

THE POLITICAL STRUGGLES

IN RUSSIA

(1921 - 1929)

from "Le Parti Bolsheviqne", by Pierre Broue  
(Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1971)

Translated by John Archer, 1987

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From: "Le Parti Bolshevique: Histoire du P.C. de l'U.R.S.S.", by Pierre Broue, Editions de Minuit, 1971.

Chapter Seven. The Crisis of 1921: the Beginnings of the N.E.P. and the Rise of the Apparatus

The country which had experienced the first victory of the proletarian revolution and of the construction of the first workers' state seemed, three years later, to be near to decomposition. Entire regions were living in a state of anarchy near to barbarism, under the threat of bands of brigands. The whole economic structure seemed to have collapsed. Industry produced 20% in quantity of its prewar production, and 13% in value. The output of iron represented 1.6% and that of steel 2.4%. The production of oil and of coal, sectors least affected, represented only 41% and 27% of that of pre-war; in other sectors, the percentage varied between zero and 20%. Capital equipment was wearing out: 60% of locomotives were out of action and 63% of the railway tracks could not be used. Agricultural production had fallen in quantity and value alike. The area under cultivation was down by 16%. In the richest regions, the production of specialist crops for the markets or the rearing of cattle had disappeared and given way to poor subsistence cultivation. Trade between towns and the country had fallen to the minimum, to the level of requisitions or of barter between individuals.

At the same time, there was a black market, in which the prices were forty to fifty times higher than the legal prices. The standard of living of the population of the cities was well below what is strictly necessary to maintain life. In 1920 the trade unions estimated that the absolutely necessary expenditure represented amounts of money two and a half or three times higher than wages. The most privileged workers received between 1,200 and 1,900 calories; instead of the 3,000 which specialists regarded as necessary. For that reason the cities, starving, were emptied. In autumn 1920 the population of forty provincial capitals had fallen by 33% from the 1917 level, from 6,400,000 to 4,300,000. In three years Petrograd lost 57.5% and Moscow lost 44.5% of their population. By comparison with prewar, one lost half and the other a third of their inhabitants.

Four years after the revolution, then, Russia presented this paradox, a workers' state, founded in a proletarian revolution, in which, to borrow the expression of Bukharin, a veritable "disintegration of the proletariat" was taking place. In 1919 there had been three million workers in industry; in 1920 there were only 1,500,000 and in 1921 1,125,000. In addition, the majority of them were not really working. "Normal" absenteeism in the factories was 50%. The workers drew wages which were nearly unemployment pay. The trade unions estimated that half of what was manufactured in certain work-places was immediately sold by the people who made it. The same was true, which was more serious, in the case of tools, coal, nails and plant.

The workers had fallen in numbers, but perhaps had changed still more deeply in depth. Its vanguard, the militants of the underground period, the fighters in the revolution, the organisers of the Soviets, the generation of experienced cadres like that of the enthusiast-