage civil war it is not envisaged that it will be a permanent army similar to bourgeois armies.

Consequently the standpoint of Bukharin is similar to that of Trotsky (This is the period of his closest alliance with Trotsky). This means he considers that the traditional programme of Marxism which emphasises the role of the armed militia of the people has been superseded by the requirements of the moment which is the necessity to create a Red Army in order to wage civil war. This army is envisaged to be a proletarian army in relation to the role of the Commissars and its task of defeating counterrevolution. The sympathy of Bukharin for Trotsky in relation to the requirements of the civil war is realistic because it is obvious that only a professional army will be able to defeat the experienced forces of the White armies. Bukharin is aware that it has been the activity of the Red Army that has undermined the possibility of the victory of the counterrevolution, and he envisages that the Red Army could have a role in the development of international civil war.

(iii)Justice system

The justice system will enforce harsh punishments as long as the civil war continues but taking this aspect into account the role of the judiciary consider that moral regeneration should be the basis of sentences for crime. Judges should be supporters of the interests of the working class and replace the bourgeois judiciary. What is ignored by this analysis is recognition that the judiciary should be independent of the state if the legal system is to have an element of impartiality and act in a manner without bias. It should not be the aim to replace the class bias of judges within capitalism with a similar class bias within the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is because bias is itself a distortion of the legal system that has to be eradicated if fairness is to be realised. The ABC of Communism makes no mention of the roles of laws in the development of socialist society, but laws are necessary in order to influence the ethical and moral character of society. The introduction of laws that provide guidelines concerning the conduct of people’s behaviour are a necessary alternative to the arbitrary rule of the state. In contrast the revolutionary tribunals that Bukharin considers necessary for the emergency period of the civil war could become the justification of a legal system without the proper guidance of laws.

(iv)Education

Bukharin argues that the character of the school under capitalism which is based on the propagation of the values of the system should be replaced by the instruction of children in the aims of communism. The task of education should no longer be connected to the right of parents and instead society should have the most important role in this regard. The main form of education should be labour schools that prepare pupils for manual labour. There will also be universities for specialist education and party schools to educate the party in the tasks of revolution. This approach would be condemned in the present as being a recipe for brainwashing and propaganda. It is also doubtful to what extent these types of labour schools would prepare pupils for success in academic subjects. Marxists in the present would be more concerned with schools being successful in providing a decent education that prepared people for the future. The approach of the ABC of Communism is effectively anachronistic.

(v)Religion

The authors of the ABC of Communism are emphatic about religion: “it is the task of the party to impress firmly upon the minds of the workers, even upon the most backward, that religion has been in the past, and still is today one of the most powerful means at the disposal of the oppressors for the maintenance of inequality, exploitation, and slavish obedience on the part of the toilers.”(49) This viewpoint has only been partially true in the time of Bukharin and the same verdict could be said about the present. It is true that religion has been reactionary and justified systems of inequality and the oppression of women, but it is also been vindicated by historical experience that religion has supported the unrest of peasants and workers and provided arguments that contrast the virtues of the Kingdom of God with the limitations of secular society. Furthermore the emancipatory message of the holy works of most religions contrasts with the practice of the important people who interpret these works and provide guidance to the faithful. However, Bukharin is not content to claim that religion has a reactionary role within society he also implies that religion and communism are incompatible as world views because the former promotes a supernatural view of reality and the latter is based on the importance of science: “Scientific communism, in its judgements concerning natural phenomena, is guided by the data of the natural sciences, which are in irreconcilable conflict with all religious imaginings.”(50) But it could be argued that many religious thinkers have provided arguments as to why the results of science are not necessarily incompatible with the approach of a given religion. The Christian faith is divided between anti-science creationist adherents and those that accept the approach of Darwin and other supporters of natural selection. Furthermore, many scientists have considered that the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism is not compatible with the empiricist basis of science. The point being made is that because the very results of science are open to constant dispute and revision it is not possible to argue that the views of religion cannot be reconciled with scientific belief. It is entirely possible to be a materialist and a Christian and a Marxist and a materialist.

Consequently, Bukharin’s demarcation between a Communist and a religious believer is arbitrary and dogmatic: “A communist who rejects the commandments of religion and acts in accordance with the directions of the party, ceases to be one of the faithful. On the other hand one who, while calling himself a communist, continues to cling to his religious faith, one who in the name of religious commandments infringes the prescriptions of the party, ceases thereby to be a communist.”(51) In answer to this justification of a rigid demarcation between party and religion it can only be the individual who can decide whether there is a divide between communism and religious faith. It is despotic for the party to instruct the individual as to what they should believe in terms of their most cherished beliefs. The point is it is entirely possible to distinguish between the organised institutions of a religion, which may uphold the forces of reaction, from an individual’s interpretation of their religious belief. Hence it is entirely principled for the individual believer to support the party programme whilst maintaining his own private views about the importance of religious faith. In other words unless the party is to justify a situation in which it tries to dictate every aspect of the private views of the individual party member the question of religious belief should be a matter of individual choice. It should be up to the individual as to whether they can reconcile religious faith with adherence to the party programme. Consequently it would be an authoritarian distortion of the views of communism if the party programme was to argue that religious believers should not be members of the party.

However the above criticism of dogmatic atheism does not mean that we should reject the traditional demand to separate church and state, and church from education. (In the latter instance religion can still be taught as an academic subject, and private religious services can still be held within schools) But this does not mean that we should support anti-religious propaganda in the name of opposing religious backwardness and support for the forces of reaction. In the time of Bukharin the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Tsarist state was obvious and so his standpoint seemed to have historical justification. Indeed, Bukharin is himself aware of the problems with anti-religious propaganda. This is why he also argues in a contradictory manner that: “To thrust atheism upon the masses, and in conjunction thereby to interfere forcibly with religious practices and to make mock of the objects of popular reverence, would not assist but hinder the campaign against religion. If the church were to be persecuted, it would win sympathy among the masses, for persecution would remind them of the almost forgotten days when there was an association between religion and the defence of national freedom; it would strengthen the antisemitic movement; and in general it would mobilize all the vestiges of an ideology which is beginning to die out.”(52) This strong defence of religious freedom would seem to suggest that repression of religious faith should not occur in the Soviet state. But the Orthodox Church was repressed and atheism became a state ideology. This persecution only drove religion underground and it became a symbol of discontent with the Soviet state. In contrast the acceptance of freedom of religious belief would have meant the possibility of new forms of reconciliation between church and state.

CONCLUSION

The ABC of Communism is a mixture of the illusions of the heroic period of communism with the increasing acceptance of realism. This meant world revolution was considered in terms of its inevitable success but the internal Soviet regime was defined as a proletarian military dictatorship. It was accepted that the major task was to achieve victory in the civil war via the role of the Red Army. There were illusions in the description of the economy when it was suggested that the worthlessness of money expressed tendencies of transition to communism. In reality what was occurring was the increasing scarcity of goods and the collapse of the commodity economy. The ‘ABC of Communism’ provided strong arguments in favour of a different view of the national question but it was dogmatic about religious belief. After his involvement in the writing of this commentary, Bukharin was to become the realist of the revolution. His later works became more cautious about the prospects of international revolution and support for economic democracy was replaced by strong support for the role of bourgeois experts and state economic agencies. Bukharin as the ‘Left Communist’ was coming to an end and by 1921 he was a ‘right communist’. This process of change was not necessarily unprincipled because the New Economic Policy was badly needed. However Bukharin also became increasingly sceptical about the prospects of success of world revolution. He became the advocate of the temporary stabilisation of capitalism between 1925-29. Bukharin’s theory and practice was shown to be one-sided because in 1919 he still envisaged the inevitable success of world revolution. But in later years his revolutionary optimism was being replaced by cautious pessimism. Nevertheless his contribution to the 1928 Comintern programme was still memorable.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)The 1919 Programme in the ABC of Communism by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky Penguin, 1969, Middlesex p429

(2) ibid p433

(3) ibid p433

(4) ibid p433

(5) ibid p435

(6) ibid p436

(7) ibid p436-437

(8) ibid p437-438

(9) ibid p437

(10) ibid p445

(11) ibid p446

(12) ibid p447

(13) ibid p448

(14) ibid p448

(15) ibid p448

(16)ABC of Communism p67

(17) ibid p165-166

(18) ibid p166

(19) ibid p172

(20) ibid p173

(21) ibid p176

(22) ibid p181

(23) ibid p182

(24) ibid p184

(25) ibid p185

(26) ibid p187

(27) ibid p126

(28) ibid p118

(29) ibid p118

(30)ibid p209

(31) Bid p218

(32) ibid p231

(33) ibid p240

(34) ibid p312

(35) ibid p316-317

(36) ibid p319

(37) ibid p336

(38) ibid p339

(39) ibid p352

(40) ibid p366

(41) ibid p385

(42) ibid p390-391

(43) ibid p397

(44) ibid p247

(45) ibid p248

(46) ibid p249

(47)V.I. Lenin reply to P. Kievsky (Pytakov) Collected Works Volume 23, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965 p27

(48)Bukharin op cit p259

(49) ibid p299

(50) ibid p300

(51ibid p300

(52) ibid p308