THE ECONOMIC POLICY OF THE BOLSHEVIKS

Introduction

Lenin advocated the most principled and audacious strategy between 1914 and 1917. He understood how the crisis of world capitalism because of inter-imperialist conflict would create the possibility for world revolution, as Neil Harding explains: “The simplest and most fundamental message of Lenin's Imperialism was: capitalism is ripe, it is rotten-ripe and decaying; its time has passed, it is living on borrowed time. An epoch is at an end. Socialism is not only its chronological successor, it is logically entailed in the very development of capitalism in its monopolistic phase; all its objective and subjective preconditions have matured within monopoly capitalism, and its triumph becomes a necessity.”(1) Consequently the situation was maturing for the most intransigent revolutionary politics to become vindicated, and any compromise with capitalism is considered opportunist. Hence the aim of peace is not sufficient; instead the only principled approach is to transform the crisis of capitalism into a direct struggle for its overthrow and to promote world revolution. This means it is necessary to break with the social chauvinists, and the centrists who vacillate about the importance of revolutionary tasks. Revolutionary politics means: “Its distinctive feature is its complete break with both social chauvinism and “centrism” and its gallant revolutionary struggle against its own imperialist government and its own imperialist bourgeoisie. Its principles is: “Our chief enemy is at home” It wages a ruthless struggle against honeyed social pacifist phrases (a social pacifist is a socialist in word and a bourgeois pacifist in deed; bourgeois pacifists dream of an everlasting peace without the overthrow of the yoke and domination of capital) and against all subterfuges employed to deny the possibility, or the appropriateness, or the timeliness of a proletarian revolutionary struggle and of proletarian socialist revolution in connection with the present war.”(2)

Consequently there was no hesitation by Lenin in 1917 about the validity of the strategy of 'All Power to the Soviets'. The realisation of this slogan would represent the establishment of the popular power of the people and the possibility to create a commune state that would be based on the principles of self-administration. Lenin established an economic programme for the Soviets in his pamphlet: “The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it”(3) He is aware of the economic failures of the Provisional government and calls for the policy of the Commune state to be based on the importance of nationalisation of important firms and the banks. These measures would be connected to the introduction of the principle of workers control of the economy, or the supervision of the capitalists by unions and other rank and file organisations: “Yet only revolutionary democratic measures, only the organisation of the oppressed classes, the workers and peasants, the masses into unions would make it possible to establish a most effective control over the rich and wage a most successful struggle against the concealment of incomes.”(4)

The problem with his approach is that in an idealist manner, the political character of the state, the commune state, is conceived as having a dynamic impulse towards socialism, or its supervision of state capitalism is equated with an advance towards socialism: “Now try to substitute for the Junker-capitalist state, for the landowner-capitalist state, a revolutionary-democratic state, i.e., a state which in a revolutionary way abolishes all privileges and does not fear to introduce the fullest democracy in a revolutionary way. You will find that given a really revolutionary-democratic state, state- monopoly capitalism inevitably and unavoidably implies a step, and more than one step, towards socialism.”(5) The point is that Lenin glosses over the importance of the bourgeois democratic stage under the Commune state, and instead suggests that the economic role of the Commune state is to bring about a process of rapid movement towards socialism. He is arguing that state monopoly capitalism under the supervision of the Commune state means that the possibility of movement towards socialism can be inexorable and short-term. The important problem with this standpoint is that it results in the defence of voluntaristic measures in order to promote the advance towards socialism. The stage of bourgeois democracy is considered as a retreat, and the necessity for concessions in regards to the rights of the peasants to trade are rejected as being against the possibility of movement towards socialism. In: 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government' Lenin still emphasises the importance of the creative work of the proletariat and peasantry in relation to the possibilities generated by the Soviet state for the participation of the people in the economic tasks of the regime. (6) However this standpoint is emphasised in terms of the development of the capacity for the people to organise and administer society in terms of the realisation of the role of disciplined labour. This process is the basis to promote movement towards socialism and it involves the most ruthless struggle against the forces of capitalism: “The bourgeoisie in our country has been conquered, but it has not yet been uprooted, not yet destroyed, and not even utterly broken. That is why we are faced with a new and higher form of struggle against the bourgeoisie, the transition from the simple task of further expropriating the capitalists to the much more complicated and difficult task of creating conditions in which it will be impossible for the bourgeoisie to exist, or a new bourgeoisie to arise.”(7)

This formulation is justification for the continuation of the offensive against capitalism, and in specific terms this means the compulsory requisitioning of grain from the peasant bourgeoisie. (8) The question of accounting for the utilisation of grain requires the strictest suppression of trade and of any manifestation of the attempt to promote individual production outside of the control and accounting of the Soviet state. Hence the process of progress towards socialism is considered in terms of the strictest supervision of the economy by the Soviet state. Even the character of workers control is defined in this manner: “Until workers control has become a fact, until the advanced workers have organised and carried out a victorious and ruthless crusade against the violators of this control, or against those who are careless in matters of control, it will be impossible to pass from the first step (from workers control) to the second step towards socialism, i.e. to pass on to workers regulation of production.”(9)

In other words all aspects of economic activity concerning the task of advance towards socialism require the implementation of forms of compulsion and coercion. Workers control cannot be realised without the rigid imposition of the highest levels of discipline in relation to the realisation of tasks like accounting, administration and organisation. The implicit importance of the development of the creative abilities of the working class because of workers control is secondary when compared to the necessity of self-coercion and strict supervision within the production process. This inflexible justification of workers control is defended by Lenin because it is considered to be vital if the tasks involved in generating socialism are to be realised. Indeed this significance to the role of self-discipline and coercion is considered important for all aspects of economic activity: 'because the victory of socialism is inconceivable without the victory of proletarian conscious discipline over spontaneous petty-bourgeois anarchy'. (10)

However, this perspective becomes justified in the elitist terms that the exercise of Soviet democracy can become represented by the role of individuals. The complexity of the coercive tasks involved in overcoming the forces of capitalism, and establishing the superiority of the transitional forms promoting socialism, can mean that economic and political power is exercised by individuals: “If we are not anarchists, we must admit that the state, that is, coercion is necessary for the transition from capitalism to socialism. The form of coercion is determined by the degree of development of the revolutionary class, and also by special circumstances, such as for example, the legacy of a long and reactionary war and the forms of resistance put up by the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. There is therefore, absolutely no contradiction in principle between Soviet (that is socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals.”(11) Consequently the seriousness and complexity of the economic tasks involved in trying to promote the development of socialism has led to a serious compromise of the principles of industrial democracy and political democracy. Indeed democracy is understood to be compatible with the implementation of compulsion and repression, and Lenin suggests that it is possible to reconcile the Commune state, and its expression of political participation in the process of administration of the state, with the role of individual dictatorship: “The more resolutely we now have to stand for a ruthlessly firm government, for the dictatorship of individuals in definite processes of work, in definite aspects of purely executive functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below in order to counteract every shadow of a possibility of distorting the principles of Soviet government, in order repeatedly and tirelessly to weed out bureaucracy.”(12) Lenin may have considered that he was outlined the principles of developing socialism in a manner that reconciles coercion with democracy, but in actuality he has outlined the reasoning that justifies the rule of an elite. He has outlined the justification of the formation of a deformed workers state. It could be argued that this prospect was unavoidable in the unfavourable objective conditions of Russia in relation to the task of constructing socialism. But it also has to be remembered that theoretical flaws were justified, such as the skipping over the bourgeois democratic stage involving limited capitalism, and rejection of the promotion of the worker-peasant alliance via free trade in grain. These theoretical limitations were only to be partially overcome in 1921. But by then it was too late to restore functioning Soviet democracy.

In conclusion the Bolsheviks lacked a realistic economic policy in 1918 because they had over-ambitious plans about the possibility to realise socialism and therefore overcome the forces of capitalism. This meant they did not have any credible plans for what the workers should produce in the factories, and so as a result industrial production started to collapse. Hence they could not admit that what was desperately required was the production of industrial goods for the countryside, and this would revive the factories in terms of the exchange of these goods for grain. But this possibility was undermined by the coercive policy of war communism and the requisitioning of grain from the countryside. This policy was a disaster and led to the collapse of industry and the disintegration of society. The effective result of the economic failures of Bolshevism was the decline in the size and influence of the working class. This situation could only result in Bonapartist rule of the party over all classes. The Soviet regime became a form of proletarian Bonapartism. By 1918 the working class was increasingly opposed to the Bolsheviks. (13) However the alternatives were expressed by an unstable Left Social Revolutionaries, who embarked on an attempted coup in 1918. They would have ended war communism, but it is doubtful if they had serious plans to revive the economy. The most promising basis to promote Soviet democracy would have been an alliance of the Bolsheviks with Martov's brand of Menshevism. But this never happened because of historical differences. By 1924 Stalin was entrenched in power, and Trotsky led a flawed but brave opposition. The chance of unity with Bukharin was rejected in 1928. The last possibility to overthrow Stalin was gone. Hence the outcome of the revolution was a tragedy that never realised its promise. However, its failure did not mean it was futile. Without the attempt to change society capitalism will continue. Only revolutionary change can create the possibility to overcome capitalism and so create the possibility of progress to the classless society and the end of violence, poverty and exploitation.

Lenin's Economic Policy 1918-20

Lenin's major economic statement between 1918 and 1920 was his article: “Left-Wing Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality' (14). Supporters of his standpoint could argue that he was cautious in his approach in this pamphlet and he argued that the immediate aim of the Soviet regime was to construct state capitalism and not socialism. The problem with this perspective was that this aim was connected to the introduction and defence of war communism. This meant the petty-bourgeois kulak was considered as the major force for anarchic capitalist restoration, and in opposition to this influence the aim was to promote the leading role of the state in the economy and trade. Such a development would represent the advance of state capitalism at the expense of the anarchic interests of the kulak to engage in trade in relation to the motive of individual gain because of food scarcity. Lenin did not seem to understand that the possibilities for the development of capitalism in agriculture had been undermined by the process of land reform during and after the revolution which had led to the increasing influence of the middle peasant. This situation meant the most appropriate policy was trade with the middle peasant for the mutual benefit of town and countryside. Instead the grain requisitioning committees were resented by all strata of the peasants.

Lenin's major aim in his pamphlet was to discredit the policies of the Left Communist faction of the Bolsheviks who opposed his support for the signing of the Brest Litovsk treaty with the German army. He argued that the demagogic policy of the Left Communists in relation to imperialist war was repeated in relation to internal economic policy. He contended that their call for an offensive was no longer appropriate. The immediate task was not continued nationalisation because the Soviet state lacked the economic resources to carry out this task successfully. Instead the aim was to promote state capitalism: “It has not occurred to them that state capitalism would be a step forward as compared with the present state of affairs in our Soviet republic. If in approximately six months’ time state capitalism became established in our republic this would be a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have gained a permanently firm hold and will have become invincible in our country.”(15) Note that the apparent cautious emphasis on the importance of state capitalism does not mean a rejection of the ambitious perspective that socialism will soon be realised. On the contrary, state capitalism will be the short-term basis to promote the prospect of socialism. Lenin considers his proposals to be moderate and realistic because he is not suggesting the immediate realisation of socialism, and also that an offensive policy is not yet appropriate. But what he is implying is that state capitalism is necessary in order to defeat the forces of petty-bourgeois capital, such as the kulaks. Therefore what is being advocated is state regulation of the economy in order to undermine the influence and disruptive effect of small scale capital. He defends his proposal on the basis that the economy if differentiated between patriarchal peasant farming, small commodity production of self-sufficient peasants, private capitalism, state capitalism and socialism. Unfortunately he does not recognise that the middle peasants dominate within agriculture, and instead he argues the proletarian state should utilise state capitalism in order to defeat the private capital of the kulaks. In other words he conflates the character of small commodity production with private capitalism within agriculture. Hence he underestimates the role of the middle peasant.

He comments: “The question arises: what elements predominate?? Clearly in a small peasant country, the petty-bourgeois element predominates, and it must predominate, for the great majority of those working the land are small commodity producers.”(16) He concludes that the result of this situation is that the major contradiction is between petty bourgeois capital in opposition to state capitalism and socialism. Indeed, he defines this economic relationship as an acute danger to the survival of the Soviet state: “We know that the million tentacles of this petty bourgeois hydra now and again encircle various sections of the workers, that, instead of state monopoly, profiteering forces its way into every pore of our social and economic organism.”(17) Hence the aim is not to promote an alliance with the small peasantry, and instead he justifies establishing the domination of compulsion as the only alternative to the overthrow of workers power: “Either we subordinate the petty bourgeoisie to our control and accounting (we can do this if we organise the poor, that is the majority of the population or semi-proletarians around the politically conscious proletarian vanguard), or they will overthrow our workers power as surely and inevitably as the revolution was overthrown by the Napoleons and Cavaignacs who sprang from this very soil of petty proprietorship.”(18) Thus what is being considered is no longer the importance of the worker-peasant alliance, but instead the unity of the workers and the poorest sections of the peasants against the mass of the peasants. In actuality, the peasants were united against the grain requisitioning committees that had an urban origin. This mistaken policy had its origin in the theoretical flaws of Lenin. He was unable to assess the social effects of land reform in an accurate manner, and the result of his limitations was the justification of the coercion of war communism.

Lenin justified his errors in terms of the conflict of state capitalism with small ownership: “When the working class has learned how to defend the state system against the anarchy of small ownership, when it has learned to organise large-scale production on a national scale, along state capitalist lines, it will hold, if I may use the expression, all the trump cards, and the consolidation of socialism will be assured.”(19) Unfortunately, his boasting meant he justified the role of coercion in the name of the interests of state capitalism and socialism. Not only did this policy mean it was more difficult to obtain grain but it also created peasant discontent and opposition to the Soviet regime. The worker-peasant alliance was effectively ended. Lenin is apparently oblivious to these adverse consequences because he can only envisage the successful realisation of state capitalism and the related progress towards socialism. Emphasis on comparison with Germany, which has a state monopoly capitalism and the material basis for socialism, obscures the fact that the peasantry are becoming alienated from the economic aims of the Soviet state because of grain requisitioning. Indeed, it could be argued that the economic situation represents the worst possible scenario because the effective repression of the peasantry is combined with conciliation of important former capitalists who are considered useful for the task of developing production. Hence the policy of war communism goes alongside the end of industrial democracy and workers control. Lenin justifies this regressive policy in the following manner: “To describe as “compromise” the fact that, having arrived at a situation when we can and must rule the country, we try to win over to our side, not grudging the cost, the most skilled people capitalism has trained and to take them into our service against small proprietary disintegration, reveals a total incapacity to think out the tasks of socialist construction.”(20) Hence the consolidation of one man management occurs in tandem with the implementation of war communism, and the supposed promotion of state capitalism.

But the major objection is not that the working class should be reluctant to learn from the skills of the bourgeois specialists. Instead this introduction of state capitalism should not be at the expense of the continuation of industrial democracy and the accountability of managers to the factory committees and trade unions. Instead Lenin seems prepared to dilute these aspects of workers control in the name of supporting the development of state capitalism against small scale capitalism: “This work.... of introducing labour discipline....It is proceeding very cautiously and gradually, taking into account the lessons of the practical experience. This hard work, the work of learning practically how to build up large scale production, is the guarantee that we are on the right road, the guarantee that the class conscious workers in Russia are carrying on the struggle against small proprietary disintegration, against petty bourgeois indiscipline – the guarantee of the victory of communism.”(21) But in actuality, the real process of disintegration is brought about by war communism which means the peasant have no incentive to provide food for the cities, and the workers go hungry. This situation only indicates that the Soviet state has no viable economic policy for industry, and increasingly the workers do not know what to produce. The possibility of the trade of industrial goods for grain is undermined by the coercive character of war communism and the result is the decline of the cities and peasant discontent. What is required is the combination of the effective freedom of the peasants to trade and the continuation of industrial democracy. The aim of promoting state capitalism is an illusion because of the limitations of war communism. Instead of the encouragement of state capitalism what was actually occurring is the centralisation of production and consumption under the domination of the deformed workers state. Despite his strengths, Lenin seems unable to go beyond illusions in war communism and state capitalism. Martov had made the point that state capitalism could only be effective when combined with genuine political democracy. Instead in 1918 the one party state was being constructed after the end of the alliance of the Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries. The onset of civil war meant that no more economic innovations occurred during its duration. War communism was continued and so the economic problems worsened, and the discontent of the workers and peasants increased.

Tragically, Lenin understood the sociological importance of the middle peasants, but this was never translated into a rejection of war communism. Instead for some reason he could only envisage the importance of class struggle within agriculture between the kulaks and the poor peasants. Hence he could not recognise that this class differentiation had been undermined by the land reform of 1917-18 which had created the dominant strata of the middle peasants. However he often expressed sympathy for the middle peasants that suggested policy could be different to war communism: “No, we are not even fighting the middle peasant, let alone the poor peasant. All over Russia, the middle peasants have only the smallest surpluses of grain. The middle peasants for decades before the revolution lived worse than the workers. Before the revolution their life was one of unrelieved want and oppression. Our policy towards the middle peasants is one of agreement. The socialist revolution means equality for all the working people; it would be unfair for the urban worker to receive more than the middle peasant, who does not exploit the labour of others by hiring labour or profiteering; the peasants suffer from greater want and oppression than the workers, and fare even worse than the workers.”(22)

But these fine words are not realised in practice because war communism could meant that the small grain surplus of the middle peasant was confiscated by the state. In practice the middle peasant could be treated as an opponent of the soviet regime and considered no differently to the kulak. It is also questionable whether the kulak had immense surpluses of grain, and so the issue of capitalist restoration was exaggerated. Whatever the situation the implementation of war communism often united all of the sections of the peasantry against the Soviet state. Instead Lenin imaginatively presented the situation in the countryside as expressing the development of class struggle between the poor peasantry and semi-proletariat against the kulak.(23) He proclaimed that the socialist revolution had begun in the rural areas.(24) But he also had to admit that the urban food requisitioning detachments had led to resentment and revolts by the peasantry, however the significance of this development was glossed over because he suggested that the poor peasants united with the urban workers to end these revolts.

His position is also defended in terms of the view that the food situation would be worse if a free trade position was implemented: “If there is a shortage of food, it means...what does it mean? It means that if you were to sanction free trade when there is a shortage of essential foodstuffs, the result would be frantic profiteering and prices would be inflated to what is called monopoly or famine prices, and only a few top people would, with incomes considerably above the average, would be able to satisfy their needs at these fantastic prices, while the vast majority of the people would starve.”(25) But the point is people are already starving and this is because of the present policy. What the peasants object to is the confiscation of the grain, and so it would be possible to introduce maximum prices without incurring their discontent if they are allowed to trade. This approach would represent a sensible compromise between the extremes of state compulsion or profiteering. The problem is Lenin equates profiteering with free trade. He cannot envisage the possibility that a form of free trade may be devised that satisfies the aspiration of both peasants and workers. Instead he can only consider that compulsion is the alternative to profiteering, but this approach does not provide the food that is needed by the cities. So famine occurs despite the best intentions of the Soviet regime. The result is the demoralisation of the cities, and it is not coincidence that the period of workers control is also ending and its principles are being diluted by a form of administration in which the trade unions are subordinated to management.(26) Hierarchy is being established in a situation of growing discontent.

Lenin admits that there is discontent amongst the peasantry and the workers, and so the only alternative is to create a centralised economic system: “That is very difficult, and it is natural that many millions of people, who are accustomed to looking on the central authorities as robbers, landowners, exploiters, can have no trust in the centre. But this distrust must be overcome. Socialism cannot be built if it is not, for that means building a centralised economic system, an economic system directed from the centre, and that can only be done by the proletariat, which has been trained in this spirit by the factory and its whole mode of life. Only the proletariat can do this. The fight against parochial tendencies, against the habits of the small property owner, is a difficult one.”(27) The problem is that he does not seem to recognise that aspects of centralisation have to be combined with recognition of the importance of local conditions as in relation to the generation of food supply. All villages are different and diverse, and so require sensitivity in terms of the relations of the city to the countryside. However this flexible possibility would require ending war communism because that was based on the role of confiscation of grain from the village, and so was a crude and primitive policy that was indifferent to the alienation of the peasants.

However all these types of issues can be avoided because Lenin can argue that what is crucial and primary is that the peasants choose the rule of the Soviet regime as an alternative to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie during the period of the civil war. Also despite the limitations of war communism, Lenin insists in 1919 that force is not been used against the middle peasantry. But it is also argued that the middle peasantry whilst not exploiting others, are simultaneously property owners who vacillate between the working class and the bourgeoisie. (28) This formulation would explain the middle peasants’ opposition to the Soviet regime and the policy of war communism. Lenin blames the problem of bureaucrat's and careerists for alienating the middle peasants from the Soviet regime, and in this manner he is able to avoid having to put responsibility onto the limitations of war communism. He concludes: “You cannot create anything here by coercion. Coercion applied to the middle peasants would cause untold harm.”(29) Lenin suggests that if the Soviet state provides tractors to the middle peasants, and so improves their economic conditions this would improve economic and political relations. But what he has glossed over is that the issue of improving relations with the middle peasants would also require an end to grain requisitioning and war communism.

The resolution adopted by the eighth congress of the RCP concerning the middle peasants is full of good intentions. It beings with the view that: “To confuse the middle peasants with the kulaks and to extend to them in one or another degree measures directed against the kulaks is to violate most flagrantly not only all of the decrees of the Soviet government and its entire policy, but also all the basic principles of communism, according to which agreement between the proletariat and the middle peasant is one of the conditions for a painless transition to the abolition of all exploitation in the period of decisive struggle waged by the proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie.”(30) This view implied that bureaucratic practices that alienated the middle peasantry were a violation of war communism rather than its logical expression. Hence war communism was still considered as the most appropriate method to obtain grain during the civil war. However violations of this policy were admitted and it was accepted that corrections had to be carried out if adverse relations between the Soviet state and the middle peasantry were to be satisfactorily resolved. Thus the appropriate policy was one of co-operation between the middle peasants and the Soviet state. This means it was accepted that on occasions the middle peasants were treated like kulaks and so violations of the correct policy had been justified: “The party must at all costs ensure that all Soviet functionaries in the countryside have a clear and thorough grasp of the axiom of scientific socialism that the middle peasants are not exploiters since they do not profit by the labour of others. Such a class of small producers cannot lose by socialism, but, on the contrary, will gain a great deal by casting off the yoke of capital which exploits it in a thousand different ways even in a most democratic republic.”(31)

In other words the consequences of the limitations of war communism were put onto the shoulders of those officials and grain requisitioning detachments that had apparently violated the correct policy. This was a crafty ideological device which meant the problems created by the coercive character of war communism could be denied. Indeed it was argued that those bureaucratic grain requisitioning committees would be punished. But the problem was that it was impossible to differentiate between kulaks and middle peasants in relation to the arbitrary task of the collection of grain. Indeed it was this arbitrary character which meant the middle peasants were actually regularly treated like kulaks, and it was because of this lack of differentiation which meant there was widespread resentment against war communism. Consequently the problem was not occasional violations but instead the confiscatory and coercive character of the overall policy. Indeed because of the very arbitrary aspect of war communism, Lenin was apt to forget the importance of the divisions within the peasantry and to treat them as one undifferentiated class: “As working people, the peasants will not forget for many years to come that it was the workers alone who liberated them from the landowners. That cannot be contested: but they remain property owners in a commodity producing economy. Every case of a sale of grain on the open market, of speculation and profiteering is the restoration of a commodity producing economy, and hence of capitalism. By overthrowing the capitalists we liberated the peasantry, a class which in old Russia undoubtedly comprised the majority of the population. The peasants have remained property owners in their form of production, and they are continuing to develop new capitalist relations after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.”(32) This definition of the peasants meant they were treated as one undifferentiated mass because of the tendency of all peasants to engage in free trade and so defy the limitations of war communism. The very ideology and aspiration for free trade meant the peasants were considered as supporters of the commodity economy and so defined as capitalists. Such a harsh definition of the peasantry actually defined how they were treated under the war communist regime. Sympathy towards the middle peasants was a bit of a myth.

Lenin justified war communism as part of the class struggle against the role of the peasant as a property owner. However, this argument is not consistent because Lenin implicitly accepts that his reasoning implies the justification of the end of the worker-peasant alliance. This means he has to undermine his prior reasoning and suggests that sections of the peasantry can be won to the aims of socialism: “And now we are faced with a second task, that of bringing moral influence to bear on the peasantry. Coercive methods towards the peasantry will help us little. It is the economic differentiation of the peasantry that is involved here.....Nevertheless the peasantry of today are disunited; the interests of one section clash with those of another.....To divide the peasantry and win over the non-kulak elements will require a lot of time. It will involve a long struggle in which we shall employ all our forces, every means at our disposal. But force alone cannot ensure victory; moral means must be employed too.”(33) The problem with this speech is that theory could not be reconciled with practice. The implementation of war communism meant that all peasants, regardless of social strata, were treated as potential adherents of commodity production and capitalism, and the result was that repression was used in order to obtain supposed grain surpluses. But in theory, the various differentiations within the peasantry were recognised, and it was argued that force should not be utilised against the middle peasant. The dictates of practice were dominant because the grain requisitioning committees failed to recognise any distinctions within the peasantry. Instead repression was utilised against all the sections of the peasantry. What the Bolsheviks failed to recognise was that the application of war communism undermined the promotion of the worker-peasant alliance. Nor was grain obtained for the cities in sufficient quantities. Only the continuation of civil war meant war communism was continued despite its unsatisfactory character. But the end of civil war led to widespread peasant revolts, and the Kronstadt uprising included the demand for the end of war communism. It was only a matter of time before this policy would have to be replaced. Trotsky made suggestions for reform in 1920, but his proposals were rejected. However, the trade union debates of 1920 expressed some interesting ideas that would imply the necessity to end war communism.

The discussion on the role of the trade unions began in late 1920. Lenin was opposed to Trotsky's proposals that seemed to suggest that the significance of the trade unions could be equated with the very character of the workers state. Lenin replied and argued: “But the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of that class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here in one of the most backward) the proletariat is so divided, so degraded and so corrupted in parts (by imperialism in some countries) that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard that has absorbed the revolutionary energy of the class.”(34) This standpoint seems to represent criticism from a perspective that is more right wing than the approach of Trotsky. Lenin is justifying the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat in terms of the primacy of the role of the vanguard elite. He is against any suggestion that the proletarian state represents some form of equation of class with the character of society. Instead only a section of the class, its most politically conscious vanguard, the party, will carry out the functions of the state administration. But Lenin is also defending an important point of principle because he suggests that Trotsky's standpoint implies that the trade unions do not have to defend their interests against those of the state because there is an identity of interest. Lenin contends this view is an illusion because: “Our Party Programme.....shows that ours is a workers state with a bureaucratic twist to it.”(35) The actuality of bureaucratic distortions, and the possibility of the misuse of state power by the vanguard elite, means that the trade unions have to establish their independence from the state: “We now have a state under which it is the business of the massively organised proletariat to protect itself, while we, for our part, must use these workers organisations to protect the workers from their state, and to get them to protect our state.”(36)

The implications of this position are potentially enormous. If the working class require the independence of the trade unions in order to make a bureaucratically distorted state accountable to them, and the basis to enact policy that is in the interests of the working class, the same point could be made in relation to the peasantry. It is possible that war communism has been a flawed, elitist and coercive policy that has not properly expressed the interests of the peasants, and especially the middle peasants. Hence in order to make the bureaucratic workers state accountable to the peasants it is necessary to reject the policy of war communism and introduce a different policy that is more in the interests of the majority of the peasants. This point is not immediately realised by Lenin who is still defending the existing policy in February 1921: “We have a dictatorship of the proletariat, a term that scares the peasants, but it is the only means that is capable of uniting them and making them follow the lead of the workers. We believe that this is the correct solution, and the working class will succeed in uniting the peasantry.”(37) Lenin is aware that something is wrong in relations between the workers and peasants, but he is still reluctant to change policy. He believes that an end to war communism may endanger the continuation of the proletarian state. Hence despite the problems associated with war communism, he still considers that the following view is valid: “In Russia, the working class is exercising its dictatorship; it is the ruling class in a country where workers are in a minority. But it is precisely because the working class is ruling the country and because the workers have borne the brunt of capitalist exploitation that it is assured of the sympathy and massive support of the working peasantry and all those who do not live on the labour of others.”(38) So despite problems war communism must be continued.

However, at the tenth party congress he makes the vital point that war communism was only justified by the emergency requirements of civil war. (39) However he is increasingly aware that war communism cannot be continued because of peasant discontent and the increasing demand for freedom of trade: “What is the meaning of the unrestricted trade demanded by the petty bourgeois elements? It is that in the proletariat's relations with small farmers there are difficult problems and tasks we have yet to solve. I am speaking of the victorious proletariat's relations with the small proprietors when the proletarian revolution unfolds in a country where the proletariat is in a minority, and the petty bourgeoisie is in a majority.”(40) Lenin is possibly admitting for the first time that war communism is no longer valid for a country in which the peasantry are predominant. He accepts the necessity to address the concerns of the peasantry in terms of allowing limited trade and the introduction of a tax on surpluses instead of confiscation. He is aware that war communism has contributed to the de-classing of the proletariat, which has often left the factories for the countryside in order to obtain food: “Are we not aware of the fact that the unprecedented crises, the Civil War, the disruption of proper relations between the town and country and the cessation of grain deliveries have given rise to a trade in small articles made at the big factories – such as cigarette lighters – which are exchanged for cereals because the workers are starving, and no grain is being delivered?”(41) Lenin accepts at the tenth congress of the Communist Party that the peasants have become dissatisfied with the policy of war communism, and this means the middle peasants who are the majority of the peasants have become alienated from the Soviet state. Hence the approach of incentives should replace compulsion in agricultural relations: “The small farmer, as long as he remains small, needs a spur, an incentive that accords with his economic basis, i.e., the individual small farm. Here you cannot avoid local free exchange. If this turnover gives the state in exchange for manufactured goods, a certain minimum amount of grain to cover urban and industrial requirements, economic circulation will be revived with state power remaining in the hands of the proletariat and growing stronger.”(42) Lenin admits for the first time that war communism was too ambitious and: 'went further than was theoretically and politically necessary' (43). In other words: “We can allow free local exchange to an appreciable extent, without destroying but actually strengthening the political power of the proletariat.”(44)

In sociological terms, Lenin justifies his New Economic policy in terms of the importance of the middle peasantry: “A greater proportion of peasants in Russia have become middle peasants, and three is no reason to fear exchange on an individual basis.”(45) Hence Lenin has rejected the theoretical limitations that exaggerated the problem of the influence of the kulak and capitalist restoration. He is now more reflective and recognises the fact that the land reform of the revolution has led to the predominance of the middle peasant. They can be allies in the process of socialist construction because their grain can be sold profitably, or exchanged for industrial goods, which can be obtained by purchasing these goods from the capitalist countries before they are produced internally. The influence of the Kulak will be undermined not by the repression of war communism but by the promotion of economic links between the state and the middle peasant. Exchange between the state and middle peasant will mean that trade is for the benefit of the state and the working class, the very aspirations of the peasantry will contribute towards socialist construction. In reply to criticism that Lenin is advocating the restoration of capitalism, he argues that what is not recognised was that war communism was dictated by the conditions of civil war. This situation has changed. It is not possible to embark on a direct transition to communism in a peasant country. Encouragement for the small farmer, who may not be initially sympathetic to socialism, will ultimately be to the benefit of socialist industry because the workers will have access, via trade, to greater quantities of grain.

However the unfortunate consequence of the factional conflict between the party leadership and the Workers Opposition meant that a return to industrial democracy was not considered to be the logical extension of the New Economic Policy. Instead the application of the NEP, or the acknowledgement that mistakes had been made in agricultural policy, did not result in an emphasis on the end of one man management. This situation was characterised as one of acute political crisis because of the recent Kronstdat uprising and the factional tension inside the Communist Party. The result was that the promise of the trade union debate to make the bureaucratic workers state accountable to the workers and peasants was not realised. Instead the NEP was introduced in connection to the tendency to accelerate the process of the centralisation of the Soviet regime. The role of political democracy was associated with the demagogy of the Mensheviks. Hence the potential of the NEP to promote political liberalisation was never realised. Instead the ban on factions meant the party itself became the instrument for further bureaucratisation and centralisation. The democratic lessons of the trade union debate were effectively forgotten because what was remembered from this debate was Lenin's view that the dictatorship of the proletariat was most effectively upheld by a vanguard elite. Accountability of this elite was rejected because of the perception that the regime could only survive as an iron dictatorship. Yet the political lesson of the NEP was that economic coercion did not work, what was required was relaxation of the methods of coercion and their replacement by consensus. This implied that political freedom, such as the restoration of multi-party democracy was the next logical step. Unfortunately this never happened because the party never considered the middle peasant to be a reliable ally. The spectre of capitalist restoration seemed to hover over the application of the NEP. This was why Stalin could raise the kulak threat in 1928, and so prepared the basis for the end of the NEP. Once again the middle peasant was given the label of kulak. All the errors of war communism were to be repeated.

In his 'Report on the Tax In Kind', Lenin still justifies war communism in terms of the appropriation of grain without the prospect of remuneration because of the dire economic situation caused by the civil war.(42) He justifies the new approach in terms of providing incentives to the middle peasants, who he admits have become the majority of the peasants: “The extremes of kulaks and poor have been rounded off, and the majority of the population have come closer to the status of the middle peasant. If we want to raise the productivity of our peasant farming we must reckon chiefly with the

middle peasant.”(46) This perspective is utilised in order to refute the claim that increased trade will only increase the economic power of the kulak. He admits that a certain amount of capitalism will occur but this can be to the advantage of the workers because the effect of increased trade will be the revival of industry which will produce goods for the countryside. In his pamphlet the 'Tax in Kind' he contends that: “The most urgent thing at the present time is to take measures that immediately increase the productive forces of peasant farming. Only in this way will it be possible to improve the condition of the workers, strengthen the alliance between the workers and peasants, and consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(48) Hence the view promoted at the time of war communism which emphasised the differences between the workers and peasants has been replaced by a conception of mutual interests. To continue to differentiate the interests of the workers from the peasants is to defend sectional interests and to fail to recognise that the aim of economic progress requires the unity of the workers and peasants.

Lenin admits that war communism was the confiscation of the surplus of the peasantry because of dire economic need in the period of civil war. This is now defined as a 'makeshift policy' which is not able to promote the correct policy of the exchange of grain for industrial goods. This aim will be promoted by a tax on a certain level of grain combined with the right of free trade. The only problem with his standpoint was that he also emphasised the importance of concessions to the industrial companies of the West to engage in production in Russia in order to help provide the industrial goods for exchange with the peasantry. This perspective is worthy but is undermined by the political tensions of the time and the reluctance of international capitalism to help build socialism. What would be more useful would be concentration on the role of state planning. However, this standpoint seems to be a long-term goal and so the only other option is support for small industry. Lenin seems reluctant to endorse this option, although he does recognise its importance. The problem is that his approach is based on the perspective of state capitalism, via state regulation of the large scale monopolies of the West, and this standpoint represents wishful thinking rather than practical sense. However, Lenin does call for research in order to establish what are the most effective methods to develop production and promote trade. In that sense Lenin is non-dogmatic and is prepared to revise his original views about economic development.

In his 'Report to the Tenth All Russian Conference of the RCP' Lenin admits that the concessions policy has not worked, and the problem of generating the exchange of industrial products for food has not yet occurred.(49) Nor has the revival of large scale industry occurred. This means the problem might develop that the peasantry has no incentive for grain exchange given the lack of industrial goods. In order to resolve this dilemma in the short-term, Lenin admits that there is no alternative than to promote the development of small scale industry.(50) To be opposed to this possibility because of fear of the influence of capitalism is wrong because what is being encouraged is a short-term answer to the problem of the goods shortage for agriculture. However, Lenin makes what seems like a warning to the peasantry: “We tell the peasantry frankly and honestly, without any deception: in order to hold the road to socialism we are making a number of concessions to you, comrade peasants, but only within the stated limits and to the stated extent; and, of course, we ourselves shall be the judge of the limits and the extent.......We say that we shall agree to make any concessions within the limits of what will sustain and strengthen the power of the proletariat, which, in spite of all its difficulties and obstacles, is unswervingly advancing towards the abolition of classes and towards communism.”(51) This comment is irrational, and seems to imply that the New Economic Policy and compromise with the peasants is resented. But the so-called concessions to the peasants actually represents the only practical policy that could promote the economic development of Russia after the period of civil war. To allow trade is not primarily an empirical necessity but is actually the most feasible approach for the generation of the possibility of socialism. Hence a so-called compromise, or deviation from the true path, is actually an expression of what is necessary to revive industry and agriculture and to therefore advance the aim of socialism. In this context what has occurred is not a concession, and is instead an expression of the most feasible strategy to internally promote progress towards socialism. This means this policy is in the interests of both workers and peasants. Their interests are not counter-posed, and instead are complementary. The ideological problem seems to be that Lenin has not entirely overcome the influences of war communism and is instead still considering the relations between the peasants and workers in terms of antagonism. This understanding seems partly a concession to those party members who are critical of the NEP.

The tensions of Lenin's approach are outlined when he comments: “The supreme principle of the dictatorship is the maintenance of the alliance between the proletariat and peasantry in order that the proletariat may retain its leading role and its political power.”(52) Of course it could be argued that in the last analysis this is the only strategy that is principled. But what also has to be emphasised is the mutual interest between the workers and peasants. Without this common interest the question of an alliance would be very problematic and instead there would be relations based on antagonism and struggle. Lenin sometimes seems to reject this conception of common interest when he simply equates the NEP with the development of capitalism. This implies that the peasants represent capitalism and the workers are for socialism. But in fact the peasants are for trade and this is in the interests of the state which is also in favour of trade in order to obtain grain. These mutual relations were weakened by war communism, and so this is why this policy had to be ended and replaced by something that was able to express more effectively the common interests of workers and peasants.

But increasingly Lenin was less inclined to defend war communism, and instead by late 1921 he considered it a mistake based on a false conception of the transition to socialism. In his speech on the NEP to the second congress of 'Political Education Departments' he criticised war communism in unmistakeable terms: “Partly owing to the war problems that overwhelmed us and partly owing to the desperate position in which the Republic found itself when the imperialist war ended – owing to these circumstances, and to a number of others, we made the mistake of deciding to go over directly to communist production and distribution. We thought that under the surplus-food appropriation system the peasants would provide us with the required quantity of grain, which we could distribute among the factories and thus achieve communist production and distribution.”(53) Thus what had been considered to have been an unavoidable practical necessity is now defined as being an expression of theoretical and practical illusion. War communism had been based on the false premises of voluntaristic illusions about the possibilities of a quick and direct transition to the successful overthrow of capitalism. This new understanding implied that the peasants had been antagonised because of the illusions of the party about the character of the objective situation. The complex understanding of the development of socialism was undermined by the dogmatic illusions of war communism. The incorrect policy meant that an economic defeat occurred, which presumably means that less grain than was possible was acquired by the state, and so a strategic retreat became necessary. This retreat can be orderly because it corresponds to the situation in relation to the necessity to introduce incentives for the peasants in order for the state to obtain grain. However, this situation generates the question as to whether the peasants will follow the working class or capitalist class. (54) In other words despite the negative evaluation of war communism the alternative is posed in problematical terms of a retreat that may restore capitalism. But it would be a more perceptive view to suggest that a retreat is necessary in order to undermine the prospect of capitalist restoration. The alienation of the peasants from the Soviet regime was caused by the excesses of war communism. Hence a retreat which introduces free trade in grain is the only manner in which the worker and peasant alliance can be consolidated, and therefore ensure the possibility of progress towards the realisation of socialism. Lenin does generally outline the issues of power in these optimistic terms because he contends that the proletariat-peasant alliance will ensure that the development of capitalism is regulated by the state and is in the interests of socialism. But he is also cautious and suggests that it will be a fierce struggle to ensure that the regime can control the development of anarchic commodity exchange. The point is to establish a popular movement of workers and peasants in order to ensure victory. The forces of capitalism have technical and organisational superiority, but the proletarian regime has the ability to develop popular support that will undermine the influence of reaction: “The issue of the struggle depends on whether we succeed in organising the small peasants on the basis of the development of the productive forces with proletarian state assistance for this development, or whether the capitalists gain control over them.”(55)

In other words the issue of capitalist restoration is very complex. It could be argued that the present policy generates the possibility of capitalism because commodity exchange is allowed and encouraged. But to be content with this conclusion would be dogmatic because the very character and effectiveness of the policy of the proletarian state will be able to ensure that this development of capitalism is kept within the limits of state capitalism and is to the benefit of the construction of socialism. It is simplistic and fatalistic to suggest that NEP is encouraging capitalism. This is formally true, but the role of state policy is vital in order to ensure that the development of capitalism is kept within acceptable limits. Hence we should not fear the dynamics of capitalist restoration, but rather understand how limited development of capitalism can be to the benefit of socialism. The point is that there is no alternative because the direct approach of war communism has failed. Instead an indirect approach utilising personal incentives and the limited development of capitalism has to replace the frontal strategy: “We tried to solve this problem straight out, by a frontal attack, as it were, but we suffered defeat. Such mistakes occur in every war, and they are not even regarded as mistakes. Since the frontal attack failed, we shall make a flanking movement and also use the method of siege and undermining.”(56)

War communism failed because it was the wrong strategy to promote socialism. This implies that the result of this failed approach was the generation of the forces of capitalist restoration in the form of the discontent of the peasantry. Therefore there was no alternative than to change the policy because the continuation of war communism would have meant the toppling of the regime and the victory of counter-revolution. Consequently the threat of the victory of capitalism is not greater under the present situation, even if it seems that the situation allows greater freedom for commodity production and exchange. The point is that this trade can be regulated by the state in terms of allowing personal incentives for the peasants. This is how we obtain the support of the peasantry for the aims of the Soviet state. The tasks will not be easy because competition between the forces of capitalism and communism continue, and so the survival of the regime will often be put into question. However, what should be remembered is that the continuation of the old policy would have been to ensure greater support for capitalism and counter-revolution. In contrast, the support for capitalism can be connected to the aims of the proletarian state, and so enhanced trade can be utilised in order to facilitate the development of industry. Only the present policy ensures the undermining of capitalist restoration because it promotes the connection between trade and industry. In other words war communism was undermined by subjective illusions because it was unable to establish the economic connections between workers and peasants that could promote the development of socialism. This policy represented the declaration of the possibility for communism, but the means to achieve it – frontal attack – (coercion) was flawed. It is necessary to construct the objective basis for socialism, via increased trade and the generation of industry, in terms of the indirect means of the regulation of capitalism. Only this approach can ensure the consolidation of the worker-peasant alliance that can promote the advance of socialism.

Lenin utilises an analogy from warfare in order to assess the usefulness of war communism. He contends that although this strategy of direct attack was a failure it still represented the useful ability to establish the balance of forces and indicated the necessity to develop a more effective approach: “Hence these tactics were necessary and useful; for without a test of strength by the practical attempt to carry the fortress by assault, without testing the enemy's power of resistance, there would have been no grounds for adopting the more prolonged and arduous method of struggle, which by the very fact it was prolonged, harboured a number of other dangers.”(57) In other words war communism was a strategic failure, and it could not ensure the success of its objectives which were a frontal attempt to ensure direct transition to socialism. But it had its merits in its very failure. It proved that the direct approach was futile and counter-productive and that the only appropriate method was that of siege and the gradual undermining of the strength of the opposition. War communism was mistaken and had to be replaced, but its very failure was useful because it proved conclusively that an alternative strategy was necessary. What had shown to be a failure was the view that: “We regarded the organisational, economic work that, which we put in the forefront at that time, from a single angle. We assumed that we could proceed straight to socialism without a preliminary period in which the old economy would be adapted to socialist economy. We assumed that by introducing state production and distribution we had established an economic system of production and distribution that differed from the previous one. We assumed that the two systems – state production and distribution and private commodity production and distribution - would compete with each other, and meanwhile we would build up state production and distribution, and step by step win them away from the hostile system.”(58)

Hence the view had been that the task was to try and immediately create a state system of production and distribution within agriculture that could express an alternative to private commodity production and exchange. The conception was to try and develop a form of competition that would enable state production and distribution to become dominant. This perspective was shown to be illusory. What was not recognised was that the situation was not receptive for this transition to state regulation of production and distribution because of the unfavourable economic conditions and the attitudes of the peasantry. The only alternative was to accept that this approach had been based on illusions about the favourable possibilities to establish state production and distribution and so what became necessary was a retreat: “By the spring of 1921 it had become evident that we had suffered defeat in our attempt to introduce the socialist principles of production and distribution by “direct assault”, i.e., in the shortest, quickest and most direct way. The political situation in spring 1921 revealed to us that on a number of economic issues a retreat to the position of state capitalism, the substitution of “siege tactics” for “direct assault”, was inevitable.”(59)

This comment is effectively an underestimation of what was occurring. The fact was that widespread peasant revolts, and the discontent in the cities, meant the overthrow of the Soviet regime was imminent. The only basis for survival was to reject the policy of war communism. Strictly this could be conceived as a U-turn but what Lenin is trying to suggest is that the illusions of a direct transition to socialism had been refuted by the very discontent of the peasantry. They had shown that it was not popular to try and implement war communism and instead the only basis to maintain the support of the peasantry for the regime was to introduce a different policy that provided the peasants with greater economic freedom. This change of policy may have been defined by Lenin as a retreat, but in actuality there was no alternative if the Soviet regime was to survive. Indeed, Lenin calls this reversal of policy a defeat, but he accepts that was unavoidable because the policy of war communism was shown to be illusory and did not promote the possibility of direct transition to socialism. Instead it only alienated the peasantry from the objectives of the Bolshevik government. Thus retreat is the only realistic option of the Bolsheviks. The point is that advance can occur after a period of retreat. But this advance cannot assume the direct forms previously adopted, instead it must be an advance that has different forms and is more able to establish the co-operation between workers and peasants. Indeed it may be necessary to establish a whole series of retreats before the most appropriate method of promotion of socialism is realised: “We could not carry on with the tactics of direct assault, but had to undertake the very difficult, arduous and unpleasant task of a long siege accompanied by a number of retreats. This is necessary to pave the way for the solution of the economic problem, i.e. that of economic transition to socialist principles.”(60)

Lenin's reference to the unpleasant character of the new approach refers to the fact that any change of policy that indicates the illusions of the old approach is not wanted, and instead they would have preferred to establish socialism within agriculture by direct methods. But this does not mean that the new economic policy is merely ad hoc or short-term, instead the role of retreat is identical to the development of a new strategy for the process of transition to socialism. The failure to recognise the aspirations of the peasants had led to the situation of the prospect of the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime. Hence it is necessary to listen more seriously to the peasants, and understand their aspirations more effectively, in order to promote the possibility of transition to socialism. This may represent a process of retreat because the direct transition to socialism has been rejected, but retreat will be more effective in the long-term in generating the economic conditions and popular support for socialism. Thus retreat is necessary in order to create the conditions for advance. Retreat does not mean capitulation to the forces of capitalism even if forms of capitalist economic activity will become manifest in this new period. In this context, Lenin admits that the retreat to state capitalism was not sufficient and instead it was necessary to retreat to a situation of open trade and encouragement of commodity exchange is necessary. “That is why we find ourselves in the position of having to retreat still further, in order, eventually, to go onto the offensive. That is why we must all admit that the methods of our previous economic policy were wrong. We must admit this in order to understand the nature of the present position, the specific features of the transition that now lies ahead of us.”(61)

This comment explicitly recognises that the approach of war communism was fundamentally flawed. Hence the purpose of retreat is not to re-establish the role of war communism. Instead the character of the retreat has established a more appropriate basis to advance the aim of socialism via the importance of agreement with the peasants and the role of commodity exchange and trade. The previous approach only established opposition to socialism and so advance could not occur. If advance is to be made practical, feasible, and not illusory, then retreat is the dialectical aspect that actually ends in promoting this possibility of advance. Hence to argue that the very cause of communism has been defeated by this retreat is defeatist talk. He admits that the pessimists argue that retreat can only result in defeat and the end of the attempt to establish communism. Lenin accepts that retreat has its dangers and risks, such as the possibility of the restoration of capitalism because of the relaxation of commodity production and exchange. But the point he is making is that these risks or tensions are unavoidable, and the process of the development of socialism cannot occur without contradictions being generated. Furthermore, the major problem has proved to be was the attempt to directly realise transition to socialism. This situation has led to mass discontent and the possibility of the popular overthrow of the Bolshevik regime. Hence the only alternative that could save the attempt to build socialism was to retreat. There is no other option. But this retreat is not simply a matter of survival it is instead the most appropriate method by which to promote socialism. The direct attempt to construct socialism has proved to be a failure, and so the only alternative is to conceive of retreat as the most effective and practical basis to advance socialism: “It would be much more pleasant to capture capitalist trade by assault, and under certain circumstances ( if our factories were not ruined and if we had a developed economy and culture) it would not be a mistake to launch an “assault”........In the present circumstances, however, the mistake we make is that we refuse to understand that another method of approach is necessary and inevitable.”(62) The point being made is that the present unfavourable conditions for the transition to socialism mean that the retreat is unavoidable. This is the strategy that is vindicated by the dialectical understanding that retreat is the only basis for further advance.

Lenin is entirely open to the possibility that tactics for promoting socialism may change if the international revolution advances. But what he is presently concerned with are the tasks of the immediate situation. He is concerned with how a backward and isolated country can most effectively advance the aim of socialism. This question requires the necessity of retreat, and learning how to trade: “Trade is the “link” in the historical chain of events, in the transitional forms of our socialist construction in 1921-22, which we the proletarian government, we the ruling Communist Party, “must grasp with all our might”. If we grasp this link firmly enough now we shall certainly control the whole chain in the very near future. If we do not, we shall not control the whole chain, we shall not create the foundation for socialist social and economic relations.”(63) Lenin is making the point that the peasants only accept trade as an acceptable economic function. Hence if this trade is to be utilised in favour of socialism instead of capitalism, then the communists must learn how to trade. Ultimately trade will become the connection between the small farmers and the large scale industry in terms of the exchange of grain for industrial goods. This should be the aim of the Bolshevik government. Hence trade should be orientated and directed towards the realisation of the interests of socialism. This process will in turn be in the interests of the peasants who will materially gain from this trade. Hence trade is the consensual policy that is an acceptable alternative to the compulsion of war communism. It could be argued that this policy creates the possibility of the restoration of capitalism because the trade of the small farmers will overwhelm the capacity of the socialist sector of the economy. This is why Lenin urges the Soviet state to learn how to trade, and in this manner trade can benefit the advance of socialism. Indifference towards the aspects of the process of retreat can only result in defeat. Learn to trade and socialism will benefit!

Lenin also admits that trade is vital because it has not yet been possible to establish a process of exchange of industrial goods for grain. The importance of large scale industry in the advanced capitalist countries would make a direct transition to socialism possible. This situation does not exist in the USSR, and so trade is required in order to generate the possibility of the creation of these material conditions. Trade in grain would in an immediate sense feed the workers. The alternative of war communism led to the undermining of the worker-peasant alliance. But trade can revive small scale industry which can be a preliminary step towards the revival of large scale industry.(64) In this manner of a detour the material advance towards socialism can be built. Lenin is suggesting that this change of economic strategy will mean that progress will be slow, but this will not undermine the possibility of the realisation of socialism: “We need the aid of the peasants to assimilate our great political victory. We need to look at things soberly and realise that victory has been won, but it has not yet become part and parcel of the economy of everyday life and of the living conditions of the people. This work will take many decades and will require colossal efforts. It cannot be carried at the same rate, speed, and under the same conditions which existed during the war.”(65) Lenin is outlining how the victory over reaction in the civil war is not identical to the economic advance of socialism because the peasantry did not support this aim during war communism. Instead different tactics of a slower and more gradual character have had to be adopted, and this means the possibility to construct socialism will be a task taking many decades. But he is warning the party that to undermine the worker-peasant alliance in the name of accelerating progress towards socialism will only result in endangering the prospect of realisation of this aim.

Lenin admits at the eleventh congress of the RCP that during the period of war communism there was effectively no connection or link between the peasant and urban economies. (66) Indeed he admits that this connection has not yet been established in the beginning period of the NEP. Hence one of the present tasks is to create this link to the peasantry: “We must reveal this link so that we may see it clearly, so that all the people may see it, and so that the whole mass of the peasantry may see that there is a connection between their present severe, incredibly ruined, incredibly impoverished and painful existence and the work which is being done for the sake of remote socialist ideals.”(67) Lenin is admitting that the October revolution has not led to material benefits for the peasantry, and so it is necessary to provide incentives that will connect the peasantry with the aim of constructing the socialist economy. The view that Lenin is developing is that the limitations of war communism meant that it did not provide any incentives for the peasants to connect their economy with the emerging socialist industry. Hence they were disconnected from the aims and objectives of socialism and instead were effectively isolated and discontented. This situation had to be resolved by establishing viable connections between town and countryside. Such a possibility could only be created by an attempt by the state to satisfy the aspirations of the peasants for trade in grain and in exchange supplying them with industrial products. The policy of war communism was a failure because it alienated the peasants from the objectives of the state and instead only increased their opposition to the policies advocated by Bolshevism. In contrast, the New Economic Policy is an attempt to provide real assistance to the peasants to improve their situation by means of trade, and this possibility is connected to the encouragement the state will provide in order to enable the peasants to engage in trade. The aim of socialism will become consistent with the objectives of the peasantry because it is based on an enhancement of their material welfare via the role of trade. Hence the era of compulsion is over and instead the policy of retreat means the consolidation of the worker-peasant alliance in the name of the interests of socialism, even if this initially means the revival of capitalism. The forces of capitalism, via trade, are to be promoted in the interests of socialism. Lenin is suggesting that we should not be afraid of the prospect of capitalism because its very economic aspects, such as commodity production and exchange, can be utilised in order to promote the interests of socialism. The point is the limited revival of capitalism will be to the benefit of the peasant, and this will enable the peasant to comment: “You have postponed payment for so many months, so many years. But by this time, dear rulers, you must have learnt the most sound and reliable method of helping us free ourselves from poverty, want, starvation and ruin. You can do it, you have proved it. This is the test we shall inevitably have to face; and, in the last analysis, this test will decide everything; the fate of NEP and the fate of communist rule in Russia.”(68)

Lenin is accepting that war communism only resulted in hunger and want for the peasants, and this situation only undermined the continuation of the Bolshevik regime. But the NEP represents an alternative, it is a retreat, but this has been necessitated by economic failures and the flaws of the direct attempt to realise socialism: “Is this NEP fit for anything or not? If the retreat turns out to be correct tactics, we must link up with the peasant masses while we are in retreat, and subsequently march forward with them a hundred times more slowly, but firmly and unswervingly, in a way that will always make it apparent to them that we are really marching forward. Then our cause will be absolutely invincible, and no power on earth can vanquish us.”(69) NEP is a retreat because it recognises that socialism can only be built at a pace that is acceptable to the peasants, or with their consent. He asks the party not to be impatient, because this slow process of the generation of socialism is the only feasible policy because any alternative will alienate the peasantry from the aims of the party. Indeed, Lenin argues explicitly that the peasants mistrust the ability of the party to administer the economy; they consider the communists to be inefficient. Hence the only manner in which the trust of the peasants can be created is by introducing an economic policy that seems to be both realistic and is able to satisfy the aspirations of the peasants. He asks the party not to be arrogant because they know little about organising an economy, they are only beginners, and in order to gain the confidence of the peasants they must engage in difficult struggle with the forces of capitalism. Consequently, the adoption of the NEP does not mean engaging in any illusions about the end of the class struggle, on the contrary the class struggle continues in many different forms, and the strategy that can ensure success has changed. The approach of direct struggle has been replaced by the importance of retreat. But this means that the forces of capitalism have to be allowed because this is how the peasants are encouraged to support the aims of the state.

Indeed, the state should encourage state capitalism in order to regulate private capital in the interests of socialism: “Never before in our history has there been a situation in which the proletariat, the revolutionary vanguard, possessed sufficient political power and had state capitalism existing alongside it. The whole question turns on our understanding that this is the capitalism that we can and must permit, that we can and must confine within certain bounds; for this capitalism is essential for the broad masses of the peasantry and for private capital, which must trade in such a way as to satisfy the needs of the peasantry. We must organise things in such a way as to make possible the customary operation of capitalist economy, and capitalist exchange, because this is essential for the people.”(70) Lenin is suggesting that the party should not be afraid of the encouragement of capitalism because it can be limited and regulated in terms of the role of state capitalism. Indeed the state should learn how to regulate capitalism in the interests of socialism. In this manner it will be possible to generate the development of socialism in terms of the flourishing of the workers and peasant alliance. Thus Lenin would have been amazed by Stalin's horror at the possibility of the restoration of capitalism. Instead, he suggests that with the correct and principled economic policy it is entirely possible to promote socialism despite using and encouraging capitalism.

Lenin is also insistent that the retreat is not a panic, or disorderly process. The point he is making is that panic would imply that the party does not have a principled and explicit policy of how the economy should be organised and developed. He advises the party that instead of panic they should concentrate on establishing connections with peasant farming: “The capitalists create an economic link with the peasants in order to amass wealth; you must create an economic link with the peasant economy in order to strengthen the economic power of our proletarian state You have the advantage over the capitalists in that political power is in your hands; you have a number of economic weapons at your command; the only trouble is that you cannot make proper use of them.....We possess political power; we possess a host of economic weapons. If we beat capitalism and create a link with peasant farming we shall become an absolutely invincible power. Then the building of socialism will not be the task of that drop in the ocean, called the Communist Party, but the task of the entire mass of working people. Then the rank and file peasants will see that we are helping them and they will follow our lead. Consequently, even if the pace is a hundred times slower, it will be a million times more certain and more sure.”(71)

Thus some of the party members who raise the spectre of the restoration of capitalism are engaging in panic. They do not recognise that the advantages are with the proletarian state which is able to utilise its political power in order to promote an economic policy that facilitates the possibility of socialism. Certainly the forces of capitalism are able to engage in open trading because of the NEP, but the NEP is also able to establish a link between the workers state and the peasantry. The state is able to convince the peasants that it is acting in their interests and promotes an economic policy that is able to relate to their aspirations. Hence the ability of the state to win the peasantry to its objectives means that the threat of capitalism can be restricted within limitations acceptable to the Bolshevik regime. Indeed the state can utilise state capitalism in order to ensure that capitalism is promoted in a manner that is in the interests of the proletarian state and its aim of socialism. In contrast, those Communists who panic about capitalist restoration have not grasped the principles and objectives of NEP. They indulge in phrase mongering and do not recognise the connection of the NEP to the promotion of socialism. Hence they do not understand the significance of retreat, and instead support a disorderly retreat that is without strategic vision and clarity. Lenin is aware that some of his critics argue that the NEP will only result in the promotion of capitalism. His answer is that socialism cannot be built merely by the Communist party instead this aim must acquire popular support. Lenin is aware of the problems created by the bureaucracy of the state, or the arrogance of the Communist commissar. Nor can socialism be built merely by passing decrees. However, none of these problems should incline the Communist Party member to believe that the forces of capitalism can emerge successful and defeat the proletarian state. Instead “True, we are permitting capitalism, but within the limits that the peasants need. This is essential! Without it the peasants could not exist and continue with their husbandry.”(72) Hence the Communists who raise panic about capitalist restoration do not recognise that the advantages are with the proletarian state. It is able to limit the role of capitalism to its advantage, and to therefore obtain the support of the peasants for socialism. Instead of pessimism we should have confidence that the NEP can advance the economic and political conditions for the promotion of socialism.

Lenin makes the prediction that retreat will create the basis for an offensive in economic terms: “We are now retreating, going back as it were; but we are doing so in order, after first retreating, to take a running start and make a bigger leap forward. It was on this condition alone that we retreated in pursuing our New Economic Policy. Where and how we must regroup, adapt and reorganise in order to start a most stubborn offensive after our retreat, we do not yet know.”(73) This comment is an acknowledgement that the policy of the offensive has led to the most serious political crisis and discontent of the peasantry, whilst the present approach of retreat has been successful. Hence it is vital that this present approach is not undermined by pressure for a premature revival of the previous perspective. Hence this supposedly ambiguous comment actually seems to suggest that the New Economic Policy is envisaged as a long-term strategy. Obviously, the role of retreat will have its limits, and then the issue of advance will once again become necessary. But, presumably this advance will occur in more favourable conditions, such as the revival of the heavy industry and the realisation of the peasant aspirations through trade. Hence this comment does not imply what some commentators have suggested, which is that the process of the offensive will be resumed in the short term. Instead Lenin is advocating the opposite. He is implying the importance of caution and opposing accommodation to impatience. Indeed, Lenin maintains that it is still necessary to take advantages from the NEP. (74) The task is to transform NEP Russia into socialist Russia. This view contends that the role of the worker-peasant alliance will not be replaced by an alternative approach in order to promote the transition to socialism. However, at some point the aspect of retreat will be replaced by advance because of the development of more favourable conditions for this prospect of the realisation of socialism. The point is that retreat is dialectically interconnected with the possibility of advance. Without the former, the latter is impossible.

Lenin summarises his approach in his article 'On Co-operation'(75) Lenin makes the comment that became controversial in the period of the struggle between the Stalin leadership and the Left Opposition: “Indeed, the power of the state over all large scale means of production, political power in the hands of the proletariat, the alliance of the proletariat with the many millions of small and very small peasants, the assured proletarian leadership of the peasantry – etc. - is this not all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society out of co-operatives, out of co-operatives alone, which we formerly ridiculed as huckstering and which from a certain aspect we have the right to treat, as such now under NEP? Is this not all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society? It is still not the building of a socialist society, but it is all that is necessary and sufficient for it.”(76) Lenin is referring to co-operative trade which to some extent will replace the importance of private trade. The point is he is outlining an aim which has not yet been realised. If this aim is to be established it will be possible to suggest that the transition to socialism is being advanced. But, first of all, the co-operatives must establish their supremacy in trade, and the present situation cannot yet be said to express this possibility. Indeed, Lenin implies that the peasants are not yet receptive to the advantages of co-operative trade: “Strictly speaking, when a co-operator goes to village and opens a co-operative store, the people take no part in this whatever; but at the same time guided by their own interests they will hasten to try to take part in it.”(77)

In other words there is a contradiction or tension between the ideal conception of socialism and the actual practice. The reality indicates that the forces of private trade and capitalism are still influential. This situation can be overcome by the encouragement of co-operative trade but this has not yet happened. Indeed Lenin calls for a cultural revolution in order to motivate people to recognise the importance of the co-operatives. He does not consider that this development will express a short-term process. Instead: “But it will take a whole historical epoch to get the entire population into the work of the co-operatives through NEP. At best we can achieve this in one or two decades.”(78) To promote this possibility requires the advance of literacy, and the prospect of avoiding famine, and the creation of cultured trade that replaces the crude forms of existing trade. Hence certain objective and subjective conditions have to be satisfied before it is possible to suggest that the following situation is realised: “And given the social ownership of the means of production, given the class victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, the system of civilised co-operators is the system of socialism.”(79)

Lenin makes no mention of the importance of international revolution in relation to developing the conditions for socialism. But it is entirely logical that it could be argued that revolutionary success in Europe will contribute to the process of developing civilised co-operators. The revolutions in advanced capitalist countries will create the conditions for the workers of the advanced countries to translate their experience and wisdom to the task of promoting the development of socialism in Russia. There is nothing in Lenin's article that would suggest that he is justifying socialism in one country. Instead he is advocating a strategy that promotes the internal possibility to advance the prospect for socialism, via the role of co-operation. He does argue that this process is all that is necessary for the creation of socialism, and his view does not exclude the importance of international revolution in relation to advancing the objective and subjective conditions for the possibility of completing the task of realising socialism.

In the second part of his article 'On Co-operatives', Lenin admits that the situation is still internally unfavourable to the transition to socialism because of the uncultured condition of the peasants, who are not yet receptive to the merits of co-operation: “If the whole of the peasants had been organised in co-operatives, we would by now have been standing with both feet on the soil of socialism. But the organisation of the entire peasantry in co-operative societies presupposes a standard of culture among the peasants (precisely among the peasants as the overwhelming mass) that cannot in fact be achieved without cultural revolution.”(80) If we interpret this comment very rigidly it could suggest the possibility of socialism in one country via the realisation of the dominant role of the co-operatives. The point is what is the relationship of the development of co-operation to the international situation? Lenin does not answer this question and instead is satisfied with the ambiguous view that the realisation of socialism requires cultural development and an advance in the material situation: “This cultural revolution would now suffice to make our country a completely socialist country, but it presents immense difficulties of a purely cultural(for we are illiterate) and material character (for to be cultural we must achieve a certain development of the material means of production, must have a certain material base.”(81) Consequently the issue of the relationship of the international situation to the role of the internal is left unresolved. On the one hand it could be argued that the cultural difficulties, and the problem in developing a material level sufficient for socialism, require an international resolution of these limitations. On the other hand Lenin could also be arguing that the internal generation of co-operatives implies the successful achievement of socialism, or socialism in one country. It is also necessary to emphasise that Stalin did not build socialism one country according to Lenin's criteria, because the ruthless process of modernisation lacked the consent of the peasantry, and was an effective break with the NEP.

What is more problematical is Lenin's article 'Our Revolution' which does seem to explicitly support the conception of socialism in one country.(82) In replying to various Social Democratic criticisms that the Russian revolution was premature because it did not correspond to Marxist principles about the necessary economic and political maturity of the process of social transformation, Lenin accepts that what occurred was distinctive and did not express rigid adherence to the approach of historical materialism. He suggests the Social Democratic criticism represents dogma and a denial of the revolutionary potential of the situation in Russia: “Infinitely, stereotyped, for instance, is the argument they learnt by rote during the development of Western European Social Democracy, namely that we are not yet ripe for socialism, that as certain “learned” gentlemen among them put it, the objective economic premises for socialism do not exist in our country. It does not occur to any of them to ask: but what about people that found itself in a revolutionary situation such as that created during the first imperialist war? Might it not, influenced by the hopelessness of its situation, fling itself into a struggle that would offer at least some chances of securing conditions for the further development of civilisation that were somewhat unusual?”(83) He elaborates this comment: “What if the complete hopelessness of the situation, by stimulating the efforts of the workers and peasants tenfold, offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilisation in a different way from that of the Western European countries? Has that altered the general line of development of world history? Has that altered the basic relations between the basic classes of all countries that are being, or have been, drawn into the general course of world history?”(84)

Lenin is arguing that the European Social Democrats justified class collaboration because of their rigid interpretation of historical materialism. In contrast the Bolsheviks had an imaginative interpretation which enabled them to understand the revolutionary situation in Russia because of the imperialist war, and so they were able to provide a strategy for the realisation of proletarian power. This perspective was part of an understanding that the Russian revolution was an integral aspect of the revolutionary process in Europe. This understanding was not a denial of\Marxism, but rather its confirmation in an imaginative manner. But this argument is connected to what seems to be an explicit justification of the possibility of socialism in one country. In this context, Lenin is admitting that history has undergone a different trajectory to that envisaged by Marx and Engels. Lenin does not deny that the Russian revolution is an integral part an international revolutionary process caused by the first imperialist war, but he also seems to suggest that the outcome is the possibility of socialism in one country. This view is confirmed when he concludes it is possible to build the level of culture necessary for socialism, and therefore : 'with the aid of workers and peasants government and the Soviet system, proceed to overtake the other nations?'(85)

The point is that if this apparent support for 'socialism in one country' is Lenin's interpretation we should reject it, and continue to make the argument in favour of the internationalist conception of the connection of the process of the building of socialism in the USSR with the world revolution. Indeed, Lenin outlined his standpoint in terms of this approach in what effectively was his last article: “Better Fewer, but Better”.(86) He suggested that the world revolution was being delayed, and so this would have an influence on the process of generating socialism within the USSR: “Thus, at the present time we are confronted with the question – shall we be able to hold on with our small and very small peasant production, and in our present state of ruin, until the Western European capitalist countries consummate their development towards socialism? But they are consummating it not as we formerly expected. They are not consummating it through the gradual “maturing” of socialism, but through the exploitation of some countries by others, through the exploitation of the first of the countries vanquished in the imperialist war combined with the exploitation of the whole of the East.”(87) He does expect revolutionary development in the East, but this is in the long-term. Hence the situation is characterised by the capitalist stabilisation of the West. In this context he does not support socialism in one country, but on the contrary implies the complete opposite: “But what interests us is not the inevitability of the complete victory of socialism, but the tactics which we, the Russian Communist Party, we, the Russian Soviet government, should pursue to prevent the West European counter-revolutionary states from crushing us.”(88) Indeed he contends that there is a lack of 'enough civilisation to enable us to pass straight away to socialism', and instead the aim is to develop a state 'in which the workers retain the leadership of the peasants, in which they retain the confidence of the peasants'. (89) In relation to this advice, only Bukharin carried it out in a consistent manner. Stalin ended the worker-peasant alliance in order to carry out forced collectivisation, and Trotsky lacked a programme for the peasantry in terms of his ambiguous understanding of the NEP and an emphasis on industrialisation. These issues will be evaluated in an appendix.

CONCLUSION

Lenin admitted that the approach of War communism had been a failure. It was unable to achieve satisfactory levels of grain for the state, and led to the discontent of the peasantry. Only the situation of civil war provided a temporary military justification for war communism, and this point is debatable. The immediate period after the revolution also led to the end of workers control and its replacement by one man management. The industrial economy was nationalised, and this state centralisation meant the working class was subordinated to the imperatives of strict discipline, and the role of the trade unions was to accept this situation. In the period of the civil war the economy was bureaucratised and subject to the imperatives of this emergency. Lenin justified this situation in terms of an emphasis on the reactionary role of the peasantry and the necessity of the working class to accept the orders of the communist party. However when the civil war was over the reasons for war communism were over. The widespread revolts of the peasantry, and the development of famine, indicated the urgent necessity for a new policy. Lenin did respond to this situation and accepted the introduction of the Tax In Kind. This measure became the New Economic Policy. He justified this effective U-Turn on the basis that the frontal and direct character of war communism had been a failure. It was an illusion to consider that it would be possible to realise socialism in the short-term. Instead a proper and principled link, or connection, had to be established with the peasant economy and this meant the aim of developing the worker-peasant alliance had to be re-established. The very character of socialism had to be modified in terms of what was acceptable to the peasantry in terms of the right to trade or produce commodities for sale. Unfortunately he also rejected any suggestion that industrial democracy would be restored. However, this new development did materially benefit the worker and the peasants. Hence popular support for the NEP was motivated by the end of the sacrifices of the civil war period, and increasing grain sales were increasingly connected to exchange with industrial goods.

But the argument still remained that NEP was strictly a short-term policy because of its apparent encouragement of the forces of capitalist restoration. Lenin rejected these arguments and suggested that retreat was a long-term process. Only the success of retreat would create the economic and political conditions for a new offensive. This prospect was not envisaged for the short-term. Indeed, he implied that the very question of the realisation of socialism was connected to the success of the workers-peasants alliance via the role of co-operative trade. Hence it could be argued that the Left Opposition rejected this perspective because of their emphasis on industrialisation and apparent opposition to peasant commodity production. But, Lenin was still in favour of industrialisation, but he argued it should be connected to the interests of the peasants in trade. Industrial goods would be exchanged for grain. In this manner the socialist economy would be built. Hence it could be argued (as the appendix outlines) that Lenin's conception of the role of the NEP is not necessarily opposed to the standpoint of the role of the Left Opposition. But, as Richard Day has argued, the views of the Left Opposition on economics, and those of Bukharin, were not necessarily opposed. (90) Hence despite different emphasis on some aspects, it could be argued that Lenin, Bukharin and the Left Opposition had essential unity on the process of transition to socialism. All agreed that it was vital to maintain the worker-peasant alliance if progress towards socialism was to be maintained. In this sense the person who effectively rejected the NEP was Stalin with his policy of forced collectivisation, and equation of the continuation of the NEP as the process of the restoration of capitalism. It would have been possible to establish an alliance of the supporters of Bukharin and the Left Opposition against the adventurism of Stalin.

However, it could be argued that the issue of socialism in one country effectively divided the Left and Right Opposition's. Indeed, Lenin seemed to have upheld socialism in one country in a few of his last articles, like 'On Co-operation'. These ambiguous comments became the basis for the justification of socialism in one country by Stalin and Bukharin. Unfortunately, the Left Opposition was unable to reject such formulations because of their uncritical understanding of the legacy of Lenin. Instead they dogmatically connected Lenin with their internationalist position, whilst glossing over his conception of the building of socialism via the NEP. Thus it seemed that Bukharin and Stalin were actually justified in connecting Lenin with socialism in one country. These theoretical failures meant the Left Opposition could not anticipate that Bukharin and Stalin would ultimately split over the issue of the continuation of the NEP and the significance of the worker-peasant alliance. The result of these limitations was that the Left Opposition effectively provided critical support for Stalin's industrialisation and collectivisation programme, whilst considering Bukharin a supporter of capitalist restoration. (91) This understanding represented a situation of disorientation created by rapidly moving events. It could be argued that this dire situation could not have been changed because of Bukharin's intimate involvement in an alliance with Stalin, and his support for opportunist politics as in relation to the Chinese events. This point has some validity, but what was crucial was to maintain the worker-peasant alliance in order to maintain the possibility of transition to socialism. Stalin's programme of forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation meant he rejected the perspective of advancing socialism via the role of the NEP and the importance of the work-peasant alliance. Hence he expressed the evolution of a repressive state that had no accountability to the working class. (92) This situation, or the defence of socialism against Stalin's repressive measures, could have united the Left and Right Opposition. Differences on the question of the importance of international revolution could have been resolved in terms of this common defence of the gains of the October revolution against Stalin's creation of a repressive state that opposed the interests of the workers and peasants.

The point is that Stalin's actions in 1929 ended the continuation of Lenin's legacy in terms of the importance of the NEP, or led to the demise of the worker-peasant alliance. Stalin considered himself the disciple of Lenin, but his measures in 1929 meant the rejection of Lenin's ultimate conception of the process of transition to socialism. The actions of Stalin were not based on any measured or objective understanding of the balance of class forces within agriculture. The conception of a ‘kulak threat’ was basically fiction. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the peasants were of the middle strata, and the problems related to the collection of grain were caused by bad harvests and low prices. But in a propaganda manner, Stalin created an emergency and justified measures to repress the peasantry and so develop the programme of collectivisation. Isaac Deutscher has justified this policy as being ultimately progressive. (93) This view is a terrible mistake. The misery of the peasants can never justify so-called historical progress. Indeed, the only result of this catastrophic process was the formation of a repressive state. Consequently, Lenin's bureaucratic workers state became a new social formation under Stalin. (94) In this sense, whilst Lenin was a flawed revolutionary who tried to uphold the interests of a proletarian state in an elitist manner, Stalin was a counter revolutionary. This is the difference, and in these terms Leninism did not result in Stalinism. Instead Stalinism was the rejection of Lenin's understanding of the NEP, and the worker-peasant alliance, as the basis of the development of socialism, and he also repudiated Lenin's emphasis on international revolution in favour of defence of the Soviet Union. In contrast, Trotsky and Bukharin could have jointly continued Lenin's legacy if they had both been prepared to compromise. Unfortunately, such a development never happened, and the Left Opposition never openly appealed for support from the working class. (95)

A united opposition could have avoided the problem of small groups with little support within the working class. Both Bukharin and Trotsky could have utilised their connections within the Communist International in order to promote a significant challenge to Stalinism. Instead Trotsky was an isolated, if defiant individual and Bukharin tamely accepted the domination of Stalin. Neither of them accepted that the very reactionary character of Stalinism justified a united opposition. They also lacked the will of Lenin and the necessity of making no compromises and accommodation with Stalin. Sadly, this was their political record during the 1920's. Bukharin accepted defeat by Stalin in 1929, and became the editor of Pravda, whilst Trotsky tried to establish an international Left Opposition. Both should have united and appealed for support from the Russian working class. Instead, they effectively accepted the victory of Stalin. They were executed by Stalin in 1938 and 1940.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Neil Harding Leninism: Macmillan, Basingstoke 1996 p114

(2)Lenin: The Tasks in Our Revolution, Volume24 p78

(3)Lenin The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it, in Collected Works volume 25 p327-369

(4) ibid p358

(5) ibid p361-362

(6)Lenin: The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government in Volume 27 p237-277

(7) ibid p244-245

(8) ibid p251-252

(9) ibid p254-255

(10) ibid p258

(11) ibid p268

(12) ibid p275

(13)Alexander Rabinowitch: The Bolsheviks in Power, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007 p183ff

(14)Lenin: Left-wing Childishness and the Petty-Bourgeois Mentality, in Collected Works volume 27 p323-354

(15) ibid p334-335

(16) ibid p336

(17) ibid p337

(18) ibid p337

(19) ibid p338-339

(20) ibid p347

(21) ibid p351

(22)Speech at Fifth All Russian Congress of Soviets, volume 27 p523

(23)Speech at the Extraordinary 6th All Russian Congress of the Soviets, volume 28 p138

(24) ibid p143

(25)Speech at a Session of the ALL Russian CEC, January 17th 1919 p394

(26)Lenin All Russian Congress p137-138

(27)Speech at All Russian CEC op cit p400

(28)Speech at Eighth Congress of the RCP, volume 29 p206-207

(29) ibid p210

(30)Resolution on the Attitude towards the Peasantry, 8th RCP congress p217

(31) ibid p218

(32)Lenin: Speech at All Russian Trade Union Congress, volume 30 p506

(33) ibid p509

(34)Lenin: The Trade Unions, The Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes, Volume 32 p21

(35) ibid p24

(36) ibid p25

(37)Lenin: Speech before Metalworkers volume 32 p109

(38)Lenin, Speech at the fourth Congress of Garment Workers, Volume 32 p118

(39)Report on the Political Work of the Central Committee to the Tenth party congress p176

(40Ibid p186

(41) ibid p199

(42)Report on the Tax in Kind p219

(43) ibid p220

(44) ibid p220

(45) ibid p225

(46)Report on Tax in Kind, Volume 32 p289-290

(47) ibid p295

(48)Tax In kind p341-342

(49)Report at the Tenth Conference of the RCP p405-407

(50) ibid p414

(51)Summing up speech on Tax in Kind, p419-420

(52)Report on the Tactics of the RCP p490

(53)Report on The Tax in Kind to the second congress of Political Education Departments, volume 33 p62

(54) ibid p65

(55) ibid p68-69

(56) ibid p69

(57)Report on the New Economic Policy to Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the RCP p86

(58) ibid p88

(59) ibid p93

(60) ibid p94

(61) ibid p96

(62)Summing up at Seventh Moscow Gubernia Conference of the RCP p105

(63)Lenin, The Importance of Gold, Volume 33 p113

(64)Speech at Ninth All Russian Congress of Soviets, p160-161

(65) ibid p175

(66)Speech at the Eleventh Congress of the CPSU p268

(67) ibid p270

(68) ibid p271

(69) ibid p271

(70) ibid p279

(71) ibid p285

(72)Summing up Speech at the Eleventh Congress of the RCP p313

(73)Speech at Plenary Session of Moscow Soviet, p437

(74) ibid p442

(75) Ibidp442

(76)On Co-operation p467-475

(77) ibid p468

(78) Ibid469

(79) ibid p470

(80) ibid p471

(81) ibid p474

(82)Our Revolution p476-479

(83) ibid p477-478

(84) ibid p478

(85) ibid p479

(86)Lenin, Better Fewer, but Better, p487-502

(87) ibid p499

(88) ibid p500

(89) ibid p501

(90)Richard Day: Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation, Cambridge University Press, 1973

(91)Thomas M Twiss: Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2015 p198-237

(92)Cliff Slaughter: A Critique of Some Past Guidelines, In Against Capital, Zero books 2016 p270-272

(93)Isaac Deutscher: Stalin, Pelican, Middlesex 1966 p318-346

(94)Max Shachtman: The Bureaucratic Revolution, The Donald Press, New York, 1962

(95)Slaughter op cit p278-282

Appendix: The Left Opposition and the New Economic Policy

It is often assumed that the Left Opposition were opposed to the New Economic Policy, or at least wanted it to be quickly replaced by a different approach concerning the development of industrialisation. This perception seems to have influenced the controversies of the 1920's. But Preobrazhensky, the very originator of the economic views of the Left Opposition, formulates his standpoint in terms of advocating the continuation of the NEP and the worker-peasant alliance. However, he is concerned to indicate how and why the Soviet economy is based on the opposition of the law of primitive socialist accumulation and the law of value. One of the most important points is that the terms of trade between petty commodity production and industry will be defined by the level of influence of the law of value or the law of primitive socialist accumulation. However this understanding does not mean that Preobrazhensky neglects agriculture and instead has a one-sided emphasis on the role of industry. Instead he reminds his critics like Bukharin that he is aware that “In our case we must not forget, moreover that the economic organization of the proletariat does not at all coincide with the entire economic basis of Soviet society, in which more than half of the material values are created outside the circle of the state economy.”(1) Hence he is not indifferent to the significance of the role of the law of value within the economy, but he is implying that the aim is to overcome the importance of this law and its connection to commodity production: “The position is, however, that when we counter-pose to the law of value the rational, planned regulation of society, we have in mind the complete and finished antitheses of capitalism, that is, communist society.”(2) But in tactical and strategic terms this standpoint does not imply the return to war communism, and the administrative attempt to replace the importance of the law of value and commodity production by coercive methods. Instead he argues, in response to Bukharin's lack of clarity on this question, that in the long transition period between capitalism and communism the law of value, as an expression of the regulatory role of commodity production, will have an indispensable role. But the strategic aim is to overcome the influence of this law. In contrast, Bukharin is accused of equating the law of value with labour proportionality, which Preobrazhensky suggests will only be realised with communism.

What should be explicitly acknowledged is that the transition period between capitalism and communism means the struggle between commodity production and socialist production. However, this economic assessment does not mean the end of the worker-peasant alliance. Instead this is the form that it assumes. Preobrazhensky is careful to differentiate between the importance of economic laws and the concrete character they have in terms of the continuation of the worker-peasant alliance. In strict economic terms the transition period means: “During this period, our state economy being as it is, the law of labour expenditure must inevitably take the form of the law of primitive socialist accumulation, and inherent in this form is a collision and uninterrupted conflict with the law of value. From this standpoint the law of primitive socialist accumulation is the law of overcoming our socialist backwardness, and is operative only in that period of development when our state economy has not achieved technical and economic predominance over capitalism.”(3) Hence it would be a serious methodological error to confuse or conflate economic laws with their political aspects. What is being implied - and should be explicitly stated – is that the antagonism of economic laws of capitalism and socialism does not mean the end of the NEP and the worker-peasant alliance. What is of theoretical concern is how to develop the dynamic whereby socialism is more efficient than capitalism in providing goods to society and so becomes the most dominant expression of the economy. In this manner primitive socialist accumulation can only enhance the ability of the workers (state) to generate the material basis for sustaining the workers-peasant alliance. In contrast, a feeble and limited ability of the state to provide goods for the peasants means the undermining of this alliance and instead the extension of the influence of capital over a large part of the internal market. The only possible law of expansion of the socialist economy is the law of primitive socialist accumulation, Bukharin has no alternative. It is true that this law was not operative under war communism because the priority was for consumption and not accumulation, but the very progressive character of the NEP is that it has been economically and politically possible to establish more stable relations which have enabled the dynamics of state expansion, or primitive socialist accumulation, to occur in opposition to commodity production and the operation of the law of value. The point is that this dynamic does not undermine the importance of NEP; instead it means the state can facilitate relations with the commodity economy, and the peasantry, on its terms. This possibility occurs because the very relationship between the state sector and the private economy favours the former in terms of the expansionist dynamics of primitive socialist accumulation. It would be an opportunist mistake to consider that the relations between the state and private economy have neutral effects. Instead the only possible result of this inter-connection is that either the former or the latter benefits. We can have only the growth of the forces of socialism or those of capitalism. However this relationship is complex and dialectical because the expansion of industrialisation means both the growth of socialism, and also benefits the peasants in terms of the increased ability to trade grain for industrial goods. Thus in absolute terms industrialisation means the decreased importance of the private agricultural sector, but this possibility is to the benefit of the peasantry who gain by increased opportunities for trade. This situation does not mean that there is not a contradiction between the state sector and the private economy in terms of contrasting influence over the overall economy, and so Bukharin's view that there is harmony between the law of value and socialist accumulation is an illusion. Instead contradiction explains the inter-relationship between the different sectors of the economy, but this process includes the role of both struggle and co-operation. For example, it is important to try and encourage connections with the middle peasants through the role of incentives. Thus it is important to facilitate the support of the middle peasants for the aims of the state, and so undermine their relations with the kulaks. In this manner the expansion of the socialist economy occurs through the result of the acceptance by the middle peasants of its aims.

Consequently the attempt to promote socialism by coercive means is rejected, and instead the change of the balance of forces becomes favourable to the aims of socialism because of the consolidation of the alliance between the workers and sections of the peasantry. In this manner the expansion of socialist economy undermines the operation of the law of value. However it is not satisfactory to merely explain the relations of the economy in terms of the conflict of socialism with the law of value. Instead the economic dynamics in this transition period of contending economic forces is expressed by the law of primitive socialist accumulation, or the increasing ability of the planning principle to undermine the effectiveness of the law of value. This does not mean that there cannot be a temporary unity between the contending economic principles of planning and the law of value, but this situation does not overcome the tendency towards domination of one or the other economic laws: “If each principle is fighting for supremacy in the whole system, it is thereby fighting for the type of regulation which is organically characteristic of the particular system of production relations, taken in its pure form.”(4) Hence if the law of value became dominant it would mean the undermining of the planning principle and the effective political overthrow of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Industries would be de-nationalised and the monopoly of foreign trade ended. However the situation would be very different if the world revolution advanced and therefore provided an impetus to the development of the planning principle within the USSR. In order for the latter option to occur it is necessary that expanded reproduction occurs within the state sector, which is identical to the transference of values from the private economy. But this process is not an issue of exploitation of the private sector by the state because what is crucial is the increased ability of the state sector to expand. What is important is that the state becomes more productive, and in this manner the domination of the law of primitive socialist accumulation over the operation of the law of value is realised. This process is not necessarily detrimental to the private sector because what is implied is that the state is able to exchange a greater amount of goods for the same amount of grain, and these industrial goods will be cheaper because of increased productivity. In formal terms the surplus product is transferred to the state from the private sector because of the higher productivity of industry when compared to agriculture. This situation is also beneficial to the peasants who have the possibility to obtain more goods at lower prices. But if industry does not become more productive, a goods famine will result that means products are more expensive, and so less are sold compared to those from the private sector. This situation still represents the operation of the law of primitive socialist accumulation but in negative terms.

Preobrazhensky is making the point that there is a struggle between two contrasting principles, the law of value and the law of primitive socialist accumulation. The only possibility to overcome the influence of the law of value is to expand the socialist sector of the economy, or establish the domination of the dynamics of the law of primitive socialist accumulation. This understanding represents the abstract model of the contradictions within reality. However, its application in practice is that the peasants are increasingly sympathetic to the aims of socialism and state industry because it is increasingly productive and able to provide cheaper industrial goods in exchange for grain. Thus the influence of the law of value is overcome in a manner acceptable to the peasants. Socialist accumulation is different from primitive socialist accumulation because the former refers to the process of systematic functioning of an organised and established system, whist the latter represents the struggle to establish the process of socialist reproduction in terms of the connections between antagonistic forms of economy: “Primitive socialist accumulation....means accumulation in the hands of the state of material resources mainly or partly from sources lying outside the complex of state economy.”(5) In this context the dynamic of economic laws represents the beginning of a struggle for supremacy between socialism and the forces of the law of value. Success means the extraction of a surplus from the private sector to the advantage of the state sector. But this process is not identical to the plunder via the role of coercion that occurs under the development of primitive capitalist accumulation. Instead a surplus is extracted from the commodity economy, but in a manner that is beneficial to the peasantry: “In any case the idea that socialist economy can develop on its own, without touching the resources of petty-bourgeois (including peasant) economy is undoubtedly a reactionary utopia. The task of the socialist state consists here not in taking from the petty-bourgeois producers less than capitalism took, but in taking more from the still larger incomes which will be secured to the petty producer by the rationalization of the whole economy, including petty production on the basis of industrializing the country and intensifying agriculture.”(6)

Hence in absolute material terms it may seem that a process of exploitation of agriculture by industry has occurred in relation to the operation of the law of primitive socialist accumulation, in actuality what will happen is the transcendence of commodity economy by means of the connection of the peasants to the socialist economy because of their increased incomes. The peasants will have material incentives to become part of the socialist sector because of their growing affluence. Only in this manner will a surplus be extracted from them in formal and absolute terms. This perspective is vastly different from the terrible reality under Stalin and the misery imposed by forced collectivisation. Preobrazhensky betrayed his own approach when he capitulated to Stalin concerning the coercive measures taken to exploit the peasants. Stalin's measures were more similar to the exploitation of the colonies described by Preobrazhensky in relation to the early period of primitive capitalist accumulation. Unlike the intensification of exploitation of labour that is utilised in order to promote the primitive accumulation of capitalism, the socialist system is dedicated to improving the material situation of the workers, but the voluntary self-restraint of the workers promotes primitive socialist accumulation within industry. Primarily, the major option is to generate a surplus product from pre-socialist forms of economy. The advantage that the socialist economy has is that it can carry out this task in terms of expressing a single unified whole with a common purpose. Hence the aims of the socialist economy can be dedicated to the purpose of primitive socialist accumulation. In this context the intention is to create the dependence of the peasant economy on the state economy. The private sector can exert influence over the state to the extent that goods are sold by private producers to the state, but the state can also influence the private economy in relation to goods sold by state industry: “Here state industry is bound fast to the wheel of private economy. Yet its work to meet market demand is the necessary prerequisite for socialist accumulation itself. For if accumulation at the expense of private economy entails a balance of values exchanged in favour of the state economy, this balance will be the greater in proportion to all things being equal, the numerical amount exchanged is greater.”(7) In other words the price policy of the State can represent a preferential basis for trade, and so extract a surplus product. Thus primitive socialist accumulation is defined as the process of expanded reproduction at the expense of the private economy, but this process does not mean the ruination of the commodity producers, instead what is important is the growing links between the state economy and the commodity producers to the advantage of the former. However, the very connection of these two economies means that the commodity producers are able to thrive in this relationship, and in this manner become part of the state economy. The domination of the state economy is realised in a peaceful and consensual manner, because of the mutual benefits of this process of primitive socialist accumulation. Hence the state economy is able to accept more generous prices for grain the quicker is the development of industry, and this situation also means that lower prices for industrial goods become possible. (8) If the peasants consider that the prices paid by the state for their products are too low they will attempt to find alternative buyers in the private sector. Only the cheapening of the products of the state will enable it to become an attractive market for exchange with the goods of the peasants.

A goods famine means that the state does not expand production in correspondence with effective demand. This situation can only be overcome by the state expanding its production, and so becoming more effective or enabling goods to be sold at cheaper prices. However, the grain market is based on the role of the private commodity sector, and this situation results in goods being sold at expensive prices. The state is unable to regulate grain prices because this would result in a decrease of production. Hence measures still have to be taken that would enhance the relations of the state with the peasantry.(9) The role of the consumer co-operatives is to enhance the possibilities for trade between the state economy and the private commodity economy: “The petty producer has every reason to support a trading apparatus which sells more cheaply. And when both the co-operatives and private traders sell at the same price, the petty producer can choose between them, taking into account quality of goods and credit facilities, etc.”(10) Preobrazhensky accepts that this situation is still unsatisfactory and the ideal is the development of producer co-operatives, but he does not envisage their development in the short-term, and there is no suggestion that the process of transition would be coercive. Instead only the creation of favourable material conditions would create the possibility of voluntary generation of producer co-operatives: “This means that the transition to socialism is completed in the sphere of producers’ co-operation, for which co-operation in exchange merely clears the way. But our successes in this very sphere of co-operation between petty producers are as yet very few, and the concrete forms (as against the general line) of this process are still quite unclear. Only one thing is clear: everything depends on the quickest possible development of industry, which is the transforming centre of the whole economy and the only active principle of socialist co-operation.”(11) Thus Preobrazhensky admits that the peasants are presently unenthusiastic about producer co-operatives, and there is no question of them being forced into these organisations against their will. Instead the development of industry will allow for the mechanisation of the co-operatives and so enable this reluctance to be overcome.

This analysis indicates that Preobrazhensky has not outlined a conception of the transition to socialism that is at the expense of the peasantry. Indeed he has accepted that an important aspect of the process of primitive socialist accumulation is the possibility of temporary low wages of workers in order to generate the surplus product of industry. But he does also accept that the state sector can only expand at the expense of the private sector, in terms of the transference of surplus product from the latter to the former. Bukharin criticises this perspective as justifying exploitation, but he also accepts that resources must be transferred from the private commodity economy to the state sector. Preobrazhensky argues that his approach is not based on the exploitation of the peasantry: “I deliberately refrained from speaking of this because exploitation of petty production by socialism does not necessarily imply exploitation of the petty producers by the proletariat.”(12) It is possible to increase the share of the wealth of the peasants whilst still expanding the state economy at the expense of the private sector: “The peasant economy is, in this situation, not a colony of state industry but a participant in socialist expanded reproduction. The worker is not an exploiter of the peasants but a collaborator with him in the deductions made for the expansion of reproduction, which is needed not only by him, but by the whole of Soviet society, by all the toiling classes.”(13) Effectively Bukharin accepts that the process of interaction between the state economy and the private sector should generate surplus product for the former, and so he is in agreement with Preobrazhensky despite his formal opposition. What Bukharin is wary of accepting is that the relationship of the private sector and the state economy is one of contradiction and opposition, and so he would not support the following view of Preobrazhensky: “But, on the other hand, the more successful our state economy develops, the more vigorously it draws towards itself all the country's private economy, and the more successfully the process goes forward of subordinating the pre-socialist economic forms to the socialist form, adapting them to it, and eventually absorbing them into it.”(14) Thus the argument is that Bukharin cannot accept that the opposition of the two forms of economy must result in the domination of one or the other, and so he is against any conception of devouring or absorbing the private sector by the state. The consequence of this ambiguous standpoint is that he is vague about the possibility of the formation of producer co-operatives. Instead of this imprecision, Preobrazhensky outline what should be the aim of the expansion of the state economy. He implies that Bukharin lacks a definite perspective of development towards socialism because he instead emphasises the importance of the co-existence of the two forms of economy.

Thus after this comparison we can understand the differences between them, Preobrazhensky asks: “What is the essence of the worker-peasant bloc? It is that the proletariat, as the ruling class and therefore as the class which takes responsibility for the Soviet economy as a whole, by leading the peasantry in its struggle for the existence of the Soviet system, carries out its great historic mission of developing and consolidating a new type of economy, and fights against all vacillations, moods of disappointment, revolts and retreats on the part of its ally.”(15) This bloc attempts to undermine the possibility of the peasantry preferring alliances with capitalists and landowners, and instead the compromise formed with the peasantry has the aim of promoting socialism and defeating the forces of capitalist restoration. It could be argued that this approach is over-generalised and lacks Lenin's acute awareness of the importance of retreat and concessions to the peasants. But the merit is that it has a sense of direction and understanding of how the strength of the worker-peasant alliance is its attempt to enhance the influence of socialist economy and undermine the importance of the commodity sector. Bukharin agrees with this comment to the extent that state economy should utilise the surplus product of the petty economy. But he lacks clarity about how this process should occur because he does not utilise the law of primitive socialist accumulation which can indicate how and why surplus product can be extracted from agriculture. What has to be understood is that the economy is characterised by the opposition of the law of primitive socialist accumulation and the law of value. Instead of this clarity Bukharin substitutes ambiguity and a failure to describe the contradictions of the emergence of the socialist economy. He emphasises the importance of the worker-peasant alliance at the expense of definite economic strategy.

In order to justify his limitations Bukharin suggests that Preobrazhensky wants to reject the role of the workers-peasants bloc. But this political critique lacks any substantial economic criteria for its justification. Bukharin does not seem to recognise that the objective basis of the worker-peasant bloc is the expansion of socialist industry. In this manner the connections of the peasantry to the state sector can be reinforced, and its tendency to prefer economic connections with the capitalists can be overcome. This effective strengthening of the worker-peasant bloc can only be realised by the successful realisation of the law of primitive socialist accumulation. This is the objective and material basis for the dynamics of the increasing dependency of the peasant economy on the state sector. However, if difficulties are encountered in the development of primitive socialist accumulation, the peasantry will lack incentives to become incorporated into the socialist economy. In this context the worker-peasant alliance will not flourish. Bukharin glossed over this economic aspect to the worker-peasant alliance, but the political objectives of himself and Preobrazhensky were similar. What they differed on was the economic analysis connected to sustaining the worker-peasant alliance.

This analysis of the economic approach of Preobrazhensky concerning the transition period to socialism attempts to indicate that the view that he underestimated the peasantry, or rejected the importance of the NEP, amount to a caricature of his standpoint. It is true that he developed an offensive understanding of the NEP, and outlined the tensions between the socialist and commodity economy in terms of the importance of antagonism, but this did not mean that he rejected the continued necessity to obtain the consent of the peasantry for the aims of the state. In this sense the differences with Bukharin were mainly methodological, and involved the relationship of the abstract to the concrete in the elaboration of the theory of political economy. Preobrazhensky was more concerned with economics and was not inclined to elaborate the political reasons for NEP. The major difference with previous thinkers was that he did not consider NEP in terms of a retreat and instead was more emphatic about the possibility of advance, and was confident about the capacity of the state to define the conditions of its relationship with the petty commodity economy. However this difference of emphasis did not mean that he supported a different strategy regarding economic policy. Instead it could be argued that there was general agreement about the NEP being the most appropriate method to advance the forces of socialism, and the real difference was about the issue of socialism in one country. In this context, the Left Opposition did not consider that the validity of NEP justified the view that socialism could be built without the progress of world revolution. However in its most specific terms, the political differences within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were expressed on specific issues like China and the general strike in the UK. The 1928 programme of the Communist International suggested that the possibility to build socialism in the USSR was an integral part of the world revolution. (16) Effectively the Left Opposition agreed with this standpoint. What it objected to was the opportunist politics that accompanied the adherence to the Comintern programme.

When Stalin embarked on the policy of forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation, the period of the NEP was over. The Left Opposition should have emphatically rejected this repressive economic policy and argued it could not result in the modernisation of agriculture. Instead they vacillated and seemed to provide critical support for Stalin's measures, and they rejected the alternative of Bukharin as an expression of the pressures of capitalist restoration. (17) The major political limitation of Trotsky's approach was the characterisation of Stalinism as centrism that was under pressure from both Right and Left Oppositions. This standpoint obscured what was supported in common by the Left and Right Opposition, which was effectively the defence of a valid and principled process of transition to socialism versus the alternative of a repressive consolidation of the power of a new reactionary class. Trotsky did not recognise this development: “This misconception, this terrible wrong underrating of the true significance of the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy, failed to prepare us properly for the future. Stalin's “zigzag to the left” was no movement to the left at all, if by that term is understood a movement in the direction of the class interests of the proletariat. It was not a brief precursor of a long zigzag to the right, if by that term is understood a capitulation to the capitalist elements. The opening up of the independent Stalinist drive (independent of Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky, that is of the right wing) marked the beginnings of the declaration of independence of the bureaucratic counter-revolution, of its rise to power in its own name, not in the interests of the working class and not in the interests of capitalist restoration.”(17)

The consolidation of the reactionary power of Stalinism meant the most important issue was no longer about socialism in one country. This was an illusion given the promotion of the regime of a new class. Instead what was crucial was opposition to the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism within the international class struggle. This point was recognised by the acceptance of the formation of the Fourth International in 1933. The Transitional Programme of the Fourth International in 1938 maintains: “The definite passing of the Comintern to the side of the bourgeois order, its cynical counter-revolutionary role throughout the world – particularly in Spain, France, the United States, and other “democratic countries” created exceptional supplementary difficulties for the world proletariat.”(19) This is an accurate estimation of the role of Stalinism, and indicates that its reactionary role had to be overcome if capitalism was to be overthrown and replaced by a revolutionary regime. Cliff Slaughter has argued that it was wrong of this programme to characterise the situation in the 1930's as being pre-revolutionary. He contends: “Within a year of the “Transitional Programme” being adopted by the Fourth International, Europe was engulfed in World War Two. This war was certainly a manifestation of the crisis of the system, but the 'objective conditions' resulted in war, not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation. Trotsky had concentrated absolutely correctly on the responsibility of Stalinism for the defeats of the working class in Germany, Britain, China and Spain in the 1920's and 1930's. But he surely underestimated completely the strength derived by capitalism from those defeats as well as the demoralisation, disorganisation and in some cases decimation of the working class as a result of the betrayals and defeats.”(20) Hence to define the situation as pre-revolutionary was optimistic. This criticism may have some validity, but it fails to offer an alternative strategy for the working class. What could have been developed was principled anti-fascism that did not represent the opportunism of Popular Frontism or accommodate to 'democratic imperialism'. The connection of anti-fascism to the aim of proletarian revolution could have represented an alternative to world war and advanced the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism. Indeed this possibility was created in France and Italy soon after the end of the Second World War. However the reactionary role of Stalinism undermined the possibilities to overthrow capitalism.

Slaughter also fails to offer any assessment of the role of transitional demands, and so fails to comment about the programme of action of the Fourth International... We would argue that the role of these demands, which is to enhance the capacity of the working class to engage in the class struggle, and to develop independent politics, is still valid: “It is impossible in advance to foresee what will be the concrete stages of the revolutionary mobilization of the masses. The sections of the Fourth International should critically orient themselves at each new stage, and advance such slogans as will aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of these politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses, and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power.”(21) The major theoretical problem with this perspective concerns whether the contemporary working class is able to collectively organise to both effectively oppose and undermine the domination of capital. Slaughter outlines a useful summary of a Marxist understanding of social relations and the possibilities to overcome the domination of capital. But his conclusion is far too simplistic: “First, and foremost, the reign of capital has entered its structural, historical crisis, and this means that the exploited and oppressed are certain to find themselves driven into new struggles, as capital must pass onto them the burden of intensifying contradictions.”(22) This understanding may have some truth in terms of the continuing recession since 2008. But this prediction of struggle must explain the possibilities for collective action, and the prospect of overcoming reactionary ideological influences such as nationalism and the everyday tendency for passivity and acceptance of the status quo. Crucially, how do we develop a strategy that can unite the working class despite the demoralising effects of the offensive of capital of the last 40 years?

Thus in the centenary year of the celebration of the October revolution, Marxism has a crucial task. This is to develop the understanding of why class struggle is still relevant and can result in the revolutionary transformation of society. The Marxist groups presently have failed to address these tasks because of dogmatic activism and defensive complacency. However what we should remember was that the October revolution was not merely a brilliant exercise in political practice, but was effectively promoted by the conclusions Lenin made from the outbreak of inter-imperialist war. He knew that this tragedy expressed revolutionary possibilities. With this theoretical understanding he was able to recognise the potential of 1917. In contrast, the Mensheviks were limited because of dogma and outdated truisms. If we are to contribute to a revival of class struggle politics we also have to be creative and reject dogmas. We should not be afraid of the truth. What we should remember is that Marxism represents truth not because of its doctrines but instead because capital can only continue because of the exploitation of labour. This aspect of reality can never be overcome as long as capitalism continues. However, this truth does not mean that revolutionary change is inevitable. We have learnt by experience that historical events do not correspond to a progressive necessity. Instead the future is open-ended. We must be determined and principled if the aim of socialism is to be realised.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)E. Preobrazhensky: The New Economics, Oxford University Press, 1965 p17

(2) ibid p21

(3) ibid p24

(4) ibid p64

(5) ibid p84

(6) ibid p89

(7) ibid p144

(8) ibid p173

(9) ibid p182

(10Ibid p221

(11) ibid p223

(12) ibid p229

(13) ibid p230

(14) ibid p232-233

(15) ibid p245

(16)Phi Sharpe: The 1928 Comintern Programme, on the DSA website

(17)Thomas M Twiss: Trotsky and the Problem of the Soviet Bureaucracy, Haymarket Books, Chicago 2015 p207-237

(18)Max Shachtman: The Bureaucratic Revolution, Donald Press, New York 1962 p64-65

(19)Leon Trotsky: The Transitional Programme, Pathfinder Press, New York 1973 p113

(20)Cliff Slaughter: A Critique of Some Past Guidelines, in Against Capital, Zero Books, Hants, 2016 p274

(21)Trotsky op cit p135

(22)Slaughter op cit p308