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Lenin's Government: Sovnarkom 1917-1922

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TO IVAN IVANOVICH GAPANOVICH

Russian historian

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Preface

The Constitution of the USSR describes the Communist Party as 'the leading and directing force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organisations and all voluntary organisations'. In practical, institutional terms, this means the superordination of the executive bodies of the party over those of the state at the centre, in the constituent republics, and right down to the lowest level of local government. In official doctrine, this institutional embodiment of the party's leading and directing role is seen as essential to safeguarding the socialist order and ensuring its progressive transformation into the fully communist society envisaged by Marx and Lenin. It was above all the apprehension that the Czechoslovak Communist Party was abdicating this leading and directing role that motivated the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies to invoke the principle of 'proletarian internationalism' and intervene in Czechoslovakia in 1968 in order to overturn the Dubček regime and its reforms.

The best known and most important manifestation of the party's leading and directing role is that the effective government of the Soviet Union is not formally an organ of the state at all, but a party body, the Politburo of the Central Committee. It is the Politburo that takes the final and binding decisions at its weekly meetings on all significant questions of internal and foreign policy and whose members have final responsibility for the various bureaucracies through which these decisions are implemented. It is thus the functional equivalent of the Cabinet in countries like the United Kingdom. The Presidium of the Council of Ministers, which corresponds in a formal sense to the British Cabinet, plays a subordinate role as a committee on second-order business and an administrative work-horse for the Politburo.

The relationship of the party to the various governmental and

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non-governmental organisations through which the Soviet Union is run bears a striking resemblance to the relationship sketched out by Lenin, long before the Revolution, of the party to the trade unions and other organisations of the working class. The party should seek to get its members into leading positions in these organisations, but at the same time should maintain a separate, tight-knit and centralised organisation of its own, which would work out the strategy and tactics for the working class as a whole and direct and coordinate all working-class organisations in putting these into practice. In both cases it was to be party discipline, the obligation of party members to give priority to party directives over their commitment to the particular organisations in which they were working, that was to ensure the party's leading and directing role.

Is, then, the present institutionalised role of the Communist Party in the Soviet system of government merely a logical and inevitable expression, once the party was in power, of the role Lenin sought for the party before the Revolution as the 'vanguard of the proletariat'? This, certainly, is how it is seen in official Soviet political and historical doctrine. But so, too, is it represented, explicitly or implicitly, by many Western writers critical of the Soviet system, who often trace the roots of the present one-party dictatorship in the USSR back to the ideas Lenin expressed in such early articles as 'What is to be done?'

In the face of such unanimity of defenders and detractors of the Soviet Union alike, the scholar hesitates to raise a dissenting voice. And yet when one looks closely at how the infant Soviet Republic was actually governed for the first three years or so, before the onset of Lenin's illness, the conventional wisdom begins to look simplistic. For neither the party's Central Committee, nor its Politburo once it was established in 1919, functioned at this time as the 'government' of the Republic in the sense we have indicated the Politburo as being the effective government today. Instead it was the Council of People's Commissars, chaired by Lenin and the constitutional equivalent of the present Council of Ministers, that was government in fact as well as name. Lenin certainly identified the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' with rule by the Communist Party, but this did not mean government by the party's executive machinery. Lenin's 'Cabinet' was not the Politburo, but Sovnarkom – the Council of People's Commissars. Unlike the situation prevailing since Stalin first established his dominance, neither Lenin himself nor the second

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most prominent figure in his regime, Trotsky, occupied any post in the party machine.

Admittedly, well before the end of the Civil War the Politburo had begun to direct the implementation of certain important areas of policy, and in 1921–3 its sphere of action spread rapidly to embrace almost the whole range of government activity. Yet the long delay before the party's leading and directing role was institutionalised in this way raises serious doubts about its assumed inevitable logic. Moreover, while the prerevolutionary doctrine and traditions of the party clearly *facilitated* this process, there were other factors which had a large and perhaps a necessary part in bringing it about. What is more, by 1922 Lenin had become seriously concerned at the emergence of the Politburo as an organ of government superordinated over Sovnarkom, and in the final months of activity left to him made vain efforts to reverse the process.

In this book we try to show how Sovnarkom was organised and operated under Lenin. We trace the emergence of its internal machinery and procedures and seek to explain how and why these changed over time. We examine what kinds of Bolshevik leaders served in Sovnarkom under Lenin and how they were chosen. We consider Sovnarkom's relationships with the executive machinery of the soviets and the party, describing and suggesting reasons for the gradual eclipse of Sovnarkom by the Politburo and the failure of Lenin's counter-measures. In a final chapter we outline some parallels and continuities between the character and evolution of pre-revolutionary Russian institutions and those of Sovnarkom, and attempt to place these in the broader framework of Russian political development.

In the West the study of Soviet governmental institutions and their history has been rather neglected in favour of research on the party and the political struggles of the top leaders. The best available account of the early period is Walter Pietsch's *Revolution und Staat. Institutionen als Träger der Macht in Sowjetrußland 1917–1922*.^{*} Pietsch's analysis of the changing relationships among the chief decision-making bodies of party and state is largely confirmed by the evidence assembled in the present book, despite some differences on the level of explanation. Another path-breaking study is G.P. van den Berg's *De Regering van Rusland en de Sovjetunie*, which des-

^{*} Details of publications mentioned here will be found in the Bibliography.

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cribes the evolution of governmental structures in the Soviet Union and its constituent republics from 1917 to the present. It is a pity that neither of these works is available in English, in which language the best account remains that given by E. H. Carr in the first volume of his *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*. Though much of Carr's analysis stands up remarkably well, it did not tackle certain important issues and much new information has come to hand since it was written.

During the Stalin era Soviet works dealing with the early years of Sovnarkom were practically confined to general and formalistic outlines by constitutional and administrative lawyers. With the post-Stalin revival of historical scholarship, however, and particularly from the mid 1960s, many valuable books and articles emerged from the pens of such writers as E. B. Genkina, Ye. N. Gorodetsky, Ye. I. Korenevskaya, and especially M. P. Iroshnikov. While much of this work is heavily embellished by the official hagiology and demonology, it also contains much interesting and important analysis of primary research data. Meanwhile a great deal of relevant documentary material has been published over the same period, which helps to make up for the inaccessibility of the relevant archival collections to Western scholars.

In combination with contemporary publications and with memoirs and scholarly articles published in the 1920s, this new material provides opportunities for a far closer analysis of the origins of the Soviet political system than was heretofore possible. The present book is a pioneering attempt to exploit these opportunities, and as such it takes a rather broad canvas. The topics of each of our chapters deserve, and are now susceptible to, separate book-length study, and when this is done the description and judgments offered in this book may call for reassessment. Meanwhile we must hope that one day a Russian scholar will enjoy sufficient freedom from political constraints to write an infinitely better book.

The system of transliteration followed in this book is a conventional one. The forms 'yu' and 'ya' have been used rather than 'iu' and 'ia'. At the beginning of words and after vowels the Russian 'e' is rendered as 'ye'. The traditional English '-sky' has been used in names, and apostrophes as a rendering of the soft sign have been avoided in the text. Dates are given in Old Style up to the introduction of the calendar reform on 1 (=14) February 1918.

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A section of Chapter 1 and Chapters 2 and 4 are substantially based respectively on the following articles: 'The Birth of the Council of People's Commissars', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. xx (1974), No. 1, pp. 70–75; 'The First Proletarian Government', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. iv (1974), Part 1, pp. 37–51; and 'Birth of the Soviet Bureaucracy', *Politics*, Vol. vii (1972), No. 2, pp. 121–35. Appreciation is expressed to the editors of these journals for permission to reproduce this material

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Abbreviations

CEC The Central Executive Committee (of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets) (*Vserossiiskii Tsentral'nyi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet – VTsIK*).

CHREZKOMSAB Extraordinary Commission on Supply of the Red Army (*Chrezvychainaya Komissiya po Snabzheniyu Krasnoi Armii*).

CHUSOSNABARM Extraordinary Plenipotentiary of the Defence Council for the Supply of the Red Army and Navy (*Chrezvychainyi Upolnomochennyi Soveta Oborony po Snabzheniyu Krasnoi Armii i Flota*).

GOSPLAN State General Planning Commission (*Gosudarstvennaya Obshcheplanovaya Komissiya*).

GUBKOM Regional (Party) Committee (*Gubernyi Komitet RKP (b)*).

MRC Military-Revolutionary Committee (*Voyenno-revolyutsionnyi Komitet*).

NEC (All-Russian) National Economic Council (*Vserossiiskii Sovet Narodnogo Khozyaistva – VSNKh*).

NEP New Economic Policy (*Novaya Ekonomicheskaya Politika*).

ORGBURO Organisational Bureau (of the Communist Party Central Committee) (*Organizatsionnyi Byuro TsK RKP(b)*).

POLITBURO Political Bureau (of the Communist Party Central Committee) (*Politicheskii Byuro TsK RKP(b)*).

RABKRIN Worker-Peasant Inspectorate (*Raboche-krestyanskaya Inspektsiya*).

SOVNARKOM Council of People's Commissars (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov*).

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SRs Socialist-Revolutionaries (*Sotsialisty-revol'yutsionery*).

STO Labour and Defence Council (*Sovet Truda i Oborony*).

TSEKOMPRODARM Central Commission on Food Supplies for the Army (*Tsentral'naya Komissiya po uporyadocheniyu i pravil'noi postanovke dela snabzheniya armii prodovol'stviyem i produktami pervoi neobkhodimosti*).

TSENTROVOYENZAG Central Department of Military Procurements (*Tsentral'nyi Otdel Voyennykh Zagotovok*).

TUC (All-Russian Central) Trade Union Council (*Vserossiiskii Tsentral'nyi Sovet Professional'nykh Soyuzov – VTsSPS*).

VECHEKA All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (for Combatting Counter-Revolution, Speculation and Sabotage) (*Vserossiiskaya Chrezvychainaya Komissiya po Bor'be s Kontr-revol'yutsiyei, Spekulyatsiyei i Sabotazhem*).