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# Soviet Democracy, 1917–91

The Soviet Union was created and destroyed amidst calls for 'democracy'. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin wrote of his revolutionary utopia: 'only in communist society . . . will a truly complete democracy become possible and be realized', superseding the imperfect democracy of capitalist states.[1] Seventy years later, speaking at the January 1987 Central Committee plenum, Mikhail Gorbachev also announced that 'democratization' was to lie at the centre of his 'perestroika', a process that was to lead to the demise of the system Lenin created.[2] Indeed, throughout the intervening period, all Soviet leaders claimed that they were perfecting 'Soviet democracy'. Stalin, in his notorious 1936 constitution, declared the Soviet Union the most democratic country in the world, as did Brezhnev in his constitution of 1977. Stalin even claimed that his terror of 1936–8 was, at least in part, aimed at those who were suppressing democracy.

Commentators on Soviet politics have been sharply divided over how seriously to take these claims. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was common for scholars to argue that Bolshevik theory and practice did contain democratic elements, although they differed on the nature of that democracy. For some, a semi-liberal democratic Bolshevism did exist, represented by Nikolai Bukharin and Lenin in his later years, which was then destroyed by Stalinist statism.[3] Other commentators examined the non-pluralist participatory democracy of the Brezhnev era, arguing that it gave citizens some limited influence over particular areas of public life.[4] Yet in recent years it has been rare to take 'democracy' or political 'participation' in the Soviet Union seriously.[5] Lenin's ambitious claims for the democratic nature of the new state have been seen either as cynical posturing or as a naïve utopianism that provided no answers to the problem of over-

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weening bureaucracy, and therefore unwittingly contributed to the authoritarianism of the Soviet state.[6]

Much of this scepticism is entirely justified. The slogan of 'democracy' was often used by the Soviet leadership cynically. Also, it is clear that the 'democracy' advocated by its proponents within the Party failed to counter the emergence of an authoritarian, repressive state. Yet this article will argue that 'Soviet democracy' was not a meaningless concept. Its meaning did change considerably between 1917 and 1991, but it did retain some coherence throughout the 74 years of the Soviet Union's existence, and its origins were recognizable in Marxist conceptions of democracy. I shall also show that it had a significant, and even sometimes destabilizing effect on Soviet politics. Indeed, the Marxist–Leninist concept of democracy played a significant role in the collapse of the Soviet system.

## The Origins of Soviet Democracy

The relationship between ideas and practice is always a complex one, particularly in political systems, like the Soviet one, in which the regime used an ideology to legitimize itself. Ideas therefore mattered, but it would be misleading to draw a simple causal link between Marx's writings and the policies of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Soviet democracy, like so many elements of Soviet reality, emerged in part from Marxist and other socialist ideas of more local provenance, and in part as a response to circumstances; both combined to create a set of practices that could be used by politicians and others to further their interests.

Four important elements of Soviet democracy can be identified, all of which could be justified by an appeal to Marxist ideas but also had their ideological roots in indigenous Russian socialist traditions and working-class political culture. First, Soviet democracy was a form of direct democracy and was sharply contrasted with liberal democracy.[7] Marx, and following him Lenin, criticized liberal democracy for restricting popular involvement in politics to the periodic election of representatives, who in turn had very little control over those who had real power, the bureaucrats. Both saw the Paris Commune of 1871 as an alternative model, in which democracy was extended to all spheres of life. In an ideal world, under communism, all men were to

participate in the administration of the state in a type of 'mass-meeting' democracy; bureaucrats were to be directly elected and recallable and there was to be no distinction between executive and legislature. This model of democracy assumed that the interests of the people were, fundamentally, identical, and that there would be no need either for institutional checks and balances to control the bureaucracy or for legal protection for minorities.[8] The germs of this form of democracy can also be found in the practices adopted by the 'soviets', councils of workers and soldiers which emerged in parts of the Russian empire in 1905 and 1917, and which combined both executive and legislative functions. Secondly, at least until the death of Stalin, Soviet democracy was closely associated with class, the concept of the rule of the proletariat, and a highly moralistic view of politics. In part, these ideas can be found in Marx: communism, for Marx, would be possible because the proletariat, a uniquely collectivist and egalitarian class, would establish it. However, Russian conceptions of class virtue, with their origins in popular culture and Russian populist socialist thought, were probably more influential. Socialist intellectuals and workers, before and after 1917, often thought of the working class as a class blessed with a particular 'democratic' set of virtues: they were comradely and egalitarian, unlike the hierarchical and authoritarian 'bourgeoisie', or '*verkhi*' (those at the top).[9] Hence in 1917 the term 'demokratiia' was popularly used not to refer to a particular political system, but to the 'people' or the 'workers' — i.e. 'those who are democratic'. A third important component of Soviet democracy was its insistence that popular control be extended to the economy: there was to be no distinction between the economic and political spheres, as was generally the case in liberal democracies. Marx himself believed in some form of democratic planning after the revolution, as did Russian populist socialists. A related, fourth element was Soviet democracy's concern with democracy within the workplace and its association with a fundamentally new set of incentives. For Marx, men would work in communist society because they wanted to and were expressing their innate creativity and love of labour, not because they were bribed by wages, or because they were subject to external discipline. While this utopian project was of little interest to Russian workers before 1917, the demand for some form of working-class intervention in factory management was a common one.[10]

Lenin defended all four elements of Soviet democracy in his seminal theoretical work of 1917, *State and Revolution*. The time had come, Lenin argued, for the destruction of the foundations of the bourgeois state, and its replacement with an ultra-democratic 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' based on the model of democracy followed by the *communards* of Paris in 1871. Much of the work was theoretical, designed, by means of quotations from Marx and Engels, to win battles within the international Social Democratic movement against Lenin's arch-enemy Kautsky. However, Lenin was not operating only in the realm of theory. He took encouragement from the rise of a whole range of institutions that seemed to embody class-based, direct democracy, and in particular the soviets and the factory committees, which demanded the right to 'supervise' (*kontrolirovat'*) (although not to take the place of) factory management.[11]

Lenin's attitude towards democracy in *State and Revolution* has been the subject of a great deal of controversy; some have seen the work as a profoundly cynical document, while others have seen it as utopian and naïve.[12] Yet it is perhaps best seen as a highly ambiguous work in which Lenin both exposed and glossed over the problems of establishing the new 'commune-state' (*gosudarstvo-kommuna*). So, for instance, he insisted that the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat', a state which according to Marx would have to exist immediately after the revolution to defeat class enemies, would be organized along the principles of the Paris Commune and would gradually wither away as more and more of the population began to participate in administration.[13] In a striking passage, he compared the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to a group of concerned citizens who intervened spontaneously to assist a woman being attacked in the street;[14] it was therefore not a 'state' in the normal sense of the word. Yet at the same time he suggested that the masses could not be entirely trusted to rule themselves and that some hierarchy would be required in the medium term. He accepted that for some time at least, the more 'class-conscious' of the working class would have to 'train' the less conscious, until all workers had attained the requisite level of maturity. But he refused to say anything explicit about the relationship between the Party and the masses, implying that because the masses were very rapidly becoming mature this was not a serious problem. Lenin's attitude towards economic policy was similarly ambiguous. Just as there was one 'general will' in

the political realm, he argued, so there was one scientifically correct way of organizing the economy which everybody could agree on. Lenin suggested that the Russian economy could be organized along the lines of the German war economy, which he believed ran automatically without the need for any complex decision-making and could thus be managed by any literate worker.[15] Yet, at the same time, he insisted that he was not a 'utopian', and that in the medium term engineers and accountants would still have some power to direct production, although he said nothing about how to reconcile worker democracy and the authority of experts. Similarly, within factories, while Lenin insisted that 'bossing' had had its day, he did admit that some form of hierarchy of expertise would survive during a transition period.

Lenin showed, therefore, that in 1917 he was already aware of the practical difficulties of running the commune state, even if he was not willing to explore them openly and fully. In the six months after the revolution, measures such as his Decree on Workers' Control suggested that he still clung to his original vision, although he was also probably recognizing the *de facto* power of the factory committees and local soviets.[16] By April 1918, however, Lenin's views had changed markedly. Responding to economic collapse, localist challenges to central authority, the breakdown of labour discipline in factories, and, from later in the year, civil war, he questioned all four principles of Soviet democracy, announcing that the regime had to 'retreat from the principles of the Paris Commune'.[17] He now declared that the Russian worker was a 'bad worker', and the authority of managers and experts had to be restored in factories, under a system of 'one-man management'; now Taylorist methods of labour management, based on a system of strict monetary and disciplinary incentives were acceptable to Lenin, even though he had previously denounced them as the products of a cruel capitalist system.[18] His broader commitment to the democratic organization of the state and the economy was also seriously compromised. The Communist Party became a much more hierarchical organization, and while some debate was permitted within the party elite, Lenin increasingly restricted the areas in which party members could question the leadership's policies.[19] In the economic sphere, also, a new centralized body was established in Moscow, the Supreme Council of National Economy, which

engaged in a war of attrition against factory committees and regional Councils of the People's Economy (*sovnarkhozy*).[20]

Yet, despite this retreat from the original 'democratic' promises of 1917, Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership never abandoned the commune state as a goal. Indeed, to have done so would have been very difficult indeed, as the Bolshevik Party's legitimacy depended on its claim to be leading the Soviet Union towards the ideal society, communism. As the Party's programme of 1919 declared, the Party's ultimate aim was to democratize all areas of life; liberal, 'bourgeois' democracy was declared to be unacceptable. Unfortunately, according to the programme, the time was not yet ripe for the full participation of the masses in administration; the working class was not mature enough, and the economy not sufficiently developed.[21] Lenin and his successors therefore always remained vulnerable to the criticism, largely from the leftist oppositions within the Party, that they had compromised the principles of the Revolution and were not doing enough to promote Soviet democracy in the Party and in society as a whole.[22]

Even so, with the exception of a few radical groups,[23] the Bolshevik Left did not return to the utopianism of *State and Revolution*. The Democratic Centralists of 1919–21, and their successors in the Left Opposition during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period, did not demand the introduction of mass participation in administration, or challenge the dominant role of the Party; nor did they question the need for managerial and expert authority within the workplace. Rather they called for some form of *progress* towards participatory democracy by way of a rather diluted form of democracy. The Left used spatial metaphors to describe their aims. If the ideal was the merging of state and people, the current situation was unsatisfactory because the 'gap' (*otryv*) between state and workers was too wide, a condition the Left identified as 'bureaucratism'.[24] The regime therefore had to narrow the gap, even if it was impractical in the then current circumstances to eliminate it. The Left argued that this could be best achieved if party leaders 'listened' more to workers' opinions and took account of them when making policy, although there was to be no obligation to act on them. Within factories, officials and managers were to respond to 'criticism from below' and employ a particular 'democratic' style towards their subordinates, eschewing 'command and administrative

methods' (*komandovanie i administrirovanie*). Here the second element of Soviet democracy had some influence — the notion of the virtuous proletarian. One of the ways in which the system could be 'democratized', the Left argued, was by replacing officials (and particularly specialists) of bourgeois class origin with proletarians, who were much more likely to treat their subordinates in a 'democratic', 'comradely' way than their 'bureaucratic', bourgeois colleagues.[25] The Left insisted that their plans for the 'democratization' of the leadership of the regime and the economy were not only ideologically desirable, but would also have practical advantages: they would strengthen the legitimacy of the regime and help the Party to mobilize the working class to greater productive efforts; 'democratization' would be much more effective than discipline and 'bourgeois' Taylorist methods of management in motivating workers and increasing production.[26]

By the end of the civil war, therefore, the meanings of 'democracy' and 'democratization' in Bolshevik discourse had shifted in significant ways. The first element of Soviet democracy, the mass participation in the administration of the state, had become a demand for greater 'discussion', particularly within the Party, and for officials to take account of the opinions of workers. The Left, like all other groups within the Bolshevik Party, remained hostile to political pluralism and committed to the idea that there was one correct 'line'. The second element, the notion of the 'democratic' proletarian, continued to occupy an important place in leftist 'democratic' thinking, but the Left's main objective now was to replace bourgeois managers and specialists with proletarians, not to involve all workers in the management of society. 'Democratization' therefore came to be closely associated with purges of officials deemed to have been corrupted by 'bourgeois', 'bureaucratic' attitudes.[27] Naturally, this aspect of the 'democratization' strategy could easily be used by political leaders to remove officials of whom they disapproved for a number of reasons. The third element, the 'democratization' of the economy, was a central theme of the Trotskyist Left in the mid- to late 1920s, but it had become a plea for the introduction of particular economic policies, such as rapid industrialization, which, according to the Left, would be in the interests of workers.[28] The Left did not envisage that ordinary workers would become seriously involved in economic decision-making. The fourth element, worker 'control' within the factory, had also been seriously

diluted, and now become a programme for motivating workers and mobilizing them more effectively, by involving them in 'discussions' and allowing them to criticize their bosses.

### Stalinism and 'Democracy' Campaigns

If we understand the peculiar meaning 'democracy' had assumed by the early 1920s, it becomes easier to explain what Stalin meant by 'democratization' in the late 1920s. The call for 'proletarian democracy' and 'criticism and self-criticism' (*kritika i samokritika*) was central to Stalin's 'left turn' of 1927–30, and many of these themes were derived from traditional leftist discourse. Stalin, of course, did not accept the Left's calls for greater discussion of policy within the Party, and he sought to tighten central control over policy-making, particularly in economic affairs. However, he did imitate the Left in condemning the 'bureaucratic' 'gap' between the apparatus and the masses, and in calling for 'democratization' as a way of enhancing the regime's legitimacy among the working class; indeed, there were good reasons for him to do so, as there was considerable industrial unrest in the late 1920s at a time when the leadership was making increasing demands on workers.[29] Stalin also followed the Left in linking 'bureaucratism' with class. He targeted individual 'bureaucratic' officials, who, he claimed, were using *komandovanie* and showed 'malicious inattention to the needs of the masses, conceited toadying and sycophancy to superiors'; he also claimed that many of them were of bourgeois class origin or had been corrupted by bourgeois influences.[30] As a solution to the problem, he urged 'criticism from below', combined with a purge from above and the rapid proletarianization of the apparatus; all of these measures, he claimed, would bring officials 'closer' to workers. Like the Left, also, Stalin saw 'democratization' within the factory as a way of motivating workers to achieve heroic tasks. Managers were forced to hold 'production meetings' at which workers could 'discuss' issues of factory management and respond to worker criticism. Only in this way, Stalin declared, would workers acquire the '*chuvstvo khoziaina*', the 'feeling that they were masters [of the country]', a feeling that would enhance their 'activism' (*aktivnost'*) and thus release the 'colossal reserves latent in the depths of the system'.[31]

In practice, Stalin's 'democracy' campaign was often used to

remove people who had displeased him for reasons other than their 'bureaucratic' behaviour. So, for instance, Mikhail Tomskii, the leader of the trade unions, was a victim of a campaign for trade-union 'democracy' orchestrated by Stalin's ally Lazar Kaganovich and clearly connected with the conflict at the top between the Stalin group and the so-called 'right deviation'. However 'democracy' campaigns were not entirely controlled from above and did have effects that were not always welcome to the leadership. The attempt to remove 'bureaucratic' party officials certainly backfired in Leningrad, where opponents of Stalin's ally Sergei Kirov used the slogan of 'criticism' against him, much to Stalin's displeasure.[32] But the effects of 'democratization' lower down in the hierarchy, and particularly in the workplace, were probably more worrying to the leadership. In his memoirs, Viktor Kravchenko, then the editor of a factory newspaper in the Ukraine, remembered that 'within the limits of the party line', 'considerable freedom of speech was possible'; while nobody would dream of criticizing the party leadership or the General Line, 'attacks on the factory administration, trade union functionaries and party officials, exposés of specific faults in production, were allowed'.[33] This form of 'democratization' may not have threatened the regime, but allowing workers to criticize bosses and the party rank and file to criticize local bosses undoubtedly undermined labour discipline and disrupted the economy. The campaigns against bourgeois specialists and the massive promotion (*vydvizhenie*) of cadres of proletarian class origin to replace those purged also was particularly damaging to economic efficiency. Stalin certainly recognized the dangers of 'democracy', and in a letter to Molotov of 1929 he indicated that he was under pressure to curtail the campaign. However, he insisted that it continue, even if it was disruptive, as any appeal to 'rein in self-criticism' would give succour to 'all and sundry bureaucrats'.[34]

Yet by the autumn of 1930 Stalin had clearly decided that 'democracy' was contributing to a serious economic crisis, and in June 1931 he called for the restoration of strict 'one-man management' and discipline.[35] He also signalled the end of attacks on officials of bourgeois class origin and called a halt to proletarian *vydvizhenie*. For the next few years 'democracy' remained part of the Party's rhetoric, but criticism of officials 'from below' was no longer a priority of the regime.

Even so, it was not long before Stalin yet again embarked on a disruptive series of 'democracy' campaigns. In 1935 the leadership declared that 'criticism from below' within industry was an essential part of its new Stakhanovite Movement of hero workers. Again the leadership insisted that only if 'democracy' operated in the workplace would workers' energies be released. This period also saw the beginning of a campaign against 'bureaucratic', undemocratic practices among local party bosses, and both managers and party officials accused of 'bureaucratic' behaviour were to suffer during the Terror of 1936–8. Official rhetoric also suggested that these 'bureaucratic' habits were the result of bourgeois corruption, and yet again the 'struggle against bureaucratism' became associated with the 'class struggle'. Stalin again used 'democracy' campaigns as a way of undermining and removing officials he was suspicious of, and the party elections of the spring of 1937, in particular, seem to have been designed to help the centre check up on local bosses and discover who was reliable and who was not.[36]

The Terror, of course, was not primarily a 'democracy' campaign, but Soviet 'democratization' was an important part of this complex phenomenon, and as was the case earlier in the decade, 'democracy' helped to destabilize the regime. As in the late 1920s, labour discipline collapsed, and at the end of 1938 the leadership responded by introducing the harshest labour discipline laws yet enacted.[37] Stalin and his allies also seem to have become worried about the dangers of other elements of its democracy campaign. Stalin's constitution of 1936 had introduced the secret ballot and enfranchised 'class alien' groups who had previously been deprived of the vote, such as former kulaks and priests, and elections to the Supreme Soviet were organized on the basis of the new rules for December 1937.[38] Initially they were to be multi-candidate (although not, of course, multi-party) elections, and Stalin seems to have hoped that they would encourage significant 'criticism from below'. However, by the summer of 1937 Stalin seems to have become worried that the newly enfranchised would use their rights to challenge the regime, and that criticism of individual bureaucrats in the Party would encourage an attack on the Party itself. The leadership responded by rounding up and killing hundreds of thousands of suspicious 'class aliens' and by changing the election rules to make provision for only one candidate per seat.[39] The 'democracy' campaigns of

1935–7 showed yet again that 'Soviet democracy', despite its attractions to the leadership, could be dangerous.

## 'Democracy' after Stalin

Stalin was never again to launch a 'democracy' campaign similar to those of the late 1920s and 1930s, and he declared in 1938 that 'capitalist encirclement' forced the leadership to delay democratic participation in administration and communism until the distant future. Yet the concept of Soviet democracy remained a powerful one within the Party's ideology, and it was likely that anybody within the Party who was dissatisfied with the conservatism, rigidity and disappointing economic performance of the late Stalin era would seek solutions in the 'democratization' of the Party and of society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Soviet democracy should have been at the heart of Khrushchev's reform programme, and he signalled his commitment to it in 1961 by promising that the regime would bring the Soviet Union to the early stages of communism by 1980.

In some ways, Khrushchev's conception of 'democracy' marked a sharp break from that of Stalin, and even that of the Left before him. What I have called the second element of 'democracy' was modified significantly, and 'democracy' was no longer associated with class and proletarian rule (although, as I shall show, Khrushchev continued to interpret 'democratization' as the purge of individual officials with 'bureaucratic' attitudes). Also, Khrushchev was much more interested than his predecessors in the third element of Soviet democracy — the 'democratization' of the economy. He revived the *sovnarkhozy*, last seen in the revolutionary period, hoping that they would contribute to a planned economy more responsive to local and consumer concerns. Khrushchev's call for the 'democratization' of decision-making at the top also departed from traditional ideas of Soviet democracy by giving technical experts higher status and a greater role in decision-making.[40]

Yet Khrushchev's programme owed a great deal to earlier conceptions of Soviet democracy.[41] At its root was a criticism of the apparatus: it was 'bureaucratic' and 'cut off' from the masses; it was therefore unable to mobilize the population and harness the enthusiasm of the people for economic development.

Khrushchev's solution was twofold: first, to allow the population to participate more in the administration of the state and their workplaces, and encourage them to express views on issues that affected them; second, to purge the apparatus itself, replacing 'bureaucratic' individuals with people who listened to the masses. Greater 'discussion' was to be allowed and the narrow dogmatism of the Stalinist period was criticized, particularly in the scientific sphere, but there was to be no pluralism;[42] 'democracy' was designed to channel the energies of the people behind the construction of communism.

In practice, Khrushchev's 'democratization' had some effects at the lower levels of the state apparatus. So local soviets established Comrades' Courts in enterprises, in which trusted workers and employees would meet after work to try lesser crimes, and a number of 'volunteer' organizations were set up — for instance a citizens' militia was established to assist the state's militia.[43] Trade-union reform perhaps had a greater impact, and unions were granted more powers to defend workers against management. Even so, the practical effects of these initiatives were inevitably limited as they were designed not to permit any real challenge to central and managerial authority.[44]

Khrushchev probably had greater success than did Stalin in preventing his 'democratization' campaign from escaping central control (although his critics blamed the Novocherkassk strike of 1962 on his overly accommodative labour policies).[45] Other aspects of his 'democratization' backfired more seriously. As was entirely predictable, the *sovnarkhoz* reform merely complicated the administration of an economy that was still planned and therefore had to be co-ordinated centrally.[46] His decision to purge the Party of conservative, 'bureaucratic' officials (the 'systematic renewal of cadres'), by decreeing that a proportion of party officials were to be replaced at each party election, was even more disruptive.[47] The policy was mainly designed to affect lower-level party officials, but it alienated precisely the group whose support Khrushchev had relied on during his struggle for the leadership. Hostility to the 'democratization' of the Party played an important part in the coup against him in 1964.[48]

Brezhnev came to power promising to reverse Khrushchev's policies of 'democratic' mobilization, and, as under Stalin, the advent of the communist stage and full participatory democracy was put off to the distant future.[49] Under the principle of 'stability

of cadres', officials in the Party and the state were to be protected from populist campaigns, and decision-making became more technocratic. The new slogans were to be 'discipline' and a 'scientific approach' to politics.[50] The regime did continue to stress the importance of mass 'democratic' political participation, but this was very different from the mobilization of the earlier period. Individuals were to participate in state administration, but largely as individuals and in initiatives strictly controlled from the centre — for instance by taking part in elections or in the national discussion of the new constitution of 1977, or by criticizing particular abuses by officials.[51]

Yet the neglect of ideological goals during the Brezhnev era, and the continuing inability of the system to sustain economic growth, soon generated discontent within the Party, as it had done in the early 1950s, and from 1986–7 a new leadership began the final campaign of 'democratization' in the history of the Soviet Union — a campaign that was to prove fatal. Gorbachev's objectives in this period are the subject of some scholarly debate. While some argue that from 1987–8 he became disillusioned with the Soviet conception of democracy and moved towards a more liberal intellectual framework, others argue that he remained firmly within the Marxist–Leninist tradition.[52] It is difficult to come to any clear conclusion, as Gorbachev was no political theorist and often expressed contradictory views; his ideas also evolved over time, and there is some evidence that, under the influence of his ally Aleksandr Iakovlev and the western leaders he met, he did develop greater sympathy towards a more Social Democratic view of democracy.[53] It is likely, however, that between 1985 and 1988 his notion of 'democratization' remained firmly rooted in the 'Soviet democratic' tradition, and while he did introduce new concepts, such as 'socialist pluralism', he frequently used traditional language to express his ideas. He would not countenance any challenge to the Party's hegemony; the Soviet people, he assumed, had a single interest that could only be represented by the Party. The defects of the Soviet system, Gorbachev insisted, were caused by the 'bureaucratization' of the apparatus and its separation from the masses, by officials' use of '*administrirovanie*', and particularly by the Party's inability to listen to the masses. The solutions lay in the encouragement of 'discussion', 'criticism', or 'openness' (*glasnost'*) as the slogan of the time put it. They also lay in the removal

of those 'bureaucrats' who refused to reform themselves. Once the masses felt closer to the regime, they would support the Party's goals, work more enthusiastically and transform the economy. Gorbachev used terms strikingly similar to those employed by the leftist Bolsheviks before him. The people, he declared, had to 'feel that they are their own masters and creators. A house can only be put in order by a person who feels that he owns this house.'[54]

Gorbachev also followed the Soviet democratic tradition in calling for the alteration of authority relations within the enterprise. In the Law on State Enterprises of January 1987 he allowed workers to elect managers, although they were still to be guided by the Party.[55] Gorbachev, then, was going much further than Khrushchev had in his pursuit of Soviet democracy, and in other areas of economic policy he was abandoning Soviet democracy and moving towards a more liberal conception. Since the Khrushchev era, faith in the virtues of planning had declined among the intelligentsia, and among reformers there was much more interest in attempts to reconcile planning and the market.[56] Gorbachev's Law on State Enterprises did not fully embrace the market, but it did strengthen market mechanisms by giving enterprises more autonomy and encouraging them to use 'full economic accountability and self-financing'.[57]

Yet, fundamentally, Gorbachev's programme of democratization was in the tradition of its predecessors, at least in the early stages, and it had the same disruptive effects. Democratization of enterprises failed to generate worker enthusiasm and improve productivity; rather, as had been the case in the past, it hit production by challenging the economic apparatus; indeed, by strengthening the workers' position in the factory, undermining the authority of the Moscow planners without replacing it with the discipline of the market, and giving enterprises control over their budgets, the reform fuelled wages and the hyperinflation that did so much to destabilize the Soviet Union.[58]

In the political sphere, also, Gorbachev was faced with the same problems that had confronted previous 'democratizing' leaders. He had to bring the Party closer to the population, so that it could mobilize the people. The Party therefore had to be democratized, its old authoritarian practices criticized and reformed, and the 'bureaucratic' opponents of democracy removed. However, he also had to prevent criticism of the

'methods' used by party officials from becoming a challenge to the rule of the Party. Gorbachev played this dangerous game between 1986 and 1991.[59] In 1987 he introduced a number of 'democratic' reforms, including multi-candidate elections for the soviets and the possibility of secret ballots for party elections. Yet resistance from opponents of 'democratization' within the Party led him to adopt more radical measures. Unlike Khrushchev, through skilful manoeuvring he managed to cling to power, while at the same time encouraging greater criticism of the party apparatus, under the slogan 'socialist pluralism of opinions', a concept that was designed to permit differences of opinion within the framework of a unified socialist ideology, but did not accept differences of interest within the population.[60] In March 1989 he went even further and allowed the public to vote against leading party figures in multi-candidate elections to a new body, the Congress of People's Deputies.[61] A majority of delegates to the Congress were still party members, but the establishment of a body that included a number of vocal critics of the apparatus, and Gorbachev's insistence that delegates be responsible to their electors rather than to the party apparatus, fatally challenged the principle of party rule and the notion of a people unified in support of socialism.[62] It was not long before the Party, undermined by splits within its own ranks and by challenges from liberals and nationalists, lost its authority and was forced to relinquish power.

This article has argued that the Soviet democratic tradition was a powerful component within the ideology, that it legitimized an influential politics of 'democratization', and that it could prove to be very dangerous to the rule of the Communist Party. Soviet democracy was bound to be unsustainable, since if pursued energetically and consistently it would undermine the basis of Soviet rule. All four of its central elements were inherently unstable. First, Soviet democracy was based on the false assumption that the people (or the working class) were united by a general will that was committed to socialism and the Bolshevik Party. If the leadership interpreted Soviet democracy as popular self-government, it was therefore bound to undermine the Party and Soviet socialism, as Gorbachev discovered. Soviet democracy could be defined in less radical terms, as the closing of the 'gap' between officials and masses by means of 'discussion' and 'criticism', but even this diluted model could damage the

authority of officials and undermine the legitimacy of the Party. The second element, which justified the removal of individual officials who were alleged to have bureaucratic attitudes, appears to have been less disruptive, although when associated with 'class struggle', as during the revolutionary and early Stalinist periods, this form of 'democracy' could generate a populist politics that proved to be difficult to control. The third element, involving the 'democratization' and decentralization of the economy, was incompatible with central planning and the elimination of the market. Such reforms were either ineffective, as under Khrushchev, or they were corrosive, as during the revolutionary period and under Gorbachev. The fourth element, enterprise democracy, was difficult to combine with labour discipline and high levels of productivity, and it tended to lead to denunciations and even disorder.

The language of Soviet democracy was an extremely powerful one, and remained so throughout most of the Soviet Union's existence. Many of the voices that have seemed most appealing to Russians and to western observers embraced these ideas, and a great deal of hope was placed in them, particularly during the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras. But it has to be accepted that the opponents of Soviet democracy within the apparatus were correct in sensing that it was likely to both threaten the economy and destroy the Party, and the form of socialism it defended. Now the era of Soviet democracy is over and Russia has a political system based on Western liberal democratic models, many of Marx's original criticisms of 'bourgeois democracy' have renewed force. Political participation is limited to periodic elections, and as recent presidential elections in Russia have shown, business interests have an enormous influence over their outcome.[63] No longer is there any attempt to extend democracy to the economic sphere, even though it might be argued that popular control could act as some counter-weight to the corrupt elites that control so many of Russia's resources. The time may yet come for a revival of demands for participatory democracy, but it is unlikely that any future supporters will seek inspiration in the history of Soviet democracy.

## Notes

1. V.I. Lenin, 'Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia', [*PSS*] *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow 1958–65), xxxiii, 89.

2. This plenum was used by Gorbachev to announce his 'democratization' campaign. See M.S. Gorbachev, 'O perestroike i kadrovoi politike partii', in idem, *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i* (Moscow 1988), iv, 299–354.

3. S. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (New York and London 1985), chapter 3.

4. Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, MA 1979), 314–19.

5. For a similar point, see S. Kotkin, '1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70 (1998), 385–6. Although for a recent argument that Stalinist 'democracy', at least within the academic world, should be seen from an anthropological point of view, as a set of 'ritual games', sanctioned and ultimately controlled by the state, during which the higher authorities decided between competing groups, see A. Kojevnikov, 'Games of Stalinist Democracy', in S. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London 2000), 142–75.

6. Schapiro argued that the 'democratic' elements of *State and Revolution* did not represent Lenin's true beliefs. See L. Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (London 1970), 209. For the view that *State and Revolution* contained a 'subterranean authoritarianism', see A.J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (London 1984), chapter 2.

7. For a useful comparison between liberal and 'direct' forms of democracy, see D. Held, *Models of Democracy* (Oxford 1987), especially chapter 4.

8. For this point, see Polan, op. cit., chapter 2.

9. For some of these themes, see B. Kolonitskii, 'Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti-"burzhui" Consciousness in 1917', *The Russian Review*, Vol. 53 (1997), 83–96; O. Figes and B. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven and London 1999), 122–3.

10. See a discussion of workers' attitudes in T. McDaniel, *Autocracy, Capitalism and Revolution* (Berkeley 1988), 43ff.

11. For workers' attitudes to the workers' 'control' movement, see S. Smith, *Red Petrograd* (Cambridge 1984), chapter 11.

12. For the view that the document was written to help the Bolsheviks gain power, see J. Keep, *The Debate on Soviet Power* (Oxford 1979), 22. Ulam, however, argued that the text was utopian and anarchistic, and entirely unrepresentative of Lenin's thought. See A. Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks* (London 1969), 462–3.

13. Lenin, 'Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia', *PSS* xxxiii, 48f.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 100f.

16. Iu. Akhapkin, ed., *First Decrees of Soviet Power* (London 1970), 36–8.

17. Lenin, 'Ocherednye zadachi sovetskoi vlasti', *PSS*, xxxvi, 155–6.

18. For Bolshevik attitudes towards Taylorism, see Smith, 'Taylorism Rules OK?', *Radical Science Journal*, 13 (1983), 5–27; K. Bailes, 'Alexei Gastev and the Soviet Controversy over Taylorism, 1918–1924', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 1977), 373–94.

19. For increasing authoritarianism within party and state institutions, see, among others, R. Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution, 1917–1923: A Study in Organizational Change* (London and Basingstoke 1979), 90–101, et passim; G. Gill, *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge 1990), 110; R. Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power. A Study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918–1921* (London and Basingstoke 1988).

20. See S. Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918–1921* (Cambridge 1985), chapter 5.

21. 'Programma RKP(b)', *KPSS v rezoliutsiiakh i resheniiakh s"ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK, 1917–1924*, Vol. 2 (1919), 42. See also Lenin, *PSS*, xlii, 35.

22. The Left was particularly vocal and powerful during the civil-war period. See especially the debates over 'democracy' at the ninth party conference in 1920 and the tenth party congress in 1921. For leftist conceptions of 'democracy', see D.R. Priestland, 'The Debate over Party–State Relations', *Revolutionary Russia*, Vol. 10/2 (1997), 37–61.

23. Such as the Left Communists of 1918 and the Workers' Opposition of 1919–21.

24. See, for instance, *Vos'moi s"ezd RKP(b)*, *mart 1919 goda. Protokoly* (Moscow, 1959) 181f. (E.N. Ignatov). The term 'bureaucratism' [*biurokratizm*] could have a variety of meanings (including 'red-tape' and inefficiency), but it was generally used by the Left and their successors to refer to the absence of participatory democracy.

25. *Vos'moi s"ezd RKP(b),* op. cit., 199f. (V.P. Antonov).

26. *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, Vol. 9 (1989), 165 (V.M. Smirnov).

27. For the connection between 'democratization' and the class composition of the apparatus, see 'The Platform of the Opposition, 1927' in L. Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926–27)*, eds. N. Allen and G. Saunders, (New York 1980), 341, 355, 358–60.

28. 'The Platform of the Opposition, 1927', op. cit., 390.

29. For numbers of workers participating in strikes between 1926 and 1928, see *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii* (*RGASPI* — formerly the Central Party Archive) f. 17 op. 85 d. 305 l. 14.

30. See, for instance, I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow 1949), xi, 131.

31. Stalin, op. cit., xi, 37; xii, 110.

32. See Stalin's letter to Molotov on the subject, 13 September 1929, *Pis'ma Stalina Molotovu, 1925–1936 gg. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow 1995), 180.

33. V. Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (London 1947), 52–3.

34. Stalin to Molotov, 13 September 1929. *Pis'ma Stalina Molotovu*, op. cit., 180.

35. Stalin, op. cit., xiii, 51–80.

36. For the accusation that 'Trotskyite enemies' in the Party were sabotaging democracy, see, for instance, *RGASPI*, fol. 17 op. 120 d. 280 ll. 3–6.

37. For these laws, see D. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization* (London 1986), 233–6.

38. Stalin seems to have been motivated by the desire to improve the image of the Soviet Union among the western left, now that he was pursuing a policy of popular fronts and alliances against Nazi Germany. See *RGASPI* fol. 17 op. 163 d. 1052 l. 153 (25 January 1935).

39. For these elections, see J.A. Getty, 'State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50 (1991), 18–35. For the order that 'class aliens' and others be repressed in July 1937, see *Trud*, 4 June 1992, p. 1.

40. G. Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London 1982), 57, 127.

41. For a discussion of Khrushchev's conception of 'democracy' and participation, see G. Breslauer, 'Khrushchev Reconsidered', *Problems of Communism* (September–October 1976), 18–33; Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders*, op. cit. 71–4, 75–7, 104–7,127–31.

42. For Khrushchev's approach to science, see R.F. Miller, 'Khrushchev and the Soviet Economy: Management by Reorganization', in R.F. Miller and F. Feher, eds, *Khrushchev and the Communist World* (London 1984), 124–6.

43. For a discussion of Comrades' Courts, see M. McAuley, *Labour Disputes in Soviet Russia, 1957–65* (Oxford 1969), 191–3.

44. Ibid., 59–77.

45. W.J. Tompson, *Khrushchev: A Political Life* (Basingstoke and London 1995), 245.

46. Miller, op. cit., 128–30.

47. *XXII s"ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza: stenograficheskii otchet*, Vol. 3 (Moscow 1961), 344.

48. Tompson, op. cit., 268.

49. For the concept of 'developed socialism', see A. Evans, *Soviet Marxism–Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology* (Westport 1993), 105–39.

50. *Pravda*, 23 October 1965; *Pravda*, 7 July 1965. For these themes, see Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders*, 170–1; Hough and Fainsod, op. cit., 422–3.

51. For this point, see M. Sandle, *A Short History of Soviet Socialism* (London 1999), 349–50. See also J. Adams, *Citizen Inspectors in the Soviet Union* (New York 1977).

52. Contrast Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor in Soviet Politics* (Oxford 1996), 126–9, with Neil Robinson, *Ideology and the Collapse of the Soviet System: A Critical History of Soviet Ideological Discourse* (Aldershot 1995). Brown, however, does argue that Gorbachev often introduced concepts such as 'socialist pluralism' which were subsequently used in more liberal ways than originally intended.

53. See Brown, op. cit., 115–17.

54. Gorbachev, op. cit.

55. 'O gosudarstvennom predpriiatii (Ob"edinenii)', in *Pravda*, 1 July 1987.

56. For changes in economic thought, see P. Sutela, *Economic Thought and Economic Reform in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge 1991), especially 130–9.

57. G.E. Schroeder, 'The Anatomy of Gorbachev's Economic Reform', in E.A. Hewett and V.H. Winston, eds, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika* (Washington, DC 1991), 206–10.

58. For this point, see J. Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power* (Basingstoke and London 1993), 48.

59. See Robinson, op. cit.

60. For the concept of 'socialist pluralism', see Robinson, *Ideology and the Collapse of the Soviet System*, chapter 5.

61. See J. Miller, op. cit., 114–16.
62. Ibid., 118–19; Brown, op. cit., 190–3.
63. For an analysis of business involvement in elections, see V. Gelman, 'The Iceberg of Political Finance' in Archie Brwon, ed., *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader* (Oxford 2001), 179–94. For a useful survey of the nature of democracy in post-1991 Russia, see A. Brown, 'Evaluating Russian Democratization', in Brown, op. cit., 546–68.

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